

Democracy in Danger

S1E1: Illiberal Media

William Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock, a history professor at the University of Virginia.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:07] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan, and I'm a professor of media studies at UVA and director of the Deliberative Media Lab.

William Hitchcock [00:00:14] And this is Democracy in Danger. A new podcast series from the University's Democracy Initiative.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:23] In these conversations, we will be talking with some leading scholars and thinkers and writers about the state of democracy, not only in the United States but around the world.

William Hitchcock [00:00:33] The basic premise is pretty simple. Democracy is in trouble these days. We're seeing the rise of new populist and authoritarian leaders who are mobilizing racism, nationalism and economic anxiety. And they've used the power of the police and the military to intimidate critics and suppress dissent, either to gain or hold onto power.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:54] We'll want to explore some pretty urgent questions like, How much of this is really new? Are these patterns just knitted into the messy business of democracy? Is democracy in danger? And if so, what can we do about it?

William Hitchcock [00:01:09] So to help us sort out the continuity's from the ruptures, the facts from the falsehoods, we're going to be talking to all kinds of experts about the challenges facing democracy and what we have to do to make it work better.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:21] And today for our first episode, we're joined by Nicole Hemmer. She's a political historian specializing in media, conservatism, and the far right. She's also the author of *Messengers of the Right: conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*.

William Hitchcock [00:01:38] Nicki, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Nicole Hemmer [00:01:40] Thank you both for having me.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:42] Nicki, let's start out with your work on the rise of conservative media. Now, these days, of course, Fox News and other right wing media organizations have practically become booster clubs for President Trump. But Fox News has been around for a lot longer than Trump has been a political figure. And your work shows that partisan right wing news actually gained traction as early as the 1950s. Tell us a bit about that. And how and why did conservative media become so influential?

Nicole Hemmer [00:02:12] Yeah, it's a great question because conservative media were punching above their weight pretty early on. I mean, if you go back into the 1950s where conservative media outlets like the magazine *National Review*, the book publisher Regnery Publishing, a man named Clarence Mannion who had a popular radio show, we're talking about a handful of people who, you know, didn't have that many people listening to them or reading them. I think *National Review* at the time had by the 1960s,

maybe 50,000 people who were subscribing to it. But their influence wasn't just in the media products that they were putting forward. They were getting down and dirty with Republican politics from really early on. And you see this, for instance, in 1960 when Clarence Mannion, this radio host, starts this draft Goldwater movement in order to boost the presidential hopes of Barry Goldwater, who was probably one of the most conservative members of the Senate. And it sets the stage for his 1964 run, which is again engineered by a conservative media figure, by Bill Rusher, who is the publisher of National Review. And so you see this intertwining of the conservative media activists and Republican Party politics that are starting to pull the party further and further to the right. And it's limited in some ways, right, because the Republican Party of the 1950s and 60s just isn't that conservative.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:03:47] So this is maybe a little bit surprising to people who might not have been aware of what the Republican Party looked like, felt like and spoke to in the 1950s and 60s. Right. We're used to thinking in 21st century terms that we have two fairly polarized political parties in the United States and there's not much overlap in terms of agenda or agreement on almost any issue here in 2020. But that wasn't the case in 1960 or in 1956. So what are we talking about or are we talking about conservative media cleansing the Republican Party? Or did they see their mission as beyond transforming the party and ultimately transforming America?

Nicole Hemmer [00:04:30] So, yes, they absolutely had a much broader goal of transforming America. It's just that they didn't have a lot of influence. They were they were trying to build influence over the 1950s and 1960s. And so they're doing that in part through their media projects to sort of serve as a rallying point for disparate conservatives spread across the nation. And they're also trying to figure out which party is going to be their home. I mean, you're exactly right, Siva, that the parties in the 1950s and 60s were very politically mixed. You had conservative white segregationists in the Democratic Party. You had liberal Republicans, many of whom were on the leading edge of civil rights in American national politics. And one of the projects of the conservative movement in conservative media becomes attracting those conservative Democrats to the Republican Party and purging the Republican Party of these more liberal Republicans. And there's nothing that ratifies that more than Barry Goldwater's nomination in 1964 and so conservative media, they have a fundamental responsibility for the way that the two parties reorganize over the course of the 60s and 70s.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:44] So if Goldwater was the vehicle for this transformation, first of the Republican Party and ultimately of the nation, what were the rhetorical moves? What were the issues? Why would a conservative Democrat be attracted by the Republican Party? I mean, like, you know, a lot of places in America, the idea of voting Republican would have major your grandfather spin in the grave. Right.

