[MUSIC PLAYING]

CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the Career and Academic Research Center Podcast. I am Chris Davis, your host, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center. And today, it is my great pleasure to have Mo Lotman, who is-- I hope I'm going to get this right-- the editor-in-chief of the Technoskeptic.

MO LOTMAN: Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: Is that correct? Yes. And Mo has actually come to speak in person to our students a couple of times for the Career and Academic Research Center in this summer and the January session. And I thought it would be a nice treat to do a little podcast version of some of those talks.

So we're going to talk about a few things. Mo's perspective is a little different on technology in terms of I think what some of the received wisdom is on the benefits of technology, its impact on us as consumers of it in society, in interpersonal relationships, and a whole bunch of other areas. And I'm eager to hear his thoughts on that. So this is going to be a wide-ranging conversation. So first of all, Mo, thank you so much for being here today.

MO LOTMAN: Thanks for having me, Chris. I like how you put that-- the received wisdom.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah.

MO LOTMAN: I just like that phrase. Because it implies this just a passiveness, I guess. And maybe that's part of the problem. Maybe we should be querying the wisdom before we're receiving it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Tell us a little bit about the Technoskeptic, your role. How I believe you were the founder of--

MO LOTMAN: I am the founder, yeah. Well, I started the magazine back in 2014-15. It grew slowly. It was a pretty small effort at the beginning. And then we had a public launch in 2016. We launched our print edition in 2018. And we ran that for a year. It's on hiatus at the moment. I would love to bring it back, but that's-- unfortunately, it's difficult in this environment to get funding for nonprofits doing alternative journalism of any kind.

Especially if it's something that's maybe not the most popular topic. Although I certainly think it's become more popular in the past few years, and I'm gratified to see that. I'm gratified to see that the rest of the world is catching up to some of the stuff that I was talking about and we were talking about a few years back before it became-- even before the Facebook stuff was happening.

It's a challenge. Because obviously, technologies are embedded in our lives in millions of ways. And of course, one has to be careful about what do we even mean when we're saying technology. I mean, I guess in this conversation, perhaps we're talking about digital technology. But obviously, this table is a technology. My glasses are a technology. So it's a complicated subject, and it's not one that yields easily to incisive analysis. It can become extremely complicated. And I think that's one of the reasons why we have such difficulty wrestling with it.

I think one of the problems with social media that I see is something that I don't hear talked about a lot, which is the problem of the conflation of two different historically divided types of media that have merged into one. So we have the, what you would call, I guess, mass media or broadcast media on the one hand, and then you have peer-to-peer communication on the other. And these have been historically completely separate. I mean, for all of history, you had peer-to-peer communication-- someone talking to someone else.

In a more technological sense, you had peer-to-peer communication over the telephone. Or by a letter. Mass media and broadcast media are really artifacts of the 20th century, mostly. I guess you could say books. If you want to count books as mass media, then we can go back to the 1500s. But most people didn't have books in the 1500s either, so.

By the time most people are having access to books and newspapers-- and I mean, it's really been only a few years. So it's incredibly recent. And even when you see that divide between mass media and peer to peer, there's a completely different sense of the purpose for it, the relationship people have towards it. And all that's been scrambled by social media. And I think this is part of the reason people are really having a hard time wrestling with it. People want it to be all of both-- they want to it to be a public facing diary. They want it to be completely free and they should be able to say anything they want. But they also want completely uncensored access to billions of strangers.

CHRIS DAVIS: What struck me in your talk a couple of years ago was you cited a study in 1990. And pulling back a little bit and looking at internet usage, I mean, before the smartphone era.

MO LOTMAN: Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: There was a 1998 study that you cited that looked at one year of internet use--

MO LOTMAN: Oh, right.

CHRIS DAVIS: And how it impacted people.

MO LOTMAN: That's right.

CHRIS DAVIS: And that was at the early end of widespread internet usage. And then you cited a 2010 study that looked at frequent internet users and their thoughts on their connection with peers, family, their social lives. So looking at the dawn of the internet age and 20, 25 years later, can you talk a little bit about that? And what do you think that says about what the internet has impacted communities or certain level of social fabric.

