

Democracy in Danger S1E12 Trump Speak

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

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

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Well, this week, Will and I are going to delve into one of the oldest areas of knowledge: rhetoric. You know, once upon a time, rhetoric was a core subject in American universities. It was right up there with theology and Greek and Latin. And these days, rhetorical analysis is finding new fans and new students, thanks in part to increased attention being paid to how politicians and corporate leaders manipulate us with their words. Especially, and we can't be shy about this, President Donald Trump.

Donald Trump [00:00:42] COVID19. That name gets further and further away from China as opposed to calling it the Chinese virus.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:50] Yeah, well, it might seem puzzling to associate an erratic Sunday morning tweet storm kind of president like Donald Trump with this ancient craft of rhetoric. But as our guest today shows, Trump has demonstrated genuine skill in the art of political communication.

Donald Trump [00:01:09] I saved hundreds of thousands of lives. We don't ever get even a mention.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:17] Well, to find out just how good Trump is, we've invited Jennifer Mercieca to join us on the show. Jen is a scholar of political rhetoric at Texas A&M University and the author of the new book *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump*. Jen, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:01:36] Thank you so much for having me on the show.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:38] So let's jump right into the title of the book. What is a demagogue? It's a term that we've heard thrown around a lot in the last four years, but it does have a more traditional specific meaning and etymology. But more important, is Donald Trump a demagogue and how does he qualify as one?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:01:58] Yeah, so the literal translation of the word demagogue in Greek is a leader of the people and it's a neutral term. And so, you know, we would actually want someone to lead the people to emerge maybe from the people to lead. We're not used to thinking of a demagogue that way. So if you look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary, the first definition of a demagogue is, you know, sort of a heroic figure. It is someone who defends the interests of the people against the other parts of the state. The second definition in the OED is a more villainous or dangerous figure. And that is someone who uses polarizing propaganda for their own benefit. And so what I argue in my book is that Donald Trump is both the heroic demagogue and the villainous or dangerous demagogue. And it depends on how you understand him. So to his supporters, he has convinced them that he is defending their interests against the other parts of the state,

which he has convinced them are corrupt. And then for everyone else, they see him as someone who uses polarizing propaganda for his own gain.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:03:10] Well, Jen, you know, Donald Trump calls himself "a very stable genius". And you use the word genius in the title of your book. So I just I've been itching to ask you this question. You know, a lot of people, including myself, were, you know, will we listen to him and sometimes he sounds like he can barely put a coherent sentence together. And so when we hear him say he's a genius, I can't help but laugh. Am I missing something? Is he is he practiced in some way, or disciplined in some way that I can't see or I refuse to see? What is the source of his genius?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:03:47] I've had a lot of people ask me about this part of the title. So, you know, one way of saying what I'm trying to say with the title is his demagogic effectiveness. And that is a term that comes from a rhetorical theorist named Kenneth Burke when he wrote about Hitler and Mein Kampf. And he explained, you know, Hitler's rhetorical strategies in Mein Kampf. And he described it as his demagogic effectiveness, like these are the effective strategies that he uses to be a successful demagogue. You know, marketing being what it is, I didn't think that 'the rhetorical demagogic effectiveness of Donald Trump' would sell so many books or be, you know, meaningful for people. You know, it is kind of a wink wink, you know, when I say he's a genius. I actually have an index of how many times, you know, he calls himself a genius in my book. Which is quite a few.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:45] It has to be true, then, right? If you repeat it enough times.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:04:48] But at the same time, Donald Trump has controlled our public sphere for five years. That is nearly impossible in the attention economy that we have today. He has turned every political question into an up or down referendum on Donald Trump, which serves his interests. He has solidified a base in a way that we've never seen a president do. And he is, you know, in fact, very effective. He is a rhetorical genius at demagoguery.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:23] Well, let's dive into some of the nuts and bolts here. So you have a kind of a matrix of the sort of rhetorical tropes or tricks in his bag that he uses in his public communication. And you write that some of these tricks are designed to unite people around certain ideas or grievances. But the others are very explicitly designed to set Americans against each other. So there's a unifier and a divider at work at the same time. Give us a couple of examples of these strategies and, you know, you examine what he was doing in 2016. But is this still in the playbook for 2020?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:05:57] Oh, yeah, absolutely. So I got started, you know, really the beginning of Trump's campaign, largely because of what Lindsey Graham said.

