

Democracy in Danger S1E8 Tempting Hate

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

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] 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 [00:00:13] As our listeners know, Will and I both live and work in Charlottesville, Virginia. A small, mostly quiet college town. But three years ago, in August 2017, our city became the scene of a shocking and deadly torrent of far right violence. It was a day that none of us will ever forget. Organizers called that August March a Unite the Right rally. And that name is a clue that at least the leaders of these extremist groups think of themselves as part of a movement with a shared ideology. But how are these groups built? How did they recruit new members? What sort of threat they posed to our safety and to our democracy?

Will Hitchcock [00:00:54] Yeah, those are big questions. And to help us drill down into this toxic underworld of the far right. We have with us today Cynthia Miller-Idriss. She's a professor of education and sociology at American University. She has a new book called Hate in the Homeland, and it explores just how far right extremists find each other and, especially, how they draw in young people and socialize them into these many hate groups and movements that have sprung up in the U.S., but also in other countries. Cynthia, great to have you on Democracy in Danger.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:01:27] Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:29] So in your new book, you write that after these events in Charlottesville in August 2017, the U.S. surprisingly saw a spike in extremist violence. The following year, in 2018, right wing extremists killed about 50 people and in 2019, over 40. And it seems from what you've reported, that the number of hate groups in America is at an all time high. Why now? What is fueling this growth?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:01:58] Well, I would say it's sort of a toxic mix of factors that combine to create a kind of perfect storm for extremist recruitment and radicalization. I think one is the kind of esthetic mainstreaming that you just talked about that we saw in Charlottesville that has helped to kind of normalize what is really hateful rhetoric by putting it into a package that doesn't look like what most Americans hold in their heads in terms of, you know, thinking someone who is a racist skinhead, you know, has a swastika tattoo or a shaved head and combat boots and is stomping around in the backwoods at a heavy metal right wing concert. When you have a kind of normalization of what it looks like and repackaging of hateful and white supremacist extremist ideas into a form that looks more like the teenager next door than the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang member, it is much harder for people to understand those ideas in the same way. And I think that's one of the factors that has led to young people being attracted to it and feeling like this is an easier reflection of their beliefs. But it's not a full commitment in the way of shaving ahead and a bomber jacket and donning combat boots once was. But of course, it's not you know, it wouldn't it wouldn't be attractive if the ideas didn't also resonate. And I think we're seeing simultaneously a mainstreaming and normalization of the rhetoric around anti-immigration elected leaders using hateful rhetoric, a very polarizing election climate in 2016, and a

legitimation of white nationalist kind of sentiments from the Trump campaign and then later from other elected officials as well on the local level and state level. And so we had this kind of combination of factors combined with global growth. And I think that's a really important thing to note, is this isn't just an American phenomenon. In fact, you know, we may be driving some of the so-called alt-right and the and the modernization of the movement here, but a lot of the inspiration comes from Europe. There's a lot of copycat kind of inspiration from things like the Christchurch terrorist attack that mobilized a global network and global dialog around this. And so it's it's certainly not just an American problem.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:20] Cynthia, the events of Charlottesville came under the umbrella, Unite the Right, which of course, leads us to the conclusion that these elements of the far right were not united before that event. We saw a wide array of esthetic choices. I mean, we saw young men and in polo shirts and we saw older men in camouflage and we saw people in all sorts of garb and wearing all sorts of symbols and colors symbolizing a whole variety of organizations. And they seemed to have come from different parts of the United States and had different specific messages to send. Now your book uses the word homeland in the title. And you go into depth on what the word homeland means. Is the concept of homeland one of the sort of unifying ideas under which these groups are uniting?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:05:16] It is, definitely. I mean, I think that if the Unite the Right rally was an attempt to unite the right, it failed. So I think that's also important to note is that they remain as fragmented, if not more fragmented than ever. And so the far right really represents a broad spectrum of groups and of movements and of even individuals who are not in groups or movements - what I would call scenes - particularly on the U.S. cultural side, that are loosely affiliated online and engaged in kind of toxic ecosystems online, but wouldn't consider themselves members of any particular group. They fight a lot about the use of violence, for example. They differ on things like around what they call the JQ, the Jewish question, the state of Israel. They have different opinions on ideology and they have different opinions on strategies and tactics. Some of them are obsessed with the idea of optics that, you know, violence is a bad way to move forward because it will turn people against you, for example. So there's a lot of infighting and debates within the far right and the extreme right fringe as well that I think are important and probably have helped those of us who are trying to prevent more violence in the sense that the lack of unity makes it harder for them to mobilize as a as a widespread group. They're also fighting with each other. But I would say one thing that unites them all is a kind of obsession with the idea of homeland. Even if they never articulate that with the use of that word. And what I mean by Homeland is, is a concept of ownership over a place and an idea that ethnic or racial ties to that place exist. And this dates back for generations. And the Nazis used the concept, obviously, blood and soil, the very idea that that Aryans belonged to the land. You belong to this place and others don't. And I think everything that we see from the articulation of a white ethnostate and the desire to force deportations or to have what's called ethnic remigration, which is really just forced deportation with prettier words. You know, all of those concepts are tied to the idea that this land belongs to white people and that others don't belong here, and that some people are entitled to that land more than others.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:34] Cynthia, you talked about the idea of esthetic mainstreaming kind of making the far right. Look, whatever - look attractive, look normal, look mainstream. Walk us through how the recruitment process works. So if you want to attract college kids to your group, you know, typically you go to a college and you hand out fliers and you set

