# Designing for Tech, Anti-Racism and...Tik Tok with Jen Serdetchnaia

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

people, design, exclusion, talking, tick tock, read, thinking, specific, financial services, feel, problem, algorithm, influencers, relates, question, inclusive, called, big, technology, part

00:05
Zoya:
Hello, everyone, welcome to another episode of Inclusive Conversations. In this episode, we handed the mic over to Joe, who took some time out of his busy schedule to have a chat with a fellow alumna of our graduate program, Jen Serdetchnaia. She also has professional experience in financial services, and we thought Joe would be the perfect person to carry this conversation. Now since we are very transparent in our conversations, and about where we work and our professional affiliations, I do need to note that all the views expressed in this podcast are strictly those of the individuals and they do not represent any of the institutions mentioned at all. We speak only for ourselves. Personally, I really enjoyed listening to this conversation and I hope you do as well.

00:55
Joe:
Hi, Jen Sir-ditch-nyah, did I say it right?

01:01
Jen:
Nope. Sir-dutch-naya.

01:06
Joe:
Oh, by the end of this, I'll have it down.

So you are a product design lead at Scotiabank in Toronto? Notice how I did not pronounce the second T.

And you have been for some time? How long have you been in your line of work?

01:28
Jen:
Oh, that is a great question, Joe. So I've been working as a designer since, let's say early 2013, which is really hard to think about because Time flies, especially the last couple years, and I've been in tech, so starting my career at IBM actually, ever since 2012. Yeah. And that,

to me, still feels like a couple years ago, but now that's a good 10 or so years behind us. Scary.

Joe:
Why the jump into financial services?

Jen:
Another good question. So I think I would assume you're a little bit familiar, pretty familiar with Toronto? No, as, as indicated by your pronunciation. So I think many of us in Toronto, what we know is that it's a massive hub for financial services. So pretty much when I look at any city and any geography and actually my masters at OCAD, which is our connection, part of kind of the crux of my master's was the impact of geography on the startup ecosystem. So when you look at Toronto, you see a lot of financial innovation, you see a lot of fintechs. And that's because that's where the financial ecosystem is for Canada. And that's kind of, in my opinion, one of one of the spots where it's like, it's the thing to do a lot of innovation, a lot of startups and a lot of Central thinking. And I always kind of try to situate myself around, you know, that kind of big hub, which Toronto is a big hub of financial services.

Joe:
And you mentioned it, but the thing we have in common beyond working in financial services is the program at OCAD. Why? Why get into inclusive design?

Jen:
Another really great question. And that's it's serendipity, right, sometimes? So I, at the time, I think when I decided to apply was 2015. And I was, I was finishing my certificate and UX at NYU at the same time, I was working as a UX designer at the time. That's what we were called. Now it's more product design, you know, five or so years ago was UX design. So I was a UX designer and consultancy. And I think that honestly, I just started browsing OCAD's programs, I was curious how I could level up my knowledge at that master's level, and maybe a little bit more research based, a little bit more framework space. And to be honest, it took a look at all the programs, I went to the info session for probably every single one. And I think that I was in that Inclusive Design session. And all of a sudden, it was this opportunity for me to connect the path that I ended up choosing for my career with sort of the ambitions that I had had, as, let's say, a student or somebody who was younger. And when I was in university, and I went to school at UNC, actually University of North Carolina, and I studied health policy and Health Policy and Management and Mandarin. And a lot of my internships and a lot of my interest was all around nonprofit work and international development. So one of the one of the big things I did while I was in college is that I co-founded a nonprofit with somebody on the ground in Uganda to look at women's rights. And that's kind of you know, at that time in my life, I definitely saw myself going into something that was in the direction line of work of kind of creating a better world and non-negotiable clear terms. And as I transitioned into the workplace, you know, when you transition, there's like a whole new world opens up to you with all these new challenges and new things you could possibly do. So I think the first few years of my career, I was just like sampling every industry trying to figure out where I fit in, and seeing that program at OCAD,

it was just this moment of this is it like, this is how I connect who I have been with who I want to become, and on the path that I'm already on. And, of course, I think, having been interested and around inclusive design, and working, I believe in inclusive design for a while now. I think many of us have personal stories of people we know who can't access services, or can fully partake in sort of the community or the economy because the system wasn't made for them not because that there is anything in their abilities - it's literally the system, it excludes them. And I think having some of those personal stories with family, for myself as well, it just was like it was instant. I'm like, this is what I need to do, and financial services actually came after that. And I was just so fortunate to wind up where I did, where inclusive design is such a huge part of our core design practice, our core design team, and it's championed at a very, very high level. And so it is actually part of my day to day now. So it's a great, great story.

06:38
Joe:
I did not know that that was your journey but lots of that resonates even from the I didn't know you went to UNC for some reason, but I went to Virginia Tech, doing sports all the time. And I resented you all because you were better at most of them.

This is kind of a detour. But why? I mean, how did you know that part of your personal wiring included an interest in more of a socially minded version of career, where did that come from?

