

Democracy in Danger S2 E2 Down The Rabbit Hole

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

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyathan.

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

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:00:12] Will, January 2021 was a historic month no matter how you look at it. My head is still spinning. My heart is still racing. You know, we started out with the Georgia Senate elections, the runoffs, and they seem to predict a potential breaking of the solid South that Republicans have depended on for decades. Then right after that, on the 6th, there was this deadly attack by mobs of domestic terrorists on our US Capitol. And taken together, it did not look at all like the peaceful, stable, secure democracy that you and I grew up in.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:51] And Siva, you and I got to watch all of this unfold in the company of more than three hundred University of Virginia students who were enrolled in our class called Democracy in Danger. And in fact, they're with us again today as we record this episode. We'll be monitoring our chat box during our conversation today for their questions. Now to your point, Siva, the crisis we witnessed is continuing. Even with new leadership in Washington, our democracy is still in danger for many of the same groups and the same anti-democratic ideas and ideologies that fomented the January 6th attack.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:01:26] Well, perhaps nobody understands the scale, the breadth of this problem better than our guest today, Renee DiResta. She's the research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory. Renee writes widely about the tech industry and how it shapes and misshapes public discourse.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:43] Renee, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Renee DiResta [00:01:45] Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:47] So, Renee, before we jump into the details of the current crisis, just tell us a little bit about your day job. I mean, what is it like to spend hours and hours following in real time the plots for a white supremacist outright takeover of the nation? Can you just kind of walk us through your your work and your path into this work?

Renee DiResta [00:02:10] Yeah, so at Stanford Internet Observatory, we study the misuse of current information technology. There are researchers who have deep domain expertise in a region or a particular group or a topic. There are tech folks who are building tools to help us both monitor and understand social media and media conversations. And then the last piece, the last thing that we look at is really what do we do about it? How do we think about the Internet as an ecosystem and what policies might improve our discourse? What policies might minimize the ability of bad actors to manipulate the conversation and how we should think about the role of regulators, the role of platforms, the role of the public in shaping this information environment that we all participate in.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:01] But it must have been a pretty hairy month this past month.

Renee DiResta [00:03:04] It's been busy. So for the last - since September, we were working on with three other institutions an effort called the Election Integrity Partnership. And so what we really focused on was voting related misinformation. And for a period of months, we watched efforts to kind of preemptively delegitimize the election and we watched ways in which isolated incidents documented by ordinary people were woven into a broader narrative of voter fraud, of ballot fraud, mail in ballot fraud. We watched ways in which those narratives became conspiracies as they were assigned a puppet master. The idea that someone, somewhere was coordinating to steal the elections. And we watched over a period of months that dynamic happened. And that idea of the election had been stolen really became a constant, incessant topic of conversation in a lot of communities online. And so the way that this morphed ahead of January 6th was this protest called Stop the Steal. And so there was a couple of them - fliers going around, Occupy the Capitol, Operation Occupy the Capitol. I don't think - you know the challenge with online communication is it's quite difficult to tell what is serious rhetoric and what is kind of online bravado and puffery. But again, you know, calls to protest - there are many calls to protest online all the time. There was also though, unfortunately, in this particular situation, the kind of avowed white supremacist group vanguard, that was really at the forefront of actually making that shift from rally and march to offensive operation against the Capitol. And so there's a reckoning that's happening now related to how seriously should the FBI and lawmakers and folks who work in security have taken that online commentary.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:00] Yeah, so. So it seems to me that you have tracked what happened on January 6th, way back, so months, maybe years back. What do we know about who was behind this? Was it a dispersed and disorganized effort, a leaderless effort, or did there seem to be core groups that were executing their agenda?

