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### Description


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MLA
Alexis Ohanian How the Internet Is Making the World a Better Place

DAVID GREGORY, anchor:
This is Press Pass. Your all-access pass to an extra Meet The Press conversation. This week on Press Pass- a story of launching new ideas and using the internet to make the world a better place; or as our guest puts it, to make the world suck less. Alexis Ohanian is the co-founder of Reddit, author of the new book Without Their Permission- How the Twenty-First Century Will Be Made, Not Managed. Alexis, wel-- welcome. You've been on Meet The Press. It's great to have you on Press Pass as well.

ALEXIS OHANIAN: Great to be here.
GREGORY: I want to talk about the book but-- but even before we started rolling tape on this we were just involved in a conversation about a different culture. I mean, it's a culture that-- that you've pioneered digitally online, that has a sensibility to it, which is about idea exchange, that Reddit's about. How do you summarize this? What is this culture about that you are really at the forefront of?

OHANIAN: You know I grew up with the internet. The internet changed my life. I got that 33.6 modem in my home in Columbia, Maryland, thanks to my parents. And in middle school, I could create something the world could see. And I didn't know what I was doing but I could find other resources that taught me, right. I learned freely with this open exchange of ideas. And I think for so many of us in this generation, we have this understanding--because we've grown up with the internet--that there's this place, this amazing place, where we can learn and share, we can express ourselves, or we can go learn how to make the perfect poached egg. And then we can make a better version of it and share that with the world. And it's this-- it's this hunger for knowledge and access and transparency. It's not all selfies.

GREGORY: Right. And but with that comes I think-- we were just talking about this too--

OHANIAN: Yeah.
GREGORY: --some judgment about big institutions that a lot of younger people feel have not been
truthful with them, not been transparent with them.

OHAHIAN: Yeah. And it's-- I-- I think back to, you know, most of my childhood and then growing up, certainly I had examples where-- you know, where there was-- we all in this generation have vivid memories or most of us have vivid memories of 9/11.

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHAHIAN: And then the wars after that, wars that went on for-- continue-- that seemed to be areas where our leaders sort of failed us. Where we had for decades the thought put in our heads-- go to school, don't worry, take on the student loans, there'll be a job waiting for you. Those aren't there. We've seen the financial collapse. We've seen housing bubble burst. We've-- we've got a lot of reason to look at conventional institutions and think, well, maybe we need to do something unconventional because they--

GREGORY: And that-- that's true of big media institutions, right?

OHAHIAN: Indeed. Yeah.

GREGORY: And-- and describe what you think that sentiment is like, about big media.

OHAHIAN: I don't think it's-- I think there's probably a little bit of skepticism-- or cynicism. But there's definitely a lot of skepticism. There is-- and that's not to say we don't need experts anymore. I think quite the opposite. It's to say that now more than ever we have the potential to tap into more experts than we ever could. Because, you know, the-- the ability to distribute ideas used to be something that just people with cameras and expensive studios could do.

GREGORY: Right.

OHAHIAN: Now, anyone with a smartphone can.

GREGORY: The concept of your book, the idea of-- of taking charge in this economy without permission, means what?

OHAHIAN: Well, permission-less innovation is something that we toss around a lot in tech. It was-- it's inspired by an amazing sort of OG of computer science, Grace Hopper, who said very famously, "It's better to ask forgiveness than permission." And what the internet lets us do-- whether we want to start the next Reddit or Twitter or Facebook or WhatsApp; whether we want to start an Etsy store to sell our jewelry; or whether we want to start a Kickstarter campaign to fund a movie-- is we can just get started, right. And that kind of low, low, low barrier to entry has never really been around before.

GREGORY: Right. And-- and with Reddit, you know, it's interesting, you-- you've rejected this term of being the mayor of the internet with Reddit. Why do you reject that?

OHAHIAN: You know that was a very generous Forbes headline. I-- I-- the-- the reason I rejected it-- well, one, because there was never an election. I make a lot of foursquare check-ins, but that does not make--

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHAHIAN: And on the contrary, you know, the internet works because it is flat. It works because it is non-hierarchical. And to have a mayor is-- is kind of a preposterous thing. I mean, I-- I appreciate it because I certainly want to protect it. But I feel the same way about the internet that I think every one of us should.

GREGORY: So for somebody who's watching this conversation, who doesn't-- hasn't necessarily been to
Reddit, doesn't know Reddit, what is it?

