

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Disinformation and Democracy

featuring

Nina Jankowicz, Author, *How to Lose the Information War* and Global Fellow, the Wilson Center

interviewed by

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Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts. You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world.

Reema Saleh: Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Reema Saleh: In this episode, Annie and I speak with Nina Jankowicz, an expert on disinformation and a global fellow at The Wilson Center. We talk about her debut book, *How to Lose the Information War*, which takes the reader through several case studies of how western governments are impacted by Russian disinformation tactics and how to navigate the future of conflict.

Reema Saleh: As a note, this episode was reported in November of 2021 before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. So, keep that in mind as you're listening. In the past month, we've seen misinformation and disinformation efforts ramp up. So, it's important to understand how these strategies work and what threats they pose. We also talk about her upcoming book, *How to Be a Woman Online* coming out April 21st on how to deal with gender harassment and abuse and online spaces.

Nina Jankowicz: My name is Nina Jankowicz. I'm a global fellow at the Wilson center, which is a nonprofit nonpartisan think tank here in Washington, D.C and I'm the author of *How to Lose the Information War*, which came out in 2020 and the forthcoming book, *How to Be a Woman Online*, which will be out in April of 2022.

Annie Henderson: Could you tell us a little bit about your first book?

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, so this book came out of my experience when I was a Fulbright public policy fellow in Ukraine. I was lucky enough to be advising the government of Ukraine, specifically the ministry of foreign

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affairs and the spokesperson there on strategic communications and counter disinformation efforts in 2016 and 2017, which as you can imagine was a pretty interesting time to be in Ukraine.

Nina Jankowicz: I kind of felt, especially as the United States woke up to the threat of Russian disinformation specifically, but just kind of information warfare or online influence more broadly that we approached the problem with a certain hubris that I found really distasteful, especially from my seat in Ukraine. It was as if we thought we were the first country, the first people to ever deal with this problem, when that couldn't be farther from the truth.

Nina Jankowicz: Central and Eastern Europe had been dealing with disinformation, especially of the Russian variety for decades and had been really familiar with this new iteration of Russian online disinformation. And so I thought it would be useful to policy makers, but also to normal people who want to follow the news to understand how this phenomenon developed in Central and Eastern Europe and what the government and civil society there had been doing to try to combat it where they won and where they made, unfortunately, a lot of missteps as we tried to chart our own course in countering disinformation.

Annie Henderson: How are you defining disinformation? As you talk through all these different topics, I just want to make sure that our listeners understand the term that you're using.

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, absolutely. I'll give you kind of the lay of the land as I see it, because these terms often get used interchangeably, which doesn't do the listener or the viewer really any good and frankly confuses a lot of people.

Nina Jankowicz: I use the definitions that First Draft News use. They're a great organization that focuses on how journalists and the media can identify and counter disinformation. And the definition they use for disinformation is, "False or misleading information used with malign intent." Now, that's different than misinformation, which is similarly false or misleading information, but it doesn't have that malign intent behind it. So, we're in the holiday season now. We're all going to be seeing our family soon.

Nina Jankowicz: We've all probably have that one family member who traffics in conspiracy theories. They're not necessarily sharing disinformation; they're just sharing their crazy theories because they think they're interesting or they might have something to them.

Nina Jankowicz: That's misinformation. That's all a little bit different than propaganda or fake news. I try not to use the term fake news in any academic writing. It is in the subtitle of my book, which is *Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict*. That was something that my publisher insisted on as a signpost for curious readers. But fake news doesn't really describe the full breadth of information operations that we tend to see in this realm.

Nina Jankowicz: Often, the most successful disinformation campaigns aren't necessarily fake. They're not false and fully fabricated. They are grounded in emotion or a kernel of truth. So, let's take the coronavirus as an example. A lot of the distrust of the vaccine or distrust of government initiatives to counter COVID comes from a deep-seated distrust of either institutions or institutional medicine. If you kind of pull back the layers with people who are in the anti-vaccination community, that's what you get at when you get to the root of the problem.

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Nina Jankowicz: So, it's not fully fabricated, it's playing on something that's very real for those people. And then propaganda is often thrown into the mix as well, but propaganda has a different meaning at least to my ear and that is propaganda is a little bit more for political purposes. It serves to support or promote one political ideology.

Nina Jankowicz: If you look at what Russia has done particularly in the last 15 years or so, they have supported groups and spread disinformation on all sides of the political spectrum. Sometimes directly working in opposition to one another, just to create polarization. That's very different than the propaganda that we saw during the Soviet period, which promoted the Soviet worldview, Soviet ideology, et cetera.

