

The Art of Asking Everything

Eli Pariser: How We Can Actually Use the Internet for Good Things

Amanda Palmer 00:34

This is The Art of Asking Everything, I am your host, Amanda Palmer. This week's episode is called "How Can We Actually Use The Internet For Good Things?" And guess what we have coming up next week in America-land... an election! Are you voting? You better be, you motherfucker. And guess what is awesome for sharing information about politics and voting? The internet! And guess what is also full of lies and conspiracy theories and bullshit? The internet! Oh no! Multitudes!

We are lucky. This week's guest is Eli Pariser. Eli is an author, an activist, and an entrepreneur focused on how to make technology and media (read: the internet) serve democracy and human beings.

You have probably heard of MoveOn.org, and you have probably even used it if you are an American on the internet who has done any sort of political activism. Eli became the executive director of moveon.org in 2004, where he helped pioneer the practice of online citizen engagement. He's also the co-founder of Upworthy, which you've probably heard of, a website for 'meaningful viral content,' as he calls it. And Avaaz, which is a large global citizens organisation. And in a nutshell, Eli has clocked a lot of hours thinking about how we can use the internet to make things better in the world.

I first met Eli through the TED conferences, because we both did talks there. And if you wanna check out his TED talk, it's amazing, it's called 'Beware Online Filter Bubbles'. And we sat down for this interview at a TED event in Edinburgh in July of 2019, while I was on a break from touring. I had just finished reading his book, called 'The Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You,' which will be the book that we discuss in the podcast book club in about a month, and oh my god, is this the topic that we need to be talking about right now, at the moment, because it is very important. And I could have talked with Eli for many, many, many, many more hours, and hopefully he can

come back on the podcast in a couple of months, and tell us what the fuck has happened to our country. I can't wait to find out. I'm scared.

But for now, let's just go into the past. Before COVID. Before Donald Trump looked like he might actually be the president of the United States of America again. Cross your fingers. And listen to me talking with Eli Pariser.

Eli Pariser 03:16

As many people I think, who end up in communicating or performing are, I started out as a very awkward, bad communicator.

Amanda Palmer 03:25

Then you had to get good at it.

Eli Pariser 03:25

And then I was overcompensating, because I had to learn how to do it.

Amanda Palmer 03:30

Do you now feel a lot more comfortable talking to people like public speaking, or doing a podcast, or whatever, or is there still a part of you that's weirded out by the whole thing?

Eli Pariser 03:42

I feel reasonably comfortable now, but as a 20 year old, I was super introverted, and just nervous in front of people, and not sure what I wanted to say. It's been a journey, but I've realised mostly it's nice to connect with people, and they're interested in what I have to say, and we can have a good conversation.

Amanda Palmer 04:03

One of the weird things about TED is it's a conference, so you walk around with a badge, and at the bottom of your badge, it says 'ask me about...', and I've noticed that actually over the years, people have gotten a lot braver about what they will... They won't just put hiking, craft brewing...

Eli Pariser 04:21

How I killed it.

Amanda Palmer 04:23

Mine, for instance this year says abortion on it, and I actually sat there before I typed the words in, and I was like ooh, that's gonna be interesting. I actually have only had

one person point to that and say so, tell me about abortion. But yours says ask me about 'The Person and the Situation'. What does that mean?

Eli Pariser 04:43

Well, it's a book. And my friend Vikram described it as, it sounds like the title of a book where you don't remember the title of the book. It's like, a person in a situation. But actually, it's a classic of social psychology. And it was written by this guy Lee Ross, and his partner. What they are looking at is how, as human beings, we systematically attribute people's behaviour to what we think is their internal character, when we should be attributing it to the situation that they're in. So we attribute it to the person not the situation, and what's fascinating is there have literally been probably tens of thousands of studies that show how strong this effect is. Yet just a lot of our intuition about how predictable people are, based on who we think they are, you're generous, you're extroverted, you're whatever, is just totally wrong.

Amanda Palmer 05:42

Not that those things aren't superficially true about this person, they are superficially true.

Eli Pariser 05:47

They're true in situations. So one of the reasons that we think that they're true, is that it's like, I see you at TED, and I don't see you with your family, or at home. and so, I encounter you in the same kinds of situations, and so you seem like a very similar kind of person when I encounter you. But actually, everybody's had the experience of like, oh I went drinking with my work colleague, and it was a totally different thing. Everybody's like that, all the time. But you don't usually get that view.