Jen:
Oh, you're digging deep. That's a really good question. I think for many people, that would be something they look to, and maybe find in their childhoods. I think that would be similar for me. I mean, I think of my parents to thank for that they always really encouraged us to volunteer to get involved in the community. We immigrated here from Belarus, at the end of 1998. And I think having that experience where you kind of come in as a newcomer, and you need so much, you need help, you need to understand how things work, you need to learn the language like there's, I think there's kind of as I've been fortunate to take part in Canada's economy, I would say Canada's really good. I'm sure everyone has different stories. But in my experience, Canada somewhere, it's still that you can come and you can kind of take part in the dream like, I could go on about this for a while. But I think there is a bit of this, as an immigrant, this mentality that there is a place that if you come there and you work hard, you can make something happen for yourself. And I would say that in Canada, that's been proven true. And I've seen it happen for others and I just feel like I came in needing so much I got so much help from the public systems, like public health care, public education. The reason I ended up at UNC on full scholarship was our excellent public education system would have never happened if I was, you know, in some neighborhoods in the US, and I don't want to make this a political conversation - but I just felt so grateful for all of that. And I felt that as I kind of managed to amass the fortunes of Canada, not financially, but like the richness of life that Canada has been able to give me, I've always wanted to give back. And I think the very first time I remember giving my time back that was probably super, super young. I mean, something memorable is like I was 16 and I basically spent six months in Ecuador in the Andes Mountains in a little village working in a clinic. And it's always been I think, from that kind of early age and before that,  just really been part of what I wanted to do. So I always knew I wanted to tie that into a big part of my career, and it was just a matter

of how, while still being true to the fact that I'm somebody who's naturally very intellectually curious. So I definitely wanted to combine all of the above.

09:46
Joe:
They should stick you on like one of those Canadian commercials for why people should immigrate to Canada. [laughter]

10:09
Joe:
In what you were saying earlier, you're talking about how a lot of the problems of inclusion or the opportunity space as it relates to inclusive design that you find personally compelling is the systematic variety, and I know that part of your research at OCAD was around, you know, what are the kind of ecosystem characteristics of what lends itself to innovation within financial services? So it's, again, it's not, you know, it's more of the system's level, the macro level types of exclusion, is that reflective of the types of inclusive design problems you find most compelling, just naturally? Or is there another reason why those are parts of your story?

10:57
Jen:
Hmmm, so let me see if I can kind of get underneath your question. So part of what you're asking about is systemic exclusion. So systems that are built in ways that unless we sit and think about, and really dive in and be like, how does this exclude others that we don't see it? And is that kind of what you're asking around?

Joe:
Yeah, yeah.

11:24
Jen:
I think it's a bit of a cheesy answer to say all of the above. I think that part of what I have been learning, and unlearning as a designer, particularly with how 2020 went and seeing particularly all of the protests related to the George Floyd killings, and you know, beyond that, I think I'm very sensitive to the idea that not everything is a problem for us to solve or a challenge for us to design for. So I think I'm trying to figure out what's the new kind of vocabulary that I want to use and the language that I want to use because it wouldn't be the kind of designer user group relationship, can be really problematic. Particularly in the way that we have been designing for, you know, hundreds of years, whether that's industrial design, or graphic design, there's a very specific kind of, or other kind of design -- architecture, anything really, service design -- there is a some groups that have had more of an influence over how those services products, posters are created, and for others to use, as well as what then becomes the standard for that. So I think, and then the design process comes out of years of sort of both like with this current iteration of design thinking and then everything from like the grid system, it comes out of this standard of we're only a few people really got to define what that standard was and when you fall outside of that standard, you're not considered not meeting the bar, when really, we're just creating a totally different bar, because the bar was separate. So I'm kind of going in a circle, because I realized as we're

chatting that I kind of want to adjust the language of this, particularly that question. And I think a lot of the problem that we have is making sure that when we are working on anything, the right people are at the table and that's really the beginning of designing anything. And by the right people, I mean, the most varied representative diverse set that we can think of. Both from a demographic standpoint, but also from that invisible standpoint, people have different lived experiences, different mentalities, but very much so as well as making sure that it's actually representative of the population, like if Toronto for example, is which it is about 10% black population, let's make sure that that's what we're seeing in our design team and in our broader team. Yeah, kind of talked a bit around there.

Joe:
A lot of what you said, I think lines up with things I've been thinking about recently, especially as it relates to communicating about inclusive design with people in a professional capacity. One of the things that's hard to pin down is -- I think you pointed at this, but like, a lot of times it's not just about what is the interaction between the design thing and the user. It's how did the system get the way that it is now? How did that user end up in or interacting with this specific designed object or design asset? And what is the you know, who, who was excluded from even being allowed to be a user, for example, it might be one manifestation of that and that is really hard in its abstraction to like, bring that to light for somebody who's just like, you know, I have a specific set of goals that I'm responsible for, I'm going to design against those, and I have a methodology for doing that. So illuminating some of like, the assumptions that go into informing the entire ecosystem we're designing within it's not easy.

