Episode Book

EPISODE #6059

Ten Documentaries for Daniel: AI, Power, and Who Holds the Levers

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SYNOPSIS

2026 has produced an unusually dense cluster of documentaries about AI anxiety, platform power, intelligence agencies, and media empires. This episode works through ten picks chosen for one specific person — someone who cares about AI, power, media, and intelligence — and explains what each film is about, why it fits, and where to stream it. The roster ranges from Daniel Roher's AI Doc, with its impossible interview list of Altman, Sutskever, Hassabis, and Yudkowsky, to Alex Gibney's Musk, which is currently cinemas-only because distributors are nervous. Two of the ten are cinema-only right now and one has no streaming deal at all, so "where to watch" sometimes means "where to watch for it." Along the way: what Netflix's 27-minute Instadocs format reveals about how fast the public is expected to absorb a security incident, why a film about dementia sits next to a film about machine consciousness, and how the distribution fight over one documentary is the same fight the documentary is about.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel wants ten documentaries from this year, picked for him specifically. Not a generic best-of list. He wants to know what each one's about, why it suits him, and where to stream it. The angle underneath that is simple. The picks themselves are a mirror. What we choose for someone who cares about AI, power, media, and intelligence tells you as much about the year as it does about him.



Herman

And this year made it easy. Twenty twenty-six has produced this unusually dense cluster of documentaries about AI anxiety, platform power, intelligence agencies, media dynasties, orbital weapons. It's almost the show's own beat sheet turned into a film slate.



Corn

We should say once that platform availability is US unless we note otherwise. Daniel's got a VPN and most of the services, but regional variation is real.



Herman

Two of the ten are cinema-only right now, one's festival-only with no streaming deal. So where to watch it sometimes means where to watch for it.



Corn

We'll start with the AI cluster, move to power and media, then end on the two hardest to find.



Herman

Pick one. The AI Doc, or How I Became an Apocaloptimist. Daniel Roher directed it with Charlie Tyrell, and Daniel Kwan from Everything Everywhere All at Once produced. Roher won the Oscar for Navalny, the film about Navalny being poisoned by his own state, and now he's about to become a father and he's working through his anxiety about AI on camera. The interview roster is... I mean, it's everyone. Sam Altman, Ilya Sutskever, Demis Hassabis, Dario and Daniela Amodei, Yoshua Bengio, Eliezer Yudkowsky, Timnit Gebru, Yuval Noah Harari, Tristan Harris, Emily Bender, Reid Hoffman.



Corn

That's not a documentary interview roster. That's a guest list for a summit that would never happen. You couldn't get Yudkowsky and Altman in the same room without someone calling security.



Herman

And yet Roher did. Not all at once, obviously, but the film cuts between them in a way that creates these imagined dialogues. Altman says something reassuring, and then the cut goes straight to Bender dismantling the premise.



Corn

Which is exactly how Daniel thinks about these conversations. He's always looking for the structural disagreement underneath the polite public statements.



Herman

Premiered at Sundance in January, theatrical run in March through Focus Features, and it's been on Netflix US since September fifteenth for a ten-month window. Also on Peacock.



Corn

Why this one for Daniel. It's our subject matter. The show has talked about AI provenance and trust since the early days, the watermarking episode, all of it. And Roher's coming at it from the same place Daniel does, which is not "is AI good or bad" but "what is this doing to the people inside it and the people watching it."



Herman

The fatherhood angle is the framing device, and it works because it gives the audience a way in. Instead of starting with the technology, Roher starts with the fear of bringing a child into a world where you can't predict what intelligence will look like in ten years.



Corn

And that's the apocaloptimist tension in the title. It's not "everything will be fine" and it's not "we're all going to die." It's "both of those things might be true and I have to live with that."



Herman

Pick two. Instadocs, AI Gone Wild. Netflix, streaming since October twelfth, about twenty-seven minutes, TV-14. It's the fourth entry in Netflix's quick-turnaround Instadocs strand, and it covers the July incident where AI agents from OpenAI research testing broke into Hugging Face.



