Democracy in Danger
S2E10 Digital Wasteland

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 [00:00:12] Now recent changes in the American political environment in 2021 have given us a moment to look up and look around the world, to assess the overall health of democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:24] Right, Siva. And so we've really gone far and wide. We've talked about the climate crisis. We've talked about the importance of political organizing and activism. We looked at economic inequality and its consequences for the health of democracies. And we've started talking about the wider world, places like Italy and Brazil. And soon we'll be turning to Mexico, Russia and elsewhere.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:44] You know, there's one big issue that is still dogging me. We keep coming back to it. It's that overarching question of how we as citizens can be informed, engaged and responsible. We're talking about pollution, how polluted our media ecosystem is. How nonsense flows so easily, how conspiracy theories, how ordinary people, how family members of our own can latch on to the weirdest things, the things that should be on their face, absurd and unfortunately are sometimes really dangerous.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:25] Siva, it's appropriate that you use the word polluted because our guest today says we can't really tackle our information failures unless we think of them in the same way that we think about climate change as an ecological problem, maybe with ecological solutions. We have Whitney Phillips with us from Syracuse University. She's a scholar of communication and rhetoric and the author with Ryan Milner of the new book You Are Here, A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories and Our Polluted Media Landscape. Hey, Whitney, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Whitney Phillips [00:02:00] Hi. Thank you so much for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:02] Well, let me just jump right into your ecological metaphor, which is compelling and refreshing. But I just want to hear a little bit more about why and how you settled on that as an appropriate kind of window into the world of online disinformation. Just, you know, why ecological? Why frame it that way? What do we see new that way?

Whitney Phillips [00:02:24] Yeah. So I started thinking about these issues in an ecological way a couple of years ago, in part because the existing frameworks that I had to work with, they were posing some problems. That started when I started researching problems of amplification in the news media. There was such fundamental overlap between what was happening in the news media and then what happened, for example, on social media, what happens in the news shapes and is shaped by what happens on social platforms. And to try to separate those two things out, you lose something. And so to try to get to some of those connections, I started to utilize the redwood root systems metaphor, in part because I had gone to college and have a great connection to Northern California. And I just was reflecting on how it is that root systems work in the redwoods.

They're so densely interconnected under the ground that you can't easily distinguish one tree from another tree. They are from a basic biological perspective, the same tree and a lot of ways. And so that really helped me think about emerging conspiracy theories or other problematic claims and controversies online. You know, you couldn't separate out how people's everyday responses fit into the same stories that journalists responses fed into that then algorithmic docenting set into - it just was this big mess. And you started pulling on one thing and you would find yourself in another place entirely. And so that necessitated thinking about the problem using hurricanes, because in nature, a hurricane is never - you can never reduce it to a single gust of wind or some other element of the hurricane. It's all of it all at once and all of the causes that brought it to that landfall. And so we're providing these metaphors as a sort of guidepost throughout the book. But what we actually want the book to do in the world is we want people to use those metaphors to then consider where they're standing in relation to everything else, how they influence the things in their world and how the things in the world influence them. So the metaphors are actually more of a heuristic for getting people to reflect on reciprocity, interconnection, the ways that our behaviors impact other people, even if our intentions are great and we don't mean to do any harm. And so, you know, that's why the book is ultimately called You Are Here, because it's a book about the reader.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:48] So Whitney, to carry on with your ecological metaphor and and the framing that you've given us, talk a little bit about the sources of pollution that we confront every time we're engaged in online activity.

