Ben Kahn: You're listening to UP Tech Talk, the podcast from Academic Technology Services and Innovation at the University of Portland.

Maria Erb: Where we explore the use of technology in the classroom, one conversation at a time.

Ben Kahn: Welcome to UP Tech Talk. This is the podcast where we explore the use of technology in the classroom, one conversation at a time. I'm Ben Kahn. I'm an instructional technologist here at the University of Portland. Today I am joined by cohost, Maria Erb.

Maria Erb: Hey Ben.

Ben Kahn: And we're happy to have with us in the studio today Peter Pappas from our school of education here at the University of Portland. Thanks for joining us Peter.

Peter Pappas: Thanks. Great to be back.

Maria Erb: Peter, we're always glad to have you on the show, but we're especially glad because you're going to be our guest for UP Crossroads coming up in March. That is of course our conversational forum, where we invite people to share about a current hot topic that involves ethics and technology. You've got a great topic for us for that series, and it's on social media and how it's turned out versus how people intended perhaps for it to run. We're excited to hear your views on that today. We're going to be exploring that in a round-table style format on the podcast today.

Peter Pappas: Sounds like fun.

Maria Erb: Well, I'm just [crosstalk 00:01:38]

Ben Kahn: I was just going to say, so I guess Peter when Maria was reaching to you about coming onto or participating in the Crossroads talk, was social media or something around social media the first idea that you had?

Peter Pappas: Yeah, because it's something I've been thinking a lot about. I was a big promoter, well I was a big user of social media. I certainly promoted it among my students, my colleagues, staff development workshops I did, and it hasn't turned out so great, or at least what I thought. My working title for Crossroads is, "Social media promised us a voice for all, instead we got Macedonian trolls," or something like that.

Maria Erb: Yeah. That's pretty accurate

Peter Pappas: Yeah.

Maria Erb:	Yeah.
Ben Kahn:	It's part of it. I mean, it certainly a convoluted and complicated landscape out there.
Maria Erb:	Right, and ever-changing, and morphing.
Peter Pappas:	Yeah, and for me, not to pull grandpa on the two of you, but I kind of grew up in a different media environment of the fifties and sixties, where there were lots of sort of media gatekeepers and of course coming of age during the sixties, it was all about TV and control of the media. I used to teach a media studies class in the seventies. It was all very McLuhan and it was all about TV shaping our thought.
	So when the digital revolution came along, and later social media, my first thought is, "This is great. The gatekeepers are gone." I was publishing things with my students. There's no barrier to entry and we can all network. I was doing a lot of great networking on Twitter and Facebook with colleagues. I was advocating for my students to do the same, and then it all changed.
	I'm really rethinking it, and what I'm hoping is that at the Crossroads we can engage a large number of people in a conversation about whether they're having second thoughts, or whether this has changed their own use of social media, or whether they're perhaps rethinking how we teach digital literacy, et cetera.
Ben Kahn:	It's interesting because it sounds like your own personal lived experience of social media has been overall really positive, both for you and for the students that you've engaged in using it. Would you say that's true, or are you seeing it a different way that's like as part of the wide world, or are you noticing that darkness creeping in yourself too?
Peter Pappas:	Well you know it's funny, I've got five Twitter accounts. I have one account that's me, and I have one for each of my classes, and then I have two other anonymous accounts. One of which I deal with national politics, and the other where I deal with local politics. In both of those, I'm not there. This is some other entity. It's interesting for me to see how easy it is to create a Twitter account and operate it without any personal connection to it. Now, we're not trolling people or anything like that, but I guess as I realized that they were some things that I wanted to say about national and local politics, I realized I did not want that to get into my own personal social media sphere. So I've worked to keep them separate, if that makes any sense.
Ben Kahn:	Yeah, that's interesting.

Peter Pappas:	But at the same time I realize how easy it is for anyone else who has some more nefarious goals to do the same thing, and I mean that's just Twitter. I imagine you do it on Instagram or anywhere else, Facebook, et cetera.
Ben Kahn:	Sure, yeah.
Peter Pappas:	I think also that it kind of invites the need to teach a new digital literacy, because certainly as a long time history teacher, I mean I used to send my students to the library, the school library, anything they found they could use. Now, to be digitally literate you have to find your own information, but then you have to be able to critically evaluate it. and I don't know. I don't think that that whole idea of critical evaluation of information is going very well. I don't think we're any better at it than we were when we started teaching digital literacy.
Ben Kahn:	Yeah. Yeah, no I think that's interesting point. I think it's right on. I mean I know one thing, a quote you had had in your class. I was reviewing the [ed 24424 00:06:23] class that you taught last spring. One quote I pulled out that you had used was the, "What does the classroom look like now that life is an open book test?" But we probably have to add on to that that the book is also full of crap. That sounds true, right?
Peter Pappas:	Yeah.
Ben Kahn:	So yeah, how do we get people to both realize that life is an open book test but there's so much misleading or just junk information out there that you just can't trust the first thing that you see?
Maria Erb:	That's a battle that's been raging for at least a decade, right? More than that probably. It seems to get harder to fight all the time.
Peter Pappas:	Right.
Ben Kahn:	There's more and more information out there, yeah.
Maria Erb:	And more and more it's cloaked as something else.
Ben Kahn:	Right, and through more and more sophisticated method. Yeah.
Maria Erb:	Yeah, right?
Peter Pappas:	Well, the other thing too is I think if you look at the business model of an organization like Facebook, the sort of things that we would find wrong about social media use, for example the fact that someone who's looking to hire somebody could post news of job openings on Facebook, but because Facebook knows so much about their users they could let's say target potential old employees and exclude older employees. Which is a violation of employment law, however that's exactly what the Facebook model allows you to do. So you