Lindsay Graham [00:06:07] There are some people who love Donald Trump and say that he's speaking the truth. What I think he's doing is being a demagogue. I think he's uninformed...

Jennifer Mercieca [00:06:14] He called him a demagogue, trying to destroy the Republican Party or something like that in July of 2015.

Lindsay Graham [00:06:21] I think he's hijacked the debate. I think he's a wrecking ball for the future of the Republican Party. And we need to push back.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:06:27] And then in late November, early December 2015, The New York Times invited me to participate in a week long analysis of Trump's rhetoric. And they wanted me to, you know, see what I saw or what I heard that we can, you know, if there were any instances of demagoguery. And so I took notes and took it seriously. So there are things that he does that I think helped to bond him with his followers. And the first one is probably the most important one for him, and that's ad populum: appealing to the wisdom of the crowd. And the way he does it is, you know, Trump's crowd. He appeals to the wisdom of Trump's people. They're the smartest. They're the best. They're the most patriotic.

Donald Trump [00:07:12] Those people in North Carolina. That stadium was packed. It was a record crowd. And I could have filled it 10 times, as you know. Those are incredible people. Those are incredible patriots.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:07:23] All of the best parts of America are represented in Trump's people. And so, you know, he puts himself as the leader of the best part of America. And that really does a lot to bond him to his people. And it also gives him power because he can wield those people like a cudgel. And he does. So, you know, a demagogue would be nothing without followers, without loyal followers. And Trump uses ad populum, you know, daily to solidify his base. The second thing that he uses is paralipsis. Paralipsis can be understood colloquially, as "I'm not saying. I'm just saying." And everybody loves this one. It's great for Trump because it allows him to say two things at once. To not say and also say at the same time, it connects him to his base because it allows his base to think that they understand, you know, the real behind the scenes Trump what he really, really thinks. And it makes him seem authentic. It's it's an act, I believe, but it makes him seem like he is an authentic truth teller.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:33] But that's probably also a kind of permission structure. Right. So that you can believe in conspiracy theories that maybe other people have promoted.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:08:40] Oh, absolutely. He uses paralipsis to circulate rumor and innuendo and conspiracy. And it's often framed in like the language of conspiracy. So he'll say, you know, no one's going to tell you this. They don't talk about this. The media won't report this. You know, I'm not supposed to say this.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:01] But Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of John Kennedy.

Donald Trump [00:09:05] You know, his father was with Lee Harvey Oswald prior to Oswald being shot. I think it's ridiculous.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:09:15] It's a fantastic story because it emerges from like one guy who's associated with Infowars. And, you know, moves from the extreme right wing fringe, conspiracy fringe, to being mainstreamed by Trump. You know, and propaganda theorists call that 'narrative laundering'. There's quite a few examples in my book of Trump doing that, whether it's mainstreaming or laundering, white nationalist content or, you know, things from the manosphere, conspiracy theorists like Infowars. Trump did that a lot in 2016. And I think that would be surprising to his base. You know, they wouldn't have suspected it.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:09:54] Were those choices strategic or is that just what's flowing by his eyes?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:10:00] Yeah. So there's the story of Muslim refugees. And the first thing that Trump said about Muslim refugees, was...

Donald Trump [00:10:11] It's so horrible on a humanitarian basis.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:10:14] We should accept them. It's a humanitarian crisis and we have to help.

Donald Trump [00:10:19] And the answer is possibly, yes. Gokey Possibly, yes.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:10:23] And if you look at the reaction to those thoughts from Breitbart from Infowars and other like right wing anti-Muslim blogs, it was very severe and it was very much like maybe Trump hasn't really thought this through. Maybe Trump doesn't know what he's talking about. Maybe Trump isn't our guy after all. You know, we thought he was on the right side of the nationalist question. And here he is saying that he's going to accept all of these refugees if he if he wins.

Donald Trump [00:10:56] Its a huge problem. And we should help as much as possible.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:10:59] And it didn't take very long for him to reconsider that position and to, in fact, reverse it. And as he did that, he adopted their language, which I explained as a reification, where he treated people as objects coming into this country.

Donald Trump [00:11:16] And we have no idea where they come from, folks.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:11:21] And that was to frame the refugees as a Trojan horse.

