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A DEFENSE OF TRUTH  
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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WEST: Good afternoon. I am Darrell West, vice president of Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. And I would like to welcome you to our discussion of a new Brookings Institution press book by Jonathan Rauch entitled "The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of the Truth." Here is a book — today actually is the official publication day of this outstanding volume. It is smart, thoughtful, and provocative book and I recommend it to all of you. And I think now is a great time for this book to be coming out because knowledge, truth and facts are under attack. We don't agree on basic facts and truth is seen as a relative concept. Indeed, people often are encouraged to find their own truths.

In this book, Jonathan argues that we are facing an epistemic crisis that makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction and truth from falsehood. He feels that the way we generate knowledge is problematic in the United States and around the world. So today we're pleased to have Jonathan outline his new book. He is a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and the author of many excellent books.

But we're also honored to have two other distinguished guests with us. Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic and a senior fellow at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. She also is the author of "Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism." Love that title. We're also pleased to have Neal Stephenson with us. Many of you know he is the author of many bestselling novels, including "Snow Crash" and also "Fall; or, Dodge in Hell." And I do have to say we don't often have novelists speak at our events, but Neal writes about virtual reality and cyber sensibilities, so we thought his perspective was quite relevant to this more general topic of knowledge generation and transmission.

And if you didn't see it, Jonathan's book actually made the front cover of the New York Times book review on Sunday. And I think that is a sign of how important the book is and how seriously others are taking its message. His book also has a raft of prominent people praising it. For example, historian John Meacham says it is a hugely valuable and necessary book, an illuminating exploration of the flight from fact. And then George Will describes Jonathan Rauch as a singularly talented analyst and claims he is a James Madison for this era. Now, the latter may involve a tiny little bit of hyperbole, but

we're going to go with that anyway.

So I have a few questions for our author and panelists, but you can join in the conversation as well. You can submit questions via [Events@Brookings.edu](mailto:Events@Brookings.edu), or via Twitter with [#ConstitutionofKnowledge](https://twitter.com/ConstitutionofKnowledge). I also want to point out, you can order a copy of the book at the Brookings event page that you came to watch this event at [Brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu) or at leading bookstores around the country.

So Jonathan is going to start with an overview of his book and then we will get reactions from Anne and Neal.

John, over to you.

MR. RAUCH: Thank you, Darryl.

Thank you, Anne and Neal. It's such an honor to appear with both of you. Both of you in your very different ways have been inspirations in my own work and you've been a leader in understanding and warning us about information warfare and other kinds of attacks on our democracy.

And, Neal, your book "Snow Crash" was fundamental to me. There's a wonderful metaphor in "Snow Crash" to a device that kind of wipes our brains. And that's really not a bad metaphor for the disinformation attacks we're under right now.

Darryl, thank you for the support of Brookings and Governance Studies. Thanks also to the Hewlett and Coke Foundations and to Phil Harvey for supporting my work at Brookings over the past two years. And thanks to the audience for being here.

So I'll summarize the book very briefly, because I know the part everyone is waiting for, including me, is the conversation, but there are three big ideas in this book. The first idea is it's not the marketplace of idea, it's the constitution of knowledge. But what does that mean and what's a constitution of knowledge?

Every society, whether it's a small tribe or a large nation, needs some kind of regime for – for public purposes at least — deciding what's true and what's false. You know, some people believe Elvis is alive. Should we go look for him, just send him a social security check? Well, this turns out to be an extremely difficult problem. And most societies for 200,000 years of human history have handled it very poorly because humans are well wired to discover truth about things that are important for our

survival and generate immediate feedback, like is that a tiger in the bush or just a breeze. But we're not good at all about discovering truth about abstract questions, like will it rain in a week, what is the shape of the universe, where does disease come from, which god should we worship. And it turns out that we base our beliefs typically not on any systematic kind of objective believing, but on what what's good for our status, what supports our identity, and what confirms our existing biases.

So all of this is well-documented and over history it meant that for most of human history knowledge advanced very little because we all looked for ways to confirm our biases and agree with our friends. And we split into sects and tribes and then we went to war with each other, we had civil war, we had a lot of killing, we had a lot of authoritarian regimes where princes, priests, and politburos decided what truth was going to be. Constitutional knowledge comes along, starts about, you know, 300 years ago, 350 years ago, and really picks up steam around the time of James Madison. And it says let's do something very different, let's take this whole process of deciding what's true and what's false and hand it to a process. No one in particular is going to be in charge. Instead everyone is going to have to persuade everyone else. Much as in the U.S. Constitution the way you make law is that everyone has to compromise with everyone else. In the constitution of knowledge no one person or faction can simply decide for everyone else what's true, they have to go out and show other people who very much disagree with them. Well, some people call this the marketplace of ideas. I like that metaphor, but it's woefully short, and here's why: like the U.S. Constitution, the constitution of knowledge doesn't magically work by itself form some abstract exchange of truth, it works because we have tons and tons of rules and institutions that structure how we communicate in ways that help us find each other's biases. We are talking about everything from think tanks like Brookings and universities to mainstream journalism, to the law, to journalism schools and law schools, law enforcement. The courts are part of this, the intelligence community, federal agencies like the CBO. These are all populated by professionals seeking truth using a lot of rules and structures through a lot of institutions. That's the stuff that makes up the constitution of knowledge, just as the U.S. Constitution is partly written on paper, but most of it is the courts, the congress, the administrative agencies, the political parties, and so forth. And it turns out they're doing much the same thing. They're saying the outcome of politics or of knowledge is going to depend on this impersonal process that no one is going to be able singly to control. And probably this does an incredible

