

Former Google, Facebook employees step up battle against tech addiction

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Former Google and Facebook employees — and early investors — are launching a campaign to warn people about the dangers of the technology they helped create.

Roger McNamee, Tristan Harris and others have been agitating for change at companies such as Facebook. Now they've formed a coalition, the Center for Humane Technology, and are launching a huge awareness campaign called The Truth about Tech.

Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube "are not neutral products," the website for the Center for Humane Technology states. "They are part of a system designed to addict us."

McNamee, a longtime tech investor who was an early backer of Facebook, and Rogers, former design ethicist at Google, have been sounding an alarm about the ill effects of technology and social media lately. In a recent interview with NBC News, they slammed Facebook for its role in spreading misinformation during the 2016 presidential campaign and election. McNamee has penned op-eds about his suggestions on how to "fix" Facebook.

Now, with millions of dollars from San Francisco-based nonprofit Common Sense Media and others, the new coalition aims to inspire companies to design their devices with tech addiction in mind; apply political pressure and advise governments on how to protect their constituents; helping consumers "take control of their digital lives" by spreading awareness; and "empowering" like-minded tech employees.

This Wednesday in Washington, Harris will join tech and health experts and lawmakers at Common Sense Media's conference, "Truth about Tech: How Tech Has Kids Hooked."

"Tech companies are conducting a massive, real-time experiment on our kids, and, at present, no one is really holding them accountable," said James Steyer, CEO and founder of Common Sense, in a statement Monday. Last week, Common Sense and other advocacy groups and children's health experts urged Facebook to pull the plug on Messenger Kids, its new messaging app.

Steyer's sentiments are in sync with McNamee's, and that's no coincidence. The two went to high school together at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, and McNamee introduced Steyer to former Googler Harris, according to Corbie Kiernan, vice president of communications for Common Sense.

The stepped-up action and awareness campaign comes amid the mea culpas and changes that tech companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google are issuing and enacting. The tech giants have testified before lawmakers about how their platforms enabled the spread of misinformation and exploitation of the nation's political divide, and are rolling out new initiatives and changing their practices to try to keep such things from happening again.

In addition, the new campaign cites research about tech addiction and the harmful effects of social media on children and adults. Apple investors also recently asked the iPhone maker to take

responsibility for studying the effects of smartphone addiction on kids.

"Facebook appeals to your lizard brain — primarily fear and anger," McNamee told the New York Times, explaining his involvement with the campaign. "And with smartphones, they've got you for every waking moment."

The Center for Humane Technology also was founded by tech entrepreneur Aza Raskin, best known for his work at Mozilla, and counts among its key advisors and supporters Lyft President John Zimmer and Omidyar Network.

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