THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

DEFENDING TRUTH FROM THE WAR ON FACTS

Washington, D.C.

Friday, June 25, 2021

PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction:

FRED DEWS

Managing Editor, Podcasts and Digital Projects

The Brookings Institution

Host:

BILL FINAN

Director, Brookings Institution Press

Guests:

JONATHAN RAUCH

Senior Fellow, Governance Studies

The Brookings Institution

DAVID WESSEL

Director, Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy

Senior Fellow, Economic Studies

The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Truth is contested ground. Facts are under attack. From disinformation to conspiracy theories, from social media pile-ons to campus intolerance, Americans are facing an epistemic crisis in their ability to distinguish fact from fiction and truth from falsehood. This episode features the author of a pathbreaking book on this crisis and how we get out of it. Jonathan Rauch, senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings, is the author of *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, just published by the Brookings Institution Press. Rauch is interviewed by Brookings Press Director Bill Finan.

Also on this episode, Senior Fellow David Wessel asks six questions about how the U.S. economy and workers will look in a couple of years, after the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast, The Current, and our events podcast.

First up, here's David Wessel, with another Economic Update.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. As the U.S. economy reopens after the enforced slumber of the pandemic, we wonder how the post-COVID economy will be similar to or different from the economy that preceded it. We've never gone through anything like this before so we can only speculate.

In the near-term, employers are hiring—but we're still more than 7 million jobs short of where we were in February 2020, before the pandemic. There are more than 3 million fewer people in the labor force—that is people who are either working or actively looking for work. And prices are climbing at a pace faster than most forecasters anticipated. Wages, particularly for the lowest paid workers, are rising. Best guess is that hiring will continue, some of the folks on the sidelines of the job market will come back, and those price increases will be, as Federal Reserve Chair Jay

Powell puts it, transitory. We'll see. The stock market certainly is very optimistic. But we have some big challenges: the end of the moratorium on evictions and on student loan payments.

But I wonder what will things be like in a couple of years. Will COVID be just a nightmare, a story that we will tell our grandchildren the way my grandparents talked about World War II? Or will it leave a lasting mark on the U.S. economy? We can't know. But here are a couple of big questions. One: How lasting will the work-from-home trend be? Of course, many workers don't have this option—the ones who work in hospitals or grocery stores or daycare centers. But the latest Census Bureau Pulse Survey found that nearly 30% of all workers teleworked at least one day a the past seven days, and half of all workers with college degrees did. Many of us will go back to the office when it reopens—I will—but probably not five days a week. And I wonder whether working remotely turns out to be so convenient, and such a strong recruiting tool, that the office will change forever.

Two: Related to that, what'll happen to the nation's downtowns and all the commerce there? If all office workers work from home two days a week, that's 40% fewer rides on the subway and 40% fewer people to buy lunch at the local deli. Downtown Manhattan bounced back from 9/11, defying the doom and gloom crowd. Will this time be different?

Three: The spotlight shone on "essential workers" during the pandemic—the caretakers, the hospital workers, the delivery people, the grocery clerks, the people who clean floors at the hospital—the very label "essential workers" conveyed a significant change in our attitudes. Many of them are enjoying long overdue wage increases now. But I wonder if a couple of years from now they'll be betting get the respect, and the benefits, they deserve. They might be.

Four: We know there have been a lot of "early retirements" because of the pandemic. Labor force participation rates are lower for the 54 to 65-year-old crowd than they were just before the pandemic, though they have risen a bit lately. Some of these workers will never get another job, but I wonder if the work-from-home option may keep other graying baby boomers on the job a few years longer.

Five: I suspect we'll see a surge in travel of all sorts later this year and early next. Vacations that have been put off will be taken. Conferences and college reunions that have been relegated to Zoom will be held in person. And people will really want to see each other after such a long absence. Sales reps will want to check in with customers they haven't seen in a year and a half. And so on. But after that? It's really hard for me to believe that business travel will ever come back fully. Flying across country for a two hour meeting that can be done efficiently on Zoom? I don't think so.

And sixth: there is productivity, the amount of stuff we produce for every hour of effort. Growth in productivity is the magic elixir of rising living standards. It's the reason we have more goods and services than our grandparents without working more hours. Productivity growth has been in a slump for the past several years. Perhaps the pandemic will recharge it. We've learned to do so much more remotely—telehealth for instance; we've realized new benefits from automated checkout kiosks; some factories have picked up the pace of automation; we've shaken up the way we work and shop. Perhaps, just perhaps, this'll give the economy a jolt of efficiency.