Nicole Hemmer [00:06:10] So, I mean, we can't underestimate the power of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, even though a higher percentage of Republican officeholders voted for the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act than in the Democratic Party, having Lyndon Johnson as the face of the Democratic Party and Barry Goldwater, who voted against the Civil Rights Act as the face of the Republican Party, really helped shift the racial politics of America in the two major parties. It just it had a profound effect. And racism obviously isn't the only argument. I mean, there is a shift that had started earlier in the New Deal of the Democratic Party toward more federal intervention, federal intervention and civil rights, but also in the economy and the conservative movement and conservative activists really nurture an argument for smaller government, for less government intervention. And, you

know, the Republican Party wasn't necessarily the natural home for that, but because the Democratic Party was the party of the New Deal and later the Great Society. That's why it becomes easier to find a home in the Republican Party for this argument for smaller government.

William Hitchcock [00:07:23] Nicki, do those lines of division and that genealogy, does it still work today? Does it still help us to understand, you know, what public figures in the right wing media ecosystem believe? I'm thinking of Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity, figures like that. They seem to be particularly motivated by opposition. They know who they don't like, but it's often difficult to understand where they are on a kind of political ideological spectrum in terms of what they stand for. What changes are they most likely to want to see in America? Do they still read from the Goldwater script or have they kind of left a lot of that ideological purity behind?

Nicole Hemmer [00:08:06] So this is a great moment for tackling that question, because over the past few years, we have seen a real, almost wholesale transformation in what it is that conservative radio hosts like Limbaugh and Hannity and conservative cable news networks like Fox News have been backing. You know, since the 1980s free trade with sort of one of the huge pillars of both the conservative movement and the Republican Party. I'm not going to say it was entirely abandoned, but it's been abandoned pretty dramatically. And so there are still orthodoxies like lower taxes, but there has been a real jumbling of ideologies in the past several years. And that then invites the question of like, what do these guys believe and what is what is their purpose? Rush Limbaugh is a conservative. He grew up in a conservative family. It's not to say that he doesn't have those political leanings, but the number one goal of the Rush Limbaugh Show is to make money. That's why it exists. And that economic impulse or that economic priority is something that will trump politics, which is not to say that it's going to become liberal, but that it is somebody like Limbaugh is very attuned to what his base wants. And I want to give you an example of this. You know, in 2013, there was this push in the Republican Party for immigration reform. And Marco Rubio, who is one of the senators who was behind that push, went around with Rupert Murdoch to people like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity and said, look, you guys have to provide us cover on this because we're not going to be able to get immigration reform passed if we don't bring the base along with us. And so if you turned on Sean Hannity's show in February of 2013, you would have heard him advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. His base and his listeners rebelled almost immediately. And Sean Hannity knows that if his base and his listeners aren't on board, he's going to lose them like they're not going to tune in anymore. And so by like April of 2013, what you're hearing is amnesty for illegals from Sean Hannity. And that gives you a sense of how malleable in many ways, some of the specific policy issues are because of this incentive to hold your listeners together and to be responsive to your audience in order to continue to be a profitable enterprise.

William Hitchcock [00:10:43] So it really is a marketplace of ideas.

Nicole Hemmer [00:10:46] I mean, it is one way to look at it, although, you know, especially in the early days, none of these conservative media outlets from the 50s and 60s were profitable. And so you have somebody like William F. Buckley at the National Review sort of arguing against a marketplace of ideas, because if he didn't have a bunch of donors, he wouldn't be able to stay in business.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:06] But once it becomes a marketplace phenomenon, you see a pretty extreme dynamic that maybe was invisible before. Now this movement

transforms from merely being top down. Right? Merely being the William F. Buckley is of the world trying to inject a particular ideological framework on the Republican Party in the United States. Now you see passions bubbling up from below from the audience and they're impossible to ignore. Social media makes them impossible to ignore. Ratings for radio shows and television shows make it impossible to ignore. This, of course, corresponds with the rise of Trump and basically the complete takeover of the Republican Party. So what else has changed between 2013ish and 2020 besides of the presence of Trump? And where do we get this phrase alt-right from? Is it part of the right? Is it distinct from the right? What's going on there?

