

The Great Simplification

PLEASE NOTE: This transcript has been auto-generated and has not been fully proofed by ISEOF. If you have any questions please reach out to us at info@thegreatsimplification.com.

[00:00:00] **Maren Urner:** And the worst thing you can do to people is make them feel that whatever they do, it doesn't matter what we call in psychology, helplessness, or even stronger learned helplessness. But we also know psychologically the antidote is self-efficacy. And that's the feeling that we have when we do something and see that it actually creates change.

[00:00:22] And it can be something really small when we sign a petition, when we go to a demonstration, when we raise our voice, when we talk to other people and have the idea that it changes something.

[00:00:36] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm pleased to be joined by Mari=en Urner, who is a neuroscientist and a professor for sustainable transformation at Munster University of Applied Sciences in Germany, to discuss the role of traditional media and journalism during the coming years and decades as the challenges journalism faces to remain relevant and helpful to humanity at large, amidst global turmoil and growing disinformation.

[00:01:06] Maren is the head of the new Masters program in Sustainable Transformation Design and is also the winner of the 2023 BAUM Environmental and Sustainability Award in the category of science. In 2016, she co-founded Perspective Daily, which was the first ad free online magazine for what she calls constructive journalism, where she led the editorial team as editor in chief, as well as managing director until 2019.

[00:01:36] Going into this conversation, I was skeptical of what role journalism could play, a, alongside this moment of broad information overload and confusion. Instead, I discovered a greater understanding of how journalism has played into the dynamic of what I call the economic super organism historically, and I see the value of Maren's and others work using neuroscience to reinvigorate, thoughtful, constructive, and empowering journalistic practices in service of life and humanity.

[00:02:12] If you are enjoying this podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more of the system science underpinning the human

The Great Simplification

predicament, where my team and I post special announcements related to the great simplification. You can find the link to subscribe in the show description.

[00:02:29] With that, please welcome Professor Maren Urner. Maren Urner great to finally have you on the program.

[00:02:37] **Maren Urner:** I'm so thankful to be here.

[00:02:39] **Nate Hagens:** So, at long last you were here after a couple of, delays and, tech snafus. Your background, which I was very interested in, when I was in Berlin last year, takes on the combination of neuroscience and journalism, from which you have become an advocate for how the media delivers information.

[00:03:03] And I invited you on the program to discuss not only the ways, in which we as individuals can be better consumers and receivers of media, but also the ways that journalism. Can change to better contribute to the pro-social future that, many of us see, is going to be essential to navigate through the upcoming times.

[00:03:27] but given events, since I first, invited you on the show, I'd like to start with a relatively difficult question during what might be called the age of social media with a growing portion of adults, especially where I live in the United States, I can't speak for Europe, who get their news from socials and are increasingly distrusting the media due to financial and political interest.

[00:03:55] Why is. Traditional media and journalism still important? Start with a big bite.

[00:04:01] **Maren Urner:** Well, it's a question we could rather last, or we could rather probably talk the whole about. So I'll try to, let's say, at least get into certain bits and pieces there. It's important because the backbone of any democracy is free information.

[00:04:19] And if we don't have that, well, we are risking of losing or we already then in the middle of losing democracy. And I mean, I'm not a historian, as you said, I'm a new scientist by training. But when I look at history with this, let's say new scientific glasses on, I usually observe always the same pattern.

The Great Simplification

[00:04:41] Wherever democracies failed. The first thing dictators and autocrats did or implemented was basically get rid of free press. Get rid of free information because that's, I mean, we can call it education, we can call it press freedom. it's all interrelated. Of course, science research, everything we now observe, and we probably come to that in a bit, in your home country, is at stake.

[00:05:11] It is at stake because it is the backbone of any democracy and everybody who wants to destroy a democracy or democracies knows that

[00:05:22] **Nate Hagens:** we're gonna get into journalism and neuroscience. But you've said the word democracy several times already. do you distinguish between democracy and open societies more broadly?

[00:05:34] **Maren Urner:** Well, I'm not a political scientist either, neither. So, I'm not sure what a formula or whether there is a formal distinction. I'm probably, it depends on whom you ask as. It's usually the case with social sciences, even more than natural sciences. That's why often prefer natural sciences like neuroscience.

[00:05:51] But to, on a more serious note, I think any democracy requires an open society, whether. It's the other way around, I'm not sure. And I would have to be honest, I would've to think about it more deeply. and would like to talk to me more people about how we define then what do we mean by open society?

[00:06:16] Whereas with democracies, we kind of know that's how we define it.

[00:06:19] **Nate Hagens:** So let me ask the question from the other, spectrum then in an authoritarian closed society.

[00:06:28] **Maren Urner:** Yep.

[00:06:28] **Nate Hagens:** Is there such a thing as journalism?

[00:06:30] **Maren Urner:** Well, my brain's bleeding when I would say yes. I, usually don't talk about the heart too much because that's just a muscle or pumps.

[00:06:40] So say, because it's all happening in the brain. That's why I say my, not my heart, but my brain's bleeding when I hear that. Because of course there is

The Great Simplification

information going from one brain to other brains. Like Hui we call that then propaganda, for example, right? And we have certain state or whatever, controlled media and they like the people who control these media outlets.

[00:07:04] Then they like to call it still media or journalism or whatever. but I'd say. As also somebody who worked and is working in journalism a lot and worked with journalists, a lot I would say that isn't journalism in the, let's say clean definition because that means that people are allowed to research what they want to research on, that they are allowed to report what they find out, and that somebody is doing censorship and then decides, whether it's going to the printing press to use an old fashioned technique or to the internet or not.

[00:07:41] **Nate Hagens:** I'm starting this conversation with the hardest questions in some, way. how can journalism, writ large, remain relevant and regain trust in the face of growing, populist and authoritarian, trends around the world?

[00:07:58] **Maren Urner:** Well, now we go more into my real, because we are talking about trust, right?

[00:08:02] And trust of course is a deeply psychological concept and there, but also a neuroscientific concept. So just to get those two terms straight, maybe right from the start as well. Psychology is basically looking. Neuroscience from outside and talking about what is happening in the brain. Whereas the neuroscientific perspective is kind of the more raw biological perspective on the same phenomena.

[00:08:25] For example, when we talk about journalism or let's say language, we can call it language, and then we can look into the brain like what's happening while we use certain words, for example, why we talk in a certain language. So when we talk about trust, we know for many neuros, scientifics, and now looking at the biological side, neuroscientific studies, that there's a lot happening in the brain.

[00:08:47] Like there's different areas involved in the brain, and it's, really an emotional state. And from psychological research, we know that trust is usually the, let's say, basis for people. And now we come to journalism to listen. What do I mean by that? To be interested, to put, like, to give people or media in, in, in any form our most valuable resource.

The Great Simplification

[00:09:12] And that's not money. That's our attention. That's our time. That's why attention is more valuable than anything else on this planet at this point in time in the human history. So when we talk about trust and asking the question, like how do we gain or get trust back into journalism in order to make it stay relevant, well, we have to talk about how do we make people listen?

[00:09:37] How do we make people pay attention? And then a lot of journalists during the last year said, well, by going to the couriers, going to the crazy to the negative things because we know people click on that. Right? What bleeds that leads? We all know these things in journalism. That's like you put the bad things, the really awkward things.

[00:09:55] The crazy things. You put them on the, again, old fashioned language here, first page. There's no longer any first page in the digital age, of course, but you put them front first. That is true. It catches our attention. Why? Because it deeply affects our most. Let's say relevant survival instincts. What do I mean by that?

