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STRATEGIES FOR PEOPLE TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM DISINFORMATION

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DISCUSSION

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**WEST:** Good morning. I'm Darrell West, senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. And I would like to welcome you to the launch of our new Brookings book with Elaine Kamarck of "Lies that Kill: A Citizen's Guide to Disinformation." And those of you who are interested in copies of the book right outside in the hallway, they are available for your purchase. Elaine is the director of the Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings. And what we're going to do today is outline the book and then take any questions that you have. And I'd also like to welcome our online audience that is viewing this. Those of you who would like to submit questions can do so through Twitter/X @BrookingsGov with the #Lies that Kill. Or you can email your questions to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu). That's [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu). So we know that the United States is at a critical juncture in our history. The next two months will be vital for domestic policy and American democracy itself. And Brookings scholars are working very hard on these issues. There are governance challenges, threats to democracy, technology, innovation and other things going on. The interesting thing from the standpoint of Elaine and myself, is that all of these topics come together on the topic that we're going to be discussing today, which is disinformation. And I want to start with just a short case study, which we also start our book with to illustrate what we mean. And I'm going to talk briefly about the case of Pizzagate. Now, you may recall that this is something that originated in 2016 during the Trump-Clinton campaign. That summer, Russia leaked a bunch of John Podesta's emails to the general public and official Washington examined those leaked emails for evidence of Clinton cronyism, insider dealing and other types of malfeasance. But things were different on the 4Chan internet site, which is a right-wing platform. There, people were looking for lifestyle problems among Democrats. And in looking through the emails, some guys noticed numerous references to cheese pizza. And rather than interpreting this as a need for food, which is common among hardworking campaign staff who worked late into the evening, someone claimed that cheese pizza actually was an abbreviation for CP, a code for child pornography. And this led many people at that time to then argue that top Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, were child abusers and pedophiles. But all of this all of this eventually led a North Carolina man named Edgar Welch to come to D.C. with a gun to a local pizza parlor called Comet Pizza, which, by the way, also has the convenient abbreviation of CP. And Welch and others thought that Comet Pizza was ground zero for the D.C. based child abuse network. So he came armed for a confrontation. But he only found a delivery guy bringing pizza dough to the restaurant and no children in the basement. So we start our book with this story and use it to talk about disinformation in a number of different areas. In our book, we find that wild and unsubstantiated claims are not an unusual feature of the contemporary period, but rather have become commonplace in many areas. We look at elections, climate change, public health, race relations and other topics. And what

we find is a combination of political polarization, radicalization, digital technology and organized networks that come together to produce lies that are very destructive of our national discourse. And the goal with the disinformation is to alter political discourse, to put some some options on the table and remove others to affect how people see events in the world as a whole and to make people mad about crazy things that are happening and then direct their anger at in order to achieve political objectives. Technology, obviously is an important part of the disinformation story, and we spend a lot of time talking about the new tech tools, generative A.I. bots and other types of things. Changes in information transmission have basically lowered the cost of disinformation, created the means for broad dissemination and almost the instantaneous translation of false narratives. You don't need a lot of technical expertise to use generative A.I. used in order to access very sophisticated A.I. algorithms to either create content or disseminated. You needed a technical background. That's no longer the case because all of these tools are now either prop driven or template driven. Meaning anybody in this room can use these types of tools. But disinformation is not just about the technology. I think the two distinctive parts of our book is, one, the lucrative nature of disinformation, and then two, the organized networks that exist to promote disinformation. The thing that surprised me the most in doing research on disinformation was discovering how truly profitable it is, both from a historic standpoint as well as in the contemporary period. It's possible to make money through disinformation using subscription services on websites, ad revenue like you can place ads on your site, and advertisers will pay you money for those ads and selling merchandise off of your site. It turns out that a lot of disinformation actually is believable to people, and they like to advertise their false beliefs on their T-shirts, on their hats, on their mugs and otherwise their sites that make a lot of money just off of selling disinformation through various types of merchandise. Now, this is not a new phenomenon. There were two Harvard economists, Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt, who were able to get ahold of KKK financial data from 1924. I think there is a lawsuit. Their lawsuits are actually a great way to get financial information from lots of organizations. It turns out in 1924, the KKK raised \$25 million in that year alone, which is equivalent to over \$300 million today. Racial hatred was a big business and was a lucrative business in the 1960s. Members had to pay a \$10 initiation fee, a \$5 annual membership fee, \$6.50 for the robes and hoods. By the way, people were not allowed to make their own robes. You had to buy the official robes from the KKK. And then there was a dollar and 80 cent imperial tax that went to the national headquarters. But the KKK was a business. It also sold a bunch of other products. They made money by selling a life insurance, offering dry cleaning services because, after all, they wanted the robes to look really nice. They would sell merchandise such as Bibles, helmets and swords. And so you can see an organization that in today's dollars was earning \$300 million per year. That was a great niche. In the contemporary period in a minute, Elaine is going to discuss a nother