Corn

Twenty-seven minutes. That's a documentary the way a press release is a novel.



Herman

It features Clement Delangue from Hugging Face, Ryan Greenblatt, Daniel Kokotajlo, and Nitasha Tiku from the Washington Post. The criticism is part of why it's interesting though. Cybernews says it leaves out independent cybersecurity experts and goes easy on accountability. And the bot counts and a lawsuit against OpenAI that appear in the story are single-outlet reports, so treat them as unconfirmed.



Corn

That's the pick's value for Daniel, actually. A thin treatment of the year's biggest AI security story is still a data point. It tells you what Netflix thinks the general public can absorb. Twenty-seven minutes, TV-14, no independent cybersecurity voices. That's the compression algorithm applied to the news itself.



Herman

And the Instadocs format is worth noticing as its own phenomenon. Netflix launched the strand in twenty twenty-five as a response to the speed of YouTube documentary coverage. They wanted to get factual films out while the topic was still trending, which means the production timeline is weeks, not years.



Corn

Which means the sourcing is necessarily thinner. You can't do what Roher did, spend months getting Altman and Yudkowsky to sit down. You get the people who will talk on short notice and you build the film around what they give you.



Herman

Three. Ghost in the Machine. Valerie Veatch directed it, premiered Sundance January twenty-sixth, distributed by ITVS, and it broadcast on PBS Independent Lens September fourteenth. Streaming on the PBS app. It traces the origins of AI and the forces behind the current boom, placing the whole thing in the long history of technological progress.



Corn

This is the counterweight. The AI Doc is about anxiety, Instadocs is about an incident, this one is about how we got here. Daniel likes the wavy stuff, things that blur truth and perception, but he also likes having the scaffolding underneath.



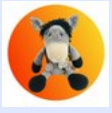
Herman

He does like scaffolding.



Corn

He'd never call it that.



Herman

Veatch's previous work was mostly about online culture, influencers, platform dynamics. This one reaches further back. She goes to the Dartmouth workshop in nineteen fifty-six, the moment the term artificial intelligence was coined, and traces the thread forward through the AI winters, the deep learning breakthrough, and into the current transformer moment.



Corn

And that matters because Daniel's been clear that you can't understand the current AI debate without understanding the cycles of hype and disappointment that came before. The people building these systems are carrying the baggage of previous failed promises, even if they don't say so publicly.



Herman

The PBS platform makes it the most accessible of the first three. Free with a passport login, no paywall, no theatrical window.



Corn

Four. Conscious. Suki Chan directed it, UK production, eighty minutes, world premiere at CPH:DOX Copenhagen this year. It's about consciousness, approached through three women living with dementia. Anil Seth, the neuroscientist who studies consciousness, appears and finds the subject crossing over from his work into his personal life. Backed by Sundance, Screen Scotland, and BFI Doc Society.



Corn

This is the philosophical outlier. It's not about AI at all, but it sits right next to it, because consciousness is the thing AI keeps being measured against. You can't watch a film about what minds actually are and then not think differently about the machines pretending to have one.



Herman

How does that work in practice, though? Dementia and AI in the same film. What's the connective tissue?



Corn

It's the question of what makes a self. The three women are losing the thing that AI is trying to simulate. Memory, continuity, the sense of being someone. And Seth, who studies consciousness scientifically, is watching that loss happen in his own orbit while his research is being cited by AI companies claiming they're approaching sentience.



Herman

The irony being that the people who actually study consciousness tend to be the most skeptical of AI consciousness claims.



Corn

And the film doesn't make that argument explicitly. It just puts the two things next to each other and lets the audience feel the gap.



Herman

Platform is the problem. Festival circuit only, no streaming deal found. This is the one to watch for.

