

Democracy in Danger S1E11 Big Bad Data

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:07] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Earlier in our series, we heard from Nina Jankowicz of the Wilson Center about how Russian operatives carried out coordinated attacks on democracies using digital platforms. Well, this time we're going to drill down on some of those tactics and practices. We want to understand how agents and groups hostile to democratic norms leverage social media networks to sow distrust and confusion. How exactly do they undermine trust in the institutions that we depend on to govern ourselves?

Will Hitchcock [00:00:42] Siva, there is no doubt that the power of Internet companies to control and and sell our personal data and their willingness to provide a platform to malign actors that spread false news. This is one of the greatest problems that democracies face today. And I'll tell you, I know I personally spend way too much time every day doom scrolling through Twitter. And it definitely influences my outlook. In fact, it terrifies me.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:08] Well, you're not alone. I've written that social media are the most influential and troubling media forms we have ever seen as a species. So Facebook has 2.7 billion users around the world and they're using more than 100 languages. We're talking about a third of humanity using Facebook regularly. No media sources ever had a reach that big. Twitter, in contrast, has only 330 million users. That used to sound like a big number, but Twitter has a disproportionate influence over opinion makers and agenda setters. So what happens on Twitter affects what happens on CNN, on BBC, on NPR, and even more powerfully it feeds back into Facebook and Instagram and WhatsApp. And by the way, both Instagram and WhatsApp are owned by Facebook.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:59] Well, I'll tell you, Siva, it it feels sometimes overwhelming. But the good news is that scholars and researchers around the world have been doing a lot of very serious analysis on these issues. And one of the world's leaders in the field is with us today from the U.K. to help us sort it out. We're with sociologist Phil Howard. He's the director of the Oxford Internet Institute and the author of numerous books on politics and digital technology. His most recent book is Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations and Political Operatives. Boy, do we need that book now. Phil, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Phil Howard [00:02:39] Thank you both. Thank you for having me on.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:41] Phil, you've argued that social media is weakening, maybe even killing democracy around the world. But in your research, you've also pointed out that there have been ways in which social media can be a powerful tool to mobilize protest against autocrats. And one thinks of the Arab Spring or today's Black Lives Matter protests. So is social media necessarily a threat to democracy or is it just that maybe, you know, grassroots activists are a little slower to adapt to the political possibilities than the big corporations or or powerful governments are?

Phil Howard [00:03:20] This is a great place to start because your instinct is right. Social media doesn't have to be structured this way. It doesn't have to spread poisonous stories and misinformation. And it doesn't have to be this way. But it's structured this way by the major social media firms. One thing I'd say, though, is that I don't think it's because social movements are too slow or aren't as tech savvy. In fact, that I will say the opposite. That social movements in my mind tend to be more desperate and more creative than most dictators. Now, I do think we're at a moment where dictators in many countries and political elites have figured out how to use social media for social control. But it doesn't have to be that way. And the creative work, there is still a lot of creativity in modern social movements, and that's where I sort of put my hope, my faith.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:04:07] Phil, you worked in Hungary as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán moved from being a pro-democracy reformer to becoming an unapologetic anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, authoritarian. You watched as Hungary moved from being a model post-Cold War Central European democracy, to being an outlier, a pariah in the European Union. What did you see and hear in Hungary? And how did that experience change or inspire your research questions?

Phil Howard [00:04:37] Well, the time I spent in Budapest was very important for helping me see the mechanism by which misinformation spreads and has an impact on what people think. I was living there in the summer of 2014 when the Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down over Ukraine. And I watched as my Hungarian friends got three or four equally ridiculous stories over social media from Russian origins about what had happened. There was the story that the American military had shot it down and that the U.S. military had sent troops into Ukraine. There was the story that democracy advocates in Ukraine had shot the plane down because they thought Putin was flying on a commercial airline from Amsterdam to Malaysia. The best one was the story of a lost tank from World War II that had come out of the great forests of Ukraine, confused and accidentally shot the plane down. And it was these multiple, equally ridiculous stories that demonstrated this new communication strategy of not trying to cede one narrative that your opponents could respond to, but ceding multiple conflicting narratives that would confuse people, make it a bit of a joke, make it tough for a public to come to some consensus about the problem and the solutions. Now, what I didn't expect over the years was that this communications trick that an authoritarian regime like Putin uses on his own people to become a trick that Putin would use on voters in the West. And then I did not expect this communications strategy to be something that politicians in the West would start to use, which would adapt for themselves for use on their own voters. And it's that learning pattern that's sort of the surprise for me.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:24] Phil, as Siva mentioned on an earlier episode, we interviewed the scholar Nina Jankowicz. She's the author of a book called *How to Lose the Information War*. And she was telling us about early Russian experiments in Estonia, meddling in Estonian politics and disruption and so forth. And, you know, Russian agents were seeding all kinds of mistrust and stoking ethnic separatism. This was 2007, and it was a kind of canary in the coal mine, I guess, about the ability of powerful states with malign intentions to use the Internet and social media to mess with democracy. But it seems as if the West was a little slow to catch on. Is that right? And if so, why? Was the learning curve in seeing the threats of this kind of, you know, cyber meddling so slow to catch on in Western European capitals and in the U.S.?