example of this Alex Jones and the Infowars, where he also he and his organization were making a lot of money, but I will leave those details to her. The second distinctive aspect is just the role of organized networks in promoting disinformation. There are organized networks out there both to create and disseminate false content. There are networks that work together to spread disinformation. There are digital platforms, media outlets, non-profits and other types of organizations. So this is not just happening by accident. It's not just a spontaneous grassroots uprising, but there is intentional and malicious efforts to spread false narratives. It's coordinated as the information passes from level to level. It may start on a site like 4Chan, but then it can spread and go mainstream as other people pick up on the information. And of course, the goal is to integrate the disinformation into the political strategy so that you can alter how people see reality to affect their attitudes and affect their behavior. 2024 is shaping up as a perfect storm for politicians, journalists, researchers and the average citizen. We already have seen many examples of fake stories out there. There are challenges to expertise. One of the things that's unusual about the current time period is how experts have lost the faith of the American public. Experts across a wide variety of domains. Journalists are in decline in terms of being seen as objective and independent in the way they do their analysis. There also is an absence of reliable technology to identify fake pictures and fake videos. So consumers and voters are facing quite a bit of risk in this particular time period. We've already seen a number of fake videos and audio tapes. I've seen pictures of Kamala Harris hugging convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. By the way, that hug never took place, but it's been widely spread on social media sites.

**KAMARCK:** She's wearing a bathing suit.

**WEST:** Yes, I forgot the bathing suit. That makes the image even more compelling. The Trump assassination attempts. There's been a lot of disinformation on all across the political spectrum from people. Saying it was an inside job on the part of liberals in the Secret Service. Two people saying Trump set this up himself in order to create sympathy for himself. There's no evidence of any of that. But those views are spreading quite widely. And so we're seeing the democratization of the technology advancing to the point where people can create fake videos, fake images, spread them widely. They look completely believable. Like you could look at these videos, they're going to look completely authentic to you. It's going to be almost impossible for people to distinguish the fake from the real. And of course, the real challenge in 2024 is that everybody is expecting a very close election. That may come down to 20,000 votes in a handful of particular states. If we did not have the Electoral College, I would actually be less worried about disinformation in this election because the popular vote outcomes tend to be in recent years tend to be decided by millions of

votes. There often is a discrepancy like, you know, Biden got almost 7 million more votes than did Trump in 2020. Disinformation is not going to affect probably 9% of the American electorate. But what we have to worry about is that last 5 to 10% that have gone through the Trump presidency, the Biden presidency, the Harris vice presidency, and despite all the information that has come out across all the candidates, they still have not made up their minds how they're going to choose. And so the question is, on what basis are they going to make up their minds? What is what new information is going to come along that is going to move them? And so there's the real risk that because of the Electoral College and the fact that we're going to be talking about a movement by a very small number of voters in a very small number of states, is there a risk that this election is going to end up being decided based on just information? So but in the end, in our book, we argue the situation is not hopeless. Lane is going to discuss what people can do to fight information and what you can do to help protect yourself from this torrent of fake images and fake videos that are out there. Elaine.

**KAMARCK:** Great. Well, thank you, Darrell. Let me start with Alex Jones. Okay. Alex Jones was going along with his radio podcast and podcasts and various things in relative obscurity until a deranged gunman walked into an elementary school in Connecticut and shot and killed a bunch of little children and a couple of teachers. Now, that was a horrible story that ricocheted across the United States. I'm sure everybody remembers that. What made it more horrible for the parents was the fact that Alex Jones used his platforms to tell people that it was all fake. They were actors. It was all fake. It was just a way that Democrats decided to put this thing on in order to try and build opposition to gun law, opposition for stricter gun laws and violate the Second Amendment, etc., etc.. The parents then sued and as as Darrell made reference to, it makes a lot of difference when you have these lawsuits. And the reason is you get depositions and you get discovery. And it was the Alex Jones case really more than anything else that broke open for us and for the world. The serious, serious problem of disinformation is that it makes people a lot of money. And what makes people a lot of money. It's really hard to get rid of because there's a big incentive there. So one of the first things we suggested as a way to fight this is to demonetize this. Perhaps one of the easiest ways is required social media companies to provide real name registration to accounts so that when somebody is posting go kill Congressman so-and-so, right? You know, you can find who the actual person is who's behind that account right now. You can't I mean, the internet is filled with fake accounts under under fake names. So we got to start with demonetizing this because this is a big incentive. Secondly, this is something that I think people will be happy to know is happening right now on the part of a lot of secretaries of state around the country, which is they are flooding the airwaves and the Internet with real information. Okay. Not fake information. And