[00:10:19] We basically all have this stone age brain in our head still, and that's perfectly programmed or optimized to make us survive. So if we miss a negative event, negative news, that might mean we are in danger and we might not survive. So we will always, even if we say the opposite, we will always click on the negative news first.

[00:10:39] **Nate Hagens:** So it's shortfall risk. It's And loss aversion. Loss aversion historically. Exactly. That is, if we lost a meal, we would die. But if we had extra, a little bit more calories, it wouldn't really make a difference. So we're hypervigilant to negative things.

[00:10:55] **Maren Urner:** Exactly. And that's the, you mentioned was aversion.

[00:10:58] That's a bias that's well researched. And we know, for example, with money that, for example, we value losing a certain amount of money, say \$50 or euros, kind of same in terms of a negative, negative consequences compared to double. Like we have to double it on the positive end in order to have the same result in our brain on the positive side.

The Great Simplification

[00:11:23] So we have to gain a hundred euro to get the same distinction from, let's say, neutral state on the positive side compared to losing 50.

[00:11:32] **Nate Hagens:** But in a journalism sense. How do you double the positive without breaking the link to truth and objective reality?

[00:11:41] **Maren Urner:** Now we come on to constructive journalism, and that's really the key point that I am trying to put forward since, of start in 2015, really, let's say professionally and consciously.

[00:11:56] Probably I did it before already, but then really started doing it consciously because that's when I got to know there is something that's called constructive journalism, and that sounds very technical. It is somehow because it changes the whole idea about journalism compared to the traditional, I mean the last decades picture, of being a journalist, like of being, for example, the one who's reporting in a neutral way.

[00:12:21] As a neuroscientist, I can just say that's Sorry, that's bs. You can't report in a neutral way because you always affect people. You always change brains and thereby people, when you send a certain information independent of how neutral it is.

[00:12:38] **Nate Hagens:** So just like, Inuits have 19 different words for snow.

[00:12:43] Exactly. Would there be different words for journalism? Because a total objective reporting of the facts, there's gotta be a name for that, and then there's a spectrum, which you're just starting to describe. Yes, sure. But

[00:12:55] **Maren Urner:** even if I would just tell you, look Nate, I learned today two plus two equals four.

[00:13:01] And we could agree that's rather neutral. Right?

[00:13:03] **Nate Hagens:** But my body was feeling your voice and how you said it, and exactly reading your eyes and all those, exactly like what my friend Nora Bateson would call warm data.

The Great Simplification

[00:13:13] **Maren Urner:** And that's all that information and the context. Look, if you were reading about that, if somebody else would be saying it, if you would listen to it on the radio, if you would see the person, if you'd touch the person while talking to the person, it all makes a difference.

[00:13:27] There is no neutral conversation and plus. I used that time to make it even more, and it might sound really dramatic, but just to get that point across, I could have said almost endless different other things in that time when I used your most valuable resource, your attention to tell you something you probably knew before, meaning two plus two equals four, right?

[00:13:53] And I could have said a million, a billion and endless number of other things. And thereby, because I selected a certain information and deselected, so to say, all the other possibilities, I changed your brain.

[00:14:07] **Nate Hagens:** So as events in the world with war and finance and climate and biodiversity and social issues become more dire.

[00:14:22] There is a default in our current, institutional setup that people, a lot of men, a lot of older confident white men, in, how I see things are really testosterone, dopamine, confident, yelling, fear-based, and that sort of journalism by definition is gonna make us worse off than better off. Exactly.

[00:14:50] **Maren Urner:** And that often then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. That's one aspect of what you just described. And the second one is they are creating reality. They are creating, and that's why I'm emphasizing this two plus two equal four, this like kind of trivial example, right? Because that is easy. We can say, well, we all agree on that, but what happens if I would have said freedom is important or I think everybody should love.

[00:15:21] Whomever they wanna love. And that creates a different, let's say, different levels of reality because it's about how we live together, whether you are going to still trust me or not,

[00:15:33] **Nate Hagens:** right. As a neuroscientist, tell me what's happening in my brain when I hear you, who I like. And given that we've just met, I, trust you, a

The Great Simplification

decent amount already, how my brain responds to you saying two plus two equals four.

[00:15:50] Or you can love whoever you want. Yeah. What's going on.

[00:15:54] **Maren Urner:** Yeah. So many things. I'll, try to, and this list is not going to be complete disclaimer, so if it tell you a mere fact, like which year Napoleon was born, that's often used as a classical example, or who invented the light bulb. Yeah. Then you go like.

[00:16:15] Kind of independent of whether you like me, like all these aspects you mentioned, or whether you trust me. You go like, okay, fine. I guess I learned something new. Why? Because just, it's just a mere fact, right? Unless you are really an Napoleon or light bulb guy, like really it's shaping or it's part of your identity.

[00:16:38] Whereas if we go into topics like love, like more related to politics, like. How do we wanna live together? Whom do we trust? Whom am I going to vote for? It's makes such a big difference because we tap into all these cases of what we call them psychology biases. And I'm pretty sure you've talked a lot about biases and talked to many people about biases before.

[00:17:04] And one of the most important ones that is relevant here is the confirmation bias. So it's, sometimes also called the father or mother of all the biases. And basically one sentence, what it means is we trust people more whom we already trust. Like if you vote, let's say for certain party and somebody from that party representing that political party tells you something that is related to your identity, you will trust that person more.

[00:17:34] The source is an important aspect. When it comes to trust, what you asked two questions before, right? How do we get trust back?

[00:17:44] **Nate Hagens:** It's the most important aspect. Maybe It's

[00:17:46] **Maren Urner:** tricky. It's tricky to judge, right? Okay. As a scientist, I would say, okay, how do we analyze most important, right? We can look into the brain and then they'll go like, okay.

The Great Simplification

[00:17:54] It's definitely very important. I wouldn't go into like, okay, first, second, third. Right? yeah. Here because as a scientist, I'm very curious then how do we going to research that? But it's definitely very important and we know from so many studies that it makes such a big difference. I'll give you an example from the uk.

[00:18:11] During the Corona pandemic, the politic politicians then knew and also kind of a bipartisan system there that depending on who is, going to, like either the choice or labor are going to talk about the new, let's say rules that people had to live accordingly to because of the pandemic. They were like, okay, we can't do that.

[00:18:30] Because then if somebody from one party will tell the population about the new rules, the people who support that party will do it and the others will go like, nah, I dunno. So that's then they changed their policy and ask medical personnel to deliver those messages. So the people who are experts, and now we come to the.

[00:18:51] Trust aspect. Right? And coming back to journalism, whom are going pe, whom are people going to trust when they send certain information? And we come to all these questions of influencers and social media and who's really sending the information and can we trust sources? Because professionalism is no longer the most important indicator, and that's really dangerous for democracy.

[00:19:18] **Nate Hagens:** Well, it's, like there's another bias, which is authority bias, that people will trust someone that is wearing a medical doctor thing. no, they, won't, they'll trust someone who's really confident and charismatic over, over someone who has scientific credentials.

[00:19:35] **Maren Urner:** Exactly. And that's what I was just referring to.

[00:19:38] Exactly. Yeah. Because how we define authority is kind of changing. It used to be the medical doctor and it still is in certain contexts, right? We know the study results, like when people wear, like usually it's a, in Germany, I don't know, is it in the US also a white kind of gown? Yeah. Yeah, right. Usually, yeah.

[00:19:58] So usually the white gown. Don't wanna say something wrong here, talking about trust, and if people put that on, even if they have no medical

The Great Simplification

background and then they give certain information to patient, that information is trusted more. If you give people pills of a certain color, that pill. Has a bigger, result in the improvement of their condition, depending on the color.