Donald Trump [00:11:25] And I don't want to be known, in 200 years, for having created the Trojan horse.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:11:30] As something that looked benign but was actually an army.

Donald Trump [00:11:32] We don't know where these people come from. We don't know if they have love or hate in their heart. And there's no way to tell.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:11:39] That's really fascinating. You know, we we've been thinking a lot about how media systems have changed over the late 20th and early 21st century and really got us to this point and not just in the United States, but around the world. You know, to the point where so many of our media systems seed extremism, perhaps extremism comes in the form of misogyny. Perhaps extremism comes in the form of white supremacy. And our president seems to have this insistence on refining and focusing those things. And, you know, clearly, if you look at the biography of Donald Trump, he is a product of and an active player in the creation of our current media ecosystem, from reality TV to Howard Stern to the tabloids to Twitter. And then, you know, all of his stuff echoes on Facebook and YouTube as well. How do you see his rhetorical style connecting to the changes in our media systems over the past 30 years?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:12:46] Yeah, that's such a great observation. I think that Trump has really calibrated his rhetorical strategies to outreach media, which is a really smart choice,

considering his base and considering how outrage attracts attention and engagement. You know, so I call him the outrage president. He calls himself modern day presidential. But I think that's just code for outrage. And I think that, you know, the way that he wields conspiracy, he's very comfortable with that. And again, I think that's another sort of engagement trick. Conspiracy is really appealing in terms of those metrics of attention and engagement. And also, of course, it's unquestionable self sealing narrative. I think, you know, the way that he uses social media, it makes him seem authentic. I don't think that he's more authentic than, say, Barack Obama was when Barack Obama used social media. But the style and manner of it, you know, with the capitalization and punctuation and spelling errors and the emotive content, all of that is very different from what you saw, you know, someone like Obama do. But, you know, I went back and found an interview from his social media director who said that the goal was to make Trump seem authentic.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:16] So does that mean he makes those mistakes on purpose? That's designed to make him look like a regular guy?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:14:24] I think so. I've read articles that say that -that say that, you know, he's not always tweeting, but he will, you know, look at scripts or whatever and say, you know, can you spell that wrong or make that all caps or whatever. I believe that. You know, one of the things that was surprising for a lot of people was listening to Trump on tape with Bob Woodward. And he had, in early February of 2020, a pretty solid command of the basic facts of the Coronavirus. He understood and conveyed those facts in a way that we don't see him do publicly. And so I think the reason why that was so surprising is that people take Trump at face value. They take the performance as the reality. And I don't. I see the performance as part of the spectacle. And I see him as a demagogue of the spectacle. I don't think he's an idiot, like the left does. And I don't think he's a hero, like the right does.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:25] Well, a genius can be a mad genius, but a genius nonetheless.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:15:28] For sure.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:29] Let me ask you to come back to a specific incident that you write about that really makes chills run down my spine even now. And this maybe we can talk a little bit about whether this is intentional or just kind of part of his gut instinct. So in August 2016, he's still a candidate. And Trump tells a crowd at a rally that the only way to stop Hillary Clinton might be to resort to what he calls the Second Amendment, and this would be later described as you report, as an assassination dog whistle. Well, why would something like that work politically? I mean, it was clear that this is some kind of invitation to violence, if not outright murder. Why would such a thing resonate? What is it about the the message that works? I have to say that in most people's minds, such a message would be perceived to be horrible and awful and immoral. But somehow Trump managed to turn such a thing to his advantage.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:16:31] Yeah, I think it works the same way that war rhetoric works. Right? So Trump had really figured Hillary Clinton as part of, or the leader of, the conspiracy of corruption that had plagued the United States for decades. And he said explicitly, which was untrue, but he said explicitly that her plan was to open up the borders, let all of these dangerous criminals into the country, to take away American's Second Amendment rights and take away their guns and leave them exposed.

Donald Trump [00:17:09] Hillary wants to abolish or essentially abolish the Second Amendment.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:17:13] And allow them to be victimized by these vicious invaders. You know, and that's war rhetoric. And so for him to say, you know, maybe the Second Amendment people could do something about that.