Nina Jankowicz: It's a little bit more like what China is doing today, promoting the CCP and Chinese ideology and a positive interpretation of how China is viewed in the world. A little bit different. I wouldn't call what Russia does, propaganda, at least in the international realm.

Reema Saleh: What makes new forms of disinformation so difficult to combat?

Nina Jankowicz: Well, I think what's happening today. What we see today is the use of disinformation paired with the micro-targeting technology that social media platforms offer and that actors like Russia or some domestic political actors have become expert at using. This means that pretty much anybody with a social media account and an understanding of these platforms and how they work can target their messages at exactly the people who are going to be most vulnerable to them.

Nina Jankowicz: Sometimes you can do that with the assistance of ads, but more recently it's become really easy to segment populations or to identify vulnerable populations simply through things like Facebook pages and especially groups. We've also seen a lot happening on messengers lately. So, things like WhatsApp or Telegram where people self-select into certain groups or channels, and once you're in, you can certainly message and broadcast your views to a group of people where there's trust for your messaging and where there's a lot less content moderation, right?

Nina Jankowicz: Especially on those encrypted platforms, unless you're in the group, the platform itself is not going to have any oversight over what you're doing. It makes it very difficult to combat. And then again, outside of the technological question, we're also looking at narratives that are very, very deeply seated in people's human distrust of systems, of governments, of science sometimes and a lack of understanding in how nuanced most events in the world are.

Nina Jankowicz: Things aren't actually as black and white as we like to make them out to be sometimes. And because of a lack of media and information literacy along with all the technological and social factors that I mentioned before, we kind of have this perfect informational storm, so to speak.

Reema Saleh: What misperceptions do people have about modern disinformation campaign?

Nina Jankowicz: I think the biggest one is that these are just silly cut and dry, false things that trolls on the internet make and they have no real-world implications. As I said before, these traffic and emotion and often they do drive people to take offline action. As we saw around the January 6th insurrection and a number of events during the COVID pandemic, the Reopen Movement and other protests that have inspired violence or threats to public safety. I think that's something that a lot of disinformation researchers have been warning

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about for a long time, because we've seen it happen in other countries. Again, the United States and a few other Western nations have approached the problem with such hubris that we thought our institutions are strong enough, we're going to be able to withstand this without the types of offline effects that we've seen in other countries.

Nina Jankowicz: And that's just been proven not to be true. There are two other kinds of demographic misconceptions that people have about disinformation. One, is that young people are going to be more susceptible to it because they use the internet more. What we actually find through a lot of data is that young people are a lot savvier about how they get their information. They understand that when they're watching their TikTok for-you-page, that that is not being generated organically, that the algorithm knows them and is sending them the content they're most likely to interact with and be engaged with and stay on the platform for and they recognize that and know how to navigate those platforms a lot better than let's say their grandparents do.

Nina Jankowicz: It's actually the boomers end up that have the most problems with information literacy. They're used to having a gatekeeper for their information. Having watched the nightly news for so many years and don't really fully grasp that on their Facebook pages or Twitter timelines, I doubt many of them are on TikTok, but if they are, that that is an especially curated stream of information, that's targeting them individually.

Nina Jankowicz: That is something that unfortunately, we have a lot to contend with and that population is voting more reliably than the younger folks as well who may not even have the right to vote yet. That's one demographic misconception. And then another one is that we often think that disinformation only targets folks on the right of the political spectrum and there are a lot of examples, especially from Russia in which disinformation targeted folks on the left. It's less frequent, but it does happen, and it doesn't mean that just because you're a registered Democrat or whatever, that you're immune from disinformation. You still need to take the same precautions online as folks on the other side of the political spectrum.

Annie Henderson: You talked a little bit about how disinformation is different than propaganda. I'm curious about where the modern concept of disinformation started. Is it really an internet age invention or does it have roots earlier than that?

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, so Russia used disinformation during the Soviet period as well. Thomas Rid has a great book about Soviet era disinformation campaigns called *Active Measures* that I would highly recommend to anybody who's looking at it.

Nina Jankowicz: But in terms of our modern understanding of disinformation, certainly that began, I would say in the mid-2000s as the social media sphere was becoming more ubiquitous. A lot of the techniques that we see Russia using in particular, are holdovers though from the Soviet era. As Rid describes in his book, using these preexisting fishers and hot button issues and disagreements in society to further polarize, to further turn different sectors of society against one another, in order to gain political leverage is something that Russia has been doing since the Soviet period, since the early Soviet period we could say. I've been reminded by policy makers before that disinformation has long existed.