Phil Howard [00:07:20] I agree that there's a long history of propaganda and there's a recent history to its computational side of things. I would say that Western governments

have learned these techniques and we've found examples of governments that spend money on manipulation. They tend to be programs that are targeted against terrorist attack from other countries. So, for example, the U.K. has a program, a misinformation campaign program that's designed to help prevent young girls from leaving the U.K. to become ISIS brides. And so that's a program where when we do our comparative work and look across countries, we don't compare that kind of program to an offering that a presidential candidate might take up that involves spreading misleading information about when to vote and how to vote safely. And one of the things that's changed since those early Russian experiments in Estonia is that now we have major professional communications firms in the West who apply these techniques, Russian origin techniques with major political candidates in regular campaigns. It's now part of the normal toolkit of a moderate candidate who wants to get elected. And it's difficult to follow the paper trail, the money trail and exactly which clients are subcontracting which services. But this is now a major part of a modern political communication campaign. And it's not about foreign government intervention. It's it's domestic white supremacists. It's local extremists. And it's and it's the occasional political candidate now.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:08:49] Well, Phil, you know, when we look around the world and we see all these places where these sorts of practices seem to be exploiting racial and ethnic fissures, we see that attacks on democracy seem to be intended to fracture the polis, to make it seem like our neighbors are incompatible with us. And we know from your research that bots and automated accounts often focus heavily on race and ethnicity and stoking those divisions. Right. So does this mean that other issues, other differences like economic inequality, access to health care, school quality taxes, foreign policy, those are those typical policy issues that, you know, for years political scientists said were more or less salient in a given election that that maybe they they don't actually resonate in our current political and media ecosystem. I mean, are we seeing something new here now? What are the interests and concerns and divisions that these lie machines exploit the most?

Phil Howard [00:09:52] I think it's safe to say that going forward, every budget bill, every tax bill, every complex humanitarian disaster, every school shooting, every referendum question will come with some kind of automated, or troll based campaign for it or against it blaming political Islam or blaming local African-American communities. And you're right, the project of polarizing a public often plays on race. I would say it often plays on gender and sexism. Those are the other kinds of stereotypes that we've seen come out of the foreign actors and the domestic actors that are trying to muddy political issues and poison public life. I would say that there's an interesting difference, though, something we've noticed since the Hong Kong protests and since COVID. There's a difference between what the Russian government's misinformation campaign looks like and what the Chinese government's misinformation campaign looks like. We knew the Chinese government had capacity on social media platforms. We didn't see them exercise that capacity until the Hong Kong protest began about nine months ago. And of course, it's very strange because these are platforms that Chinese users in mainland China can't actually themselves access. And this is content that the Chinese government is putting out in English. So it's it's clearly geared for us. Now, the Russian strategy involves accounts that have existed for a long time, 5, 6, 10 years, and they talk about soccer scores and post pictures of flowers and soap operas. And then very slowly, they start talking about politics and they take a long time to groom, and they're very difficult for Facebook to catch. The Chinese strategy is a much more bulk strategy. They simply purchase 40,000 fake accounts. They'll set them up in one, you know, one or two days. They won't even bother with names and pictures. They'll give the accounts numbers right? And they'll just they'll

just release them in a massive lob of misinformation. Now, we're still trying to figure out as researchers which mode is most effective. There does seem to be some difference in how foreign actors are trying to influence public opinion in the West.

