



Episode 1,175: Social Media Thought Control: Is This the Answer?

Guest: Bill Ottman

WOODS: Give me your one-minute, no more than one minute, elevator pitch for Minds.com.

OTTOMAN: Sure. So Minds is a community-owned social network and powered by cryptocurrency, open-source software, privacy, transparency. We're basically taking what the major social networks are doing and inverting it and basically doing everything with a much more freedom-based foundation.

WOODS: That is good. I think you maybe came in at about 30 seconds. You're good at this. All right, can I just ask you something that a lot of laymen won't know? And it's a term that gets thrown around all the time. Can you just explain for a layman what open source means?

OTTOMAN: Sure. So open source means that the software that powers the network is completely transparent and public and anyone can inspect it, modify it, take it, use it for their own purposes. Anyone could actually take our code and build their entirely own social network in the app. But it's really important for privacy and so that you can – not that everyone's going to go inspect the code, but that the developer community can. So for instance, Facebook and Google are totally proprietary. Their code is secret. We have no idea what it's actually doing to us.

WOODS: All right, so tell me about how you got started. How long has it been around and whose idea was it? Give me all the details of the formation of it.

OTTOMAN: Sure. So I mean, we've been around – we actually formed in 2011 and just went to work building the code. And that took years. We didn't really launch our out-of-stealth to the public until 2015, and then now we're over a million users and just growing quickly. Obviously there's no shortage of issues with major social networks, crazy data scandals, surveillance, algorithm manipulation, censorship. So it's just sort of a natural movement of the Internet to gravitate towards more Internet freedom-based platforms. And there's a handful of emerging alternatives out there, and we've been able to, yeah, track some momentum from the mistakes of these bigger juggernauts.

WOODS: It's an exciting platform and I want to spend a good deal of time talking about it, but I have to say I'm interested in your own story, because according to my notes here, your background educationally was in English and music, and now here you are more or less a tech entrepreneur. How does that happen?

OTTOMAN: Yeah, I don't know. Honestly, I went to school at UVM in Vermont and was not into — very against Facebook when it first started coming out. I had issues with it just from a social implication and like psychology perspective. Like I didn't like what it was doing to people. It just seemed weird to me. And I still — it obviously has major psychological issues, and Facebook themselves are conducting experiments to see if they can control people's moods, for instance. They did a controversial study with Princeton to see if they could make people happy or sad and they proved that they could, and they were doing that without people's knowledge. And people's just smartphone addiction and what not.

And so my background was more in — I actually organized music festivals and I was a writer, and I still am and I still love the power of crowds, which sort of drew me towards this. And I just knew that, look, the Internet is — I ended up embracing the Internet, because I think that the Internet is sort of this incredible network connecting everybody and sort of this physical manifestation of global consciousness. And it's just very powerful for transforming the world in a powerful way.

And if you look at the top 100 networks in the world, you look at who has power, only a couple are actually coming from a perspective of Internet freedom. Those would be like Wikipedia, WordPress is actually open source. But you know, Wikipedia is a totally open project. It's a top-ten site in the world, and I'm not saying that they don't have any problems, but they proved that a community-driven effort can lead to a major global network. And now it's happening with cryptocurrency and Bitcoin and open-source projects are making a big splash, and I think the same thing is going to happen with social networking.

WOODS: When you say that there are problems with some of the other social media platforms, do you have in mind anything other than what we've all seen in the headlines, namely there seems to be in some cases the suppression of particular points of view or — I hate to use the word "censorship," because it is their platform, but nevertheless, you know what I mean when I say censorship, that some ideas just aren't allowed. And then also as you say, there's data tracking of various sorts that they haven't maybe been as transparent about as they might be. Anything else?

