[Algorithms and Outrage](#): Talking social media with Charles Arthur, author of *Social Warming*

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Transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee

(Theme music – jazzy synth-pop)

Anne: Welcome to the Noncompliant podcast. I'm your host, Anne Borden King. My guest today is Charles Arthur, the author of *Social Warming: The dangerous and polarising effects of social media.* We're going to discuss the history of social media, the crisis of disinformation globally and what regulators can *or could* do about this. Also, as consumers we're going to talk about: what's our role in all of this? What can we do to make things better? How are people making the break from Facebook? That's something that we'll get into in the second half, but first a bit about our guest.

Charles Arthur is a journalist who worked on daily national papers in the U.K. for twenty years and has written three non-fiction books since 2011, including the one we'll discuss, *Social Warming.* He met Bill Gates when Microsoft was small, Steve Jobs when Apple was smaller, and Larry Page of Google when Google was already pretty big. He's visited the offices of Facebook and Twitter… but their C.E.O.s remained elusive. He's been freelance since 2014, and he lives in Southeast England.

Charles, welcome to the show.

Charles: Thanks. It's great to be here, Anne.

Anne: Great. I'm so excited to talk about your book which **Ian Dunt** described in this way, "It reads like science fiction, except it's describing our world right now." That, to me, is so bang on and I couldn't put the book down. It's well written and comprehensive about where we were, what's kind of *happened*, and where we're headed to. So, let's start back at the beginning. Tell us a bit about some of the precursors to social media platforms – what were called the bulletin boards systems. What were they like, and how were they different than the social media we see today?

[1:47]

Charles: It's interesting to sort of reach back into the history because people forget to some extent that actually there was a time, well before the broader use of the internet, when not everyone was online…when not everyone had broadband. And there used to be bulletin board systems which people would generally have to dial into, and you'd basically tie up your phone line or if you were rich enough and you'd have two phone lines then you'd tie up *one* of your phone lines hooking into a computer. You'd literally phone into a computer and your computer would screech to it and it would screech back to you, and your computer would hook up. Then you had a bulletin board system which would let you write things on it; other people could

reply to it.

In that sense, [it was] rather like the social media that we see now, except that there were no algorithms in the background running to try to find what's the most interesting thing – what are the things that are really sort of driving people… should we show this to other people not involved in the conversation? These were all about a particular topic and people could navigate their way around. They had to find their way around. For other people, typing was quite a new skill, in the late 1970s, the early 1980s that was not a thing many people had.

But the interesting thing that came out of bulletin board systems…there were two-fold things. The first one which I found from my own research was that one of the very earliest ones-- one called The WELL which was mostly in San Francisco -- was no stranger to having people who would try to start fights online because they thought it was fun and that this would get people riled up and they would all reply. And also, The WELL was no stranger to this actually having a financial incentive. It was good for The WELL if people spent more time online because in fact, they were charging people for the privilege of being connected to The WELL.

Anne: Hmm.

Charles: So, the more time people spent arguing with someone who was causing trouble, the better it was for The WELL, and there was a person there who would post regularly and would get people riled up and they did consider throwing her off the site. And for quite a long time the people in charge said, 'no, no, she actually is good for business, and she's only saying things that people happen to find controversial. They're not illegal what she's saying.' It was a really interesting example of how this all got riled up and once it spread more widely, then you got to the much more deep questions about: what are you allowed to put on these sorts of bulletin boards? What are you allowed to put on the internet? And that led to a really crucial point in 1988, I think it was with the Communications Decency Act… in the 1990s.

Anne: Mm-hmm.

Charles: The dates all sort of fuse together. But the Communications Decency Act which was trying to basically get porn off the internet, which I think experience has shown us was a pretty hopeless task….

Anne: (laughter), No, yeah.

[5:03]

Charles: But the key thing that it *did* do, because there were a couple of lawsuits that have happened where one bunch of people have been sued for something being on the bulletin board and got away with it, and another bunch of people had been sued for something that appeared on a bulletin board and had – even though they had no responsibility for what appeared -- they got sued and were successfully sued. And it was down to them being treated

as a publisher because they had moderated other content, and the judge said 'well look, if you moderate some content, you've got to moderate all the content, so you're responsible for all the content. You're like the publisher, you're like the newspaper editor who decides what goes in – or the newspaper publisher.'

