

Vincent Munoz:

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friendan:

The First Amendment and the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Apthekar:

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming this [inaudible 00:00:27] where people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman:

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is Speech Matters, a podcast about expression engagement in democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the center's executive director and your host.

An increasing amount of our daily communication is happening online, specifically on social media. While these platforms are run by private companies and therefore are not subject to the requirements of the First Amendment, there are debates over what role technology companies should play in regulating speech online. In the wake of the 2016 election, many introduced fact checking in order to address concerns about spreading misinformation. These tactics were tested during the 2020 election, especially when President Trump and others posted false claims that he had won the election. Platforms were forced to respond or not. It seemed that things were trending towards a willingness to accept more moderation in order to stop the spread of false information and other harmful content. This changed dramatically when among other developments, billionaire Elon Musk bought the social media platform, Twitter now X, and fired their whole trust and safety team.

Most recently, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that they too would be changing their policies. And on January 7th of this year, he released this message.

Mark Zuckerberg:

Hey everyone, I want to talk about something important today because it's time to get back to our roots around free expression on Facebook and Instagram. We've reached a point where it's just too many mistakes and too much censorship. The recent elections also feel like a cultural tipping point towards once again prioritizing speech. So we're going to get back to our roots and focus on reducing mistakes, simplifying our policies, and restoring free expression on our platforms.

Michelle Deutchman:

To learn more about these events and their potential impacts, we turn to John Perrino, a senior policy and advocacy expert at Internet Society. But first class notes, a look at what's making headlines.

With over 50 rapid fire executive orders issued in the first weeks of Trump's second term. I often feel like I have whiplash trying to keep track of everything that is being dismantled, especially with regard to higher education. It is not possible to recap at all. So I'll focus on the most recent developments. We're recording this on Tuesday, February 18th.

This past Friday, the United States Department of Education for Civil Rights issued a staggering Dear Colleague letter that threatens to stop federal funding to any preschool, elementary, secondary, or post-secondary educational institution or state educational agency that receives financial assistance from the

federal government that utilizes race-conscious student programming, resources, and financial aid. Schools have 14 days to comply.

The letter reads, at its core, the test is simple. If an educational institution treats a person of one race differently than it treats another person because of that person's race, the educational institution violates the law. Federal law thus prohibits covered entities from using race and decisions pertaining to admissions, hiring, promotion, compensation, financial aid, scholarships, prizes, administrative support, discipline, housing, graduation ceremonies, and all other aspects of student academic and campus life.

This interpretation letter relies on the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions V. Harvard*, which struck down affirmative action. Although the students for fair admissions case solely focused on admissions, the Trump administration believes it applies to all race-conscious spending activities and programming at colleges. This controversial interpretation and application of the decision is certain to be met with legal challenges. The Dear Colleague letter went far beyond legalese. It also boldly and I think incorrectly asserts that educational institutions are toxically indoctrinating students with the false premise that the US is built on systematic and structural racism.

It is likely that many of you have been following the National Institute of Health's explosive announcement that indirect funding for grants will be capped at 15%. Indirect costs are the money used for overhead for research-related expenses such as labs, equipment, and staff members. While the changes expected to save the government \$4 billion annually, it will have a devastating impact on university's ability to perform research, especially in the fields of healthcare and science, including life-saving biomedical research. Numerous lawsuits were filed to challenge this NIH announcement, including one by the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the American Council on Education.

The University of California submitted a declaration in support of the California attorney general's suit against the new NIH guidance. Last Monday, a federal judge in Massachusetts issued a temporary restraining order from enacting the new indirect cost rate in response to a lawsuit filed by 22 state attorneys general, the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education and the American Association of University Professors partnered to file a separate lawsuit challenging two executive orders that will withhold federal funding from institutions with diversity, equity and inclusion policies. The suit alleges that these orders are vague and overbroad as well as violate the first amendment. There will be an in-person court hearing tomorrow to address the plaintiff's motion for a temporary restraining order and/or preliminary injunction.

