Welcome to season seven of Tech Talk. I'm your host, Maria Erb, and with me at least always for now, is Ben Conn.

Hi Maria.

We have our special guest today is Anne Santiago from the political science department.

Hi Maria.

Thanks for joining us.

Thanks for having me.

Yes, we're excited to have Anne. She's going to be kicking off our U.P. crossroads discussion series, coming up in a few weeks. So she's here today to talk a little bit about her topic. Our theme for this year is "taking on the digitocracy", and Anne's theme is going to deal with media literacy, digital citizenship, and a few other assorted topics in there. It's gonna be very thought provoking.

Yeah. We're definitely looking forward to your talk.

Great. Me too.

So today, we're going to talk a little bit about the upcoming discussion and give you a preview and sense of what you're likely to encounter if you attend, and we do hope that you attend. Anne, why don't you introduce us to your topic a little bit?

Sure. I'm talking about media literacy and digital citizenship. As I've been thinking about that topic broad theme, one of the things that comes up for me is what does it mean to be a citizen, both within our democracy but also in the use of media, the internet, social media, broadly. I often think about citizenships in terms of rights and responsibilities, so what rights do we have as citizens and then what are our responsibilities as citizens? Linked to that for me, because we live within a democratic society, is the idea that we need to have civility within our political realm and within our dealings with one another within society. I think linked to that in addition is the whole idea of media literacy and whether or not we are paying attention, paying good attention, understanding what information is coming at us. Are we seeking out multiple sources? Are we checking our sources? Can we distinguish fact from fiction when politicians or other sort of societal leaders start telling us things? I think that that issue of being well informed as a citizen is something that is very critical to the democratic process.

Well one question that I had as we were talking right before our show here ... You know we do talk a lot about the need to fact check and also to check our sources for validity, but I'm just wondering, in the past where we only had a few sources to get our news from, there really wasn't the sense that we had to fact check, but was our source any more reliable?

Yeah.

We had more trust, certainly. We had more hierarchical kind of set up in our society, but did we have more truth than we have now?

Right. That's an interesting question. I think there's a couple of things that I would ... I'm not a media expert, so I can't give you facts and figures, but there's a general sense that there was a broader swath of sort of independent media. Now we have very large corporations owning most of the media in the country, and especially when it comes to sort of local newspapers, those are all very much controlled from above, rather than independent and local. I think there was a sense that there has always been a certain view that has been projected through the media because that does come from above and newspapers and corporations that own them are the ones that decide what to put out there. There was definitely the conservative side and the liberal side within newspapers for example. But there were also completely fictitious news that came out and poor reporting as well. On the other hand, pretty much everybody in society, or at least working, middle, upper class people were reading the newspaper, so there was a general sense that people were informed at least as far as local events that were happening, national events that were happening.

I think today newspaper readership is much much lower. I think that can be problematic if people aren't getting information from other sources, right? We definitely do have a much broader swath of information coming at us from different areas and different sources, and that's good I think in that it gives lots of different perspectives. The difficulty, maybe, in that is that people don't know how to process that much information and sort it out to understand what's valid and what's not valid.

Yeah. So if I'm hearing you, the trade-off is we have sort of a top down approach to setting the agenda of what people are discussing and learning. Now the downside as we moved away from that and are completely decentralized is that there's no agreed upon baseline of reality in many ways.

That's right. I think that's true. And of course in the past, of course it was a particular elite class that was giving the information, right? So the perspective was upper-middle class, generally white, generally male. Now we've got a lot more diversity when it comes to access to information.

Yeah, I think your point about people don't know how to process the variety of sources and the sheer volume, do you have any pointers or tips on how to do that?

I think there still are some pretty reliable newspaper sources, for example. I think we can look to those to get broad information. My focus is international, so I tend to want to know what's happening globally and I can get the U.S. perspective from, say The New York Times and The Washington Post. I can get an international perspective by looking at, say, the BBC, or the Financial Times because that'll give me a wide variety. I would advise people if they're interested in big topics to look at some of those really good newspaper sources, but then also if you're interested in something like immigration, look at what some of the think tanks in the United States are saying about it. Then also check out Fox News, and check out some other sources that give you a different perspective and try to assess what is the truth when we're being delivered information from, say, the President of the United States, or people who are his spokespeople.

I think something that you mentioned in there actually is great advice, potentially for our students or young people, is to actually check out international sources as well because that gives you, in my experience, a very different lens in terms of what's important and what's being discussed, versus our local or our national news sources.