up tables and you talk to the kids and you get out a clipboard. But that's not how the far right is recruiting potential members, is it? What's. How does it actually work? Walk us through that process.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:08:06] Well, one of the great ironies actually of the of the recruitment process over the last several years is that paper fliers actually have had a comeback. You know, the Anti Defamation League has tracked record breaking numbers of actual paper propaganda, paper fliers, being hung around the country, hundreds of incidents just over the last year, heavily targeting college campuses. Besides that, a lot of directed recruitment happens online. We have a lot of white supremacist engagement in online gaming platforms. Someone from a very violent extremist group who is leaving reported that they were working on recruiting young people, kids as young as eight off of online gaming platforms, directing them to encrypted chat rooms. And then, you know, working to undermine their sense of their parents authority before they introduce white supremacist propaganda. But they'd say things like, hey, you know, you don't have to listen to your parents. And so this a very manipulative strategy of working to over long periods of time, kind of groom young people into the belief system. So there are very deliberate and targeted ways. But actually, I think the way that most extremist recruitment is happening for young people today is not directed from the top down. It is through the toxic kind of online ecosystem that people encounter extreme content as they kind of peruse videos or read materials and then follow those recommendation systems.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:38] Cynthia, you've had someone in your research group who had been recruited by the far right and then emerged from from that world to tell the story. What role is he played in your work and what insights has he brought to the to the picture?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:09:54] Yeah, we work full time with Caleb Kane is former alt-right. And has been an indispensable part of our team. Among other things in running kind of youth cultural advisory board for us that helps us vet ideas for interventions. Listeners may know his story from a New York Times story about his descent, as he called it, into the alt-right rabbit hole that he created a viral video about that really shed a lot of light on how those YouTube algorithms can sort of inadvertently direct people toward ever more extreme content. There have been some tweaks to those algorithms that are trying to change that. I know there's a lot of social media efforts to disrupt those algorithms and change the way that that pattern happens. But I think a lot of people, you know, are drawn into this by searching for something online, you know, maybe about depression or, you know, Googling something, looking something up in a search engine, landing on white supremacist content because it shows up in the search results or watching a video that then recommends another video that is more extreme. And then gradually encountering this and feeling like they've uncovered something. They've discovered the truth with a capital T. that explains all the things that they don't understand or didn't understand before. It wraps up all the uncertainty in their lives into a neat little package of us versus them, black and white, of very clear responses to whatever is going on in your life and gives you a scapegoat to blame.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:11:28] So, Cynthia, what you're describing in that last illustration sounds a lot like a grand conspiracy. And we've read a lot in recent months about QAnon, one of these grand conspiracy theories with multiple levels of multiple stories, multiple explanations, and it's constantly changing. And we've seen the QAnon messages echoed from the very top - from the president of the United States. So we see this very strange cultural phenomenon. But QAnon, to my knowledge, is not explicitly a white supremacist movement, although we I think we could counter this a far right movement. Do you have a