OHANIAN: Mm-Hm.

GREGORY: And--and-- and what-- what is it capturing that other destinations are not?

OHANIAN: Well, so Reddit is a platform for online communities to share links and have discussions. So the web forms are nothing new. Steve and I just built one that happens to be pretty good at sorting links and discussions. People can submit them--vote them up if they like them; down if they don't. And now there are about a hundred and fifty million people using it every month to share links and have discussions about everything from politics to the Washington Redskins, favorite sports team, to cute cats. And-- and it's really tapped into something that always existed, right, everything is a remix. Message boards were sort of at the core of the original internet. This is a more modern iteration of it that just lets people come together. And we have seen amazing things bubble up. But it's a platform like any other like Twitter and like so many others before it and so many more that I'm sure will come.

GREGORY: What is this adding? I mean so what's the quality of the discourse like? How do you judge it on-- on Reddit? Or do you make a point of not judging it?

OHANIAN: It--it ranges-- I mean, it's like asking like what's the quality of discourse on Twitter, right.

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: It depends-- it depends if you're following Justin Bieber or you.

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: And there is a significant range there. And likewise it's-- it's a reflection of the people who use the tool.

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: One of my favorite subReddits, actually, interesting I think to this discussion, is called Neutral Politics. And it's a community where people do their best to describe politics or debate politics in the most neutral, objective way possible. It's quite a feat. It doesn't always work. But it really-- it comes down us and-- and it varies across all the communities. You don't want to see-- you don't want to see Eagles fans after they let--

GREGORY: Right.

OHANIAN: --DeSean Jackson go. They were not pleased.

GREGORY: You're right. Exactly. You talk about, though-- you talk about the social platforms--

OHANIAN: Mm-Hm.

GREGORY: --and your work as-- as a force for good, do you see more good? Do you see more social cohesion? Or-- or do you see more kind of tearing people apart as a result of this-- this-- more of this connective tissue?

OHANIAN: I really believe-- and we saw this-- we saw this across Reddit. I've talked to executives at plenty of other similar platforms, the vast majority of the content is actually benign or good.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

OHANIAN: And I believe that's just sort of fundamental to people. Those stories never make headlines. Those news-- they don't-- one person being decent to another person is not something that's going to be on the front page of anything. But it happens all the time. And I really do believe in-- on the whole, giving
people this access and-- and sort of entrusting with them this ability, is going to empower far more people
who never would have otherwise had the chance to share an idea than we've ever seen. And that-- that
value is-- is absolutely worth it.

GREGORY: What's the future of news?

OHANIAN: What is the future of news? Well, I hope--

GREGORY: And are you as big a part of it as say I hope to be?

OHANIAN: I personally, no. I write, I'm not a journalist. As someone who created a platform, right. I
mean-- oh, man, how do-- there-- there are so many things to this. I think the internet is going to win with
newness. The internet is a tool, right. The-- the fact that anyone of us can break a story now with a
smartphone means that-- and that's not going to go away. There was a-- there was a Pakistani man live-
Tweeting the Osama bin Laden raid, right. He didn't really know he was doing it but like-- and that's not
the highest density of smartphones there. But it will be one day, it will be up there. And-- and so we're--
we're going to be living in a world where breaking news is going to be pretty ubiquitous. What's going to
be more important than ever in a world with that much noise is-- are the people who are going to find this
signal or the ones who can synthesize that, who are the people who say, look, this is what we know, this is
actually what we know. And I-- I-- I think this is particularly an affliction for the-- sort of twenty-four-
hour cable news networks who really struggle to fill airtime 24-7. And they're competing with the internet
for people's attention. And that is not some-- there are a lot of cats on the internet. You're not going to win
that one.

GREGORY: Right.

OHANIAN: And instead, the goal should not be, we need to break the story--

GREGORY: And, look-- it may-- may not be-- you may reject hierarchy, which is fine, but there are
professional journalists that doesn't mean every journalist is-- is great or high caliber and don't make
mistakes. But there's a difference between being a journalist and being just somebody who's out in the
world sharing information, right?