The Communications Decency Act included a little clause called Section 230 which in effect gave those sites (and it turned out in future social networking sites) a get-out-of-jail-free card which was that if someone published something on one of their sites, they--the social networks or the bulletin boards--weren't directly responsible for it, even if they moderated in other places. They could moderate as much as they liked or as little as they liked. The only exceptions were made were for child abuse imagery and so on, but basically, you could do what you like as long as it stays sort of broadly within the law. They're not treated as publishers, and that's been really crucial for the growth of the internet actually, that the sites aren't responsible for what other people put on there, because for news organizations for example they'd face enormous numbers of libel suits from people around the world about things that 'commoners' say. But, as it stands, they they can get away with it.

So, that basically, Section 230, plus the fact that people just have this inbuilt desire to rile other people once they get online once they have that sort of anonymity. Those two things are really the key creation points for the social media we see today.

Anne: Where did that precedent come from? Is it mostly from the U.S. and U.K. or would you say that it generally applies in any democratic society at this point?

Charles: The Section 230 one certainly came out of the U.S. because the U.S. was the first to really start adopting the internet widely. It gets complicated. You get countries like India for example which tell Twitter that certain things said about government ministers can't be put online, Singapore where you're not allowed to say things about the Royals. There are differences in what can be put online, and Twitter for example has a filter which will allow some tweets to be not shown in particular countries, such as Germany.

Anne: Hmm.

Charles: It's very variable but in general there's a sort of laissez faire attitude for the most part to what appears. I mean, Germany is quite a special case, they have particular rules about taking down hate speech on social media, that it has to be done within 24 hours. France is looking to do the same. But, these are all tightenings of the sort of the generally loose approach, so it's been more like the American model and it's shifted away from it more generally around the world.

Anne: Mm-hmm. So they're basically mostly hoping the companies themselves will self-regulate, and I want to get into that. Now we have Meta right: that's Facebook, Instagram and

WhatsApp which are the Zuckerberg enterprises, and you outline three unwritten rules for corporations like Meta and I'll just paraphrase it:

1. Get as many users as you can
2. Don't let go of the users' attention, and
3. Monetize those attentive users as much as you can without losing their attention

So, it sounds like because they just want to grow and grow and grow, there's not a lot of incentive for them to self-regulate what is said and done in their spaces, is that right?

[9:13]

Charles: Yeah…there's no good incentive to do that up until the point where it's driving the good users away. But generally the people who are causing the most rows, the most noise actually attract other people who think incorrectly that they'll be able to reason with these people to calm them down, to have a sort of sensible argument. But in general, those people aren't there for a sensible argument, they're there to cause trouble, so it tends to be a self-reinforcing process. And there are very few examples of communities that have been emptied out. You can find them in internet history which is sort of getting long now, where you sort of have an influx of a particular group take over some very small network, they tend to be forums of some sort or another and drive all the good users out, but there tends not to be very much money at stake in those, so moderation tends to be an afterthought.

Anne: Right, and then it's all tied in with their advertising model which in your words "amplifies and encourages populism." A lot of this has to do with the algorithms, that there's this kind of perfect storm for this polarization and chaos that we see now because… I guess we should explain to listeners what an algorithm is in this context and then how specifically machine learning on Facebook and its news feeds has created this monstrous situation that's just out of control.

Charles: Sure. There's a really interesting example which I point to in my book which was about a scientist. One of his students in his class pointed out to him that there was a book on sale – a book about fruit flies, a sort of very academic book. It was a reference text about fruit flies and it was on sale for something like a million dollars and he said, it must be a mistake. He went to look, but no, yeah it really was on sale for a million dollars.

And then he noticed that there was another copy of the book which was on sale for a million two dollars, and he thought 'that's a bit strange'. And he then went away, came back a couple of days later and the price had now went up a million dollars, one hundred thousand dollars, and then there was another seller who was selling it for that amount plus a little bit more.

And what he realized – he started to track it, was that there were two systems which were running in parallel, and one would set a price and it would look around and then say "this is the

price I'm going to try and sell this for", and then there was another system which was running which would say "what I'll do is, if someone wants to buy from me, then I'll buy that book, and I'll make a profit on the difference between my price which is higher and the price that they're selling it which is lower." And, the lower price one would look up and say, "hey, there's this book which is the same book which is on sale for a higher price. I could get that higher price, and it would raise its price to nearly the same price as the other one, but just a little bit less," so it was trying to sell on the basis of "I'm a lower-priced one," and the other one was trying to sell on the basis of "I'm the more trusted one" because it had a better sales review.

The machines behind those two systems, one looking around saying, "okay, I'm trying to sell on price," and the other looking around saying "I'm trying to sell on reputation" those are all driven by algorithms – a set of computer rules which say "find out what the next highest book is and just increase the price to just a little bit lower than that." And the thing was there were only the two in this that were selling this book, and there was no reason it should *ever stop*, and the price just went up and up and up, until it hit some sort of internal block on Amazon and suddenly the price collapsed again. But again it just went down and the same two algorithms were getting working and pushed the price up and up again.