Not all suits are being brought by associations and attorney generals. However, the University of California Student Association filed suit against the acting secretary of education in order to halt the unlawful disclosure of personal and financial information that the Department of Efficiency has allegedly accessed. Late on Monday, February 17, a federal judge denied the plaintiff's motion for a temporary restraining order saying immediate threats did not exist. We will keep you posted on what happens next.

Now back to today's guest, John Perrino serves as a senior policy and advocacy expert at Internet Society where he analyzes US policy developments and works with partners and policymakers around the globe to advocate for an open, secure and trustworthy internet for everyone. John previously was the policy lead at the Stanford Internet Observatory working to root online trust and safety policy and research and technical reality. He's also held roles leading public affairs work on cybersecurity research and policy at the Glen Echo Group and working on internet policy as a fellow at the Internet Education Foundation. He has both bachelor's and graduate degrees from George Washington University in political communications and public administration.

John, we are so delighted to have you joining us on Speech Matters. Thank you so much.

John Perrino:

Thank you so much for having me, Michelle. Pleasure to be here. And I'm a fan of the pod.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thanks so much. There's so much happening in the world generally, and then also in the world of social media and artificial intelligence, it's a little hard to know where to begin, but I decided content moderation seems to be a pretty evergreen issue and I thought we should start there.

One recent and seemingly significant shift in the online speech landscape was Meta's announcement, which we heard at the top of the episode that they're moving from using a third-party fact-checking program to using the Community Notes model, which is also used by Elon Musk's X formerly Twitter. And I'm wondering if you could give us your thoughts on the shift and how it might affect what we see and we read online.

John Perrino:

Yeah, absolutely. I think there are two things with Meta's announcement. The first is the announcement itself and then there's the actual substance of the announcement. And the announcement itself might be what's most important. It was clearly framed in political language to appeal to a certain party and the language and the image that were used in the announcement I think are really important. This is about political messaging and they even launched the announcement, they did the media launch on Fox and Friends, so there was an intended audience here.

Now the substance of the announcement is a bit different. As you mentioned, perhaps the biggest change is cutting the fact-checking program. Now, recent polls I believe from Gallup and Pew have shown that trust in the media is very low. I mean, we're talking less than a third of Americans and so that's 10% of Republicans just don't trust broadly the media. And there's some merit to Community Notes, but we don't know how effective Community Notes are and we don't know how effective the fact-checking is. There's no real good research.

Now, other parts of the announcement really weren't updates. Recommending political content and feeds, again, not that surprising. It's return to the past. Talking about how content moderators are going to work out of Texas. The reality from what I've heard from people who used to work at Facebook and content moderation in the early days is that most of those people are already there in Texas. So it really comes down in the substance to the fact-checking. And then we kind of learned later on about some changes to the platform policy.

And when we talk about this, I think there's two higher level things to keep in mind. And the first is that people are less likely to use the internet to its full potential if they don't trust what they see online. And the second is that people are less likely to openly participate online if they don't feel safe. So that might be good segue to talk about some of the concerns that have come not with the announcement, but what we kind of learned later with it.

Michelle Deutchman:

How did you know where I was headed? I definitely think that we should talk about that. And I know certain groups like Electronic Frontier Foundation and others have expressed a lot of concerns to some of the changes to Meta's hateful conduct policy alleging that it actually may cause more harm to marginalized groups on the platform than it will benefit or protect speech. So let's hear what you think.

John Perrino:

Yeah, so when you look at the actual platform policy changes, it again reflects a lot of the political discourse that we're seeing right now in pretty concerning ways. So a line was added to the platform policy that says, "We do allow allegations of mental illness or abnormality when based on gender or sexual orientation, given political and religious discourse about transgenderism and homosexuality." That's the main line that was added into the platform policy.

