Spoke Media.

ALIA: There are people in the world who read terms and conditions. Who research furiously and know exactly what technology is doing to them all the time. I am not one of those people. But luckily, through the magic of podcasting, I've gotten to know one of those people. I may not be a model consumer, but I am a smart consumer, and recently I had a question. And I started it the way I guess I always do.

ALIA: So Bob, what's blockchain? Like really what is it?

ALIA: So Bob, like, when can Alexa hear me? Like is it all the time?

ALIA: So Bob, how do I actually have a safe password?

SPEAKER: So Bob, where does the data from my health apps and fitness bracelets actually go?

SPEAKER: So Bob, how private is private browsing?

SPEAKER: So Bob, if I ever delete my social media pages, where does my information go?

SPEAKER: So Bob, why do people put like little stickers over their cameras?

[Layered voices saying, So Bob, So Bob, Bob, Bob]

ALIA: So Bob, what are we doing here?

BOB: Okay so literally, I look ridiculous—I have one earbud in one of my ears, I have a full set of headphones on the other ear, I'm plugged into the computer that's in front of me in three different ways, trying to record something quietly with you, praying that the birds outside my window don't start chirping again. That's actually what I'm doing right now.

ALIA: Bob, why do you have two sets of headphones on your face right now?

BOB: Because technology makes things so much easier, that's why.

ALIA: Does it though? Because the image I have right now is like, you're just on the verge of choking yourself because you have so many wires wrapped around your head. Where's Rusty in all of this?

BOB: He's locked in his bedroom, the poor guy, wondering why he's not here, and eventually he's going to start barking and ruin everything that we're trying to do.

ALIA: Okay, so that's the literal version. But what are we actually doing here?

BOB: What we're trying to do is to take all of these nightmare-ish headaches, frustrations, blood-pressure-inducing experiences that we have with technology, and make sense out of them, and hopefully make them just a little less stressful. Technology is great. It does all of these wonderful things for us, but it also creates all of these frustrations. It lets us down in so many ways. And I want to talk about why, and maybe we can talk about how to fix it.

ALIA: This is "So, Bob," a weekly conversation about the frustrating, creepy, confusing digital stuff that might be ripping you off and you're not dumb for wondering about,

BOB: No, you're not dumb. Modern life is full of all these tricks and traps and other kinds of contraptions that conspire against you.

ALIA: Let's introduce ourselves.

BOB: I'm Bob Sullivan, and I'm a technology journalist. I write about all the little things that add up to mean a lot to people.

ALIA: I'm Alia Tavakolian, a civilian podcaster, a millennial and Iranian American who uses technology every day, but hasn't really thought about how it directly affects my digital life until I met Bob Sullivan.

BOB: And so we're going to try to answer your questions, Alia, and hopefully we'll be answering the questions that the listeners have about these things.

ALIA: We're going to ask and answer all the questions, Bob. At least we're going to try.

[AD BREAK]

ALIA: Bob, I'm so stressed by technology, like, most days. Like mostly I love it, but most days I'm just so stressed and frustrated by some aspect of it. So yeah, that's what we're here to do, we're here to like, talk about the stressful, frustrating, creepy, sometimes obtuse stuff, and we're here to like, illuminate a little bit of it for you.

BOB: Some of it's funny, right, and we've all had that experience of trying to print something out before a meeting that you're late to, and then the paper jams, and then you try to look at it on your phone and your phone battery dies, and the wifi doesn't work, at like every presentation you've ever had, and that's funny. It's almost as if the tech knows you're under pressure and it lets you down, right, on purpose, like Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown. I mean, that's what technology does to us. And that's cute and funny, except you know, put all those experiences in a big ball, over a lifetime, and I think it's adding to stress, heart attacks, family strife...And then add to that the creepy part. The part where companies use all of this against

us, and you just have this feeling, this sensation of being out of control and spinning more and more out of control all the time. So that's what I'm worried about, and I think it's really important to talk about it.

ALIA: I just want to better understand the effects that this technology that I use all the time that's essentially running my life, like, has on me.