sense of the relationship between the far right and the white supremacist movements and QAnon?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:12:19] Yeah, I would say when I talk about the far right, there is the spectrum and the white supremacist extremist part of that spectrum is one component. It is the part that I have spent most of my career studying. But there's this whole other range. I mean, the militia groups, the bugaloo groups that we've seen recently with the Hawaiian shirts, the antivaxers, some of those come from parts of the left spectrum and some of them now from parts of the right spectrum. So there's a kind of blending of a lot of these things that cut across some of the ideological components. And I would say, QAnon falls into that category where it's not totally clear yet. I would certainly say there are far right adherents who believe in QAnon, but I would expect there are some that cut across the political spectrum as well. And I think it's one of the things that has become really confusing to people when they see something like, let's say, eco fascism show up in the manifestos of the white supremacist extremist terrorists in Christchurch, in El Paso, where they're making environmental claims that link to anti-immigration. So they're basically saying, you know, this homeland, this space, is under threat because of climate change, because of environmental protection needs. We have to protect this space. And one way to do that is there's not enough room for everybody. And we need to close the borders and we need to deport people. And so even if most adherents fall into the far right spectrum, I would say it's important to understand it as something that is drawing on people who are, you know, aligned with are attracted to conspiracy theories, regardless of what other ideologies they might hold.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:56] So, Cynthia, one of the common themes that we see in groups of the kind that you're writing about and that I think underlie a lot of the online materials that you're talking about, the gaming and the violent videos and the YouTube exploitation of visual violence is misogyny. So many of the people who came to Charlottesville three years ago were men. And when we think about the alt-right and white nationalist movements, we tend to conjure up a male. And indeed, I wonder if that's deliberate? It seems like there is this kind of underlying sensibility about women's role in this future homeland around ideas of reproduction and motherhood, combined with strong ideas about masculinity, brotherhood, the bonding of role, the bonding power of violence. What role does misogyny play in the recruiting and the way that these networks hold together?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:14:58] That's a great question, because I think one of the things that's important right at the outset is that women do play a role in the extreme far right. Even in the violent extreme, far right. And not just a role, but an increasing role. So we have seen more engagement on the part of women from far right political parties in Europe to extreme neo-Nazi and violent movements and even terrorism. And that's been pretty well documented. And women in particular in the so-called alt-right play, you know, a kind of recruiting role through YouTube videos and a lot of work that is done to kind of promote traditional women's roles as homemakers, as the birthers of white babies, as people who will homeschool and create organic, pure nourishment for the future of the white race. I mean, those are all the kinds of messages that come across in a lot of those softer entry YouTube videos that are also recruiting women to the movement and to be supporters and enablers of the movement. But that said, I mean, this is clearly movements in a spectrum that is dominated by the violence of men and by male engagement and a belief system that includes a sense of superiority and misogyny and a sense of ownership, even, I would say, over women and their bodies and what those bodies should be allowed to do in terms of reproduction and the control of reproduction. A lot of what happens in the recruitment and the marketing, even in the branding of these movements, has to do with some kind of

emotional ideals that I think are targeting young men in particular who are seeking or are attracted to ideals around heroic engagement, around being a warrior or a soldier, being a defender of your family and of the nation, of your people and of your race. So it's it's a mix of, you know, the misogyny and then also masculinity and hypermasculinity around heroic engagement and defense as it relates to things like global white supremacist conspiracy theories like the great replacement and this idea that white people are existentially under threat. And there's a call to defend white civilization against, you know, a replacement through demographic change or immigration. And that, I think, is really important to understand as it relates to masculinity and calls for heroic engagement.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:24] Cynthia, I've thought a lot about why Charlottesville was the target of so many of these far right organizers. Friday night, the 11th of August 2017, the far right invaded our workplace. The grounds of the University of Virginia, hundreds of men in polo shirts marched through with torches and started of a melee with staff and students. And I've also wondered, therefore, if the university itself offered a perfect target, an ideal target for them as well. Can you tell us a bit about how and why universities, not just the University of Virginia, but universities around the country, have found themselves increasingly to be the sites of flare ups and demonstrations and conflicts with the far right? What is it that we are doing that attracts their attention?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:18:23] It's a great question. I think on the one hand, I guess it's important to understand that the far right holds a lot of ideas about what happens in universities that are related to conspiracies like something called cultural Marxism. That conspiracy, that idea that universities are being used by the left to promote leftist ideas has animated a lot of political critique of universities from even the mainstream right, the conservative right. But certainly lives very large and the ideas of the extreme far right. And I think understanding that is important for understanding the kind of symbolic place that universities and higher education in general holds for the far right in this broader conspiracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:11] I think that those problems are compounded by an additional, I want to say, kind of cluelessness within universities as to how to respond to these kinds of rhetorical and in some cases very real assaults. And I think the reality is that universities collectively really don't know how to deal with the argument that free speech should trump everything. You know, there's hate speech, but then there's free speech. But where is the line? Let's have a talk about it. Let's have speakers on both sides. So universities are at the heart of a essentially a moral crisis of both sides-ism that the far right has exploited. And obviously, that's a very difficult position to be in because it essentially lowers the guard of universities against very savvy challengers who say, you have to listen to what I have to say. You have to allow me to speak my hate filled ideology because you are a university, so they managed to turn the tables.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:20:06] Yeah, I think, you know, I think there are a couple different things that universities are doing wrong. And one is failing to recognize that you can simultaneously protect free speech and condemn hate speech. A lot of times, and especially the beginnings of these incidents over the last four or five years, universities reacted to propaganda on campus without asserting what their own values were and just saying this is allowed. Right? So one of the worst examples, I think, was in Texas somewhere and a university where there was a white supremacist propaganda flier. And the statement from the university said, you know, the fliers have been removed because they're in violation of university policy about the use of adhesives on campus buildings. (laughter)