Jen:
No, no, it's, it's really tough. And like, what is the answer to that? I went to a really great workshop. It's run out of I think, actually, Virginia. It's a lab called the Creative Reaction Lab. I don't know if you've heard of them, they have you?

Joe:
Yeah, they're in St. Louis actually. I don't want my state to take credit for something that it doesn't deserve.

Jen:
Okay, awesome. So I went to their, "how traditional design thinking protects white supremacy workshop", and I just loved it like everything from the presentation of it to this kind of head on confrontation of the theme. I think that I've spent -- and this is kind of where my answer comes from -- is I've been spending a lot of time really thinking about white supremacy and thinking about how whiteness and capitalism are intertwined and how that's showing up everywhere in our system, and what and who that oppresses. And I think it can be if you're beginning to think about these themes, it can be like the the term like white fragility array like it can, you can totally see this happens to people like you just kind of can feel really like overwhelmed, let's say, and, and so I think even when we're talking about those themes, like when I'm talking to people about what I've been able to learn, and what I haven't yet learned, or what I'm trying to unlearn, sometimes there's this desire from the old, what's the playbook? Like how do you just all of a sudden stop being racist and become anti racist? And in the similar way of like, we can't just dismantle, you know, white supremacy and design overnight, because we went through a playbook. That's kind of what I was getting at that, like, I'm definitely interested, and I think we can also talk about what are the actual

tactical practical things we can all do. But I think when we're talking about that high level, like, how do we make sure that our design is actually inclusive? The answer to that is so much more complex than I could have ever even imagined, while I'm completing my Masters like, and I think they did a great job in not trying to give us the answers, like, I don't know what your experience was like. But I really did feel that they had all, you know, such a wealth of respect for a variety of experiences, and just so much also respect for the students in the sense that I know that the freedom and the kind of ability to think on any subject that was welcomed for me to do in that program probably wouldn't, wouldn't have been as welcomed in other masters programs that weren't specifically looking for that opportunity to just elevate non traditional forms of thought, non traditional forms of research, non traditional forms of making connections. So i'm jumping between topics but basically, it's just to actually create inclusive design, that's such a huge task that we need everybody on board, like we not just the graduates of this program, we need every single person pretty much who has the privilege to be in this industry, because that's the other piece I think I'm always very cognizant of is there is this privilege balance in tech, where a few people because tech reaches so many, the decision of one person who is a designer and a project, you know, for Visa, or for Scotia, or for Facebook, they make a decision and that impacts like thousands, millions, billions of people. And that's a privilege to have gotten to be at that table and to make that decision. So I think it's particularly important that people who ask people who work in tech and who work for these big organizations where decisions get amplified, that we really, really, really think about this and bring all of us to the table because there is this kind of umm, it is the privilege that we have of being in and being able to make those decisions, and we have to be responsible for that. Yeah. And also look at who is getting that privilege, and are some people more likely to than others, which I think we all know the answer to.

Joe:
Yeah. Well, that's well said. I mean, that the parallels between I have thought of this, but I mean, the parallels between the journey that somebody who has benefited from whiteness goes on is not dissimilar from the journey that I feel like, you know, organizations go on as they try and uncover the places where they may be participating in other types of not race based exclusion. But I guess part of what I liked about what you're saying is that the, a lot of nuances in the, the friction between wanting immediacy, wanting tangibility, wanting like what are next steps, that's not just a work thing that's like how life operates these days. It's like go go go do do do, it is productivity focused. And so like you're saying, as somebody who if you have benefited from whiteness, and you want to come awake to the ways in which that is, you know, coming at a cost for yourself and for many, many other people more significantly, the answer is not, you know, to like send 10 text messages to your friends of color asking how they're doing. I mean, that may be something but the first step is there is an internal, there's a whole body of an internal work and questioning and unlearning, that has to happen. And that is something that is just, I find, we, these days, society is not really conditioning us for that type of work, you have to really seek it out for yourself. And I and I think in the same ways, those systematic forms of exclusion, you know, like if you work in financial services, and, you know, you're thinking about credit underwriting and inequity as it relates to credit underwriting, you could try and take a really narrow, like, tech focused approach to how you're going to solve that problem, by... we're going to use it, we're going to train our algorithm differently, blah, blah, blah. But there's also some larger questions to ask about, like, Why are things that way? Who benefits from the status quo? What are the forces exerting themselves? It's a whole different set of questions, an entirely different type of

contemplation and reflection than what we normally would do when we're trying to go through a problem solving process. So it feels like there's a lot of muscles that need to be developed, I guess.