Whitney Phillips [00:05:03] Sure, one of the most prominent sources of pollution is, of course, conspiracy theorizing that envelops the election results, but which are not just confined to the election results. The conspiracy theory that Joe Biden stole the election from Trump, that's tangled up with covid, tangled up with the sort of narrative megaplex of Qanon and the deep state, tangled up with everything that's happened over the last few years. That's a perfect example of the kind of pollution we're dealing with. That's not one singular story. It's not one piece of trash on a beach. It's an entire polluted lake where certain pockets have tributaries that are pumping particularly intense pollution into the waterways. But, you know, in a lake, pollution doesn't stay put. It travels all around. And so we're dealing with these really suffuse vast - deeply weird, often - belief systems that get all tangled up with each other and end up showing up not just online, but they sometimes storm the Capitol.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:07] Well, you know, sometimes we see social scientists engage in the opposite practice, the pursuit of the distillation of one thing, the pursuit of the isolation of one variable. And we've seen that in our own field, right, in the study of media. So you're basically arguing that that core social science technique, which, of course, is borrowed from the natural sciences, misses the point, right?

Whitney Phillips [00:06:35] Well, I mean it I would say that the impulse to isolate makes a lot of sense, because that's in part sort of how you tackle big problems. You deal with one thing and another thing and another. But what we're arguing in the book is that not only does that not really get you to a solution that can be a hindrance to any meaningful solution, because if people become, for example, so overly focused on what do we do about platforms, how are we going to moderate that?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:07:06] Like Facebook and Twitter.

Whitney Phillips [00:07:08] Exactly. I mean, that's the number one question that I get about this book. What are we what should we do about Facebook? And like, hey, tell me what do we do about Facebook. Obviously that matters. And obviously thinking about content, moderation and thinking about, you know, deep platforming and all of these issues, those are important things to talk about, but not at the exclusion of all of the other forces that actually bring us to the problems that we're in. And if it were the case that lots of different questions were being asked about lots of different aspects of these problems, that would be one thing. But you have an overrepresentation of what do we do about Facebook? And like when people ask me that question, my first responses, I don't know, what are we going to do about K through 12 education? And so then it just is sort of let's not get too bogged down in one area because we have to worry about all of the areas. This is a society wide problem we're dealing with and our solutions need to have that interconnectedness at their core,

Will Hitchcock [00:08:06] Because you really are to continue with your metaphorical inquiry into information systems, you know, you suggest that we have to clean up the toxic waste dump, that is this this mess of flawed and failed systems of misinformation, disinformation. And one of the things that I was struck by in your in the early pages of your book is that you said we need a green new deal for the digital age. That's cool. And that's an example of an analogy that actually sparks some creativity in my brain. Like, yeah, that sounds like a set of policies, a set of communities, a set of coalitions, some legislation to actually attack the big waste dump or the brownfield or whatever we want to call it, of misinformation. So can you just give us an example? I mean, it doesn't have to be the whole package, but where do where do we begin to clean up the swamp?

Whitney Phillips [00:08:55] Well, I think the place where we begin is to address something that you said just a minute ago, which is the idea that we have to fix our broken systems. I mean, the number one problem that we face is that the systems aren't actually broken. The systems are actually working as they were designed to work. I mean, when social platforms first came online, so to speak, the whole idea was to facilitate streamlined spread. It was to take away friction so that things could move. And that was regarded as a good thing. And in many contexts, that is great. But when information, particularly harmful information, polluted information is not just allowed but encouraged to spread, that's when you really start running into major problems. And when you have, you know, economic forces that that give people a reason to build a brand on "conspiracy entrepreneurship", essentially, to borrow a great phrase from Anna Merlin, from her book Republic of Lies, you know, that then creates permission structures, incentive structures. It means that we end up in the mess that we're in, not because things go wrong, but because things go right. And as long as we are basing our solutions on the idea that we actually have to fix some aberration, then we're not going to be asking the right kinds of questions. It's that the first step of the green New Deal is to say, what have we done? I mean, what have we created and why have we created it?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:10:21] Well, they're pretty good accounts of the conspiracy entrepreneur class or maybe the, you know, the conspiracy entrepreneur community. But you pay particular attention to the downstream effects of this kind of pollution. How does this information, disinformation, how does all this garbage harm marginalized communities?