BOB: It's really important, and technology is always disruptive. It's been disruptive since the beginning of humanity, and so, you know, our time isn't necessarily special. Except for this. It took about a hundred years between the invention of the car, and from when about half the population in the United States had a car. So that's a hundred years. Cars changed everything about life, but you had a hundred years to kind of assimilate those changes. It took less than a decade from the invention of the iPhone until the point where about half of Americans had a smartphone. So that rate of change is happening so much faster now, and we have in no way developed all of the social morays and the laws and just the, the human touch to adjust to all of this. Change is happening so rapidly that we don't have time to think about it.

ALIA: So, why us, Bob? Like, why are we talking about this.

BOB: Well, you and I are talking about it because we spent the last 18 months researching history's biggest hacks.

ALIA: Yeah, we cohosted this podcast called Breach together, and we dived into the dark, scary, wild world of data breaches.

Bob: I've been writing about this and reporting about this and ranting about this for about 20 years. I started out right when Windows '95 started out, so I've been doing this long enough to have lost all credibility with people who are under the Venmo line. Uh, and you're the one with all the good questions. You're the one who keeps me grounded in all of these topics.

ALIA: I think we're the people to do this because we're this kind of odd couple, right. Most people wouldn't expect you and I to be friends, um, but we are. And you've been doing this for 20 years, I've been doing this for 20 months, you know, talking about breaches and data and technology, and it's become an obsession of mine. And it's been an obsession of yours, and so together we're teaming up to ask all of our biggest tech questions and go out and find the answers. And we're not doing it alone, because we have our fabulous producer, Kelly, who's actually in the booth with me right now.

KELLY: Hi, I'm Kelly, and I am way under the Venmo line.

BOB: I'm going to make myself sad now and say that the phrase, "under the Venmo line," is already over the Venmo line.

BOB: You know, you think about hacks and all this drama and crime and all that, but technology is changing our lives in all of these far more subtle ways that I think we don't think about nearly enough.

ALIA: Yeah. I found that I had so many questions for you Bob, serious questions about how I can better live my digital life, or how I can just be a little bit smarter about things in this digital age.

BOB: I mean, I think our lives are ruled by gadgets right now. And the right way to do that is for us to rule our gadgets. But you have to really focus on that. And in order to learn how to master these devices, you have to understand first what they're doing to you.

ALIA: So Bob, I've been pestering you with all of these questions for the last year, but this is perhaps the biggest question of them all, and I think it's an important place for us to begin. Is the Internet good or bad?

BOB: You're uh, really swinging for the fences with that one.
ALIA: I mean yeah, let's start with the biggest of questions, right? Good versus evil, Bob. Go big or go home!

Kelly: Okay okay okay, so, let's call up a scoreboard. Good versus bad. Alia, how are you—like, what are you feeling right now?

ALIA: I mean, lately, to be honest, I've been kind of feeling like it's bad. There are plenty of reasons for me to think it's good. It's made a lot of really amazing connections for me. It makes talking to people like my family in Iran a lot easier. But it also has taken a lot from me, and it has also robbed me of some, like, maybe really important moments that I've missed, or me and my partner have missed just because we're both distracted by the Internet. Um, and so yeah I'm wondering, like, what do you think? Is it good or bad?

BOB: So there's lots of good the Internet has done, so don't want to be ridiculous about this. However, if you were to just maybe spend a moment, think about the last time you were in conversation with someone and you could just tell, you were like, oh, I was just about to get to the good part of a story and suddenly like, are you there? Am I getting 50% of you, 25%? And, and it's, it's heartbreaking. But I think if you start to add, add those up. I mean, you used the word a minute ago, the Internet's been robbing you of experiences, right?

ALIA: Yeah. So, a tick in the bad column.

ALIA But then I think about the experiences I've had with people because of the internet. I have a couple of really good friends who are very good at documenting their lives. Um, I'm not particularly good at that, but I really admire my friends who are, and one of my, my best friends in particular has, um, a lot of, she's had a lot of changes in her life over the last year and I've known her for, since we were in the seventh grade, and I've gotten to watch her evolve into this like beautiful whole person that she is. I'm gonna get teary now. And I really think I have the internet to thank for that. You know, like I've gotten to witness, um, all of the phases of her religious experience, all of the phases of her sexuality. Um, yeah. And like, I don't think, I think I would just like have these check-in points if I didn't have the internet, right. Like I would like get to hear from her maybe once or twice a year. But like now I get to actually like witness the beautiful, um, sort of like prism of her life. I get to see all of the different colors and I get to see the evolution of it all. And like that is so incredibly special to me.

