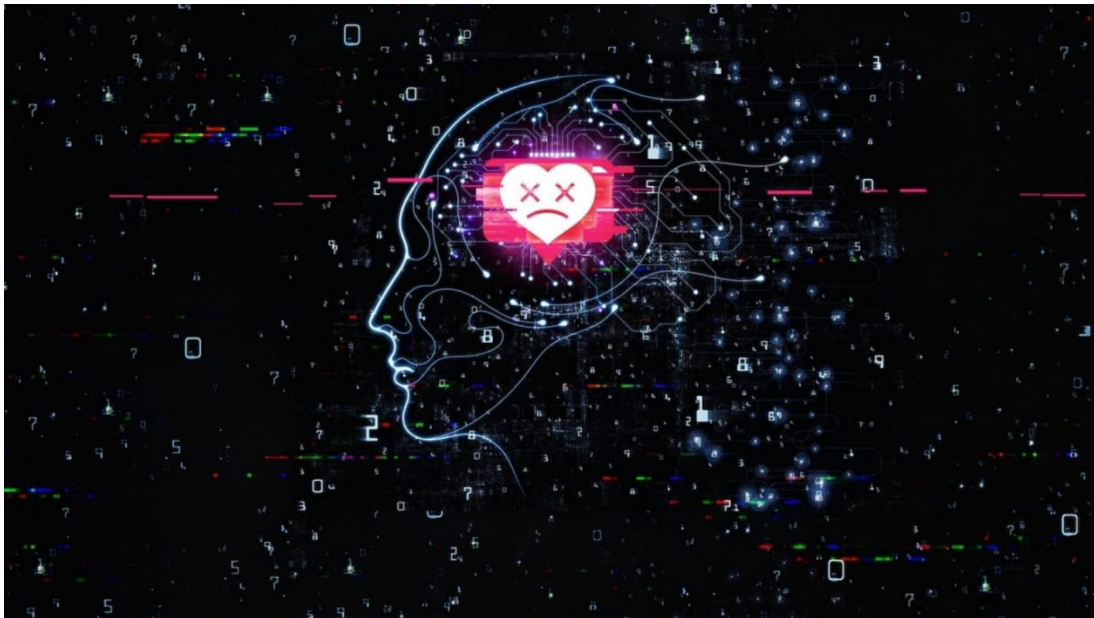


The Social Dilemma: defeating its own purpose

Analysing how *The Social Dilemma* propagates polarisation instead of providing a solution for it



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Abstract

The Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* focuses on the problem of polarisation and other dangers of social media usage. The arguments made by the documentary, however, have generally been accepted without further critical thought. This paper therefore provides a rereading of the documentary and the accompanying website as a paratext in search for how it propagates polarisation instead of attempting to eliminate it. This has been done by looking at rhetorical strategies employed throughout the film, exploring how the makers of the documentary have produced a counter-mythology to oppose the current consensus around implications of social media usage and the power of Big Tech companies and analysing the filmmaker's goal of activism, induced by collective identity formation. It has been found that *The Social Dilemma* deploys mostly deliberative rhetoric in the predominant rhetorical modes of pathos and ethos throughout its argumentation. By making use of an expository and participatory cinematic mode of documentary making, the makers of *The Social Dilemma* seek to provide personal insights from credible professionals in the field in a pursuit of the truth behind the scenes of the social media landscape as well as to make it easier for the audience to engage with the counter-mythology they produce. Lastly, *The Social Dilemma* encourages its audience into activism by adding incentive to visit their website and take actions in order to prevent a dramatic turn of events in the near future, possibly even leading to the end of humanity, according to one of the interviewees. In the deployment of these strategies, however, the makers have eliminated the possibility for different, opposing voices to be heard, having led to the final product of a documentary which itself can easily lead to polarisation in the minds of its audience.

Keywords: Polarisation, rhetoric, counter-mythology, collective identity formation, activism

Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of contents	3
Preface	4
Research questions	4
Academic relevance	4
Theoretical framework	5
How does a documentary argue?	5
Collective identity formation	8
Methodology.....	10
Analysing the documentary	10
Analysing the website	11
Analysis	12
The rhetoric of documentary.....	12
Deliberative, epideictic and forensic rhetoric.....	14
Pathos, ethos and logos in <i>The Social Dilemma</i>	16
Modes of documentary.....	17
The counter-mythologies of <i>The Social Dilemma</i>	18
Beyond the Film-as-Text	19
The creation of a movement	20
Conclusion.....	24
Bibliography	26

Preface

In September of 2020, Netflix aired the documentary *The Social Dilemma*.¹ It talks about the dangers of social media and the various techniques that Big Tech companies use to keep people engaged with their products, even to the extent of dragging users into an addiction. On average, the general public has uncritically accepted the arguments made by *The Social Dilemma*, despite it making polarising claims which lack nuance and perspective. There are some critics to the film, such as social media strategist Anna Rawhiti-Connell,² but they are scarce and greatly outnumbered by the positivist receivers of the documentary. This is in line with how both the documentary and the accompanying website were designed to create a movement and strive for societal change. This paper looks to conduct a balanced re-reading of *The Social Dilemma*, placing it in a theoretical framework and broader context by looking at how the documentary and the website are intended to foster polarisation and form a movement to carry out changes to the social media landscape.

Research questions

The main research question central to the analysis conducted in this paper reads as follows:

“How does *The Social Dilemma* propagate polarisation in the debate around societal implications related to social media usage?”

Three subquestions have been formulated to help demarcate the field of research and concretise the broader topic of the main research question:

- What kinds of rhetorical strategies does *The Social Dilemma* employ?
- How does *The Social Dilemma* produce a counter-mythology founded on a standpoint of technological pessimism?
- How does the available paratext in the shape of a website seek to create an activist movement surrounding *The Social Dilemma*?

Academic relevance

Most articles that have been previously written about *The Social Dilemma* are reviews or news articles. Paschal Preston of the School of Communication in Dublin has edited a quartet of

¹ *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski, featuring Tristan Harris, Justin Rosenstein, Jaron Lanier, Aza Raskin, Shoshana Zuboff et al. (Netflix: 2020), https://www.netflix.com/watch/81254224?trackId=14170287&tctx=2%2C0%2Cefc43e2c-4d19-4990-bf86-6897163fe2c9-144219916%2Cfe7d956a-e641-4cc1-a793-b6fac1ecef56_53131615X3XX1623769684470%2C%2C.

² Anna Rawhiti-Connell, “Review: The problem with The Social Dilemma,” accessed 15th of June 2021, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/media/26-09-2020/review-the-problem-with-the-social-dilemma/>.

professional reviews on the documentary.³ However, despite mentioning the importance of considering the context in which a documentary is aired and watched, Preston does not take this context into consideration in his article. Part of my own academic relevance hence lies in providing a context of the framework of polarisation by means of extensively elaborating on the rhetoric used in the documentary, specifically focusing on creating activism. Additionally, the website TheSocialDilemma.com will also be taken into account in this analysis in order to provide further context to the original documentary and to lay out the continuation of the documentary's rhetoric.

