JOE MCGONEGAL:	This is the *MIT Alumni Books* podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, writer for the MIT Alumni Association.
	If you made a word cloud out of Judith Donath's new book, *The Social Machine,* the word "balance" might appear more frequently than any other. Donath, who like many of us has watched her share of cat videos and flamed her share of newbies in chat rooms, thinks about the notion of balance in the digital world a lot. Balance between identity and anonymity, between text and graphic, and between connection and isolation.
	While many debate exactly who invented the internet, Donath seem seems concerned with whether it was worth inventing to begin with and, possibly, who will reinvent it. *The Social Machine,* published by MIT Press in May, is a book for those who may want to do so. But it's also for those who inhabit those designed digital spaces. Donath, who earned your master's and PhD at MIT in 1986 and 1997, is a faculty fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Judith Donath, what prompted you to write this book now?
JUDITH DONATH:	The time was ready for it and also I had left MIT. I had this legacy of ideas and work and felt that there were a lot of themes and ideas that I needed to put together into a coherent space where the relationships among them would show.
MCGONEGAL:	The first few chapters seem, at least, like a chronicle of your work at the Media Lab over the years.
DONATH:	It is a mix between projects that I had done with my students, partly because some of the ideas that we explore really haven't been looked into. There weren't other examples. But also because I felt, as you said, I'm very interested in balance. And knowing I could look at these works and know what it is we have tried to achieve.
	So it's not such a chronicle of here are all of our accomplishments but it's also a way of showing these were the big ideas we were trying to get at here. And as with many demos but even real products, I think it's important for people to see where the goal and the actual created objects differ because the technologies are still not there for a lot of the things we want to do.
	So I think it was also a way of helping people who see technologies as we see with them. They see them as end products but they're really always a process. And part of what I'm hoping to

accomplish with the book is getting people to understand that they can critique the technologies they deal with on an everyday basis. Like you say, you know, this is what I would like to have as opposed to what I've been given.

MCGONEGAL: You seem to be setting out models for how to think about this stuff for the ordinary user in behaving online.

DONATH: Right. And part of it is that the technology has changed so fast. It's very hard for people to always understand what's possible. Where were just the blind decisions made that are somewhat arbitrary versus the ones that were really necessary.

A couple of times I've been a critic for architecture classes at Harvard and I'm not an architect but I, or most other people, can walk into a crit like that and be able to look at a student's work and have something useful to say because we all understand what a house does and what it's supposed to do. And you can look at them and say wow, that seems really cool and innovative. Or there's really practical problems with this.

Is harder with online designs because people don't even have a way always of articulating what they want. Or until a technology is there-- Until Facebook existed, for a lot of people, they would never have thought that they wanted that technology but now that it exists, it's really useful for them.

But they don't have the experience to say, well, what does it not do that I wish it would do? And that's some of the ideas I'm hoping to prompt in people to say, you know, these are the ways I would like to be handling privacy. Or I can ask more clearly about how I'm represented online or other people are? Or what do I want to do with all the past conversations that I've had?

MCGONEGAL: It seems like you have some concerns about us taking connection for granted and the idea of being connected.

DONATH: Well I think we have to look at both the changes in technology and the changes in our society as a whole. The computer is helping us connect more easily to other people. 20 years ago the idea that you could be a part of a massive conversation with hundreds of people, some interesting topic where the participants were all over the globe, was completely fanciful. And today it's commonplace. On the other hand, we can also say that the technologies are making our connections less necessary and in some ways loosening the bonds that held us together.

One example is if you look at something like Google. I just came back from a trip with my kids to Europe. And I was able to plan this whole trip by myself. I didn't really ask anyone I knew for a lot of advice. I was able to search online for what the train schedules were, what cities was it really feasible to go between. I read the reviews of strangers on TripAdvisor.

But I put together what turned out to be a perfectly fun trip but I didn't have to call all of my friends who never travel. I didn't need to go around asking people, I didn't have to call a travel agent. And so the fact that we can Google a lot of information now means that even in a realm of basic knowledge, let alone all the other things that move to a market, we have less need to contact other people.

So we both have, somewhat paradoxically, more ability to connect with other people and fewer and fewer reasons to do so.

MCGONEGAL: What got in the way of writing this book? It's a beautiful book in terms of a lot of the depictions of the digital world into a print medium. Was that difficult?

DONATH: Well I'd always seen it as a very visual book so as I was writing it, it was written with the final form in mind. So it was written with the sidebars and the conversations within conversations that it has. I had collected a lot of images. It's really getting image permissions, and everything was a bit more work than I had recognized.

Probably the thing that most got in the way of writing it is that there are all of those cat videos. It's an endless world of distraction and almost an infinite set of relevant information. And when your research is online technology, it's very easy to say, well I have to be online all of the time, I have to see what's going on all of the time.

So there's certainly a lot of ability to distract myself along the way from the writers of [INAUDIBLE] which at some point comes into unplugging everything and locking yourself in a room and saying you're not leaving this room, or looking at anything, or getting on email, or looking at another cat video until this chapter has been revised and finished.

MCGONEGAL: The cutoff date in the publishing world is a frustration for many writers who are writing about current stuff. You have six months or nine months in a window.

DONATH: I'm hoping that this book is something that people will read for a long time. And so I actually try not to use very many very contemporary technologies. There's a couple of chapters where I

talk a lot about Usenet, which, you know, was a very thriving technology of the '80s and early '90s because I'm hoping that there's bigger lessons I can draw from a technology that is of the past.

And I write about in the past, you can be reading it in 15 years and it will still be in the past. Whereas it's hard to have that kind of perspective on contemporary technology. I hope it isn't that recognizable as a book of 2014 in five years.