It was the sort of thing that could just go on and on. And this is the thing about algorithms, people set them in motion. They're a sort of computer programs basically which have no knowledge of what they are or what they're trying to do. They didn't know that they were trying to sell a book. They didn't know that there was another algorithm doing the same. Whereas humans, had they been doing the job, they would have said "wait a minute, this is kind of crazy. I could effectively stop this by putting my price above the other one because I'm the one who's actually got the book".

You know, there was only one book in all of this.

Anne: (laughter)

Charles: This was the point about it…

Anne: Right.

Charles: …which made it so crazy. Only one of the two suppliers *had a book*. So humans would be able to see this, but algorithms can't. They have no morals. In that sense they're sort of amoral. They are unmoral, they don't understand the context. They just know the rules that they have to follow. And with Facebook, you have a newsfeed which says "my purpose is to keep people engaged. My purpose is to keep people using Facebook for as long as they possibly can." If they were to use it 24 hours a day, 7 days a week that would make the newsfeed algorithm as happy as it could be as possibly be, in the sense that algorithms could ever understand happiness.

Anne: Right.

Charles: It would feel that it scored 100 out of 100, and that's always what it's trying to do. It's always trying to show you content that would keep your gaze. And what the people at Facebook do, having set this algorithm in motion is, from time to time, they tweak it. They say, "don't show people so much politics or don't show people so many things from, you know…" All they can do is sort of tweak at the edges, but the river of this feed continues down its way and it's an unstoppable thing in that sense.

They'd have to switch off the entire algorithm, and if they did that, then they'd basically be back to the bulletin board system as it used to be, where people would post things. You'd have to look around to see what was interesting, what had recently been updated. You'd be basically in the 1980s and 1990s. But that's not to say that those things don't exist now. Reddit is a good example of a system which has not got an algorithm powering it but is pretty popular.

Anne: Right, right. Discord is another place where people kind of turn to, especially if they're leaving Facebook because of all this. Everything that we've just been talking about, it's all being done by robots basically. It's machines, and the system profiles people based on their demographics – things that they liked, things that they said, words that they use on their- let's say on Facebook, on their profile.

I was on Facebook for a while; I'm not anymore. But I posted to my friends when I was diagnosed with cancer [in 2020] and then just like within hours I was getting ads for these fake cancer clinics. They were turning up in my newsfeed because I had written the word *chemotherapy* in my announcement to my friends and suddenly I was being targeted by this just horrible, horrible pseudoscience and not knowing much about Facebook, I reported it and I kind of naively assumed that a human being was going to see my report and do something, but even the reports themselves get reviewed by bots and rejected.

And so, I reported all this fake medical content – basically medical disinformation that I had been receiving on my profile – I reported it to Facebook and the bots wrote back to me and said "it doesn't violate our community standards" and that was that.

And what I've been reading about in your book and elsewhere is how it has the effect of sending people down a rabbit hole, basically, in terms of political disinformation and ultra-right ideology. Your book points out it's been very easy for extremists to set up spaces on Facebook and then use those spaces as a recruiting platform. You write, about groups, that--and I'll quote you here-- "The algorithms couldn't distinguish between a group that wanted to get together to go bowling and a group that wanted to get together to beat people up."

[17:26]

Charles: Because they're both people who want to be in *groups* – they want to be in groups of like-minded people, and there is a Facebook algorithm which looks at people's personalities

which you can work out from the sort of things that they show interest in, the things that they like, the things that they spend time on – it looked to people's personalities in that way and says "well, looks like you're quite interested in people who do bowling, and you've looked at lots of people doing bowling, so I'll suggest a group to you" and you have other people who were "well, it looks like you're very interested in shooting guns and it looks like you're interested in insurrections in countries, so here's a group you might find interesting." It's sort of like that.

It's no more complicated than that... Mark Zuckerberg had this absolute enthusiasm, to put it mildly, for getting people into groups because he felt that the whole thing of just *friends* wasn't keeping Facebook alive. It was seeing a fall-off in the amount of content that people were posting, the amount of interest that people were showing. So he was like, "Groups is what you're interested in. It's your interest, so let's direct you to those," and the advertising thing follows on from that, because groups gives advertisers more things to target. You know, maybe there's this faint expectation if you have posted about chemotherapy, then you might join a cancer support group, but of course that gives the people pushing the real help on cancer, or all the fake stuff about cancer – that gives them two bites of the cherry because they can target you in your newsfeed and they can target you in the group.