Daniel Binns has written an article on the Netflix House Style of documentary making, in which he speaks about specific characteristics that are only seen in Netflix Original Series and Films and therefore equip Netflix' producers with a unique, standardised framework to characterise their products to fit the streaming service.⁴ This article, however, has been written with the idea of documentaries existing in a vacuum, meaning they are regarded as singular texts instead of existing in a context. By conducting this research and exploring how documentary films are not simply a self-contained entity that exists within a platform, I will add societal context to documentary studies and the position of documentaries in society. Hereby I will go beyond the film-as-text and into paratextual analysis in order to create new insights.

Additionally, this research will also contribute to the discourse on political polarisation in a public setting by looking into the documentary and website as a case study of the consequences of excessive usage of social media. Lastly, this study contributes to an academic understanding of the algorithmic imaginary and the algorithmic literacy this requires, by demonstrating how a documentary is able to affect the algorithmic imaginary in the mind of its audience.

Theoretical framework

How does a documentary argue?

The Social Dilemma tries to get an idea across to its viewers using a particular rhetoric. The foundation of rhetoric is explained by Christian Kock in his book *Deliberative Rhetoric: Arguing about Doing*. He describes three branches of rhetoric, being the **deliberative, forensic and epideictic branch**.⁵ The deliberative branch of rhetoric aims to persuade the hearers of a debate to take future action upon a certain matter. This branch is the most prominently present in *The Social Dilemma* as the documentary's main aim is to persuade viewers to take future action upon the current status

³ Paschal Preston, "The Social Dilemma, by Jeff Orlowski, Netflix, 2020: Film reviews with section editor's introduction," in *The Political Economy of Communication* 8, no. 2 (2020): 75-103, via <http://polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/download/131/364>.

⁴ Daniel Binns, "The Netflix documentary house style: Streaming TV and slow media," *Fusion Journal* 14 (2018), 60-71, via <http://fusion-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Issue-14-Intersections-Binns.pdf>.

⁵ Christian Kock, *Deliberative Rhetoric: Arguing about Doing* ed. Hans v. Hansen (Windsor: University of Windsor, 2017), 35, via <https://windsor.scholarsportal.info/omp/index.php/wsia/catalog/book/19>.

quo in the social media landscape. The other two branches of rhetoric are also present in the documentary, albeit not as prominently. The epideictic branch is focused on the present and is deployed in the examples of how social media currently function in terms of business models, algorithms and psychological tactics in user interface design. The forensic branch is focused on the past and comes forward when interviewees discuss their intentions behind creating certain affordances in a variety of social media platforms, such as the like button on Facebook.

In terms of rhetorical strategies used in documentaries, Jouko Aaltonen has described three modes of persuasion which documentary makers can make use of. These modes are **pathos**, **ethos** and **logos**.⁶ The mode of pathos is a style of rhetoric which relies on emotion and affective persuasion.⁷ The deliberative nature of *The Social Dilemma* leans strongly on the emotion-oriented mode of pathos, as it makes use of emotional appeal in order to make an impression on viewers. The mode of ethos is based on credibility.⁸ It calls on experts in order to solidify its claims and strengthen its argument. This mode is also prominently present in *The Social Dilemma*, as all interviewees have worked for or with Big Tech companies and thus can be regarded as knowledgeable concerning the topic. The mode of logos finds its foundation in rationale and logic.⁹ It relies on people's knowledge and common sense in order to convince them of a truth. This mode is less apparent throughout the documentary, but still comes forward in terms of claims made from a standpoint of intellectual arrogance.

In exploring how documentaries can argue, it is also relevant to consider the general genre properties of documentary, as they have been described by Bill Nichols in his book *Introduction to Documentary*.¹⁰ He describes six different cinematic modes of documentary, being the **expository** mode, the **poetic** mode, the **observational** mode, the **participatory** mode, the **reflexive** mode and the **performative** mode.¹¹ In the following table, a summarised overview of the qualities of each mode have been listed under their respective modes of application.

⁶ Jouko Aaltonen, "Claims of Hope and Disasters: Rhetoric Expression in Three Climate Change Documentaries," in *Studies in Documentary Film* 8, no. 1 (2014): 61-75, via <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17503280.2014.900947>.

⁷ Aaltonen, "Rhetoric Expression," 66.

⁸ Aaltonen, "Rhetoric Expression," 65-66.

⁹ Aaltonen, "Rhetoric Expression," 66-67.

¹⁰ Bill Nichols, "How Can We Differentiate Between Documentary Models and Modes? What Are the Poetic, Expository and Reflexive Modes?" in *Introduction to Documentary* 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 104-131, via <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/reader.action?docID=4813367>.

¹¹ Nichols, "Documentary Models," 105-112.

Quality	Expository	Poetic	Observational
<i>Knowledge treatment</i>	Abstract ideas and perspectives	Affective, reviewing similar concepts in a new way	Learning by watching, listening and observation
<i>Time and space</i>	Discontinuous, imagery from a wide range of time perspectives	Discontinuous, images building mood and patterns regardless of what they were originally used for	Continuous, words and actions are constantly linked
<i>Ethical concerns</i>	Historical accuracy, accurate representation	Disregard for individual original identity, danger of distortion	Passive observation is difficult for subjects
<i>Voice character</i>	Pursuing truth, aiming to inform the viewers	Expressive, aiming to refresh the viewer's perspective on the world	Simple, leaving room for interpretation in the viewer's mind.
Quality	Participatory	Reflexive	Performative
<i>Knowledge treatment</i>	Learning from interactions, interviews, encounters	Contextual, asking how and what we learn and questioning the framing of knowledge	Embodied and situated, learning from direct encounter instead of second-hand learning
<i>Time and space</i>	Continuous, but oftentimes connecting to historical time and space	Contextualised, realising how time and space are regarded and changed	Variable, possible stylisation to emphasise affect
<i>Ethical concerns</i>	Questions of manipulation and distortion	Abuse of subjects in order to have them represent the opinion of the filmmaker	Chance for misrepresentation of larger issues, self-deception
<i>Voice character</i>	Engaging, investing in presenting historical perspective	Questioning oneself, doubtful about truth and knowledge	Personal, pursuing truth of how the world is experienced from a certain point of view

Table 1: qualities of cinematic modes of documentary

Reasoning from Nichol's theory, characteristics from multiple modes of documentary are applicable to the case of *The Social Dilemma*, particularly the expository and the participatory mode, as these are characterised respectively by learning from interviews and interactions in a continuous time and space and seeking to inform and activate the viewer.