Renee DiResta [00:05:22] Well, anytime there's a protest, you know, a lot of different groups, particularly and increasingly a lot of different groups will come together and will coordinate, and they'll push messages out for a show of numbers in the street. And so there are individuals who kind of sit in the you know, if you if you it as like a kind of a Venn diagram - There's the mainstream supporters of President Trump who believe that the election was stolen. There are the Qanon supporters who not only believe that the election was stolen, but also that there's this vast, deep state pedophile cabal and whatnot, you know, the sort of far out conspiratorial narratives that Qanon trends towards. Then there's the militia groups, right? The Oath Keepers were there, Proud Boys. And these groups that are not Qanon, they're distinct. They're not mainstream supporters, but some people are members of multiple groups. And so the extent to which things are coordinated, you know, you tell people on this day, at this time, we're going to have a protest. And in mainstream communities, that's messaged one way and in some obscure Discord server or Telegram chat, that may be messaged quite differently. And so the question is, what is the expectation when when groups come together?

Will Hitchcock [00:06:34] So, Renee, just remind us again, you know, what is Qanon and what is its role in amplifying a lot of very strange conspiracies which then bled into the events of January 6th? But secondly, what is your research show about why these really extraordinarily outlandish conspiracies actually take hold, how they are able to do a certain kind of political work?

Renee DiResta [00:06:58] So Qanon started as a post on 4chan, which an individual claimed to have inside knowledge, alleging that President Trump was working to dismantle a cabal of deep state pedophiles and that the president was sort of fighting this existential

war of good versus evil unbeknownst to the American public. And over a period of multiple years, Q would post these messages. They were commonly referred to in the community as drops. Q Drops. And the community that kind of sprung up to follow these posts would discuss and debate what the meaning of them was. They were always presented as a very cryptic riddle. And so there was an investigation process by which folks kind of fancied themselves sleuths, would go and try to find the deeper meaning behind these drops. You know, you had some phrases like "trust the plan", the idea that there was a plan that was unfolding and it would all be revealed to the followers in good time. But it took on dynamics that became increasingly cult like of an entire sub-Reddit sprung up called Qanon casualties. And it was people posting about how their family members had started following this community and had just completely lost grip on reality, had isolated themselves from family members, would spend all of their time trying to convince family members that they needed to believe this conspiracy. And as often happens in the age of the Internet, you can find people who have the same interests to do on something like a message board or Facebook group. At the time, Facebook was working to promote its groups feature. It wanted to get more people into groups. You used to come to Facebook with your real authentic social graph and people who you actually knew in the real world. But gradually Facebook decided to expand that and to push people into interest based groups. Qanon became one of these interest based groups, and the Qanon groups were very high volume, lots of posts, lots of engagement on the posts. And so they were perfect for the recommendation engine to suggest to people. And so you started to see the recommendation engine promoting Qanon Groups to ordinary people who had never typed in the word Qanon. Many didn't even know what it was. So the way that I found out about Qanon was I had spent some time in anti vaccine spaces. I was very interested in the anti vaccine movement. Prior to doing research in the space professionally, I was interested in it just as a mom and as a mom activist who wanted to see our vaccination rates in California improve. And so I followed some anti vaccine pages and joined some anti-vaccine groups. And my recommendation engine then began to show me these Qanon groups. And again, I had never typed in Qanon, but I was struck by the way in which some of the recommendations had made sense, if you will. You know, I was getting a lot of chem trails, a lot of flat earths, a lot of these pseudo science conspiracies. But when it started promoting Qanon, I started feeling like what was happening was inadvertant connections being made between conspiracy theorist communities. Because if you are a believer in a conspiracy, psychological research suggests that people who believe in one conspiracy are likely to believe in multiple conspiracies because it's a particular alignment and way of thinking and requires a certain degree of distrust in the government. And so if you believe the government is lying to you and covering up the fact that vaccines cause autism, maybe you're also more likely to believe that there's some some secret work afoot. So Q gradually became an omni conspiracy, a conspiracy that that sucked in people from a whole variety of other conspiratorial communities. And it just grew and grew and grew. And you started to see actually pretty early on members who, you know, one of them built a homemade armored vehicle and kind of held the Hoover Dam hostage for an afternoon. You started to see evidence that this was not just going to be one of these things that stayed confined to the Internet.