OTTOMAN: I mean, what started happening — so we started actually utilizing some of the major social networks to drive traffic to Minds, and the suppression of speech actually didn't — five years ago, you could drive a lot of traffic to your website through Facebook, and we had millions of followers on there and it was pretty cool. And even despite all the problems back then, we were still building the alternative back then, regardless. But when they started making it so that if you had, say, 10,000 followers and you post, only 2 to 3% of those fans are even seeing your post — I mean, look, this is what social networks are supposed to be about: communicating with your community. And then when they take the ability because their algorithms show you what they want you to see and they don't want certain articles to be seen, that is just horrendous. And when the majority of the population of Earth are using this as a tool to communicate, we need something where you can reliably reach your network.

And so there's a number of reasons I think that a different type of corporate structure, I think that there's stuff with — the open source model and with community voting on the evolution of the network, I think just more involvement by the — and rewards for the participants of the network are essential. The users are the ones who are bringing the energy to the network, especially the big influencers and figures in media, and the fact that they're getting

punished, it should be the opposite. They should be getting huge rewards for the energy that they're bringing.

WOODS: When it comes to censorship, isn't it a case though that at some — I'm just playing devil's advocate here, but at some level, you've got to have some censorship? And my listeners are having a heart attack, but what I mean is: would there really be a platform creator who would turn a blind eye if a bunch of users were openly planning to bomb the Eiffel Tower, let's say? Would you just sit back and let them do that?

OTTOMAN: Of course not. I mean, our perspective on free speech and our policy is, look, if it's legal in the U.S. and it's not inciting violence, it's not like extreme harassment, then it's okay. And generally speaking, we're actually about to release a paper of dozens of empirical, peer-reviewed studies that prove that censorship can actually amplify violence and extremism. And even though, yes, look, there's a lot of really harsh stuff on the Internet, and I think having really good filtering tools, control over your experience, blocking, muting, and you know, in certain cases banning stuff — but with stuff that is just controversial, I mean, the First Amendment is only for controversial ideas. You don't need free speech protection for ideas that everybody accepts. It's for the tough ones that we need that.

And if you actually look at what has happened with censorship policies — and yeah, sure, they have the legal right to do that and those networks can do whatever they want. But when they do that, they are sweeping a big, big social problem under the rug and actually putting it on everyone else's shoulders on the Internet and they're making the more macro problem much worse. And I'll shoot you the link after the interview, but dozens of studies in universities specifically looking at social networking behavior.

WOODS: How is Minds funded? I know how Facebook is funded.

OTTOMAN: Yeah, so we did an equity crowdfunding round last year. We raised over a million dollars from 1,500 members of our community. And it's not just like a typical crowdfunding where you get like a T-shirt. People actually get future shares of the company. And we hope to be continuing to fund ourselves like that and then ideally generating revenue as well. That's good.

But we have this whole reward system and crypto token where based on your contribution to the community every day, you earn a number of tokens, and it's running on the Ethereum network, which is basically the second largest cryptocurrency. And so based on the votes you receive, comments, shares, referrals you make to the network, check-ins, a number of other types of activity, you get a percentage of the daily reward pool of tokens. Then you can use those tokens to boost your posts for more views. One token will give you about 1,000 extra views, or you can send the tokens to other users and crowdfund them on like monthly subscriptions or one time like as tips.

So basically we sort of inverted the advertising model as well. So advertising is in the sense of Facebook and Google, they're spying on everybody to advertise, so that's obviously not cool. But advertising in itself, look, it's just promotion. I mean, so we want —

WOODS: Yeah, I agree.

OTTOMAN: We want people to be able to promote their work, and so we build this in. It doesn't track you. But we also build in tools so that users can directly advertise peer-to-peer with each other. So I could send you an offer of 100 tokens, which would have some sort of dollar equivalent value theoretically. And then you'd get an offer that says, "Hey, Bill's offering you 100 tokens to share this post." And you'll get another notification that says you can accept that or reject that. And if you look at how brands really want to grow — sometimes you want to go to us and say, "Hey, Minds, send my post to 10,000 people," and we can do that. But a lot of times, it's better for the creators to directly interface, because you know the types of audiences that you want to reach and you probably have other big influencers that you would love to get shares on their networks.