[It's] the advertising model where **attention is money** and all attention has to be grabbed because everyone only has 24 hours worth of attention to give per day. In that sense it's a zero-sum game. Facebook is all about finding as many times as you can to show adverts to people.

[19:28]

Anne: Right, and then this amoral kind of growth pattern that you identify has a destabilizing effect. It can have a destabilizing effect and an undemocratic effect. I wanted to move into a chapter that you wrote that was just really, really interesting and disturbing: your chapter about the crisis in Myanmar, which is in Chapter 5. According to United Nations fact finding experts and journalists on the ground there, Facebook had a key part in the incitement in ethnic and religious hate and massacres there, for example in 2017.

Charles: It's an incredible thing. In twelve years or so, Facebook goes from being founded to being implicated in a genocide. One should be clear that Facebook wasn't used directly to target the Rohingya in Myanmar…

So, the Rohingya are a Muslim minority. Myanmar is mostly Buddhist – very strongly majority Buddhist, but it's often been sort of the last redoubt of Buddhism, so there's a strong feeling there among the Buddhists they have to sort of *preserve* themselves- preserve their way of life. Before 2010, there was a military junta and basically there was a great deal of control over communication. After 2010, they opened the country up to mobile data networks and Facebook was in there very quickly and it had an explosive effect.

I called the phenomenon **Social Warming**. It's what happens when you throw together people who may have different opinions about things and who haven't been used to having to see those opinions expressed directly in front of them. You wouldn't expect to get on the bus and have someone suddenly tell you about their views on abortion, or their views on the refunding of student debt. You wouldn't expect someone just say this suddenly to you just because you walk on the bus, but if you get onto social media that's pretty much what happens all the time. These things are just thrown at you because they bring a sort of outrage in you, and you respond to that. It's completely in our nature to do that.

And in Myanmar, the ethnic divisions that exist already and which are longstanding were amplified by this, and this was a population which had no experience with computers in general, with smart phones in particular. They had no understanding of what the ideas of 'report abuse' meant, they had no idea what 'like' meant, what email really was about. The concept of user accounts and a password was again, unfamiliar. Why would you want to have a password, because you know you're in a country where you're living cheek-by-jowl with everyone in the village? Why would you need to keep anything particularly *secret* from them? So, all these cultural differences which are baked into Facebook, all these things are assumptions that Facebook makes of how the world is – that you know what email is, you know what a user account is, you know what a password is for. Those all completely collapsed in the face of the Myanmar population, and what happened was that misinformation, disinformation, things to rile up people, hate preachers, these all ran amok.

And it was made even worse because Myanmar uses a language …because of the way it was cut off for a long time, its computer systems use a particular way of encoding the Burmese language, called Zawgyi, which is not the same as Unicode. Unicode is how you encode languages beyond just the Roman alphabet, and there's a very particular way of doing that. Burmese, which Facebook was using, no one in Myanmar was using, so that meant that when things were sent to Facebook for moderation, Facebook basically couldn't understand it. They were mistranslated and thought [the content] was completely inoffensive when they were calling for people to be killed. There was this understanding inside Myanmar of what was going on, and the complete incomprehension outside of it.

Anne: Wow, and some of this happened as you outlined in your book because SIM cards had been very expensive and of with course the whole influx of cell phones in Myanmar, it suddenly became ubiquitous. I was wondering if you could talk about what happened when **Aela Callan**, who's a journalist who was there, approached Facebook to tell them what was happening in Myanmar. How did Facebook respond to that?

Charles: Aela Callan is an Australian journalist who was one of the first people into Myanmar when the military junta started to lift restrictions. She saw a lot of the changes that happened and she was very worried [around] 2012 onwards by some of the rioting that happened. People

were killed and she saw that this was because the ethnic tensions that already existed were being inflamed by posts on Facebook. There were no other social networks to speak of in the country and Facebook really was everything. And, again there was no moderation.

She got a Stanford Scholarship not long after and took her concerns to Facebook. She saw the number 3 there who said, 'okay this is very important' and said that he would see what he could do about it. He referred her to some other developers and to the press office and she started to feel that she was just being managed. That what she had said was not percolating upwards as it needed to do to Sheryl Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg. Instead, it was all percolating downwards and as it went downwards it was just being dissipated. All the concerns that she'd expressed were basically being overlooked and ignored in favour of the idea that Facebook was a really big hit in Myanmar. And it *was*, but not in the way that they thought.