Will Hitchcock [00:10:57] You know, you mentioned that you began to observe anti vaccination communities because you were you came to it as a parent and as a citizen looking for information. But what's fascinating about the antivax movement, if I'm right and please amplify this, is that it doesn't map onto a preexisting political divide. It's not a left right issue the way so many things are in the country. You know, we tend to think of ourselves as polarized, left, right. But the disinformation is creating different kinds of fractures. And it seems like in this era of a global pandemic, the vaccination/anti-

vaccination argument is not mapping onto this clear left right divide. What are the politics of the anti-vaccination movement? And some of it is not an online conspiracy. Some of it is being pushed by people who are posing as knowledgeable, thoughtful figures, the Robert Kennedy Jr. community. How do you explain the political dimension of this?

Renee DiResta [00:11:51] So back in 2015, there was a measles outbreak in Disneyland. And I'll start with that, because I think that was that was sort of the pivotal restructuring of the anti vaccine movement. It prior to that had been very much, you know, the stereotypical Southern California, you know, well tanned, wealthy yoga mom kind of dynamic. You would read articles talking about how it was predominantly white, it was very wealthy. And so there was a distinction made between those who were deliberately and voluntarily eschewing vaccinations versus underserved populations who had lower immunization rates due to access. In 2015, during the Disneyland measles outbreak, prior to that outbreak the law in California was that if you did not want to vaccinate your children, you just didn't have to. You wrote a letter saying that it was a violation of your personal beliefs, it didn't even have to claim a religious belief. You could just say, I'm not going to vaccinate. That was the end of it. So after that outbreak and the realization that there were pockets of voluntary refusal of vaccines, particularly in the Waldorf community, that had taken vaccination rates down to 30 percent in some schools, there began to be parents like me who decided we were going to call our legislators and ask for something better to eliminate the personal belief opt outs and say, if you're going to send your kid, particularly to public school, your child should be required to adhere to the vaccination immunization requirements set by the California Department of Public Health. It was a very heated and caustic legislative battle that spanned multiple months, it was triple referred - three votes in the House, three votes in the Senate. But what wound up happening was that California has a Democratic supermajority. So the Democrats control the House, the Senate and the governorship. And the anti vaccine activists really worked to get the Republican Party, the Republican minority, to oppose this bill, to eliminate vaccine opt outs. And what happened as a result of that was that it did all of a sudden become a partisan issue in California. And almost every Republican lawmaker just opposed it kind of as a unit and turned it into a narrative of personal liberty. The government shouldn't be able to tell you that you have to vaccinate your children. And so this new libertarian strain of anti vaccination rhetoric really came out of that legislative fight. Now jumping forward six years to 2021, the platforms have chosen to try to intervene in health misinformation, which means if you make a claim like vaccination causes X, the canard about vaccines causing autism, for example, that is not something that the platforms will allow you to amplify. Those groups are removed from recommendation engines after a certain number of strikes. They're really restricted. Sometimes they just come down. So they really made an effort to minimize the health misinformation. But that political position, that vaccination is government tyranny. That's a political opinion. And so you are allowed to be an anti vaccine organization provided that your objection to vaccines is related to this idea of government overreach and tyranny.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:15:00] So, that's really fascinating because, you know, it's pretty clear that the tech companies trying to think along the lines of algorithms and logic trees and machine learning and artificial intelligence have tried to parse human expression in clear and governable ways, only to find that human beings are weird, complex, undependable, unpredictable and endlessly creative. Right. So when we expect these companies that run these platforms to keep themselves clean of garbage, you know, it shouldn't surprise us that they fail more often than they succeed. Now, we have a question from one of our students, Elizabeth. She asks, Tech companies have started taking more extreme measures to prevent or take down extremist content from their platforms. So it's

likely that much of this content will move to less detectable parts of the Internet. If this extremist content is moved underground, will this improve our current situation by limiting the reach of these groups to radicalize others? Right, to bring in new recruits? Or will this development pose a greater threat by exacerbating divisions and preventing awareness of how these groups are operating?