MO LOTMAN: Yeah, I'll try. I mean, I think the original study that you're talking about, and it's been a while since I've given that talk, so I don't have all the figures at my fingertips. But it was new internet users, as I recall. So it was people that had never been online before. Which is really interesting, because you can't really do that study anymore, at least not in America.

So that's what's so interesting about that study, is people had never been online before. And now they're online, and what happens? And I think what happened was their relationship suffered. All of their familial ties suffered, the number of confidants declined. Things of that nature. And I mean, this has been also documented. And I think Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is a famous work about this sort of phenomenon. Not just related only to the internet. But a decline over time of relations among peers, neighbors, families, groups associations, things like that. In person social groups.

And what's happened in the year since is we've seen an incredible rise in depression and anxiety. I mean, now to be fair, we can't say, oh, yes, this is because of the internet. We really can't identify one specific cause for all of those problems. But taken as a whole, it certainly doesn't appear as though the internet's been helping anybody, let's put it that way. There are people that have been doing pretty in-depth research into the internet use. I'm not a researcher myself. I'm a researcher of research rather than a first person researcher in general. I do some of my own research, but it's more of the anecdotal type.

But Jean Twenge is one that's done from San Diego State, I believe, who's done a lot of research. I think she wrote a piece that was in The Atlantic about teen use of smartphones and how it impacted their relationships. And it was a really amazing piece, and it's very in-depth. And I think at the end, she really hammers it home. In the end, every single type of screen activity was associated with worse outcomes with these teens. And every off screen activity was associated with better outcomes.

I mean, there was just no way to really be confused about the results. And it's a shame that even with that type of research-- and it's a shame that we need the research either, because it seems frankly, rather self-evident. But even with that research, that people still refuse to take screens away from children, the parents can't do it. And I think that's just attests to how deeply addicted people are. And not just kids. I mean, parents are addicted. Because the kids are modeling their behavior to some degree off their parents.

And I see that behavior all the time just walking down the street. You see parents ignoring their children, interrupting them because there's a call that's come through or whatnot, or they're talking on their phone while they're pushing their baby carriage. And these are moments that would be parental child bonding moments. Not to say that every single moment obviously is not going to be-- I'm not so foolish as to think that a parent is going to have 24/7 pure attention on their child, nor should they.

But there is something disturbing about the fact that so easily parents are handing over their attention to these devices.

CHRIS DAVIS: So last quick question. I wanted to get your thoughts on the Internet of Things.

MO LOTMAN: Oh god.

[LAUGHS]

CHRIS DAVIS: Talking about another area that's rife with abuse.

MO LOTMAN: Yeah, you got another hour? Did you have a specific question, or are you just--

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, what are your thoughts? What are your thoughts on it?

MO LOTMAN: I mean the Internet of Things is-- I guess what the Internet of Things represents is-- I think the Internet of Things is just a great example of corporations purposefully trying to create demand for something that's completely unnecessary in order to essentially--

CHRIS DAVIS: Sell products?

MO LOTMAN: Well, it's actually more complicated than that. Because they're not really trying to sell the product. They're trying to gather data that they can then aggregate and sell to other people. I mean, if you are familiar with Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* which I highly recommend everyone listening to this read, even though it's 600 pages long.

The entire Internet of Things is-- it's a scam. I mean, it is so preposterous that I just can't believe the number of people that are swindled into this idea that they need their refrigerator to talk to them or they need their light switch to be turned on when they're not at home or they need-- no. I mean, the only reason someone wants to sell that to you is so that they can collect data about what you're eating, where you're going, what your electric use is. Where you are, who you know, what your risk is. And all these pieces of information.

And a lot of times, probably people don't even know what they're going to use the information for yet. But they're all just added to your profile. They're all just added to create a complete picture of everything about your behavior. And that picture, it's not just you, obviously. It's amalgamating your behavior with others so that there are incredible data sets that can predict and control and elicit behaviors to create profit for particular companies. That is what the Internet of Things is. If you think anything else, I beg of you to read Shoshana Zuboff's book.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, Mo, I want to say thank you so much. This was a very interesting conversation.

MO LOTMAN: Thank you, Chris. Yes, it was. I appreciate the opportunity.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah, thank you so much. Very eye opening. A lot of things to think about.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

You have listened to the CARC Podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.