Now, content moderation policy is very tricky, But I don't, you have to protect people online and I don't think there's any excuse for adding language like that, right? Let's just be blunt. That's concerning. And we don't know how that's going to be enforced. We don't really know what the change means, but it reflects a broader concern. And it's not just Meta here. Like Community Notes, this is taking a signal from a broader shift on other social media platforms. And it's also creating this divide. People feel less comfortable on certain social media outlets, so they move to others and they move to other spaces on the internet where they feel like they have more protections and the rules are more comfortable.

Companies have the power to make these decisions. They're not the government, they're not First Amendment rules. For as much as you hear in Washington DC First Amendment rules do not apply to private companies and social media platforms. Meta can make this rule change. Other social media platforms can make whatever rule changes they want within the law for their platform, but people also have the option to move and go elsewhere. Now, one of the other interesting things that's going on here is there's a lot of claims about free speech, but free speech for who? When people don't feel safe, they're going to self-censor. When there's uncertainty and you feel like you could be targeted and you give more power for other people to target a certain population, in effect, there's going to be a different kind of censorship going on.

So as much as there's talk about freedom of speech and people say that they're against censorship, it's possible that you're going to see an impacts that is not actually what they say they want here. You're going to see people self censor. We don't know that, but if people don't feel safe, they don't speak up. That's my concern here. Now the other broader thing with fact-checking is it's impossible to check every single claim. And at the end of the day, each little post and claim kind of fills into a broader narrative. And if you repeat something enough, it sticks. With all this going on, it could feed broader narratives and it could have a different kind of politics or different parts of the culture wars that are ongoing could be more prevalent for users. So we don't know yet. It's really impossible because it's been so soon, but there is reason for concern here.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, thanks for sharing that and for framing it that way. I really resonate with what you're saying about narratives and how if you repeat something enough, people might really start to believe it. And I think that in last podcast at the end of the year, we talked with Mary Anne Franks who wrote this book called Fearless Speech, and one of the things she talked about was how it really benefits social media companies to use free speech and to sort of put that guise over them to say, "Oh no, we're actually, we can't really content moderate because of the First Amendment and free speech," when in fact that's actually not true. And I think they're not unhappy that people are confused about that. So I'm really happy that you pointed that out.

I think obviously you're not the only one that is concerned about what's happening on social media, and I think one of the larger questions is what do you think are effective ways to prevent harms? And is anybody on the right or a better path forward? And I don't mean just companies in the US, I mean even globally, and I realize that's a big question, but I guess who do we look to see a possible pathway to positivity and safety online?

John Perrino:

Yeah. There's the platform policy, there's the public policy, and then there's technical measures that can be taken. And increasingly we're seeing them all. There's a lot of interplay between all these different elements. Now on actual platform design, there are some really interesting ideas. There's something that's basically called bridging algorithms, and it's an idea that's been presented by Aviv Ovadya in a Harvard report. It's concepts that's been proposed in various ways by Ravi Iyer and others who have entered academia from the social media space, from that Silicon Valley, different Silicon Valley roles. And what these bridging algorithms would do is instead of optimizing just by engagement and by a user's interests

and connecting those to similar interests, it would look for areas where there's perhaps productive disagreement or people aren't screaming at each other and they're talking about a hot button issue and seem to be listening and engaged in a conversation that's not just yelling.

Or another way of looking at it is a whole lot of dog lovers and a whole lot of cat lovers are coming around and both engaging around, I don't know, maybe a really cute penguin who's hopping around. Finding the points of agreement and finding productive conversations and positive engagement that's going on. Now, the reality is it's easier said than done. Trying to optimize beyond engagement you have to still define certain ways that you're going to like when you are going to amplify content there need to be certain points that you can define. That's just how these algorithms work, and that's the part where people won't agree. So then you see other recommendations and public policy tend to default to much simpler ideas. Those are either reverse chronological feeds, so you just see whatever the most recent post is for a page or a person who you follow.