[00:20:25] And if you use, syringe, it is even higher. So

[00:20:30] **Nate Hagens:** is there a placebo effect Yes. With journalism as well?

[00:20:34] **Maren Urner:** Yes, I would say so. I'm actually not sure whether there's studies there. That's an interesting question. I would have to do the research there in order to answer that, but my expectation would be yes, given from what I know and what I've observed anecdotally and kind of half empirically, so to say.

[00:20:51] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Yeah. this is all. Fascinating. Can you now, discuss some of the primary issues that you're observing in your work, with modern day journalism? especially as you alluded to early the overreporting of negative news? Yeah. Like what are the impacts on mental health and wellbeing of, people who consume this media?

[00:21:14] **Maren Urner:** Yeah. This is not only my research, but for many people just to, hear full disclosure as well. So. We know from many different countries, many different regions that we have an increase in the negativity. So for example, what people have been done and what I've been doing with my own students as well, is for example, analyze headlines for negative words, functionalities, sentiment, these kind of like content analysis of headlines and also texts.

[00:21:44] And what we see is we have an increase of negativity. And there's one huge study that has been done on English speaking, a UK American, and I think also Australian, New Zealand, but I'm not sure, like from different political directions. So it includes Fox News, it includes the washing, Washington Post includes the Guardian, so on, and they've analyzed it using, ai.

[00:22:08] So a very, let's say, complex study. using millions of headline. And they found that negativity increased neutrality. So more or less. Again, neutrality. There's no neutrality, but neutral words. That amount decreased. And that is important here to mention, talking about negativity, that the negative emotions increased way more than the positive emotions in headlines especially.

The Great Simplification

[00:22:37] And I think you mentioned that shortly earlier, that, emotion, anger, and fear are those two, right?

[00:22:45] **Nate Hagens:** Is this because. The hyper vigilance and loss aversion in our evolved social primate minds results in sitting in a capitalist growth based system. More clicks equals more dollars. Exactly. And it's just from the top down that we want.

[00:23:06] Let's not make everyone angry. That's not the objective money. Objective is let's make more moneys. Make money. Money, exactly. Yeah.

[00:23:12] **Maren Urner:** that's where we come to the attention economy. Right. And that's easy. And we just can talk about this honestly, and that's amazing, right? We can still talk about this, honestly.

[00:23:22] Doesn't mean that it's going to change tomorrow. Probably not. I would be really happy because that would mean this podcast would've had an impact. Right. But that's what we know and we have to talk about it more openly because it's just. I'm so tired of not talking about that elephant in the room, that it's all about money, like you just said.

[00:23:42] Right. I'm so tired that journalists meet on conferences and then they go like, about quality and fine. Yes, fair enough. But the most important thing that's kind of deciding, or not only kind of, but most on the cases, deciding of what's printed or not, is money. And I mean, we see that now, right? We see the heads of the big companies that are shaping where we spend our attention, what they are doing.

[00:24:09] And how they are changing their political attitude.

[00:24:12] **Nate Hagens:** So I don't know how much you know about my work, but I've told a story of, humans found energy. I,

[00:24:20] yeah,

[00:24:20] So we've kind of become this emergent metabolic force that's no one's fault. It's emergent from, optimizing for profits at all. Exactly.

The Great Simplification

[00:24:31] categories and what the result is. We've outsourced our wisdom to the financial markets, and we are all. Downstream causation from this milwaukeean dynamic that's going on. And it sounds like that the Superorganism has also eaten media and journalism so that there's the prophet is the main thing. And being real good conscientious journalists to help open societies is a secondary, goal, which they're at, cross purposes.

[00:25:04] So my question is, how could a fourth estate, press and news media as a watchdog of government and information to the public coexist or thrive in this era of money captures all

[00:25:22] **Maren Urner:** That's exactly, what we have to change in order to have this trustworthy. True. Fourth is estate. We need to change the incentive.

[00:25:33] And that's what you just described. Right? And I'm just using that word here, which because that's ruling wherever people come together, it's very important to talk about incentives. But as I said before, we often treat that, especially if we know that, for example, money is the most important, let's say decision criteria.

[00:25:55] We kind of pretend that's not the case, which is just really weak and sad and. Annoying, and you can use many adjectives here because it's also self-destructive as you described just now in the story, right? So we need to look first honestly at what's really the incentive here? Why are people doing certain things?

[00:26:16] Our brain is programmed to do certain things in order to make us survive. It's very simple, right? When it comes, let's say, down to earth or down to brains, it's all about survival. And maybe we have a bit of fun in between. But other than that's what life is about. So we decide sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, often unconsciously, according to the most important criteria, which is always, is it going to be beneficial for me or not?

[00:26:48] And now, as you described in your words, we created during the last decades certain decision criteria that are. Be a. But not for, let's say the majority of humanity

The Great Simplification

[00:27:07] **Nate Hagens:** or the other creatures on the planet.

[00:27:09] **Maren Urner:** Exactly. or the, whole, let's say basis that makes us as a species survive. Right. Because now this is what I just wanted to say.

[00:27:17] So our brains are aligned now. Perfectly aligned because I just wanted to say this is going or has been going so off that now we had this point in history where we crossed six out of nine planetary boundaries, which means we are destroying our own life support system. Full stop. Because we created certain incentives that are really short term.

[00:27:42] That are really shortsighted, so to say, if we wanna come back to the glasses example, right? So that is not sustainable, that is not future oriented or whatever work we wanna use here. And I can say as a new scientist, okay, fine. I have certain understanding for that because I know that the brain is, let's say, better programmed or organized towards short-term things compared to long-term things.

[00:28:10] And that makes biological sense, right? Because if I'm kind of trustworthy, what I said before that our brain wants to make us survive always and all the time. Well, it's first and foremost important to keep me alive now and then I can start to think about, let's say in five or 10 years, right?

[00:28:27] If I only think about five to 10 years and then the saber tooth tiger comes along and I go like, wait, let me make that plan for in five years. Well I'm dead. But we know that and that's where I go crazy. We know that since decades. And we haven't changed the system we just played along.

[00:28:47] **Nate Hagens:** That's a question I asked my students when I taught, reality 101.

[00:28:52] Can knowing about our cognitive biases change our cognitive biases? I know that question. Yeah. So it's almost like social media the way it is today, especially turbocharged with AI and algorithmic shifts and everything. It's almost the perfect monkey trap for a social primate like us to just be captured by.

The Great Simplification

[00:29:14] **Maren Urner:** Yeah, totally agree. Because it plays into those biases, into the, confirmation bias, the loss aversion, the shortsightedness, the authority effects and so on. The we are, and this is maybe the hope for maybe we can go now, try to, let's say, walk. Also, according to the quote you mentioned, right? Not talking about the destruction and the how, but where do we talk about the solutions?

[00:29:39] Because the solutions are there, right? We don't have to come up with them. We don't have to research them. We can stop every research today and could walk a different sustainable, future oriented path because we have all that knowledge. The only thing that's really truly missing is the change in the heads of a big enough N, so a subset of human beings that are going to implement these different kind of incentive structures.

[00:30:09] What do I mean by that? What's, yes? I would answer if I would be a student of yours, and you would ask me the question, can it help to know about the biases, then change them? Yes. If we are smart enough, if we really take the time to sit down and truly understand it. But that takes time. And that's again, opposite to this hyper attention digital, what we talked about before.