Jen:

Yeah, one thing I'll add to that is that like that kind of culture that you encapsulate is a go go go do do do, that's actually indicative of white supremacy, right? Like that whole culture comes from this, like super productivity oriented, like, must show results. That is part of that culture that none of us benefit from. And that's I think, what I've taken away from my, a lot of my learning over the last, I would say a year is really like the time that I kind of set the challenges for myself to really read and to think about and to write about it, to talk to people about it, I think, not to jump between topics, but one of the toughest kind of hurdles for me personally had been to just actually start to talk about it as if it's public, like, if it's to a group that I'm part of at work, if it's to friends, if it's to my sister, if it's to my parents, like just bring it up. Because I'd always had this kind of fear that if I did talk about it, I would come off wrong, or I would say something wrong. And I think a big part of my learning is that that's like, not that talking will fix it but it's for some people like me, I'm a talkative person, it's an important step to kind of, to really let it sink in. And to think about it. So is this kind of, like, thought process where what's the worst that could happen? It could sound stupid, and people could, you know, misunderstand me, or they could think I'm not coming from the place that I'm coming from, or no change happens, because we're all too scared to sound stupid and for people to misinterpret where we're coming from. So I have kind of chosen the one where I do talk, and the one where I do try to learn and the one where I do try to make what I can happen. And that's kind of what I'm committed to. And I'm going to remain committed to that. And like what I do this year, and what I do next year probably won't be the right thing, because it's so complicated. But like, this is a lifetime commitment and you know, I'm just going to continue to figure it out and continue to talk to other people who want to talk about it and I think the other piece that I do want to mention is we've started talking about race and anti racism, because obviously, it's been such like big year for many allies, and many new allies, or many new people who are learning about it to really have it come into their periphery. And something else that I've been talking to peers and colleagues about is just around how discreet yet connected so many of these problems are.

24:35

So we're talking about white supremacy, like that's also the root of other forms of exclusion, including exclusion based on physical abilities, or exclusion based on age, you know, like, it is all actually connected, but the problems are discrete. So I think the other thing we can run into is if we're unclear and we say, hey, this big time happened with feminism right, like back in the 70s with a feminism wave. And I'm by no means an expert on this, to be honest, but the gist of it is like the TLDR that I guess I could share is, and when you lumped feminism into this one group, you ended up leaving a lot of people behind, particularly women of color. And so that's what happens when you also don't discreetly call out, like, what are we talking about right now. So we've been talking about anti racism, and that is rooted in like in a lot of the same things that other forms of exclusion are rooted in, but it has its, you know, its own unique set of problems, its own history, that's discrete from some of these, from any of the many things we could talk about from the other many groups that are excluded. Yeah.

25:39

Joe:

You segued naturally into what I was going to ask you about next, which is, I guess, how do you see the relationship between, you know, inclusive design as practice or even just design, equitable design ethical design, as practice and then some of these, you know, some of these very human problems around exclusion? Like it, I guess, I am asking that from the place of some of what you were just alluding to where there is, it feels like we often fall short of having language that's adequately equipped to name, you know, what is discrete as a specific type of exclusion and the individual problems that come there? Versus, you know, like, how does that apply to a design practice beyond just being better human beings? You know, like, if I read more about racial inequity, and the history of why things are the way they are today, and I make an intentional effort in my personal life to be an ally, that's one thing, but it's different than me being a designer who is designing for a different set of outcomes, I guess, how do you find yourself navigating these different worlds where some of the similar topics are applying but but the set of things you do about it might be different?

27:14

Jen:

I think that's a good question. I think that immediately the thought that comes to mind, and that's it comes there, because I do think in the iteration of design that we're currently in, there's a lot of emphasis placed on research, which I wholeheartedly do buy into and love the fact that design is not research based, and I guess has been for a long time, but that we have these sets of tools and frameworks that we can access. But I think that one flaw of that process is this belief that if you run you know, 1000 person survey and back it up with 10 interviews, and then do usability testing, you understand fully your target base, you understand where they're coming from, you understand what they're thinking, and the word that was kind of that had like its rise and fall in tech and in design was empathy, right? Like, first it was kind of like everybody was we need to have empathy for our user, we need to understand them, we need to get how they're feeling. And then the fall of it came with, there are limits to empathy if the people we are designing for are not at the table, there's only so much that you're going to be able to design for them, it should almost Ideally, you should always be with them. So I think the kind of cheat answer in the sense because maybe it's obvious for anybody who's kind of even following this conversation, or anybody who's kind of studied that is that you just need to make sure that you're designing with a group that's representative of the people who you're designing for. And outside of that, I do think that tactically, and research is a great way to check your bias, being really open to changing your mind to being called out. I think that's the other thing I've gotten, I can ever feel they've gotten say they've gotten really comfortable being called out or criticized, you know, it's probably never easy. But I think it is kind of this just opening yourself up to knowing that everything you knew yesterday might have been wrong, and to being told that maybe you should reconsider. So I think it's kind of in the absence or while we are working toward hopefully a more representative team and I mean, like hold it globally. And what we can do is just keep an open mind and make sure that we are checking our biases, checking our opinions. And I think it's not to kind of add to that part about an inclusive team. It's not enough to just get the people at the table. You also have to create the kind of table that everybody wants to sit at because I think that that's one thing -- it's super important because if you create an environment where people are uncomfortable being themselves or bringing their full selves, or if the culture is overwhelmingly white, still, even if the people aren't, you're not going to actually create a team that's inclusive, it's going to be diverse, but it's not going

to be inclusive. And I think I actually OCAD did a great job of talking to us about that quite a bit. Yeah.