job. Human knowledge basically adds about as much in a day today as it did in approximately our first 200,000 years. It put the shot in my arm that's defending me from COVID right now. It also ended the civil wars, the wars over reality that we used to take for granted.

It's been a fantastically successful system, but because we assume that it just takes care of itself — you know, marketplace of ideas, free speech is all you need — we forget it's there, we forget to take care of it. Well, what happens when we forget to take care of it? We become vulnerable. And that brings me to the second big theme of my book and the one that's most relevant to our moment.

The second big theme of my book is you're being manipulated. So all of these institutions and rules that we've been talking about can be attacked and undermined. And all of the cognitive shortcomings, the flaws that I describe, the tendency to believe our biases, the tendency to respond to outrageous stimuli become preoccupied within the tendency to believe conspiracy theories. All of these can be weaponized and they have been weaponized to subvert the discovery of truth, undermine the constitution of knowledge. This is why I kind of like the metaphor in Neal's work to these technologies that can scramble our brains.

That's what disinformation does. Disinformation, or really information warfare, really actually epistemic warfare, what that is is organizing and manipulating the social and media environment for political gain, specifically to dominate and divide and disorient and demoralize the target population. Well, how do you do that? There are lots of ways to do that, they're discussed in my book, but there are two I want to mention briefly in passing right now, because they are singularly relevant.

One is so called cancel culture. And that's where you use social coercion to silence or intimidate one side of an argument in order to dominate. And actually fairly small groups can do this very successfully if they're willing to use coercive tactics and if no one else stands up to them. That has effects of widespread chilling in America right now. Sixty percent of the public says that they don't tell the truth about politics for fear of social consequences. And a third of Americans across all political persuasions say that they're worried about losing a job or career opportunities if they tell the truth. That's a chilled population. That is not good.

The second mechanism, which I think is most relevant and most worrying at the current moment, is Russian style disinformation. And by that I mean tactics like trolling, which kidnaps our brain.

By outraging us we can't stop thinking about it, we can't stop talking about it. And the so called fire hose of falsehood, which is when you push out so many lies, conspiracy theories, and half-truths through so many channels at once, people become disoriented, confused, they don't know who to trust anymore, they become cynical, divided, polarized, and open to demagoguery. The latter is what Donald Trump and his MAGA movement and a substantial share of conservative media have been doing for four years, escalating sharply in the "stop the steal" campaign, which I argue is the most audacious, large, and successful disinformation campaign every conducted against Americans, but hard to identify as disinformation because its source is other Americans. We are not used to that. I know that will sound to many of you like a partisan statement. I am not a partisan person. I have voted for many Republicans and I am center-right. But what we're seeing now is not within the bounds of ordinary politics in the American tradition. It's much more like something that Vladimir Putin would do that has been adapted to the U.S. context.

The third big point of my book is they are not 10 feet tall, we are. These tactics came out of nowhere. As an epidemiologist might say, the American population was naive to these tactics. Unless you had read Neal Stephenson or Anne Applebaum, you probably thought these things could just never happen here. I mean, for example, how could the 8 percent of the population, which is committed liberal progressives, sometimes called woke, how could they dominate lots of corporations and the media. There are not enough of them, or so you would have thought. Well, we didn't know about canceling and the harnessing of social media for that purpose.

How could it be that a United States politician and his political party would use Russian style disinformation tactics to tell 35,000 lies over the course of a presidency and just blatantly pretend that the election, which they had lost, they had won. Inconceivable. So we're unprepared for these tactics. They caught us by surprise, number one. And number two, we took the constitution of knowledge for granted. We just assumed, you know, truth will out, these tactics will go away. The bad news is they don't just go away. These have now been unleashed in American politics and society, they're going to be here for good. These are sophisticated psychological warfare tactics. They are hard to resist even if you understand them.

But here's the good news, they are much easier to resist if you do understand them than

if you don't. And there are tons and tons of ways that we can respond. And the book is full of them, but they involve lots of adjustments throughout lots of society, in the media, in our schools, in our politics, in academia, in newsrooms. And some of those adaptations are happening right now. Facebook's oversight board is a good example of the sorts of things that have worked a century ago to get out of, for example, the miasma of fake news and hyper partisanship that infected American media a century ago.

So there are lots of ideas in the book for fighting back, but the most important thing is to understand that America is under sustained epistemic attack right now. That means deliberate efforts to divide, dominate, disorient, and demoralize us. And we've got to respond.