Absolutely. Fortunately we do have access to all of these things. I mean that's what's incredible about it, you know? If you were thinking of 25 years ago or 30 years ago, how on earth would get access to anything?

I think the unfortunate thing is we're talking about people going out and intentionally seeking out information, and I think so many of us are at the receiving end of a fire hose of information at all times and it's not even an agenda item to go out and look for more information.

Right, and it can be very overwhelming to people, I think, to try to figure out what is truth and oftentimes if you get overwhelmed you just step back and don't engage at all. That's really problematic, I think, for a democracy.

Yeah, I think that that's exactly what is happening right now. People are just so overwhelmed that they're kind of shutting down on topics.

Right.

Yeah. I don't want to go too far off of topic, but just in the digital realm I know another issue is the way that we're fed information and the kind of algorithms that control that tend to find out what we're interested in and what kind of niche things that we're interested in. There's a techno-sociologist named ... I hope I don't get her name wrong, but it's Zeynep Tufekci. She's a Turkish-American. She talks about like YouTube, you can't be too hardcore for something in YouTube because if you watch something about eating well, you might get vegetarianism next and then you get veganism, then you get all the different things. Just as that as an example, but if you're looking at a particular political subject like immigration and you get one video that leans a particular way and you like that, you're gonna get fed a lot more until you eventually stop watching.

Right. I think Facebook works the same.

They all work the same way, exactly.

So you're pushed to the point of overwhelmed.

Well not only that, but you're pushed into kind of an extreme viewpoint on one topic and you might not even see ... You're only gonna get things the algorithm thinks that you'll like based on what you've liked so far.

Right.

I guess we should go back to the topic digital citizens, right? What would be your vision for ideally how this could all work, if we're all kind of trying to find the best sources we can and we're sort of weighing what we find, where do you see that leading?

Well first off, I think everybody needs to be taught critical thinking skills. I think when we're reading we need to be asking ourselves what evidence is presented, not just what the arguments are, but what evidence is presented. I think that if people seek out multiple sources that helps them to come to sort of a common understanding, and also to understand that most of what we get as far as information is from a particular perspective, right? I have a particular worldview. You have a particular worldview. Everybody does, right? So do the people that are writing about particular topics that we're interested in. I do think, you know, as far as information goes that that's an important point to just step back and be aware of, then make our judgements based on that. But when it comes also to digital citizenship, I think one thing to really foster is a sense of civility and respect for other people.

I'm not on social media because I find it extremely vitriolic and not particularly helpful to my own mental health, right? But I think we should be able to sort of self-regulate, take a step back, don't be so reactionary, and think about, okay here's somebody's position. I don't agree with it, but I'm going to respectfully disagree with it and not go down some sort of road of really being on the attack because that only fosters more defensiveness, more attacks, more defensiveness, and that doesn't help us communicate. I think one of the beautiful things about social media, about the internet is that we can communicate so much more widely than we ever used to be able to do, but we can also do it very anonymously, which makes us bolder in sort of how we approach it.

I'm just wondering what you think about, I don't want to say safe spaces, but spaces where the type of discourse you're talking about can occur. It almost seems like you'd have to have a different space because the ones we have right now are so loaded and they've already been so kind of skewed with however people have been using them up til now. So I'm wondering, do you see an existing space being able to be repurposed for these types of things or do you think something new would have to come along that's got a fresh look to it?

You know, it's interesting because you can think about the idea of policing something like Facebook or Twitter where the company itself could set rules and then everybody has to abide by that, but I would image that would be a huge task for the company to actually police all of these different accounts, right? So I think you could see it happen, but that would almost have to be a top down solution. I think you could build a community of people who wanted to have serious discussions, serious disagreements, but agree to do it in a way that is civil and that is productive. I don't really believe in the idea of not hearing what other people have to say because that just cuts us off from communication and discussion and what we're supposed to do within a democracy, which is sort of work these issues out and figure out how to move forward. I think if somebody out there wants to create a new space, that would be really wonderful, but I think we also need to have maybe a national discussion about how do we use these platforms that we already have in a better way to really have dialogue rather than vitriol.

Where could we have that discussion though?

Yeah, maybe it's not on social media.

Yeah, maybe it isn't on social media. But maybe it's in our educational systems. Starting in middle school, how many middle school kids are on social media already? Maybe we have within the curriculum, you know, teaching students about how to be better citizens on social media, in our democracy, in our society generally.