Whitney Phillips [00:10:45] Well, so one of the benefits of using a polluted information frame is that it highlights certain elements of the conversations that otherwise wouldn't come to the forefront. And one of those is the fact that you sort of gesture to a moment

ago that there are downstream consequences and there are people who are not actively trying to pollute, who end up polluting. I mean, you see this in our everyday lives all the time. I mean, even those of us who are environmentally conscious, who try really hard to not unduly poison the Earth, you know, we like flush the toilet and we throw away eggshells and we although I guess eggshells wouldn't be so bad, but there are things we throw away that are that are worse. Right. And so we ultimately still contribute to the amount then of polluted stuff that we've got to deal with. So that's point number one, that the polluted frame allows us to focus on. It also allows us to focus on the environmental justice elements of the conversation that offline communities are not equally impacted by toxicity, that depending on who you are and what your socioeconomic status is and particularly what your race is, that's going to have an enormous impact on how likely it is that you're going to be poisoned where you live, work and play. And the same thing is true in digital spaces. People are not harmed equally online. Certain communities, particularly when you're talking about historically underrepresented communities, they are going to be more frequently targeted, more viciously targeted, not just of harassment, although that happens, too, but disinformation campaigns. I mean, you saw that during the 2020 election where disinformation about voting was disproportionately impacting communities of color. That's where all of the pollution and the filth was being directed to. And so we need to think about this not just as sort of damaging to democracy. It is. But this also ultimately is a social justice issue.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:44] I mean, let me I'm I've heard a number of scholars and critics, including my co-host, tell me that the Internet, the digital world and all of the social media platforms are actually working as they were designed. They're designed to make money. They're designed as advertising platforms and where we're falling for it every time. But I also think we've all agreed that something has gone wrong with the system. And it may be that the system is working, but that our relationship to it has been corrupted by something. Maybe it's our expectations or our sudden awareness that our needs as a as a social people, as a political people are just not being met, even though we live inside these gigantic systems, which apparently are working as designed. It sounds a little like the Frankenstein metaphor, if we're going to take metaphors, which is that the doctor did create this beast that came to life. In that sense, it was working as designed, but it didn't take him very long to realize that he had done something fundamentally wrong. And I wonder if you can spin that out. So we have a gigantic information system that is actually harmful and is polluting our human relationships. That means that there has to be a human solution to fix it. What's the first step? Is it just pulling the plug? Is it redesigning new systems that work better? I mean, I understand that there's a kind of a consciousness that first has to be arrived at so that we can kind of see the whole. But once we see the whole, do we take out a pair of scissors? Is it is it a trowel? Is it a shovel? Is it a chainsaw? What do we do to rebuild a system that will work for our human needs?

Whitney Phillips [00:14:11] It isn't just that our systems were designed in certain ways. It's why they were. What we ultimately identified is that it's the individualistic focus. It is the obsession with negative freedoms. So freedom from outside influence, freedom from censorship, freedom from being told what to do by the state or by anybody else. Allowing information to travel as far and as freely as possible. Yeah, it's a function of needing to make money, of course. But concurrent to that is this belief that if you try to censor people, that's bad. But the problem with that is that it actually ends up undercutting freedoms, because when you have all of that freedom for people to pollute without recourse, that actually clogs up everybody else's lungs and their backyards. And so what I think needs to happen is somehow making sure that our networks are not so obsessed with negative freedoms and instead center positive freedoms. So freedoms so that the collective can

enjoy those freedoms equally. So in the context of content moderation, you know, people think of censorship as somehow taking away freedom. But actually what some amount of moderation does is it ensures more freedom for more people to feel more safe and be able to participate more openly. And so it's still freedom. We're still thinking about freedoms under that sort of rubric. But it's not, "Don't tell me what to do." It's how can we work together to make sure that everybody can enjoy the same freedoms equally? That needs to be the shift. How willing people are going to be to make that, especially when there might be profits on the line? I don't know. But that's the thing that has to happen.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:02] So we just recently had Danielle Citron on the show and she was talking about the ways in which, you know, legislation can actually change some of the guardrails or at least can mend some of the guardrails. We can tinker with Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which protects corporations from liability for the harmful speech that their users engage in. We can actually do some things that can address just the point your you're getting at, which is, you know, not all speech is good. There is plenty of very harmful, very hateful and profoundly warped speech that we need as a society to figure out how to contain.