So the book opens with this story, it's an experiment where they had a bunch of religious seminary students, who were asked to teach a class about the good Samaritan, where you stop on the side of the road and help the guy who has trouble. And some of them were told that they had plenty of time, and some of them were told that they were late.

Amanda Palmer 06:46

I know this story.

Eli Pariser 06:47

Yeah. And so the ones that were told that they were late...

Amanda Palmer 06:51

And when you say late, they were late to...

Eli Pariser 06:54

To walk across the campus to where they had to give the talk. Of course, being devious social psychologists, they put someone who is evidently in trouble halfway between where they were given these instructions, and where they had to go. So the people who were late were stressed out, and they totally didn't notice...

Amanda Palmer 07:10

The real life person in need.

Eli Pariser 07:11

Yeah. And the people who were told they were early stopped. And what's fascinating is...

Amanda Palmer 07:18

They were situationally generous.

Eli Pariser 07:19

They were situationally generous. That was much more important than whether they scored high on generosity, how religious they were. None of these sort of factors that you'd think would predict who was gonna stop and who was not gonna stop.

Amanda Palmer 07:33

This is a very Brechtian concept. Bertolt Brecht was always saying, it's situational. If someone's hungry, they're not gonna be generous.

Eli Pariser 07:44

Right. A hundred percent. And I actually think for me, the reason it's important is that if our behaviour mostly comes from our situations, then figuring out what situations to create for people becomes a really important way to have people be decent to each other.

Amanda Palmer 08:08

So if we're all always late, we're all going to be assholes. Which is sort of what's happening.

Eli Pariser 08:11

Yeah, which we all are, all always late.

Amanda Palmer 08:14

And now we're all assholes! Alright.

Eli Pariser 08:15 Yeah. We're all walking too fast.

Music break – Look Mummy, No Hands

Amanda Palmer 08:28

We're also moving in a situation where, instead of tuning into our environment at any given moment, we're fixated on a three inch lit up screen, very close to our face, and we're not even taking in the situation that we're in.

Eli Pariser 08:45

Right, no, the phone is the situation.

Amanda Palmer 08:47

The phone is the situation.

Eli Pariser 08:48

Like always.

Amanda Palmer 08:49

And then what's the situation in the phone? There's layers and layers and layers.

Eli Pariser 08:52

Totally. The book is really good at illustrating the concepts. But I hadn't realised myself, it actually meets up with this esoteric religious stuff, where it's like, there is no self, there is no identity. You actually kind of get some of that in this lens too, cos you realise there is no such thing as this person is generous, or emotionally attuned, or whatever. There are people who have extreme versions of those traits, mostly the way we behave is a function of what's going on around us.

Amanda Palmer 09:27

So do you feel like a big part of your work is examining and trying to help shape the situation?

Eli Pariser 09:36

As an activist, to me that's like, it's a very hopeful thing in a way. Cos you don't actually have to change people.

Amanda Palmer 09:43

And as we've all learned...

Eli Pariser 09:45

Changing people is fucking hard.

Amanda Palmer 09:46

You can't change. And you actually can't totally, really change people. You change the situation.

Eli Pariser 09:51

Yeah. Right. And actually, so this is a little self-helpy, but I was reading this, and I was thinking about changing my own behaviour, and my narrative to myself about stuff that I'm doing that I don't like, if I'm procrastinating or whatever, is that I'm not trying hard enough, or I have some character flaw that is making this difficult. I realised, if I'm taking this book literally, then my intervention with myself shouldn't be to change my inner traits, it should be to figure out what situation I'm not gonna procrastinate in. Which turns out, by the way, that it's not having the internet. And I'll sit around, I'll be annoyed and bored, and then I'll do my work. And that's actually a much more powerful intervention to change your own behaviour.

Amanda Palmer 10:38

I always feel like I have been a procrastinator. Which people don't believe when I say it, because I'm so prolific and I do all sorts of things. They don't see my inside world, and they don't see the inside of my head, and they don't see that up in my brain I'm all bumbling and putting off things, and doing other shiny, exciting things that look really productive to people, but actually I'm just procrastinating on the thing that I said I would do.

I did a situational change in songwriting, that really changed the way I thought about procrastination, and thought about productivity, which is... So the way a song usually works is I get an idea for it, and then if I'm good, I turn everything off, I sit down at the piano. And if I'm really, really good, I stay, you know, like a good dog. I stay until I've written enough of the structure of the thing, like if you were a writer it would be like your book outline or whatever. Enough of the structure of the thing, and enough of the song, that it's finished enough, that it's finish-able. And that it won't just die on the vine. And

part of that discipline included, up until that point, totally turning off the internet. Shutting the computer and putting it in a drawer. If I was gonna sneak into the computer, it would just be to sneak in and look at the online thesaurus, or Google some historical fact that I needed for my song, but not get on Twitter, and not check my email, and not do the bad things that would take me to the bad place.