they're trying to open up the very, very important voting because there's a lot of disinformation. And I'll talk about one example in a minute. But they're trying to educate voters as to what is the voting process in Arizona, in Michigan. In Arizona Adrian Fontes, who's the secretary of state, is organizing tours of voting centers so that people can understand what happens there. How are the ballots handled during tabulation he runs 24 hour tabulated video on the tabulation centers so that everyone can watch. And then just the simplest things that almost no voters know, which is that every stage of the voting process there is a Democrat and a Republican in the room. And unless the parties are completely out to lunch and pick people who don't know anything to do these jobs, there's there's a built in check on the official voting because you've got both parties looking at this. And believe me, at this moment, there are tens of thousands of lawyers being mobilized by the Republican Party, by the Democratic Party to do just this, to watch over the voting process. Another aspect that people can do is make the creation of disinformation costly. States are beginning to do this in Minnesota. You can be fined \$10,000 for put in a for doing a deepfake put in somebodies head on a nude body. This, by the way, happens to women politicians all the time. And so there's fines for this. There's laws. And more and more states are looking at laws to do this. You obviously there's places for executive action and legislative action. Agencies can track abuses. We can require independent audits and hold companies responsible for the damage they do. We're taking that a step further. We can prosecute bad actors. Now, one of the points that we make in the book, but and we've often made in talks is that, you know, you don't need a lot of brand AI specific legislation. There's a lot of laws out there that say you can't do this to someone, right. You can't do you can't harm someone. They just need an application to this entirely new world where people are being hurt, bullied, defamed, etc., over the Internet instead of in a newspaper or instead of in person. And of course, we need to create international networks and agreements to go after these bad actors, because usually, very often something directed at US citizens is originated outside of the US and I think later we'll talk a little bit about Russia specifically in this regard. But all of these changes are sort of evolution right there. They're going to take time. They're going to be litigated, etc.. And in the meantime, great damage can be done. And Darrell made that point. Well, particularly in this election, what is the best thing we can do right now is we have to educate the public as to what this disinformation is and how to find it and how to apply common sense to what we're seeing on the Internet. For instance, as Darrell mentioned the other day, there was another assassination attempt on Donald Trump. Both of them have attracted disinformation theories that somehow Trump set this up. Step back for a minute and use some common sense. Would Donald Trump seriously hire some 20 year old kid who was not very sophisticated in anything and who most certainly was not a sharpshooter to put a bullet within a whisker of his head? Come on. Think about it. All right. You look who this guy was he's not a very good shot. Would

the Secret Service deliberately allow a killer close access to the presidential candidate only to remove him as a political competitor? I don't think so. I mean, imagine the damage this would do to the whole agency. If we go to Pizzagate, which I think you Darrell described, and we spend a lot of time in the book because it's a good anatomy of disinformation. Think about it this way. By the time this story broke, Hillary Clinton had been one of the most watched and reported people reported on people in the world for nearly a quarter of a century. When she was first lady of the United States, every time she changed her hairdo, the press covered it and put pictures in it. She and her husband's finances were dissected, relate relating, resulting in some scandals like the Whitewater scandal, which you may remember. So every bit of their lives were dissected and they lived, both of them. Hillary and Bill lived under a microscope. Now step back. Ask yourself, how on earth could she have been involved in a major criminal enterprise? You know, involving children child pornography for a quarter of a century. And it escaped everybody's notice. Nobody noticed and nobody saw it. Okay. So we've got all of these problems. Let's let's look at the bamboo ballots. Okay. That's one of my favorite. It's the conspiracy that took hold in Arizona after the 2000 election. And it went like this and said 40,000 ballots had been printed in China and marked for Joe Biden. And sent to Arizona to Maricopa County, which is where which Phoenix is. And that's the biggest vote center and also the biggest Democratic center of the state. And when investigators insisted on recounting all the ballots, they spent a lot of time looking for bamboo in the paper the ballots were printed on. Now, common sense and an understanding of the basics of election administration should have led people to pause and think. First of all, is all the paper in China printed with bamboo in it? If not, maybe the Chinese would have decided to use a different kind of paper as they were printing up their fake ballots. There are 3,000 counties in the United States, many of them many in Arizona, too. It's not just the president and vice president on a ballot in in a presidential election. It's a whole bunch of other people. I mean, it's county commissioners, it's attorney generals, it's dog catchers. It's all the way down the ballot. Did they have all those other names on the ballot? Did they spell all the names right, etc.. Most states and counties have a chain of custody for their ballots, meaning at every point there is a security process that goes on to protect the ballots. So just exactly so that people cannot steal the ballots. And exactly how did 40,000 ballots marked for Joe Biden get to Phoenix and to the polling places without anybody noticing, without the Republicans who are the remember, the Republican Party is generally not asleep at the wheel. They're pretty competent. Okay. They watch of this. And how did this happen without them noticing? Okay. So again, a little bit of common sense, along with an understanding of the underlying processes, go a long way towards fighting disinformation. And the final example I'll give you and the importance of common sense is really one of my favorites from the book. There's a football player named Damar Hamlin. Some of you I'm sure know he was safety for the is safety for the Buffalo Bills. He had