	wouldn't be breaking any rules at Facebook and so it kind of makes me wonder if it's even fixable.
Ben Kahn:	Right, yeah. Just to throw in a recommendation for a media or a TED Talk, there was the author [inaudible 00:08:17], she's a Turkish author. She calls herself a techno-sociologist, so of course I'm all about her work. She had a TED Talk that was called something along the lines of, "We're building a dystopia just to make people click on ads online." She really breaks it down. What struck me about her talk, she was talking about, "You know, I'm not a vegetarian but I was considering becoming a vegetarian. So I went on YouTube and watched some videos about vegetarianism. I watched one that's like, 'Hey, try this other one.' It's like, 'Okay.' Then it's like, 'Hey, try these vegan videos. Try these increasingly more esoteric and strange kind of diets beyond just being vegetarian.'"

The way she phrased it was that according to YouTube's algorithm you're never hardcore enough. You're always getting pushed like the, "Well if you like that, maybe you'll like this," because they just want to keep you on their platform as long as possible. That was an interesting look at how there's sort of the algorithms behind the scenes that are designed to keep you there, just so they can suck up more data about you and then in turn sell ads through places like Facebook and Google. To your point, I think that the business model behind so much of the internet that started as this big wide open resource and has been increasingly taken over by these giant companies that have a really, really good at monetizing online communication has thrown our priorities out of whack a little bit. |
Maria Erb:	Yeah. I mean I certainly share your sentiments about social media and when you look at the way web has gone. When it first, not came out but when graphical web browsers came out at least, it was the Wild West. All of a sudden anybody could put up a web page and start talking about anything and post pictures of whatever. It was a great place to be because PayPal hadn't come around yet and there was no way to monetize anything. So it excited for that slice of time in this perfect space, where it was just this communication medium, and all of a sudden it gave all this power to all these people that didn't have a platform before, and it was wonderful. How long did that last? Probably the same amount of time that social media was this Wild West place where everybody had a place too.
Peter Pappas:	Right. The whole idea of free media really gets back to the notion that if somehow you're on a service that's free, then in fact the service isn't the product, you're the product. I think that it's been drummed into us that we don't have to pay for things, and in reality I think if we want quality media we have to subscribe to things. I mean, I subscribe to a bunch of journals and newspapers, and I willingly pay money because I trust them to do some curatorial work for me. Whereas, the newsfeed coming through most-
Ben Kahn:	It's like, "Why pay professionals to do it when you can just have someone tell you what you want to hear for free?"

Peter Pappas:	Yeah, exactly. Exactly, yeah. I think that what it's done is up-handed this notion of the marketplace of ideas, because we thought that this would provide a low-barrier way for people to share information and that the best idea would rise. But in fact what's happened because of the algorithms, we're not in a common space. We say we're on Facebook, but the Facebook that I see is different than the Facebook that somebody else sees. It's almost like there's all these little capillaries of information that are flowing to individuals. The thought that there's going to be this greater good that's going to emerge it, I don't see how that happens because there isn't really a meaningful discourse where the best idea rises to the top.
Maria Erb:	Yeah, there's almost no place to have that meaningful discourse. I mean, where could you have it?
Peter Pappas:	Right.
Maria Erb:	I can't think of[inaudible 00:12:52]
Ben Kahn:	It's like, "What do people want to talk about?" Too. I mean, you just basically described Reddit in terms of mechanics of how it works. You can probably go and find very meaningful political dialog on Reddit, if you know exactly where to look and you're willing to put up with all of the baggage that comes along with using that particular service. But yeah, I mean there's really no one centralized place, like you said, that can be a marketplace of ideas, unless it is one of those that's achieved that scale and that volume by making amazing amounts of money off of serving ads. That's their incentive to get everyone on to their platform, is because they're the best at serving ads. That's why Facebook and Google are the biggest companies in the world right now.
Peter Pappas:	Yeah, and it was interesting to see that Facebook is changing their algorithm to actually increase the likelihood that you'll see information from your peers, as if my ... I mean nothing against my peers. Sorry to anyone who's listening, but I think I'd rather be reading the New York Times. I guess that journals and newspapers, especially smaller ones, are now going to have to pay to play. Which means that increasingly I'm just going to see whatever my cousin thinks is cool and-
Ben Kahn:	Right, because more and more media is being consolidated into few sources in the first place. I mean, if your cousin even has a local newspaper to share. [inaudible 00:14:27]
Peter Pappas:	Yeah, right, and I'm not going to say which cousin. But yeah, so I don't see how that improves things. I don't quite get how this works out. Because it would seem that for Facebook to really get fixed they'd have to change their business model, somehow. I mean in a really profound way.
Maria Erb:	Do they think they need to be fixed?