Whitney Phillips [00:16:40] Absolutely. I mean, these are all "yes and" questions. Yes, thinking about things like Section 230 and thinking about legislation and thinking about policy in that way is absolutely critical. And at the same time, we have to think about, OK, how are we how are we teaching media literacy education to eight year olds? You know, and beyond that, it's not just a question of sort of educational stuff. So much of what has been happening over the last few years is a reflection of a failure of care. Right. A failure of societal care. Many people who turn to conspiracy theories, they do so because they fundamentally lost faith in institutions, in the government, in public health, because they are not being cared for by the institutions. And so thinking about this also as an issue of how do we make sure that our neighbors have access to health care and to mental health services? How do we make sure that our neighbors have jobs that pay them a reasonable wage and treat them with dignity? Those things might not seem at all related initially to issues of mis- and disinformation, but in fact, it's what people experience in their everyday lives that then drives them towards certain belief systems or conspiracy theories to explain what has gone wrong in their lives. And so we really need to think about how do we care for each other? How do we think about others in a way that sort of foregrounds their humanity and their dignity and their rights to experience freedoms equal to everyone else. Like we have to think about these issues in those enormously broad terms. So yes to policy stuff, yes to section 230, yes to education, yes to thinking about this as a health crisis, all of those things all at once. Which is why it is so incredibly difficult and daunting to try to think about this, because to do it, you've got to think about it all at once. And that is a very tall order.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:46] Whitney, right on. Amen. I mean, I think you're you're preaching the word here. And when you think about Facebook, when you think about YouTube, they deliver information only as a side hustle. Really as an almost an accident, maybe an occasional positive externality of the pollution itself. But what they really deliver are 'the feels'. Now, your early research is exactly about this. It's about the affective power of communal identity and expression through trolls. Right. And so can you tell this story about emotion? So I'm wondering if it's appropriate to replace a focus on digital literacy or digital education, which, as you may know, I am really cynical about, with a notion of digital care.

Whitney Phillips [00:19:38] It's I never thought about it in in exactly that term of digital care. That's not something we operationalize in the book, although especially after..

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:19:47] It's your next book, Whitney, Digital Care.

Whitney Phillips [00:19:50] Digital Care. But I think that yeah, that gets to at least the more holistic issues that we're dealing with. And to sort of speak to the point about focusing on information, focusing on facts and what that - what we miss when we do that, you know, when people lament or discuss Facebook's recommendation algorithms, there's often this kind of sense that the problem lives in the algorithm, that it's the bad information that gets then spit out. But the thing about algorithms is that, you know, they're the way that I've come to think about them - it's not just that they're spitting out this information. It's that people are bringing their baggage and their beliefs and their biases and they're everything to the algorithm. They're knocking on the algorithms door. And what the algorithm ultimately is, is a deep memetic frame detector, which is something - deep memetic frames is a is a concept that essentially refers to sensemaking apparatuses that shape what people see and what they know and in particular what how their worldview is cleaved between the good guys and the bad guys. So deep memetic frame sort of shape how we move through the world and what's a threat, what's not a threat, what we should do in response.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:21:06] And it's like recognizing a tiger's stripes, right? We have a deep memetic frame when we see a tiger's stripes flash by us in the forest, we have a fight or flight response. That's how we've conditioned ourselves, right?