A major part of rhetoric deployed by *The Social Dilemma* is **polarisation**. Concretely, polarisation arises when two opposing parties disagree with each other to such a strong extent, where they are no longer open to communicating together to discuss their differences.¹² As is described by Michael P. Lynch, polarisation is oftentimes caused by what he calls **intellectual arrogance**. Intellectually arrogant people are stubborn in their beliefs and are unwilling to consider enriching their own view of the world with evidence and experience from others.¹³ Especially when intellectual arrogance is enacted from the safety of a community, it has plenty of opportunity to spread and grow.¹⁴

Collective identity formation

The second sub-question is centred around counter-mythologies. A **mythology** is a particular narrative that plays a fundamental role in society, as has been described by philosopher Roland Barthes.¹⁵ Reasoning forward from that idea, a **counter-mythology** is a similar narrative, but opposing the original consensual narrative, introducing a new standpoint into the general public. *The Social Dilemma* proposes this counter-mythology by inducing what is called **collective identity formation**. This phenomenon, which finds its origin in identity theory and social identity theory, is broadly explored by Jenny L. Davis et al. in their article in *Social Psychology Quarterly* no.3 of 2019.¹⁶ Collective social identity captures the relation between individual and group dynamics in an environment of media and explores how individuals are prone to wanting to belong to a group or a community. The verification of a social identity relies on perceived support for the performance of said identity, meaning individuals will alter their behaviour in order to belong to their community if they feel like their initial behaviour was not appreciated.¹⁷ The formation of this collective identity comes forth easily from a standpoint of activist identification, meaning that activist social movements often make use of collective identity formation in order to exist and maintain.¹⁸

In answering the second sub-question, it is also important to explore the idea of the **algorithmic imaginary**. This theory by Taina Bucher relates algorithms to affect and is to be understood “as the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what

¹² Michael P. Lynch, “Polarisation and the Problem of Spreading Arrogance,” in *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism: Philosophical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2021), 147, via https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342719075_Polarisation_and_the_problem_of_spreading_arrogance.

¹³ Lynch, “Spreading Arrogance,” 139-142.

¹⁴ Lynch, “Spreading Arrogance,” 146-147.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

¹⁶ Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love and Phoenicia Fares, “Collective Social Identity: Synthesizing Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory Using Digital Data,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2019): 256, via <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/doi/10.1177/0190272519851025>.

¹⁷ Davis et al., “Identity,” 254-258.

¹⁸ Davis et al., “Identity,” 257.

these imaginations make possible.”¹⁹ As *The Social Dilemma* paints a rather dystopian picture of social media and the algorithms it functions with, the makers of the documentary actively aim to change this algorithmic imaginary in the minds of the people. Changing the imagination of algorithms towards a single mythology is important from the perspective of collective identity formation, as a collective imagination will further unify the individuals of the community, thereby strengthening its collective identity and increasing the possibility for the creation of a movement.

¹⁹ Tania Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms,” in *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 31, via <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

Methodology

The research questions will be answered by conducting a (para)textual analysis. The corpus will consist out of specific scenes, stills and excerpts from the documentary itself as well as a select few pages of the accompanying paratext in the shape of a website.

Analysing the documentary

In analysing *The Social Dilemma*, important scenes and stills from the documentary will be analysed using two method texts. The first text will be from Bill Nichols, namely the chapter “How Can We Write Effectively about Documentary” from his book *Introduction to Documentary*.²⁰ This chapter will be used as a general framework on writing on documentaries and provides a step-by-step guide on how to write about a documentary.²¹ The first step to writing about a documentary is to watch it multiple times. In reviewing the documentary, taking notes is vital as it provides the raw material that will be explored for analysis.²² Subsequently, a writer can sketch out their viewpoint before formulating a thesis statement and then proceed to rewatch the film again in search of concrete scenes that will support their statement.²³ Nichols then provides a guide to help writers explore how to conduct research into a topic using both physical libraries and internet searches, aiming to move away from opinion and into analysis.²⁴ After this initial research, the next step is to examine the six cinematic modes of documentary that Nichols has laid out in a later chapter in his book in order to identify which of these modes are used the most in the making of *The Social Dilemma*. Additionally, the text “Claims of Hope and Disasters: Rhetoric Expression in Three Climate Change Documentaries,” by Jouko Aaltonen will also be used as a methodological inspiration, meaning the theoretical rhetorical modes of pathos, ethos and logos will be methodologically used throughout this paper to provide a coherent framework for the analysis.

The specific scenes and excerpts that will be analysed in this research paper are chosen after careful examination and note-taking. I have selected scenes, stills and excerpts that demonstrate the strategies of polarisation, counter-mythology production and collective identity formation in the most explicit way, for instance the thumbnail for the documentary as shown in figure 2 and the interview excerpts in table 2. Therefore, it is ensured that the selected scenes represent the mythology of the documentary in the truest way possible in order to prevent misinterpretation or falsely made claims.

²⁰ Bill Nichols, “How Can We Write Effectively about Documentary?” in *Introduction to Documentary* 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 194-208.

²¹ Nichols, “Write Effectively,” 194.

²² Nichols, “Write Effectively,” 194-196.

²³ Nichols, “Write Effectively,” 196-198.

²⁴ Nichols, “Write Effectively,” 198-204.

Analysing the website

As has been described in the theoretical framework, the makers of *The Social Dilemma* created a website as a paratext to the documentary, aiming to create a movement around the problem they see arising in social media usage. To analyse this paratext, the same range of concepts will be used that have also been used to explore analyse the documentary, specifically the concepts of deliberative rhetoric and collective identity formation. The article ““Not merely para”: continuing steps in paratextual research” by Robert Brookey and Jonathan Gray will be used as a supportive method text as it provides insights in how paratexts are built to function as well as how to analyse paratexts as primary research subjects which complement the original text by adding new layers of meaning, without being inferior to that original text.²⁵

The website informs visitors of online gatherings and conferences where issues like the ones highlighted in the documentary are further discussed.²⁶ Visitors can watch previously held meetings and are encouraged to then continue their way into the website and take real world action on the matter. Additionally, individuals are invited to reboot their own social media use, to start a conversation with people in their surroundings, to get people together and to “Fight Fire with Fire.”²⁷ This paratext unifies the film’s mythology and facilitates the creation of a movement by means of collective identity formation and a concrete call to action. The website as a paratext will be made tangible by means of screenshots and direct quotations.

Two specific pages of the website have been carefully chosen as a subject to the analysis. Firstly, the landing page, as this page is the first thing which viewers will see if they choose to extend their Social Dilemma experience and thus has been built to make an immediate impression on the visitor of the site. Secondly, the ‘take action’ page, as this is the page where visitors are very actively persuaded to, indeed, take action and take matters into their own hands.

²⁵ Robert Brookey and Jonathan Gray, ““Not merely para”: continuing steps in paratextual research,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 101-110.

²⁶ “The Tour,” *The Social Dilemma*, last accessed 16th of June 2021, <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/the-film/virtual-tour/>.

²⁷ “Take Action,” *The Social Dilemma*, last accessed 16th of June 2021, <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/take-action/>.

Analysis

The rhetoric of documentary

The first thing to discuss is how *The Social Dilemma* as a documentary can construct an argument and argue in favour of a certain standpoint by means of rhetorical strategies. As has been stated in the theoretical framework, the theme of polarisation reoccurs consistently throughout the film. The first instance in which this duality of opinions is addressed can be found in the thumbnail for *The Social Dilemma* in the Netflix application, see figure 1.

