

Do you trust your computer? New film explores perils of technology

Chris Paine's documentary looks at the potential dangers of our intimate relationship with smartphones and laptops



A still from Do You Trust This Computer?. Photograph: Papercut Films

In all likelihood, you are currently reading this article on a device that contains all the salient parts of your life. You've given it your bank account information, and use it to move your money around. It's privy to your conversations with loved ones and work associates, perhaps even words uttered out loud in private moments. It knows your schedule, where you are at any given moment, what you buy, what music you listen to, and who you should date.

Chris Paine's new documentary *Do You Trust This Computer?* wonders if that might not contain some potential for disaster down the line.

In fact, it's really more of a film essay, in the methodical way it introduces, dissects and draws conclusions from ideas applied to real-world developments. Having tried narrowing his focus to a single topic in the 2006 breakout *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, Paine decided to go wide for this project, weaving together far-reaching trends and headlines to form a more holistic meditation on the theme of technology.

"With this film, we wanted to pick apart the stuff we take for granted," Paine tells the *Guardian*. "We wanted to say: 'What is the reality behind these things? Which anxieties are well-founded, and what's just fear?'"

It's hard not to enter full-on panic mode as Paine blows through digital threats to life as we know it as if from apocalyptic flashcards. While advances like artificial intelligence, increased automation and algorithmic learning have propelled humanity into a faster and more convenient future, they have paved the way for some chilling developments as well.

"There are tentpole concerns," Paine explains. "The danger of autonomous weapons, the danger of election tampering and other hacking, the hazards of over personalization – these are part of the 'existential risk' we've covered in the three years of working on this film ... People are very fast to trust things that take care of them. We trust airplane autopilots, and we trust the FAA to make sure the pilot's not flying under the influence or something. Like machines or governments, digital programs have a real relationship with the humans that use

them. When we go to a computer program to buy from an online marketplace, purchase flight tickets or book a hotel, we trust that the algorithms in place are giving us good information, the best prices.”

The former head of an internet company that was sold before the dotcom bubble’s big pop, Paine spent the interim years learning all he could about the technology sector. He sees humanity approaching a reckoning with itself, as we turn more of our high-level thought over to software and more of our physical function to automatons. To ensure that qualities like privacy, safety and agency don’t become things of the past, it falls to us to self-regulate.

“There are simple ways to minimize your digital footprint,” Paine says. “Covering your phone and computer’s camera, so they’re not always broadcasting your face to whoever happens to have access to them is one. But with this film, the push is mostly to create awareness, to call on our congressional bodies to push back against companies like Apple and Google. You don’t have to throw away your computer and go completely offline – that’s just difficult to do, practically speaking.”



He continues: “Changing the culture of technology requires getting different types of people into available jobs. More women, yes, but also people from the arts. People with a background in ethics, or philosophy. This idea of the outsiders having some measure of control could be a big part of the solution ... It’s part legislation, part internal revision of the system.”

Paine places an emphasis on action over terrified paralysis, offsetting each disturbing morsel of information with a whiff of hope. He doesn’t want to come off as the tinfoil-hatted luddite that tech giants often claim their most ardent opponents are. He’s more sober-minded than that, both aware of the stratospheric stakes and confident that managing them represents the only way forward. After all, he’s the first one to describe himself as a “technophile”. He zeroes in on a lack of awareness as the chief problem, citing the embarrassing showing from a congressional committee hearing that had to ask Mark Zuckerberg what Facebook does and how it produces money during his deposition. (In a film that features Elon Musk musing about his vision of digitized empire on camera, Zuckerberg stands out as the most glaring absence. “You know well enough how difficult it is to get a hold of him,” Paine joked. “The Guardian broke the [Cambridge Analytica](#) story.”)

Paine contrasts that ignorance with the signing of the [Copenhagen letter](#), part plea and part pledge for the world’s top innovators to do and be better. Mindfulness is key, the simple act of remaining conscious about the invisible ways daily life has been infiltrated by evolving machines. Common consumers cannot go half-cocked into the coming decades if we hope to survive under the small handful of billionaires calling more and more of the shots. Paine tries

not to get too melodramatic over the course of his interview, but even he can't deny that privileging healthy cynicism over blind faith could be a matter of life and death:

“To a computer, the security systems of the world's largest nuclear mainframes are just a game, so we need to be careful if we're going to teach them to be master game-players.” He chuckles. “What could go wrong?”

- Do You Trust This Computer? is released in New York on 17 August and digitally in the US on 21 August with a UK date yet to be announced

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