Joe:
Yeah, I have little moments like when thinking about inclusive design related stuff, or more, you know, issues of exclusion that play out in society at large, these little moments of like, it's almost like deja vu, but it's not really deja vu, it's just a similar type experience of like, a lot of what feels like we're trying to describe is just being better people. Like, if we were just better human beings, what percentage of these things would go away, and that's not totally true. Like there are, as you said, before, there are particularities to each different type of exclusion, that matter, and are different and unique and need particular addressing. And a lot of those things have been engineered into systems. And I don't care how many, just how many great human beings you have operating in a totally broken system but I still have these little glimpses of like, if we were all just better listeners, and we're more empathetic and more willing to come off of our priors and admit we were wrong. You know, like, what percentage of this stuff would go away? And it's not really that helpful of a thought exercise but I have that thought semi frequently.

Jen:
I think that's interesting. And if we're going to take bets -- I would say that I'm an optimist. And I'm a believer that human nature is generally good. I won't say anything political, but sometimes something is, you know, show up in the news, and I'm just like, okay, maybe I was wrong. There are some people that just don't get it, but I am a believer that most people mean, well, maybe I'll be proven wrong in my life. It's hard to also know, because even as I'm saying this, I'm thinking about like, well, maybe most people mean, well, when you're an educated white woman, right? Like, I don't know, maybe that's just the view that I've had of the world that's kind of convinced me that the world is a certain way and it isn't. But I guess, I do kind of, it's a good thought experiment, because I kind of fall back and say, let's say 85% of it would not be fixed. If we were all just well intentioned. And it really is -- it really will require, I think, systemic change that is starting and kind of happening and none of us like we don't have the privilege of being alive for that many years. So it's hard for me to say whether we're making progress, because sometimes it can really feel like we're not. Like, I kicked my TikTok addiction to the, you know, to the curb, which I'm very happy about, because now I have all this free time. Thank you, thank you. But there was one TikTok and it was a woman just showing her father, maybe grandfather at the hospital, and I was, you know, some Tiktok also gets very real as I know, you, you also partake, and she just asked, she was just telling him and this was way back last year about the protests that he was like, "wait, are we still -- he's like, race, we're still, that's still an issue?" He's like, "I thought we would have already solved it by now". And he's like, and I think the caption was something like my 101 year old grandpa or something. So it's just sometimes I feel optimistic because I am an optimist. And I like to think that we all want the best. Um, and then yeah, you get kind of reality checks like that of people who maybe were alive 100 years before you. And I think that when I do look at my day to day, and I look at my own behavior, day to day, it is I mean, it gets really meta. But how much do I do? Because it's self driven, and how much of it is external incentive, and what I'm incentivized to do by the system? And I think if you go on a really meta level, you can say that 100% of our lives are because why are we all living like this? Like we all like many of us share a very similar kind of lifestyle where we do very

specific types of things. Is it possible that all of us just kind of woke up with this drive to do the same thing when we were born or has the system shaped us all?

34:42
Joe:
Oh, yeah, I want to ask a follow up, but I think my head might explode. The essence of existence.

34:52
Joe:
I mean, as it relates to, I mean, you mentioned TikTok, I guess how do you understand technology to fit into some of these topics that we're talking about exclusion, systematic or otherwise?

Jen:
Yeah, I think we started talking about this. We got onto this topic last time. And I've just been thinking about it obsessively over break, particularly when you have time - when one tends to have time - about what is social media, specifically network technology. So this is kind of outside of my immediate, current working role, at least but I do definitely keep an eye on like the trends that happen in the Tiktok's and the Twitter's and I think one of the things that Tiktok has managed to do, and I'm sure, I mean, I'm sure China, this is not their first app that kind of takes advantage of the network effect in this specific way. Because they do have some pretty innovative technology there that I think we always look over the fence and we're like, cool, that's, that's gonna, you know, we're gonna invent something like that soon, hopefully. So what I found fascinating about TikTok is that unlike with Instagram, or with Twitter, or with Facebook, or with LinkedIn, where you over time, build your followers, like even with Instagram, I, you know, I happen to know people who have been successful creating kind of an influencer profile on Instagram, they really had to work for that they had to figure out who their core target market was, they had to post a lot, they had to hashtag a lot. They had to get specific followers, and build those followers, they have to mark it. Same with YouTube, like that's building your audience over time, and hopefully in some kind of niche feel like it takes time. And with TikTok, it's this fascinating like the algorithm literally chooses who's employed as an influencer. I've read the stories of the top influencers on tik tok, it took me a while to find them, because I was all over the algorithm at first. And then I kind of clued into the fact that these specific profiles are the top followed profiles. So I'm kind of going through and I'm just like, cool. I mean, these kids are like, 10 years younger, and more than me. So I mean, it's a little weird but like, I'm just like, cool but like, explain to me how this is no different than the other kids that are posting dances and lip synching. And so I started to research it and my suspicions confirmed like the influencers are, they also didn't know how they got famous.

