

Democracy in Danger S3E10 Hot Spots Pt1 - #Charlottesville

Will Hitchcock [00:00:04] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

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

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

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:17] Well, a warm welcome to everyone in the audience here in person at UVA's Nau Hall and also to the hundreds who are joining us online today. We're going to play some sounds right now that are difficult to hear. Many of you will recognize these sounds. All of them are from the streets of Charlottesville in the summer of 2017.

White Supremacists [00:00:38] (Chanting) Ow, ow ow ow ow ow.

White Supremacist [00:00:43] I'm a fascist myself, so I'm not really allying with them, I am...

White Supremacist [00:00:46] Something that unites us all is that we believe that white heritage and white culture is something that's vastly important and worth fighting for.

White Supremacists [00:00:56] One nation and liberation.

White Supremacist [00:00:56] I never seen a site like this.

White Supremacists [00:01:00] Jews will not replace us.

White Supremacist [00:01:01] We're currently winding through what I believe is a college campus somewhere in Charlottesville.

White Supremacist [00:01:05] Klan, Proud Boys, all mixing together and uniting. Awe it looks like we got a fight!

Counter protester [00:01:12] How can you love God and hate other people? Hey, you can't.

Witness [00:01:17] There was fighting all over the place and officers just stood there and did nothing, nothing. I got it on tape.

Witness [00:01:26] We had lots of tear gas in the air.

Reporter [00:01:33] We're not sure what's going on. This is at Water Street at Fourth Street. Witnesses are telling us that a car just rammed over several people.

Susan Bro [00:01:35] They tried to kill my child to shut her up. Well, guess what? You just magnified her.

Crowd singing [00:01:49] This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. All around UVA, I'm going to let it shine.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:57] Wow, that, that is hard to hear. And it's hard to it's hard to remember, it's hard to bring those memories back, but we are here today precisely to do that work of thinking back on that moment when white nationalists and neo-Nazis brought violence and mayhem to our city. And to make sense, especially of the media ecosystem that frankly enabled them – that's the topic of our conversation today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:28] Yeah, I mean, Will, sometimes it's hard to be reflective and academic about events that were so powerful in our lives. But that's our job. The backdrop to this live show today is that there is a trial going on right now, downtown from where we are in a federal courthouse, just blocks from where a car attacked and injured more than 20 people and killed activist Heather Heyer. A jury is being asked to decide whether the organizers of the so-called Unite the Right rally should be held financially liable for the physical and emotional trauma inflicted on August 11th and 12th, 2017, when they marched on this university with torches and fought students and community members. And then on the 12th, when they clashed with thousands of counter protesters in downtown Charlottesville. This civil case, known as Sines versus Kessler, has been four years in the making. It draws on the KKK Act of 1871. So the plaintiffs are arguing that organizers of the rally, like Jason Kessler and Richard Spencer and Christopher Cantwell, who you might know as the crying Nazi, we're not just spewing their fascist ideas and hatred, but they were also conspiring in advance of that rally to commit violence.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:53] So here's Amy Spitalnick, director of Integrity First for America, which is spearheading the case, explaining the case to CBS News.

Amy Spitalnick [00:04:04] There was such a lack of accountability for the violent extremism we saw on display here, and that's what this case is about, making clear that if you are part of this violent hate, if you conspire to bring violence to attack people based on their race, their religion, their willingness to defend the rights of others, you will face consequences. We know that what happened four years ago is not an isolated incident, but really has previewed so much of the extremism that's followed.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:29] Well, at the core of this case are emails and social media posts shared among far-right leaders. Much of it gathered by activists and counter-protesters themselves. Now, these messages contain some very ugly statements, including references to their intent to crack skulls and fight until the last drop.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:52] OK, so the defendants who are at the moment are arguing on their own behalf, some of them anyway in court, and cross-examining the activists who are suing them, they deny that there was a conspiracy. And they say that OK, whatever the jury thinks about their opinions, their views, those views are protected under the First Amendment. So here's Spencer, a UVA alumnus, by the way – you just, you can't always pick them – sparring with the press at an event in Florida just a few months after the Charlottesville riot.

Richard Spencer [00:05:25] That I engaged in violence Charlottesville? Did I inspire violence in Charlottesville? Is that what you are implying sir?

Reporter [00:05:27] Well, I'm happy to say it. Your words and your actions, your group's actions scare people. Please just answer. Just answer my question.