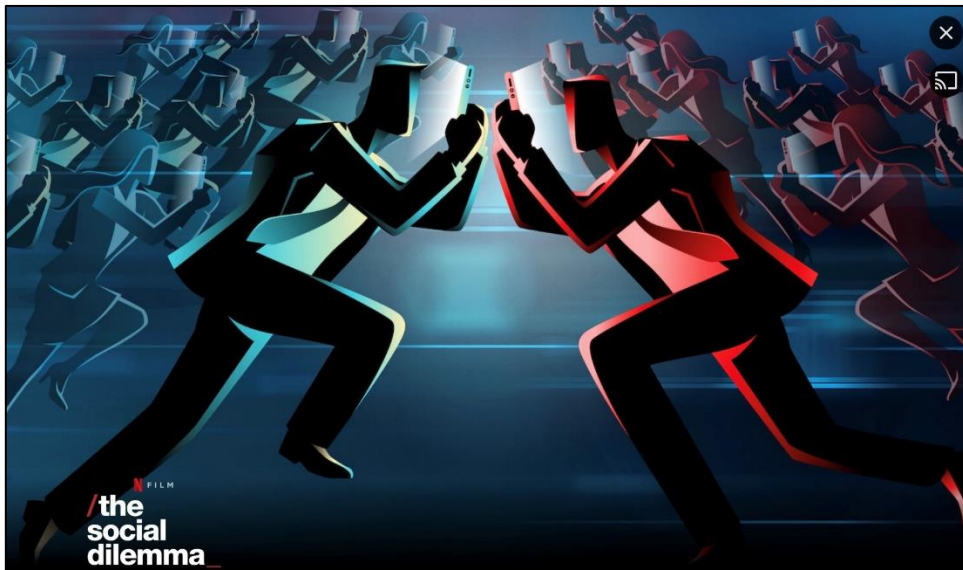


Figure 1: the thumbnail for *The Social Dilemma* on Netflix in the iPad application

The thumbnail shows two groups of people coloured blue and red, running towards each other at high speed, a mere second from colliding. Each individual runs with their phone inches from their face, negligent to their surroundings. Albeit a very literal visualisation, this imagery very specifically visualises the theme of polarisation by dividing the group in the immediate centre and giving them very distinct colours, which link to the American political system wherein the colour blue represents the democrats and red represents the republicans.

This division between the political left and right returns in the documentary, in a scene from the dramatization. Throughout the documentary, a multitude of scenes that form a chronologically told dramatization alternate with the interviews. The storyline entails an American family of five, each of whom has their own things they struggle with. The oldest daughter Cassie strongly opposes the concept of social media and dislikes the fact that her mother gave her younger sister a smartphone. Ben, the middle child, uses his smartphone a lot but is unaware of the dangers of algorithms behind it, and the youngest daughter Isla is trying to find her way online but has a hard

time coping with her insecurities. Additionally, there are three characters, all played by the same actor, who act as a personified version of an artificial intelligence (AI) in Ben's phone: the engagement AI, the growth AI and the advertising AI. This personification of the algorithms suggests that AI functions like a human or is controlled by one, a notion which is reiterated by one of the interviewees when he states these algorithms take on a life of their own as soon as we release them.²⁸

After having showed interest in conspiracy theory, the AI in Ben's phone picks up the heightened interaction with these posts and leads Ben into a filter bubble of radicalised far right politics. The interrelated AIs trigger certain responses in Ben by presenting him with content from intellectually arrogant creators based on a confirmation bias, hereby creating a filter bubble which results in Ben looking for more and more confirmation to the idea that these conspiracies are true to reaffirm his sense of belonging. The intellectual arrogance from the fictional creators is a key factor in inducing polarisation, as human beings are naturally programmed to want to be part of a group or a community.²⁹ A similar filter bubble of misinformation is created relatively easily, as fake news spread six times faster than true news through platforms such as Twitter.³⁰ When his algorithms keep presenting Ben with more videos to confirm his doubts, his behaviour escalates once he decides to join a rally in his neighbourhood and gets arrested when police intervene.

By designing the thumbnail and incorporating Ben's storyline in the dramatization, the makers of *The Social Dilemma* aim to demonstrate the dangers of polarisation and its consequences. These dangers are further emphasised by the interviewees throughout the film. A multitude of observations done in this research, however, suggest that the filmmakers themselves actively practice the propagation of polarisation and intellectual arrogance, despite their efforts to underline the dangers of it. The first instance of intellectually arrogant behaviour exhibited by the filmmakers is found at the opening of the documentary. *The Social Dilemma* opens with a black screen which a quote fades into. It reads: "Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse," a quote from around 450 BC accredited to Sophocles as can be seen in figure 2. This statement, accompanied by an eerie piece of music, is pretentious to open the film with as it does not have a direct link with the subject matter of the discussion in the film. Its accreditation to Sophocles gives the viewer a sense of inferiority in terms of intellect, as the average person does not encounter ancient Greek tragedians on a regular basis. Additionally, the usage of this quote ties in with the poetic documentary mode as described by Nichols, as it immediately aims to alter the viewer's perspective of the film and its main topics.

²⁸ *The Social Dilemma*, Alex Roetter, 2:45 to 3:01.

²⁹ Lynch, "Spreading Arrogance," 146-147.

³⁰ *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris, 1:02:11 to 1:02:19.

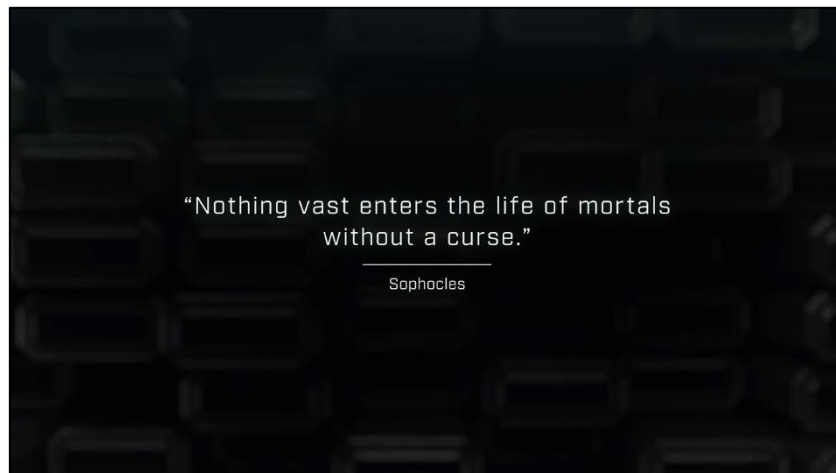


Figure 2: the opening shot for The Social Dilemma

This display of intellectual arrogance by the filmmakers is used to attract the viewer's interest and keep them looking for reaffirmation of the statement made, just like how Ben wanted to verify his thoughts about the conspiracies presented to him by his AI. The documentary hereafter proceeds to reconfirm and maintain this claim, wherein the 'vastness' is the dilemma of social media and the power of Big Tech companies, and 'the curse' are the consequences that these may entail.