[00:30:35] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. I have so many questions and I'm totally going off script now. that's fine. So we're gonna get to your constructive journalism and your ideas, but let's just recognize that the fourth estate is going to need some structural changes. It's going to need some incentive changes. Yeah. It's gonna need some new creative things.

[00:30:55] but let me read you another quote based on what you, said earlier about the importance or the most important thing in our world today is, attention.

[00:31:05] **Maren Urner:** Yep.

[00:31:05] **Nate Hagens:** So this is a quote that, sir Ian McGill Chris and I talked about in our podcast. It's a quote from Viktor Frankl who says, between stimulus and response, there is a space.

[00:31:17] In that space is our power to choose our response. And in our response lies our growth and our freedom. So. On the path to a better fourth estate on the path to constructive journalism. What is the responsibility for us as individual

The Great Simplification

humans alive today during these times? Being aware of the negativity bias, being aware of the problems with social media to pause and reflect and have the little Maren or the little Nate on our shoulder talk to us, in quiet words, shifting our awareness to what matters and to the present.

[00:31:57] Do you have thoughts on that?

[00:31:58] **Maren Urner:** Yeah, actually, I know that quote, that's why I was smiling so much. And I love it because this exactly, this black box, like neuroscientists used to call it the black box. It's like we don't need to know what's happening, between stimulus and response. When it was all about behaviorism, right?

[00:32:15] Because the idea in the past when behaviorists were determining what. We were supposed to think about psychology and neuroscience was that you put any stimulus in and you decide them about the response. Like, you give me any child and I could either make a, thief or a successful banker out of that person.

[00:32:35] Right? And then people understood, well, no, it actually matters because even though we don't understand the black box fully in the brain and the human, there is definitely a lot of things happening between stimulus and response. And that also brings me back to the question that you are asking your students and maybe, going down the path of, kind of an answer of what we could do or what I think everybody can do starting today or yesterday.

[00:33:07] And that is shaping the conversation, changing the conversation. Because as you rephrased my words from earlier, that attention. Our most valuable and most important resource, we all have the same of that 24 hours. Minus certain time of sleep, minus certain time of silence, whatever, eating. Yeah, we have the same amount, at least given every single day.

[00:33:35] Of course, people die earlier and some people get older and so on. And so whether I'm somebody who owns a media company or whether I'm somebody living in the forest, talking mostly to myself and some dear passing along, right? Because I affect more or less, no brains compared to I affect many brains if I own the media company.

The Great Simplification

[00:33:58] So my responsibility, and that's where it becomes important on the individual level, is so much bigger. If I own a media company and now we come also back, now I'm trying to put everything together or at least more things from the beginning of the podcast as well. It comes to democracy because whom do we trust to be in charge of a media company is a democratic question.

[00:34:22] Because if we know as a species or let's say a certain set of members of that species who are organized, for example, in the country or company or family or any kind of group, that's how we cope. And bigger than one in psychology, A group. then we have to ask who is in charge? Who's responsible for what and responsibility.

[00:34:46] Talking about incentives again, is something that we've attributed in a wrong way in many, areas, and that is important now. So what are we in charge or what can everybody do? Starting today, starting latest tomorrow, and maybe already started yesterday, is change the conversation. Change how and whom we talk to about these topics.

[00:35:14] Make your voice heard because this is what people take for granted. This is, again, coming back to the history books, what people thought is normal when they have a certain level of safety and trust in, for example, authorities in structures until it's no longer there and then it's too late because then it becomes a danger to talk out.

[00:35:36] Then you are prosecuted, for example, or killed. if you raise your voice. So now is the time to be loud.

[00:35:45] **Nate Hagens:** So another thing that's Sir Ian, said to me is that our civilization values certainty over truth. And so how does journalism deal with the complexity of all the things in, the world when people don't want complexity and they don't want uncertainty, they want, you know.

[00:36:08] All this stuff. Just gimme the bottom line. I want, I just want this answer. Yep. But that's not how we evolved really. No. And so journalism is. Necessary, but we have to meet it halfway. And so what percentage of the population seems to me to be becoming smaller and smaller, that can access this full spectrum, open society, uncertainty, complexity, pro-social.

The Great Simplification

[00:36:38] What are your thoughts on all that?

[00:36:40] **Maren Urner:** I'm so thankful that you're asking that question because that also gives me the chance to answer or to give the second aspect of the question before, which is when you ask about decision, Nate or Maren on the shoulder, right? Yeah. What do we need for that? Being loud and speaking up?

[00:36:56] We need self-awareness and that's an interesting aspect of, the English language, compared to the German language. You have self-awareness and self-conscious, but it's only one word in German. We don't distinguish between those two aspects of. Being aware or conscious about yourself.

[00:37:17] **Nate Hagens:** Self-awareness and self-conscious is the same word in German.

[00:37:21] Exactly. what's the word? What's the word?

[00:37:27] I, was about to say, beautiful. But that wouldn't have been honest.

[00:37:31] **Maren Urner:** But that's, why I'm doing this little linguistic mumbling here because it's important because what I'm talking about now is the self-awareness aspect of the Z or Z design in German, which, or where, what I wanna, the, point I wanna make here is that the vicious circle that you just described comes with fear and anger.

[00:37:57] So coming back to those two and uncertainty plays along here as well to those two key emotions that we shortly mentioned earlier. What do I mean by that? If we are independent of our IQ or education or whatever, if we are in a. State of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and kind of this mixture. We are no longer able, our brains are no longer able to deal with complexity, with uncertainties, with, oh, maybe this or that.

[00:38:28] Why not? Well, because think back. Think back about what I said. What is the most important task of the brain keeping us alive? If there's fear, we don't have the time, and literally new scientifically, we don't have the resources. The areas of our brain that deals with complex answers, that takes into account what we've been learning in the past are blocked.

The Great Simplification

[00:38:50] They are no longer accessible. And in English, you have the three Fs. Then fight, flight, or freeze, right?

[00:38:57] **Nate Hagens:** Yes. and there's a fourth one, fawn.

[00:39:02] **Maren Urner:** or flock. Yeah.

[00:39:03] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. But oh yeah. So, so modern journalism is dysregulating our vagal nerve. Our, oh,

[00:39:17] **Maren Urner:** exactly. And now talking about solutions, because now I only talked about the challenge, right?

[00:39:22] So what do we need? Well, we need to kind of deal with that vicious circle. Like first make it obvious that's what we just did, and then say, okay, stop. I don't want that. And we don't need that and we can't afford that to make it an economic case here as well. Talking about destroying our own life support system here, having crossed six out of nine boundaries and so on, planetary boundaries.

[00:39:48] So what do we need? What we need in this hyper chaotic crisis, multipole crisis time. We need rest. And that's of course kind of absurd, right? Because people go like, look, you can't ignore this. There's a war here. There's inflation there, there's this there. You have to deal with it, right? But then we have to be really strong and say no.

[00:40:13] One thing after the other, and this is not about the escapism that a lot of people then do and they go make bread and plant their flowers in the garden, which is fine if you do that sometimes, but not all the time. But I'm really talking about making sure that you are self-aware of what you can do, what you want to do and what's enjoyable.

[00:40:36] Talking about incentives for you, and that's kind of a Venn diagram. Then with three kind of circles where you have that sweet spot in the middle where the three areas may be overlapping. And a podcast is a perfect example if you realize, okay, you can talk, you can ask questions, you're interested in certain topic and you enjoy that.

The Great Simplification

[00:40:57] Well, maybe then a podcast is just the thing for you

[00:41:00] **Nate Hagens:** maybe. So, What is it for you, the overlap of those three diagrams?