DEWS: You can listen to more from David Wessel on our Soundcloud channel. And now, here's Brookings Press Director Bill Finan with Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Constitution of Knowledge*.

FINAN: Fred, thank you. And Jonathan, thanks for dropping by today to talk about your new book.

RAUCH: I'm so happy to be here. So excited about the book and so excited to have Brooking as a publisher.

FINAN: Man, so are we totally. *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, a book Newsweek just this week is calling the timeliest book of the year, although really, as we've talked about, it's not a book written just for today's headlines and echoes beyond them. This new book, what prompted you to write it? Was there a single catalyst?

RAUCH: Not a single one. I've been involved in writing and thinking about where knowledge comes from and how to defend that since I published a book in 1993 called *Kindly*

Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought. And that basically said we have this system called liberal science, which it's not just hard science, it's also all of academia and also journalism and a lot of other things that search for reality by using impersonal rules in a kind of global marketplace. And it makes knowledge and it makes freedom and it makes peace. And it was a defense of that.

And then I kind of went away and did other things for a long time. Back then we were very concerned about college speech codes and some stuff like that. But then about five years ago, we started seeing something really different. And one of them was the emergence of what became called cancel culture. We didn't know that phrase at the time, but that's when you had people lose their careers, their reputations, sometimes their mental health, because they would be ganged up on and dragged for stuff that they said that could be random, not even strange or offensive in some cases. And around the same time we saw the emergence of Russian disinformation targeting U.S. elections and American disinformation coming from Donald Trump also targeting U.S. elections. And I thought, well, okay, wait, whoa, this is different. And that's when I started to think it was time to come back to that subject, but from a different point of view, looking at these more modern threats and understanding better what the strategies are that they're using to attack and undermine our institutions and our confidence in our institutions. And that became this book.

FINAN: The book is in some ways a critique of a try at epistemological rot or dysfunction and misinformation, cancel culture, disbelief, distrust, and expertise in institutions. But before we come to that, there's something you talk about at the very beginning of the book. It's why we like what we know or think we know and how it reinforces our tribalism. Can you explain how that works and what you mean by that?

RAUCH: Maybe if I could come at that by just backing up to a slightly higher altitude. So, what's a constitutional knowledge? Why do we have one and why should anyone care? I came up with this idea that basically where knowledge comes from is a marketplace of ideas, and if you have free speech, more information is always better and it'll sort itself out and we'll come up with the right answers and it'll all happen kind of automatically.

And that turns out to be wrong. It turns out that left to their own devices, people are generally terrible at figuring out what's true and false on abstract matters, things that don't affect their personal lives. We're pretty good at detecting whether it's a tiger in the woods or a breeze, but on an abstract question like who is God or broader sort of scientific questions, we're really bad at that. We look to confirm our biases instead of challenging them, and we're deeply biased. There are dozens and dozens of well-documented biases that distort how we perceive reality. And it doesn't come out in the wash. A lot of them actually complement each other to deceive us even more. And if that's not enough, we also look for other people who share our biases. So that will confirm our biases even more. We go down into these epistemic spirals, it's called, and we become cult members where we're only talking to people who agree with us. And then our cults go to war, or we submit to an authority who says here's how reality is going to be. And that's how it was done for pretty much the first two hundred thousand years of Homo sapiens.

And so along come some people in the 17th century who say that's a terrible way to do it, it's killed millions of people and oppressed millions of others. Let's do something a lot like the U.S. Constitution, which comes along kind of the same time from a lot of the same people. Let's set up a system of rules, impersonal rules that require people to persuade each other and compromise. It's going to distribute the authority, it's going to have checks and balances so no one person can have authority over knowledge. We'll have to consult each other and persuade each other. It'll be decentralized. It won't be final. There's no last election. There is no last truth. Everything can always be subjected to revision if it has to be. And that becomes the constitution of knowledge. And that's the system we rely on as a country, as a society, to collectively keep ourselves anchored in reality. It's really hard to stay anchored in reality. Works incredibly well. It put a vaccine in my arm five weeks ago. It's revolutionized, transformed the human species by giving us knowledge that goes so fast, so impressively, that literally every day we learn more than the entire species did for the first two hundred thousand years.

So that's the reason we need it. That gets back to your question, if we don't have a system like that with these rules and institutions, we become trapped by our cognitive vulnerabilities, and it turns out those vulnerabilities are very easy to exploit for political gain.

FINAN: Something that becomes very clear in your book and also leads me to my next question, and that is to talk a little bit about what you mean by disinformation and cancel culture and first, disinformation. We've always had that to some degree. Why is it so bad now?