And then we're also seeing a lot of proposals to just ban people under a certain page. These are just black or white, this or that kind of proposals. And I don't think these are particularly effective for a reverse chronological feed. It can still be gamed. It's not a neutral design decision, and this is how influencers and others, they are still going to optimize for engagement. So how do you do that? You post more often. It's really simple. And then in terms of keeping people out, I mean there's benefits to social media for most people. It's hard to define whatever that age is, but there's benefits to social media and other online social spaces for everyone. So I also don't think the answer is to just keep young people out. You have to prepare them and provide them safeguards, but keeping them out of online spaces isn't the answer.

So on the public policy side, what is the answer? I mean, that's really hard. I don't think anyone has gotten it just right. But knowing that this is an audience of academics and students, I mean, something that I've been advocating for a few years is more research and more transparency. We need to understand, the public needs to understand how these systems work and have a better understanding of how it impacts people, the users. And most of this research resides within the platforms and doesn't really come to light of day, or if it does, there have been whistleblowers. And when it does come to light, the company's claim, oh, it's been manipulated, this doesn't fully tell the story. And they might have a point, right? I mean, if you are sharing it with news outlets, the most absurd, the most fiery things are going to be the things that are highlighted.

The reality is we don't really know how these things work. We need more research, we need more transparency. And this is actually coming to fruition in public policy in the European Union under the Digital Services Act. There have been US proposals, they haven't really gone anywhere, but I'm hopeful to see a system developed for researchers to actually get data and do the research and do it in a way that preserves people's privacy. I think the reality is we need more research and we need more transparency. It doesn't solve the problem. And we're talking about a societal problem in terms of sharing false information. People have always shared false information, propaganda, from the earliest days, but we're seeing it at scale. So really 0.1 is transparency in research. And obviously we need to improve education so that people can identify these things. And then I think people do need to have more safeguards and ways to feel like they have more control and autonomy over the content that they see, the conversations that they have online.

Because there is research that says when people feel like they are in control, when they feel like they are empowered online, they have a better experience and they moderate their experience better. So it's not any one silver bullet. It really needs to be holistic approach to addressing this. But there are little areas, and I think if we start to focus more on specific things and we further develop them, then we'll start putting in more and more tools and educate more and more people and have more and more information to better understand this and have protections and empower people.

Michelle Deutchman:

It's interesting because you've emphasized more research, more transparency, and you mentioned privacy also. And it seems to me that all three of those things connect back to what you initially said, which is trust, which is that by having more data that's available to understand how the data impacts what's happening, and then making sure privacy is secured, that leads to trust which leads to a better experience. So anyway, many, many building blocks.

It seems like one of the challenges is that we're watching all this happening at scale, and yet the question becomes how does one respond at scale? So even if there isn't a silver bullet, but once you figure out a couple of the tools, it seems like one of the challenges is then how do you have a response to meet the scale of what one is responding to?

John Perrino:

Yeah, absolutely. And just this week, so we're talking, we're currently talking on February 13th and I believe on Monday there was a new open source trust and safety project announced by a non-profit, it's called Roost, R-O-O-S-T. And the whole idea is to have open source, fully transparent software that companies can use to help identify harmful content and help users navigate online. And it doesn't have specifically, this is what's harmful, this isn't harmful, but the idea is to allow more and more online spaces to be able to have scalable trust and safety tools and use AI for this type of work. So there's still work to be done, but there are initiatives to help make trust and safety tools to improve security at scale no matter if you have the resources of the largest companies or you're a smaller player in this space. So absolutely, I think it really does come down to being able to scale and improve accuracy.