Nina Jankowicz: It's just a bit of a horse of a different color when it can travel as fast and as far and be as precisely targeted as it is with social media, with the platforms that we have today, where things can go viral in

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an instant and change our perception of events and make it very difficult to fact check or debunk after the fact in a way different than it would've been if newspapers were the ones being considered.

Nina Jankowicz: The famous example of Soviet disinformation campaigns that we often talk about is the Soviet operation to convince the world that AIDS was an American invention and that actually did gain some purchase, but it took a lot longer than it would have in the internet age because they had to launder their information through different print media and it took much longer to target certain populations abroad, especially and it was much, much more connected with kind of covert operations than the things that we see today, where a lot of these campaigns are kind of farmed out to different non-state actors like the Internet Research Agency, for instance.

Nina Jankowicz: So, disinformation as a concept has been around for a while. The Russian variety has some certain hallmarks to it and certainly is buoyed by the technology that's available today.

Reema Saleh: You compare the United States approach to tackling disinformation, to playing a game of whac-a-mole. Can you explain what you mean by this?

Nina Jankowicz: Sure. I actually call it whac-a-troll because I think that's kind of funny. But what I think we have been focused on basically since the very beginning when we figured out that Russia was attempting to influence the elections is removing fake accounts and posts that are harmful. There's been a lot of focus on that during the COVID pandemic as well.

Nina Jankowicz: But it's not a very systematic approach. It means that we are constantly on the back foot, constantly reactive, and it also means that essentially, we're always going to be chasing after these inauthentic actors who really have no reason not to continue to create fake accounts, not to continue to put out misleading information because the cost is very, very low for them. It takes much, much more effort to identify these fake accounts and identify the harmful posts than it does to create them.

Nina Jankowicz: And so, while it is important to put pressure on the social media platforms, I'm not making excuses for them here to make sure that they're identifying that content as quickly as possible and removing what it goes against their terms of service. But we also need to think more holistically. So, like how can we dis-incentivize actors like Russia from creating this content in the first place? thinking about that. Not that I think punitive measures are the end all, be all. These operations cost very little for Russia and for other countries.

Nina Jankowicz: So that is part of the toolkit, but not the panacea. We also need to think about how to educate our populations so that they're going to fall for these things less. There was such a debate. It feels like a long time ago now, but for most of the Trump administration, there is a big disagreement in Washington as to whether Russian disinformation was something we should worry about or not or whether it even happened.

Nina Jankowicz: It did happen. There's plenty of open-source evidence to that fact. And it certainly bothers me that an adversarial nation was attempting to influence our electoral discourse and I hope that any voting American would agree that that's not something that we should be okay with.

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Nina Jankowicz: Instead, we just kind of looked at our shoes and allowed the hole that we're in to get even deeper. So rather than thinking about those generational ideas, those generational investments that we need to make that countries like Ukraine or Estonia or Finland in Sweden have been making, been in the case of Finland and Sweden, for generations in the case of Estonia and Ukraine for less time, but certainly making a large impact, we've been and cool in our heels. I think that is really, really unfortunate. And instead creating all this hubbub about removing content when that's only part of the solution.

Annie Henderson: Speaking of these other countries, I love how in your book, you don't just talk about the US, you talk about how a variety of countries are addressing the disinformation problem. I'm curious, do you see one approach emerging as the best in class? The gold standard for managing disinformation?

Nina Jankowicz: The best approaches all have things that are in common. I think of the countries that I look at in my book, which are Estonia, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Ukraine, Estonia has of course the privilege of being the first that Russia hit with some of these campaigns way back in 2007. They've got hindsight. They have really developed some systems that are quite robust, and their systems not only look at internet security, as we've probably all heard about. I'm sure this is very erudite audience, Estonian votes online. They have a lot of their government services online.

Nina Jankowicz: As a result, they're quite the leaders in cybersecurity in the trans all into community, but it's not just about hermetically sealing their online space. They've got an ethnic fisher that Russia likes to exploit, with the ethnic Russian population in Estonia. That was what led to the Bronze Soldier Crisis in 2007, in which a monument was moved and Russia through its media and some covert operations instigated protests in the center of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia.