Anne: Right. Right, I mean I think when you look at the amoral system of the bots and everything else, you also have to look at the *management* of some of the social platforms and ask: are *they* also taking an amoral stance? They are resistant to regulating themselves. They're also resistant to being regulated by outside regulators and you talk a bit in the book about the challenge of regulating social media platforms.

There's this dissonance, right, between the speed of new technologies and the speed of legislation, which is very, very slow. Governments are slow and then the new platforms are developing at the speed of light. But at this point it's a bit predictable as to what's going to happen when we use these kind of platforms in the way that they're being used. But regulators really haven't come to grips, I think, with the vastness of that threat, and they haven't really developed protocols or regulations to control it. Part of your book is talking about well, how much can regulators do, and what should regulators do should they break up the companies to make them more controllable and smaller--or what other kind of interventions can be done? Can you talk a little bit about where things might be heading in terms of regulation?

[27:23]

Charles: Yeah, it's interesting, because there's a lot of noise about regulation coming out of certainly the U.S. and to a lesser extent in the U.K. Obviously it's more difficult in the U.K. because you know the companies aren't headquartered here. You also get noises in India about this, and the European Union, you know covering 20-something countries. It does seem to have ideas about what it wants to do with this.

The difficulty, you know, when people say, 'oh well, you should just break them up' is what exactly are you going to do? I mean, if you take Meta, which is Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, okay if you say well, we need to break it up. Okay, if you break Facebook and Meta- if you separate Facebook from Instagram from WhatsApp, you still have Facebook. You still have

gigantic – you still have three billion people or so. And the difficulty about Facebook is not the fact that it's linked to Instagram or WhatsApp, that's not what makes it bad.

Anne: Right.

Charles: The thing that makes Facebook bad is its sheer size because it means you can get the interaction between so many people and the moderation goes completely out of whack.

Just as a sort of example, imagine that you have a network where you have 100 people on it and you assign a number of moderators. So, with 100 people you can have X number of interactions. They can all interact 100 times, 99 times or something. Now double the size of the network and you have 200 people. They can have 200 x 200 interactions, that's four times bigger. How many more moderators are you going to need? You're certainly going to need at least four more moderators, but possibly more because some of the interactions are gonna get really nasty and they're gonna get very messy. You might actually need moderators to help out for when things spill over. Now if you make the network 16 times bigger, well, now you know your moderation problem is growing so much more quickly than the linear size of the network. The moderation problem grows geometrically.

And this is the problem that these 'break them up' suggestions don't seem to have thought about. The problem with Facebook is not the fact that it's the owner also of Instagram and WhatsApp. It's absolutely about its size and that's why my suggestion is that you reduce the size of the network. You actually put a limit, you say 'okay Facebook, you can be Facebook if you want to be, but you're limited to 250 million users.'

Anne: Hmm.

Charles: …'That's all you can be,' and 'if you want to be bigger than that, sorry. No, it's just not allowed.' It's rather like the way that, for example, in the U.K. we have laws about media ownership. You can't own more than, I believe it's one-third of all the media output in the country. and the definition of that is sort of laid down in the law somewhere. Similar, in the U.S. the F.T.C. is at the moment struggling with a lawsuit where it's trying to define how much of the social network space Facebook has, which is sort of getting towards my point, which is about… okay, the problem is about Facebook's size.

Anne: Mm-hmm.

Charles: Much more than its ownership of things. And I think that if you do that, then yes you start to have some effect. I mean there are ways you can fiddle around the edges. You can do things like make it harder to share content. If you make it more difficult, for example, for people on Twitter to retweet something. Say if you had to fill in one of those Google Captcha codes where you have to identify all of the street lights in the picture or something, you can bet people would not be retweeting stuff so much. And it tends to be those sorts of things which go viral which lead to problems on the network. If [Facebook] made it a little more difficult to

share content or a bit more difficult to join a group or whatever – if you put a bit of friction in people's way, then you tend to reduce, ironically, the social warming on the network.

But the disconnect is always: how are you going to impose that on them? What sort of laws do you have to pass to make these things effective?

Anne: Right.

Charles: I mean, the thing I think is good about saying you have to be a certain size and no bigger is that it's very easy to count how many users you've got and it's pretty easy to write that in law. That's my best suggestion.

Anne: Yeah.

Charles: And believe me, I did think of lots of other possibilities, but the trouble was that they all come over as a bit unworkable. And I keep coming back to the point that the problem grows geometrically and *ownership* isn't the problem.

[32:11]

Anne: Well, it seems like there's always within social media (and maybe we could talk about Twitter for a minute), there's like a captive audience, except the 'captives' can leave any time they want. We have free will not to use these platforms, right?