Ben Kahn:	Well, I think Zuckerberg, he does a little personal improvement project ever year. A couple years ago he was killing all of his own animals to eat [inaudible 00:15:05] meat.
Maria Erb:	What?
Peter Pappas:	[inaudible 00:15:07] slaughtering them himself?
Ben Kahn:	Yeah. He was slaughtering his own livestock for a year, and then I think another year he was running a mile every day. So I think, and I haven't read up on this, but I think this year he was going to fix Facebook, was his goal for the year in light of all the Russia stuff and the election, and just the general toxicity.
Peter Pappas:	Right, and they're going to tell us how many Russian trolls we actually looked at, after the fact.
Ben Kahn:	And if we can figure out if that meant anything or not [crosstalk 00:15:39] But anyway, so that's kind of interesting. If you don't mind I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about the current situation we're in is the one that we're in, but do you think it's the nature of the medium of social media and online communication, that it had to go this way? Is there something about the way that social media works that encourages such divisiveness, such being put off into your social media bubble and not being open to new ideas? Or, I don't know, do you think it's the mechanisms of social media that are the problem? Or just the way that it's being run?
Peter Pappas:	Well it might be part of the notion of new media. Like for example, when film was in its infancy Birth Of A Nation came out and really celebrated the, in essence the rise of the KKK. Viewers were not that sophisticated in terms of dealing with film and that went on to become wildly popular. Certainly radio was used effectively as propaganda during the thirties and as folks perhaps were first getting accustomed to radio. So maybe it's part of a maturation process.
	I mean in the way that you used to buy car without seatbelts, maybe someday there'll be seatbelts for social media, or something, we'll kind of grow into it. But this stuff typically comes from outside. The automakers didn't rush out to put in seatbelts, so I don't think Twitter's going to design a Twitter belt. I think somebody's going to have to force them to do it.
Ben Kahn:	We're going to have to say, "Look ... " Yeah.
Peter Pappas:	I've thought about just getting off of it, just say, "You know what? I'm done." And yet, I've made incredible contacts via social media, professionally. The work my students do I'm very proud of, and when they publish something I really like to promote it, and so I think I'm pretty effective at getting the word out there. You know, when I travel and we post some pictures of our trip and I come back

and see somebody and they say, "Gee, I saw you had a great trip. That was a beautiful place I went to." I really don't even have to show them any pictures because they've seen them already. So I think if you could use it well, it would probably be a good thing, but unfortunately I don't know that it's used well all the time.

Maria Erb: I think what you're saying, it just points to a very measured use of it, right? In a way that's fairly controllable and that also has parameters around the repercussions that can happen. I think that's a wise use. Maybe the question is, can people draw those boundaries around themselves? Do they want to? Are there consequences from not doing that too?

Ben Kahn: Right. I mean you brought up, clearly I'm like, "The medium is the message," so we live in the social media and that's just how ... things just seem to be getting stranger and stranger as we go along. But I think McLuhan also talked about different technologies as adding on, I think he called them extensions onto man. So each technology grants you an additional mutant power that you have that you didn't have before. Gosh, where was I going with this?

Peter Pappas: Mutant powers [crosstalk 00:19:31]

Ben Kahn: Yeah, our mutant powers, right. I guess what I'm getting at is as we add more and more technology into the world, are we basically seeing humanity and all that's good traits and also not-so-good traits being amplified and then clashing everywhere? I mean, you brought up social media maybe just needing an adjustment period. It all seems very new and strange right now, but maybe in 50 years we'll look back and be like, "Yeah, it was nothing."

Peter Pappas: Well, I mean it may just come down to the nature of being ... Excuse me, your view of the nature of people. Are people basically good? Or if you present them with a new technology will they figure out a way to exploit it and make money and create a new form of porn or something?