MR. WEST: Thank you. That was a tremendous overview of the book. I love the point about knowledge doesn't take care of itself, we have to nurture it and we have to think about the institutions that sustain that. You point out accurately that people can get manipulated. In the book you talk about tribal truths, cancel culture, our outrage addiction. I love the line about the fire hose of falsehood.

So, Anne, I want to bring you into the conversation. You have written about many of these topics the threats to democracy, the risks of authoritarianism, the use of misinformation and disinformation. We'd love to hear your thoughts and reactions to Jonathan's book.

MS. APPLEBAUM: Sure. So, first of all, thank you. I'm delighted to be here. It's a great book. The article upon which it was originally based, I actually assigned the students in a course that I taught at Johns Hopkins this spring. I thought it was that good and that important that everybody who's between the ages of 18 and 21 should read it. So it's really worth your time.

One of the things I liked about it is that this question of what is true turns out to be much more central to the question of how do we maintain democracy in a democratic consensus than we ever thought it did. I mean it wasn't something that theorists of democracy have written about, certainly not in the way Jonathan's written about it.

But if you step back and think about how democracy works, I mean democracy in its essence is a kind of improbable — you know, it demands things of human beings that are almost inhuman, so it demands, for example, that when you win an election you win and then you maintain all of the institutions in place, you know, judicial and media freedom and legal and so on, that will enable your

political enemies to beat you again in four years. And by the same token, it demands that if you lose an election you allow your opponent to rule without seeking to disrupt him, you know, in any way on the assumption that you yourself will be able to win again, or could win again in four years.

And all that demands this incredibly high level of consensus as well as a shared reality. And we have to all agree that it's good to have independent courts and we have to agree that the courts are independent. You know, we have to agree that there is such a thing as independent media and it's good that it maintains its independence. And we have to be able to discuss similar topics using similar language so that we can have political debates that are meaningful over time.

So, you know, in one election you can say you said you would do X but you didn't, and vice versa, you have to be able to say I'm going to do Y four years from now and people have to be able to judge you on those bases. Once that falls apart it becomes very difficult to see how democracy itself can be maintained, because if you aren't having the same conversations, if you don't agree about the institutions that need to be preserved through those periods in between elections, then you begin to lose the consensus that democracy needs, you know, that we've all agreed to play by this set of rules and we're going to respect them every four years or every two years or every six years, depending on which country you live in.

So this is why I really liked this book, because it gets to something fundamental about democracy that isn't usually discussed in that context. We don't really talk about democracy and epistemology.

The only other thing — the other point I wanted to make, and this isn't really a point. I'm hoping Jonathan and maybe Neal can help me resolve this dilemma. I spent a lot of time trying to decide whether this problem that Jonathan began to sketch out, and he does in (inaudible) in his book, really can be boiled down to the internet. In other words, social media, but also the internet more broadly, and the way in which it's changed the nature of communication.

I mean Jonathan in his book talks about at least three things that the internet does, or social media does, that changes conversation. One of them is it kind of offers this level of quantity, you know, that you — again, that it's possible to do this fire hose of disinformation, which wasn't — I mean we've always had disinformation, we've always had lies, but we haven't had them in this sustained



permanent way. You know, a friend of mine who studies this from a psychological perspective talks about the effect of having lies repeated over and over and over again. If you read them 10 times a day or 20 times a day or 30 times a day as opposed to once a week, how that changes the way you think. And whether that's the key to explaining it.

The second would be the way in which the social media algorithms and other algorithms are designed to individualize what it is that we see. In other words, our desires are somehow reflected in what we see and our biases are reflected in what we see in a way that was never true in the past. I mean you pick up the New York Times and agree with it or disagree with it, but it wasn't carefully tuned to appeal to you in a specific way, in which increasingly much of what we do on the internet is.

And then the third point is that there is now a business model that rewards disinformation, whereas before printing out sheets of whatever, handing them out on the street, I mean you couldn't make money out of it in the mass, you know, scaled way that you can do now. And I'm torn between that interpretation. And there are many other things that the internet does too as well. I think it establishes the distance between us and institutions and it makes people feel. It creates openings for parity and for irony in ways that other forms of media didn't.

But the question is whether it's that or whether there are other things that have gone corrupt or whether there are other things that are deeper elements that are wrong with society, you know, that it's the — you know, that Trump is a product of financial corruption and the loss of morality around the business community. You know, whether there are deeper things going on or how much of it is the internet, how much of it is the specific — you know, the venal people who are particularly interested in doing this, how much of it is circumstance and how much of it is the way in which this new medium shapes our world.

I don't have a clear answer. I'd be interested to know what you both think of that.

MR. WEST: Thank you, Anne. Those are great questions. And I think you're absolutely right. We have to pay attention to this tie between information, knowledge, and democracy because, as Jonathan pointed out, American democracy is under attack and the way our knowledge systems operate are a big part of the problem.

So, Neal, I'd love to get your perspective. So you are a novelist, so you are usually in the

world of fiction, but it seems like the worlds of fiction and nonfiction are colliding in a new kind of reality. So what is your reaction to Jonathan and this general topic?