Donald Trump [00:17:26] Nothing you could do, folks, although the Second Amendment people? Maybe there is. I don't know.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:17:31] But, you know, it really makes no sense within the context of understanding this, not as just a political campaign, but as, you know, lead up to civil war.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:43] Well, you know. I find myself a little bit confused at this point, because as I reflect on the past five years and the statements and insults and everything else from Trump, and the way that his choices are echoed through Fox News, through Infowars, through, you know, a dozen or 100 different surrogates and different social media and regular media forms. So to what extent is he just a bully shooting from the hip? I mean, he's using his power to insult people who, you know, nicknames like Crooked Hillary and Sleepy Joe, and he's mocked disabled people and he's declared that Mexicans are rapists and shamelessly and in rapid fire succession. So it's hard for me to grasp the thoughtfulness of this pattern. And it's hard for me to grant it the title of rhetoric. All right. Because to me, you know, a rhetorician is someone who is practiced at delivering a message. Whether that message is sincere, manipulative or whatever it is. Our introduction to rhetoric is all through, you know, classical sources and we're introduced to fancy Greek words. So how did how did middle school insults become rhetoric?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:18:58] Yeah, that's such a great question. So the ad hominem attacks, right, these insults that you talk about, threats of force or intimidation, those things that, you know, equate to the schoolyard bully, they are typically understood to be fallacies. They're errors of logic or reason. If you were in competitive debate, you know, in high school or college and your opponent did an ad hominem, you would raise a point of personal privilege and you would appeal to the judge and you would say, you know, this is what happened. You know, this is against the rules. And, you know, the judge would adjudicate whether or not it had happened. And in denying the standing of that person who had made those attacks because they're grievous errors of debate. Right. So there's that. But Trump is a demagogue and the way that he uses language is as force. What I mean by that is that it denies the consent of the governed. It's compliance gaining and not rhetoric in the way that, you know, we understand rhetoric in the best sense of the word, which is a meeting of minds where one person tries to convince another person to think or feel or understand or remember in the same way that they do. And, you know, affirms that that person has the freedom to choose whether or not to change their mind and adopt those opinions. You know, that's a very idealistic view of what rhetoric is and what it could and should be. Very Aristotelian view, Kantian view, whatever. But Trump doesn't care about that. He cares about effectiveness. Right. He cares about exerting his will on another. He doesn't want to affirm their human dignity. He doesn't see the eminent value of persons. And he doesn't care about whether he has convinced you to obey and agree based on compliance or freewill. And I think that's the difference that you're trying to sort out.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:04] You know, we try to think through some of these problems and imagine what solutions there might be out there to deal with the many crises that

