

Democracy in Danger

S1 E7 DisinformationWars

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

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

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

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:12] In 2017, soon after the election of Donald Trump, we learned of some troubling ways that Vladimir Putin's government, through companies it sponsored, had flooded Facebook with fake groups and false messages. And had populated Twitter with bots meant to undermine trust in American democracy. But the fact is, this wasn't a new game. The United States was just the latest victim of this sort of information attack.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:39] Siva, our listeners know we've been trying to understand the range of threats to democratic practices and institutions around the world. Some of those threats are homegrown and we've talked about those, but some really do come from outside sources. And in many cases, they're working together in tandem to destabilize democratic institutions.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:59] Yeah. And while it's way too simple to say that what benefits Donald Trump necessarily undermines democracy, in the case of the 2016 U.S. election, Russia had both goals in mind to spread general distrust in our political system and to use social media to favor its preferred candidate.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:20] Well, our guest today has written about those efforts, and her work shows that the tactics used here in the U.S., in 2016, had been tested out in Europe not long before Donald Trump's election. Nina Jankowicz, is a scholar in residence at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. and she's the author of a new book, How to Lose the Information War: Russia Fake News and the Future of Conflict. Nina, welcome to the show.

Nina Jankowicz [00:01:45] It's great to be with you.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:48] So, Nina, you lived in Ukraine in 2016. And in your book, you tell the story of how a Russian backed disinformation campaign worked against Ukraine's efforts to strengthen its ties with the European Union. Now, this may seem kind of foggy to a lot of American listeners, but you place it right at the center piece of a larger story of disinformation that starts in Europe and that has huge consequences. Can you walk us through that story? Tell us a little bit about it and how it preceded what was going to happen in the United States?

Nina Jankowicz [00:02:24] Sure. So in 2016, Ukraine was basically on this path to Euro Atlantic integration. A couple of years before they had a big revolution, which I'm sure many of your listeners remember. It was all in favor of this, you know, greater Western integration. And it was predicated on the signing of this document, Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union. Every country in the European Union had ratified that document except for the Netherlands. And in this opportunity, Russia saw that it could achieve goals of undermining Ukraine's Euro Atlantic integration and undermining

European unity. The Netherlands called a referendum on the association agreement, and Russia unleashed a sea of falsehoods in the Dutch media on YouTube, even at town halls in the Netherlands. It dispatched people there to say that they were Ukrainians when indeed they were not, talk about how Ukraine was a corrupt society, all of these really malicious falsehoods were unleashed. And basically, there was nothing that Ukraine could do about that. They tried to create a really positive comms campaign through their Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But because of the inherent skepticism of the EU in the Netherlands, and this very strong negative communications campaign coming from the Kremlin, that was all put up for grabs. And I think, you know, this event was a harbinger for what was to come in Brexit. And, of course, in the 2016 election here in the United States. And I think it shows, you know, it's not just about telling a good story. We can't just bring people back into the fold of democracy by telling them why it's good, because disinformation targets people's emotions. It targets their real visceral feelings and reactions to the political systems of which they are a part. And we need to address those root causes if we're going to solve these problems.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:04:27] Nina, that raises a couple of questions, things I've been kind of curious about. First of all, do you have a good sense of how disinformation actually works in a democracy? Like what it does to us? And the other thing about this is, right along with all of this disinformation, Russia was up to cyber warfare as well. Right? So trying to hack systems, trying to use phishing to get into systems, they managed to get into certain troves of emails affiliated with certain candidates. And we know that this didn't just start happening in the United States. It happened in places like Estonia - before 2010 from what I can see. And you know, Estonia has been dealing with this kind of cyber warfare for a number of years. What's the relationship between cyber warfare and information warfare and how does information warfare actually work?