After this opening shot, a few interviewees are shown sitting down and getting comfortable for their interview. Almost every interviewee appears nervous and even slightly unsettled, having the atmosphere tie in with a less prominent cinematic mode of documentary, namely the self-reflexive mode, as the interviewees seem doubtful about their own truths and the way they want to express those. Joe Toscano even admits right away that he has spoken with numerous lawyers for months about what he is allowed to say to the documentary makers and what needs to remain secret.³¹ In addition to engaging in a reflexive mode, Toscano's statement works as an attention grabber by means of intellectual arrogance, Toscano implies that he knows so much about the issue that the viewer, nor the interviewers, are not even allowed to know how much he knows.

Deliberative, epideictic and forensic rhetoric

The overarching concept of rhetoric as has been introduced by Aristotle has been reinterpreted by Christian Kock in his book *Deliberative Rhetoric: Arguing about Doing*.³² He describes the deliberative, epideictic and forensic branch of rhetoric, which are based respectively on focusing on the future, the present and the past in its argumentations.³³ Each of these branches can be

³¹ *The Social Dilemma*, Joe Toscano, 1:47 to 1:56.

³² Kock, *Rhetoric*, 35-38, 106-109.

³³ Kock, *Rhetoric*, 35-38.

distinguished in *The Social Dilemma*, albeit some more prominent than others. Tristan admits the current situation regarding social media and the power of Big Tech companies is not all doom and gloom, but a simultaneous utopia and dystopia.³⁴ Other interviewees also emphasise that no one ever intended evil in designing technologies into how they are today, but that the problem lies in the business model, maintained by economic incentive and shareholder pressure.³⁵ This argument ties in with the epideictic branch of the present in discussing the current status quo, as well as the forensic branch of the past in mentioning original intentions. Alex Roetter mentions that it is impossible to “put the genie back in the bottle,”³⁶ making change almost impossible, tying in with Lanier’s earlier claims as to how the initial change toward the current state of things was slow and gradual, but now can barely be undone.³⁷ The argument Roetter and Lanier make thus continues with the deliberative branch, focusing on the future.

Currently, there is no regulation, there are no rules and there is no competition in the social media landscape, according to Sandy Parakilas.³⁸ There are a few companies who own all platforms and have all the power, making them de facto governments of the internet. Both national and international law runs behind on these companies, which many of the interviewees believe to be incredibly dangerous.³⁹ Shoshana Zuboff therefore claims that these monopolised markets should be outlawed as they undermine freedom and democracy.⁴⁰ This argumentation also ties in with both the epideictic and deliberative branch of rhetoric, first stating the current state of the social media landscape and then proceeding to formulate necessary action which needs to be taken in the future.

From around timestamp 1:27:08 on, a more concrete call to action starts to form in the deliberative argumentation, by indicating that us humans can change the technologies and the dangers within them and claiming that we can demand that these services are designed in a humane manner. Most interesting is a quote formulated by Jaron Lanier: “It’s the critics that drive improvement.”⁴¹ By making this statement, Lanier is exemplifying himself and makers of the documentary as the critics, thus the ones driving the improvement. He hereby portrays himself as a sort of hero in pursuit of the goal of avoiding future disaster. This portrayal entails a certain degree of arrogance once again, thereby creating an incentive for viewers to broaden their views and join the conversation. The option of choosing not to want to drive improvement is not mentioned, as the makers of the documentary solely aim to activate their audience into taking future action. Hereby

³⁴ *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris, 1:21:17 to 1:21:35.

³⁵ *The Social Dilemma*, Joe Toscano, Alex Roetter and Tristan Harris, 1:22:10 to 1:22:49.

³⁶ *The Social Dilemma*, Alex Roetter, 1:22:25 to 1:22:27.

³⁷ *The Social Dilemma*, Jaron Lanier, 14:20 to 14:55.

³⁸ *The Social Dilemma*, Sandy Parakilas, 1:22:43 to 1:23:06.

³⁹ *The Social Dilemma*, Sandy Parakilas, 1:22:43 to 1:23:06.

⁴⁰ *The Social Dilemma*, Shoshana Zuboff, 1:24:22 to 1:24:44.

⁴¹ *The Social Dilemma*, Jaron Lanier, 1:28:29 to 1:29:32.

they manage, however, to leave out the other side of the story and the reasons why a change might not be necessary, which leads to polarisation among viewers. Viewers will either completely agree with Lanier et al. and want to make an actual change, judging the ‘less knowledgeable’ for not doing what is right, or they will perceive Lanier as a cocky doomsayer and move as far away from this improvement as possible, creating a big gap in opinions between viewers by means of deliberative rhetoric. We can thus conclude that out of the three rhetoric branches that Kock describes, the deliberative branch is by far the most visible throughout the film, as its main focus lies on looking forward and changing the course we are currently on.

Pathos, ethos and logos in *The Social Dilemma*

Rhetoric can also be expressed through different modes, as has been explained by Jouko Aaltonen, specifically regarding (climate change) documentaries. These three modes of pathos, ethos and logos are all in practice in *The Social Dilemma*, though once again some more prominently than others. The emotion-oriented mode of pathos ties in with the deliberative nature of the documentary, as it speaks to the viewer’s emotions in order to make an impression and encourage them to take future action. The film appeals to the psychological properties of human beings not wanting to be left out and feel alone in order to have the audience want to be a part of their story, as has been described in previous paragraphs.

The mode of ethos bases itself on credibility, both in the professional and in the moral sense.⁴² This mode is present in *The Social Dilemma* as all interviewees are ascribed with having been actively involved with Big Tech companies or having written extensively about their experiences and concerns. All interviewees are accredited with their accomplishments as soon as they themselves appear on screen, consistently maintaining the use of the rhetoric mode of ethos. The interviewees are also credible in the moral sense as they all share similar concerns about the current state of the social media landscape, creating a coherent ethical position throughout the film.

Lastly, there is the mode of logos, which entails arguing based on logic, rational and common sense. It relies on people’s knowledge about a certain topic in order to convince them of a truth.⁴³ In *The Social Dilemma*, the mode of logos is less prominent than the previous two modes, but present in the eldest sister in the dramatization, Cassie. Through Cassie, the filmmakers visualise the modes of pathos and logos by presenting her as a character who strongly disapproves usage of social media. By wholeheartedly disagreeing with her parents and siblings, she hereby visualises an empathically relatable personality who is also able to logically piece together the potential future dangers of

⁴² Aaltonen, “Rhetoric Expression,” 65-66.

⁴³ Aaltonen, “Rhetoric Expression,” 66-67.

excessive unchecked and unregulated social media usage. Her insights are thus in line with those of the interviewees in terms of the dangers of social media and the works of algorithms as she repeatedly warns her brother Ben about them.