KELLY: So that seems like a point for the good then.

ALIA: Yeah definitely.

BOB: I remember when I went to Grad school and they forced me to get an email address for my class and I had vaguely heard what email addresses were. Um, but, uh, you know, I initially did what you would do, which was, you know, look around for people to write to. And I was very, very close to my college advisor who was a history professor, but I hadn't talked to him in years. And you know, 20 minutes later I had sent him an email and he had written me back from across the country. To me, this was absolute magic. It was an unbelievable sensation that I could reach out to someone in the past of my life and suddenly have a reignited friendship with him. And we emailed a couple of times back and forth and I had, you know what I often call my internet moment, everybody's had one where they suddenly realize, holy cow, there's this massive world and the door's just been opened for me. And I had this profound thought. I remember it like it was yesterday. Maybe it sounds kind of sad or pathetic. I don't know. But the thought was I'll never be lonely again. I can always access someone now if I want to talk or communicate or, or talk about history. Who else could I talk about British history with other than my old advisor, you know? And I was like, this is amazing. And it was, it was kind of like an out-of-body experience, and it did actually feel like a little slice of heaven to me. Like, oh my God, I can reach out across the planet to anyone. That's incredible. So that's the biggest gift the internet ever gave to me.

ALIA: That's really beautiful.

KELLY: Yeah.

ALIA: I got sort of teary hearing you tell me that story.

KELLY: Me too.

KELLY: Maybe this is me just wanting to be warm and fuzzy all the time, but, uh, cause I'm cynical by nature, so then I try not to be. We forget what the Internet gives us, especially if you grew up with it, you know, um, if you're like a millennial and you can't really remember a time without access to someone semi-immediately. Um, like when I was growing up, it was emails when I was a kid, like I emailed my pen pal from Girl Scouts that I met at Girl Scout camp, and then we emailed each other back and forth. Um, but that was when I was like, you know, a fourth grader, so I can't, so I can't remember a time without that. And so sometimes I think I forget when I'm like, yeah, Internet's bad, all these bad, bad things. And then you forget. Well, if without the Internet we wouldn't have this immediate connection that we're so used to. And that you might take for granted sometimes.

ALIA: Yes. Yes.

BOB: So that's the, the joyous story of it and why I find the time we're living in right now so heartbreaking is because I went from that feeling, which I can still summon up in myself to this beautiful Internet that connects me to people. I think more times than not now disconnects me from people because the people who I'm nearest can't resist looking away. And so now I feel like on balance I'm lonelier than I was. And so to go from "I'll never be alone" to "Oh my God. Maybe I'll never make a friend again." That's the highs and lows of the Internet to me.

ALIA: Hmmm. Yeah. And like with connection, we aren't just connecting the good things. Like we're connecting the bad people, the dark stuff too.

BOB: In general what our data shows is that lies are more interesting than facts. And it's just much easier to spread rumors around the internet than it is to correct incorrect information on the Internet. And my evidence for that, and I always boil it down to this is do more or less people think the earth is flat today than did 10 years ago?

ALIA: Oh, oh God. What's the answer?

BOB: The answer is more.

ALIA: What?

BOB: The answer is more because people who believe in flat earth have an easier time finding other people who might believe in flat earth. And so, you know, we're setting civilization back at least 500 years. And the reason is because these algorithms that places like YouTube use, they know somebody who looks at a conspiracy theory video that might be a small conspiracy theory about JFK or something and they say, Oh, this person likes that kind of conspiracy video. They

might like these other conspiracy videos about things like whether or not the earth is round because YouTube, all it cares about is more views and more ad hits.

ALIA: So if we're looking at our scoreboard for internet good or bad, under the column bad we could put one tally for perpetuates conspiracy theories.