I like that idea, actually. I think that's a great one. Well that brings us into the topic of regulation that we were talking about before. How much of our interaction should be regulated?

Right and that's a very difficult topic that each society sort of comes to terms with for itself. Our democracy has always aired on the side of the individual and the freedoms of the individual, I think sometimes at the cost of social cohesion. Other democracies tend to do it a little bit the other way so that they're a little bit more socially cohesive and a little restrictive on some of the freedoms. Think taxes, for example. Sweden has much higher taxes than we do in the name of using those resources to better the society. I think that the danger in any sort of discussion of regulating speech is that that easily runs into a movement towards authoritarianism. Once you head down that road, it's hard to recover. Once you start making restrictions on people, people don't like those restrictions when they already have the freedom and that can lead to violence and upheaval. On the other hand, I think if we allow everyone to put out any information they want to, say anything they want to, spew hatred and violence, really, then that's also a problem for a democracy, but who gets to regulate that is really difficult.

Right, I don't think we've quite figured out what the 21st century equivalent of yelling fire in a crowded theater is just yet. I hope that it's not too costly of a lesson when it happens.

Right, absolutely. I think the problem for governments, generally people who put laws in place, is that things like technology and social change always runs ahead of where our rules are. So it's sort of this process of trying to catch up to figure out, oh how do we deal with stuff that is hate speech on the internet? I think related to that, honestly, I don't think Donald Trump would have been elected president of this country 40 years ago, simply because I think he was a master at manipulating media. I think the media gave him way more attention than they needed to and he was able to build on that momentum and then become this legitimate candidate.

Yeah. It's so interesting though ... I don't want to extend too far down a wormhole, but really you're talking about the more traditional mass media that gave him a lot of attention, right?

Absolutely.

So is it this weird feedback loop where the traditional, like television and newspaper media is kind of hyper focused in on social media, and they're getting their agenda from that, and then rebroadcasting that out which then creates a feedback loop as people reshare and react to that. It's sort of this information overload in our media system.

Right and some of it is because we've ... you know, media has become entertainment. News has become entertainment for people. We have shows that are reality TV that we're basically voyeurs looking at other people's lives rather than living our own lives. I think the media has responded to that need for entertainment within our society.

Yeah, I mean you don't really have to rely on media for news because you have so many other avenues.

Absolutely.

So it only makes sense that the media would shift into a new form of, you know.

Yeah and that kind of goes back to what we were saying earlier. Fifty years ago at five o'clock, the only thing on is the news, right? Then now it's whatever subject you're interested in that algorithmically you're getting more and more stuff pushed to you, so why would you pay attention to whatever's not your most pertinent interest at that time?

Absolutely. I teach a class on democratization. I have the students read Václav Havel who was the president of Czechoslovakia after the end of the Soviet era in Eastern Europe. He was a playwright and he was a dissident. He came into the presidency because the people saw him as a moral leader within their society. He talks a lot about the need for civility within society. He even talks about the idea that because Czechoslovakia went from a very restricted society to a very free society that those freedoms were wonderful, but they posed some serious concerns as well because not only would people use their freedom for good, they could use their freedom for ill as well, so he talked about the need for civility within society, within politics. That politics can really be a place of sort of moral leadership for society. That politicians can be these great examples to people to encourage them to be involved, to be informed, to be true citizens, keeping tabs on what the government's doing and making sure that the government is working in the interests of the people. He of course was starting fresh with a new society.

We've been at this for a couple of hundred years, trying to develop our democracy. I think we've gotten away a little bit from the basic responsibility of citizenship, which is to be informed and be a voice that really calls our government to account, and really checks it. I think going back to media and sort of social media broadly, that can be a place where we can really have some checks on our government and really organize. We can organize in a way that we never have been able to do before. I think people need to start being a little more serious about their responsibilities in addition to their rights. We all know what our rights are, but we have a little bit lost sight of what our responsibilities are as far as really making sure that we're using our gifts and our talents and our technology for good within society rather than for selfish means.

But they had Havel, I mean they had a leader that ... Where are we gonna find this leader? That's what I want to know.

That is a really difficult question. I don't know the answer to it, but I think a lot of the young people can start demanding it. Our students can start saying it's not good enough to have these same people in power forever and that we can do better. I think if you start demanding that, the system will respond.

Well that's a good thought to leave this with. I hope our students will attend your discussion coming up on October 26th at 3 p.m. in the digital lab. We hope to see everybody there. This'll be very thought-provoking discussion. Anne, we thank you so much for coming.

Yeah, thank you.

Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

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