Modes of documentary

In his book *Introduction to documentary*, Bill Nichols describes six different cinematic modes of documentary: the expository mode, the poetic mode, the observational mode, the participatory mode, the reflexive mode and the performative mode.⁴⁴ Elements from four out of these six have been combined in *The Social Dilemma*, namely the expository, participatory, reflexive and poetic mode. Nichols explains in his book that it is not uncommon for a documentary film to mix (aspects of) these modes, as filmmakers “frequently adopt a fluid, pragmatic approach to their material, blending different models and modes to achieve a distinct result.”⁴⁵

The expository mode is characterised by treating knowledge as concepts and perspectives, using a discontinuous chronology of space and time and voicing a pursuit of truth, “seeking to inform and move an audience” by presenting evidence.⁴⁶ In *The Social Dilemma*, the knowledge and perspectives of the interviewees are regarded as indexical evidence as all interviewees tell their story from the experience of having been part of the system in question. The timeline can be regarded as discontinuous due to the constant alternation between interviews and scenes from the dramatization, and due to the deliberative branch of rhetoric equipped throughout the entire film, the main goal is voicing a need for change through informing an audience, attempting to lead them to make changes in the future.

The participatory mode treats knowledge as obtainable through interactions and encounters had by creators themselves, such as but not limited to interviews. The chronology of space and time is arranged in a continuous manner and the voice of a participatory film is engaging, seeking to invest effort in presenting (historical) perspective.⁴⁷ This treatment of knowledge is seen in the entire film, as most of it consists out of interviews. In some instances, interviews are further enhanced with animated scenes to further clarify and visualise the story being told, which is where aspects of the poetic mode arise as knowledge is herein treated as an affective good which is voiced expressively. An example of this is how a simplistically animated sequence is edited into the film when Tristan Harris talks about how he initially acted on his concerns about the addictiveness of e-mail by making a presentation about the topic and sending it to his closest colleagues. A continuous

⁴⁴ Nichols, “Documentary Models,” 105-112.

⁴⁵ Nichols, “Documentary Models,” 110.

⁴⁶ Nichols, “Documentary Models,” 108.

⁴⁷ Nichols, “Documentary Models,” 109.

timeline is found in the dramatization, which has been edited in chronological order to maintain comprehensibility and a sensible storyline.

The counter-mythologies of *The Social Dilemma*

The Social Dilemma produces a counter-mythology founded on a standpoint of technological pessimism. A mythology is a certain narrative that is considered a consensus in our society, playing a fundamental role in how we interact with each other as has been described by philosopher Roland Barthes.⁴⁸ A counter-mythology is thus a narrative which directly opposes the original consensus, introducing a new standpoint to the general public. The mythology in this case is the consensus around the state of the social media landscape and the power being held by Big Tech companies. In the beginning of his interview, Jim Kendall describes this mythology by explaining how social media have created beautiful opportunities for people all around the world, from reuniting long-lost family members to finding organ donors.⁴⁹ He then proceeds to introduce the major theme of the counter-mythology of the documentary by stating: “I think we were naïve about the flip side of that coin.”⁵⁰ Kendall hereby pinpoints the core of the counter-mythology which the documentary is trying to produce, which is reiterated by different interviewees who explain how many of the professionals involved never intended any of the negative implications that arose.⁵¹ It is worth noting that *The Social Dilemma* is not the first medium that attempts to argue against the abundant usage of social media at the present time, but it is the first attempt in combining all those arguments into one coherent counter-mythology.

Tristan Harris talks about how it is important for us to know what metaphorical tribe thinks of us, which ties in with the concept of collective identity formation.⁵² He emphasises, however, that humans were never built to seek the approval of thousands or even millions of people online, and hereby puts emphasis on the problematic nature of this current situation online.⁵³ Later in the film, a different interviewee underlines the dangers of this extensive tribalism, warning the viewers against polarisation, exemplifying his statement by referencing the alleged interference of Russia in the 2016 American presidential elections.⁵⁴ This is where the concept of the algorithmic imaginary comes into action, as this statement explicitly tries to change the algorithmic imaginary in the mind of the viewer by putting emphasis on the counter-mythology which the documentary is presenting.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*.

⁴⁹ *The Social Dilemma*, Tim Kendall, 2:19 to 2:40.

⁵⁰ *The Social Dilemma*, Tim Kendall, 2:41 to 2:45.

⁵¹ *The Social Dilemma*, Jeff Seibert, 2:45-3:01

⁵² *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris, 38:52 to 38:59.

⁵³ *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris, 38:59 to 39:14.

⁵⁴ *The Social Dilemma*, Roger McNamee, 1:12:12 to 1:12:31.

The earlier described personification of the three AIs in Ben's smartphone are also playing a role in reshaping the algorithmic imaginary of the audience, as this simplification conveys a concrete idea of how social media operate behind the scenes.

Out of all interviewees, Jaron Lanier is the one to make the most radical claims, speaking of how the current usage of social media destroys civilisation, and degrades democracy into a "bizarre autocratic dysfunction," eventually resulting in humans not surviving as a species if we continue to go down this path.⁵⁵ Lanier hereby, too, strengthens the counter-mythology presented by the documentary through deliberative rhetoric, as he completely disregards all positives of social media and solely focuses on its problems. He personally imagines the algorithms and everything behind it as evil and dangerous, which is an imaginary he tries to convince the viewers of as well.

Tristan Harris, co-founder of the *Center for Humane Technology* and labelled "the conscience of Silicon Valley," is one of the key figures in the documentary, receiving by far the largest amount of screen time. The filmmakers have decided to portray Harris as some sort of hero in the counter-mythology they produce, wherein they portray Harris almost like a fictional character undergoing a hero's journey into becoming the key to viable changes in the industry. Harris is hereby put forward as a personification of their counter-mythology and can visually demonstrate what such a journey would entail. The filmmakers hereby seem to take a position of intellectual arrogance on Harris's part.

Beyond the Film-as-Text

The final component of the documentary that will be taken into consideration in this analysis is the rolling credits of the documentary. Interestingly, parts of the interviews are still rolling on the left side of the screen whilst the right side displays the usual rolling credits. The purpose of showing these interview excerpts in addition to the regular rolling credits is likely in order to avoid definite closure on the issue at hand. Having deployed mostly the deliberative branch of rhetoric throughout the documentary, the filmmakers want the viewers to act on the issues they have been presented with, thus provide suggestions of concrete actions the audience can take in order to improve their social media usage. These actions include turning off notifications, discussing social media and smartphone usage with your children, not clicking on videos recommended to you by the algorithm and uninstalling applications.⁵⁶ The filmmakers hereby aim to push the viewers out of a passivist view and into activism.

⁵⁵ *The Social Dilemma*, Jaron Lanier, 1:20:24 to 1:20:55.

⁵⁶ *The Social Dilemma*, 1:30:17 to 1:32:42.

The Social Dilemma ends with a black screen stating: “Follow us on social media!”, followed up with: “Just kidding”. The final shot reads: “Let’s have a conversation about fixing it. TheSocialDilemma.com.” This final shot builds a bridge to the website by means of a final deployment of deliberative rhetoric, urging the audience to look further into the counter-mythology which *The Social Dilemma* has laid out for them.