Nina Jankowicz [00:05:20] Sure. So cyber warfare can be a component of a disinformation campaign. You brought up, I think, the hack and leak of the DNC emails in 2016. Similar operations have occurred across Europe as well. They inform disinformation campaigns. And actually, first, draft news calls that mal-information, not disinformation. So it's the release of information that may not have already been public with malign intent. And that's what the hacking leak was with the DNC. So they can be distinct things. Cyber warfare can inform disinformation campaigns, it can also exist on its own. We've seen Russia attack power grids in Ukraine. We've seen them attempt to access voter rolls and voting infrastructure here in the United States. That also feeds into a bit of a disinformation campaign about what Russia is capable of. Right? But we have no evidence that they actually altered any of the voting infrastructure or voting rolls here. But there is a lot of doubt and distrust in the process right now as we head toward 2020. And that, of course, benefits Russia in the long run. How does disinformation work? There's a big misconception that disinformation is about fake news, cut and dry fakes. And I actually had a conversation with my publisher about whether we should use the term fake news in the subtitle of the book, because I think it's really misleading. This stuff isn't just about fakes, right? It's about emotion. It's about the manipulation of people's emotions and these deep seated beliefs that they hold. It's not just that they're buying into bad Photoshop jobs, often on the Internet. Something deep down in what these narratives are putting forth is really resonating with them. And that's true when you look across the case studies in my book in Estonia in 2007, playing on ethnic Russians misgivings toward their government there as that government pursued Euro Atlantic integration and kind of left them behind, playing on ethnic issues in Ukraine or in Georgia, playing on anti-Muslim sentiments in the Czech Republic. All of these things aren't things that Russia created, right? They exist in society. And we've seen the same thing in the United States playing on racial tensions, economic

tensions, white supremacy that's endemic to the United States. And Russia is very good at finding these fissures, amplifying them and making them bigger, driving larger and larger cracks into our society.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:44] Nina, it seems that the U.S. government is quite divided about how to confront this threat of disinformation, whether it's Russian or coming from other places around the world. The intelligence communities, the defense community understands and sees a very serious threat to American democracy. But it also seems as if, you know, the White House and the partisans inside the government don't want to credit this threat as being very serious. So as citizens, where can we turn for guidance on how to deal with a disinformation threat if the government itself seems so unsteady and divided?

Nina Jankowicz [00:08:26] Yeah, you're absolutely right that this issue has been politicized because it affects the very legitimacy on which Donald Trump was elected. Unfortunately, I don't think the media have gotten it entirely right yet. We're still seeing a lot of false equivocation about disinformation campaigns and the provenance of information that was obtained illegally, such as through hack and leak operations. I think academia is doing a pretty good job of grappling with these issues. But for a lot of people, academia is extremely inaccessible. I'm glad that this podcast exists so that it can be, you know, a way for academics to communicate to people who might not have the time or the volition to read a book. We need to be presenting these ideas in accessible ways. And there are some good civil society organizations who are doing work on this stuff. Unfortunately, some of the great work that I'm seeing, I think also falls in that political spectrum where folks from the Deep South or America's heartland are really unlikely to engage with it because it seems to come from a political space that they don't agree with. Even though the information there that's contained there is quite good. So I worry about that politicization. And, you know, I don't think we've found the solution yet. I hope that libraries in particular can become vectors of good, trustworthy information in the future. But that's not something the U.S. government has sought to invest in yet.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:09:49] Well, Nina, you know, the Mueller report and then the Senate Intelligence Committee report and other intelligence sources have made the case that the Russian information warfare of 2016 had two goals. The first was to divide and disrupt the democratic norms of the United States. And the second was to support Donald Trump's campaign for president. Now, if the Russian plan was to divide us, it wasn't that hard. I mean, we've been a pretty divided nation since about 1776. And in fact, historians can make the case that the 1945 through 2000 period was anomalous in the United States - a rare moment in which consensus was possible or even expected. So why should we even care about Russian attempts to do to us what we Americans are already willing to do? In other words, how does information warfare like this undermine democracy in the United States?

Nina Jankowicz [00:10:47] It undermines democracy because it undermines trust and participation in the system. And democracy doesn't function without that. So I've seen, especially in the Facebook groups that I monitor a sentiment expressed over and over that, you know, why should I vote? Why does it matter? There's nobody that represents me in government. There's nobody that represents me in the media. I'm happy for our society to be polarized, for us to have a very rigorous and hard fought debate if people are participating, if we are continuing to hold institutions to account and make our voices heard. But what disinformation does is is undermine that trust in the system and also, you know, undermines the authentic American voices that should be overseeing the democratic process. When trolls and bots and, you know, advertising that's bought from