Richard Spencer [00:05:38] Engaged in violence. Do I scare people? Let me answer this in an interesting way. I'm sure the alt right does scare people. We truly do want to change the world. We think another world is possible and we want to bring it about.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:56] Well, today we have on stage with us two esteemed guests who have spent a lot of time analyzing just this kind of rhetoric. They've also been analyzing the symbols and the actions in play in that summer of hate of 2017. And of course, they've done a lot of thinking and a lot of writing in the lead up to this trial that is now going on in Charlottesville. Jessie Daniels is a sociologist at Hunter College in New York City and a faculty associate at Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center. Aniko Bodroghkozy is a professor of media studies – my colleague – here at the University of Virginia. Jesse, Aniko, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Jessie Daniels [00:06:40] It's great to be here

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:06:41] Thank you.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:42] Well, Aniko. Thanks for being with us on Democracy in Danger. If I could get the conversation going with you and talk a little bit about your scholarship and what it brings to this moment of studying 2017 and its, and the events of that time. You're a media historian who focuses mostly on the 1960s, and in particular the civil rights movement and the role of television in the civil rights movement. Tell us a little bit about what you study, but also how it can be used to unpack the media moment around 2017.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:07:14] Yeah. As a scholar and a historian, I typically don't get out of the 1960s and never thought I would until what happened here. So I have studied the civil rights movement and the way that the civil rights movement used television, which was new media, in the 1960s as a way to amplify its message and attempt to reach a national audience about issues around Jim Crow segregation, voter disenfranchisement in the South – basically make these national rather than regional issues, and the new medium of network television news was a particularly advantageous medium for this movement. Thinking about this social movement in the 1960s and seeing this new movement in our era, which called itself the alt right, and seeing the way that the alt right was using Charlottesville as kind of a stage set to launch this movement out of the shadows of the online world into real life. I was seeing these odd similarities, reverse mirror, images echoes to all the things that I've studied and thought about with the civil rights era.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:53] That's really interesting, but also a pretty provocative. We don't usually put the civil rights movement in the same frame as the alt right, but you're, you know, you have a new book coming out #Charlottesville. You see, a weird echo, you know, mirror images. But how do you connect the two? Because normally we would tend to see these as of the opposite spectrums of how to use media. But there is, you say, some kind of connection.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:09:15] Yeah, there's a number of them. With the alt right in particular, they needed a stage set. They needed to bring media attention to this movement that they were building. And yeah, did that quite well for many years online using the affordances of online media. But like the civil rights movement, the civil rights movement used stage sets. So the Birmingham campaign of 1963. Many people will be familiar with the attack dogs, the high-powered fire hoses on nonviolent civil rights activists. That didn't just happen. That was in many ways staged so that white

supremacists and segregationists would behave violently – which of course they are violent, this is a violent worldview – with cameras there so that the rest of the country could see it. And so in this weird flip-the-script kind of way, the alt right came to Charlottesville, knew there would be violence, knew there would be confrontation, they knew that there was an anti-racist, anti-fascist movement in Charlottesville. Charlottesville was to be a stage set bring the mass media, not just online media, but CNN, the networks, the traditional mass media, so that the alt right would have the stage set to, you know, to build their movement.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:01] And of course, we hear echoes in that sort of twisted idealism of Richard Spencer that a new world is possible, right? So very much sort of plugging into that in a way that should trouble us deeply. Now, Jessie, in your writing, you have connected this version of the extreme right, the extreme right of the last decade, and in particular the groups that did unite in a sense, at least for a moment, in Charlottesville in 2017, with a widespread global white power movement with a deep and long history. What are the contours of this global dynamic and how does it figure into events like that in Charlottesville?

Jessie Daniels [00:11:40] Yeah, I mean, I think anytime we talk about white supremacy in the current moment, we have to place it in a global context because it's no longer just national, it's no longer just the U.S. And that's really as a result of the internet. And that's been happening since the rise of the popular internet, which, you know, in my classes, I always chart it back to that mosaic Netscape browser. Everybody here is way too young to remember that, but I was around the internet then. And part of what that did was it opened up a way for ordinary people to surf the internet. And among the first through the gate and sort of seeing advantage and possibility in the rise of the popular internet were white supremacists. They were actually early adopters of that technology, and they were very conscious in those early days in the 1990s of, of being able to connect to other people who shared their ideology of white supremacy, that the white race is somehow better than all the other races that they could connect to people globally who share that same ideology. And in fact, there's a really fascinating interview with the guy who grew up as the son of the founder of Stormfront. He's since defected. His name is Dereck Black, and he's defected from the white supremacist movement. But he talks about growing up in the household where his dad was running that site and saying, yeah, I was talking to people on the other side of the world about white supremacist ideology when I was growing up. So it's a very intentional move and they've succeeded in a certain way.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:22] Jessie, I want to jump onto that theme that you're developing about, first of all, you know, the relationship between the media and the alt right? Well, which media do we mean? Unpack that a little bit. Because there's old media, there's new media and they both play a role. But I'm curious to know in your analysis how that older media – newspapers, TV – has covered the rise and the public actions of the alt right. That old media, I think, sort of made its bones on saying, well, we're going to tell it from both sides. We're going to give you the pros and the cons. We're going to explain what happened. But of course, that as Aniko was saying, can be manipulated. So how did that older media sort of cover and engage the rise of the alt right from the 90s all up to today?