[00:41:07] **Maren Urner:** Well, I'm not sure whether I found the perfect answer, but one thing I definitely enjoy doing, and I see a certain impact, and I think it's a relevant topic, is what we are kind of doing here as well, is talking to other people in different settings about my fascination and also frustration of the human brain related to being in this absurd situation where we kind of know so much, we know more than we've ever been knowing before in, in, history about how we function, but still being on the self-destructive path and how we can finally and forever change that path.

[00:41:49] And that is a lot of pain. Pain is often helpful because it tells you again, like what is important and what isn't, but it's also a lot of. Fun and a lot of joy. It's joy talking to you now. It's joy talking to all these initiatives who are working on solutions. talking to people who don't wanna play along, who don't wanna behave according to the incentives that other people decided are best for them, even though they know they aren't.

[00:42:23] And it also gives me then the power and strength to continue.

[00:42:27] **Nate Hagens:** So let me ask you this, a bit personal, on my end. I think I used to be that sort of journalist, five or 10 years ago talking about oil depletion and climate change. And there was a bit of righteousness in, my tone. Yeah, because there was righteousness in my heart and in my body.

[00:42:47] And now that I've understood more the nuances and the complexity of how everything fits together, I'm a little bit less left brain, a little bit more balanced on the heart versus the head. maybe a little bit less, masculine dopamine, testosterone, and a little bit more serotonin, oxytocin.

[00:43:11] **Maren Urner:** Just to add that side mark, you changed your incentives.

[00:43:14] **Nate Hagens:** I did.

The Great Simplification

[00:43:15] **Maren Urner:** Yeah, because what you just described, sorry, I didn't wanna interrupt, but that was just the perfect example. Your description of what I try to explain on a more theoretical level. And you gave it a case, an example, because you said, I'm more listening to this compared to what I was listening to beforehand.

[00:43:34] And that's the switch. And you were only able to do that, I'm pretty sure, because you became more self-aware.

[00:43:41] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. Yes, I think that's true. self-aware and self-conscious, both. and I've had help, you know, and I, where I was going with my comment is I've been blessed to have lots of, you know, co-pilots on, this route.

[00:44:00] Yep. the last decade of all different stripes. a lot of them recently have been women, that in dialogues about the metris and the poly crisis, there's a softness or, a wide boundary gaze with which to view these things. and so somehow, the, tenor of, how I'm describing and thinking about the these things has, changed and maybe softened, but that leads me to the question is.

[00:44:34] Is there a, is there's something there that rhymes in journalism that more of the right brain versus left brain, more of the listening as opposed to preaching. I, is there a larger role for the feminine writ large in a future pro-social fourth estate?

[00:44:55] **Maren Urner:** Yeah. I love that question first about the definition of famine.

[00:44:59] What does it mean? coming back to the black box or not black box, we know by now that it's always a mixture, right? The nature nurture debate hasn't come to an end. But we know, or everybody who's sincerely dealing with those question agrees on it is a mixture plus, but we nature nurture plus they are interacting, which makes it very complicated.

[00:45:26] Talking about epigenetics and all these kind of fields, or mostly about the, let's say, overarching, field of epigenetic. So when we talk about famine, I first wanna ask the question or make sure that we are all aware of this aspect. Like what in the famine definition is cultural? And what in the femin definition is actually biological.

The Great Simplification

[00:45:52] So nature, and I'm not sure, nobody can be sure because how are we going to, again, asking the scientific question, right? How are we going to investigate? Well, we need different, let's say laboratories and it, that's not going to happen hopefully. where we put certain groups of humans and so on.

[00:46:12] But we know of course from different cultures living on this planet right now and haven't, been living on this planet before that it depends, right? Certain values that we attribute to, the fem side, differ between cultures, differ between times, and so on. That's just because. I'm making that point because I think it's important because we also, when we talk about femin stuff, we often attribute it in our cultural work.

[00:46:46] And now I combine the US and Germany as kind of the similar-ish cultural work when it comes to these questions as to kind of the weaker side, right? The more emotional, less rational, and that really gets me. Let's say Hypervision, because I go like, wait a second, right? And I become very emotional what people say then, because it's so wrong.

[00:47:12] It's so wrong to say that emotions are weak. And I think that's what you kind of partially referring to, if I got that right in the question as well, because I, and I wrote this, un unfortunately it's only in German, but hey, use an AI to translate, eh, in my last book, which is called Radical Emotionally.

[00:47:32] So to say how, feelings make politics if I freely, instant translate. The title and subtitle here, is all about how everything we do, everything we decide, everything we talk about is an emotional question because it always. Goes down to the question what we value. We talked about trust earlier already.

[00:47:54] what we think is right or wrong, basically. And that's the most political question you can ask, at all, I'd say, right. Talking about right or wrong. And now asking that, or answering that question a bit more precisely that you asked, like, okay, is it going to be more important at famine side? I think it's going to be so fundamentally important that we learn to be more self-aware, and that means in neuroscientific terms that we become more emotionally educated.

[00:48:26] We need a new education that is truer to our biology than what we have right now.

The Great Simplification

[00:48:35] **Nate Hagens:** Let, me pin, what you just said a minute ago. You know, I, if we were to do this again, let's do this again. let's have you come back and I'm gonna have a whole different set of questions because we're talking about journalism today and constructive journalism in your work.

[00:48:52] But I really, since you're aware of all these other issues, I have a ton of actual neuroscience questions for you. Sounds good. Here's one you mentioned. Our brains perceive right and wrong, and that relates to our value system, which is primary when we see some action or statement or issue in the news.

[00:49:13] What's fundamental, our value system. And from that, then we determine whether it's right or wrong, or is there something deeper where we know we feel that's right or wrong, and that's underneath our, val, our value systems are created over that. Do you have any insight to that?

[00:49:28] **Maren Urner:** Well, how, again, asking scientifically, how would we investigate that question to you?

[00:49:33] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Very difficult.

[00:49:35] **Maren Urner:** Well, but it's possible. Think whom would we ask whether we wanna check its nature or nurture?

[00:49:42] **Nate Hagens:** A priest and a biologist.

[00:49:45] **Maren Urner:** Interesting answer. Very young children who are Oh, right, okay.

[00:49:49] **Nate Hagens:** Yes.

[00:49:50] **Maren Urner:** Who are less culturally influenced than you and me are. Right. So now we are entering the field of developmental psychology slash neuroscience.

[00:50:00] And what we know, for example, from studies there is that, for example, it's deeply ingrained. That's what I meant was we need to be truer to our biology. It's deeply ingrained that we are helping other people and not only kin the kin

The Great Simplification

selection, right, but total strangers. And what people are doing, for example, in these studies is they take very young children, they can't talk yet.

[00:50:29] Toddlers make kind of not even walking yet, and then accidentally. Somebody lets something fall or there's some food that they can get, but I wouldn't be able to get. And then they share it with complete strangers, not even of different skin color, but also different age, different gender and so on. And that.

[00:50:52] So that's nature, not nurture. Exactly. And that is so fascinating. And that's what I mean, I researched those studies. I didn't do those studies myself. it's probably a lot of fun but also a lot of hell pain because I mean, you can't control very young people very well. You can't tell them sit down. I mean you can, but that's so good to work.

[00:51:12] **Nate Hagens:** Those experiments like that are so hopeful about future pathways, right? Because the carbon pulse has separated us from who we really are. it's like this Las Vegas MGAs so junket that we're all on.

[00:51:29] **Maren Urner:** And that's what I meant was the wrong incentives. The incentives that we built our trust and society on in the last decades slash centuries are just completely gone off the rails.