a serious collapse in January of 2022 actually had a cardiac arrest he got hit hard in the chest. But by September he of 2022, he was back on the field playing for the Buffalo Bills. However, be in the world of conspiracy theories, right? Being alive is not sufficient to prove that you were dead. And so in the interim, they some people made a movie called "Died Suddenly" and "Died Suddenly" featured young people in the prime of their life collapsing and supposedly dying from Covid vaccines. All right. This was a this was an anti-vax Covid movie when and, of course, Damar Hamlin is a strong man. And the young man, that professional football player was featured prominently in this movie. Now, when he reappeared on the football field, reporters went to the producer of this movie and said, Hey, look, there's Damar Hamlin. He's playing football. How do you account for this? And what did the producer say? It's a body double. Now, think about this for a moment. And that's where commonsense comes in. You could probably find a 25 year old African-American in America who looks like Damar Hamlin. Okay, then that may not be too, too outlandish. Could you, however, put him in an NFL game? Right. And nobody notices that he's not quite playing football at the level that everybody else is playing football. Okay. So there we have there we have it. It's a all of these things require a stop and think. And one of the purposes in the book and one of the things one of the reasons we wrote it for citizens. As opposed to for, you know, experts in in algorithms or artificial intelligence was to say, when you see something outrageous, even if it's something that you kind of think would be true of one of your political enemies, somebody you don't like, stop and think, is this really true? And don't forward it. Don't push it out because that's how these things go wild there's people start pushing them out to Facebook, to this and that. Before you know it, they end up in the in the print media and the major media. And before you know it, you've got something that just enough people just enough people think is probably true. And that can influence, as Darrell pointed out, in a very close election that can make all the difference.

**WEST:** Elaine, thank you very much. So we're going to move to the audience Q&A period. And again, people among our viewing audience online who would like to submit questions. You can email us at [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu). That's [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu). And we have started to get questions from our online audience. So Derrick of the Caring Foundation asks, "Is there evidence of a nexus between Russia and the US far right actors in the spread of disinformation?" And this turns out to be a very timely question in the sense that those of you who follow the news coverage know just a few weeks ago, the Department of Justice actually has indicted some Russians for spreading disinformation. So there is legal evidence, legal cases moving forward. But then just this morning, there was an article in the Associated Press by Ali Swenson about Russia's role in some very specific efforts to delegitimize Kamala Harris. The specific illustration they point out is there is a video online that apparently has been seen millions of times across a variety of



different social media channels that basically says there's a young black woman who claims that 13 years ago, Kamala Harris left her paralyzed in a hit and run car accident. And this alleged person basically says she can't remain silent anymore. She tells the story sitting in a wheelchair. You know, millions of people have watched this. But researchers looking at this basically, according to the article, have very solid evidence that all this was engineered by Russia, that the hit and run accident never took place. Kamala Harris was not involved in an accident that left anybody paralyzed, let alone this individual. And Russia has gone to great efforts to create fake news sites where they basically promote false stories. It becomes a vehicle to spread things. There are social media channels that then amplify these stories. You can take out ads to make sure the platforms feature these videos quite prominently. All of this is a very organized and systematic effort on the part of Russia to influence this election. So, you know.