Michelle Deutchman:

Great. I'm glad that you provided that example. So I want to pivot a tiny bit. I mean, we're still going to be talking about content moderation, but I want to focus on the facet of it that deals with the fraught relationship between government and social media platforms that we've seen a lot of, especially as of late, as our listeners may remember this past June, which is when the Supreme Court term wraps up the court threw out a lower court ruling that prevented the Biden administration from being in communication with social media companies about their content moderation policies, especially as it pertained to COVID-19 and mis and disinformation about vaccines and other healthcare policies. And the justices argued that there was no proof that the government had pressured social media companies into restricting speech on their platforms despite what social media companies had argued.

In the announcement that we've been referring to, at Meta CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, alluded to the case, again alleging that the Biden administration pushed for censorship. And then of course one of the numerous executive orders by President Trump was pulling on this idea, and it's called restoring freedom of speech and ending federal censorship. And that EO alleges that the government "trampled free speech rights by censoring American's speech on online platforms, often by exerting substantial coercive pressure on third parties, such as social media companies to moderate, deplatform, or otherwise suppress speech that the federal government did not approve."

I think I have two questions. One is what impact, if any, will this executive order have on social media companies and how they regulate speech? And then more generally, what thoughts you have about the appropriate role for government to play in these back and forth conversations?

John Perrino:

Yeah, so I think the good news about executive orders is that they don't apply to private companies. And I really liked this line. There's a University of Minnesota law professor Alan Rozenshtein was a really great one-liner on explaining executive orders. He says executive orders "are not magical documents, they're just press releases with nicer stationery." I think what Alan is saying is oftentimes executive orders are really about political messaging. And sure they have the force of law for federal agencies, there is some

power to them, but it's really about political messaging. And for this executive order on government and speech, it is true that the government should not be suppressing free speech. For internet companies, there's also the political signaling of don't take down certain types of content because we consider that censorship. So it's a really difficult [inaudible 00:27:08]. It doesn't have the force of law over the companies, but I'm sure your listeners are familiar with the concept of job owning or basically informal government pressure, you push the companies in a certain way.

We call it working the refs per se, where if you bug the referee enough times, then maybe they are likely to, more likely to rule in your favor, keep the speech that you like up and only apply the rules for the other content, right? I think that's the potential concern that you have here. Even though the executive order doesn't say that, and it is about, "To secure the right of the American people, to engage in constitutionally protected speech," whose speech and how is it going to be applied? That's the big question that we have with this executive order.

Michelle Deutchman:

Got it. And generally, do you have any thoughts just more generally about the role of governments or? Yeah.

John Perrino:

Something that we've seen in recent days is staff at CISA or the Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency within the Department of Homeland Security, having their jobs cut if it was perceived that they were working on election information issues. I think that the government can have a role in helping educate people about how the government works very simply. So role that the federal government took was simply explaining how election processes work and identifying prevailing narrative. And passing that on to the relevant state officials few of those issues and communicate to the public in those states.

There might be a gap if people don't trust the media, don't trust the government, how do they really understand government processes? How do they understand whether the posts that they're seeing concerned about someone's just personal experience at the polls are legitimate or not? I mean, people do experience issues at the polls and each polling location for the most part is different.

And there's unique ways that they are run based on the equipment and a whole bunch of different processes. It's incredibly complex. So there's, there's no perfect solution to this. The government role in this, we don't even know how effective it was, but we will probably lose some degree of eye-level understanding of what's being said and official government communications in these cases. And we saw something similar at the State Department. There's something called, we call it GEC in D.C. Because we love our acronyms, but it's the Global Engagement Center. It's no more within the State Department.

And what the Global Engagement Center does is they analyze and can engage in foreign, false or misleading narratives essentially from outside of the United States. And we do probably want to have an understanding of how other countries are trying to manipulate or push certain propaganda narratives. And the group that was doing that work, you don't know how effective it was, and I think it's fair to kind of poke some holes in it, but now there might be nobody doing that work. So those are the types of gaps that you might see. There was less trust in government in the first part. There's always government inefficiencies, but now that kind of work just isn't there in the United States.