On this particular occasion, I tried something different. I don't know why. I had an idea for a song, it had been baking in my brain for a couple of days, I was alone in my apartment in Boston, and I just left the computer open, and tweeted a photo of myself, saying I am about to start a songwriting session, I almost never finish these, I'm a total fucking procrastinator, please cheer me on. And I actually kind of left the computer by my side, and logged my progress. And was like, I've been actually sitting here for two hours, and people are like whoop, whoop! You're doing the thing, hooray Amanda, you're doing the thing. I didn't check my email, but I kept checking Twitter. And that song that I wrote is called The Bed Song. It made it onto my next record, it is now one of the songs of my canon, it's one of the best songs I've ever written. And I had to confront that I'd changed the situation, and I did the bad thing. I kept checking the internet. But also, I checked a channel of the internet that was feeding me. I didn't check my email to find out that someone's FedEx package the day before was lost, and I had to all of a sudden get on the phone to track my friend's FedEx... These things that were just gonna take me totally out of the flow.

That was really fascinating to me, and I think it may seem like kind of a silly story, but I think as far as art is concerned, and work is concerned, it's a really important story about the internet, and how we use it. And that it isn't just a big binary, an on/off switch of internet bad, internet distracting, internet non-productive, or even Facebook bad, distracting, blah blah blah. We forget that we have control over what the internet is. Over what email is. Over what Twitter is. What online activism is. It isn't just this big, giant, scary, black and white morass.

Music break – The Bed Song

Eli Pariser 14:32

I've been on this weird deep dive on urban planning, and part of the reason is that I'm thinking about how to take urban planning concepts and apply them to the internet, that's my thing right now. So there's this guy, Jan Gehl, he's sort of the descendent of Jane Jacobs, he's this Dutch urban planner who has this idea of invitations.

So the way he introduces the idea is actually around traffic. He says so many cities saw that they had a traffic problem, and what they did was they widened the roads. A wider road is an invitation to cars. And so there were more cars, and more traffic. And this is actually empirically true, that you build bigger roads, it doesn't solve your traffic problem, it actually makes it worse, which is kind of crazy. Because more people drive there.

Amanda Palmer 15:26

More people will get cars and drive there, or more people who have cars will use them more often, or both?

Eli Pariser 15:30

If people perceive that there is a lot of traffic going through a place, they're not gonna go as much. So then when the road gets widened, they can go to the place that they couldn't go, cos there was traffic. There's something profoundly human about that little thing.

Amanda Palmer 15:46

Yeah, we'll just fill any void.

Eli Pariser 15:47

But we'll also do what we're invited to do. Mostly he talks about invitations in this positive sense, like what do you wanna invite in this space? Specifically, do you wanna invite quiet conversations? Do you wanna invite street parties? It's cool what you wanna invite, but know what you wanna invite. And so that's sort of what I hear in your Twitter story, that was a specific invitation. It wasn't like, tweet at me your badly articulated, wrong political opinions. That wouldn't have been like, I'm opening up a little channel, with a particular invitation.

Amanda Palmer 16:22

The way that my community has been invited again and again and again and again over the years has created language, so that when I say X, they're more likely to do Y. Me and my community of listeners, fans, audience, whatever, have a really respectful relationship. So for me, it's not really so much a roll of the dice as it is like, ooh, I get to do something exciting, because the chances that someone's gonna come back at me with something negative, at this moment in time, are very, very low. But also, a lot of what the internet has meant is that if you can't control the faucet on that stream of human car-souls that are coming into your cobblestoned alleyway, or your giant nine-lane super Lady Gaga highway, you have to, as an artist, know what your invitation

is. And part of the invitation is, are you going to try to sign with a massive label and make algorithmic pop music? Or are you going to play a single instrument, act like a troubadour, and try to write really soulful songs that will probably never get played on the radio because they're ten minutes long? Cos that invites alleyway.

But this didn't really use to be true. In the 80s, if you were an artist who wrote soulful songs, you still only had one channel to reach really, if you were gonna be a recording artist. So whether or not you were Nick Drake or a soulful weirdo songwriter, or you were a giant pop artist, you still only had the super highway, if you wanted to put your songs on records and get them to other human beings round the globe.