The creation of a movement

TheSocialDilemma.com is a continuation of the counter-mythology which was originally presented in the documentary. This website actively seeks to create a movement by hosting online conferences, being broadly present on social media and actively encouraging viewers to change their current behaviour, constituting the counter-mythology that the makers of the documentary are attempting to get across. By further encouraging collective identity formation, the makers of the film and website aim to create a movement and make viable changes to the Big Tech industry. The pages that will be looked at in this analysis are the landing page and the ‘Take Action’-page, as the first of these is the initial interaction a viewer will have with content related to but outside of the original documentary, and the latter of these is most explicitly aimed toward activism and making a change.

When following the link ‘TheSocialDilemma.com’, the viewer of the documentary, now visitor of the website, will first be directed to the landing page of the website. The design of the website shows parallels with the design of Netflix’s website in terms of colour choices: the main two colours on TheSocialDilemma.com are a greyish black and a contrasting shade of red, with some white added for readability. In terms of design, the website is thus constructed following the Netflix House Style which was described by Daniel Binns in his article in *Fusion Journal*,⁵⁷ and forms a visual parallel with the documentary, confirming that this website is indeed an extension of the original documentary. In the top bar, the logo of *The Social Dilemma* shows on the left, an icon representing a notification bell with one unread notification in the middle and to the right four different pages to redirect the visitor to, followed by a drop-down menu which leads to pages about contacting the makers, making donations and press opportunities, as can be seen in figure 3. Under this top bar an animated screen is placed, showing short excerpts from the documentary with overlaying text: “The technology that connects us also controls us,” wherein the word ‘control’ gets backspaced and retyped through animation to be replaced with “manipulates,” “polarises,” “distracts,” “monetises,” and “divides.”⁵⁸ The fact that these words are deemed as interchangeable by the makers of the

⁵⁷ Binns, “House Style.”

⁵⁸ “The Social Dilemma,” TheSocialDilemma.com, accessed 15th of June 2021, <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/>.

website suggests that all these terms are interrelated, thereby reminding the visitor of the website of the scale of the problem at hand.

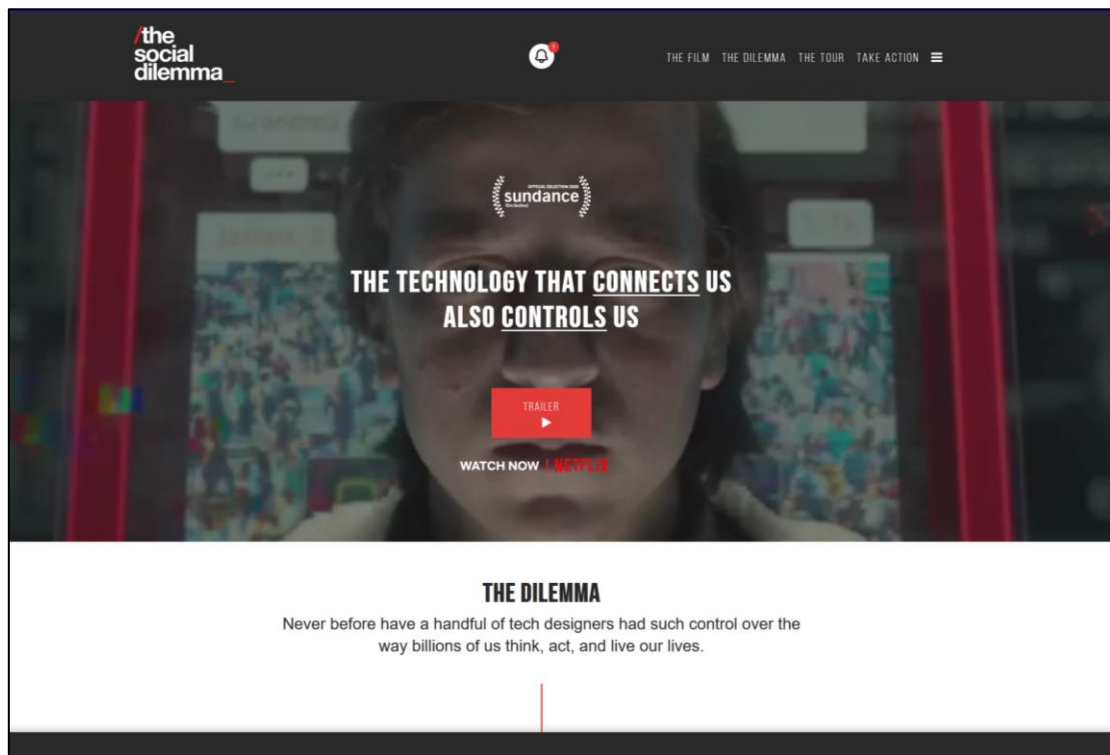


Figure 3: the landing page for the website accompanying the documentary.

At the bottom of the looping animation, a link to the trailer is visible, followed up with the words “WATCH NOW | NETFLIX.” Under the animation, the dilemma which the documentary is about is concretely put to words for the first time: “Never before have a handful of tech designers had such control over the way billions of us think, act, and live our lives.”⁵⁹ Under this explanation, depending on the wideness of the visitor’s computer screen, the dilemma is further specified into three parts, namely the mental health dilemma, the democracy dilemma and the discrimination dilemma.

The first thing that will attract the attention of the visitor is the animated banner in the middle of the screen. The text in the middle draws the eye through the constant movement and will leave the visitor looking for a while, at least until they have seen all the variations of the sentence that are presented. The red vertical line under visually continues the deliberative rhetoric that has been employed in the documentary and continues all the way to the bottom of the page, leading the visitor through all the content which the makers want them to see. This specific form of direction is what Jonathan Gray metaphorically refers to as ‘urban planning’.⁶⁰ Whilst the visitor of a website has

⁵⁹ TheSocialDilemma.com, “The Social Dilemma.”

⁶⁰ Brookey and Gray, “Paratextual Research,” unknown.

agency to choose where they want to scroll to, it is the job of the creator of the paratext to get the reader through a text in the way they want them to by making one option of continuation more enticing than the other one.⁶¹ By deploying this tactic of website design, the makers of the website further strengthen the intended collective identity formation as they aim for as many of the visitors as possible to read the exact same text, whereafter they are convinced to agree with the arguments it makes and join the intended activism.

On the top right of the landing page, the visitors of the website see four links to different content pages, being “The Film,” “The Dilemma,” “The Tour,” and “Take Action.” The latter of these four will be analysed in this research and is enclosed in figure 4.