Michelle Deutchman:

So now we're having to deal with gaps. Okay, big sigh. Part of me feels like I really wanted to get through a whole episode without mentioning TikTok, but it seems like that is not going to be possible. So let's talk about TikTok and whether it's banned or not banned by the US government. We've been covering our case, John, in our class notes, but I think I'm just going to run through a quick refresher for our listeners about what's happened and then where we stand and then ask you to kind of opine on it. So for a review,

last April, the US House and Senate passed and President Biden signed a law requiring the sale of TikTok, a Chinese-owned social media app to the US company. Congress considered TikTok a threat to national security and worried about the ability of the Chinese government to access data about American citizens. The legislation required that the company be sold within a year or face being shut down.

TikTok filed a lawsuit in response claiming that the courts should intervene to strike down the law because here it comes, it violates the First Amendment rights of TikTok's more than 170 million American users. This case wound its way, of course, through the court system. And last month, the US Supreme Court unanimously, which is unusual, voted to uphold the law, meaning the court disagreed with TikTok's allegations that the ban violates the First Amendment. So the ban is set to take place. People are videoing their sad swan songs to TikTok. It's January 19th, 2025. The app goes dark in the US, it's removed from app stores and then, poof 12 hours later, videos are live again on the app. Users were welcomed with the new message that says, "Thanks for your patience and support. As a result of President Trump's efforts, TikTok is back in the US."

Since taking office, president Trump has signed an executive order, pausing enforcement of the ban for 75 days and suspending liability from tech companies that do business with the app. You, John, have argued that banning one app won't solve larger online speech issues. And so I want to ask you to talk about what steps you believe the government should be taking to address common and systemic problems including national security issues or the spread of child sexual abuse material or CSAM, hopefully I'm saying that right.

John Perrino:

Yeah, so it's been quite a saga for TikTok as you just laid out. And I've argued with my colleague Natalie Campbell at the Internet Society. I've argued that a TikTok ban would threaten the security and in some cases the livelihood of millions of Americans and have global consequences. So on global consequences, it's a tit-for-tat situation where if the US is blocking an app, then why wouldn't Europe block? They could block American apps, and it kind of sets a bad precedent. Of course, China already has a completely different version of TikTok, and it was banned in [inaudible 00:34:23]. It was already banned in India. But in America, we have a vision of an open global internet, and this contributes to splintering that. And a lot of people rely on TikTok for income and a place to be creative. So the main point is it's not just about TikTok and going app by app creates a whack-a-mole situation.

So what do you do instead? Well, we're talking about privacy and security concerns. So in a logical world, we might have a national privacy law and we might take additional security measures, but there's always holdups, and it's an incredibly complicated politically thorny issue in Washington DC with a whole bunch of different competing camps when you get to a national privacy law. So that hasn't happened yet. The other thing you can do is if you know there are certain security issues, particularly around people's data, and the government seems to say, "Yes, we know certain things that are happening. There's been private research that's shown this. We also know that certain reporters have had their data used in inappropriate ways to track them." There should be some transparency around them.

The thing is, it's not just TikTok doing, most social media platforms are collecting data in an identical way to TikTok, and unfortunately, there are other social media companies and other companies in the tech ecosystem who have also used journalist data for tracking and inappropriately accessed, say, an ex-boyfriend or an ex-girlfriend's information. It's unfortunately not that uncommon, this stuff happens. So we need more transparency and we need more rules around that. It can't be a whack-a-mole approach of TikTok ban, but then we don't address these issues at every other platform out there.

Michelle Deutchman:

Sounds like you need to be elected to office so you can create this privacy law. So I could keep asking lots of questions, but I want to make sure we have some time in our conversation to focus a little bit on

higher education and sort of the intersection of these issues with higher ed. And I guess one of my questions for you, and I don't know if you have the answers, we've talked a lot about content moderation and some of the harms and some of the issues and concerns that have come up and the siloing and the bubbles and the algorithms, and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how that might translate to in real life conversations and dialogue?