Will Hitchcock [00:11:56] Phil, I know you live and work in the UK, but you may have noticed that we have an election going on here in the United States. (laughter) And we know one of the things that analysts are carefully watching and debating is whether there will be any defection from the camp that voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and whether some of those voters might switch sides and vote for the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. But if I've got your work right, you've drawn on quite a lot of political science data that shows that, in fact, voters rarely change their minds and that it's possible that social media play a huge role in reinforcing voters behaviors and loyalties. It serves as a kind of echo chamber. So I just wanted to ask you to reflect a little bit on the impact of social media on individuals political behaviors. And in particular, do we think, do you think that it's possible that social media can foster the sort of deliberation that we do need to generate consensus or indeed to change minds? Or is it really just the case that we are stuck with this model and these platforms are, as you call them, just lie machines?

Phil Howard [00:13:11] I think we're stuck at the moment, but it's not too late to fix things. So I accept the cynicism, but not the fatalism here. Right? In terms of the November 2020 vote for the U.S. I do think that a lot is riding on the ability of social media platforms to manage the content that they're feeding voters. You know, the big picture cause of the problem here might be the stature of news and institutions of journalism. The proximate cause of the problem is that Facebook and Twitter serve up large amounts of misinformation in the few days before people vote. If the platforms can get their flagging systems right, if they can do the takedowns that they need to do properly, then you stand a better chance of successfully collecting public opinion. Now, one of the key things here is that the most important, probably the most important misinformation campaign that we're tracking anyway for the U.S. is misinformation around the election itself. The process of voting, the interpretation of voting results and the performance of institutions. So what the platforms should be doing is running comprehensive, get out the vote campaigns. I mean, their alerts and reminders to encourage people to vote do help people turn up.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:14:23] Well, Phil, it seems to me that we do what our democratic republics to foster the ability for differently minded people to conflict and compromise and accept defeat when it comes to issues and elections. Right? Democracies are not, as I said about your side winning or my side winning. It's about my side losing and me being okay the next day with my side losing. Knowing that the that the rules were fair, the system will allow for voices that don't necessarily hold power to be respected, that the issues will be deliberated with facts and good faith, right? So that seems to me to be what's missing from our current media ecosystem - some sort of platform for deliberation. Do you have a sense of how our current media ecosystem could foster that kind of deliberation? Or are we stuck in this moment and mood of constant stimulation and motivation?

Phil Howard [00:15:28] I think you really hit on the challenge here. There have been multiple experiments now involving small groups of people deliberating over the weekend, deliberating over the week on the hottest, most divisive issues. And researchers find that when you actually do put people together and the far right meets the far left and your crazy uncle meets the recent immigrant who's faced some of life's great challenges, you build empathy. You'll learn about the real evidence around a problem. And you can, in these small group deliberative processes, arrive at consensus. There's multiple kinds of evidence and others. So I think the route forward is to use social media to try to take

advantage again of that empathy building process. I don't think we can ever take back Facebook. I don't think we'll be able to undo Twitter or take away Instagram. So for me, the answer is, is probably more social media, not less. I know I'm going to get some pushback on this idea, but I'd I don't see how we can take social media out of our media ecosystem. The best thing we can hope for is to have these platforms structured to promote consensus, to identify issues where you actually do agree and push that content up, rather than using those platforms to identify what's controversial or involves dirty pictures and potty mouth words and promoting that content. It's not too late. And I think the system is there if it can if it can have a redesign.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:16:54] Phil, in the last year we've seen Facebook and Twitter try to take more seriously the problem of disinformation and misinformation on their platforms. So we've seen Twitter mask some of President Trump's misinformation about voting rights and about COVID. And we've seen Facebook basically resign themselves to letting everything flow. That's been the general tone of it all and saying they don't want to get in the way of anything that President Trump might say. But just recently, we have seen a new policy when it comes to the advertising platform that Facebook sponsors. Right? So Facebook has promised that no campaigns will be able to purchase new ads in the seven days before the November 3rd election in the United States. Now, of course, that means they can run all of the ads they bought like eight days before the election. But in those last seven days, they won't be able to flood our Facebook newsfeeds with new ads that can't be responded to, that can't be vetted, et cetera. Right? So it seems like they're tapping the brakes here a little bit. This is a departure from Facebook's laissez faire attitude toward politics before. When you look at the big picture of how Facebook and Twitter are responding do you think the people in these companies get the problem? Do you think they're as tuned in to the threats to democracy as they should be?