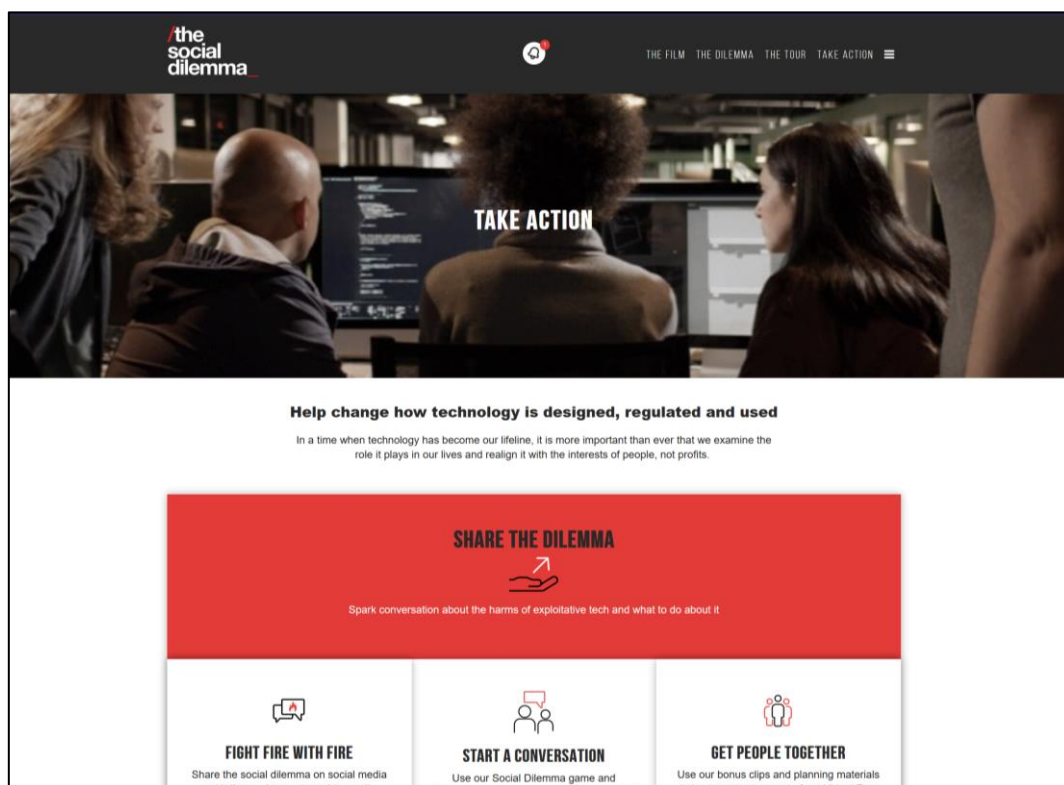


Figure 4: the ‘Take Action’-page from TheSocialDilemma.com.

The banner of this page, unlike the landing page, is not animated, but shows a still image from the documentary.⁶² This clip is edited in with the interviewees functioning as voice-overs, explaining how it is not impossible to change the current social media landscape as it is not set in stone, but solely based on decisions made by human beings. In this sudden utopian shift in the trail of thought in the documentary links with the rhetorical mode of pathos as it appeals to the viewer’s emotional characteristics in order to reiterate the intent of collective identity formation and convince viewers

⁶¹ Brookey and Gray, “Paratextual Research,” unknown.

⁶² *The Social Dilemma*, 1:26:53.

to join. The picture shown appeals to the human need for community and collective identity formation by showing multiple people at the computer, emphasising how this change cannot be done by oneself, but is possible as a community.

Under this banner, a text tells the visitor to help make a change, after which multiple concrete actions to take in order to do so have been listed. This Take Action-page is thus a continuation from the point where the documentary left off, providing the audience with more ways to become part of the community and form a collective. As has been explained in previous paragraphs and the theoretical framework, collectives are oftentimes formed as part of activism as activism many a time finds strength in numbers. Visitors of the Take Action-page are encouraged to share the dilemma at hand with as many people as possible, ironically enough by use of social media, but also by starting discussions about it with people in their lives. The makers of the website even encourage visitors to take their activism a step further and organise meetings and events in order to spread awareness and increase their contribution to the community, thereby further strengthening the call for a collective identity formation and the sense of community in those individuals who decide to engage in the intended activism.

Conclusion

In this analysis, the main research question has been to examine how the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* propagates polarisation in the debate around societal implications related to social media usage. In order to formulate an answer to this question, three subquestions regarding rhetorical strategies, counter-mythologies, the algorithmic imaginary and the creation of a movement have been formulated.

Much of the rhetoric of *The Social Dilemma* is based on the concept of polarisation, often caused by intellectual arrogance. The makers of the documentary put forward many cases in which polarisation occurs, for instance in the political field or within families. Ironically, they have not managed to stay away from these practices themselves, as they open their documentary with a statement expressing intellectual arrogance on their part.

In a more general context, it was discovered that documentaries have a wide range of tools, models and modes to deploy to get an argument across, the first of which are deliberative, epideictic and forensic branches of rhetoric. In *The Social Dilemma*, the deliberative branch is the most prominent out of those three, as the main goal of the documentary is to encourage its audience to act upon the current state of the social media landscape and to thus change it in the nearest possible future. In addition to these three branches, has been determined that the rhetoric mode most prominently present in *The Social Dilemma* is the mode of ethos, which finds its foundation in professional and moral credibility, of which there is plenty throughout the entire documentary. The other two modes of pathos and logos are also present, as the documentary both appeals to the audience's emotional capacity as well as their critical thinking. The six modes of cinematic documentary described by Nichols have also been taken into consideration in this analysis, and it has been determined that a mix of four of these is at play in *The Social Dilemma*.

In exploring how *The Social Dilemma* produces a counter-mythology to the current consensus around Big Tech companies and the social media landscape, it has been determined that the makers of the documentary do this through a practice called collective identity formation. By playing into the human psychology of wanting to belong, they make it possible for all interviewees to come together a community which the viewer should want to be part of. This notion is taken through to the paratext in the shape of the website [TheSocialDilemma.com](https://www.thesocialdilemma.com). This website actively seeks to empower visitors to act and make a change, once again by deploying the deliberative branch of rhetoric found in the original documentary as well as by speaking to its visitors on an emotional and psychological level in the mode of pathos.

Returning to the main research concerning rhetorical strategies, however, an alarming observation has been made. Polarisation forms a main part of the rhetoric of the film, and the

makers do everything in their power to express the dangers of it to its viewers. *The Social Dilemma* and the accompanying website, however, do exactly that: they leave no room for the expression of different opinions, as individuals who disagree with their argument do not appear in the documentary nor on the website and are thus not given a voice. In conclusion, the makers of *The Social Dilemma* have created a documentary which itself leads to polarisation through intellectual arrogance, the production of a counter-mythology and collective identity formation, despite its efforts to demonstrate the dangers of these very constructs, resulting in possibly having brought its audience further from a solution to polarisation instead of closer to it.

The research conducted in this paper has been bound by various limitations. For example, there has not been room to incorporate viewer reviews into the analysis in order to analyse how the public has responded to the message the documentary tries to convey. In terms of further research into this topic in order to find out more about how *The Social Dilemma* itself is a polarising documentary, an opportunities thus lie in analysing how the documentary and the website have been received by the general public through a method of data mining and textual analysis. Additionally, this research paper has focused solely on the visual and textual strategies deployed throughout the documentary, and so more room for further research lies in exploring the effects that the soundtrack of the documentary has on its viewers in order to examine whether the choices for music and sound effects play a supplementary role in shaping the rhetoric of the documentary.

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