And so we build this tool so that not even just for big media people. We have a lot of small creators, artists, musicians, these types of people, who are sort of directly paying each other to access each other's audience, because there's actually an underground economy that's existing on Instagram and Twitter and all the rest, where pages are going to each other and saying through email, "Hey, I'll pay you 100 bucks if you tweet me or whatever." And so we decided to automate that to actually help creators make money.

WOODS: All right, that's very great and interesting. So I'm very interested in what you're doing and just in any challenges to the big guys. Now, not to say that I don't have a presence on those platforms. I'd be crazy not to. But I'm pulling my hair out half the time in trying to deal with them and the constant changes and the arbitrariness of a lot of it. Describe for me what the user experience is like at Minds.

OTTOMAN: Yeah, I mean, it's honestly very similar to Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. We have mobile apps. You can go to the App Store and grab it. It feels very similar. You have a status post, news feed, we have groups, encrypted messenger. We actually made our messenger so that we cannot even access people's conversations. Google and Facebook are scraping your conversations and analyzing it with AI so that they can target you with ads or do whatever they want. But otherwise, it feels quite similar and that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to make it sort of easy. It has to be easy in order for mass adoption to occur. But then the big difference is you have a wallet, and that is where all of your tokens are tracked and all of your payments, and you have this sort of daily earnings report and a way to send the tokens to other users. And we even see Facebook's looking at blockchain and cryptocurrency. They can't avoid it. I think likely in the future we're going to see all of these networks start to get into this stuff to try to stay relevant.

WOODS: Can you describe for me exactly how it works that you would be rewarded in effect for some of what you're doing on Minds? How does that work and where is the money coming from?

OTTOMAN: So I don't know if anyone out there is familiar with Ethereum, but basically it is a general purpose blockchain where you can create tokens on top of it. So it's called an ERC20 token, and it's really cool and interesting and it allows us to create sort of a microeconomy. And we mint a certain number of tokens. We're actually about to release this whole document about our token economics where we have a supply and a certain small degree of inflation and a capped supply, though, so it can't just infinitely inflate. And certain actions cause the distribution to occur.

And it's just a fascinating experiment. A number of other apps are playing with cryptocurrency, and it's interesting. We were dealing with Stripe, which is for fiat, so that users could send that to each other, but we've taken that out for the moment to kind of focus on crypto, because it's decentralized. It's basically powered by computers all over the world, so there's no central point of failure. It can't get taken down. People have actual total control over their tokens. They're not on our servers, which is really important. And yeah, it's just sort of a wild experiment, to be honest. But as we see with Bitcoin and other emerging cryptos, it's sort of here to stay.

WOODS: I would think there are a lot of examples of failed social networks that we never even found out about because they never really got off the ground. The key thing in trying to launch something like this and no doubt that some people try to discourage you with is precisely the problem of mass adoption. It's one thing to get your friends and family to humor you by setting up accounts, but the only reason people would want to be there is if people are there. But so you're caught in a vicious circle. How did you break out of that circle, do you think?

OTTOMAN: Well, it's really weird. So we're over a million users. We have a very hardcore active community, and the odd part is that even though we're a fraction of the size, small creators and medium-sized are finding it easier to gain a following of like thousands of followers on Minds than on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. You'll see people who have a Twitter account for ten years. They have 5,000 tweets and they never were able to get more than 100 followers. And obviously virality is up to what is most popular, and that's important too, but because we have this reward system where you can boost your post out of the void and sort of into the eyeballs of some of the community, we've built a way for people to actually be heard, and so I think the reward system is what is going to give us a chance at growing in some orders of magnitude. And so hopefully, like you said, you're not going to necessarily leave all of the other networks right away. It's good to just supplement.

And supporting these types of alternatives is what empowers them, so I think even just signing up is a sign of solidarity and very powerful. And not even just with Minds. I sort of advocate supporting this on all levels of your technology. So on your browser, are you going to use Firefox, which is fully open source, transparent, much more focused on privacy, or the Brave browser, or Safari or Chrome or Edge, those are all spying on you. They are all — it's spyware. And most people don't know this and it's no fault of their own. I mean, these companies just have been totally secretive with what they're doing.