Phil Howard [00:18:25] I think the platforms in several ways have responded well and proactively to COVID misinformation. I don't think they have signaled that they're going to take just as seriously the same kinds of misinformation around politics and democracy in the election that's coming up. I think the firms, especially Facebook, want us to talk about ads. And I think political ads are somewhat of a diversion from the organic content. I mean, that the stuff generated by trolls or in the misinformation generated by people, and it's that organic content that is so hard to trace and so hard to get rid of and so hard to flag. But that's also the most damaging stuff. I think the program of blocking ads seven days before the election is one of the lessons they learned from Brexit because they did not do that. And there was a huge rush of misinformation in the two or three days before people voted. And the other side of the campaign complied with the spending rules and didn't launch, couldn't afford to launch a response. So it's good there'll be this quiet time. But I sort of agree with you. That means that there's going to be an onslaught of ads in day nine and day eight before people vote. And I think the organic stuff, the misinformation that happens in groups and privately, that's still going to spread. The one other thought I have is that we've seen in recent research that much of the activity we really need to worry about has moved on to Instagram. So I'm happy that Facebook is being proactive on ads. Instagram still doesn't share data. Will this apply to Instagram? And then there's all this other stuff on WhatsApp, the other platforms that are out there. So I think I'm afraid to say drop in the bucket, maybe.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:07] Phil, one of the things that your work has grappled with is the question of privacy and public discourse. You've said in very simple terms, we've lost the privacy war. And on our show, we're concerned with the state of democracy and its health.

That I wonder if you could connect these two. How does losing the privacy war threaten or endanger or challenge democratic processes?

Phil Howard [00:20:30] Well, I think we've lost the privacy war in the sense that we have no control over where our data sits or where it goes, who has it. Most agreements when we give permission to a firm to take our data, most agreements say things like we won't share your data except for any third party organization that we decide to share data with. And effectively, the best data on public life is not in public hands. It's sitting in private hands in massive cloud farms. That is the data that is used to generate political inferences that researchers now use to test and micro target and do their A/B ad modeling. It's that data that really lubricates modern democracy. I think the solution is sharing some of that data about what we want, what we aspire to have out of our democracy, needs to come to the Library of Congress. It needs to sit in the British Library. It needs to go to journalists, independent researchers, to play with. Now, there's another challenge in figuring out how to keep that data secure and anonymized. But at the moment, the public does not have access to the best data about public life. Let's also remember that that data is behavioral data. It's not simple polling data. It's what we actually do on a day to day basis. So it's powerful stuff. And at the moment, only the elite political actors have access to it. And I think it's democratization is going to mean sharing data.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:51] Phil, this is how we feel sometimes that we're in the midst of a of a maelstrom. Social media, news, fake news, the heightened emotions of a political season. So where are we going? What lies ahead in terms of new technologies? And particular, how will artificial intelligence change or either enhance democratic processes or continue to erode them? Where do you anticipate technology going in the next 10 years with respect to these kinds of communication technologies that shape our political discourse?

Phil Howard [00:22:21] I think artificial intelligence and machine learning tools are going to have a role in public life. They're going to have a role in modern politics. And if some lobbyist somewhere can pay a computer scientist to take data from our mobile phones, from our smart TV's and use it to produce political personalities for us, they will pitch messages that we already are most likely to respond well to, a lobbyist will do that. I mean, this is enough behavioral research at this point that male voters respond well to female pitches with a woman's voice. And women voters respond well to men with a deep voice. There's enough cues now that's the combination of rich data production of fake videos, fake announcers and fake news could get more and more sophisticated and polarizers even further. It's not too late for some public policy oversight on this, but I think it's likely that A.I. and machine learning will have a role in our in our politics in the next few years.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:18] But you said that you want more social media in a way to continue to push back. So how will artificial intelligence become a lever for progressive forces to fight back? Is there any way to balance the playing field?

Phil Howard [00:23:33] I think - this is looking far ahead - But I think one of our assumptions when we talk about A.I. is that A.I. will involve large platforms that serve significant firms or significant parties or significant political actors. It's also plausible that machine learning tools will be available to us as citizens and that we'll be able to use our own A.I. to sift through the dreck and prevent the fake news from actually reaching our inbox. Now that that may fragment us in other ways or prevent us from having good conversations that build empathy. But A.I. doesn't necessarily need to serve only corporate interests. The real problem will be if A.I. continues to work with the kinds of data that

contains so many biases and sources of discrimination and perpetuate these institutional sources of inequality. The real battle will be whether A.I. is involved in public policymaking without clean, new, fresh datasets built with the sensitivities that are needed for preserving multiracial, diverse society that I think many of us actually want to live in.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:39] Well, Phil Howard, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Phil Howard [00:24:43] Thank you both. May I ask you a question before we sign off?