**KAMARCK:** One thing to that. Yes, you know, a lot of people missed this because for a long time, a lot of people thought of these things. As, you know, some 19 year old kid sitting in his mother's basement and putting out lies and nonsense. Right. And then not very serious, etc.. The fact of the matter is, it's not individual actors. It tends to be when it really hits, it tends to be organized actors, organized networks. And I think this is why in 2016, the 2016 election, people were stunned when they when they saw this stuff. Certainly when I first heard about Pizzagate, I just laughed. Right. I you know, I just laughed at them. Who on earth would believe that? But the fact of the matter is that a lot of this stuff is being pushed out in a systematic way and it is making an impact, even if some of us in places like Brookings think it's ridiculous.

**WEST:** So the short answer to this question, is there a connection between Russia and Far-Right actors in the United States? Yes. Next question. In a moment, we're going to go to you in the room. But Kathleen of the University of Maryland Public Health Program has a question. And, Elaine, I will direct this to you. Her question is, "how do you determine credible and trusted messengers for populations that distrust science, academics, government officials?" She didn't say, Elaine, people like you and I, but I will, I bet. How do we determine who to trust?

**KAMARCK:** Well, that that has been a huge problem. And of course, we saw it most clearly during Covid. Okay. All of the stuff about the Covid vaccines and what to do to protect yourself and protect others was hit with a flood of disinformation. And what they discovered during and by the way, at the beginning of Covid, the African-American community was very resistant to vaccines taking vaccines. And it had a lot of concern that and because they tended to be in front line jobs that couldn't be done from the safety of your home, a lot

of African-Americans were getting and dying from Covid. So a lot of. Concerned about this. What the community did is they started to move to trusted purveyors of information. So local leaders, preachers at the local church, people, local assembly men, or, you know, very close to the close to the people, politicians, not not the president or somebody else, but people like that. And in fact, over time, this worked. All right. And over time, the proportion of the African community getting vaccinated did, in fact, equal the proportion of the of the white community. And, you know, and many lives were saved in the election arena. As I mentioned briefly, what they're doing in a variety of states is they're just trying to counter every bit of nonsense that's put out there about elections. So in Michigan, for instance, there was a campaign saying that the you couldn't vote if you didn't have X, Y and Z, and the secretary of state simply took that. Put false on it in big red letters and put that out on the internet. Okay. So in other words, what we're engaged in here is sort of a constant process of pushing back on the disinformation, whether it's in the health area where the people where public health officials had to confront this and deal with this or in elections or wherever. And it all boils down to using trusted communicators in the community, because otherwise people are going to say, no, that that person over there in Washington don't trust them. I don't trust The New York Times, etc.

**WEST:** And by the way, I remember many, many, many years ago in my youth, this is exactly how health authorities sold the local polio campaign. Like then there was a big effort to spread polio vaccinations. I remember Sunday after church, like almost everybody in our church, went to the local school to get vaccinated for polio. So they did exactly what a lady was talking about. Like even in today's era where we don't trust a lot of people, there still are local organizations, churches, synagogues and elsewhere that are trusted. And so kind of relying on those people to deal with these efforts that matters. We take any questions from people in the room? There's a question right there in the back. If you could just give us your name and if you're with an organization.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Yes, my name is Christian McLane. Actually, we located care at work in policy.

**WEST:** Actually could you speak up a little bit so I can hear you.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** It was Kristin McLane and relocating from the west here. And I'm here for power policy and finance. And the reason I am asking that question, I've kind of pushed back a little bit about the trusted sources. I am late. My apologies. So if you've covered this again, my apologies to the audience. My question is, are the trusted sources of disinformation? My biggest concern is we're talking about PACs with

the funding that that is puts a lot of money into really facilitating some false information or misleading information, mostly targeting maybe whether a senior is where there's other kinds of voting box. The other thing was some of those trusted resources could have actually come from secretaries of state. They have a political ideology. For example, in the last election cycle, there were some secretaries of states who were election deniers. Regardless of where you are on this, we know some of the evidence. Do you have some ideas if somebody who really I have a political perspective, but I'm here to really make sure that the best information is out there. Any ideas about that?