This is not your twitter, instagram deal where you're working, you probably already have an audience also on YouTube, your cross posting, like, this isn't your what we're used to a social media celebrity and influencing this is somebody who, on their way to dance class posts, the video that ended up blowing up and then they got a million followers, and from there they just built, but that initial decision, how I can imagine is that the algorithm was basically like, okay, you based on everything we already know, from all the other apps, we know or from history and from other algorithms, we know that a person of your profile with

your voice intonation, using your kind of clips, with your movement with your pitch, like literally, it's looking at things that aren't like that. It's looking beyond our US 17 year old girl and you know, I'm in Middle America, it's looking like, I really think your voice pitch like, do you tend to lift your shoulder are not like it's looking at things that are not detectable by a human. So I literally - this is the conclusion I'm coming to is that AI has employed these influencers, it is no longer us because there're so many think pieces if you start looking at like Reddit and so on being like, Why are these people famous? Like I don't, I don't get it. And this is, maybe, maybe it's possible, we're just getting old, right? It's possible that, you know, the generation above us looked at Instagram was like, how are these influencers coming to be, but I think there is something unique here because tik tok is the first social app that we've had this big, that doesn't at all rely on followers, it just serves you up videos based on its algorithm. And that's how it makes people famous and therefore profitable. So to kind of, I'm just, I'm in that hole, and I'm just going deeper and deeper, and I can't stop thinking about it, but to kind of extrapolate from that.

39:15

And what that kind of means is potentially your next employer will be an algorithm, right? Like, and, and sometimes I already fear because I have a tiny, tiny, tiny internet presence, but nothing major. And I haven't worked on it. And it's not something I'd prioritize but I already sometimes feel like if I don't have clout on the internet, I'm invisible. Like I should have a Twitter following and not like dancing Tiktok type stuff, but like in my field, I should be tweeting about my field. I should be posting on LinkedIn more often because it already almost feels that sometimes an employer might make their decision based on your "legitimacy", which is more and more starting to be determined by algorithms. So it's just so what does that mean? That could mean that overall, I think technologies had some really nice effects for celebrity where, you know, you cut some of that middleman, you don't have to get chosen or have a connection with a studio exec, you could just post a YouTube video next day you can be in a movie, you can create a movie of your own like Blair Witch Project that was like 20 years ago - I really liked that movie [laughter].

Anyway, so um, basically, it's, it's interesting. And what does that mean? Does it mean more inclusion? So where what it cuts out is some of that kind of middle networking. But what it adds is some of this what feels like randomness, and it almost feels like, really, we should all just be catering to the algorithms. And that's just scary. Just to add one more thing, sometimes the people around me because I'd spent so much time in tech talk will make fun of me and say, like, your humor has been shaped, and your taste in music has been shaped by algorithms, because I think, like, the internet's been doing bad, because if you don't get me in culture, you're not just gonna get in there and be like, why is this cat on a desk so funny? But it's just, it's, it's a little crazy.

41:08
Joe:
Someone's going to listen to this and you're like, literally casting a picture of us living in the matrix 20 years from now. Yeah, very depressing but you present a very compelling case.

You said at one point maybe we're just getting older. We are definitely getting older, but I have had the thought like, did my parents at 32 like, oh, TV, cable -- all the youth are

screwed. They're never going to read a book because now they have Nickelodeon. And so I wonder, you know, like, I don't know, it's easy for me to read things about the incessant -- I read this book last year called Trick Mirror. She's talking about the implications for identity formation when there's no off switch when you're constantly performing your identity for a digital audience that never goes away, and is 24 seven and always listening? What happens then? And so I read that and I'm like, yeah, I needed time as a kid, I needed time you know, doing stupid stuff in the woods, like imagining that I was playing with swords or whatever. I mean, I needed space to like, mess around and fail and not be, you know, polished or turned on so that I could become who I am now. Which I guess probably has some holes in it, because like, why is who I am now gonna be the goal for whoever's Gen Z now…. But all of those things resonate for me at the same time. I wonder, this is a totally different cohort of young people who are coming up. This is the water that day fish are swimming in and they will adjust and adapt and maybe I'm just being an old fogy.

43:02
Joe:
When you were at OCAD did you ever read or were exposed to Ursula Franklin?

Jen:
Doesn't sound familiar, remind me.