Will Hitchcock [00:24:59] Yes.

Phil Howard [00:25:00] So I find this work is starting to get tough in the sense that it's been five or six years of studying this stuff. And now with Trump in the White House generating so much of it, I'm on the edge of burnout and barely able to track the stuff. And I had a look over your other podcasts and the kind of people you're talking about. How do you two feel at this point? I mean, what are your hopes for November?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:23] Well, I think one of the reasons that we needed to do this podcast was to talk to our friends.

Phil Howard [00:25:30] To able to talk about it.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:31] Yeah, even though we didn't really know everybody, we interviewed all that well. But I mean, like I think psychologically, emotionally, we needed to talk through some of this stuff. Not for any sort of reassurance but just to clarify, you know. I think I get I get tremendous comfort out of hearing someone who has been staring into the abyss and has come out of it with coherent sentences. Just knowing that that's possible. Because every time I stare into the abyss, I'm not sure I emerge with coherence.

Phil Howard [00:26:06] I know what you mean.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:07] I agree with that 100 percent. There's a tendency to just stare at the ceiling in despair. And I certainly have that tendency. In talking to students, you know, we're back in the classroom, so to speak, digitally. But seeing students is really encouraging. Talking to smart colleagues who can put things in perspective is enormously encouraging. It doesn't mean that things are going well. It's just you have a sense that one isn't in this alone with your phone.

Phil Howard [00:26:33] That's true.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:33] It doesn't mean that things are well. It just means that if we go down, at least we go down together.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:39] You know our second interview with Federico Finkelstein, who's a historian of Latin America. The fact that he's lived under fascism and doesn't anymore, like that fact alone is comforting. You know that, yeah, things can get a lot worse than they are today and probably will, but they can also come back. You know, that helps. I mean, it's not enough all the time.

Phil Howard [00:27:02] Right. But I think I think the key thing there is that in that sense, there's a little bit of faith involved. And I sort of feel like I'm operating on faith. The fumes of faith at the moment.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:13] If I can recommend, like a book that has helped me more than I ever thought it would over the past couple of years. And that's Trevor Noah's book about his mother. And it's like, you know, it's not a profound work of political thought. But it's about, you know, a black woman who married a white man when it was not legal and she and her son suffered greatly under apartheid. And yet her fortitude really puts any of my fears to shame. Right? I mean, it's really hard to indulge myself in despair when she, you know, just lived it. And, yeah, I mean, there are hundreds of books that give us testimony of people who've been through worse situations.

Phil Howard [00:28:00] Thank you for sharing.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:02] But that one in particular only because it's about events that we witnessed in our lifetimes. And a system of oppression that's all too fresh for us, you know, kind of helped.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:12] Siva, I agree. I mean, we're in the middle of a global economic crisis. We're in the middle of a political crisis of democracy, and we're facing a global pandemic. And the result of all of this is that we've had to be isolated. We've had to be separated. We haven't had the joy of friends and and of family gatherings that normally sustain you in times of crisis. And I know for me, talking to other friends and scholars, talking to you, sharing our concerns and our anxieties in a constructive way has been enormously helpful. But also, as you say, we've gotten some perspective. I mean, the Black Lives Matter moment that we've just passed through is a source of inspiration. Look at the trajectory. Look at the larger trajectory. Keep that in mind and gain some comfort from that.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:02] That's all we have for this episode. Next time, our Democracy in Danger we'll talk to Jennifer Mercieca of Texas A&M University about anti-democratic political rhetoric, specifically the president's.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:29:14] In 2015, we had a crisis of polarization and distrust and frustration. Trump didn't cause these things, of course. He just took advantage of them and used them as a wedge.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:27] Have you spotted a bot or troll on Twitter? Have you been duped by a fake news site or a group on Facebook? What can we do to inoculate ourselves? We want to hear from you. Tell us your story. Let us know what you think of the show and share us with your followers. We're on Twitter @UVAMediaLab or on the Web at medialab.virginia.edu

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:48] Democracy in Danger is available on SoundCloud, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. And don't miss the chance to join us on the air. We'll be doing a live episode in November.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:01] The show is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our fabulous interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:08] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. This program is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast hub of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:26] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Until next time.