MR. STEPHENSON: Oh, well, first of all, thanks for including this ink-stained fiction writer in this august conversation. I appreciate the invitation. And, you know, I want to thank John for having written the book. It kind of for me gelled a number of things I had been thinking about vaguely for quite a while. And, indeed, even in what Anne just said, I heard some — I felt a similar experience in that some things started to click in my head that, again, I'd only been thinking about kind of vaguely.

What can I bring as a science fiction writer, the — first of all, a notion that came into my head as John was talking about his third point, sort of how can we fight back, as it were, I was reminded of another science fiction writer, David Brin, who has been writing for a while about similar topics and as coined the term "polemico judo", which might be worth looking up for anyone who's interested in following this. So I wanted to plug David and his work in that area.

But, anyway, the science fictional perspective, I guess, encourages us to think in terms of alternate timelines, alternate realities. Why is our world the way it is, how did it come to be this way, might it have turned out in some other way, and where might it go in the future. And so, I find it interesting to look at the history of all this and to think about how we got from not having a constitution of knowledge to sort of having one that worked pretty well for a while, because it obviously goes to the question, you know, can we get it back. You know, if we're trying to figure out how to get it back, maybe we can go back and look at sort of how it came into existence the first time.

And so John's book introduced me to some characters in that story that I was not familiar with, Charles Sanders Peirce and — obviously I've heard of James Madison, but now I need to go back and read more of him and see how he contributed to this. But I have recently been reading biographies of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington and we tend sometimes to think of their era of American history as sort of a wonderful sort of flourishing of enlightenment values, but when you go back and look at the kind of polemical environment and the press environment that they existed in, it's not difficult to see some similarities with what we've got today. These people, the colonial era of press and kind of the political environment, was pretty bare knuckles. And these people knew how to participate. And Ben Franklin himself is not above being a little bit tricky in using basically anonymous characters that he had

created to troll people in the Philadelphia press. So there was an era — a precedent, let's say — in American history for at least in some ways the situation that we're facing now, but somehow we kind of got out of it. At least for a while it feels like we had a regime in which the constitution of knowledge was a thing and our institutions were able to keep going on that basis.

So I don't have an answer, but a topic I think it would be fun to discuss is sort of how do we claw that back.

MR. WEST: Okay. Thank you, Neal. It's a great question.

So, Jonathan, I'm going to come back to you. So you say American democracy is under threat, Anne has talked about the important role of information and knowledge, Neal just asked how we reached this point and can we get it back. Can we get it back? What do we need to do?

MR. RAUCH: Yes, we can get it back. That's why I say in the long run if we play our cards right, they're not 10 feet tall, we are. How do we get it back?

Point number one, realize that an actual attack is underway, realize, as I said earlier, that even when we talk about polarization, fractured realities, disorientation, growing public cynicism, yes, they're all kinds of reasons for that and we should talk about those reasons. You know, we can, we should talk about stagnate while male working class wages, we can — we should talk about the decline of organized religion, the rise of populism. All of those things. But we cannot — we should not talk about this subject without focusing on the fact that brain scrambling techniques, at least at the social level, techniques that manipulate and scramble the way we as a society come to shared conclusions about reality, that those are under active attack by people using sophisticated cognitive weapons. This is why I loved the metaphor in "Snow Crash" so much. It's a kind of software, which on first exposure it basically scrambles the mind, it wipes the mind. Now, there's nothing like that, but going to what Anne said earlier, social media and digital media is incentivized to basically capture as much attention as it can, however it can, because that's how it makes money. It's indifferent to truth and, in fact, turns out the way it works in practice, if it's not otherwise — if it's not guided in other directions, is it's hostile to truth. And though that can't wipe our minds individually, it can send us down rabbit holes and collectively as a society introduce so much noise in the system in the form of viral disinformation and misinformation that it kind of has this scrambling effect that Neal wrote about. Ever since I read "Snow Crash" I've been kind of obsessed with

that metaphor.

The response has got to be institutional. It's also got to be personal. We've all got to realize that we need to stand against the tactics that are being used. But it's going to be an institutional response at many levels. That's how it worked in the past, it's how it worked after the scrambling that was done by the printing press and the scrambling that was done after the invention of the penny press and offset printing in America.

You know, we talk about — think about American journalism for a minute, Darryl. In the 19th century it was just rabid with fake news and extreme partisanship. Newspapers thought nothing of making stuff up in whole cloth. HL Mencken wrote about he and other reporters in Baltimore would sit down and collaborate to cook up stories because it — it was a lot easier than reporting. And they thought this was hilarious. And, you know, that's a little more than 100 years ago. How did we get past that?

Well, some people in institutions realized that this was bad for society and also bad for business if people don't trust your newspaper. They formed the American Society of Newspaper Editors. First thing it did was being promulgating some ethics codes, some guidelines, things like run a correction, be accurate. Things we take for granted today, but were not always taken for granted. Journalism schools opened, they began to pass down these methods and they began to professionalize journalism. We developed prizes, like the Pulitzer, National Magazine Award and many others, which incentivized reporters who followed the rules and established good behaviors. So we developed these norms and institutions that guided us toward our better selves. And that's why we have a constitution of knowledge. Basically it guides us all toward our better selves. Same reason we have the U.S. Constitution.