Nicole Hemmer [00:12:01] Yeah. I want to just introduce the idea that this wasn't limited to around 2008 when the alt-right emerges. That there were these sort of anti liberal democracy impulses that were becoming more visible in people like Pat Buchanan in the 1990s. But the real wholesale sort of illiberalism of the alt-right comes to the fore starting in 2008. And it's a group of people who are discontented with where conservatism is at the end of the Bush administration. And some of their ideas fit very neatly into the policy debates we always had there. They're noninterventionist. They're opposed to intervention in the Middle East in particular. They're much more nationalist, but they're also overtly racist and anti-Semitic. They think that the Republican Party has gotten to sort of the compassionate conservatism of George W. Bush and isn't dealing with what they see as the reality that race is the fundamental marker of citizenship and rights in the United States. And the Republican Party needs to more overtly make that argument and conservatives need to more overtly embrace that argument. And so there's this huge suspicion of democracy, not only because white voters aren't going to continue to be a majority, but also because overt racist ideology does not have the kind of majoritarian support that they would like. And then by 2008, after Barack Obama wins, there's sort of a pathway for them into the Republican Party, which has more overt expressions of racism through things like birtherism. There are some real racial resentments that are bubbling through the Tea Party. And so they're beginning to try to figure out a way during the Obama administration to be more mainstream, to merge into the Republican Party with this new set of overtly racist ideas.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:14:03] So, Nikki, you know, there are a lot of ideological phrases flying around in this conversation. You know, we're talking about this thing called liberal democracy with a small L and the small D. And we're talking about a conservative movement. And, you know, most Americans are in 2020. There are liberals and there are conservatives and they don't mix in a way. How do we make sense of that? Like, what is what is the relationship between conservatism and an American historical sense? And the idea of liberal democracy?

Nicole Hemmer [00:14:34] Yeah, this is one of the things where the paucity of language in American politics is a real problem because we use these same words to mean very different things. So the conservative versus liberal idea, here, we're talking about just a different place on the spectrum of mainstream U.S. politics, a conservative right that is more socially conservative, that is sometimes, but not always for smaller government, less government intervention in the economy and things like that, and a liberalism that is more progressive and more in favor of government intervention on the economy, but also on social issues. And that all takes place on the playing field of liberal democracy. And liberal democracy is just you know, it's the rules that we play by in a lot of ways, a respect for minority rights, but the ability to vote and to have the government by the consent of the governed. These very basic ideas, First Amendment protections that govern our political lives.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:15:42] So the rules of the game are based on principles of liberalism.

Nicole Hemmer [00:15:46] Yes.

William Hitchcock [00:15:46] You know, Nikki, it's interesting that you describe the alt-right and even some conservative voices in the media as a liberal, maybe even suspect, deeply suspect of liberal democracy, because on the one hand, they fear the ballot box. But on the other hand, they want to take advantage of certain principles of liberal democracy, the central one being free speech. And they tell a story about how their voices have always been silenced, even though Fox News has an enormous following. They like to spin the idea that their voices cannot cut through the liberal media. What should we make of this free speech claim that seems to cloak so many of their more outrageous assertions?

Nicole Hemmer [00:16:30] So free speech absolutely is the in road to American politics for the alt-right, because it is a way for them to make alliances with other conservatives because it's based on as you it like this fundamentally liberal principle of free speech. And I think the word cloak is really important in your question, Will, because free speech is a strategy rather than a value. In this case, and this is something that we saw in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, which was pitched as a free speech rally. And so think about those two ideas. Next to one another, Unite the Right and free speech. Well, what do we know from the Unite the Right? We know that the night before the planned so-called free speech rally that hundreds of alt-right activists who were carrying tiki torches and other weapons as well, march on to the campus of the University of Virginia. They marched to the statue of Thomas Jefferson, sort of claiming him as their white hero. And when they get there, they find anti-racist activist and they beat them. They attack them. Several people are injured. And that is sort of the moment when you see, oh, wait, they're not actually here for a political free speech. They're here is an act of political intimidation and political violence and free speech gave them the entree to do these acts. And that, I think, shows you the way that free speech can be used as a wedge and free speech can be used as an opportunity. But at the same time, if you look closely enough, you see that it is merely an entree to these types of political intimidation and violence.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:17] Nikki, I'm really glad that you brought all that up, the trauma that we all felt in August of 2017. Will and I, of course, are professors at the University of Virginia. And you were our colleague at the time and also living in Charlottesville. I've been swimming in a thousand different questions this month here in June of 2020. And I'm trying to figure out what the line is between what we saw and felt experienced and cried about in August of 2017, and what we're seeing in American streets in 2020. And is there a direct connection to the rise of right wing media? And how has right wing media changed even in that short period of time? Is there a way to make sense of all of this in your mind?