MCGONEGAL: You seem to get argumentative towards the end of the book, by chapter 11. How would you rewrite those chapters in light of what's happened in the past year in terms of data and personal privacy? How has your thinking about that changed?

DONATH: Yeah, I don't think it's changed that much because what I had been writing about there included the idea that there is government surveillance. What I wanted to clarify in that chapter is that, well one of the things, is that there's a lot of different eyes looking at us. And there's governmental eyes, there are the eyes of hackers, there are the eyes of advertisers, and there's the eyes of all their people.

And there are privacy concerns with all of these. And I don't think the revelations are that different. I think what's happened with the NSA is shocking but not surprising. And I had written that chapter a couple of years ago but with the assumption that there was massive government spying, at least potentially.

And I think that the privacy issues we have with other people are the ones that are really acute with social media. How do we want to be perceived by our neighbors, by our friends, how do we want to maintain control over our online identity?

And that's a somewhat different issue than a very, very powerful government that can look at not just your social communications but your health records, your work records, all kinds of things that have nothing to do with your use of social media. I think the stuff that the NSA may be looking at with individuals in the United States has very little to do with, you know, are you on Facebook or not. You're not suddenly exempt from being spied on because you're not on Facebook. We've had government spying scandals long before we had email.

MCGONEGAL: I'm just thinking of in the past month, the Facebook experiments, news of the Facebook experiments coming out and manipulating us on our walls. Constant growing pains for social media, it seems.

DONATH: For me, I mean a lot of the controversy is a research environment issue over the use of IRVs or not using IRVs and what is proper research protocol. I think for users of Facebook, that's not a key issue. But what it did was highlight for people how manipulated the news feed is.

And there it's a bigger issue than that particular experiment because our mental model of how we communicate socially, there's very important cues about whether people respond to you or what you expect people know of when you've written something to them. And there's very little transparency in Facebook about whether your message got delivered or not. And it might have gotten delivered to some people or not to others, or maybe only after 10 people liked it did the other 80% of your friends see it. It's completely unclear to people who has the ability to see what they've written or not.

So it's not like even being a writer where you want to have something published. You can't guarantee that *The New Yorker* will publish you, but you'd know if they did or they didn't. Here you're just in this grey limbo. You see it on your feed, but does anyone else?

And I think that is the issue here. To what extent is your words meant to be about social exchange and the issues of what's your learning experience if people stop listening to you because you're boring. Or should you be packaged up as a form of entertainment to keep people interested in this service. And there's a real tension there.

MCGONEGAL: You seem to long for those Usenet groups when, back in the 1990s, when you could just see who was online, which you can't even do with some of the social media today. And I think of using real time analytics, being able to see who is on my website at any given time. Why can't we turn that around, or flip that upside down, or flip that inside out for the user?

DONATH: I mean that notion of it being flipped is that, and I think that's where the sense of there's privacy issues there also, is that it's that a strong sense that a lot of the interfaces and information that are gathered online are used almost entirely for advertising in particular. Google Analytics is meant to help you get advertising and aim that in the right direction but that's information that is socially very interesting to people in the development of an audience and how you can maintain your sense of self in that space. Knowing those audience issues is really important. So part of the book is a manifesto for there to be more information provided to, in an interesting way, to people that's the social information that they have generated.

MCGONEGAL: What else are people writing in this space that's exciting you right now, either at MIT or

elsewhere?

DONATH: There's a tremendous amount of interesting writing coming out. Well certainly the privacy issues are galvanizing a lot of writing. There's so many things that are happening today that hit upon this, it's hard to limit it.

For instance, even Technology Review this month is about an article on lifelogging. That's a fascinating, related piece to look at that question of how you want to represent the past. Some of the interfaces I write about in this book deal with how do you deal with all of your past email? And in the article on lifelogging, they quote Gordon Bell saying, well I use this to figure out, was I really at that meeting? Or when did this happen?

And that's one of the arguments that I make. That most of the things we really want in the past really aren't to get those facts. We want to see patterns. So that's another dimension where we can be looking at data and pattern.

There's all the work in big data but there's still very little thinking about the social purpose of that. And again, I think a lot of that has to do with people looking for specific answers to questions as opposed to large picture.

I think some of what's exciting, too, to see are things like the lively commentary in *The New York Times.* For me, the experience of reading a newspaper has been quite transformed by seeing the comments and how other people read these stories.

I think there's other things they could do with the interface to it, but, for now, I'm very happy simply to see the existence of things like that. I think there's a lot more space for that type of looking at information as the foundation for discussion.

MCGONEGAL: What about your MIT education? How is it being put to good use in this book?

DONATH: I came to MIT as a programmer but I became a much, much better programmer and engineer and designer at MIT. And the early days of web, one of the reasons it spread so quickly was that it's very easy to just see a page you like, copy it, and then start your own from that.

And so I think the biggest part of my MIT education was that development of thinking of all the things you can make yourself. And I hope that that returns to our online spaces. A lot of the places you see online now, you can certainly add content. You can add photography, you can add art. So there's, I think, a lot of realms for people who are very expressive that one way but

I'd like to see the magic of programming start to spread.

MCGONEGAL: And what are you reading for pleasure right now?

DONATH: I have such piles of books. Actually, oddly enough, what I'm reading now is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* which I had never read before. But it's a fascinating stream of consciousness of the inner lives of all these people in post-World War I London. I guess the connection with this book would be that it shows the fascination we have in the minutia of other people's lives, of just understanding what makes another person who they are.

MCGONEGAL: Judith Donath's new book, *The Social Machine,* is now available online or at your favorite local bookstore. Judith Donath, thanks for talking with me.

DONATH: Thank you very much for having me.