But since Donald Trump has left office, I've thought a lot about how Trump's tweets, they were always kind of like a barometer of his mood. And in some ways it was like living in a dysfunctional family where we would kind of be seeking clues about what's the mood… "what's the Big Man's mood today?" and we would gauge that by Trump's tweets. And then Trump's tweets would impact all of the users' moods too in this way, because everyone is kind of like in a dysfunctional household, kind of tiptoeing around this person who's in charge with the tweets. I think that he really effectively used the platform to manipulate people and to manipulate so much…but at the same time I think, well *how did people get so manipulated?*

Because people can vote with their feet--or vote with their thumbs--and leave the platform. There's something about the attractiveness of the platform that makes people feel almost like – and you talk about this in your book – people almost feel like they *need* to be on these platforms. And I'm wondering what kind of strategies we might want to develop to get consumers to just get off the platforms… stop using them, or have a very limited way of using them, rather than just relying on regulators.

Charles: Yeah certainly, I mean as you pointed out earlier, trying to rely on regulators tends to be a bit of a…I don't know… it's a bit of waiting for Godot sort of thing.

The Trump stuff was always intriguing. I never followed Trump, never at all. And, in the U.K. I don't follow Boris Johnson and I don't follow the leader of the Labour Party. I don't follow any

of the big politicians in that sense because I know that the things that they're going to say there'll be… in the case of Trump they were evidently entirely personal… but you're not going to derive any benefit from knowing what *these* people have tweeted.

Anne: Right, yeah.

Charles: And they're not tweeting for you in that sense. They're doing it for an entirely different audience which simply doesn't intersect with you unless you're one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or something.

So picking who you actually choose to listen to is a very big part of successful social media strategy. You can identify the people who are looking to wind you up, as we say in the UK. …There was a really interesting study done about when did people see things that they thought were outrageous. How often a day did they come across an activity or read something or see something, or in other ways witness something that they found *outrageous*. Because outrage is a very deep emotion in humans….

Anne: Yeah.

[35:25]

Charles: … It's what makes us tribal. It's interlinked with our tribalism because to be a member of the tribe you have to identify what is *not* in the tribe and part of how you do that is to say 'this action is outrageous, therefore you can't be one of our tribe,' because people in the tribe know that's not a thing to do. Therefore, by doing this outrageous thing, you are outside our tribe. You are part of the out-group.

There are people who go on social media and will look to generate outrage because it gives them attention. And there's no come-back from getting that sort of attention and in general they can find a tribe saying 'yeah we agree with you.' And so, they're not cast out. Their outgroup is someone else's in-group.

So you get these cadres of people online who are basically trying to wind each other up and what you need to do is *recognize it*. I really like using Twitter but I try to use it to sort of effective ends to some extent, to the extent one can. But, I do look at things sometimes and say, 'oh, there's an **outrage tweet**. Yeah, this one is simply trying to get people to respond to it. It's trying to be shocking to get people to respond.' And that person who's doing that is trying to generate outrage because they know it will come back to them. It will find… it'll expand their in-group whereas, you know things that just tell you about news events or whatever, often they're more straightforward… they're more informative but obviously they don't always spark outrage in the same way so they don't get the same attention.

So, of course the algorithm which sees all the outrage tweets getting interest says "oh, I'll show more of these to people."

Anne: Yeah.

Charles: … which is why I have to say I never use the algorithmic version of Twitter, right. I always use third party apps which just give me the chronological version. I don't want Twitter showing me tweets from five days ago that got a lot of reaction.

Anne: Right.

Charles: That's totally not what I'm here for. I'm here for the information. That's another way, certainly, of curating what you look at and making sure that you're not the one who's manipulated. You're the one who's in control. Choose who you follow and choose the chronological timelines as much as you can on Facebook… it's going to come to Instagram maybe soon, on Twitter, on anything else you can.

I mean TikTok, interestingly – there's no way to avoid the algorithm on that. It's a very powerful algorithm which is really good at figuring out what people are interested in, what they're going to spend time looking at. This is why people say 'I can't get off TikTok. It's just incredible…'

Anne: Wow.

Charles: …'How does it know what I like?'

Anne: Wow. (laughs)

Charles: Personally I haven't got it at all, but it's really, really tuned--it's no words, no writing. It's all on video. So, yeah, that gets the people I think. But the other ones, you can curate what you do. You can think about it. If you're aware that you're being manipulated, if you know the way they're trying to do it, then you have a way forward.