But with a move like that, these micro-movements on the Internet are what are empowering the major corporations, so just by booting up your computer on a different operating system — if you want to be really bold, use something like Debian or Ubuntu. But the browser is a great way to participate. And then the apps. You have a number of companies that are just starting to be more supporting of Internet freedom.

WOODS: Let me just try to play devil's advocate again for Facebook in terms of one thing that annoys people, which is the feed. And really what it annoys are content creators. They think that they don't — I mean, we've heard all the things about if you have a business page or a so-called page rather than just your Facebook profile, we've seen that your posts have been severely downgraded in the feed. So if you're an artist of some kind or whatever, you're really, really struggling to get your content out there and you have to pay Facebook to boost those posts and things like that.

Now, what Facebook would say – I don't know how they would justify that particular thing except to say we want to give people what we think they want, which is stuff from their friends and family. But they would say: if we put absolutely everything in the feed a la Twitter, everything's in the feed that every one of your friends is doing, it would be so unwieldy and 80% of it you wouldn't care at all. We are trying to use an algorithm that will figure out what you do care about based on what you've liked in the past, interacted with in the past. We want to give you more of that as opposed to just this huge hodgepodge of crazy data that you don't care about.

That's how they justify having the feed be the way it is. Is there anything wrong with that argument?

OTTOMAN: Yeah, there's a lot wrong with that argument. And look, I think having an alternative option, different setting on the feed that you can opt into which is more tailored based on stuff that you've interacted with, that's fine. Have that as a secondary option. But the pure, default, chronological feed is very important, and I actually don't know – I've not heard that from people that they don't like the full chronological feed. I mean, it's sort of insulting to the intelligence of the community that you're not able to curate your own feed. I mean, look, if someone that I subscribe to is spamming my feed, I'm going to unsubscribe from them. I have that power. I like to subscribe to organizations and individuals that I want to hear from, but even Twitter and Instagram and YouTube are all getting into these weird algorithms by default and I just don't think that that is okay. It's hurting creators. You can do all your AI-tailored algorithms on the side, but really we're dedicated to always having the default feed be totally chronological.

WOODS: Do you have a distinction between like a regular profile and, say, a business or professional page like they have on Facebook?

OTTOMAN: No, we are more sort of like Twitter or Instagram in that sense, where you can have a page for your brand or for the individual and it's just one, but we also have groups. And honestly, the page and individual distinction on Facebook, it never made that much sense to me. There's like a cap for how many friends you can have on the friend page. I don't really – I think it's a little bit simpler and easier for people to swallow, like, look, if you want to make a page, make it for yourself, make it for your company. Yeah, it's all the same on Minds.

WOODS: How is Minds going to be different three years from now than it is today?

OTTOMAN: I mean, I think that if you look at what's happening with all of the big applications, whether it's Snapchat, any of them, Instagram, oddly, they're all kind of coalescing into having similar functionality. It's like, look, do you want to do a livestream, do you want to do a status post, do you want to do a story, do you want to be in a private chatroom? All of the networks are doing the same thing and they're all competing with each other, and so we are moving in that direction, technically speaking. We're working on all of those features as well.

The big difference is in more the back end, where they're all housed in a centralized server, and so we're going to pursue all of the fancy features with video and streaming and messenger and all that kind of stuff, but on the back end, we're pursuing more of a decentralized project, where peers all over the world are helping power the network, whether it's with their browser or with the blockchain or with other distributed protocols. And this is what makes it so that the network can't actually get taken down, and it also makes it so that Minds

doesn't even really have the ability to surveil or do a lot of the shady data practices that these big networks are doing. So I hope that we can just keep moving in that direction.