Will Hitchcock [00:20:53] Man, hate speech is one thing, but adhesives used wrong!

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:20:56] Exactly. And so I think it was it became kind of the classic example of what not to do. And I think we as a sector, higher education leaders have gotten much better over the last three or four years at, you know, kind of issuing statements that say this is protected free speech, but it goes against everything we stand for as an institution, as a university, as a society, as you know, in our protection of democracy itself. Another issue is not understanding or not clearly articulating where are the limits of free speech. You know, what does it mean when you have groups that are clearly anti-democratic in everything they do that are working to undermine core principles of democracy? What does that mean? Are there limits or do we allow all of it? Or do we have a Teach-In? Or do we are we obligated at some point to say this is allowed, but we have to provide, you know, accurate information about these conspiracy theories? At what point is language or speech so harmful that we as a society have to decide this is outside of the limits of acceptable speech? And I you know, I don't I'm glad I don't have to make those decisions, but I feel like those are decisions that have to be discussed.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:03] Cynthia, you've terrified us and you've given us insight into a very dark and disturbing world. But in your work at your center, I'm sure that you've thought a lot about measures that citizens can take, voters can take, users of social media can take to try to contain or at least diminish the impact of these extremist far right movements. What are some of them?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:22:24] Yeah, it may surprise you both and your listeners to learn that I'm actually an optimist by nature. And even in this moment, I mean, I think I study and spend a lot of time looking and listening to toxic things. But I spend my days working with a team of incredible people who are testing out of the box ideas to create empirical evidence to show kind of the public and policymakers what works to disrupt and interrupt radicalization pathways. Already, I think one of the things we're learning is that it is much easier to prevent radicalization than it is to de-radicalize someone. And I think a lot of the work that had been done in terrorism and extremism was focused on what's called counter radicalization or countering violent extremism, which in my opinion really comes far too late. Right? By the time someone's already down a pathway holding onto those extremist beliefs and ideologies and conspiracy theories, it's very difficult to turn them back. But what you can do is prevent people from getting there to begin with. And one of the most effective approaches, as we know from lab research, that we're now testing in the field is called inoculation interventions, where you really show people how online manipulation works or how the content of propaganda is trying to persuade them before they encounter it. So it speaks to a lot of kind of media literacy work that needs to be done with people in middle school, even in high school, in digital communications classes, so that they understand. What does it look like when you see scapegoating? What does it look like when online manipulation happens? How is someone trying to persuade you? How can you tell that they're trying to persuade you? And the last thing I would say is if you start looking at the places where extremism happens, not just thinking of this as something that happens cognitively alone in people's heads, but start looking at where they encounter propaganda, where do they first run into these ideas? Then it opens up a whole new set of ways to think about interventions. So if they're encountering and in mixed martial arts gym, let's try to work with mixed martial arts trainers. If they're encountering on college campuses, let's make sure college faculty and counselors and, you know, people understand how this is happening. And so I think if you take that approach, we're starting to find a lot of people with whom we can work to create interventions than we might have