Joe:
She's a Canadian metallurgist. Who kind of like, from a historical point of view, wrote some things -- we had to listen to one of the Massey lectures that she did, and then I subsequently got sucked into some of the stuff that she's written kind of about technology, not in its specific form factor of AI or mobile phones or whatever, but more just kind of like, how do we understand technology. One of our ideas was basically like that technologies can be prescriptive, or they can be organic. Inorganic technologies are things that are like, you know, they require us to exert our will on them in order for them to work. And then there are more like prescriptive technologies, which are like, you know, you follow three different steps and then you get, you know, that's the type of technology that led to the Industrial Revolution, that type of thing. And I guess basically, like if you read through some of her stuff, you kind of get the sense that dysfunctional relationships with technology come when they stop asking us the question of what we wanted to do, and instead just start feeding us the answer, you know, the algorithm for TikTok. It knows that I love it when there's other videos of the dog talking in a human voiceover and --

Jen:
The problem is it's not that it knows you love that, it knows that you love that specific color of dog and that specific setting and that song in the background they match that like it's literally not even that obvious and that's the problem is you can't even trace and that's what you're talking about. But yeah, yeah, yeah,

Joe:
I mean, I guess I delay or even on top of that, like I I didn't get on my phone, wanting to watch videos of dogs talking. I got on my phone because, you know, I was scanning on the bus and I wanted to kill some time. And then next thing, you know, I lost 20 minutes that otherwise I might have been using, you know, if you if you had asked me right before I open

my phone, what do you want to spend the next 20 minutes I might have answered with like, I'd like to spend some time reflecting on the cataclysmic thing that's coming for me tomorrow or whatever or, you know, feeling something or whatever dreaming of something, I would never say I want to watch, I probably wouldn't say I want to watch dogs talking with a human voice over but nonetheless, the 20 minutes are gone and I never, you know, never thought twice about it. So I think, I guess that's what scares me as it relates to inclusion and exclusion and product design. If we're not even asked, you know, what we want out of our relationship with the technology, the answer is presupposed, then it feels like it's just going to propagate whatever the status quo is. And we know that the status quo involves a bunch of exclusion.

Jen:
And that's right and I think we've been using TikTok because it's just so interesting as an example, but if you look at almost any other form of social media, and I'm sure TikTok… actually, this applies to them too… but to your point, if you're not asked, and it just serves you your status quo, that's the increasing polarization of all of our opinions, right? Because when you go if you're somebody who already holds the opinion that for example, which one which example to use, like, if you hold the opinion that the moon landing didn't happen to us was less politically charged in the moment. And that's kind of the vein of the undertone of Tik Tok you've been watching or the people you've been following, without you making a decision that you just get amplified back at you. And so there is that kind of, there's so many levels here, like there's that attention economy where it's pure time and your own lost productivity and creativity and relaxation, and your own loss, boredom and relationship building and attention to the world around you all of that combined with and then the other piece of it is just that magnification of your own view reflected back at you. So you, you know, no longer understand the people around you. And I think I was watching Death to 2020, I believe this is where I got that premise, that Netflix documentary….another thing I'm doing is no more Netflix like I have one day a week of Netflix for that same reason. And about the documentary, I think it was there that Hugh Grant acting as the racist professor, but you know, his part of his role, not the actor himself. But he was basically saying that polarization is the biggest problem of our time. And obviously, it's a documentary, it's a joke, but it made me think, because I'm like, Is there a bigger problem, and when we can no longer speak to each other. And I'm a victim of this as well, because I mean, I think many of us are, it's when you start to look at the other side is inherently evil and your right is inherently good. And that's the only opinion that you kind of get reflected back out at you. And I'm not saying there isn't inherently evil, there is evil, for sure. But that doesn't always, that's not always the divide of, you know, people who want to keep their kids home during COVID versus people who choose to send their kids to school. There isn't inherent evil on either side of that. But it can start to feel like that when you're in the polarized and internet chat room. So it's just, I don't know, I just went from a techno optimist to like, really, really cautious very quickly. And I can tell you, this is week two of Netflix only one day a week and no TikTok and I mark down every time I go on social media, for the very reason that I especially in 2020, a day a year that we were all kind of cooped up and cut off from any of our usual sources of connection. And I just felt that I lost a lot of my year to talking dogs, but also to, you know, tweets and, and all of that, and I just don't want to lose more time. And I think that's kind of where I'm driven from now. It's a little bit more of the attention economy piece.

Joe:

To bring it full circle, I feel like with the as it relates to the attention economy, you know, earlier when you're talking about systems, and you know, like what are the sets of questions that one as a designer contemplates in order to recognize places where, you know, this is not just a user versus design problem, but maybe there are some larger questions we need to be asking, you know, the question of how did things who benefits from the status quo, I think is a powerful question in that space. And I and I think that is the problem that I noticed at the core of any of these of any of the business models that are predicated on attention. Time spent viewing whatever the thing is, you the set of incentives that are in place are just, there's no way that it doesn't end up creating -- any innovation that's pointed in that direction is going to be innovation that is intended to spend to monopolize more of your attention, to make it harder for you to tap your will, as you make the decision whether or not to use the thing, I mean, the fact that you have to, you know, manually note every time you're going on social media, because otherwise it's so frictionless. It's so simple, it's so convenient, that you just wouldn't even think twice. And I'm exactly the same way. I don't even have Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, any of those things. But I have LinkedIn and I have Strava for my running. And I will go on those mindlessly without even thinking when I'm like waiting for toasts to come out of the toaster. And it's and it's just, I mean, I don't even think maybe LinkedIn is making money. LinkedIn probably makes money off of my attention, I don't know, but it's the entire design ecosystem as a set of incentives that make that so easy to get into a relationship that is not promoting a sense of well being. It is promoting a whole set of other shorter term outcomes that probably are very financially beneficial for the company. Not as awesome for me as a normal person.