Nina Jankowicz: I think as early on, Estonia realized that it wasn't going to just be these cyber operations or cybersecurity that protected it. They needed to address the elephant in the room. And in that case, it was integration of the Russian speaking ethnic Russian population in their country. And so along with all of their cyber measures, which are, again, some of the best in the world, they also invested in integration through education, through Russian classes for Estonian language for Russian speakers through other kind of cultural and investment opportunities for Russian speaking areas.

Nina Jankowicz: If you look at the integration statistics, things are really changing in Estonia. A lot of the younger ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are adopting an Estonia identity that isn't grounded just in culture or Estonia language. It's grounded in this kind of new Europeanness and being a digital leader in the EU, this sort of thing.

Nina Jankowicz: It seems to be really, really taking off. Is it perfect? No, very, very famously Estonia has had a couple of far-right politicians be elected to their parliament recently. So, watch that space, but certainly they seem to be doing a little bit better than many other countries. Now, they are a country of 1.3 million and people and have fewer societal fishers for countries like Russia to exploit. But if plucky little Estonia can do it, I am not sure why larger countries can't take another holistic approach with the resources that we have, let's say here in the United States to counter such operations that we're getting hit with pretty constantly at this point.

Annie Henderson: As you go through and talk about how each of these different countries handle their disinformation problems, do you think that that's the right approach? Should it be country by country or

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should there be any kind of international coordination? If you do think that there should be some international coordination, what should it look like?

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, I think there is a unique problem for each country to solve. The campaign that Estonia was met with and continues to fight is going to very intrinsically look different than what's going on in the United States or the UK or Germany.

Nina Jankowicz: Russia is extremely good at identifying the unique weaknesses and vulnerabilities that each country has. That being said, we can always stand for more international coordination. There have been some nascent attempts at creating body that will share information and attempt to coordinate responses to disinformation crises that cross borders in particular.

Nina Jankowicz: One that was really quite successful, I would say is the response to Skripal poisoning in the UK in 2018. I think it was 2018 in which Russia, very famously used Novichok to poison a former spy who was living in the UK, Sergei, Skripal. As a result, when that operation was uncovered, the international community came together not only to expel Russian diplomats as a punishment for this egregious violation of UK sovereignty, but the UK government also shared and declassified very quickly, the intelligence that allowed them to say without a shadow of a doubt that this was the work of Russian intelligence operatives.

Nina Jankowicz: That was shared not only across governments, but with media, with experts who gave credibility to that message. I think in my perspective, that was a really successful international coordination operation. Not every disinformation incident can rise to that level, of course. But I do think there are moments where international coordination, particularly in terms of punitive measures can be extremely successful, but we haven't seen a lot of success in that area and unfortunately have seen more duplication than I would prefer.

Annie Henderson: One of the things that I love about your book is that you don't just talk about what's happening online. You also talk about how disinformation can kind of reach out the internet and have real monetary impact either through lobbying or the direct funding of groups or even just as a business for PR consulting firms who specifically focus on disinformation. What can be done about that? those actions that are happening outside of just online platforms.

Nina Jankowicz: So, this is another misconception maybe that I should have mentioned before. We think of disinformation as something that's just about online memes, but really there is a lot of offline action from the funding of these groups, as you've just mentioned to different political manifestations and unfortunately, this is where we get into kind of the murky area of anti-corruption reform.

Nina Jankowicz: This is something that I think we are going to see the Biden administration focusing on a lot more. It has been a priority for them. It's something that we really need our allies to help with as well, to uncover these networks and make sure that dirty money isn't moving around and funding these operations.

Nina Jankowicz: But if you look at Sheldon Whitehouse, the Senator from Rhode Island, if I've got that right, I'm pretty sure I do. He's very focused on anti-corruption. I did a hearing with the Senate judiciary committee in 2018, and that was his main thrust, that if we shut down the networks, the financial networks, through which these campaigns are funded, they won't be able to go on anymore. That's very true in the Russian case. With PR firms, it's a little bit different in that their clients are trying to distance themselves and they're often

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political actors trying to distance themselves from the disinformation and having somebody else do the dirty work.

Nina Jankowicz: We've also seen Russia do this recently, either the internet research agency or other oligarchs are buying services from PR firms, let's say in Ghana, which Clarissa Ward very famously uncovered in a recent investigation for CNN.