Eli Pariser 18:15

It seems like partly what we've portrayed has been, on the one hand, you can make a vastly broader array of invitations, and artists can have much more deep and complex relationships with their communities. On the other hand, that business model that was working for some people in the 80s, that filled in the middle tier of artists, has totally collapsed. And your Lady Gaga is great, and probably it's decent to be you, but if you're the troubadour or whatever, it's rough going.

Amanda Palmer 18:50

If I were giving a TED talk right now, which I'm fucking not, cos I'm on tour and I have a 3 year old, and I'm not that nuts, but it would be about that. It would be about the disappearance of the middle class artist, but actually how it is the community's responsibility to pay the salary of a middle class artist, and not just take instructions from the media about who and how to support.

There's a really easy solution, and the solution is every community has its middle class, potential middle class artists and troubadours, and local artists and stuff, but you have to give them money. Not much money, but people aren't yet trained to do that. I don't think they really get that that's a thing. And I think when people thinka bout giving money to the arts, they want a simple solution where you just give your pledge to NPR, and you give your pledge to the Met, and then you've done your thing for the arts. And my argument would be to diversify.

Eli Pariser 19:51

Different countries have solved this problem in different ways, and one solution is you make it more sustainable to be an artist by having a stronger safety net, where you can get healthcare, you can live a pretty decent life, and not be working all the time, and

there's actually this great analysis which may be apocryphal, but I like it, of why does Britain punch above its weight in terms of artistic export? Partly because...

Amanda Palmer 20:18

NHS.

Eli Pariser 20:19

Yeah. All of those systems that Britain had, that made it so that you could kind of make it. And it's like my brother and sister-in-law are artists, musicians, doing their thing. It's rough going. They're in Connecticut, she's in a band called Red Molly, and they have a thing together called Goodnight Moonshine. They're doing what they love, but America does not make it easy to do what you love. And by the way, they're working hard at it. There's a whole other conversation about Americans, and the need to say 'but they're working hard!'

Amanda Palmer 20:49

Yeah, that's their puritan roots. They're being productive! They're contributing!

Eli Pariser 20:54

Yeah. So part of it is, let's make it a virtue to contribute to artists, I totally am with you. But part of it is like, how do we do that at a societal level, where we open up more possibilities for people to do these things? Especially if you're not coming from a middle class background yourself.

Amanda Palmer 21:10

If you wanna get into that conversation, oh my god, there's so much shit we could fix. We could make things better for everybody, we could make it possible, and not unthinkable, to be a touring artist and a mother, for example, which right now is pretty much an impossible task if you don't have...

Eli Pariser 21:26

Are you doing it?

Amanda Palmer 21:27

I'm doing it, but I'm super fucking lucky! I'm an established artist, I'm married to another established artist, we have tons of dough. We can hire childcare, we can do this, we can do that, we can take turns working. I'm friends with a lot of musicians who have children, and they struggle. Because if you're an artist, and even if you're an artist who's making it, you live really, really close to the edge. And if you have a kid, that can push

you over the edge. And it can push you into catastrophe, and into debt, and into, how am I going to go take this gig if I don't have childcare, and if I bring the kid with me am I being a good parent?

Eli Pariser 22:09

Yeah. No, I mean this is their life. And even stuff like, they wanna enrol my nephew in public school, but you can't miss more than X number of days.

Amanda Palmer 22:22

Yeah, the system is not set up for touring musicians in America, for sure.

Eli Pariser 22:26

I don't know why, it's such a... We like touring musicians in America, but...

Amanda Palmer 22:31

But that's the problem everywhere, is we both worship and completely ignore the plight of the working artist.

Music break – They're Saying Not To Panic

Amanda Palmer 22:43

I wanna go back to your TED talk, the concept of the filter bubble, and the conversation around, and the idea of, the danger of, people living in their little internet compartments and siloes, and not getting information through and from the other side, is now national news. You have a unique vantage point. What are you thinking about all of that right now?

Eli Pariser 23:13

So the talk ends by calling personally on Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who were there, to do better on this, and Zuckerberg too. I thought, okay, it might be poisoning the well here for a while, in terms of how I relate to those companies, but so be it.

I think initially it stirred up some good conversation, and then there was this period where the companies all came out and said very definitively, this is not a thing.

Amanda Palmer 23:46

Facebook, Google...

Eli Pariser 23:47

Facebook and Google. It was like on earnings calls that they would get asked about it, and they would say, Chris Cox, the Chief Product Officer at Facebook, or Marissa Mayer, would say yeah, we've looked into it...

Amanda Palmer 24:00

It's not a thing.