RAUCH: Well again, let's first talk about what these things are. There are three big ideas in my book, and I'll just say them, it's a convenient way to lay down some markers. One is what we just discussed. It's not a marketplace of ideas, it's a constitution of knowledge. It's not just people talking randomly. The second is you're being manipulated, which is what we're about to talk about. And the third is, they're not 10 feet tall, we are, and that gets to what we do about it.

So, constitution of knowledge is based on an exchange of views, a comparison of hypotheses. They're tested, they're weighed in impersonal ways. We kill ideas rather than each other. No one dies, gets sent to the gallows, hopefully loses their job just for making an honest mistake. They just lose the argument. You can subvert all that with what people call information warfare. What's that? My short, handy definition: It's organizing or manipulating the social or media environment for political gain, specifically to dominate, divide, disorient, or demoralize your political opponents. This is not about finding truth at all. This is about domination. This is about winning politically by intimidating, isolating, confusing your opponent. How would you do that?

Well, second big, I think, contribution to my book, besides the constitution of knowledge itself is cancelling and disinformation, although they're very, very different mechanically, both have the same goals. They're both information warfare designed to dominate and demoralize and disorient.

So, disinformation: The Russians are very good at this. It's been going on since at least the time of Lenin. But the idea here is that censorship doesn't work very well. It never really did. It works even less well when there's an Internet. But what does work well is confusing people by throwing out so much false, contradictory, or half true stuff that people don't know which end is up

anymore. This is what Vladimir Putin is so good at. When the Russian intelligence poisons two people in Britain using a Soviet nerve agent, they put out literally dozens of contradictory explanations. It was suicide. It was a crime of passion. It wasn't Novichok. It was some other nerve agent. It wasn't a nerve agent at all. They don't care. The point is to confuse people with so much of this stuff, whereas Steve Bannon, a Trump aide called it, “flood the zone with shit.” The people become confused, cynical, demoralized. They throw up their hands. They don't know who to trust. They don't trust anyone. That opens the space for a demagogue to come in and say, well, trust me, I'll lead you out of this wilderness. And that gets us to the greatest disinformation agent of our time, I think the greatest since the 1930s, which is Donald Trump.

FINAN: Who still remains with us. The other part of this equation is cancel culture and it's become the word of the day in many ways, the words of the day, the label of the day. It's been around for a while, too. But the ultimate cancel culture, as you pointed out in the past, is I eradicate you because I don't like your point of view. How would you define it today? And also why did it originally have this kind of leftist label attached to it, it only came from the left? Because today it looks like it's an equal opportunity political tool.

RAUCH: I think actually today it's still more coming from the left, as disinformation is more coming from the right, though both sides can use both these tactics. So, long before there was this phrase cancel culture, which actually came along while I was working on the book, I had to go back and write it in—I'd been calling it call-out culture, and before that I called it coercive conformity because that's really what it's all about. It's about coercing other people using social pressure instead of outright censorship. Instead of throwing them in jail, you say no one's going to talk to you, no one’s going to like you. Your job will be endangered. Your friends will walk away from you. Anyone who Googles, you know, Bill Finan or Jonathan Rauch, the first thing that will come up is accused of racism, for example.

Once you begin to do this, people become afraid to speak out, and that chills the environment and a couple of ways. One is, of course, they're afraid to speak out. So, a minority that does this by chopping off the heads, figuratively, of the first people who speak out can dominate the

information space in a way they never could based on the merits of their position. But there's also the second more subtle effect. Which is, remember, people look to each other to decide what we believe. Experiments find that if you have eight people in a room and you give them an obvious puzzle, just totally obvious, and seven of them deliberately give the wrong answer, a third of the time, the eighth will also give the wrong answer, because the eighth is thinking, well, this must be an optical illusion. There's something going on. I don't understand. Maybe they're right and I'm wrong.

So, by creating this environment, where artificially it seems that one side is dominating the conversation, people actually can change their opinions, their views about what's right and what's wrong. That's why the Soviet Union, for example, worked so hard—a lot of people knew the system was broken, but no one could say it. So they didn't know what anyone else thought. So you've got what's called the spiral of silence. Well, that's what cancellers are doing today as well. They're intimidating people who espouse certain points of view, keeping them frightened enough so that those people and other people will self-censor. And that, in turn, allows these small groups to exert power over the conversation that's way disproportionate to what they're doing. And, yeah, that's primarily, I think, coming from the left, mostly as a function of the fact that the left has more cultural power right now. Disinformation has basically has this grip on the Republican Party, has a lot more political power right now. So take your pick.