Jen:

I think one thing just to break in there, that I found was happening to me in 2020 is the last time I saw, you know, we had to socially distance all of the above, like we didn't have a workplace to come into, events were canceled, you could see family less, all of that. So as I felt my own personal ties, not getting weaker, but just getting more digital, which in a sense, like, you know, I think we can all say that 2020 has been a bit more disconnected from your core kind of people. And what I found happened is I was spending more time on the internet with the people I followed on the internet. And all of a sudden I was speaking to a really close friend of mine about this was actually she lives in London, UK. And we talk on the phone all the time. And one of the things that she was sitting like that we were talking about is that it was already happening that the internet became our peers. So all of a sudden, like Jack Dorsey's my peer, Kendall Jenner is my peer, like, things that are going on in their lives. And the bars that are said, and the things that they do all of a sudden becomes a measure in a bar for my own life. And that is such a valuable advertising tool, there is nothing like it, there is nothing like convincing most people that they have to compete with the Kardashians and wealth and clothing. And with I don't know, Jack Dorsey and travel, like, you know, it's, it's, it's such a powerful advertising tool. And that's part of why I also have to disconnect is I'm trying to bring myself back to my own life, so I can grapple with the massive problems that we're facing as humanity from the place that I'm in. And to add to that, the reason it was so easy for me to even give the Kardashian example than it was to give the Dorsey example, even as I was speaking, is because the internet tends to amplify, in my experience, maybe I'm looking at the wrong part of the internet, because the internet is so huge. But my experience is the internet tends to amplify things that often, when we look at it, we're like, what's the inherent value for humanity in this and you've already said, about the talking

dogs, but it's kind of like, why do I care? That this is and I'm not a materialistic person, but I'm like, why am I curious about this Birkin bag, when I should be thinking about climate change like this is the internet should be incentivizing us to, you know, dismantle systems that don't work to save our environment, but instead, it doesn't. And that's I think, what's most frustrating for me, and I think it is kind of an old folky thing, but sometimes I'm like, man, I hope kids these days want to grow up to be like scientists and economists and not just influencers on TikTok like, I literally fear that that we are rewarding this sort of like attention, grab this. We're rewarding people who can get a leg from us and who can game the algorithm but Are those the same people that are going to lead us out of this cataclysmic disaster that we're already in? I hope so, and that's kind of where we've ended up now. Even some people would say that the billionaires we have today. It's kind of like, okay, save us Elon, like we put our trust in you by liking all your tweets, just saying!

54:33
Joe:
Yeah. Yep. Well, I mean, I could bounce from topic to topic with you for many hours, but in the interest of preserving your evening, and mine, why don't we end with something more hopeful? You're not watching Netflix? You're not looking at TikTok. What is something that you have, other than those things that you have been looking at or listening to or reading that has been inspiring or uplifting or helping you out these days?

Jen:
Great question. So right now I am reading Cal Newports *Deep Work*, probably kind of in theme with what I've been talking about it is about how do you create time and energy to go deep. I actually picked up the book on a recommendation, it's not a new book, I read his other book called *So Good, They Can't Ignore You*, I thought it was good. My friends and family make fun of me for reading nonfiction, as much as I do. Almost every book I read is a nonfiction book of this kind of vein, or I've been drawn to them. And my sister actually called it like self help. So one of my goals for 2021 is with all my newfound attention to read more topical books to learn more about the environment, how engines work, you know, to actually get deep into topics and to read more fiction. But this was just already on my Kindle was recommended, not new. And as I'm reading it, he talks about obviously, none of the things we talked about today are mind blowing. That's what's sad about them. A few years ago, he was talking about the same thing, the attention economy, how social media essentially incentivizes specific types of behaviors and specific styles of work and what that could result in. And so I think, right now finding it uplifting because as much as I don't believe the frameworks and tools, fix everything, he is providing a bit of a framework for the conundrum that I all of a sudden found myself in, which is that I believe in creating real value in the world that hopefully will be beneficial and a net positive for humans. I can't say that I'm necessarily doing that every day. Obviously, it's a lofty goal, but that's what I'm working toward. And he talks about that and how hard it can be in our current climate and our current social media status to work that way. And to think that way when we're seeing different things rewarded and different behaviors are incentivized. So I'm just kind of finding a bit of kinship with it. So if any of this resonates, any of this conversation resonates, I'd recommend it. I'm only halfway in so we'll see how it ends.

Joe:
Okay, that's good. Well, thank you, Jen, for talking with me.

Jen:
Thank you for having me.

57:24
Zoya:
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