Eli Pariser 24:00

Fake news. Or before that time. And it was this very strong shutdown. I try to approach things listening carefully, and sincerely, and at face value, and so there was this period where I really thought, did I get it wrong, or did I over-exaggerate it, or what was I missing, that they would be that definitive? To be honest, having now spent seven years with the idea, it is complicated, and there are people who experience it more, there are people who experience it less, it totally depends on how you consume media, which varies greatly from different groups of people.

Then the 2016 election happened. Zuckerberg famously was asked about it a couple days after the election, and was like, I think that's nonsense. What did they know, is a question that I think probably I give them even more of the benefit of the doubt than they deserve in some cases, cos I do think there were people who had some sense, but I also think it just wasn't on the radar. And I've run a company, and you only have attention for limited things, and you focus on the stuff that people internally or externally are stressed about, and democracy wasn't one of those things.

So then there was this big turn after 2016, and everybody came back and said well, it kind of is an issue, and invited me in for conversations, and there was this whole different pasture. And I guess the reason I say that is like, it's not as if I felt all the way through, the world's one day gonna prove me right or whatever, and I didn't even really want that. I was trying to have a public conversation about an idea, and it's been a journey with the idea. One of the pieces, after the 2016 election, people start to say well, the filter bubble, that's what elected Trump. I don't believe that at all.

Amanda Palmer 25:55

What do you believe?

Eli Pariser 25:56

Talk radio and Fox. Demographically, on non-college educated white men in the upper Midwest, they're not on Twitter at all, they're barely on Facebook. But they're listening to a couple hours of talk radio a day, and they're listening to a lot of Fox. And that's an

incredibly powerful channel that you and I don't experience at all. With your most devout community members, you probably don't get a couple hours a day of their time, right? That's a lot of time with someone.

Amanda Palmer 26:25

Socially, that's as deep as it gets. Listening to your fellow tribespeople discussing the issues of the moment with one another, and confirming each other's beliefs, is, I assume, socially one of the most powerful things that we take in.

Eli Pariser 26:42

Yeah, and the feeling of being seen. And the feeling of being represented. It does feel absurd to me sometimes that these older white men are like, 'where are the old white men in the national conversation?! When do we get to talk?!' There is a feeling of other voices are coming in.

Amanda Palmer 26:58

Especially when there's a younger Black president.

Eli Pariser 26:59

Yeah, exactly.

Amanda Palmer 27:00

Some day you're gonna be an old white man. How do you feel about that?

Eli Pariser 27:04

I'm not just a white man, I'm a straight white man, who is tall. It's so ridiculous that being tall gives you anything, and yet actually, social science says you get so much from just a few extra inches. So one the one hand, I feel like I've over-benefitted from that. A lot of my responsibility in the world is to transfer that benefit to people who haven't had it.

Amanda Palmer 27:29

Thanks for doing that, by the way.

Eli Pariser 27:31

I'm trying. Change is hard. And I do feel like people sometimes, in their frustration, legitimately, in their anger about what Trump followers are doing, forget that it's hard for anyone to go from feeling unassailably on top, to not. Whether or not they'd earned it or deserve it, people don't deal with that emotionally well. On the one hand you don't wanna coddle that. When someone's having some bad family experience and it shows

up in their work or something in a way that's not cool, it's like, on the one hand you want to say, well you can't behave that way. And on the other hand you wanna say but, I also get that you're human, and you're going through a hard thing, and that shows up in various ways in what you do.

Music break – Life's Such A Bitch Isn't It

Amanda Palmer 28:27

Have you changed your internetting practices?

Eli Pariser 28:30

It's a battle, honestly. I think about the internet, I read about the internet, cos I kind of care about the internet, I want it to be good. I'm not like ah, things were just better... I really think society was so screwed up in the good old days, in so many ways. We don't wanna go back, but also the way this is turning out isn't cool at all.

Really, the thing that I'm trying to do with social media in particular, cos I like using social media, and like you, I have some really good experiences. As a parent, I just posted this question that's been in my mind, about where the line is between cultivating determination and grit. My son is a boy, and I don't want him to suppress negative feelings and experiences, I don't want him to be a stoic. But that's a very funky, complicated... In practice, he's like, I don't wanna keep swimming, and I'm like, okay, do we honour that you have this feeling? Or do we... How does this work out?

This is actually one of the interesting things about all the feedback I got on that question, which is that I realised that oh man, all these kids are so different, and people are like, 'well I just do this!' and I was like, that would never in a million years work. But it's also a profound experience to hear lots of other parents talk about that. So I really value that.