democracy in the U.S. and around the world is facing now. And this is a big one. And we might put it this way. Our democracy has encouraged an extraordinarily robust debate and argument, but it has started to morph into a public sphere in which sexism, racism and hate speech has penetrated and started to warp our public discourse. You know, just to be provocative. Are we at the time when we have to police our public language better? Is that the solution? And if that's not the solution, what is for constraining, containing, moderating these kind of rhetorical tricks that actually are extraordinarily dangerous?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:21:49] They are dangerous and it's anti-democratic. You're right. It's authoritarian to use language as force because it denies consent. And so, you know, I'm very concerned about our broken public sphere. And that's what I'm trying to work on now. So, you know, 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. And, of course, all of those things are even worse now. Part of the reason I think that our public sphere is so broken is, as I mentioned before, those metrics of attention and engagement that the whole public sphere seems to work on, just aren't conducive to good decision making. Right. If we're constantly posting our most outrageous takes in order to get the most likes and retweets and the most followers, you know that outrage isn't solving any political problems. And in fact, it creates more problems because it alienates people. It silos people into us versus them. You know, the way that the algorithms and the apps and all of that operate are really about attention and engagement. And those are just terrible metrics for solving problems. They're great for the app makers. And, you know, the people who are making money off of commercials and stuff, but bad for everybody else.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:20] Well, Jane, you've just hit on one of the core themes of Democracy in Danger. This entire series is trying to lead us ultimately to consider ways we might strengthen the norms and practices of democracy. And one of those core norms and practices is deliberation. Right. How can we actually build up our deliberative muscles, the sources of our information that can be well vetted and thus deliberated about comfortably, confidently, agreeably? How can we respect each other despite differences of opinion? How can we refrain from dehumanizing each other in the process of our political engagements? These are all big challenges.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:24:04] Yeah. One thing I would say, you note, is that people who study deliberative democracy and democratic deliberation, you know, they know the best practices for how to organize a productive conversation that makes people feel as though they have participated meaningfully in making a decision that arrives at conclusions that people can feel comfortable with. Whether you call that consensus or not, you know, it's up to you. But there are centers for Democratic deliberation at universities around the country. Some of them get involved in like state issues and move around and do these kinds of deliberative practices, you know, throughout their states. And they do good work. And those people should be listened to because they actually have good ideas. The Kettering Foundation is another one where anyone can get trained and use their issue guides and start forums in the public sphere, in their community. And, you know, we can relearn the skills that are required, you know, for democratic deliberation. We can do that.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:11] We'll see if it works. Jen, I mean, American historians look at Trump and on the one hand, he seems strikingly original, new, unprecedented. But they also recognize some of his moves, his act. There have been other demagogues that have been quite successful in American political history. Some remained on the margins of American public life. But maybe a couple even got to the White House, right?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:25:35] Yeah, absolutely. And what you see is that each new media invention or innovation is seized upon by people who want to lead the public. And some of those people end up being president and others are kept from, you know, offices of power. And, you know, even going back into the 19th century to think about the way that Andrew Jackson took advantage of the emergent partisan press of the 1820s. People argue whether or not Donald Trump is the most successful demagog in American history. In my book, I had originally said he IS the most successful and the only edit that I got I mean, from reviewers, from the editorial board, from the press...The one edit that I got was I had to say 'one of' the most successful demagogues in American history.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:28] Right. Well, you know that. I mean, the Republican Party in the 30s and 40s was apoplectic about FDR as demagogic talents and the spell he cast over America with his radio driven intimacy. Right? So, I mean, how does that compare to Trump?

Will Hitchcock [00:26:45] The heroic demagogue.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:26:47] Yeah, that's right. And, you know, that's the difference. If you look back to ancient Greece, the distinction between the heroic demagogue and the dangerous demagogue is whether or not they're accountable for their words and actions. And so Donald Trump is, in my mind, very different from FDR in that he uses language specifically to prevent us from holding him accountable. And no one's been able to hold him accountable since.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:14] What about their rhetorical styles - comparing FDR to Trump - what about their rhetorical styles insulates Trump from accountability?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:27:24] Yeah. So FDR, you know, he had the intimacy through radio. If you read his speeches, he uses, you know, typical reasoning patterns to try to help his audience. The American people understand the problem that the nation is facing from his perspective, his analysis of, you know, what the choices are and then what the best course of action is. And in some of those things are incredibly revolutionary, you know, sort of radical in the moment. In other ways, he co-ops, you know, existing discourses that are circulating, you know, then from communists and from socialists and other viable options in the moment and he makes them democratic. So he's very successful at turning what could have been really radical ideas into sort of mainstream American, you know, Democratic slash capitalist talking points.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:23] Whenever I try to get my daughter or listen to this podcast, she rolls her eyes. And as a parent yourself, you probably know what that eye rolling looks like. She calls this a nerd fest. She's pretty obsessed with the fact that, you know...

Will Hitchcock [00:28:40] I resemble that remark!

Jennifer Mercieca [00:28:40] What's wrong with that?!

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:44] But, you know, I can't argue with her. I cop to it. I mean, it's one of the thrills of having these conversations with so many interesting people who are writing so deeply about issues that are so crucial to our time and our future. And so I'm wondering about whether rhetoric in general, the study of rhetoric is undergoing a

significant update or change, or whether you think it should if it's not? You know, I mean, we live in a world in which rhetoric also consists of emojis and text messages and memes on Instagram and 280 character statements on Twitter. Flows and comments. How does your field make sense of this proliferation of communicative styles?

Jennifer Mercieca [00:29:33] Definitely younger scholars are interested in all of the new cool things, you know.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:40] And me!