Renee DiResta [00:16:14] It's a great question and it's one that we're going to be spending a lot of time on over the next few months, probably years, but definitely months. So the last time we were really faced with this question, I think was in 2015 with ISIS. Around the same time I was doing the anti vaccine work, we were looking at ways in which communities were networking on Twitter and in which ISIS was using various forms of recruitment. So there were the jihadi brides, right? The women. There was a lot of outreach to women to try to get them to try to sneak into Syria. While the platforms would crack down pretty heavily on the most violent content, the recruitment videos were still going out. The glorification videos were still going out. The memes were still making their way around. And there were these fanboys, these kind of amplifiers, who would look to see who had liked the content they'd put out. Then they would reach out to them and they would try to move them off of Twitter onto - at the time it was Kick and a couple of other sort of chat services, increasingly then after a while Telegram - with the goal being to kind of push people into spaces where they could go through a personalized recruitment process to incorporate them into the ISIS death cult. And so the platforms had to decide what to do about it. Facebook, to their credit, was pretty early on with dealing with ISIS. Twitter took a little bit longer and there was kind of two questions. First was the is this a slippery slope? And then what happens? They didn't want to be seen as taking instructions from the US government. This was particularly close after the Snowden revelations and such. And so they didn't want to look like the government was telling them to take down this organization. So this was the one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter kind of dynamic of how should they think about extreme groups? And if one government tells them to take someone down, might a more authoritarian government misuse that power to tell them to take down a liberty focused organization? And so that that was one one thread of thinking and the other thread of thinking was if you push them off the platform, did that mean that you were going to have radical communities that nobody could see? And with ISIS, there was some - this was an international terrorist organization it's illegal to be a member of ISIS - and so law enforcement was going and infiltrating those groups and making an effort to figure out what was going on. But what we're faced with today is, again, that same question of if you push people off and limit their visibility, limit their ability to recruit do you, wind up with communities where only the most entrenched are there? And so thinking about how platforms should curate what we see, I think is really the next front in a lot of where both regulation and self regulation of the Internet ecosystem is going.

Will Hitchcock [00:18:49] What are you what are you doing like right now? What's the thing that's completely flashing red that you're like you're taking time away from to talk to us?

Renee DiResta [00:19:01] Right now? So we're doing our Election Integrity Partnership report. It's like three hundred pages. Honestly, and I am the person responsible for munging it together, but I'm really excited about what we have in there. I think we have some really interesting ways in which we've come up with this idea of incident to narrative to conspiracy - and how that dynamic really was just such a recurring process, if you will. We try to think about not over indexing on one particular incident or one particular actor, but trying to think about how things fit into the systemic view of the world. You've got that. We've also got information operations emerging from Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Iran,