Amanda Palmer 30:04

When you say value that, you just mean the humanity connecting on the internet, doing humanity?

Eli Pariser 30:10

Yeah. But also, I got this advice from dana boyd, who is one of the smartest thinkers around on the internet. But it was about trying to cultivate a sense of awareness about really, emotionally, honestly, what am I trying to do here? And sometimes it's like, well, I want likes. I want affirmation or whatever. And sometimes that's fine, and whatever, I'm

gonna post a picture of me doing something cool. It feels good to celebrate that with people who I know.

But sometimes it's like, this is gonna be an unsatisfying way to live out that intention. Maybe I need to re-think this relationship. It's like anything, it's like drinking, right? Like great, I wanna have a nice time with a friend, awesome. But I feel too anxious to really be myself. Maybe it would be better if we could try to...

Amanda Palmer 31:06

Go get tea?

Eli Pariser 31:07

Yeah, or whatever it is that's stopping you from being yourself.

Amanda Palmer 31:13

Well, that's where things get weird. And for people like me, for instance, my own relationship with authenticity is just, I still can't figure it out. Because the underlying motivation for any of these things is always, at its base, just I want connection.

I had something really distressing happen yesterday, which is for the first time in my touring life as a mom being away from my kid, cos I'm away from my almost 4 year old for a week now, I got the text from Neil and our babysitter, that Ash was sent home from camp, for being bad. And he had been warned. So he had been hitting and biting other kids, and they were like, if this happens a third time, we call you and we're sending him home. And I know, because Neil and I watch the patterns, that this is happening cos I'm gone, cos he does this and he acts out at school or camp or nursery when we're gone, when one of us is gone.

So first of all, I'm carrying the guilt of ugh, I'm a shitty mother, I'm not there with my kid, I'm not there to deal with it either. But also, I noticed that the thought danced through my mind, do I say anything about this on the internet? And my immediate instinct was no. But then, yesterday, I did a big ninja gig. And 200 of my patrons gathered before the ninja gig, which was like a thousand people out in a big park in Edinburgh. But we gathered in a little tent, and it was just my patrons, at 8:30, and they all had a secret password screen thing, and they came in this tent. And someone said, how's Ash? Cos I did a Q&A, does anyone wanna share anything, open mic. And this is something that my fans, my community, have been asking me for 4 years, and I always have an exciting answer, like he's great, and he's beautiful, and I love it. And this was the first

time where my immediate answer, or my immediate thought, was do I tell them the truth? That I'm struggling, and this bad thing happened?

And so, I told the story. And I also sort of told the story about not really wanting to share the story, because it's that thing where posting about your child biting someone on Instagram or Facebook not only invites comments that you don't necessarily want, or you then have to defend your parenting and stuff, but I still wouldn't go back and take this to the internet. But I still got to take it to my community. My safe community of 200 people who could sort of sit there and be like ah, that sounds really shitty, we're sympathetic, we're laughing about it, we all have kids, which is probably what would have happened on the internet. But I also just wasn't ready to open up that invitation to the internet criticising my parenting, or giving me parenting advice that I didn't want.

What we choose to show, reflect, share, but one of the things that I try to do on the internet, as a person with a following, is share as much negative, shitty humanity as I feel I can handle, without opening up the door to so much extra energy that I can't handle it, and you have to be really careful that you don't throw anyone else under the bus. Because I can't hop onto Twitter and be like, I've just had a fucking fight with Neil Gaiman, and he won't fucking... because that's just not allowed. So it needs to be very I-centric. And then there's all these questions about like, did your kid allow you consent to ask about his biting issue? It has something to do with real we be on the internet. Because my experience is usually, when I post that kind of stuff, I just see relief. I just see people going ah, it's so nice to see people sharing these kinds of stories about their kids, instead of just cute sticky ice cream selfies.

Eli Pariser 35:33

Yeah. It's really hard as a parent to figure out how and when to talk about this stuff, cos there's so much about your identity, so much about this person that you wanna protect more than anything in the world, all of these things are just so bound up. And also, who hasn't had biting? I read some book recently that was like, 4 years old is when kids are the most violent in their life. If you look at blows cast per day...

Amanda Palmer 36:05

Blows per day.

Eli Pariser 36:08

You will never be, hopefully, more violent.

Amanda Palmer 36:12

That's actually really comforting.