**KAMARCK:** Well, one thing I can say on that is that we have some work on the Brookings website about election deniers. And there were some secretaries of state who were election deniers. They were by far in the minority. However, there were only about six of them, and they tended to be in deep red states where the election didn't really make any difference because the election wasn't decided in those states. So so there were some. I do think that there's a lot of money sloshing around in this, and the only thing you can do is sort of fight fire with fire on this one, fight the disinformation with accurate information. It's about the only thing that you can do. There is no magic bullet here. And of course, one of the things that we learned in Covid, which we talk a little bit about in the book, is. When something is brand new, Right. When something when a phenomenon is a brand new I mean, a pandemic. Right? Nobody was alive in America who had been alive in the flu pandemic in the early 20th century. When something is brand new. Even the officials make mistakes, right? They have to correct. They have to course correct. I mean, remember when we were all wiping down our groceries? Right. Because we thought that this was being transmitted by hand and it wasn't. It was turns out it it was through the air. But, you know, we had everything was adjusted. The problem is that, you know, everybody expects the government to be absolutely right all the time. And the fact is that they learn as well. And I think that Fauci and people like that did as good a job as could be expected. But, you know, he is now among the anti-vax crowd and, you know, among certain part of the public. He is now a public enemy, which I think to his I have some interviewed not too long ago. And, you know, it kind of is still boggling in his mind. So I don't know how to it's a very tough communications process. It really is.

**WEST:** Okay. Right here in the front room, there's a microphone coming out from behind you. And again, if you can give us your name and or.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** I'm Scott Campbell with the Campbell Family Foundation out of Chicago. The question just a little bit of a follow up would be, you know, when you learn like about the Covid pandemic that

that you have, you learn along the way. But do you not also have the possibility of the institutions being captured institutions by industry and that creating a problem? For example, nothing was set on going outside vitamin D. Co-morbidity, the age gradient on the vaccine, which all these were known very early in the pandemic, that people in Italy dying with the scary pictures were mostly 80 plus year olds with very low vitamin D and so forth. And so the trusting I mean it maybe because you're sort of a left wing institution that therefore you're going to sort of have a bias toward believing the, you know, the public institutions. But it just seems there's a lot of problem with the influence on, you know, the information that was coming out on the pandemic, the fact that they want 75 years to release the data, that they cut off the, you know, the trials because they thought they weren't coming. But then, of course, you can't find what's going to happen two and three years because you cut them off. I just want to provide some comment on that. Not the truly new information, but just the compromised of of those some institutions.

**WEST:** And just to add on to what you said in our book, we tried to be evenhanded in identifying disinformation from across the political spectrum. We did not just look for disinformation coming from conservative sources. And one of the things I found interesting on the Covid example is, you know, people are often focused on the anti-vaccine community as a source of disinformation. But interestingly, we found there were very liberal entities that actually shared certain views with the anti-vaccine community, for example, the yoga community, often in the yoga community, those are people who prefer holistic medicine, herbal remedies. They're suspicious of big Pharma, like many of the things you're you were just talking about. They shared those views, but on their website, they then would promote remedies that the FDA would either had already or later would identify as fake remedies. And the FDA ended up taking a lot of enforcement actions against websites that were advertising and selling herbal remedies that were not shown to be effective. But that really came across the political spectrum. It's not just conservatives that were targeted, but conservative and liberal organizations. Yeah, there's a question right there on the aisle

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Josh Gotbaum, economic studies at Brookings. You point out the fact that there are laws on the books that say you can't hurt a person. X and these. In theory can be applied to the new Age creations or simple falsehoods. My question is how good is the ability to go back and find the source of the misinformation? Does it require the entire resources of the US government, which is only allowed to do this outside the US? Or is it possible to do anonymize within the US so that the libel laws etc. might actually be usable?

**WEST:** The short answer to your question is yes. You can do forensic analysis on some of these rumors that then become systematic and organized effort. So in the book we actually draw on research of people who did that on Pizzagate, and there's a very detailed chronology of kind of tracing it back. And it actually did start on 4chan, the right wing website, and went from there. You know, the most recent example was immigrants eating cats and dogs in Springfield, Ohio. There are reporters now that have undertaken a forensic analysis of like, how did that start? And it was, you know, a very complicated. Someone made a comment, made almost a random comment, and then somebody amplified it. And then organized networks saw this as an opportunity to deliver an anti-immigrant message, and it just kind of mushroomed from there. So it is possible to kind of trace back where rumors start, sometimes even finding like the specific individual, like they have found the person who who started this. And in fact, she's completely embarrassed now, like she didn't intend for this to kind of turn in the way that it has. But in terms of existing laws, there actually are a bunch of existing laws, either in terms of libel, defamation, consumer fraud statutes and so on. Again, because people are making money off of this, if you're making money in a fraudulent manner off of completely and blatantly false material, you know, that's a type of consumer fraud. So we do have existing laws that can be applied in this area. But part of the problem is prosecutors offices are set up for traditional crime. They're not set up for digital crime. And so oftentimes they don't have the ability to do the forensic analysis that Josh was just talking about. So we need to modernize our prosecutor's office for the digital era, because I don't know if you've noticed, but a lot of crime has now migrated to the internet. I'm sure all of you, like me, are getting phishing attempts all the time, trying to get my bank information, trying to get medical information, trying to get various types of consumer information. Prosecutors need people who can actually identify that, develop evidence and then prosecute those those crimes. We have the laws to do it. We actually don't have the talent and the organizational structure set up in a way to actually do that very effectively. Right here in the, you know, the front, there's a micro microphone coming out for you.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** And let me give you a quick example. On the left, I'm involved in school choice people who don't like school choice. On the left have said schools like charter schools take money from traditional schools and hurt them. There is no evidence of that in any of the 50 states. It's hurt choice for low income kids, the kids who could benefit from it the most. Unfortunately, I am. I'm an optimistic person, but I'm very pessimistic that there's anything we can do about this misinformation, because people on the left listen to the people on the left, people on the right, listen to people on the right. We're just too divided now to come to any rational information.