and they look distinctly different from the Russian and Chinese actions because they are hiring mercenary organizations. Right. So they're using these like social media agencies to run the information operations for the state. So we're doing some looking at what is the strategic development of that look like? What are the implications for outsourcing to proxies and mercenaries? And what does that do for detection and attribution with the tech platforms? So it's another area that I'm really excited about right now.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:20:04] So we should let you go so you can save our election system.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:08] Please save democracy from both domestic and international threats.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:20:12] Nothing much. Nothing much. Not to mention convince people to get vaccines for covid so that we might actually get out of this nightmare.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:19] Renee DiResta, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Renee DiResta [00:20:24] Thank you for having me.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:20:31] That was Renee DiResta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory. She writes frequently for the Atlantic and other magazines about disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and the tech industry.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:45] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group podcast network visit democracygroup.com to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:21:07] You know, Will, I think Renee gave us the big picture that we might have been missing in our previous conversations about social media and disinformation, misinformation, et cetera. You know, it's really important that we understand that there is a consistency in the attractiveness of the anti vaccine movement, of other conspiracy movements, even movements as weird and diverse as Qanon. And what really strikes me - and here's here's what I wonder about and worry about going forward - when you look at the violence of January 6th, 2021, when all of those thugs invaded our capital, five people died. And you think the thing that motivated every single one of them was a sincere belief that Joe Biden lost the election and somehow stole the election. I think this election will serve as the lost cause for a movement. A paranoid, angry, hateful movement that truly believes that it is supporting democracy, that truly believes it is on the side of democracy. And what really worries me is that it seems so difficult, maybe impossible, to dislodge this thought from millions of Americans. You know, if you ask those people, why do you hate democracy, they would look at you and say, we are on the side of democracy. Why do you hate children? Because you don't want to vaccinate them. No, we are on the side of children.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:44] It's totally a new phenomenon, you know, and when she was talking about Qanon taking root in California, it's not a partizan issue so much in which we conceptualize as, well, political parties take opposing points of view on issues. Right now, it sounds like political parties are actually not only being influenced by, but essentially being taken over by online conspiracies. So party leaders, gatekeeping, discipline of parties, votes and so forth, all of that is gone, is kind of up in the air. It's it's evaporating as the online conspiracies actually set the agenda.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:18] And then consider the fact that the Republican Party, one of our two major political parties, has been infiltrated by Qanon to the point where there are elected officials in Congress who subscribe deeply to the Qanon vision of the world. This is not marginal. This is this is attached to power in addition to spreading widely. So, you know, this also undermines assumptions about the power of conversation and persuasion. Right. So we're used to thinking about political disputes being subject to mediation, argumentation, the presentation of evidence and ultimately persuasion. You know, gosh, this is exempt from all of that. And we're going to need different strategies. Checking facts, telling truth. That's just not going to do the job anymore.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:11] Well, I mean, whenever I face a problem in in real life that I think of as insoluble and unprecedented, I ask myself, is it really unprecedented? And in terms of technology, of course, this is totally new ground. But there are transitional inflection moments in history that remind us that human societies are always on the brink of one crisis or another because change is constant. And if you look at the late 19th century and the early 20th century, that seems to be the most fruitful comparison to our own time, a time when all the old verities were just completely thrown to the ground. Suddenly a mass media emerged that combined with suddenly mass literacy. So the available audience was epically larger for new ideas, new political philosophies than it had ever been. Mass political parties and mass participation, a mass voting, but also participation in labor movements, in organizations that mobilize the passions of people taking to the streets and really demanding change for all sorts of things. And, of course, mass perception of threats. The terrifying fear that mobilizes politics in the modern era was also stalking the land from the 1890s up through the 1920s. And I mean, unfortunately, all of these crises caused and contributed to 30 years of global conflict. And I'm not suggesting we're on the cusp of that, but it is something to remember what the real costs of political destabilization are for human societies.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:37] So, look, you know, over the past 40 or 50 years, we've seen around the world a sort of disorientation, an unfolding of traditional roles and expectations, a sense that we're all adrift and atomized. And a lot of this has to do with changes in economic policy, the decrease in power of labor unions, the erosion of the social safety net in much of the world, the dissolution of traditional family and village and economic ties in an agrarian societies, right? All of this change, which has been so rapid and accompanied by this communication revolution, we really have only begun to make sense of all of that. But I think when you look at something like Qanon, you can see roots of the turmoil feeding into that movement as well. So it's not just psychological, it's not just religious. There are actual material changes that send people out seeking for some meaning. And I think that might be something we have to pay a lot of attention to as well.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:46] Well, that's it for this episode of Democracy in Danger. Next week, we will check in with our colleague David Nemer, a media studies scholar here at UVA. He's going to tell us about the state of democracy and of the covid pandemic in his native country, Brazil.

David Nemer [00:27:01] Recently in the Amazon region we just had about fifty one people die because they didn't have oxygen tanks available in the hospital. Although the governor and the city mayor had personally requested that to the Ministry of Health and the request was never answered.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:19] It's not too late to send us your ideas for season two. You can find us on Twitter at DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast or visit us online at dindanger.org. And subscribe to the show anywhere you get your podcasts. Leave us a review and some stars.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:37] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovio. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:45] A big thanks this week to all our January term students who joined us for today's recording, and especially to the 13 teaching assistants who helped get us through the month.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:56] Support for this show comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. We're a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. Democracy in Danger is distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast hub of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:16] And I'm Will Hitchcock. See you next time.