Jessie Daniels [00:14:02] Yeah, there's a phrase that I use to describe the far right is innovation opportunists. Every time there's a new innovation and technology or media, the people on the far right that what we are calling today, white supremacists are always looking at certain advantages that they might create out of that innovation. And I think the “both sides” approach of journalism was another place where they went, oh, I see an

opportunity there for spreading my ideology. And in a way, the you know what sometimes gets called the mainstream press, but the legacy media of the print and cable news networks, in fact, because they have come from this world in which it was simple enough to tell both sides and let people sort that out, it's really muddled the waters of what we're dealing with now. So part of what I've witnessed happen with this kind of mesh of, you know, big tech platforms and this legacy media has been a kind of systematic moving to the center of white supremacist ideas. So for example, this fellow we were talking about a UVA alum, Richard Spencer, can be on some place like 4chan talking about, hmm, are the Jews actually people? And that could, you know, stay hidden forever on the on the channels of 4chan? And then suddenly he gets interviewed on CNN or someplace like that. And in the crawl line below the screen, they'll put "Spencer asks: are Jews actually people?" And then the experts, Spencer is not even there anymore, but the experts are sitting around going, hmm, interesting question you pose, sir. And suddenly we have this white supremacist talking point. This becomes a debatable point, at CNN. And they know exactly what they're doing. The people on the far right they're like ah, look, we can do this. We can move this this way.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:59] But the media is not that dumb right thing, but surely they know they're getting played. Let me just tee that up for you.

Jessie Daniels [00:16:06] Well, I think the media, I think they're very smart people working in media. What I want to say about that is I think especially in the US, we haven't been smart about white supremacy. And if you think about it, you know, we've got this 1871 KKK Act that the trial down the street is using. To me, that says, oh, we've had this problem in the U.S. since at least 1871. And yet when we look at journalism, you know, typically there aren't reporters that have a beat that's covering white supremacy. So every time it happens, like we have something that happened here in 2017 or we have, you know, the massacre that happened in Christchurch, New Zealand and 2019 or, you know, these different incidents, it's like, oh my goodness, this is new, how could this possibly be happening now? And it's like, I don't know, 1871 KKK Act, seems like we've had this problem for a while.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:03] Well, and the iconography isn't new either. So Aniko you are a scholar of visual culture. Television, right? So, so I love turning to you for questions about visuality and the power of images, and this is one of those moments, and you've dug deep into this. Talk a little bit, please, about the ways in which the groups that came to Charlottesville in 2017 chose particular symbols, clothing, images to push their message and connect with larger messages.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:17:36] Yeah, well, this is something...I actually have a photo...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:41] So describe the photo for those listening.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:17:42] This is, this is an iconic photo of the tiki torch march, which happened the evening of August 11th before the day of the Unite the Right rally. I've spent a lot of time looking a lot of images of the tiki torch Rally because this shows both the media savviness of the alt right and also their fundamental weakness. This image has men in polo shirts with tiki torches. Behind them is the UVA Rotunda and a number of scholars, including UVA professor Jalane Schmidt, who was also a local Black Lives Matter activist, have written about the way in which alt right, kind of new-era white supremacists and white nationalists have this affinity for Greco-Roman architecture. This is again part of staging the set, so this enactment of emboldened, empowered white

masculinity in front of this kind of an image of Jeffersonian America. And this is also, you know, the polo shirts and khaki pants. This is also a kind of playing this weird kind of respectability politics.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:19:14] Because the next day, right, Saturday, we see a very different set of symbols. We see, in this photo that we're looking at here with the torches. We see no explicit signs of affiliation with Nazism, right? We see no visual symbols. Although what came out of their mouths sure did sound like Nazism, right? But it does seem like these are the kind of people who could live next door to us with their clean-cut haircuts, with their kempt shirts. They're not wearing camouflage, they're not wearing Klan hoods. They're not what we are used to seeing when we see extreme right protesters. In fact, they don't look like the people we saw a few weeks earlier here in Charlottesville. The the earlier right-wing rallies that had occurred throughout the summer. So can you contrast what we saw the night of the 11th with what we saw on the day of the 12th?