Eli Pariser 36:14

See, there you go. I gave a talk once about shame and social change, from some thoughts that had been percolating at Upworthy. The thing that I think people forget about shame is like, well what is shame? Shame is a cultural tool for creating conformity in a group, and setting agreed standards of behaviour. Who sets the agreed standards of behaviour? Dominant groups set the agreed standards of behaviour, right? That's true in any society, that's almost by definition true. Usually what is shameful is what dominant groups want not to be expressed. And so I actually think it's literally powerful to share those experiences, because you're literally pushing up against a bunch of ideas about how parenthood should be, there's all these fucking crazy ideas about how motherhood should be.

Amanda Palmer 37:12

Ooh, I know.

Eli Pariser 37:13

Yeah. And how do you push against that, if not by sharing those? That's the most powerful way. There's a bunch of complicated feelings about that stuff, cos it can feel very self-centred, or vulnerable at the same time.

Amanda Palmer 37:28

Or non-consensual.

Eli Pariser 37:31

Yeah, or non-consensual, but I do think like, we were gonna talk about abortion, but it's like, that's one big change that's happened recently, is people have... I was always pro-choice, but hearing my friends talk about what it was like really is different, and really feels different than having it be this secretive thing that happens to some random people.

Music break - Look At All the Women in the Street

Amanda Palmer 38:06

I literally had a conversation about something directly connected to this yesterday with my friend Simone, who's here at TED, who did a great talk a couple years ago. And we were talking about miscarriage, and we were talking specifically about the three month

rule. That you don't tell someone you're pregnant until three months in. And so I had three abortions, then I had Ash, and then I was pregnant about two years later, and I had a miscarriage at about three months. And both times that I was happily pregnant, and carrying out a pregnancy, I followed that rule. And found myself really questioning, why?

Eli Pariser 39:03

And by the way, it's also just such a fucked up rule, because not only does it stop people from talking about this painful thing that happens – I mean, I have to check with my wife if it's cool to say this, but we experienced that three times between our two kids.

Amanda Palmer 39:19

A miscarriage?

Eli Pariser 39:20

Yeah. And it was intense, and terrible, and it's also intense and terrible because there's not even...

Amanda Palmer 39:31

Nobody knows!

Eli Pariser 39:32

People don't know what to say, there's no funeral for the idea of the baby.

Amanda Palmer 39:36

So baked into that three month rule is a message, that you're not supposed to bother your community with the loss.

Eli Pariser 39:47

And even beyond that, the flipside of it, that's also horrible, is that in the first trimester, when you're feeling fucking awful...

Amanda Palmer 39:57

Nobody knows.

Eli Pariser 39:57

You're supposed to pretend...

Amanda Palmer 39:59

It's the worst.

Eli Pariser 40:01

Like, imagine telling a bunch of men that you're gonna have gastroenteritis for three months, but...

Amanda Palmer 40:07

You're not allowed to tell anyone.

Eli Pariser 40:08

You can't tell, if anyone at work even thinks that you do, that's not cool.

Amanda Palmer 40:13

And that's where the concept of pro-choice needs to be introduced. That if you are not yet feeling like handling this shift of society towards you as a pregnant person, your choice. But if I were to get pregnant again, I would tell my community on day one. On day one. So that if I went through a miscarriage three weeks later, six weeks later, twelve weeks later, I'd be supported. And the message is... it's a message of non-support. It's a message of shame, basically. Like, stay in your closet and don't bother us until you have good fucking news. It's very dark.

Eli Pariser 41:03

No, it totally is. And without getting too classic feminist-y, like...

Amanda Palmer 41:15

Oh, please don't, not on this podcast, Eli.

Eli Pariser 41:18

I know, it's inappropriate. But like, that is patriarchy.

Amanda Palmer 41:26

I have Handmaid's Tale sitting on my bed, that's some pretty Handmaid's Tale shit.

Eli Pariser 41:30

It's not of use to us men to hear about all this gross detail.

Amanda Palmer 41:39

Well I'm sorry.

Eli Pariser 41:40

And it's so damaging for whole families I think, cos people just don't have a place to go.

Amanda Palmer 41:52

Is this something that you've talked about?

Eli Pariser 41:54

No. I mean, I really do have to check with her. But yeah.

Amanda Palmer 41:58

You should.

Eli Pariser 42:00

I mean, we've talked with friends, but I haven't...

Amanda Palmer 42:01

I'm also really impressed by you sharing that story.

Eli Pariser 42:06

Oh, thanks.

Amanda Palmer 42:06

One of the additionally weird things about this, and about abortion, is I appreciate that you wanna get your partner's consent, and that's good, but also men, and partners, get really disappeared sometimes in these conversations.

Eli Pariser 42:30

Totally, yeah.