[38:28]

Anne: Right. I guess it's like any substance like alcohol or cigarettes. I was interested to see – you talked about it in your book -- the internal memos in Facebook where they talked about… well, people are trying to portray Facebook as like cigarettes and nicotine – addictive like that, but some guy was trying to be optimistic at Facebook and said, "well, maybe we can spin it as more *addictive like sugar* and we can have it be like sugar. You just do a little bit in moderation."

They were trying to put that spin on it, which I thought was so interesting to see because – I mean personally I don't use [Facebook] because I don't think it's sugar…I don't think it's sugar at all. I hate it and I don't use it because I don't see how it can be moderated. I don't have any hope that- that we can really moderate that space to the degree where I feel ethically comfortable using it when it's been used to sow chaos, disrupt elections, destroy democracies,

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lead to genocide… all of the things that it has caused with no accountability in this sort of amoral structure. So, my choice was simply not to use it.

But, I understand some people who feel like they really do still need to use it for a lot of reasons. You mentioned parents having parent groups, people that use it for their business, things like that. Then how can people try to find a happy medium of how to responsibly use it? And there are certain steps that people can take. I think we need more guidance for people in terms of how they can use these spaces in a more responsible and also in a more comfortable way.

Some people have decided that they're going to take the app off their phone because when it's off the phone and they can only go to the desktop then they'll only use it a certain amount of times or in a certain way. And it *is* very reminiscent of people trying to curb drug use or alcohol use when you look at the way that people are trying to control it.

I'm wondering when we talk about the bigger picture, it obviously it has a personal impact on people's lives that can be quite detrimental. I'm thinking of Instagram with girls, for example, and the rising rates of suicide and depression among girls that's pretty plausibly linked to the environment on Instagram in many cases…because there's this toxic load there. But, also on a broader scale on a meta level, which you really get into in your book, is the threat to democracy. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the bigger picture of the threat of these platforms and what can be done about this.

[41:02]

Charles: Sure. …The 2016 U.S. presidential election was pretty famous for being the first time that Facebook ads were used to target a small number of swing states. And you have to give credit to the Trump campaign here where they really did focus in on a few states: Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania – the three states swung it for Trump and swung away from Hillary Clinton and they used Facebook ads. You could say, "well, Facebook doesn't make that big difference, does it? It's not actually making all the difference- it's not making people vote one way or another". But the difficulty is that these were very small margins and you can't say for certain that it *didn't* have an effect.

My whole point with Social Warming, the reason why I liken it to global warming is that it doesn't take a *big* change to have a large effect. It's rather like when ice melts, you know at - 0.1C it's still ice. Get to 0C and suddenly you got this thing called water and you've gone through a whole change, yet there's only a small change in temperature and yet you've got this whole new mess. So, that was an instance where you have a comparable online population and you have an effect on an outcome.

Similarly, the Brexit result in the U.K. in the same year, in 2016, that was something where the Facebook was used to target people who had never voted before. People who had not actually

gone to the ballot box in their whole lives and because the Leave campaign reckoned that these were people who were more likely to be voting to leave the E.U. which is what the vote was about; they targeted them. They found them and they encouraged them as hard as they could to come out and vote for the Leave vote. And that was pretty effective. They got a lot of people who had never voted to come out and vote.

So in that sense Facebook is effective at doing democratic things – you know getting people to vote. But, was the basis on which people were making these decisions actually well-informed? There was a lot of misinformation, a lot of disinformation, a lot of completely false claims going about but no one could see what was actually being shown to people – what claims were being made because these were **dark ads**. These were ads which targeted that particular demographic in particular places and there was no oversight of them. You couldn't see what was said. And many years later, Facebook is still being difficult about giving access so people can see what was shown to who, because the thing about democracy is that you want to have some sort of clarity about what ads are being shown to people. You want to know what it is that's being said on behalf of one or another political party. When you have people leafletting in the streets, you can do that. But when you have dark ads that are being shown to people in their bedroom and there's no way to go back on that, that's not quite the same thing.

So the U.S. election, the Brexit… but before that you had the Philippines election which is the same year – 2016. And this was an election which was described as ground zero for Facebook having an effect on democracy, by a person from within Facebook. In the Philippines, that's a very connected country where loads of people had smart phones, loads of people on Facebook, and misinformation was rife in the 2016 presidential election. I mean, the Philippines always struggles with democracy in that it's not always the most truthful politician that gets through, but the election there of Duterte was really one that was fuelled by huge amounts of disinformation and misinformation on Facebook and in that instance you could say that democracy was not well served by the presence of Facebook.