I think we can do that and I think we have in a small way started to do that. I think we see Twitter, for example, is innovating on trying to get people to read stuff before the re-tweet it. If you try to re-tweet without reading you'll get an intervention. Facebook's oversight board, it's a very interesting moving. We see an international association of fact checking emerging, which is setting standards for that field and beginning to create an international database of false news. We're seeing the rise of internet observatories at places like Stanford and Harvard and around the world — there's some in Europe where Anne is — which are probing the disinformation networks to find the conspiracy theories and the viral misinformation before it goes viral, notifies social media companies of it. It's going to be lots

of stuff like this, it's not just going to be three bullet points, it's going to be an all of society response. As I said earlier, the beginning of that response is for us to understand that we need to respond.

MR. WEST: So, Anne, in your book blurb you warn that democracies are facing an existential challenge and you point out that it's not merely the citizens don't agree on politics, they don't agree on the nature of truth itself. And you've also written very eloquently about the risk of authoritarianism in the current period.

So are things too far gone? Are there ways we can fix it? Jonathan just offered some words of optimism. How optimistic are you?

MS. APPLEBAUM: So I think it's irresponsible to be a pessimist because that would be condemning all of us and all of our children and their children to something terrible. And so I, despite my instinctive pessimism, I resist it very hard and — but joking aside, you know, it's very — human beings very much want to say something is inevitable, decline is inevitable, or democracy is inevitable. Nothing is inevitable and everything is to do with what choices we make every day.

And to pick up where Jonathan just left off, in terms of controlling or regulating or shaping the internet, the internet is not a force of nature. It's not Hurricane Katrina. It's a thing that's created by humans and humans have created new forms of media and new forms of communications before and they have been regulated before. And it is possible to regulate the internet as well. And it probably — I mean I agree with Jonathan that it's not something that — there isn't going to be a big ministry of truth that's going to stand up and say this can go on the internet and that — you know, it's not going to look like that. But there are lots of different small ways and large ways in which what we see on line can be shaped.

I mean I'll give you two examples. One, we talk about regulation. Again, people have this 19th century idea that regulation means banning things. Regulation in the new era might not mean banning things, it might mean — and certainly doesn't mean taking down content. It's not about — you know, remember that the social media platforms don't produce the content. What they do is engineer it, they create the algorithms that spread it. So the regulation should touch not the content, but the algorithms. So it's not what some specific person has written, it's the formulas by which certain things spread and don't spread. And as it happens, you can write algorithms, or you can certainly create forms

of online conversation in which the goal is not to promote sensation or emotion or keep people's attention, but in which the goal instead is to create consensus, for example. There have been a number of experiments like this and there were several famous ones in Taiwan where a program called Polis is used. There's a big debate about a controversial subject, lots of people post on line, they have a conversation, and eventually certain consensus around certain issues begins to emerge. And the computer program can help create that. Not that it — it draws out the consensus from the conversation rather than emphasizing the divisions.

So if we can begin to have something a little bit more than the Facebook oversight board, actually, but perhaps independent scientists who monitor and watch algorithms and look at the way they're being used. You know, I'm sorry. I'm simplifying for the sake of this conversation, but who can follow the experiments, for example, that Facebook carries out every day and tries to understand them and help make judgments about whether they're working or not and involve a lot more people in a much more transparent conversation about how they work and what they do. That kind of regulation, which is much more sophisticated than any kind of regulation that we've had before because it's a constantly moving, constantly changing thing, is something that we need to begin to get politicians to start thinking about. What would this look like, what kind of institutions would be necessary. Maybe they're not government institutions, maybe they're decentralized at universities, you know, in the way the internet itself is decentralized.

But looking at the form of regulation is one form of change.

And the second form of change that's already possible is some alternate forms of social media which are in the public interest. Again, that are organized around a different set of principles. And these might not take the place of Facebook and Twitter, but they would at least exist alongside them. So if you think of the internet as a kind of city, you know, nobody wants to live in a city where all you have are commercial spaces and shopping malls, right. You also want public parks and you want museums, you know, giving people other ways of communicating online. In atmosphere, in websites and platform that have a set of rules, again designed to create consensus, designed to partake information, designed to create the — to mimic the constitution of knowledge that Jonathan describes in his book. You know, it may be that we need some government push or effort or a tax or something to push this in one direction.

It may be that it is something that is going to emerge organically. But beginning to think about alternatives and what those would like. This is another way to think about how to change the rules.

Again, I want to say that the — I want to get across the idea that this can be done. It's not as if this is such an overwhelming industry and it's out of our hands. You know, it's a world created by humans and it can be shaped and altered by human decisions. And if you can get people to pay attention to this problem and take it seriously, then I think it can be fixed.

MR. WEST: Anne, you're absolutely right. When we look historically the policy always has lacked the technology innovation, but eventually it will catch up and once people are aware of the problem we can actually catch up pretty fast. So I actually am optimistic if we have the political will to address this.