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:20:09] What we see here at one level the alt right succeeding, creating a media image, and you know, there were 30 counter-protesters around the Jefferson statue in the front of the Rotunda, including some of the Sines versus Kessler plaintiffs. As far as these guys were concerned, they won. We won the night, and assumed that that would happen the next day. But the next day, of course, what happened in the streets of downtown Charlottesville was not kind of choreographed successfully the way that the tiki torch March was

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:52] So that their symbols, their dress were much more sort of polyphonic, much more direct. Not at all respectability culture. We saw no respectability culture on Saturday, right?

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:21:02] No respectability culture at all. I mean, if you've looked at enough film and enough pictures of the tiki torch rally, yes, you will see a number of guys doing the, you know, the Hitler salute, which alt right folks called Roman Salutes. But for the most part, the situation was more under control. And that, of course, was not the case on the streets on the 12th. On the other hand, had the counter protesters not shown up in the huge force that they did. It's possible even with the shields and the more explicitly Nazi kind of symbols, the alt right could still have taken this as a kind of victory. But it's not what happened.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:49] Jessie, I want to pull back a little bit from the tick-tock events of August 11th and 12th and just talk about some of the technology that you've been writing about. So would it be fair to say that none of this really happens, the successes that you're describing Aniko, none of this really happens without social media. Both the staging of the events and then the counter protesters. And I just wonder if you could talk a little bit, not just about what how the medium was used, but more broadly like it is the fix in with digital media. I mean, you've argued that there's a kind of a structural racism built into the technology of social media that maybe, maybe we're missing the really the big story here. You even use the term the new Jim Code rather than the new Jim Crow to describe really the nuts and bolts of what's happening underneath all of this. What, what, what does that mean? How should what should we know about that?

Jessie Daniels [00:22:37] Well, I should first give credit where credit's due. The New Jim Code is actually Ruha Benjamin's expression, and she uses that phrase in her terrific book *Race After Technology*, which I recommend. And the work that Professor Benjamin has done, and also the work of Safiya Noble looking – her books called *Algorithms of*

Oppression – and they're really at the forefront of making this argument that race is built into the technology, that there are ways in which, for example, you know, Safiya Noble in her work talks about search engines and sort of the ways that all of our sort of our collective racism gets transmogrified in a way into the search engine technology so that, for example, when you put in "black girls are" the autocomplete suggestions from the search engine are actually quite racist. And it's not that they are racist coders sitting somewhere in Google headquarters, coming up with the most racist thing they can think of to complete that sentence. It's pulling from all of us and what we type into search engines and then offering it as suggestions to the next people that come through. So in some ways, the platforms and the technologies are holding a mirror up to us as a society and saying, oh, look, here's how racist y'all really are. It's not a pretty picture I have to say, you know, one of the other things I talk about in my writing is about the, I believe it was Microsoft that came up with a bot and they released it onto Twitter and within twenty four hours, that bot, because it was, you know, motored by machine learning and A.I., within 24 hours, it's spewing Nazi propaganda on Twitter, you know, 24 hours. So that's what I mean by.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:13] Because it's auto learning what is on Twitter. Yeah.

Jessie Daniels [00:24:14] This is what y'all seem to be doing on here, I'm just follows suit. So that's what I mean by the racism is baked into the technology. I mean, I think that the point I was making earlier about journalism also applies to these new media platforms if we can call them new anymore, like Facebook and Twitter and that sort of thing, because they have been, as we've seen recently with this release of documents from Facebook, you know, they are quite aware of how they're perceived out in the world and they especially by, you know, conservative politicians, and they don't want to err on the side of kicking white supremacists and neo-Nazis off their platform because they're afraid it will offend some conservative politicians. And I, I just have to say, well, I think the conservative politicians are telling on themselves a little bit here if they're going to try and defend white supremacists and neo-Nazis on these platforms and kicking them off is going to somehow offend these conservative politicians. So I mean, I think that there's a way in which the both sides, you know, we have to respect both sides, that argument has held sway in the big tech platform companies. And it's, you know, I think it's an unfortunate misstep that they've made.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:25:22] Well, there's not I mean, well, there's not like a direct identifiable money flow within that rather complicated machine learning system, right? There is an outrage industry that you've written about, right? So explain what that how that connects to what we're talking about.