St. Petersburg, Russia, is floating about on the Internet having an effect on our discourse. That's not something that any American, no matter your political party, should want. Our discourse, our political discourse - any country's political discourse - should be decided by citizens of that country. And I think there's a strong case to be made that Russia was able to influence that discourse very successfully in 2016. Even if we leave aside the question of, "Did it change votes?" Looking at the hack and leak operation with the DNC in particular, without those emails being released and bandied about on all of our mainstream media, the campaigns would have spoken about themselves differently. They would have had different relationships with each other and certainly voters would have talked about the campaigns differently. And I think that's enough to show how in one discrete instance, Russia was able to change our political discourse.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:34] Nina, you know, my co-host on this podcast is one of the most prominent writers and critics of social media. So it's naturally been left to me to ask you the social media question. (laughter) But I want to get your take on the platforms of social media that have been the vehicle for so much of this disinformation. Do you see social media as neutral, as a participant in disinformation, or as having the capacity to help to roll back the tide of disinformation? I understand the scale of the problem. I understand these are these are private companies and that billions of people use them every day. But nonetheless, we often come back to the question of whether Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms are part of the problem or could be part of the solution. What's your view?

Nina Jankowicz [00:13:22] I think right now they are the problem. They are incentivizing the behavior that allows bad actors like Russia and their disinformation to take advantage of unwitting populations. I've been doing a lot of work on Facebook groups recently. This is something that I started looking at in 2018 when I looked into a Massachusetts Senate campaign that was running against Elizabeth Warren and found an astroturfing operation in local groups on Facebook and I've just become obsessed with them since then. And I saw this working in Ukraine, in their 2019 election - as well as in our lead up to the 2020 election here. And since Facebook pivot to privacy in around 2018, when they started incentivizing people to join groups saying these are trusted private spaces, this is where disinformation, kind of the fungus of it really grows and proliferates. These are often closed spaces, so there is less oversight over them. And Facebook is encouraging people to interact with them, to engage more with them. It sends you more notifications from groups. It gives you groups suggestions often to groups that are more and more indoctrinating and extremist from the one that you've just joined. And this is part of Facebook business model, right? It's to keep you engaged on the platform to keep your eyeballs on ads, to keep you clicking around and allowing them to harvest more data about how you act on the platform. And until they recognize this and stop lying about whether Facebook groups are, you know, a positive thing or not. I don't think that they are going to be serious about tackling disinformation. And of course, I'm picking on Facebook a lot because it is the, I would say, most ubiquitous of the social platforms, Google gets away quite easy, even though they shouldn't, because they affect the search results for every person on the planet, pretty much. I think Twitter of the three is doing the best job because they are more transparent, marginally. And recently, I think they're taking the right tack with President Trump's tweets and labeling them and providing more context. But there's still a long way to go. We really need some regulation. The United States has abdicated its role and its duty by the rest of the democratic world by not acting and allowing these four years to pass by with no major social media regulation on the books.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:15:47] Right on! You and I could probably go deep on this and go on forever and take up another hour. So I'm wondering, like, what works? I think about Estonia, which has faced so much of this nonsense for a decade now or more. I think, about Ukraine, which has faced probably the most intense level of information warfare in the world. And I think about other places in Western Europe that have run elections or like you have pointed out, referenda in which Russia had a stake in Russia definitely was trying to influence the last national elections in France. Russia was trying to influence the last big elections in Italy. And the story goes on. What works? How have certain countries been able to inoculate themselves against the worst effects of these information warfare campaigns?

Nina Jankowicz [00:16:42] Yeah, well, it's tough. You know, everybody wants to just get done with the problem yesterday. They want to wave a magic wand and have it done and just be able to block fake accounts and hermetically sealed their information environment and, you know, wipe their hands and move on. And the truth is that these campaigns have been going on in some cases for over a decade, even in the United States. The Internet research agency was engaging since 2014. So they've had six years of experience on top of, you know, all of the KGB tradecraft that they've built this operation on. And so I think we really need to look toward more generational solutions. In all the countries that you mentioned, some of which are covered in the book and some of which I've done other work on, they all invest in citizens. So they understand that they can't just cut off supply for this problem. They have to address the demand side. In Estonia, although it took them a little while after the cyber attacks in 2007 and protests that were spurred on by the Kremlin, they realized they really needed to integrate the ethnic Russian population. And over the last 13 years, they've invested in educational opportunities. They've invested in cultural integration, linguistic integration. So they've done all that. And they've invested in some really interesting, I think, outreach opportunities where the presidential administration and other ministries have actually physically moved from the capital in Tallinn to the Russian enclave, basically ethnic Russian enclave in Narva, to say to these people, like, we see you, we hear you. We know that you have a different set of problems than the ethnic Estonians here. And it seems to be having an effect. You know, more ethnic Russians are claiming and Estonian identity for their own. And, of course, Estonia is a very different situation than the United States. They have 1.2 million people there, more, you know, ethnically homogeneous than our society. But I think it shows that with, you know, a long term dedication to these programs, they can really have an impact. Ukraine has tried similar things. They've really invested in media literacy. Their media environment is a bit different to ours as it's mostly controlled by oligarchs. But they've invested in teaching people how to recognize emotional manipulation, teaching people how to do basic research about sources and, you know, their funding and things like that. Their editorial lines. And the indications from all of this programming show that people are retaining those skills. You know, one year, two years after the fact, even though they were just done over a weekend training or something like this. So this is the type of thing I think we really need to think about. It's not palatable to most politicians because you don't see results right away. Right? This is a generational investment. It's a little more difficult to do in the United States because of our federal education system. But I always argue that we need to be addressing the voting age population above all else. And there are ways to do that. You know, professional development programs, both in large corporations and in the federal government, civil society groups and again, libraries, I think can serve as trusted vectors of this sort of training. And then we can talk about schools and give out, you know, grants for states that are doing curriculum development in this area and integrating media and digital literacy into their curricula for other courses, whether it's English or history, as long as it's not politicized. And that's the most important thing. These really should be