[00:51:45] They are not what we really want and not because it's my opinion, but it's not true to our biology.

[00:51:51] **Nate Hagens:** How is social media and our journalism, with the negative negativity bias affecting our, wellbeing and loneliness? Maybe explain that a bit. Yeah. You asked

[00:52:00] **Maren Urner:** about the mental health earlier, so that brings us back there.

[00:52:03] But so what we know from the studies, let's say building on the ones that I mentioned earlier where I said that negativity and especially negative feelings are increasing in headlines and texts and reporting, there's also a, body of research that's looking at the mental health effects and what does it do to the people.

The Great Simplification

[00:52:23] And what do people say? For example, when also talking about the trust that you mentioned earlier, when they turn away from the news, the most common arguments, and that's, always done once per year from the, Oxford or in the digital news report from the, Reuters Institute in Oxford. And they look at many different countries, including the US and Germany.

[00:52:44] And the most common reasons that people then give is, I don't trust. They are not talking about solutions. This is all too negative. I have the idea. I can't do anything about it. And especially the last three are all related to what we call in psychology, helplessness, or even stronger learned helplessness.

[00:53:07] And that's the feeling, talking about feelings again, conviction, if we wanna make it stronger or if you wanna make it stronger, that independent of what I do or what I say is not going to change anything. The people on top or wherever they are, going to decide anyway. Right? But we also know psychologically the antidote to helplessness and that conviction and that passive feeling and state maybe even leading to mental disorders.

[00:53:39] That's also, let's say it increases the probability. It's not, make sure, but increases the probability. The antidote is self-efficacy. And that's the feeling that we have when we do something and see that it actually creates change. And it can be something really small. It can be literally this nail that we put with the hammer or hold it on the wall and then use the hammer and it kind of holds and we can hang a frame, right?

[00:54:11] But it's also when we sign a petition, when we go to a demonstration, when we raise our voice, when we talk to other people and have the idea that it changes something. And the worst thing you can do to people is make them feel that whatever they do, it doesn't matter. That makes people sick.

[00:54:30] **Nate Hagens:** I think that's a real risk in the coming decade.

[00:54:32] Exactly. That apathy and checking out is gonna be the default path of least pain for people, but also least effectiveness in pro-social futures, for us in the biosphere. So, so what about that? I is when people, if there's not a constructive journalist, journalism path, or a revised fourth estate, I think there's a real risk that a lot of people out of self-protection.

The Great Simplification

[00:55:02] And I know friends of mine who have not watched the news in 10 years. It's not that they don't care about the world, it's that it was too toxic for them. And that's good. They're healthier because of it, but they also don't have a clue what's going on in the world. Exactly. And the different things. So what, how do you parse that?

[00:55:20] **Maren Urner:** That is, let's say even more, or let's say making the argument stronger that we've been developing, or we're kind of relatively sure about right from the start, that it is so important to have what I would call responsible journalism. Right. Because it's the task. let's put frankly, and really clearly, if you open a journalistic handbook, it says the most important task is to inform people and leave them in the state so that they can act.

[00:55:52] **Nate Hagens:** When was that handbook written?

[00:55:54] **Maren Urner:** I think 70

[00:55:55] **Nate Hagens:** something.

[00:55:56] **Maren Urner:** I have to check.

[00:55:57] **Nate Hagens:** Before the super organism took over the reins of our global system. Definitely. Yeah.

[00:56:01] **Maren Urner:** But that's what I mean. We know it. All right.

[00:56:03] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:56:05] **Maren Urner:** so the question is how do we make sure that's happening or that we kind of go to a state where your friends wouldn't have to protect their in brackets mental, I think there's only one health we should stop distinguishing in mental and physical health.

[00:56:22] But anyway, their health and especially then what we these days still call mental health by not watching the news. Well then we have to build that system. And again, everything we need to know is there. We don't need to do any

The Great Simplification

additional research. We don't need to invent anything. We don't need to spend endless amounts of money.

[00:56:41] We just have to create the change by, and that's an aspect we had earlier by putting people in charge who are responsible. Who are behaving in a responsible way, so it's not this toxic, self-destructive system.

[00:56:57] **Nate Hagens:** Tell me some examples of how constructive or positive, journalism is. Any seeds that are planted or things that are working and Yeah.

[00:57:08] And what are you hopeful for?

[00:57:09] **Maren Urner:** Yeah. Well, there is some research, it's still a young field, but there's some research and the is, for example, indications that people interact more and in a deeper way with constructive reporting compared to non-constructive, let's put it very general here. And that's very, like from a biological perspective, I would say, well, that's kind of a no brainer, right?

[00:57:34] Why? Because we go into those check marks of going away from the short term, okay, I'm going to be safe after clicking on the negative news. dopamine kind of ching machine, doomsday scrolling, doom scrolling and so on. Mechanism into what we talked about earlier, this kind of more relaxed but joyful self-efficacy.

[00:58:00] Filled up space of, oh wow, this is a topic I understand something about. I hear about solutions. I can talk to other people about it. You mentioned your path of all these co-pilots, right? It gives me co-pilots, it gives me other organizations, people, ideas. Also, coming back to the first quote that you mentioned.

[00:58:22] Yeah. That are going away from this hellish path and going towards a path where I feel what I do actually matters and people have more the urge to then share with other people. That's all research results there early days, but is kind of. Promising.

[00:58:40] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. I have several thoughts here. one is just a, hypothetical abstract question.

The Great Simplification

[00:58:46] Let's just assume there's a thousand media companies in the world. I have no idea how many there are. Would it be better if we were able to find five constructive journalists and add them to each of these journalists, media companies or have a new, Positive journalist media conglomeration with 5,000 employees that are doing this type of work.

[00:59:15] and I guess the answer to that gets to the incentives of our culture and the incentives of whoever is starting those initiatives, right? Because they're gonna have to get paid, and have livelihoods. I don't know. It's a strange question, but that came to mind. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[00:59:31] **Maren Urner:** It's not strange at all because that's exactly the question I was asking. together with some other crazy enough people. In 2015, 16, when I founded my own online magazine, after I finished my PhD and kind of said, well, science nice, but now I'm going to start a company without any money, without any rich family or anything like that.

[00:59:52] And we said, look, we wanna change the narrative and the way people talk about things because we had the idea that's the most important ingredient. If we wanna stop destroying our. Life support system, planetary boundaries and so on. And then we discovered the constructive journalism. And then we had this exactly that question to answer.

[01:00:13] Are we going to knock on a lot of doors of media companies and say, hi, we are these crazy scientists and we wanna do constructive journalism, which is completely off what you've been doing so far. I'm exaggerating a little bit, but that's kind of how we were treated. Or we start our own company and doing just that, doing just constructive reporting.

[01:00:36] So what do we do? Well, solution oriented thinking applied. We talk to other people around the world, including, for example, David Bornstein, from, the Solution Journalism Project. if you haven't talked to him yet, please invite him on the show. who also wrote the fixes column in the New York Times and who was kind of starting the whole movement, of solution journalism in the US and Canada.

[01:01:03] We talked to people from the Netherlands who had just started a company called The Correspondence, where they were doing constructive reporting

The Great Simplification

and we talked to some Danish people who were doing it and so on. So cut along. Cut a long story short, we asked other people what did they do and why did they do it and did it work or did it fan on?

[01:01:23] And basically the summary was, look, right now, if you are going to media companies that already exist, you're going to lose so much of your energy on convincing those people, like changing the internal structures, the, in our language here now, the incentives that you are not going to have a lot of energy left to actually do what you want to do.

