

Sean Parker unloads on Facebook "exploiting" human psychology

Mark Zuckerberg (L) and Sean Parker (R). Photos: Steven Senne/AP, Axios video

Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, gave me a candid insider's look at how social networks purposely hook and potentially hurt our brains.

Be smart: Parker's I-was-there account provides priceless perspective in the rising debate about the power and effects of the social networks, which now have scale and reach unknown in human history. He's worried enough that he's sounding the alarm.

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Parker, 38, now founder and chair of the Parker Institute for Cancer Immunotherapy, spoke yesterday at an Axios event at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, about accelerating cancer innovation. In the green room, Parker mentioned that he has become "something of a conscientious objector" on social media.

By the time he left the stage, he jokingly said Mark Zuckerberg will probably block his account after reading this:

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"When Facebook was getting going, I had these people who would come up to me and they would say, 'I'm not on social media.' And I would say, 'OK. You know, you will be.' And then they would say, 'No, no, no. I value my real-life

interactions. I value the moment. I value presence. I value intimacy.' And I would say, ... 'We'll get you eventually.'"

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"I don't know if I really understood the consequences of what I was saying, because [of] the unintended consequences of a network when it grows to a billion or 2 billion people and ... it literally changes your relationship with society, with each other ... It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."

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"The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?'"

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"And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get you ... more likes and comments."

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"It's a social-validation feedback loop ... exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology."

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"The inventors, creators — it's me, it's Mark [Zuckerberg], it's Kevin Systrom on Instagram, it's all of these people — understood this consciously. And we did it anyway."

P.S. Parker, on life science allowing us to "live much longer, more productive lives": "Because I'm a billionaire, I'm going to have access to better health care so ... I'm going to be like 160 and I'm going to be part of this, like, class of immortal overlords. [Laughter] Because, you know the [Warren Buffett] expression about compound interest. ... [G]ive us billionaires an extra hundred years and you'll know what ... wealth disparity looks like."