Jessie Daniels [00:25:37] Yeah, so part of what, how white supremacists have seen an opportunity in the innovation of social media is that these platforms and also the cable news stations they, they solve for outrage. They make more money when people are outraged, because then we log on to these platforms to share our outrage or we dial up the cable news networks to hear from our team on the outrage spectrum of the day. And so these, you know, the platform companies and the network news companies, they make money when we're outraged by the events of the day, and that's part of how they're making money. But I also want to point out that there are people with really deep pockets, deeper pockets than any of us will ever have who are funding some of this. You know, I mean, we have to look no further than people like Rebekah Mercer, right, who has spent tens of millions of dollars sort of fostering a far-right in the United States. And we don't know, I mean, I'll just say this about the money on the far right, we don't really know where

all of it is flowing to and from, and I think this is a very underreported part of the story. Like one of the things I'm always struck by with those images of the tiki torches is, you know, if you notice they're all identical, which means they were bought at the same place from the same manufacturer. I want to see those receipts. Who paid for all those tiki torches? I think they're about, I don't know, 15, 20 bucks at one of your Home Depot-type stores. Somebody laid out a credit card and said, I'll take, you know, four or five hundred of these, right? Where did that money come from? And we still are not getting that.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:18] So follow the money as usual. But can I just follow up with one question about the money issue? Because Facebook obviously is making enormous sums, so are many of the other digital platforms. But I can't tell if you think that they are neutral players, they're just sort of outrage pays or if they really are actually creating an environment that will promote hate speech, essentially while also making it difficult to fight against it in the same medium. Like, is it a neutral, you know, let the let the games begin kind of attitude? Or is it actually not a level playing field?

Jessie Daniels [00:27:50] Well, I think it's not a level playing field, but I think that the people who are running those platforms think that the level playing field. So I mean, I think that's the that's a distinction. And I think that there's also a way in which the people at the platform companies, like all of us who have grown up in this in American culture, are not practiced at understanding and noticing and working against white supremacy. I mean, I think that I mean, one of the things I admire so much Aniko is that this wasn't her area and this stuff happened in her backyard and she's like, oh, we've got to pay attention to this. But I think that we kind of need that moment as a nation where we all go, oh, this is my problem. I see now. And we haven't been and I think the tech companies are like white supremacy, that doesn't look like my problem. But it absolutely is.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:41] Aniko, let me come back to Charlottesville and locate this again back in August 11, in particular August 12. So one of the arguments that we're going to hear in this trial is somehow that the counter protesters were just as guilty for the things that went wrong on that day of August 12 as the protesters themselves. Had they stayed home and not engaged, not taken the bait, if you like, maybe things wouldn't have gotten out of hand. There would have been a moment where people had said their piece and then they would have gone on peacefully. I'd like to know what you think about that line of inquiry, but also you said in your opening remarks that the Unite the Right folks expected violence and they came looking for it and they came prepared to engage in it. So these are two potentially conflicting narratives. Any sense for how these two things are going to work out. How do they clash? Which of these is more likely to dominate, the both sides view or the view that there is really bad people doing bad things on that date?

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:29:33] I mean, it comes down to the philosophical question, do you allow white supremacists and neo-Nazis to claim space. And the activists in Charlottesville, and they were the ones who inspired me to come up and, you know, be on the streets and do my little bit, is you cannot allow white supremacists to command the space. Another famous image that got a lot of traction, which is the confrontation between the 30 students at the Jefferson statue who came to peacefully protest. So here, here this is again the civil rights era narrative. We have nonviolent anti-racist protesters surrounded by white supremacists. And what's interesting about this image is the counter protesters are faced away from the tiki torch mob and they are about to be attacked. And that image reminded me so much of this iconic image from the civil rights movement of the sit-in movement, where you've got the exact same dynamic, nonviolent protesters just wanting to, you know, integrate a lunch counter surrounded by white supremacists who are

attacking them. So, similar kind of narrative, but it's the same kind of dynamic, right? You cannot let white supremacy stand.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:20] So the argument for staying home is unacceptable, on moral grounds? Ceding the public sphere. Yeah.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:31:26] Yes. Yeah. You don't cede the public sphere to Nazis and white supremacists.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:32] Well, I think that's really important because we do spend a lot of time focusing on the group collection of journalists, question of engineers who forged this field of images and reacted to these events. And we put a lot on them. But, you know, we are just as responsible for the health of our communities. And I say that as someone who made the wrong choice and stayed away. Jesse, we've reflected a lot on what happened here in Charlottesville in August of 2017 and of course, in our minds, as we're coming up on the one year anniversary of the invasion of our U.S. Capitol on January 6th, it's easy to look at those two things as the most indicative and powerful and frightening moments in very recent U.S. history. But of course, peppered in between those two events are a number of acts of white supremacist violence in Pittsburgh, in El Paso, gosh, in Kenosha, right? In all these places, I've probably forgotten – three or four – real serious right-wing brutality that has really shaken us to the point where the conversation cannot be what it was in the wake of Charlottesville in August 2017. Yet we don't seem so shaken, right? When we talk about the events of January 6th, sometimes we try to frame it using the same moves that we did for Charlottesville 2017, and we seem to as, in Aniko terms, allowing the extreme right to shape our narrative. We're still reactive. What can we do about that? And is there any hope of deploying the tools like social media to, to help reshape the way we interpret these events and maybe anticipate them?