Nicole Hemmer [00:19:07] Yeah. I mean, I think that there are two different questions there. So let me tackle the media one first. The alt-right in many ways of fundamentally transformed conservative media. And what I mean by that is back before Charlottesville, back before Trump in early 2014 or so, the website Breitbart began to make itself into a platform for the alt-right and became sort of the place where the alt-right was going to be mainstreamed. And this was the explicit goal of Steve Bannon, who ran the website at the time. He would go on to become Donald Trump's campaign manager and work in the

Trump campaign. He now runs sort of a war room for Trump's reelection in DC. And what's important about that is not only that it was mainstreaming the alt-right, but by early 2016, during the campaign when Donald Trump is fighting with Fox News, we see a fundamental reorientation of the conservative movement and conservative media. So some media scholars have looked at this and they've traced sort of where the center of conservative media is over time. And it used to be Fox News. But in those early months of 2016, it becomes Breitbart. And that begins to give you a sense of how this sort of media and movement in politics of the right were changing in that moment. How that project of mainstreaming the alt-right and some of the more palatable ideas of the alt-right was actually becoming really effective. It becomes sort of a road to Donald Trump and his election in many ways.

William Hitchcock [00:20:43] So that answers the first question. But now talk a little bit about the differences and maybe the similarities between 2017 and 2020.

Nicole Hemmer [00:20:52] There are some striking differences between 2017 and 2020. And this is something that I've been thinking a bit about lately. The thing that I'm struck by is this question of policing. I mean, we're seeing widespread riots right now throughout the United States and the conflict and the clashes happen between police and anti-racist protesters. What we saw in Charlottesville was a little different, but nonetheless really important and really telling in that the clashes were between anti-racist protesters and alt-right racist rally goers and the police were there, but the police aren't doing anything, right? You see this an image after image, and I certainly experienced this on August 12th, is that they watched as white power activists injured, attacked anti-racist protesters and did nothing on several, several occasions throughout the course of that day. And I should note, on August 11th as well. They stood back. And so what ties those together, despite the differences, is this question of whose side the police are on. And I think that's something that people are grappling with in a really real way right now as they see police officers attack peaceful protesters. And I think that with different players in the game on August 12th, that looked a little different. But I think that they are very much connected in terms of their core questions.

William Hitchcock [00:22:19] I mean, it's so obvious, but you had to say it for me to connect, man, the difference. They were they were participating in the riot by doing nothing. Whereas today they are the source of much of the violence.

Nicole Hemmer [00:22:32] Yep.

William Hitchcock [00:22:33] Nicki, I want to ask you a larger question, especially in your role as a historian and a historian of media. To step back a moment and think a little bit about how the conservative and alt-right voices and media, radio and Internet presence has impacted democracy in America over the last, say, 20 years or so or more. We're at a stage where we feel that democracy is fragile. It's eroding in some cases. We're confronted with it on a daily basis in our own communities, whether it's voter suppression or police violence or racism. And it just seems as if the elasticity that we expect of democracy is becoming a little more brittle. Does media play a role in that story? The media environment we're living in. When you think about the challenges facing democracy.

Nicole Hemmer [00:23:28] Oh, I think media has a huge role to play and you need to take a step back. Democracy was built on the presumption of an informed citizenry and of a common consensus and not necessarily a common consensus of, you know, we're all going to agree on the same policies or we're all going to agree on the direction of the

country. But we are going to agree on this idea of a liberal democracy. That there is a political way of working out, a nonviolent way of working out a lot of the conflicts in society. And, you know, in U.S. history that has often been breached. But in this particular moment, what we're seeing is a real breakdown of that consensus around liberal democracy. And I mean, you can kind of see why it happens not to get too sort of historical here. But, you know, a lot of that consensus for the first 200 or so years of American history was really built around the idea that the electorate was white. And as you get more and more nonwhite citizens who are participating in politics, there is a strong contingent of white Americans who no longer agree that the consensus is working or that the consensus should even be protected, that liberal democracy should be protected, because there are people who are participating who used to just be shut out of it. And so that's important background, I think, to what's happening in media and what's happening in media is, you know, a wholesale assault on this idea of a shared set of facts and a shared sort of belief in liberal democracy. And that really matters. You know, everything from climate denialism or actually, here's a good example. Voter fraud. This has been a boogie man on the right, particularly since 2008, 2009. It is an absolute myth. This idea of widespread in-person voter fraud. We have no evidence that actually happens. But it is a myth that has shaped policy decisions across the United States. Republican governments have pushed for strict voter I.D. laws, and they point to this myth of voter fraud as a way of justifying that policy, a way of justifying keeping certain people out of the electorate. And we know from behind the scenes conversations and sometimes even on the record conversations that these laws are actually about keeping Democrats and particularly black Americans from being able to exercise the right to vote. It's all built on a fraudulent argument. And that doesn't matter, no matter how many facts you throw at this argument. The important thing for the people who use it is just that that argument exists and that resistance to reality is, as you can see, a real problem for American democracy, because where do you go? Where do you go at that point if you can't fact check a lie? I don't have the answers to that. But I think that the conservative media ecosystem has been a major driver of that kind of myth formation that has been reshaping our politics, especially in the past decade.