BOB: Yeah, and to me it's probably worth two or three tally marks, right, That's a big one. It's blocking out truth. And um, foreign governments have figured this out. So, and, and this is a really interesting turnabout, so it used to be 10, 15 years ago, that places like China when they want it to suppress free speech, they would install the great firewall of China so they wouldn't let people access the Internet. All that did was, of course, give people a craving for something that they knew about but couldn't find. But now it turns out a much better way to control populations is to flood them with information, to flood them with bad information or information or propaganda. So instead of firewall, we have the great troll now.

ALIA: Another tally on the bad column, the great troll.

BOB: Yeah.

ALIA: Or trolling or fake news or whatever that is, all of it.

BOB: Right. Right.

ALIA: Um, good? Puppy photos. Puppy photos.

BOB: Okay, I think you just won the argument.

ALIA: Yes.

BOB: The Internet was worth it for the puppies.

ALIA: Yes.

BOB: Okay. Um, good? Babies.

ALIA: Oh my God. Pictures of babies.

ALIA: So, tick in the bad column, um, kind of like some false intimacy.

BOB: To me, this is like the darkest of dark sides, because really what we often have, is you see people at their peaks. And so not only does it, it sort of substitute as this sort of faux intimacy, but if gives you the wrong idea about the party you were missing out on. I mean it was designed to create FOMO, right, and you're the only one who has these bad feelings because there is no

Facebook for bad feelings. Mostly Facebook is just parties and celebration and all the fun you're not having.

KELLY: Facebook for bad feelings is just Tumblr.

ALIA: Okay. Good? Memes. Really funny memes.

BOB: Also bad memes.

ALIA: Yeah. Bad memes. In particular, not funny memes. Okay. But also bad, like fake news perpetuating memes.

BOB: Right. Yeah. Um, bad fake news. But maybe just bad news, like every day on my feeds is some horrible, sad story from somewhere in the world that breaks my heart and I feel responsible to not turn away because that's horrible. But yet now, you know, my life is just, you can be depressed about one natural disaster after another.

ALIA: So bad. Inundated with, with bad news.

ALIA: Uh, good: Netflix and Hulu and all these streaming services. I can watch all of Gilmore Girls year round.

BOB: Also good movie makers who would never be greenlit before...

ALIA: Yes.

BOB: ...are now being produced all over the place.

ALIA: You're so right, Bob, you're so right. We're getting, we're getting to see some really amazing work that I don't think we'd see if we didn't have the Internet.

ALIA: Bad...So many people, especially artists and comedians, uh, are getting ripped off and not credited because of the Internet.

ALIA: Okay, good. I think the Internet has made talking about mental health less taboo.

BOB: Good. You can find someone else suffering from whenever you're suffering from, whether that's mental health or physical or you're just questioning things. You can always find somebody else who's in that spot and you don't have to feel so isolated. And that's, that's probably the best thing about the internet

ALIA: Bad. If you put something out there that's vulnerable, um, somebody will almost certainly come out there to hate on you, tell you you're wrong or tell you, um, just undermine you in some way.

BOB: Bad. The end of second chances when you make a mistake now in our time, it lives forever. Even if you pay your debt to society, you can't get hired. Someone can always Google your name and find these horrible pictures of you, and people make mistakes. America was founded on the concept of second chances for the most part. And now second chances are done.

ALIA: Good, people are held accountable for their actions, even ones that maybe happened a long time ago. There are Twitter receipts, there is evidence that still exists, and it's accessible. So I have all the information, and I can decide how I feel about a person, knowing all the good and the bad. And also like the internet can pressure people to solve crimes and catch people like the Golden State Killer.

KELLY: So I feel like if we look at the scoreboard, we're actually pretty even.

BOB: I got 21/21 going into overtime is what I see.

ALIA: And I think if we kept going like I think A), I think we could keep going forever, but I think if we kept going, it would just continue to look like this. It's sort of like, like a see saw.

KELLY: It is. And that's why we need to talk to some experts this season who will take questions like, "Why is my Apple Watch recording me in my sleep?", "Is Google tracking me wherever I go?", or, "What happens when my private photos get leaked?" And turn them into conversations like these.