Jessie Daniels [00:33:21] Yeah, I mean, it's a, it's a complex set of questions that we're left with, right, in the face of this. I mean, I think that in a lot of ways, these questions are still being decided and I'm paying attention to, for example, the case of Ashley Babbitt, you know, who was one of the insurrectionists who was killed on January 6, 2021. And I think that the way that her narrative, the narrative of what happened to her is being shaped is kind of this ongoing battle really over who gets to tell the story, who are the heroes, who are the villains of that of that moment? And I don't know that there's a quick fix, either in terms of the media side, whether we're calling it, you know, legacy media and that sort of thing or these big tech platforms. But I do think that all of these events should renew our willingness to look at the very uncomfortable, unpleasant history of white supremacy in this country. And we we don't have a good track record for looking at that history. But I think that, you know, people like Nikole Hannah-Jones and her wonderful 1619 project, are certainly giving us opportunities to think about that history and to reconsider it. And I think that we've got to do things to sort of shore up both journalism and education as institutions in the face of these threats. And in both those things, we've got to acknowledge the power that this set of ideas called white supremacy has had on our, you know, on the history of the nation and on the present moment. We've got to get smarter about thinking about white supremacy and talking about it in this new media moment that we're in.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:10] Can I just follow up with the same question for both of you as we're starting to wind down? And, you know, let me just ask you directly if to use your phrase framing. Did the alt right, you know, terror attack of January 6th on the Capitol? Was that a win for the right? Was that a win for the forces that staged that insurrection? Now again, I'm asking you as scholars of that event. I mean, obviously, they wanted a very

specific political outcome. I think they wanted, they said, they wanted the election to be overturned and they wanted Donald Trump to remain president. They didn't get that. But did they win anything else? Or do you think the media in the distance between August of 2017 and January of 2021 had learned something and maybe the coverage was different? You know, that's an interesting experiment. Maybe nothing had changed. How do you read it? Win or lose for the far right?

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:35:58] I thought a lot about this. And again, I come from the perspective of looking at the media coverage. Now, of course, there were no counter-protest. So you don't have countering images. What worries me is the kind of images that we have seen over and over again that have become some of the iconic images of January 6th. One being, you know, a insurrectionist lounging at Nancy Pelosi's desk and you've seen the QAnon Shaman over and over again. You know, these are images again of emboldened masculinity. We even have the Greco-Roman imagery with the Capitol, with all these insurrectionists in the front. So, you know, in the media battle, the media battle of, of images, this at least is winning one battle. And that worries me because this is, you know, one of the things that the alt right here in Charlottesville had wanted to do with the tiki torch rally and then with the Unite the Right rally the next day, is to create this movement that other, you know, potentially like minded, mostly men, white men would want to join. And there's a way in which I mean, on the one hand, the QAnon Shaman looks ridiculous. Just like tiki torch, Polynesian backyard barbecue, tiki torch marchers look ridiculous. But on the other hand, these are images of white male power, and that is distressing.

Will Hitchcock [00:37:53] Sounds like a win. Jessie, how do you see it?

Jessie Daniels [00:37:56] Yeah, I mean, I mean, to me, it's much more undecided. And this battle, I think, is still happening. I mean, I think that we have such a short memory in this country that it's going to be determined, I think still in the months to come, how we think about these events in a particular kind of way. And I think part of that is going to depend on whether any of these people will be held accountable. I mean, I think that's the other piece. It's not only the media images, it's are there any consequences for these people? And so far, not so much.

Will Hitchcock [00:38:29] But I mean, these images can be read in different ways by different people, right? So some people will read them and be shocked. What? There's a QAnon Shaman standing in the well of the Senate or in Mike Pence's chair. But others will say awesome, victory, sign me up. So it really depends on what frame you bring to this, to the publicity.

Jessie Daniels [00:38:46] Sure. Absolutely. I don't I don't disagree with that, but I'm saying that the frame is going to have teeth if somebody is held accountable. Right. It's like, oh, look at you, you're kind of looking like an idiot here and then you got arrested and had to pay a huge fine, right? So that's going to change the meaning of these images, I think, if there are real consequences. But I am not optimistic.