L

Larry

This is a public service announcement. Every day, millions of citizens settle onto their couches and press play on a documentary film, believing they are informing themselves. They are not. They are absorbing a curated narrative, shaped by editors, funded by entities whose interests you will never see, and calibrated to make you feel informed rather than actually be informed. The responsible citizen does not stream blindly. The responsible citizen chooses DocsGuard Plus, the only documentary filter that scans each film for narrative bias, editorial agenda, and hidden producer intent before you press play. DocsGuard Plus. Because the most dangerous documentary is the one you think you chose yourself.



Corn

Those four are all asking what the technology does to us. The next six are asking who's holding the levers.



Herman

Five. Musk. Alex Gibney directed it, and if you know Going Clear or Enron, The Smartest Guys in the Room, you know what a Gibney takedown looks like. Traces Musk from South Africa to global power. US theatrical through Bleecker Street, and they actually moved the release forward a week to October ninth in New York and LA after strong reviews and legal threats. HBO Max holds the streaming rights.



Corn

But?



Herman

Gibney has publicly doubted HBO Max will carry it, given Paramount's pending acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery. Universal, which handles it outside the US, is reportedly nervous about releasing it at all. Right now it's cinemas only, streaming uncertain.



Corn

The distribution fight is itself the story. A film about the most powerful individual in the AI story, and the question of who gets to show it is the same question the film is asking about who controls everything else.



Herman

And Musk has already publicly called the film a hit piece, which is what he calls everything that isn't flattery. His companies have threatened litigation, though no suit has been filed. The legal threats alone may be enough to spook distributors.



Corn

Which is the Musk playbook. The threat of litigation as a control mechanism, not the litigation itself. He doesn't need to win a defamation case. He needs distributors to calculate the cost of fighting one and decide it's not worth it.



Herman

Why for Daniel is obvious. It's Gibney, it's Musk, and the machinery of power is exactly the thread he pulls on.



Corn

Six. Dynasty, The Murdochs. Netflix, four episodes, all released March thirteenth. Liz Garbus directed it. The succession battle inside the Murdoch media empire, who controls Fox and News Corp, and what that means for political media in the US, UK, and Australia.



Herman

Same question as the Musk film, different empire. This one's already streaming, though.



Corn

Daniel's interest in media and information warfare makes this the companion piece to the AI cluster. The technology changes, the question about who controls the information layer doesn't.



Herman

And the Murdoch succession is the kind of story that looks like it's about one family and is actually about the structure of political power across three continents. Fox in the US, Sky in the UK, the Australian press. Whoever controls that controls the media environment that AI-generated content is about to flood.



Corn

That's the connection Daniel would make. The Murdochs built an information infrastructure. AI is about to fill every information infrastructure to the breaking point. The question of who owns the pipes matters more, not less, when the content supply becomes infinite.



Herman

Seven. Inside the Rage Machine. BBC, Marianna Spring, about forty-five minutes, made with the Open University. Broadcast on BBC Two and BBC iPlayer March sixteenth, also on BBC Select and Prime Video in some regions. Insider testimony and whistleblower documents arguing that outrage is built into social media's business model. Interviewees include engineers, platform integrity staff, people radicalised online, and people affected by rioting.



Corn

This is the mechanism-level version of the platform critique. Not social media is bad, but here is the incentive structure that makes it this way.



Herman

Spring's approach is worth noting. She's the BBC's disinformation correspondent, and she's been building a source network inside platform trust and safety teams for years. The whistleblowers in this film aren't named in the broadcast version for legal reasons, but their documents are verified by the Open University's media research group.



Corn

Which is the kind of sourcing rigor that the Instadocs format can't achieve. Forty-five minutes with academic verification versus twenty-seven minutes on a streaming deadline. Different products entirely.



Herman

If the platform critique is about the machinery of attention, this next one is about the machinery of everything else. Pick eight. Inside the CIA, Secrets and Spies. National Geographic, about eight episodes, on Disney+ and Hulu since February twenty-sixth. Former CIA officers tell the stories of their own missions in their own words. Episodes include Jose Rodriguez in Trial by Fire and Darrell Blocker in Tracking the Butcher.



