

## **Case Study: Social Dilemma**

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## **Introduction**

There have been various innovations in history that have impacted society across the world. The invention of the light bulb, for example, changed how people lived by creating artificial light, affecting when people slept and how long they worked. This one invention also influenced the culture of productivity, shifting work from a natural cycle to one based on business and constant light. Another invention, the car, transformed transportation across long distances with comfort. Cars in relation to society were based on one's wealth which in turn became status, admiration, and envy. This is present today with sports cars from Ferrari and Lamborghini being status for those with wealth. With that in mind, the impact of social media, as shown in *The Social Dilemma*, represents a historic impact. In the film, Tristan Harris talks about the ethical challenge of whether to remain silent or speak out against persuasive design practices that exploit users' attention. This is seen throughout the film in fictional characters such as Isla or Ben having their lives vastly changed as their attention is siphoned away by social media. In this essay, I will apply Act-Utilitarianism, a theory that evaluates the morality of each individual action by its consequences for happiness and suffering, to the dilemmas faced by Isla and Ben. I argue that, according to the ethical theory Act-Utilitarianism, both Isla and Ben should limit their social media use, and designers like Tristan Harris are morally right to challenge the algorithms because by doing so reduces suffering and promotes greater happiness for society. As a result, I will explain the key ideas of Act-Utilitarianism, describe Isla's and Ben's challenges, and show how this theory resolves their conflict.

## **Act-Utilitarianism**

There are multiple ethical theories that contain various views on morals, their codes, and how society perceives them. Act-Utilitarianism is one such ethical theory that judges the rightness

or wrongness of an individual action solely by its immediate consequences. This ethical theory originated from the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and refined by John Stuart Mill. Act-Utilitarianism evaluates each decision made on a case-by-case basis rather than abiding by strict moral code. In this view, there is no absolute duty or prohibition; instead, the worth of an action is dependent entirely on the outcome. For example, when one tells a lie it may be acceptable if the lie in itself prevents any greater harm or create more happiness than telling the truth. This is telling someone what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear. This focus on the direct consequences makes Act-Utilitarianism especially relevant to modern ethical issues, such as technology use, where many actions are caused and heavily based upon the aspect of societies view on an individual.

### **Characters and Challenges**

In *The Social Dilemma*, fictional characters Isla and Ben represent how social media's design affects users' emotions, relationships, and choices. Isla is a young teenage girl, who becomes increasingly addicted to checking her phone for likes, comments, and notifications through the few scenes she was shown. In the beginning of the documentary Isla is shown ignoring her mother scrolling through social media seeking validation online. As the documentary continues Isla is shown taking selfies and adding filters to "shape" herself to the version she believes to be "her." Yet, when negative comments appear on a post she made talking about her ears and showing elephant emojis, her self-esteem declines feeling anxious and ashamed. This shows how her happiness depends on external approval from social media, especially based on the scene in the bathroom where a tear is shown after checking that post. Isla's challenge lies in whether to continue using social media platforms that give her momentary pleasure but cause long-term distress.

Ben, Isla's older brother, on the other hand faces a related but different ethical dilemma. Throughout the documentary we are shown three individuals that represent algorithms Tristan Harris argues against in which they personalize Ben's feed and draws him into polarizing and extremist content. This content hole that he goes through manipulates his beliefs, emotions, and time. This is evident by his growing isolation from his friends and family. This is seen slowly from his distancing from soccer practice, distancing from his sisters advice, to unknowingly joining a protest. As such, Ben must decide whether to continue engaging with online content that satisfies his curiosity and sense of belonging or to step away for the sake of his mental and social well-being.

Both Isla and Ben's experiences reflect exactly what Tristan Harris warns about throughout the film with the exploitation of human attention and emotion for profit. Their stories demonstrate the ethical costs of social media and other companies persuasive design that raise the question of how individuals should act when wanting digital pleasure causing real-world harm.

### **Application of Theory**

With Ben and Isla's challenges and experiences with the basis of Tristan Harris's argument through the perspective of Act-Utilitarianism, the moral choices for them of maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering differ in their specific situations. For Isla, continuing to use social media will provide her brief satisfaction through connection and approval, but cause significant emotional harm in the forms of anxiety, insecurity, and distraction from real relationships. The negative consequences for Isla's situation clearly outweigh the benefits. A Utilitarian would conclude that reducing or quitting social media use would directly impact long-term happiness by restoring self-esteem and improving her mental health.

For Ben's case involves understanding the consequences of his social media obsession. His ever-growing time online gives him constant stimulation and a sense of belonging but also deepens the amount of misinformation received growing social isolation. This outcome impacts happiness for both himself and his family. From the Utilitarian perspective, the "moral" action for Ben would be to separate himself biased content like the videos he watched that lead him to the protest and rebuild his personal relationships with sincerity.

### **Resolution**

Therefore, based on Act-Utilitarianism, the ethical course of action for both Isla and Ben is to reduce their dependence on social media and reclaim control over their time and attention. Those choices will lead to more stable well-being and healthier relationships which in turn creates more happiness overall. On a broader level, Tristan Harris's decision to expose the tech industry to their practices aligns with Act-Utilitarian principles. His goal of promoting awareness of these practices and algorithms for social reform aligns with Act-Utilitarianism: the moral path is the one that minimizes harm and maximizes well-being for the greatest number of people.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout *The Social Dilemma*, both the fictional experiences of Isla and Ben and the real-world advocacy of Tristan Harris highlights how technology shapes human happiness and suffering. Using the Act-Utilitarianism shows that we can see the right actions are those that reduce the psychological and social impact caused by the manipulative designs while promoting healthier engagement with technology. This means for Isla and Ben setting limits on usage and choosing real relationships over the severe issues of online validation and bias. For Tristan Harris, it means to continue to speak out against such designs to protect society from exploitation. Act-

Utilitarianism provides a clear and practical framework for understanding these challenges: ethical actions are those that bring about the greatest happiness and least harm to all.