[01:01:48] So I think it's better you start your own company, and that's what we did right now, 10 ish years forward, at least in. A lot of German speaking areas slash countries, that's not so many, but mostly Germany, Austrian, Switzerland, where I've been talking a lot to journalists and I've taught students about it and I'm still talking to some of the editorial rooms and so on.

[01:02:15] And I just talked to a student of mine who's now working at the public media, which is not constructive by definition, but she's the constructive voice there. And she did a master's with me. so this is so great to see. Now it's actually possible she's happy, right? She's not depressed because her work is actually paying off and she's not losing.

[01:02:39] I mean, she still says it's a lot of work I have to convince people. But I have a team and I have, let's say, a critical mass of people inside who work with me and who maybe slowly are changing culture, are changing the feelings, around constructive journalism.

[01:02:58] **Nate Hagens:** Let me share a, rhyming story with you, Maren.

[01:03:04] So this podcast, my organization, is largely funded by the viewers and the listeners, of this show. And so the incentives, that you mentioned for me, ha, have, changed. not doing this to, make money. I'm doing this to change the future and meet the future halfway and change the initial conditions of what I perceive to be a bad default outcome.

The Great Simplification

[01:03:34] And I've just recently learned that. And you see the sensationalist, testosterone, angry, clickbait, stimulative titles. And I've never liked that. it made me feel like I needed to take a shower or something

[01:03:52] **Maren Urner:** or wanna run away.

[01:03:53] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. And so I'm consciously, I. I don't know when this episode will air, but I'm just saying this to the viewers right now.

[01:04:01] I'm happy to have fewer viewers as long as I can pay for my staff and, the production and everything. If a higher percentage of the viewers really roll their sleeves up and play a role in our collective future, and I would rather have a smaller amount of those people spread out around this blue green Earth than a lot more, dopamine doom, scrolling people who want the next hit on bombs and blood and Bitcoin and beans and bullion and, whatever.

[01:04:35] I mean, not that I, still wanna paint a picture of the biophysical macro situation, but I. Really sensationalize this content. Sure. And the great simplification is gonna be a collapse of some variety and we need to prepare. That is true, but that's not helpful to the world because it's more of the hell described in what I said earlier.

[01:04:58] So the incentive for me, as long as my bills are paid, of course, which is always an asterisk, is to, inform and inspire more humans to play a role in our collective future. That's my goal. So in a way, this is a sort of constructive journalism.

[01:05:16] **Maren Urner:** Sure. Certainly is. And again, you talked about a change in incentives, and you mentioned awareness and what I would call this new emotional education because you asked yourself.

[01:05:32] I don't know, let's say a couple of years ago. And it's always a process when people say, this moment changed my life. Well, yeah, that's the story they tell themselves, but it's always a process. That's the one moment that kind of consciously felt it, that you became aware of, okay, what do I really wanna do?

The Great Simplification

[01:05:54] Contrary, maybe to the stories that I've been told about what means to have success. That's where it comes to feelings and values, because that's what I like to call the stories we tell, we are these telling stories species. I mean, not only in movies and podcasts and I don't know, bad times stories, but also in politics.

[01:06:19] It's always a story behind it. That's why I mentioned this term values right from the beginning, or talking about laws, even though they might sound super dry, it's about stories and values.

[01:06:33] **Nate Hagens:** So tell us a story, Maren, a story of how humanity navigates the next few decades, and makes it through the, risks that we all see.

[01:06:46] Tell, tell us a story.

[01:06:47] **Maren Urner:** Well, the story in my head. That's a pretty crazy one. the head and the story, of course, it kind of maybe goes like this, I haven't prepared this, so it's going to be very raw. I get up every morning in order to make that story become a bit more alive and the story is going to involve a lot more pain for now because people unfortunately sometimes only learn by disaster.

[01:07:21] You have to touch the heart or the, or whatever it is you have to touch in order to really feel it that way. It comes down to the, that's where it comes down to the feelings in order to really acknowledge, and realize with your whole body as sometimes people say, right, I felt it in my whole body. Yeah, that's what we need, in order to change because.

[01:07:46] Whatever changed people's life and whatever will change people's life in the future is because they felt something, not because they hurt something or read something. It's always what we feel. So the story will involve more pain because there will be more people needed who felt that it's really necessary to change the incentives right now.

[01:08:10] But, and that's what I try to focus on, and as I said, it's often painful, but it's also often joyful. There is already a certain number of people who really feel it and who kind of understood with the whole body that we really have to change almost everything if we wanna have a future on this planet.

The Great Simplification

[01:08:31] And one proof for this, my story that's the case is the backlash we observe globally right now from. The elite, right? From the people who made those wrong incentives and their ancestors who made those wrong, incentives because they were getting really nervous. And that makes them really angry and that makes them fight because they wanna defend their belief system coming back to values.

[01:08:59] And that makes me hopeful and that makes me hopeful that we are not going to destroy on the individual level more and more of our personal lives by getting addicted to the things we talked about earlier. The testosterone kicks the success stories that we tell each other that mean success, but they actually don't because they don't make us happy or content or healthy.

[01:09:26] And that it's worthwhile to keep. And I'm very consciously using that word now, fighting because it is also a fight. Keep fighting for that. Success story of humanity. If I wouldn't be convinced about it, I wouldn't be able to get up in the morning. Why would I?

[01:09:46] **Nate Hagens:** No, I, feel the same way. the day that I'm no longer convinced that there is that chance.

[01:09:52] I won't be doing this work. yeah. I'll be planting, Trees. Yeah. I wanna be respectful of, your time, but I do have so many more questions. So I will, formally, in a social contract on camera sort of way, invite you to come back for, another, episode in the future. Maybe I'd love to do that, maybe as a round table with some others.

[01:10:17] one more question though before I get to the closing questions, is a future of constructive journalism, and positive journalism, the way that you've described, is that a global thing or can it happen, nationally and regionally. and I ask that because there's been a lot of changes in my country in the last few months.

[01:10:39] And how is Europe responding or Asia, or like, please gimme your opinion there.

[01:10:45] **Maren Urner:** Yeah, that's a really interesting, another big one, of course, because change if. What I said earlier is still resonating with you and the people

The Great Simplification

who are listening always starts with the individual, right? That means if a certain amount of people or group, as I said earlier, come together or comes together, that's the most powerful thing that can happen.

[01:11:15] So that's what we see. For example, where is the energy transition or the food transition or the media transition? And you can put basically every now and now in front of the word transition happening. It's on the kind of local level. And that's what a lot of organizations like meta organizations like for example, organizations that group cities together, like the C 40 for example, like a group of cities that decided we really wanna be sustainable, we wanna change how people move inside us, how people go from A to B, how we eat, how we live, how we work, and so on.

[01:11:54] Because it's not going to be on the state level. That's too big. Talking about trust, it's too disconnected. How do I know what these people in Parliament or wherever they meet will decide for me? I have no idea. I can't talk to them. Maybe I can send them an email they're not going to read, but if it's about my community and the people I meet, maybe on the market, even on the street, on the bus or I don't know, some kind of physical encounter makes it more direct and makes it also more accountable and thereby this self-efficacy compared to the helplessness that we often have on the state level, when it's too far away and we don't know how to trust becomes more valuable, more.

[01:12:41] That doesn't mean the state level is unimportant. Of course, it plays a role if certain countries then say, or also communities of countries like the EU say, look, we connect and we make certain decisions together in order to be big enough. To face also dangers and threats to democracy or our value system together.

[01:13:06] Of course, that is important.