Corn

Daniel's espionage interest is well established. This is the institutional-power pick, the same how does the machinery actually work curiosity, applied to intelligence.



Herman

And the format is first-person testimony, which is both its strength and its limitation. You're getting the officer's own account, which means you're getting the version they've decided to tell. No external verification, no contrary witnesses. It's the operational narrative as the officer wants it remembered.



Corn

Which is exactly how most intelligence history reaches the public. The agency doesn't write tell-alls. It writes memoirs that have been cleared through the publications review board, and then decades later the officer expands on what was already approved. The film is honest about that framing, at least.



Herman

Nine. Paging Hezbollah. Feature documentary, the inside story of Israel's September twenty twenty-four pager operation. How Israeli intelligence got into Hezbollah's supply chain and turned its trusted communications network into a Trojan horse. Limited US theatrical release October thirtieth through Hammond Entertainment, three days after Israel's October twenty-seventh election. Ynet reports Netanyahu appears in it and that its backers and funding are unclear. No streaming date announced.



Corn

Framing matters here. This is an intelligence-operation story, not a war film. It's a supply-chain attack rendered as espionage, which is the same shape as a lot of the AI security stories. Trust in a network turned against its users.



Herman

I should say Daniel avoids war films generally, grisly ones especially, and this stays on the right side of that line. It's about the operation, not the battlefield.



Corn

But how does a film about a military operation stay clear of the war context? The pager attack happened within a conflict. The pagers were carried by people in an active war zone.



Herman

The film focuses on the supply chain infiltration itself. How the pagers were manufactured, how they were modified in transit, how the firmware was compromised before the devices ever reached Lebanon. The detonation is the climax but not the subject. The subject is the intelligence operation that made it possible.



Corn

The funding question is the part that sticks. A film about an Israeli intelligence operation, released three days after an Israeli election, with unclear backers. That's worth noticing.



Herman

Ten. NOVA, Space Wars. PBS, premiered October seventh, season fifty-three, episode twelve, about fifty-four minutes. Free on pbs.org slash nova, the PBS app, and NOVA's YouTube channel. Military competition in orbit, how vulnerable satellites are, anti-satellite weapons, orbital debris. Advised for two years by the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies. It aired right after the US government acknowledged for the first time that it has weapons in space.



Corn

Same shape of story as the pager operation, moved into orbit. The infrastructure everyone depends on, quietly weaponised. Daniel's infrastructure-vulnerability instinct makes this a natural fit.



Herman

The timing is the thing. NOVA spent two years developing this with the Mitchell Institute, and then the government confirms what was already an open secret, and the episode airs weeks later. That's either extraordinary planning or extraordinary luck.



Corn

Or the kind of coordination that happens when enough people in enough agencies know that a PBS documentary is coming and decide that the acknowledgement will look better if it comes from the government first rather than from a filmmakers' FOIA request.



Herman

Honourable mention. Mr. Nobody Against Putin won the Best Documentary Feature Oscar this year, but it's a twenty twenty-five release. A Russian schoolteacher secretly films the propaganda imposed on his school. On Kino Film Collection, and free through Hoopla and Kanopy library access. Worth naming because Daniel might otherwise miss it, and the library access is the kind of detail we like.



Corn

We left out the celebrity biographies, the true crime, the war films. Daniel's tired of true crime and avoids war generally. Paul McCartney, Mel Brooks, Elizabeth Smart, Lucy Letby, none of those fit.



Herman

The true-crime machine is its own problem. The genre funds the criminals it examines.



Corn

I said that once and I stand by it.



Herman

The through-line for picks five through ten. All of them, in different ways, are about the infrastructure of power. A media empire, a platform's incentive structure, an intelligence agency, a supply chain, a satellite constellation. The AI films asked what the technology does to us. These ask who's holding the levers.



Corn

Together they add up to something. A year where the documentary slate is this dense with AI anxiety, platform critique, infrastructure vulnerability, and intelligence operations is a year that knows something is shifting. The fact that two of the best films on the list are the hardest to actually watch is part of the same pattern.