So, Neal, your blurb writes that the ability to talk in good faith about a shared reality is a foundational element of civic life. And you're worried that we already have lost that ability. Can we get back that sense of shared reality? How can we do that?

MR. STEPHENSON: I have noticed that people are endlessly energetic and ingenious when they're responding to incentives. And I first started thinking about this, watching kids go through high school and seeing the lengths that parents would go through to get their kids any little advantage in maybe getting into a nice college. And but it applies in many areas of life. And I think that the particular historical instance that I spent a lot of time reading and writing about a few years ago was the scientific revolution. And there was this era during which the way people thought about things was transformed and we created a new constitution of knowledge around doing science, so obviously closely related to other kinds of developments and what we call the enlightenment. But why did those people put all of that energy and all of that money into developing that system of thought? I don't think it was altruism, I think they saw some incentives there. I think they realized, hey, wait a second, if we follow these principles and put them to work, we can build steam engines and we can make money from that. You know, we can build all kinds of new technology that we can use to improve our lives and get rich.

And I think a large part of what's happened in the last couple of decades — and the public's fear — is that people began to see some incentives driving them towards these negative uses of social media. Basically, it's possible to make a lot of money from doing this, it's possible to gain power,

and it's possible to alter the way our political system functions in the favor of one party or another.

So my thoughts tend to head in the direction of how could we rig up a new set — you know, without being coercive or kind of dictating what people are supposed to think or how they're supposed to act, is there a way that we could rig up a new system on incentives such that the majority of people would see some benefit and some upside for them personally in changing what is currently so bad about the way our public discourse functions.

I don't have an answer to that yet, but I suspect that's what we need to be thinking about.

MR. WEST: Well, when you come up with that answer let us know, we want to have you back — because we are worried about that as well.

John, I know you wanted to react to what Anne said as well.

MR. RAUCH: And to what Neal said, which was actually perfect. Thank you for that, Neal.

The question that comes up all the time is the one that Anne asked earlier, which is really is technology to blame for this, social media. And I think the answer to that is no. I think social media was an accelerant that as Anne's work, among others, has pointed out. The tactics being used today, trolling, disinformation, conspiracism, canceling, those are not new. Tocqueville came to America in 1835 and gave a chilling example of what we now call canceling, the use of social coercion to silence and intimidate. Trolling was pioneered by Hitler and Goebbels, as was the big lie, as was disinformation. Although social media have played a very important role, when people actually look at why fake news and disinformation spreads, social media, for its day, lags behind ordinary cable TV and talk radio, primarily on the conservative side. And those lag behind the most important, then and now, conveyors of misinformation and disinformation, which is politicians. And politicians always find ways to exploit technologies and push these buttons if the buttons are exposed to push. And that gets me to what Neal just said so beautifully, which is, yeah, we can do tech fixes and there's a place for that, but we need to be thinking in deeper ways about changing the incentives that reward politician and media networks for spreading lies, disinformation, half-truth, conspiracy theories. Because right now they're making a lot of money doing it, they're convincing a large share of the public that things that are false are true in ways that are beneficial to them.



So incentives are the right way to think about this. And that's really what the constitution of knowledge does. It doesn't put you in jail if you're wrong. It's greatest innovation is to say we punish the hypothesis rather than the person. What happens if you're wrong in a constitution of knowledge? You lose the argument. That's all. You have to go try some other idea.

So it's a fantastic system because it makes errors and because it can do that so quickly. But just for that reason it's vulnerable for these tactics. So the question is can we create incentives in a new media environment and in the face of deliberate targeted weaponized political attacks. Can we create incentives to behave in a pro social way and not in an anti-social way. I think the answer is yes. Anne mentioned some of the things that are being tried. I think there's a ton that can be done in terms of redesigning the platforms and some of that work is under way. I already mentioned that there are some institutional changes. But also some of it's going to be politics, right. Some of it is going to be figuring out ways to wean the American public from its attraction to politicians who use some pretty elaborate and pretty scary disinformation tactics.

MR. WEST: So, Anne, you raised this topic of the role of technology. And I know in an *Atlantic* article, I think it was a couple of months ago, you wrote our democratic habits have been killed off by an internet kleptocracy that profits from disinformation, polarization, and race.

So could you answer your own question about the role of technology in misinformation and disinformation?

MS. APPLEBAUM: So I actually don't have an answer. I agree absolutely with what Jonathan just said, namely that a lot of this stuff has been around for a long time. You know, the fire hose of lies is an old technique. You know, Hitler invented this phrase *Lügenpresse*, which meant the line press, which means — is more or less the same thing that — and he used the phrase the same way that Trump used the phrase fake news. In other words, to undermine the veracity of actual reporters or really any information that was unfavorable. So none of this is new.

But I wrestle with the question of whether the new technology has accelerated in ways that are different. In other words, it's old stuff but the quantity of it changes the nature of it. The speed of it changes the nature of it. The ability of the algorithms to target people individually changes the nature of it. So it's somehow more toxic, you know, than the same kinds of were in the past.