[01:13:08] **Nate Hagens:** So trust starts with one, then two, then four, then eight, then 20, then a hundred and scales from there.

[01:13:16] **Maren Urner:** Exactly.

The Great Simplification

[01:13:18] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So what advice do you have for our viewers who have followed along, and agreed with the logic and, heart of, your argument of positive and constructive journalism?

[01:13:30] what advice do you have for individuals and their awareness? after this podcast?

[01:13:36] **Maren Urner:** It's a three step way. It's always three steps because we often forget the middle, and we remember the first and the last thing. Our brain is kind of programmed for that. So if we only have three, there's only one middle.

[01:13:50] So the first step is start with yourself. Ask yourself honestly, like you describe, described so beautifully about yourself. What is important for me? Like I, when I tried to outline that story, what works for me and not what other people expect of me, or what some people try to tell me I should be, or should do or should have been doing or being, but what is it that really, resonates with me?

[01:14:20] And that's a painful journey. It's not easy and it never ends as far as I know. The second step is talk to other people like we are just doing now. Talk to other people whom you trust, whom you want to trust, who are worth your trust, and make your voice heard in the, let's say, communities where you feel at least half safe because it will resonate with you.

[01:14:47] And often I, try to explain a bit like. This picture with a bus, right? Be the bus driver who picks up the people who have been all waiting for that bus and you say, Hey, come on, hop off. It's going to be a joyful ride. And find that smallest common denominator with the people who are all waiting and kind of searching for somebody or something, or maybe just you and that bus to come along because they've been lost.

[01:15:15] And then the third thing is find really in your professional and private life, not only the bus and the drive, but structures or build them that can support you. Like you mentioned, your copilot. Don't look for the people who can hurt you. I mean, watch out for them. That's important to stay alive, of course.

[01:15:38] but really focus on the what am I for and not what am against. That changes the whole narrative because suddenly you, so

The Great Simplification

[01:15:48] **Nate Hagens:** that's constructive and positive living, not journalism.

[01:15:51] **Maren Urner:** Exactly. It's not only journalism, but it's also journalism.

[01:15:56] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. No, they apply the same concepts of constructive journalism.

[01:16:00] Yeah. To your own life. Exactly. With large. I love that. Yeah. So I originally came across your name from people, my friends in Berlin, that you care very much about climate and the natural world. So you are aware of the poly crisis and all, the things. So taking off your neuroscience and journalism hat for the moment, do you have any personal advice to the listeners of this podcast who are alive during this time?

[01:16:27] **Maren Urner:** Yeah. Stop ruminating about whether you drink the soy or the oat milk. I'm serious because that's, I mean, it's also fun. So I love those discussions sometimes and when I'm in a good mood, but I. Seriously, don't waste your time on it. Again, your attention is your most valuable resource. So when people ask me what's the most useful thing I can do, is it like buying a bike?

[01:16:59] Is it like stop eating meat? Is it like this? The most important thing you can do is talk about it. Talk about planetary boundaries. Talk about that. We have to do everything, almost everything different in order to keep our beautiful life support system called the earth. As our life support system, educate yourself about it and talk to other people, and you will realize it's so much fun.

[01:17:27] it's so much fun because it is a beautiful planet and it gives me a goose skin when I now go outside and see how spring is starting and how I can smell and feel and touch it. Do that, feel it, touch it, talk to other people about it. Go outside and talk about it.

[01:17:45] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for that. It's about to be spring here today, but we had snow this morning, but there's still the spring bird sounds.

[01:17:53] do you, you're a professor, you have students, how do you, and also a neuroscientist, what advice do you have for young humans in their late teens or twenties? being alive at this time,

The Great Simplification

[01:18:04] **Maren Urner:** it's such a pleasure. And also I'm feeling very honored to be able to talk and work with all these young.

[01:18:15] They're in their mid twenties, they're master students, people. because it always makes me realize how much, and of course this is kind of a selected crowd, right? Because they wanna study sustainable transformation. I'm now in charge of this master's degree, started in, it started in last September.

[01:18:39] it's called sustainable Transformation or Design of Sustainable Transformation. And they're of course already very interested in all those topics, but still to make me realize how much they are searching, how much they are waiting for this bus, how much they actually wanna do some good, and are looking so almost desperately for the right answers.

[01:19:00] I love these moments when they go like, now I don't know what's to. To be right or wrong because that's this moment of irritation. That's the self-awareness. That's what we talked about earlier when I said we need time for that. We need rest for that. We need sleep in between the really basic human needs.

[01:19:23] We need to talk about it to other people. We need to make it resonate with other people. I, the first thing I tell them methodologically is fun fact. Now, to say this on a podcast where we've been talking all the time, is to actively listen. Actively listen. Active listening is by now also research area.

[01:19:46] It's a skill you can learn, but we are no longer taught, or most of the times we are not taught to really, listen because we are programmed to have the better argument and not to understand the other person. Again, talking about incentives, but to be louder. Than the other person.

[01:20:05] **Nate Hagens:** Can journalism help with active listening?

[01:20:07] **Maren Urner:** Yes.

[01:20:09] **Nate Hagens:** How

[01:20:10] **Maren Urner:** invent new, formats talk in different ways. Use the constructive language or the, let's say, constructive skillset by asking different

The Great Simplification

questions. This is where it all start, is it goes through the whole journalistic process, asking different questions, really doing your research, really talking to different people, really searching for people who are already working on solutions, creating formats that engage with people.

[01:20:35] All these kind of things. We know how to get the brain hooked not only by the negativity, but also with other terms, forms of engagement.

[01:20:43] **Nate Hagens:** Can you, either right now list some or off camera, give me a list that I can share with the viewers Sure. Of examples of, media that exist today that is operating on these things.

[01:20:59] **Maren Urner:** Certainly I can send you a list. That's fine. And then you can put it in the show notes.

[01:21:02] **Nate Hagens:** A few more questions. Maron, what do you care most about in the world?

[01:21:06] **Maren Urner:** That's baby the most. Difficult question at all. What do I care most about? Okay. I'm going to make it abstract, of course. I mean, I'm going to give you a concrete answer and an abstract one.

[01:21:19] Okay? It's too fine.

[01:21:20] **Nate Hagens:** That's fine.

[01:21:21] **Maren Urner:** Okay. I care most about that. People love each other and love in the most basic understanding, meaning I want to understand you. What I care most about. On a basic life support system is chocolate. Okay.

[01:21:42] **Nate Hagens:** And as a neuroscientist, there's probably a Venn diagram overlap between those two.

[01:21:46] **Maren Urner:** I hope so. I'm still searching for that one.

The Great Simplification

[01:21:50] **Nate Hagens:** if you were had a magic wand and could do one thing that would change human and planetary futures for the better, with no risk to your reputation or status or anything, what is one thing you would change?

[01:22:03] **Maren Urner:** I would give every human being on this planet an experience.

[01:22:11] It's more like a magic wish, where they feel connected because I think that's the most valuable experience connected to not only other people, but this connectivity that I call radical connectivity to understand I depend. On clean air. I depend on the fact that it rains. I depend on food, I depend on other people, that kind of connectivity.

[01:22:38] because I think that would really change our conversation.

[01:22:41] **Nate Hagens:** Professor Maren Urner, it's been a joy, to connect with you in real time. Thank you for your work, and thank you for your time today.

[01:22:49] **Maren Urner:** Thank you.

[01:22:51] **Nate Hagens:** If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform.

[01:22:58] You can also visit the [great simplification.com](https://greatsimplification.com) for references and show notes from today's conversation. And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stint, Leslie Balu, Brady Hayan, and Lizzie Sirianni.