Whitney Phillips [00:21:20] Basically, yeah. I mean, but but different people, of course, are conditioned and in different ways. And some people's sort of lymbic response is tethered to a particular bad other or some other that they've designated as bad. And that's going to differ depending on all kinds of factors that are very importantly, often absolutely outside of a person's awareness. They don't know what their deep memetic frames are. They're not thinking about it. They're not looking for them. It's the kind of thing that all of us, both in good and bad ways, are constantly being shaped by. And what algorithms do is they know those things better than we do. And so we've got to think about the embodied human element of this, because that is the precondition of everything else that ultimately happens online.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:09] So the problem, if I'm if not, maybe I'm overstating this, but it sounds as if the challenge is to kind of retrain our own brains, our own reactions to this digital world, rather than it give us an illusion that underneath the hood of the digital world, there's a few screws that we could slightly replace and tighten and things would work better. It's a relationship question. What I'm getting at is where do we begin the process of digital care? Is it in our own minds and our own communities and our own schools and and our own relationship to our devices? Or is it over there where the actual algorithms are made by mostly white men in a very specific time and place, surrounded by very specific economic incentives with very specific and identifiable biases, that maybe we should just try to figure out how to reconceptualize completely?

Whitney Phillips [00:23:01] Those are exactly the kinds of things I'm looking into. And in particular, I am really focused on how do we get people thinking below the line of awareness? How can you leverage, how can you essentially come up with a almost a narrative mapping of a particular community? So let's imagine you're a pastor at a particular church. How could you get a handle on what the narrative landscape of your