Those are three examples, but those are fairly online countries and I was interested in what happens in countries which are comparatively offline, where you don't have a gigantic penetration of social media. In late 2019 [as] I was writing the book or choosing what things to focus on I said "okay, which country was about as low penetration as Myanmar used to be?" because Myanmar had a couple of percentage points of penetration for mobile phones at one point. So, "what country is really a long way down the list in terms of penetration" and I picked Ethiopia, pretty much not quite at random but because that's where it was in the ranking. And Ethiopia turned out to be a country which has got very low social media penetration, perhaps 10 or 15 percent at most and yet social media was having an effect on its democracy because it was used by the elites to communicate with the population. Things that they would say would get reported on the news and in the newspapers. Facebook was used to try to organize demonstrations [and] the things that were said on Facebook would then get repeated by small

groups which would then form larger groups and then you'd get riots and things.

So, it doesn't matter whether you've got a country that's got a big population using social media or a country with a small population using social media. It doesn't matter if it's a big slice or a small slice. You still get these effects.

Anne: Right.

Charles: Social warming happens all the time, everywhere. Wherever it touches down, social media has this effect unless you find some sort of way to regulate it – to make it less toxic. And the difficulty is that …the advertising model drives it to drive attention, which effectively means that it gives a prime seat to outrage content, not necessarily true [content], because they don't filter for truth, they filter for outrage. Wherever you do this, then it's always going to have this effect.

Anne: It's a huge thing to be trying to tackle and it seems like regulators and governments are just starting to get on top of it. Your metaphor of the Social Warming is so interesting and I wonder, going in the other direction in terms of one degree changing ice to water, what kinds of little acts can start to move things in the other direction… to try to heal things and make things better?

Charles: For individuals it has to be down to seeing when it is you're being manipulated and resisting that. You've got to step away from it or observe yourself, almost, and understand what's happening. The platforms could do a lot. As I said, they could make it more difficult to spread content. They could focus more on the accuracy of content, and I know that with COVID, it's been interesting how both Twitter and Facebook have made a big play of 'well, we're removing misinformation,' the difficulty being that at the beginning of the epidemic certainly, they didn't know what really was misinformation and what wasn't. They removed a fair bit of content that was actually up for grabs scientifically.

And they slightly improved on the whole anti-vax stuff as they removed wrong claims and they simply banned some of the people who make completely false claims about vaccination. But the difficulty is always that because they're built around attention-gaining system they're always going to fall prey to the people who are going to manufacture outrage and spread things around like that.

And the difficulty is that they have to do things which go against their own interest. They have to say, 'okay, we're limiting the amount the algorithm shows you outside stuff. We're limiting the amount of time we think you should spend on our platform.' For example Instagram, a bit a while ago had a thing where once you'd scroll through all the new posts, it would say 'that's it, you've caught up' and then if you wanted to scroll on it would show you other things sort of suggested things, 'you might be interested in this, maybe not, but you're finished.' It was saying 'you're done'.

In recent months, it's completely changed that. It's now whenever you start scrolling it shows you all sorts of random nonsense from people you don't follow because it says 'well, you might be interested in this because you were interested in that.' It's gone completely back to the attention-grabbing algorithmic feed that has been shown to be bad for people. And in that respect, the platforms have to show some sort of maturity and recognize the effect that they're having on people.

Anne: Yeah.

[50:18]

Charles: The difficulty is like you were saying is, who's going to tell them off if they don't? And there's no visibility on that at all. When is the government going to crack down on them? What would cracking down on them look like? None of these answers is available to us at the moment.

So, really to that extent, it's down to us. We have to do it ourselves. You don't use Facebook. Limit yourself on Twitter or whatever. You know, you set limits for your social media. You go outside and have a walk or something. Listen to a podcast. There's all sorts of other things you could be doing… and the thing about social media, I guess, is that it's fooled us into thinking that there's nothing else we could do.

Anne: That's right. So true! Charles Arthur, it's been very, very interesting speaking with you and everything that you have to say. I highly recommend Charles' book. It's called *Social Warming: The dangerous and polarising effect of social media.* Thank you so much for speaking with us today.

Charles: It's been a pleasure, Anne!

(Theme song)

Anne: I was just speaking with Charles Arthur, author of *Social Warming: The dangerous and polarising effect of social media.* He spoke to us from Southeast England.

You've been listening to Noncompliant, the podcast. I'm your host Anne Borden King. Noncompliant is recorded at MCS Studios in Toronto. This session was engineered by Francois Heroux. Noncompliant is transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee. The podcast is available at NoncompliantPodcast.com and podcast streaming services. Thanks to our team and thanks for listening.