thought about before. So ultimately, I am optimistic, but I think we have to be putting the resources into the really prevention and even pre prevention side rather than just the countering radicalization end.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:57] Well, Cynthia, we're still bruised from the events of three years ago. And we get re-bruised as the news of other far right violent events echo through the country and we see other people suffer and become traumatized in the same way that we and our neighbors were. And we've definitely all felt our moments of feeling hopeless. And I have to say that your book and this conversation have given us new ways of making sense of this whole process, this whole movement, and has given us a first step to try to address these problems. So, Cynthia, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss [00:25:39] Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:51] Siva, after that discussion with Cynthia, I'm not going to use the word homeland without thinking about its resonance in the extreme far right and white supremacy community, because clearly they've endowed that term with a racist, you know, essentially genocidal meaning, which is we want to clear out people who aren't like us. And this is a terrifying notion. But of course it does. She said it latches on to ideas, myths about ownership of land and people and cleansing that go back centuries. And it also brings out echoes with a theme that one of our earlier guests talked about, Matt Hedstrom, when he talked about Christian nationalism as dominionism, the idea that the purpose of Christianity is to control the earth for certain social and religious purposes. And so there's this sense of claiming and owning and populating space is really powerful stuff.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:51] And Cynthia asks us to pay more attention to the dynamics of recruitment. One of the things I really like about her construction of the far right as her object of study as opposed to merely white supremacy or white nationalism, is that it can include far right movements and ideologies and cults like QAnon like the Incel movement and other misogynistic elements. So gender can be embedded in every part of this story and every part of this explanation, and it need not be bracketed off as something different. And we don't have to say, oh, here's our gender analysis and here's our race analysis.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:34] It was also a wakeup call for me, as if we need one, of just how much universities are contested territory. Not just for those of us who live in university towns or work at universities, but for the far right itself. You know, universities are in this imaginary place where a kind of cultural poisoning is happening. We're the last holdouts. And, you know, that is kind of frightening because it's not about free speech. Well, let's just go to university and hear all the ideas. No, the ambition here is we can't have universities anymore. We shouldn't have them the way they're constructed because they're poisoning the body politic. Wow. I mean, I just feel that that message needs to be heard within university walls much more than we're hearing it now.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:22] Absolutely. You know, universities are to me sites of cosmopolitanism. They're sprinkled and embedded in places all over the country like Lincoln, Nebraska and Ames, Iowa. You know, these amazing institutions, people from all over the world come to those places to study. People move and open up labs and open up companies and their relatives open up restaurants and these things open up the United States of America to a whole flow of ideas and people and languages. So they are cosmopolitan institutions and they are counterbalances to extreme nationalism. So it

makes sense that they are the target and the enemy of nationalist movements. I mean, if you're part of a nationalist movement here, a radical nationalist and you see a place like the University of Nebraska, it is deeply threatening. That is the place where the world comes to Nebraska to do amazing things. So that's a threat. The notion of not being rooted, of being a citizen of the world and therefore not having a particular nationalist mindset is historically a really controversial position. It's one of the things that was invoked in 18th and 19th and 20th century anti-Semitism. It's one of the problems that Jews presented to the anti-Semitic elements in Europe is that they were cosmopolitan. It's a sense of identity that is not necessarily German or Austrian, you know, but Jewish. And therefore, it crossed borders.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:55] And, of course, the first targets of the Nazis when they took power were university professors who many of whom were Jewish but who were forced out of their positions if they could not be seen as loyal to the Nazi party. So our universities have long been a target of the extreme right. Well, that's it this time for democracy in danger. But don't miss next week's show with our guest, Kathleen Belew. We'll continue our discussion about the militant white power movement in American history.

Kathleen Belew [00:30:30] I think the thing to understand about the Oklahoma City bombing is it was an act of coordinated white power violence. And most people are still walking around without any idea of what it was or what it meant.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:43] As always, we would like to hear from you. Reach out to us on Twitter. Our handle is @UVAMediaLab, or visit our home page Medialab.virginia.edu. You'll find links there to past episodes, to published work by our guests, and more information as well.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:00] Democracy in Danger is available wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to subscribe and leave us some stars or reviews and share us on your favorite social media platform.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:10] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:18] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show 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 Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:34] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.