OHANIAN: Yes. And there is-- and-- and I think that role of the journalist is more important than ever.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

OHANIAN: And I'm-- I'm hopeful-- you know, these days I sort of wear my investor hat more often than
my entrepreneur hat. And I see more and more properties, more and more things getting funding. You
know, obviously, Glenn Greenwald's new project--

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: --with Omidyar, My friend Ezra Klein starting out at Vox. These are exciting times. In fact,
there's a startup I just backed called Beacon Reader, which for five dollars a month lets you back an
individual journalist and get access to the wealth of all of the articles being written by all the journalists in
the network. We-- we still don't know what the future business models of these up-and-coming news
organizations look like. But these are exciting times. Because the-- the tools seem to finally be in place to
promote I hope really important journalism and really good business because they have to be self-
sufficient.

GREGORY: And-- and the takeaway then from-- from the book you are writing about, economic
opportunities for this space. Describe that?

OHANIAN: Well, you know, it is-- it is amazing. Steve Huffman and I were so fortunate to have lived-- we lived the American Dream, right. To think that at the age of twenty-two, we had sold our first company and-- and it-- it's started with a couple of laptops in a dorm room. That's amazing. And what's so great is our story is actually not that impressive in the grand scheme of things, in-- in the grand scheme of what is happening right now and what will continue to happen. And so my message is simple, you know. A lot of the-- a lot of the things that we expected to have waiting for us, a lot of the careers that maybe a lot of us in the generation were sort of expecting to have, they aren't there. But it's a chance for us to create them. It's a chance for us to invent them. And the platform for it is the internet. And that's why I went-- I mean I did a two-hundred-event book tour, going across the country, seventy-seven universities, to spread this message of internet entrepreneurship. Because I wish I had heard it when I was in school. Because I-- I see these students now and they are so much further along than I was or Steve was when we were at school. I'm a little jealous. But I'm mostly hopeful because they're going to go off to do even more amazing things, and hopefully empower even more people.

GREGORY: But your point is that there's a founda-- a technological foundation there--

OHANIAN: Mm-hm.

GREGORY: --that will facilitate what the internet has to be, which is it's just always got to be new. There's got to be-- right, as you say there's got to be remix after remix on some of these established ideas.

OHANIAN: Yes. And-- and innovation-- innovation will have to continue. That is-- there-- there's a bit of whiplash, right?

GREGORY: Right.

OHANIAN: Because you feel like there's something new happening every few weeks. But I-- I love it. I think a lot of us in the industry do. And the other concession we have to make is, you know, as Marc Andreessen said software is eating the world.

GREGORY: Mm-hm.

OHANIAN: Software is going to be involved in everything we're doing, every light, eve-- everything that turns on is going to have software. Every industry is going to be affected by software. And our nation as a whole has-- has-- has arguably led the world in this. But none of that is guaranteed, right? The internet-- I-- I'm fond of saying the world is not flat-- sorry, Tom-- but the worldwide web is. An open internet where all bits are created equal is flat. And so, you know, we've seen glimpses of this, right? Skype was world-changing software that was built mostly in Estonia. That was a country behind the Soviet Union's walls just a couple of decades earlier. And they were able to create tremendous value, tremendous wealth. They're using software and technology and the-- the value of it has only increased. And I want to make sure we stay at the forefront as a nation of this.

GREGORY: As somebody who understands the forefront, back in 1994, I was doing a piece about the future of the internet when I was in local news--

OHANIAN: Mm-Hm.

GREGORY: --I was showing people that one day you'll be able to buy chocolate on the internet. I was so far ahead--
OHANIAN: Can we get the clip of this?

GREGORY: Oh, we've shown it. Trust me. That YouTube moment has already--

OHANIAN: But there--

GREGORY: --has already happened.

OHANIAN: There were-- there were a lot of skeptics.

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: And-- and I am-- I am still-- I tried to ground myself as-- as, you know, that-- it's a-- it's-- these are such fortunate times in tech because we're one of the few sectors of the economy right now that can't hire enough people. Like I go around the country telling people, learn how to code--

GREGORY: Yeah.

OHANIAN: --because there are software jobs that are-- jobs designing and writing code available all over the country right now. They pay well. They're great jobs. You can-- like to-- to see this opportunity at a time when so much of the country is still finding its footing again, I can't get enough people into it because it's going to be the economic force that drives this nation forward in the twenty-first century. And I-- I-- I don't want us to lose our edge.

GREGORY: Alexis Ohanian, good luck with the book. Thanks for being here.

OHANIAN: Thank you very much, David.

GREGORY: Great talking to you.

OHANIAN: Pleasure to be here.

GREGORY: All right.