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:39:06] And this, I think, brings us back to Sines versus Kessler. There is a reason that this trial is happening. It's because of the counter protesters. It's because of the movement that was built here in Charlottesville. The plaintiffs that are sitting in that courtroom and are having to face questioning from Richard Spencer and the crying Nazi and the other lawyers of these unite the Right organizers. It's their courage first to have come out and stood against these white supremacists in the summer of 2017 and

their courage now to face them in court. And there are also court cases going on and, you know, all kinds of legal hazard for these guys who are part of the insurrection. And that's encouraging. But if they do not suffer major legal consequences, that's a loss for the anti-white supremacy cause.

Will Hitchcock [00:40:17] Well, you know, I'm a student of World War Two and the great moment that we still look to, even though it was not exactly by the book jurisprudence was the Nuremberg tribunal where you said, well, it is going to be post-facto justice and it's not going to be perfect and we're going to shine a light on the ways in which it's it's not working, but we're going to have a trial anyway, and they're going to be consequences. And I mean, you know, there does come a moment when you have to say this may not be perfect, but we have to get, we have to get a result. Well, look, questions from the audience we'd be happy to take them right now. We do have some coming in online. Siva, do you want to?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:48] Well, we have a question. Could you go to the microphone, please?

Catherine [00:40:52] Thank you so much. So my name is Catherine. In terms of the last point that was being made about accountability for these folks, they're gaining seem to be gaining some traction in not even recognizing the rule of law and our institution. So these folks get jail, they get fined, and they are being portrayed as martyrs, as heroes. And to wit, Stephen Bannon refusing the subpoena. So just beginning to like not recognize the structures that we have to try to hold people accountable. I think that's really worrisome.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:41:30] Jessie, any thoughts about accountability and institutions? Because one of the things we have here, of course, in the photos of January 6th, is a direct assault on an institution. So yes, there is the iconography of the Greco-Roman, you might even call it kitsch, 19th-century kitsch. But more than that, this is the core institution of American democracy, and it is being directly attacked, violently attacked. So and this follows years of other forms of attack on institutions. What do you think about the way the rule of law plays into this?

Jessie Daniels [00:42:07] Well, I mean, I think it's important. I mean, I think it's important that these people be held to account, and I think Catherine's absolutely right that, that there's a way in which the institutions themselves are corroding and crumbling under the weight of it. But I mean, I want to actually just sort of use this opportunity to shine a light on what we're talking about here, right? The podcast has the name democracy in it. And I want to just suggest that we're not only talking about democracy, we're talking about a very specific kind of democracy, a multiracial democracy. That's the American experiment. And we still don't know yet if we can do it, you know? So I feel like each one of these, are we going to hold these people accountable? Is that question, going to have a multiracial democracy or are we going to have apartheid? And I mean, to me, it's like a day to day question, and we're going through that every single day. It's like, what's the answer going to be today?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:42:59] Sir?

Justin [00:42:59] Hi there, my name is Justin. Thank you very much for this illuminating discussion. Concerning the unlevel playing field of social media. What role should the federal government play in solving the problem, as in the debate over Section 230? Should this be tackled by activists and CEOs or by legislators?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:43:16] Surely the CEOs, we should let them run it right?

Will Hitchcock [00:43:18] Yeah. Jessie, what do you think? What do you think?

Jessie Daniels [00:43:21] Yeah, I think that CEOs time to solve this problem is up. They have demonstrated that they are not up to the task of regulating themselves. So I think now it's going to be over to legislators. I don't think that's a perfect solution, but it's time has come.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:43:38] I would only add an asterisk to that, which is the alleged debate about Section 230 really doesn't have anything to do with the way these companies structure and amplify certain conversations. The question of civil liability for very clear torts and very clear violations of the law is a really detailed thing and doesn't really speak to the larger problem of all the garbage. I think these two conversations have been conflated in a really unhelpful way. Again, that's a total asterisk being a social media nerd. So let me just leave it at that. What's the next question?

Joey [00:44:17] Hi, my name is Joey. Thank you so much for the discussion. I found it particularly interesting, kind of your comments about how CNN will just broadcast kind of these bogus claims from backstream channels like 4chan. I was just wondering, how do you think they should be treating kind of all of this talk in the background going forward and trying not to just give free publicity to all these individuals? Like what is the correct term of having these conversations without just giving all of this free media attention?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:44:44] And I think that one of the interesting ways to approach this is look at how television networks covered the civil rights movement and the response to the civil rights movement, right? Didn't they have the same challenges?