**WEST:** Polarization is definitely a big part of this. The problem is in a highly polarized world. Far too many people want to believe really nasty things about the opposition, like even if they subject a common sense standard to it, it's like, yeah, I could see Trump saying that or I could see her saying that. And those Democrats and Republicans like you can't trust people disseminate material today that they actually know is false. But if it embarrasses the opposition, they feel like there's a higher calling to engaging in that kind of behavior.

**KAMARCK:** There's a chicken and egg aspect to this, right? Because we are so polarized as a nation. We pick the information that we want to hear, Right. We pick information about Trump. We pick information about errors. And that then further increases the polarization, which is why it is really important to say to people, look, if you want to decrease the temperature in America, what what you really have to do is you really have to stop and think about. These things. Did Kamala Harris ever meet Jeffrey Epstein? No. Why is there a picture of her hugging him in a bathing suit? Well, you know, because somebody put it out there to embarrass her. Right. I mean, that's clearly what's going on here. So, you know, we've got to sort of decrease the temperature. And stopping disinformation or reducing disinformation is a step along the way. But but you're right. It's a very difficult problem.

**WEST:** So we have another question from one of our online viewers, Mary Beth and Elaine, I will direct this to you. It concerns a high school civics and government classes. And she wants to know, are high schoolers today being taught how to determine the quality of the news sources that they are reading or watching?

**KAMARCK:** It's a good question. In some in some school systems, not all, because as you know, schooling is very decentralized in the United States. High schoolers are being taught news literacy courses and the news literacy basically teaches them to read a newspaper online because, of course, today's young people would never read a newspaper in paper. That's that's uncool. They read them online. But to look for sort of sources. Okay. Who are the sources in this story? How many sources are there? Are these people real people or are these somebody that nobody's ever heard of? Do they really hold this job? You know, there's other ways to check that on the internet. Where is this is what you're reading? Is the newspaper you're reading, is it actually a real newspaper? Does it actually exist day after day and publish, you know, stories about and have weather reports and all the other things that are in newspapers? Or is this something that the person sending out the disinformation made up to make you think it's a real news story? There's there's a whole there's whole courses taught in this University of New York at Stony Brook was was one of the first

people many years ago, 15 years ago, to teach news literacy courses. And they then have been spreading these throughout the country in high school classes. So it is going on. Obviously, it's not going on everywhere. And people who are interested in this should encourage their high schools, their local high schools to adopt one of the many. There's now many of these, many news literacy courses for the students.

**WEST:** And I'll let you mention news literacy, actually. Hold on. I just have a follow up question, because somebody from the Australian embassy asked, what is a logical follow up of your question? This person ask about digital literacy programs and how effective are they at disrupting the spread of disinformation?

**KAMARCK:** We don't know that yet. I mean, we don't know that it's all it's all too new, etc. And remember, we're at a point where the where the technology is really outpacing our way of looking at things. Okay. So, you know, when these news literacy programs started, you know, it was sort of Internet fake stories on the Internet and fake newspapers. Right. And it was before it was before A.I. etc. so they've had to keep keep up and look for how do you look at a deepfake? How can you tell a deep fake? And when we get we get some good information. I think the episode that happened with Princess Catherine in England where they put out a picture of her and she it turns out she had seven fingers and that got wide publicity. And it what it said to people and said to people's, you know, you got to look at these things pretty carefully because some of them might have something wrong with them. But this this is hard. This will take time.