John Perrino:

So something that we talk a lot about at the internet society is the importance of encryption for everyone so that people can have open conversations, private conversations because I think there is a growing concern about some, particularly Democrats in the United States, they feel less safe. And if people feel less safe, whether or not that's true, you need to give them a safe platform to have certain conversations to talk freely, whether that's about their healthcare, whether that's about just how they are feeling, because some people are feeling very stressed. Probably half of America now is incredibly stressed and half of America now is excited about this incredibly rapid chaotic change.

So people need to have a secure, trustworthy space to just talk about it with friends. So yes, in real life. And then also probably on our phones where we're using our two thumbs for most of our conversations, people need a safe space to do that. Because if not, then in real life we might whisper or we might not quite express how we feel. So it goes back to this concern about, by and large, self-censorship when there's so much talk about free speech and anti-censorship. So in order to feel comfortable, to openly participate online and in real life, again, people need to feel safe and secure.

Michelle Deutchman:

And I think that's an amazing point. And of course, there's a lot of studies and conversations about how much self-censorship there is in the classroom right now, not just on the part of faculty, but on the part of students, which I guess is a lead up to what I also want to ask you, which is there's a lot of folks from the higher ed world who are listeners and they are part of what makes life happen inside and outside the classroom at colleges and universities. And I'm wondering what you say to some of them, but in particular to people who are in the classroom, well, really anybody I guess in higher ed who's charged with educating students who are likely not just using, but relying on social media and AI in their day-to-day academic and personal lives.

I guess if you had to give them some things to keep in mind in this moment, what might those be?

John Perrino:

Yeah, so first, even when there's a lot less going on in the world, there's a lot going on for students and stress is only natural. You have to expect it, right? Students are not only in the classroom, a lot of them are also working jobs. They might be on their own for the first time or responsible for making their ends meet for the first time. They might've taken on additional responsibility for caring for family members. There's a lot of stress. So what do you do when you have a lot of stress? You probably look for an escape outlet, and increasingly that's your phone or your laptops probably open up most of the day in the classroom or schoolwork, in the library, on the job. So a lot of people go to websites, social media, whatever their escape outlet is, and it also helps them stay connected to friends and family, especially if they're away from them. But it's also natural to struggle with moderation. And I think that's where a lot of the issues come down to. That's what we talk about a lot.

The reason that there's a moderation issue, I call it compulsive usage. Typically, we talk about addiction, but it has a certain medical meaning. So I talk about compulsive usage, and that's a lot of the times what we're trying to guard against. So how do you do that? I mean, the real simple answer is to set aside time to put your phone down, to close your laptop. That's not always possible. So what are other things you can do? People need friends, family, someone who they trust and can go to talk about what they're

experiencing online because as we've already said, there's very little boundary between online and in real life right now. People need someone who they can go to and talk to. It's not just about the technology, it's about these broader things that are going on.

And then on the technical side, there are often ways to find new settings. Personally, I set my phone to go to grayscale and turn off notifications at a certain hour before I go to sleep because I also struggle with always checking my phone, especially someone who works in politics, policy, public affairs, I totally get it too. My phone is always there. My wife has to yell at me about that too. So we all struggle with it. There are some technical solutions. There are some real basic things we should all try and do. The other side of this in the classroom is obviously people are using this for their classwork, for writing assignments. And I remember when I was a student, the big thing was never cite Wikipedia.

And it's not really, don't use Wikipedia. Wikipedia can be a great source with great summaries, but at the end of the day, you need to click through and go to those links and those citations. In a lot of ways, it's the same with AI. Yes, you can get a nice summary, a quick answer. It can help you move on behind beyond the blank page problem that we all have in our writing. And you can use ChatGPT to kind of generate some text and get you going, but it needs to be your own work. You need to double check sources, you need to click through, you need to do that direct research.