FINAN: I see cultural institutions, book publishers, for example, twisting themselves in all kinds of knots to figure out who to cancel or not. I just saw this morning a story about Simon and Schuster having to deal with the fact that it's not publishing Josh Hawley’s new book, the senator from Missouri, but it is going to publish Mike Pence’s book, his memoir, and trying to defend why Pence and not Hawley. It leads us into this crazy, crazy distortion.

RAUCH: Yeah, these thickets. People are withdrawing works of young adult fiction. I had a screenwriter I talked to in the book who talks about how whole scripts and plot lines are off limits now because all female characters have to be strong and confident and assertive. And I said, is that a problem? And he said, well, it limits my creative choices. I've learned to work around it. But, you

know, imagine Jane Austen if all the characters have to be like that. So there's those kinds of prices that have to be paid, too.

And there's the bigger price that the goal of this information warfare is not just to say, here are the dozen things, specific things, you can't say. It's to say, it's never necessarily going to be safe to say anything. Because you're never going to be able to predict what's going to set off a cancel campaign. One guy lost his job because he's a political analyst and he simply tweeted out an accurate description of an academic study by someone else. He lost his job the next day because some people launched a campaign against him. So, what's going on there? Why would they do that? The notion here is if you salt the ground with enough landmines that go off in random places, you can make everyone self-censor way over broadly. No one knows what's safe anymore. So the publishers are like, well, we don't really know what's safe. We'll try to get ahead of this by overchilling. That's the effect they're looking for.

FINAN: You offer a systemic solution to our current epistemic crisis, but you end with how we as individuals deal with it. How you yourself had to do with hate speech, the language of anger, ignorance, and flaming.

RAUCH: Yeah, the book ends on a personal note. I mentioned the third big takeaway that I'd like to convey in this book, is they're not 10 feet tall, we are. These tactics that we're talking about are well tested, they are very sophisticated, and they are powerful. And that is why people like Lenin, and Goebbels, and Putin, and now Trump in his own very different way, are using them. They are sophisticated and hard to resist for all kinds of reasons. They exploit our cognitive vulnerabilities, conspiracy theories, disinformation. If you refute it, you give it more attention, more oxygen. If you don't refute it, it continues to spread. You can't win that game. They know that.

So, it seems right now like the other side is 10 feet tall, we'll never get social media under control; the cancellers have taken over, some people argue, the schools and the newspapers and the publishers. And what are you going to do about the now seventy-five percent, I think it is, Republicans who think the election was stolen? And it all seems huge and impossible. It's not. There's a whole lot that can be done. A lot's happened already. The message of the book is once our

side gets mobilized, the constitution of knowledge is formidable and it can defend itself. So, there's a lot in the book about, as you say, institutional changes. A lot of it's happening already. A lot more needs to happen.

But then I come back to my life and our individual lives in the chapter called Unmute Yourself. And this is saying: remember, the recent disinformation and these other tactics like canceling works, is because we let them work. We, for example, chill ourselves, we overchill ourselves because we're so worried about what will happen. We fail to do the basic work of thinking twice before we retweet some outrageous conspiracy theory that appeals to us. We can do better, and if we do do better, each of us can become kind of a barrier to the spread of disinformation, or the cancel campaign.

So, I tell people, you know, don't let yourself be silenced. They win if you let yourself be silenced. They're trying to demoralize you. Demoralization is demobilization. If you feel like you're afraid to say something and you don't say it, they win. It really doesn't take many challenges to break down the system.

And then something else I try to remind people is, you know, a lot of people hesitate these days, especially younger people, because they think that free speech, having these conversations on hard issues like, you know, transgender, race, my issue homosexuality. They think that open debate is the enemy of minority rights and nothing could be further than the truth. I'm gay and I'm married today because for 20 years I was able, as an activist, to use my voice to make these arguments which were outrageous and controversial at the beginning. Laughable. My father warned me, please don't become a gay marriage advocate, you'll destroy your career because it's such a ridiculous idea. And I remind them that if we don't shut up, if we unmute ourselves, we not only become the barriers to disinformation, but we become advocates for a more enlightened future. Social justice and blocking disinformation—these things go together.

FINAN: Jonathan, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today about your new book, *The Constitution of Knowledge, A Defense of Truth*.

RAUCH: Thank you.

DEWS: *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, is available wherever you like to buy books, and may I recommend your local book store.

A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks go out to: audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews; my Communications colleagues Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration; and finally, to Soren Messner-Zidell and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support.

The Brookings Cafeteria is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network which also produces Dollar and Sense, the Current and our events podcasts.

Follow us on Twitter @Policypodcasts.

You can listen to the Brookings Cafeteria in all the usual places and visit us online at Brookings.edu.

Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.