based in an educational expertise and best practices that exist for media and digital literacy rather than just weaponizing this as another vector of politicization of American society.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:27] So perhaps the most important audience for these messages of education and change are young people, college kids, even high school kids who are just coming into voting age.

Nina Jankowicz [00:20:38] Well, actually, you know, I think it has to be even older than that. We look at the polling and the folks who are college age, high school age, they actually know pretty well how the online information ecosystem works. But when we're talking about older adults, you know, a lot of the people in my grandparents generation or even in my parents' generation to some degree, have always had gatekeepers doing some form of content moderation for them. Right? Whether that was newspapers, TV, radio, and suddenly they've been placed in this unprecedented information flow where kind of everything is given the same weight and they don't realize that the stuff that's coming at them is coming at them for a reason. They don't understand that algorithms are controlling that, that they're being led to certain content by the platforms. So we need just a little bit more awareness about how all of that works and the fact that not everything you see, whether it's in your Facebook feed in a group, in an encrypted messenger on Twitter, is necessarily, you know, the God's honest truth. And we all need to do a little bit more digging before we share.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:48] Nina, in studying this topic and having contacts in the U.S. government and policy world, do you have a sense for the degree to which the United States engages in disinformation?

Nina Jankowicz [00:21:58] This is one of my favorite questions to answer, actually. So before I started studying disinformation, before I moved to Ukraine, I worked for an organization called the National Democratic Institute, which supports Democratic activists all around the world has done since the 80s. And I worked on Russia and Belarus, those bastions of democracy. And we are often called "color revolutionists" or CIA operatives by the Russian government because they didn't like our work with Russian activists. And to be perfectly clear, we are clear about where our funding came from, mostly from the U.S. government. We were clear that anybody who wanted to show up to our trainings, whether they were part of United Russia, Putin's party or any other political party, anybody could show up in and take the trainings if they wanted to learn how to do more responsive governance, if they wanted to learn how to monitor elections, et cetera. And that sort of activity is often branded, as you know, why Putin and other dictators, authoritarians are pursuing this sort of disinformation campaign and reflexive control in America. And I think that's kind of nonsense, right? We're talking about overt activities that any NGO is allowed to do, although Putin has now kicked NDI and many other American NGOs out of Russia as undesirable foreign organizations. But does every country to some extent do disinformation and their covert activities and their intelligence community? Yes, Russia does, too. I'm sure the United States does. There are many examples of it throughout history. Every country does. But when we're talking about the stuff and the overt sphere, America is bound by its values of openness, transparency, and certainly when you look at the Russian operation in 2016 to today, that's not the case. They are posing as Americans and attempting to influence our discourse. And I don't think it's something that we should stand for. And we certainly shouldn't buy the "What about us?" narrative about, you know, America does disinformation, too. I think to some extent, every country in the world is