Jennifer Mercieca [00:29:45] In a lot of ways despite, you know, my giggling and my ability to tweet out a memes about rhetoric, you know, that people will actually, you know, circulate. I'm an old school rhetorician. I talk about argumentation and democracy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:05] Right.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:30:06] You know, and not everybody is doing that anymore in rhetoric. So it is a broad field. So I have actually made it a point and I've had a lot of opportunity because of Trump, but I've really made it a point to try to talk to the public and with the public about rhetoric. Rhetoric's cool.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:27] Words may have gotten us into this trouble. But I like your idea that words can also get us out of it and heal us. Jennifer Mercieca, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Jennifer Mercieca [00:30:39] It was my pleasure. Thank you for the wonderful conversation.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:50] Siva, what a great stimulating conversation with Jen about demagogue as president, which is what Donald Trump she thinks really is. And has forced us to think about what has happened to us politically in the last four years. What have we learned about ourselves? How do we reason through political problems as a society when the source of information and the source of so much of our political conversation is Donald Trump, who is a skillful manipulator of reality, and we have to now assess whether or not we can rebuild ourselves after these four years of having a demagogue as president.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:25] I mean, one of the things that that I've sensed just sort of standing back and feeling it all wash over me, is that the rapid fire effect of Trump's rhetorical choices that, you know, might be intuitive to him, might be practiced, might be strategic or tactical, has the effect of dislodging whatever we were mad about the day before or whatever he might be on the verge of being held accountable for the day before. And we're onto a new thing. You know, I don't know of any other American politician who even tried that.

Will Hitchcock [00:32:02] Oh, oh, oh. Pick me. Pick me. Of course, Senator Joseph McCarthy, you know, used that tactic to perfection. And it was perhaps the first time in which somebody would knowingly put a falsehood into the media by holding a press conference, then send the media, you know, running around Washington, trying to to fact check these loopy accusations and then greet the press the next day with an entirely new set of falsehoods. He did this for four years. He exhausted the press. He had them running around Washington, trying to track down something that he had said two weeks ago that then had cooled and no one cared about. So to what end? You might ask? I mean, Trump

became president. He took the White House. He has some sense of greater ambition and McCarthy couldn't keep up the act. So in a way, he's nowhere near as successful a demagogue as Trump. And at a moment when trust in institutions is at an all time low. So he's hitting the moment perfectly with his particular skill set, wouldn't you say?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:00] And hitting a particular set of media institutions that are primed for it, as Jen pointed out earlier. The attention economy, the notion that clicks, shares, likes and comments are the currency of our moment plays perfectly into someone who is willing to engage in this sort of rapid fire strategy. Right? So, I mean, I gosh, my mind's going a million miles a minute. Everything suddenly makes sense. You know, it's like things are suddenly clearer.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:34] Well, one of the reasons we have such bright people onto our show is to help bring clarity to our very confused and muddled political moment. I mean, nothing seems as difficult to understand as our current lack of information about the president's health. He's tested positive for Covid19, but we still really don't know a great deal of information about his current status, his current health. And this is just one example and a very, very serious one, of the ways which information has been shaped or molded or manipulated during the Trump presidency. And I think we've really gotten some insight this week into how rhetoric and manipulation of reality can be a very corrosive factor in our political life.

Donald Trump [00:34:15] And one thing that's for certain. Don't let it dominate you. Don't be afraid of it. You're going to beat it. We have the best medical equipment. We have the best medicines, all developed recently. And you're got to beat it. We're going back. I'm back to work. I'm going to be out front. As your leader. I had to do that. I knew there's danger to it, but I had to do it. I stood out front. I led. Nobody that's a leader would not do what I did. And I know there's a risk, there's a danger. But that's OK. And now I'm better. And maybe I'm immune. I don't know.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:54] That does it for this episode of Democracy in Danger. Next week, we'll hear from Yale University philosopher Jason Stanley. He'll have a lot to tell us about the F word.

Jason Stanley [00:35:07] Fascist politics works in democracies. Plato argues that democracy will straightforwardly lead to tyranny because democracy enables a tyrant to say whatever they want to so fear and present himself as the protector.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:24] Send us your own rhetorical flourishes in the meantime. We're on Twitter @UVAMediaLab. Or if you want to go old school, send an email to uvamedialab@virginia.edu. Let us know what you think of the show. Share your suggestions with us for season two coming up in the New Year.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:42] You can catch all of our past episodes on almost any podcast platform. And, of course, on our Web site. Our Web site is medialab.virginia.edu/democracyindanger.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:54] The show is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:36:01] 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 Network of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:21] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you here again next time.