And I think the other thing that professors and TAs can do is have really clear guidelines. People are probably going to use AI in the classroom, and I think a lot of class materials now do have guidelines about using AI. Really important to just be transparent. I think it's probably easier to say you can use it, but if you use it, you need to tell me how. And please double check your sources if you're a student. And if you're a professor, if you're a TA, encourage people to click through and be transparent about how they use AI in their school products.

Michelle Deutchman:

That was such a terrific answer. You even answered one of the other questions I was going to ask you, which is what everyone can do small, actionable steps. And since you already answered that, I think I'd like to end with sort of a going up and looking down from the, is it the 30,000-foot view and talk a little bit about democracy, right?

Right now, there's so much discussion, especially from the legal perspective about what many are referring to as a constitutional coup. We're seeing what many, I know, argue is a decline of our democracy. So I guess I want to ask you to talk about why you think social media either is or is not, or both valuable to our democracy, especially in this moment.

John Perrino:

I think online spaces are incredibly valuable for democracy and empowering people no matter where you are. I mean, working at a global nonprofit, we help connect people to the internet in all different parts of the world. And we often forget that there are so many people who don't have an internet connection or maybe are relying on something that's unaffordable on their phone. And something I've heard is that for a lot of these people who get newly connected, it's a source of income. They can start selling or start a business and reach a global audience to a certain degree. They can stay connected with family, they can get the information that they need to expand their education, to improve efficiency for their business, right? The internet can do amazing things, and the internet should be for everyone. And I think most importantly for this conversation, it's about having a space to openly participate online in ways that we never would've been able to just in real life.

And it provides a space for people to get news and information. It provides a space for people to have conversations when there's a whole lot of things going on in the world around them. And then inevitably, there's really a lot of awful things in the world too, and that can also be reflected. And sometimes oftentimes the news is not happy. So all these things in our real life are reflected on the internet. They're

reflected in the social spaces, and I think there's a lot of good, and then there's a certain point where you need to say, this is not making me feel better. This is not making me happy, and maybe I need to take a step back. Maybe I need to change the feed I'm using and go to this one that's just dogs.

I think personally that exposes my bias. I am a dog fan. I will take that controversial position on this show, but that kind of empowerment, that potential is really important to really make these social media spaces and other online spaces valuable to people. But then again, kind of going to this even larger level, yes, having an internet access expands power and opportunity, but we also need to find ways to stay safe and secure and take care of ourselves and not go down rabbit holes.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, that's certainly a good way to end so many rabbit holes to go down right now. Is there anything else you want to add before we officially close? And I'll just note, I'm also in the dog camp, and I'll go even more controversial and say, I'm black licorice, not red licorice.

John Perrino:

Oh, I see. I won't-

Michelle Deutchman:

No.

John Perrino:

I won't quite go there, Michelle, but I respect your bravery and leadership. The thing is I'd want to lead listeners with is it's really important to feel like you have a place where you can express yourself online. And in order to do that, you need to feel secure. It's both technically and your perception of feeling secure. And it's also about your own perception of trust online. And a lot of these problems that we discuss on the internet stem from societal problems. So all the work that people do to improve the lives of the most marginalized communities is incredibly important.

And for marginalized communities, there's really great research out of Common Sense Media [inaudible 00:48:13] and it's called double-edged sword, and it's about how for the most marginalized people, social media can have the most benefit and it can have the most drawbacks. I think that's really important to consider. There are always huge benefits and opportunities, connection, connection with your community, and there are challenges with it. So it's about finding that moderation and it's about making sure that people feel like they can openly participate and have open conversations both in real life and online.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thank you so much for taking time to join us, John.

John Perrino:

Thank you so much, Michelle.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's a wrap. Thanks so much to John Perrino for joining us. Next month we have the privilege of speaking with Josiah Beharry, UC student regent and Sonya Brooks, UC student regent-designee about the challenges and opportunities that come with representing the student body on the UC Board of Regents.

Talk to you next time.

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