Nicole Hemmer [00:26:49] Nicki Hemmer, thank you so much for talking with us today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:51] Yeah. Thank you, Nikki. This has been really enlightening.

Nicole Hemmer [00:26:54] Really appreciate it. Thank you both.

William Hitchcock [00:27:12] Siva, that was a great conversation, and I think there were two things that I came away with. One is, I mean, conservative media is it is a business. It's a big business. And that means they have to follow the money. If there's a policy idea out there that that their listeners don't support, conservative media has to trim their sales. And the second thing that is so striking about Nikki's account of the rise of conservative media is basically that race runs right through it. White Americans are threatened by democracy. They're threatened by expanding the franchise to people of color. And that anxiety is what is driving, shaping conservative media.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:51] That's right. You know, these two points show both what has changed so rapidly and what has stayed the same over the past 50 or 60 years of conservative media as Nicki has tracked its rise. Right? So throughout the 1950s and 60s and much of the 70s and 80s, we see so much of it funded by philanthropy, funded by rich people who just want to inject some ideas into the media ecosystem that seem to have been dominated by liberal ideas. At the same time, the continuity is stark. All that we see

in the United States today has at its base a politics of resentment and an anxiety about status slippage with race at the center of that. The idea that whiteness might not be as valuable as it was before is a real strong motivator for building an audience and for attracting new contributors to right wing media.

William Hitchcock [00:28:50] Yeah, and although we talked about conservative media today, I think the larger context Nicki kind of hinted at this is that everybody has a different relationship to the news media than they used to in the 50s and the 60s. There was a time in American public life in which people on the TV delivering the nightly news were seen as delivering a kind of shared reality, a kind of consensus view of what happened. And I don't think anyone on the right, center or left really believes that about "the news" anymore. Conservative media has probably adapted to that landscape more creatively, more dynamically, maybe one could say more dangerously than the center and the left.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:30] Yeah, absolutely. There really is no such thing as a mainstream media right now. There are louder voices than others. There are more established voices than others. You have to count Fox News among those established voices. But, you know, to have the mindset of an insurgent right, to have that sort of guerilla warfare mindset built up over 40, 50, 60 years, that can be a huge advantage when you're first of all, when you're trying to sell the idea of collective victimhood to white people in America. That's really important. But also it just keeps you hustling. Right. So people who are in charge of making decisions at Fox News or at Breitbart or any of the other right wing media outlets, they are constantly hustling. They're never satisfied and they never fall back on something like, "This is the way we've always done it." And that has certainly made a big difference in their recent success.

William Hitchcock [00:30:23] Siva, we have a great lineup coming and we're going to be talking not just about media and illiberalism, but we'll be talking about fascism and populism around the world. We'll be talking about religion and its role in our contemporary politics. We'll be talking about immigration and the rise of xenophobia. And it's all part of this very complicated moment we're living in where we're trying to piece out the relative significance of these threads that are shaping our democracy today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:48] I'm looking forward to this, Will!

William Hitchcock [00:30:50] Me too. That's all for our first episode. Thanks for listening to Democracy in Danger. We hope you'll continue to join Siva and me as we talk to leading scholars about threats to democracy at home and around the world on our next episode. We'll speak with historian Federico Finkelstein about fascism, populism and democracy.

Federico Finchelstein [00:31:14] Populism came to power for the first time in its history after 1945 in Latin America. And these former dictators decided that they needed to create fascism in a democratic key.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:30] In the meantime, please stay in touch. For more about the show and our guests and for links to what we're reading, go to MediaLab.virginia.edu.

William Hitchcock [00:31:40] You can subscribe to Democracy in Danger on Spotify, Stitcher, Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. And please do your part to keep deliberative democracy alive. Leave us some stars and better yet, a review online. It's the best way to help us grow our audience. Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:32:03] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. Democracy in Danger is a project of the Deliberative Media Lab at UVA. The show is distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, a podcast hub of WTJU in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidyanathan.

William Hitchcock [00:32:25] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Hope you'll join us again next time.