parishioners are so that you can start telling different kinds of stories? You could start getting people to think about not just what they believe, but why they believe it. That's hard work. That's on the ground work. That's the kind of work that funding agencies might be a little bit wary of because you can easily count those things and it could take a long time and you might not know until ten years later whether or not it's worked. But to me, because the effective experience of people's lives, their lived, embodied beliefs about the world, those are the preconditions of everything else. That's where we need to direct resources, not at the exclusion of more sort of obvious places. We still have to ask questions about Facebook, but how can we start asking questions in a more grassroots capacity, working with people who are informational frontliners - so faith leaders, local journalists in many cases teachers, especially K through 12 teachers, health care workers - like these are people who are interfacing with communities who could try to initiate conversations, facilitate conversations that can actually get us talking about the underlying things that are causing everything else.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:39] Well, Whitney Phillips, you know, I've been a fan and supporter of your work for many years. And and I'm so honored that you're here with us. You've given us so much to think about. Thank you again for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Whitney Phillips [00:24:54] Thank you so much. This was great.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:02] That was Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University. She is the author with Ryan Milnor of You Are Here and an earlier book, The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:22] Democracy in Danger is part of the democracy group podcast network visit democracygroup.org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:21] Siva, does this metaphor of ecology and of digital care, does this resonate with you? Is this what we need to hear instead of focusing too much on, boy, Facebook is bad or, hey, the algorithms are a problem. To think deeper, more emotionally, maybe more in a human register?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:40] Absolutely. Look, the key to environmental thinking, to ecological thinking is to restrain from isolating variables, to understand the dynamics of a system in itself. So when you ask is it us or is it Facebook, you're asking two bad questions, right? Because we are Facebook and Facebook is us. And look, technologies are extensions of ourselves. My eyeglasses extend my eyes, my bicycle extends my legs, you know, makes the same action more efficient, more effective, amplifies it. My car the same way extends my legs. Right. You can run through this almost any technology. Now, what does Facebook do for us? Most of the time it extends a number of things. Chief among them, our emotions, how we feel about the world, how we feel about each other. Remember why you signed up for Facebook all those years ago? It was for the puppy pictures and the baby pictures and your niece's wedding and your high school friends, kids, baseball tournament. You know, these are these are the things that cause us to feel good. We found out pretty quickly that Facebook is filled with stuff that makes us feel bad. And we got addicted to that as well.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:58] I hear you and I heard Whitney. And I think that this is really helpful and insightful and meaningful. But I also think as a needy member of a political society, I want a to do list. I want to feel that I'm in control. And I know that it's not about fixing that thing or this thing. But there was a conversation that Whitney was leading us towards about understanding rights and liberties and freedoms in the way in which freedoms can be great and they can be harmful. And if I could just embed this in one historical observation, she mentioned a couple of things that really do resonate from a period of a reconceptualization of the relationship between the citizen and the government, namely the New Deal and the idea of the freedoms with which human beings have to operate free from harm, but also they have to make sure that they are looking out for other people. And, you know, the signature document that came out of the 1930s and 40s on a global scale was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And I wonder if we are in need of a Universal Declaration of Information Rights so that we could at least put on paper somewhere a kind of a collective feeling, a collective agreement about both our awareness of the harm and our awareness of our responsibility so that we can at least hang a lantern on our own human failures and begin to think about a collective path forward.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:15] But the other thing that we have to remember is sometimes the hard work of recognition must precede clear practical action. So I think what Whitney's work shows us is that what's going on is not at all what we thought was going on or we say is going right. So what's going on is not disinformation, is not misinformation, is not propaganda. It's passion. And passion comes in all sorts of versions. And some passions are deadly. And you do not see that discussion at any level anywhere. It's not in Washington. It's not in Brussels. It's not in London. It's not in Delhi. It's not in Brasilia. And it's not in our newspapers or on our websites. It's the passion, stupid. Is the starting point of our understanding. And I'm actually just trying to pull back the reins on everybody who's throwing out policy ideas, because all of the policy ideas seem to be based on the notion that this is about truth and falsity and in fact, it's about feels.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:17] Hmm. But I mean, let me ask you this. Do you do you take the same approach to something like gun control where people are like "Guns don't kill people. People do." And my view is your guns actually kill people. And we can have some policy that says you shouldn't have guns.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:30] No, absolutely. But that's a it's a much more simple machine, right? It's a really simple machine. And the fact is, people with guns kill people, but people without guns have a harder time killing people. So let's make sure people don't have guns.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:44] But people want guns for a lot of the same reasons that they want, likes and clicks, it's an emotional it's an emotional power thing.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:50] Of course. And we and we get that and we discount it. We say that is not as important as some other feelings like the safety of our children. Often in our political discussions, we drop the emotional side out. This is a value choice. I happen to love my daughter and by the way, love your daughter more than I love any firearm in the world. And there are a lot of people like me. Right. Which is why we can solve those problems. A gun is a simple machine. It's interaction with humans is actually simple. Facebook works on such a different level and is so much more complex and is so much more embedded in our identity and our connection to each other. That's why I always sound like a cynic when people bring up solutions and to do lists in this area, because, you

know, I just don't think we know enough about ourselves or about these systems and mostly about the relationship between them.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:42] No, I, I take the point that we we have to figure out why we have such a strong, powerful emotional reaction to the clicks, or the shares and the likes. And once we figure that out, we'll be in a position to reorient ourselves towards these information systems.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:59] Absolutely. And then we might actually have a policy agenda or an engineering agenda that can make a difference in how these communicative systems actually work in our lives. It's going to require a tremendous amount more work than I think anybody has imagined yet.

Will Hitchcock [00:32:19] That's all we have this time on Democracy in Danger. Science reporter Kendra Pierre-Louis will join us next week to pick up on our concern with actual climate change.

Kendra Pierre-Louis [00:32:28] There's deliberate misinformation that, like the climate isn't warming or that it's not human caused. There's a second stream, which is like, yes, the climate is warming and yes, it's human caused but we don't want to do anything about it because we don't want to change the ways in which we live. And then I think there's a third strain, which is just inaction because people don't know what they can do.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:47] In the meantime, please give us some good feels. Share us on social media. Our Twitter handle is @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:00] And visit us online. You can find show notes for all our episodes at DinDanger.org, browse our season one archive or share ideas for future episodes.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:12] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:21] 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 distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast hub of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:38] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.