doing covert propaganda through their intelligence communities. That's not what we're talking about here.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:24:05] Nina Jankowicz, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Nina Jankowicz [00:24:10] Thanks for having me, Siva and Will, it's great to be with you.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:23] Well, Siva, one of the things that Nina really stressed in that conversation was the importance for civic education. And, you know, when I hear about civics, I get a little worried. What's that really going to mean? Are we going to have to memorize the presidents and, you know, that kind of thing? But actually, I think she was talking about something else, which is one of the things that I think a lot of our peers, our friends, our citizens, our students aren't altogether sure about is how do elections actually work? Where do we vote? Who counts the votes? What is turnout like in your precinct, in your neighborhood, in your city? I mean, these are the kinds of civic pieces of education that if we can grab onto that becomes a very powerful way of countering the conspiracy theories about, you know, fraud and so forth. And so I think that's a very helpful observation.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:25:10] I also think it's important that she is reminding us that democracy doesn't just happen on Election Day. Democracy happens in everything we do in the buildup to Election Day. Democracy happens when we try to make sense of the world and we meet with our fellow citizens and we try to determine an agenda for things we might want to fix or improve. And that takes really deep deliberation. It takes patience and calmness and faith and trust in each other, in the institutions from which we get information and knowledge, and in the institutions that actually bring us together to talk. And we've seen time and time again that the best way to undermine a democracy is to chip away at that foundation of trust. So the story she tells in her book is one of Russia having an interest in weakening the processes of democracy in countries that should not be shaky. Right? Countries that should be pretty cool with democracy. And, you know, the Czech Republic has been through some stuff, right? The people in the Czech Republic should know very well how flimsy democracy can be and how valuable it can be. And yet the Russian information war effort aims itself at those very democracies, primarily, you know, and has had some success.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:33] Although it does raise the question of whether, you know, being under a totalitarian or authoritarian rule for the much of the 20th century, in a sense in Eastern Europe, wore down the ability to kind of cope with the noise and, you know, plurality of democracy itself. Now, I don't know that that's true because I think we've had 30 years of pretty successful democracy in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. But, you know, democracy requires a lot of muscle memory. It requires a tradition of trusting institutions and being able to read disinformation when it gets thrown at you, and young democracies are particularly vulnerable to this kind of thing.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:27:13] Yeah, well, you know, when you bring up muscle memory, it's really important to remember that a lot of our muscles are really young, new, flexible and have no memory. We've been living with Facebook, for instance, since around 2007, that's when most Americans started getting involved with Facebook. So 13 years ago, right? Much of the world has been living with Facebook for a far shorter time - for maybe five, six, seven, ten years. And so we're just trying to figure out how to live with this thing. This is a thing that that 2.5 billion people are contributing to around the

world in more than 100 languages. We have never, ever, ever had a company, a media experience, a platform, effect that many people in that many languages so intimately, we don't have a roadmap for how to live with this thing. We don't have a roadmap for how to control this thing, make it do less damage. We're all babies when it comes to Facebook or Google or Twitter or Instagram. And we're really at the dawn of these conversations. The bad actors are way ahead of us, right? They're much more sophisticated in their understanding of the ways these systems work and the ways they can be manipulated and exploited to do damage. So, you know, it seems to me that regardless of one's historical experience, democracy remains flimsy or certainly something that demands constant attention and repair.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:49] It has to be spoken up for. It has to be proven again for every generation that democracy is beneficial. And this is one of perhaps the blind spots of American ideology, is that we believe that everybody wants democracy. And that's not really true. The reality is there are small communities on the margins of every society that are threatened by democracy for whatever reason. Maybe it's race, maybe it's class, maybe it's gender. But what's happened now is through social media and other negative influences, those smaller voices on the margins have been significantly magnified. I mean, Brexit is a good example, but there are many others coming out of Europe in which once marginal ideas were massively legitimated and given a platform that they might not otherwise have had in our 21st century media eco spheres. So I do agree with you. I think democracy has to be cultivated, repaired and promoted on a constant basis to demonstrate its inherent value for humanity.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:48] Well, that's it this time for Democracy in Danger. Don't miss next week's show with guest Cynthia Miller-Idriss about the rise of a new brand of international far right extremism.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:29:58] I would say one thing that unites them all is a kind of obsession with the idea of homeland. And what I mean by homeland is a concept of ownership over place and an idea that ethnic or racial ties to that place exist.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:30:13] So what threats to democracy worry you? Where should we look for solutions? Send us your ideas for future shows. You can shoot us a tweet @UVAMediaLab, or you can visit our home page and read more about the show and our guests. We're on the web at medialab.virginia.edu.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:31] Democracy in danger is available wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to subscribe. Leave us some stars, amplify good information. Share us on your favorite social media platform.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:30:44] This show is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:52] 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 UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio in Charlottesville.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:07] I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:31:09] And I'm Siva Vaidyanathan. Until next time.