WOODS: There's another independent social media platform that no doubt you're familiar with. That's Gab, Gab.ai, and they also want to be a free speech platform, but in practice — and I'm on Gab and I have nothing against it and I hope it succeeds. In practice, it's where people of a particular standpoint hang out. I'm sure there are left-wing progressives on it, but that's not the sort of person who dominates Gab. And that seems to be only natural to me, because if you say, "On our platform we're going to have free speech," then a lot of people whose views are marginal from the point of view of society at large — nobody in the media, for example, is in the alt-right, for instance. And not to say that Gab is entirely alt-right, but they certainly are right of center. It tends to attract a particular group of people.

And I wonder what has been the experience at Minds. Have you been able to maintain — while on the one hand saying we're seceding from the mainstream social media platforms, have you been able to bring over a lot of mainstreamy folks, or is it all folks who are kind of in one extreme or the other?

OTTOMAN: Yeah, so a few issues with Gab are, one, they're not open source, so that to me is a little bit more of the same. I appreciate the free speech stuff, but yeah, it's very polarized. Even the tone coming from their leadership is pretty volatile. And I think we're definitely less polarized. I want to take the higher ground; I'm not going to sort of talk negatively. But we originally had a very diverse audience, for progressives, liberals, classical liberals, libertarians, and yeah, some of the more extreme on both sides.

And I think that it's essential to reach out to both sides. We need to have the conversation with the willing participants from the left and the right. That's the only way that we're going to reach a critical mass. I mean, the reality is that there are liberals and there are conservatives who want to have the conversation together and coexist, and the only way that this is going to become a global network is if we have both. You can't just disqualify a whole polarity of political thought.

And I think that freedom of speech, even though it does seem to be affecting more of the right recently, it does affect the left. Censorship on Facebook and Twitter affects LGBTQ communities in terms of language, maybe certain types of more mature content. Free speech is not a right-wing issue. Rational people across the spectrum want this and want to have the mature conversation.

WOODS: What's been the toughest challenge you've faced with Minds?

OTTOMAN: I would say catching up to the establishment networks in regards to functionality. And we're getting closer. We finally just released all-new mobile apps and a whole upgraded UX on the browser, and so we're getting closer. But you know, these companies have thousands of developers and billions of dollars of capital. We raised a million dollars and it's a small team. But so in one sense, that's our biggest challenge, but in another sense, I'm like, wow, we, with just a small dedicated group of people and our community, have somehow entered the conversation.

I mean, that is in itself reassuring for me, and I think if we can take it to the next level with increasing by order of magnitude our capital and engineering team, I think that they – Look, if people have the decision between a network – assuming they have pretty equivalent functionality – between one that respects your freedom and one that doesn't and one that is just in the news constantly about all of their shady practices, I mean, what is the normal person going to pick? It's kind of a no-brainer.

WOODS: Yeah, these news stories are like a dream for you. You could issue a press release every five minutes.

OTTOMAN: We don't even have to do any marketing. It's just like people are naturally seeking this out.

WOODS: That's really thrilling. It's amazing, again, that you've gotten up to a million users when that is just so hard – there's got to be some magic number – who knows what it is? – that once you get there then it's just going to snowball and you've succeeded. But so many people fail to get up to whatever that magic number is and the thing peters out, so the fact that you got over that threshold and the future looks so bright for you and you have such ambitions for what you're doing is really exciting. So I'll tell you I haven't signed up up to now, but I solemnly promise that I will before the week is over.

OTTOMAN: Great.

WOODS: I'll be up there and folks can look for me there, and let's see if we can make a go of using this platform to spread the good word. Well, listen, Bill, this is tremendous. Minds.com is the website. I guess it would be superfluous to ask for any other links you'd like me to promote?

OTTOMAN: I mean, feel free to just connect with me on there, Minds.com/Ottman, and feel free to reach out and let's – yeah, let's keep the momentum going.

WOODS: I love your optimism. I love just your persona, just your overall approach to this. There are a lot of reasons to be unhappy with developments on the Internet and particularly in social media, and you have no hesitation in pointing out the problems, but your emphasis is on: we can build something better. And man, is that a breath of fresh air. So thanks very much for that and best of luck.

OTTOMAN: Hey, likewise. Thanks a lot for having me, Tom.