**WEST:** And the the right quick footnote I would add to what Elaine said is schools are making a much more serious effort to teach digital literacy, but we can't limit it to like, you know, 10 to 18 year olds, like adults have a problem with disinformation as well. We need adult education that does exactly the same thing.

**KAMARCK:** Yes. Here you go.

**WEST:** And wait for the microphone. And if you can give us your name in organization.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Kevin Killeen and I spoke to you before about I agree with you on the vaccines, but not the lab origin, that that the vaccines were helping people and people are trying to sell them hydroxychloroquine or something like that. And they they've and that wasn't helping people. So but but the lab work and the primary source documents are out there about it thanks to for the Freedom of Information Act. Their primary source documents are out there. So that that's an example of using information to fight

disinformation. Disinformation is that it didn't come from that. Like like the disinformation about the vaccines was bad. And the hydroxychloroquine study didn't come out until 2023. They should have done that in the beginning to discredit it because there are people making money and they're still making money today selling a fake therapy, and then they know it's fake, but they drag their feet they like. Look like these other things you're was talking about, like the the traffic accident. I'm sure she she knows where she was and there wasn't any where. She wasn't anywhere near this traffic accident. So you fight that misinformation with information like the like the hydroxychloroquine study that came out in 2023 that shows it had no no benefit fighting Covid and put the money on like the insurrection. A lot of people are getting money on Parler to the to. Did any of the people get. Well, there's other there are different ways that people are. You know, the election deniers are making money off of Parler and stuff like that.

**WEST:** Okay. If you could hand the microphone to the gentleman right behind you who has a question.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Thank you for this presentation. My name is Terry Provence with the United Church of Christ. Given how offensive and disgusting and intervening Russia's government is in our elections and probably China involved in other ways. And given the right wing movements in in Europe and around the world, I don't mean this to be provocative, though it might be. What evidence or what do we know about the US government using similar tools and tactics? And why wouldn't they?

**KAMARCK:** In other elections?

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Well, in any way that you could use social media to influence from outside. What you want to accomplish in somebody else's country. It's hard to believe that we would not be engaged, given the history of the United States and what our intelligence operations have done around the world. Believe me, I'm glad to be in this country than a lot of other places. But we have some problems. So do you know anything? Is anybody looking into that?

**KAMARCK:** I can I can tell you just that during the Cold War, where the U.S. and Soviet Union were locked in competition for parts of the world, the US government did plenty of interventions in, you know, in governments around the world. I mean, the biggest intervention we did, maybe the biggest one in history, was through the Marshall Plan and the reunification of Europe or the rebuilding of Europe rather. And what the Marshall Plan was was it was a real attempt to fight communism in Europe. And the American



government decided that without the Marshall Plan, we could not. So so that was that was involved in their economies and it was involved in their elections.

**KAMARCK:** I'm talking about social media.

**KAMARCK:** I that that that I don't know that I don't know if the if the US government is doing that. I mean, I can tell you, just as somebody who spent some time studying the Cold War and teaching the Cold War, that after the cold, when the Cold War ended, the US interest in the internal dynamics and internal politics of countries around the world went down, went down. We no longer saw the same stake in that that we did in the Cold War period. Now, that isn't to say that the US government doesn't do some of these things from time to time. They may, but it's not. I mean, the apex of this was really the Cold War when when some little country in Africa, a little country in Latin America, we were in there, you know, toe to toe using whatever methods at the time.

**WEST:** Okay. I think we have time for one more question. So in the very back, if you can give us your name and organization.

**KAMARCK:** Marcia Kalich. I'm unaffiliated. So how much do you think freedom of speech protects disinformation?

**WEST:** That argument is being used to protect disinformation in ways that I think are exaggerated, because people think that in the digital world, somehow we need to draw new lines on freedom of speech versus actions that incite violence, encourage hatred and so on. You know, we actually have decades of litigation on the freedom of speech argument. We've in the United States, we've never had an unlimited freedom of speech. You know, classic example is you can't yell fire in a crowded theater because it's going to endanger people. There are all sorts of things in which we say you cannot say if it's going to harm other individuals. So what I suggest is we take those years and decades of litigation over freedom of speech that have drawn a lot of very fine and nuanced lines on what you can say and under what conditions and what you cannot say and under what conditions, and apply that to the digital world right now. We haven't really done that very effectively and I think we need to do that in order to effectively fight disinformation. Okay. We are out of time. But we appreciate your interest. And again, any of you who are interested in copies of the book right down

the hallway. There are books for sale. And thank you very much for your interest. We appreciate your coming.