Aniko Bodroghkozy [00:44:54] Yes. I mean, what we had in the 60s and we had until the Reagan administration got rid of it is something called the Fairness Doctrine in which broadcasters, because they're using public airwaves, had to provide voices from different sides of a controversial issue. That actually made it difficult for particularly network news who did not actually want to give platforms to segregationists and found ways around it to say to look for more moderate voices. So there's this issue of not wanting to give white supremacists a platform. And you know, I recently was debating this issue with my students about, well, we've seen the media environment that we've gotten with the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, flourishing of far right radio programming, then, you know everything that we've seen with Fox News, One America news and all the rest of it. And you know, that principle of the public interest. It helped to prevent broadcasters in the broadcast era from only emphasizing their bottom line. Now, clearly, Facebook, it's all about the bottom line. And so just the concept of public interest doesn't seem to exist in any form. And so again, as someone who studies broadcast history, I kind of wonder, is there some, some room to relook at the way that broadcasting was regulated?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:46:55] So let's go to another guest here, live in our audience with a question.

Jeremy [00:47:00] Yeah. I'm Jeremy. Thank you guys for being here. Is it fair to continue to call this the alt right or the far-right? Because it seems like a lot of the Jews will not replace us, Great Replacement theory stuff I could turn on Fox and from 8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., that's what they're talking about.

Jessie Daniels [00:47:23] Yeah. Thank you, Jeremy, for that question. Welcome to my world because this is part of what I have been trying to figure out, terminology around this for a long time. So let me expand a little bit. When I started doing this work in the late 1980s, early 1990s white supremacist groups, I studied them and broadsheet printed newsletters. And I compared what was in those newsletters – I'd gotten them from the Southern Poverty Law Center Klan Watch Archive – and part of what I was doing was like, oh, if you look at this extremist rhetoric, it's actually quite similar to this mainstream political rhetoric. And I pulled out Pat Buchanan, who is a Republican, gave a speech at the RNC, who Molly Ivins said it sounded better in the original German. And is there kind of saying the same thing? So I made this argument that the far-right extremist rhetoric and the mainstream were actually quite similar. I don't know how to talk about it now, frankly, because that used to be this Venn diagram with a little bit overlapping the middle. And now those two circles have just crawled on top of each other. And I don't know what to call the extreme in the mainstream anymore, so I'm still working that out. Thank you for your question.

Will Hitchcock [00:48:32] Let me jump in with our last question. This one comes online. Jessie, I'll throw it over to you. It comes from Lisa. She asks, you've talked about the role of social media and television, but what about the role of radio in setting the stage for Aug. 17 at Internet Radio in particular? Why is the far right seem to exert more influence through radio broadcasts than the left? I guess we ought to throw in podcast too, because as we know, second only to Democracy in Danger – for popularity – there are some shock jocks on podcasts as well. But what about is, you know, is radio just part of the ecosystem? Or does it have a distinctive place, a role?

Jessie Daniels [00:49:12] Yeah, I mean, I think that radio is and podcasting has certainly played a role in the rise of the far-right. I mean, I think part of what's happened is there have been longer drive times across the United States. And if we look at that since the 1950s or 60s, they've just increased exponentially, the drive times getting to and from work. And so if you're talking about somebody who has a 90 minute commute each way, every day, then they're they want a lot of audio content to get them through that and innovation opportunist, people on the far right, say oh, here's an opportunity and they they plug that.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:49:44] Well, Jessie Daniels and Aniko Bodroghkozy, thank you so much for joining us on this live recording of Democracy in Danger.

Jessie Daniels [00:49:59] Thank you all so much.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:50:05] Aniko Bodroghkozy is a media studies professor here at the University of Virginia. She specializes in the history of social-change movements. Her forthcoming book is called #Charlottesville: Media and White Supremacy From Civil Rights to Unite the Right.

Will Hitchcock [00:50:22] Jessie Daniels is a sociologist at Hunter College and a faculty associate at the Harvard Berkman Klein Center. She's the author of Cyber Racism and most recently, Nice White Ladies: The Truth about White Supremacy, Our Role in It, and How We Can Help Dismantle It.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:50:44] That's all we have for this live taping of Democracy in Danger. Be sure to catch the rest of our new series this month on perilous hotspots all around the world.

Will Hitchcock [00:50:54] Spread the word and let us know what you think of the show. Tag us on Twitter at DinDpodcast. That's D-I-N-D podcast and do your part to influence the narrative and save democracy. Share our episodes on social media. It's that easy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:51:08] There is a lot more to read about all this and a lot more to see on our web page. That's DinDanger.org. Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel, and Elie Bashkow. Special thanks to Sarah Ross, Sayan Banerjee and David Botnick.

Will Hitchcock [00:51:32] 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 of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:51:48] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.