And of course, you know — and I don't have an answer to whether this is — you know, this makes it something that's quantitatively, qualitatively different because the nature of its change. And I don't know.

I do think that finding ways to regulate and offer alternatives and make conversation more civilized and make it adhere to the kinds of rules that Jonathan described in his book, political debate, you know, making it adhere to rules that, again, as I say, are designed to create consensus, to build trust. I think it would help a lot. It may be that that's not the only solution, it may be that there have to be other kinds of changes. But I don't have a black and white answer. I do think there is something essentially different about modern communication and the way that the internet changes our relationships to each other, not just because of social media, but because of more generally.

And I can see the good things about it as well as the bad things, by the way. I mean I just think it's something very new and we haven't really processed that yet. But whether it's merely — you know, whether it's really that different or whether it's just an accelerant or a magnifier of things that already exist is hard for me to say. I feel that it's an open question and I welcome other views.

MR. WEST: We often have referred to this as old wine in a new bottle. And it does seem to me, as somebody who does study digital technology, that it is a little different today even though the practices are not new to this era, just the speed and the velocity at which things take place, and the scale and the scope as well.

Neal, I have one last question for you and then we're going to take some questions from the audience.

And I'm curious, when you write a lot about technology, Jonathan remote the mind scrambling metaphor that you used I'm just curious what role do you see in technology in this problem?

MR. STEPHENSON: Well, I mean you can imagine all sorts of possible hacks and fixes that might be used to — of course the hard part is getting them to pay for themselves and to earn out. That's always the missing step that's hard to figure out. And an idea that David Brin has mentioned repeatedly, which I quite like, is placing bets. You know, if you're arguing with your Fox News watching uncle over some clearly observable feature of reality, you can just place a wage. And it turns out that when people have skin in the game and actual money riding on the outcome of one of these things, it

turns out that a lot of what they claim they believe they don't actually believe. They're saying they believe it not quite — they're not quite lying. It's in some gray area between just blatantly lying and sort of kidding or saying it to get a reaction or because they think it's funny. But when there's skin in the game, then a lot of that drops away in a hurry.

And so you can do that, you know, you can individually wager on these things with family members and friend and neighbors if you want, but maybe what we need is a sort of central betting exchange on the internet. And people have set things up like this. There's the Iowa political futures exchange and there's the Long Bets, the Long Wagers program and the Long Now Foundation. But maybe there's something there as a self-sustaining project that would give people an incentive to just stop talking absolute rubbish.

MR. WEST: I like that idea of wagering. I have a lot of relatives who watch Fox News, so I'll have to try that out on them, although I know we're going to end up arguing about the fact checking part of the answer.

MR. STEPHENSON: Yeah, well, that's the hard part, right.

MR. WEST: We have some interesting questions from our audience. So I'm going to start with two because they're related.

Eleanor wants to to know what is the best way of challenging so called alternative facts. And then Christopher asks a related question. And any of you who want to jump in, feel free to do so. How can educated Americans band together to confront fictions created as fact?

John, you want to jump in?

MR. RAUCH: Yeah, I was hoping Anne would volunteer because she recently wrote a superb article on exactly the question of what we learned from other cultures and in particular post conflict about how you begin to reconstruct society, so I hope she'll say a word.

The literature seems to suggest that if someone has gone down some kind of rabbit hole, like Qanon, or you name it, that a direct confrontation saying here are the facts, you're wrong, get real, does not work. That what does work is more listening, more asking questions, probing, leading people to see inconsistencies in what they believe, but gaining their trust. There's a wonderful phrase that's been I think attributed to Dale Carnegie, which is you can't make people agree with you, but you can make

people want to agree with you. And in conversation, that seems to be where it starts.

And it also leads me to make just a little additional point on what Anne and Neal were saying, which is we focus, and we should, on using information and media technology to fight disinformation and media madness, but maybe more important is using civic technology to fight those things. And what does that mean? Well, I've been associated for a number of years with a grassroots group called Braver Angels. And it is a grassroots depolarizing effort which is bring red Americans and blue Americans together in a variety of contexts to relearn how to communicate. Not to change their minds, but just to prove to them and to prove to themselves things don't have to be this polarized and hostile. And the most common thing that people come away from Braver Angels saying is we are not as divided as we've been led to believe, and the polls show that. People think the other side is much more ideologically distant and hostile than it really is.

So building civic connections so we get better at talking to each other, and doing that consciously really helps. And, by the way, people are desperate to do it. The toxic information environment that's being created by the combination of MAGA, cancel culture, Fox News, you name it — whatever you want to put in there, people don't like it because it's anti human. And people getting together can go a long way to fix it.

MR. WEST: Anne, do you want to jump in since Jonathan invoked you?

MS. APPLEBAUM: So I did write — a couple of months ago I did write about — I mean I'll simplify it. I wrote about what we can learn from post conflict societies, because we have many of the characteristics now of a very profoundly divided society and we've already had some episodes of violence to show for it.