Amanda Palmer 42:31

Because they're going through the miscarriage and the abortion emotionally, and yet, they're kind of not in the centre of the story.

Eli Pariser 42:41

Which for us men is very hard not to be...

Amanda Palmer 42:44

I know.

Eli Pariser 42:45

No, I'm just... You were being sympathetic, I was being sarcastic.

Amanda Palmer 42:50

No, but I'm not being sarcastic. Because it's not simple, and it's not easy, for a man, who has partnered with a female-bodied person, who is pregnant, to emotionally go through a miscarriage. You actually fucking go through something. And yet, it's not really your story. But it is.

Eli Pariser 43:16

Yeah. I mean, again, I may go back... But for me, it took me a while also... One of them was pretty early on, and I was kind of like eh, we'll try again, no big deal. And it took me a while to key into what my wife's experience was about it, and also probably my own experience when I wasn't being like eh, it's all gonna be fine, I'm just gonna shrug this off. Cos it is a death of a possibility, in a certain way, or a death of a person you imagine, or something like that, and it's just like, we don't have a place.

Amanda Palmer 44:03

We don't.

Eli Pariser 44:04

Miscarriage isn't even a good word. It's such a weird word. It has this...

Amanda Palmer 44:10

It has this weird negative...

Eli Pariser 44:10

Train going off the rails feeling.

Music break – They're Saying Not To Panic

Amanda Palmer 44:17

Hopefully by the time this podcast comes out, your TED talk will be out. Can you summarise, just lead us through the idea?

Eli Pariser 44:29

You know, a lot of our online situations, when you back up and look at them and say, what is this situation? It's just not a good situation for the kinds of behaviour, the kinds of relationships, that one wants. What the talk is about, is if we think about these as

spaces where people are relating. We know from social psychology that spaces shape behaviour, right? And you and I are sitting in chairs across from each other, pretty close.

Amanda Palmer 44:56

In a dark room.

Eli Pariser 44:57

In a dark room. And we wouldn't have the same conversation if there was a big audience, if we were in the middle of a bustling airplane terminal, or whatever, it just wouldn't happen. So then, my partner in this effort, Thalia Stroud and I, said who knows how to structure spaces for the public? Urban planners are the people who have been thinking about this the longest, and people who have studied cities, because cities are our model for how strangers can live together, mostly without killing each other, and do cool things together. That's the best example we've got.

How do we actually take all of that thinking that's gone into where do we put parks, and how do we design benches and all this stuff about how people relate when they're strangers, and how do we bring it to digital platforms?

I don't think it's the whole answer, but I do think that there are things that you learn, or that you think about, when it's a physical space, that a lot of platforms aren't yet thinking about, and that can make things a little bit better.

Amanda Palmer 46:09

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast. Thank you, of course, to my guest Eli Pariser. The engineer for this interview was Liam Tate, in Edinburgh, Scotland. The theme song that you're listening to right now is a song called Bottomfeeder from my 2012 crowdfunded album Theatre Is Evil.

I would like to give a shout-out to Jherek Bischoff, who arranged the beautiful in-between-y orchestral music that you heard in this podcast, those are all little snippets from my latest album, There Will Be No Intermission, which you should listen to if you like really sad songs. Jherek took motifs from my songs, and made those lovely arrangements. And you can go support Jherek over on his Patreon, he's a fantastic musician, and your support would mean a lot to him.

To access all the music that you heard in this episode, you can go to the new and improved amandapalmer.net/podcast.

A million thanks to my podcast assistant, social media helper, and additional engineer Xanthea O'Connor. This podcast was produced by FannieCo. Thanks always to everyone at Team AFP: Hayley, Michael, Jordan, and Alex. I love you guys so much, thank you for everything you do. Extra special thanks to Nick Rizzuto, Brittney Bomberger, Allie Cohen, and Braxton Carter.

This podcast would not be possible without patronage. I currently have 15,000 people who are supporting me so that this podcast can have no ads, no sponsors, no censorship, we can just be the media, make the media, and say the things we need to say, without any middle man. Special thanks are due to my high level patrons, Simon Oliver, Saint Alexander, Birdie Black, Ruth Ann Harnisch, and Leela Cosgrove.

Please go to my Patreon, become a member, and help me make this. All of my patrons also have access to a follow-up live chat that I am doing with almost every podcast guest. That is very exciting, I do it every Friday. If you get on the Patreon, you can join us, ask questions, and be part of a smaller conversation. I also make a Patreon post about every podcast, with behind the scenes info, and pictures, and notes.

For now, signing off, this is Amanda Fucking Palmer.

Keep asking everything.