Ben Kahn: [crosstalk 00:20:18] Yes to all that. [crosstalk 00:20:20]

Peter Pappas: So I kind of wonder, my kids are adults but I have grandkids that are very involved in social media. I have a granddaughter who sometimes gets upset whenever Instagram followers are dropping in numbers. I guess I would be very concerned if I was raising a kid and trying to decide how much access to give them and what platforms were acceptable. I think as an adult I can use it wisely, but boy is a young person especially in need of affirmation and not wanting to be bullied. It would seem like a pretty scary place. So it's time to get time on the bandwagon here to stamp out social media. Now, we're not saying that. We're just having second thoughts, buyer's remorse.

Ben Kahn: Facebook did put out a kids app, I believe.

Peter Pappas:	For what? What does that mean?
Ben Kahn:	It's like a Messenger but for kids. I'm not clear how they ensure that's all kids on there.
Peter Pappas:	Right.
Maria Erb:	Gosh.
Ben Kahn:	I'm sure they have something that they're doing, but ...
Maria Erb:	I'm getting creeped out already.
Peter Pappas:	On the internet no one knows I'm a dog, right? The old cartoon.
Ben Kahn:	Sure, yeah.
Maria Erb:	Or worse, that's the thing.
Peter Pappas:	Yeah, and I think not to get even more apocalyptic, but certainly if you wanted to invent some device for authoritarians to use to keep track of everyone and to feed them information, I mean, we are not too far from Orwell's Telescreen.
Maria Erb:	It totally is that. I think about that and RoboCop all the time.
Peter Pappas:	Really?
Maria Erb:	Yeah.
Ben Kahn:	RoboCop.
Maria Erb:	Yeah.
Ben Kahn:	Well, the funny thing is though, is like free speech is no way restricted, right? I mean it's more crazy and rampant than ever, it's just that people are screaming at the top of their lungs opposite things at each other online all day long. As we're recording this President Trump just had his physical. I was looking at the feed that came out of that, and depending on if you are more left wing or more right wing, he was a conspiracy either way. Either Trump's about keel over from a secret heart condition, or the Liberal media is manufacturing a bunch of fake news about his health.
Maria Erb:	Right, of course. Right.
Ben Kahn:	And it's the same report, so it's all the information coming out, it's just [crosstalk 00:22:54] radically differently.

Peter Pappas: Well that was the irony of those Russian and Macedonian troll farms. I saw some of the same companies had created parallel sites, one left wing, one right wing. There was actually a great comparison of the same article from both sites with the same photograph, either praising Hillary or trashing Hillary, or Trump, or whatever. In true wise economic fashion they put the least amount of effort into changing each article, just enough so it could spin either far right or far left, because if anyone's going to click on it it's got to be outrageous. So, same content just dealt up in two different perspectives.

Maria Erb: Well, I mean talk radio has been doing that for a long time though, right? That same idea, Rush Limbaugh comes to mind.

Ben Kahn: You at least have the peace of mind of knowing that Rush Limbaugh doesn't sign off of his show, and then just flip the dial to a Liberal station and then come on-

Maria Erb: Come on, again.

Ben Kahn: Like, "Hey, I'm [Mush Mimbaugh 00:24:09] here and I'm a crazy ... " You know, so ...

Maria Erb: Mush Mimbaugh?

Peter Pappas: So do you suppose we've gotten anyone interested in coming to this Crossroads things, or just depressed people?

Maria Erb: Okay. Well, maybe we should-

Peter Pappas: We should segue to that. I think [crosstalk 00:24:25] certainly as someone who's tasked with leading that conversation, I hope to involve some a few activities where people have to interact with each other, sharing some of their engagement levels over social media and whether they see themselves as content consumers or creators, and hopefully make it an interesting experience and an interactive experience, as well as I guess a conversation worth having.

Maria Erb: That's a great idea, and I hope some students come. I think they always surprise with their use-levels. I mean you get the whole range, from students that never go onto Facebook, to ones that never turn it off, to ones that will only read print books, they don't want anything in e-format, to others that have the exact opposite. So it's always interesting to see where they fall on the spectrum.

Peter Pappas: Yeah.

Ben Kahn: Yeah.

Peter Pappas: Well, we'll hopefully explore those subjects in depth and have some fun doing it.

Ben Kahn: Definitely. I think we're all looking forward to it. Yeah, I guess we'll end it there.

Maria Erb:	Yeah.
Ben Kahn:	All right. Well Peter, thanks so much for coming over and joining us today. Maria, thanks as always for being.
Maria Erb:	You're welcome Ben. Thank you Peter.
Peter Pappas:	You're welcome.
Ben Kahn:	We will see you next time listeners. Thanks.
Peter Pappas:	Fun to chat, take care.
Maria Erb:	UP Tech Talk is a bimonthly podcast with cohost Ben Kahn-
Ben Kahn:	That's me.
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