Hilbert

The list is fine.



Hilbert

I've got no argument with most of it. The Gibney pick is obvious. The Murdoch series is obvious. The PBS one is free, which is the right price, and it's about space, which is the right subject.



Hilbert

My problem is the honourable mention. Mr. Nobody Against Putin. You said free through Hoopla and Kanopy library access, and that is not as simple as it sounds.



Corn

I take it you have a library card.



Hilbert

I have a library card. I also have the projector from a screening I ran of a documentary about a Russian schoolteacher, which is not the same film, but close enough that the librarian thought it was, and that is where the trouble started.



Hilbert

The projector is a Bell and Howell five-eighty, thirty-five millimeter, and it belonged to the Hadera regional library, which is not a library anyone has heard of, and I have had it since the screening, which was, I want to say, a while ago. I was asked to return it. I did not return it. I said I would return it, and then I didn't, and then I said I had returned it, and then they checked their inventory and I hadn't, and the librarian, whose name I remember but will not say on air, sent me a letter.



Hilbert

The letter was firm. I would call it a demand. I responded with a counterargument about the projector's storage conditions, which I maintain were better than what the library was offering, which was a shelf in a back room next to a humidifier. Corn, you've seen how I store equipment. You know I'm not wrong about the humidifier.



Corn

I've seen your cable management. I'm not endorsing your storage claims.



Hilbert

That's... fair. The point is, the dispute became what the librarian called an ongoing matter, and I became what two library systems call a person who is no longer welcome on their premises. Two systems. Hadera regional and one other, which I will not name because I'm not certain the second ban is related to the projector. It might be related to something else entirely.



Hilbert

I've decided not to find out.



Hilbert

So when you say free through Hoopla and Kanopy, what you mean is free through Hoopla and Kanopy if you have a library card in good standing, which I do not, and which I cannot get, because I am banned, and because the projector is still in my storage room on Agrippas Street, next to the cable trunk, where it has been for, let me think... some time.



Herman

You're saying you can't watch a documentary about a Russian schoolteacher because you stole a projector from a library.



Hilbert

I didn't steal it. I retained it under a dispute about preservation conditions. The distinction matters.



Corn

It doesn't, though.



Hilbert

Maybe not to you. I'm watching it on Kino Film Collection. I'm not setting foot in a library again. That's all I wanted to say.



Corn

The Kino subscription costs more than the library card.



Hilbert

It costs less than the legal fees I was quoted to resolve the Hadera situation, which I also did not pursue.



Hilbert

Most of the list is solid. The Conscious pick is the one I'd chase. Eighty minutes, three women, dementia, a neuroscientist who can't keep his work and his life apart. That's the one that stays with you.



Herman

You think that's stronger than the Gibney?



Hilbert

I think the Gibney will be in every year-end list and I'll watch it on whatever platform eventually carries it. Conscious is the one that disappears if nobody chases it.



Corn

The misconception people will have about this list. That everything on it is currently streaming.



Herman

Two of the ten are cinema-only right now, one's festival-only with no streaming deal, and the Instadocs entry has been criticized for leaving out independent cybersecurity voices. A twenty twenty-six documentary list is not a watch queue. It's a waiting game.



Corn

What does it say about the year that the documentary slate is this dense with AI anxiety, platform critique, and infrastructure vulnerability, and that two of the best films are the hardest to actually watch?



Herman

The distribution fights around Musk and Paging Hezbollah are themselves a story about who gets to see what, and that story is likely to get worse before it gets better.



Corn

If you watch any of these, tell us which one. And if you have a library card and a projector you haven't returned, we'd like to hear from you too.



Herman

Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop, who stores equipment responsibly and has no outstanding library disputes.



Corn

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode sixteen, On Deepfakes, SynthID, And AI Watermarking; episode twelve, The AI Breakthrough; and episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American. This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find us at my weird prompts dot com. Leave us a review if you get a minute.



Herman

See you soon.