SPEAKER: We're essentially being programmed, right?

SPEAKER: But we're also born to really connect to other people on a visceral level, and that's what gets lost when a screen comes between us and another person.

SPEAKER: That's kind of why we're here, right? Like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, let's, let's embrace the roots of who we really are.

ALIA: So Bob, and Kelly now...why should people listen to this podcast?

BOB: To use the most over-used metaphor ever, that I think is appropriate in this situation, I think that we are kind of living in The Matrix right now. And all this technology just gets thrown at us and changes our life and we're busy, we're in these tunnels, and we don't see what's happening. But the moment someone points out to you, do you realize that you don't even look at your husband anymore when you talk, because you're looking at your phone?, all the sudden

it's like some veil is lifted from your eyes. And you say, holy cow, and you start asking more and more questions about what the tech is doing to you, and I really do think that one of the dividing lines in society pretty soon are going to be people who are paying attention to what tech is doing to them, and people on whom tech is being foisted and they're not even thinking about it. And i know what side of that divide I want to be on, and I think most people, when they realize it, want to be there too.

KELLY: Well, I think this is important because uh, technology is now evolving quicker and quicker and quicker. And society needs to catch up to evolving technology. We have all these big unanswerable questions, or that feel unanswerable, and so we're just trying to answer them.

ALIA: So this podcast is like Morpheus giving you a choice.

BOB: Red or blue? And I know which side of this I want to be on, and I think most people, once they have their moment of awakening, will feel the same way.

ALIA: So, Bob. Is the internet good or bad?

BOB: I'm going to shock you, because you know me and you've been listening to this blather for a long time now. My answer to this question is that the Internet is more good than bad, but it's close and I think this is what people miss. There's no way. Like my dad had a heart attack a couple of years ago and before I had time to get to the hospital, he was already in the recovery room with the new stent. Technology is incredible. I would never want to put it all back in Pandora's box, but it's a close game and there's a lot of technology that hurts us.

ALIA: Yeah, it's really complicated. Some days I love technology and know that I couldn't live without it, and then other days I just want it all out of my life. I mean...I don't know. I don't know. But, Bob? I'm excited to talk about all of this. And to figure out how technology hurts and helps us, and to clarify how we might think about it differently. It's going to be me, and Bob, and our producer Kelly, and some kick-ass experts we meet along the way. And we're going to answer your questions. If you're as confused about the internet and how it's affecting your everyday life as I am, send us an email at sobob@spokemedia.io or DM us on Twitter and Instagram @SoBobPod. Let's figure this stuff out together. Because I've got a lot of questions. So, Bob, wanna make a show about it?

BOB: Let's make a show about it.

SPEAKER: I feel like the internet is good, I think people make it bad.

SPEAKER: Um, I think it can be both, but predominantly I think it's good.

SPEAKER: The internet is like God. It's neither good or bad, it's omnipotent. It's always, everpresent, therefore, you can use it for whatever you need. But some people don't believe in

God. Like some people don't believe in the internet. Right? And so for me, I believe that the internet is probably going to take over everything one day, and kill every human on earth.

SPEAKER: I think that the internet is good.

SPEAKER: Um, I don't think it's one or the other, I think it has its pros and cons.

SPEAKER: I think it is good.

SPEAKER: It's a scary place, where all of your information can be um, stolen.

SPEAKER: The internet is good. You can use it for bad things, but that means you're bad, not the internet.

ALIA: So, Bob is a Spoke Media Production. It's produced by me, Alia Tavakolian and Bob Sullivan. We're produced by Kelly Kolff, with help from Reyes Mendoza and Carson McCain. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett. Our head of post-production is Will Short. The songs you hear in this episode come from FirstCom. Our Executive Producer is Keith Reynolds. If you have questions about your digital life, write to us at sobob@spokemedia.io or DM us on Twitter or Instagram @SoBobPod. We'd love to answer any questions you send our way. Thanks for listening.

ALIA: Next week, we're going to be tackling a smaller, more personal question. So, Bob, should I be afraid that my sleep app is listening to me? The answer is duh yes obviously, but it's frightening. What are the implications of this? Subscribe now so you don't miss a thing.