And one of the lessons that's been learned, if you talk to people who have worked in Northern Ireland or who have worked in Colombia or who have worked in other places where there have been civil wars or long standing terrorist movements that are being brought in from the cold, one of the important questions is actually — and this is maybe a little bit, you know, for a longer conversation with Jonathan about Braver Angels — but one of the conclusions they come to is that one of the things you should not do is get everyone together in a room and have them talk about the fundamental issues that divide them because then everybody gets mad and they get angrier and then there's no middle ground.

However, if you can get people to talk about something else. So, I don't know, so if you're in a community in Northern Ireland you could — and some people felt they were British and some people felt they were Irish, there was no middle ground. But if you could get people to talk about building the local community center or jobs for young people or something else about which there might be disagreements, but they weren't existential disagreements. Then you could at least have people having civil conversations and not trying to kill each other. And this, in the Northern Irish conflict, was a big step forward.

And I mean the United States is very different. I'm not saying it's exactly the same. But there is a way in which if we — you know — and to some extent I think the Biden Administration is trying to do this — if we could talk about, you know, what bridge should be built and which highway needs to be repaired or how to fix healthcare. And we could focus on those things, you know, and we can disagree about them, but we don't want to kill each other about them. If we can change the subjects so that the subject is something of mutual interest where everybody has a stake and the subject is not something existential and irresolvable, then you can move forward.

And so the degree to which — I mean I would have — you know, I would have looked out around the political scene and ask yourself, you know, who are the politicians that are trying to do that. And there are some on both sides of the aisle. You know, who are the people who are trying to have conversations about actual policy issues that affect Americans, who are trying to debate those in a civilized way. You know, those are the people you should be supporting and listening to, because someone is changing the subject to something that is not, you know, not inspiring murderous thoughts, is the way to do it. That's one of the ideas that you can get from looking at other places that have been bitterly divided.

MR. WEST: Okay. We have a couple of more questions that kind of tap a similar theme.

Josie says it seems like misinformation often has several advantages over the truth. It's easy to fabricate and can more easily go viral, assuming it hits the right psychological notes of confirmation bias and sensationalism. How can we improve our messaging to counteract those advantages.

And then Richard has a similar question, a shorter version of it. How do we counter

internet disinformation?

MR. RAUCH: Big, big questions. And we're down to a few minutes, which allows me the opportunity to duck them.

The first questioner is indeed right. Misinformation has some very big advantages. And Neal has alluded to some of them already. One is economic. It's very expensive to find that truth. If you're a newspaper you're going to have to hire reporters, editors, you're going to have an investigative team, coordination, a budget, you're going to have to have a lawyer in case you're wrong. But if you want to sit on your sofa and make stuff up. Or, for that matter, if you're the president of the United States and you don't like the weather forecast and you prefer another one, it's the cost of a Sharpie pen.

It also is a known fact that misinformation spreads faster if it's tuned virally in order to spread. And what bots can do now is test misinformation, you know, fake headlines, in real time, see which ones spread and then amplify them. So they travel significantly faster under those circumstances than truth.

This is a problem. It's going to require some technical fixes, it's going to require, as Anne referred to earlier, algorithms that are more sensitive to fake stuff and dis-amplified. You don't have to remove it, it turns out if you just slow it down to remove some of its natural advantage, that plus native skepticism, plus fact checking and correction, will do a lot of the trick.

There's one other advantage that the reality-based community has, and that's reality. The problem with disinformation and misinformation is that propagandists ultimately tend to go down their own rabbit holes. They deceive themselves while they're deceiving other. This was a constant problem for the soviets. It's going to be a problem — I think already is a problem for the Republican Party. They come to believe things that are false and that's a really bad business model. The only system that can develop a vaccine in less than a year and put it in my arm, that can decode a new virus within the course of days, the only system that can do that is the constitution of knowledge. The only system that can marshal millions of minds, billions of dollars around the world, and pivot quickly to focus all of that in multifarious ways on a new problem is the constitution of knowledge. That is our biggest strength, reality itself.

MR. WEST: Neal, any thoughts from you on ways to combat misinformation or

disinformation?

MR. STEPHENSON: Editors. I mean it's — the problem is editors don't scale, but — and for all of the reasons that John just talked about. It's not a good business model, but the — having humans in the loop as kind of circuit breakers to stop what the algorithms are doing and say, hang on a second, this doesn't make sense, or we would be irresponsible to publish this, is a crucial link in that chain. And, you know, they've been done away with kind of for economic reasons.

So, again, I we can find an incentive structure that makes editors sort of economically viable once again, then I think we've solved a big part of the problem.

MR. WEST: I think that's a great point about the role of incentives in all of this. And certainly on the technology angle, we have had incentives in place that are encouraging bad behavior. And if there are ways we can alter that, that would make a big difference.

So I want to thank Anne and Neal for sharing their insights. Jonathan, tremendous book. Here is the book. You can purchase this book at Brookings.edu, you can go to the event page where you're watching this event, or you can purchase it at leading bookstores around the country.

So all of you, thanks very much for tuning in and we appreciate your interest.

MR. RAUCH: Thanks for having us.

MS. STEPHENSON: Thank you. Thanks a lot.

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