Nina Jankowicz: Again, that's not necessarily illegal. It just makes it a little bit more difficult to uncover these operations when the time comes. Now, the social media platforms actually for their part have cracked down on those operations, those PR disinformation or as some people like to say, disinformation for profit operations because they're quite misleading in their providence. And so, they feel that it goes against their terms of service. So that's one way that we're cracking down when there isn't illicit financial flows involved.

Reema Saleh: Disinformation doesn't just come from foreign actors. You write a lot about out how there's a rise in domestic disinformation actors and how they can be sort of amplified without knowing it. Should efforts to combat disinformation change depending on who is perpetuating that disinformation?

Nina Jankowicz: Absolutely. I think for too long in the United States, we have viewed disinformation as just a foreign problem while we are ignoring the problem underneath our noses. We have seen major political parties in the United States and high-level elected officials engaging in disinformation. Unfortunately, we don't have domestic regulations dealing with disinformation. We can point to different federal election codes and say, "Okay. Russia can't buy ads on Facebook in support of one candidate or another."

Nina Jankowicz: That's easy enough to say. But when it comes to disinformation that's coming from domestic figures online, it becomes very, very difficult to really clamp down on. We have rules governing advertising in print, on radio, on TV for elections, but when it comes to online ads, we don't, and Facebook and other online advertisers and advertising marketplaces have been reticent to be the "arbiter" of truth for political ads.

Nina Jankowicz: Instead, saying this is free speech, it's in the public interest for people to see these lies. We've seen where that leads. It leads to insurrections that attempt to overthrow election results. I think we really need to get our federal regulations into place for this sort of stuff, especially because we have seen a proliferation of disinformation over the past 18 months that has not only affected our democracy, it's affected public health and public safety. We have to recognize that the longer we allow this wound to fester, not only do we create a bigger problem for ourselves at home, but that means that we are leaving ourselves vulnerable to foreign interference as well.

Nina Jankowicz: Because as you mentioned, we see foreign actors who identify these vulnerable individuals or people who are trafficking in disinformation, and they use them to launder their own disinformation into the American ecosystem. A great example of this from 2020 was Rudy Giuliani. As the director of national intelligence stated in their report on the 2020 election, which came out in March, I believe of 2021, it's pretty likely the IC assesses that Russian intelligence operatives fed Rudy Giuliani his "intel" on the Biden family. It was either fabricated or stolen. That was all with the express intent of manipulating American voters and using Giuliani to launder that information as a trusted conduit into the American ecosystem.

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Nina Jankowicz: We have to think about this stuff. We need better awareness built about it. We need more rules about how campaigning can work with contributions from foreign governments and how that can be amplified online. Without even the foreign question in play, we need to discuss whether disinformation and just bold face lies that can affect public safety and public health can be amplified on the internet. I think there is a way to do that without endangering freedom of expression, if we keep it in an electoral atmosphere.

Reema Saleh: What are the steps that we in the US need to be taking in the long term? What institutions need to be most involved or held accountable?

Nina Jankowicz: So, I think the biggest thing on my agenda, if I were in the Biden administration right now would be empowering an office or a team of individuals to make sure that they are the kind of linchpin of US government policy to counter disinformation in the US government. Right now, we don't have that.

Nina Jankowicz: A lot of the institutions that are focused on counter disinformation activities are either within the intelligence community, within DOD, within the state department. They're not necessarily talking to each other all of the time. The coordination thing is always not necessarily the US government's strong suit, but more importantly, we don't really see involvement from institutions that are on the domestic side of things. I would love to see the department of education, the department of health and human services, housing and urban development, the national endowment for humanities, all of those and more involved in the counter disinformation question in the US government, because as we've just talked about, the domestic disinformation side of things is where it's all happening right now.

Nina Jankowicz: And if we're just playing defense outside of our borders, we're going to be missing a huge part of the game. I think that's the first step. And then we need to look at these really holistic. I hate to say it whole of government, because that's such a buzzword now, but whole of government policies where we are seeing really substantial coordination across government, where we're seeing an investment in generational activities like information literacy, where we're really trying to build up trust back in these institutions that has withered away over so long.

Nina Jankowicz: I think all of that is really important. Right now, we're kind of like a bunch of different hamsters spinning in our wheel, our own individual wheels. Are we powering a light bulb together? Yeah. But could that light be a lot stronger if we were working more in concert if we were all running on one giant wheel? Yes, I think so. And so that's the thing that I think is most important that we've seen governments like the UK do like Estonia, to some extent like Ukraine, although they have some kind of Soviet vestiges to recover from in their own government outlook and infrastructure, but that's the biggest thing on the agenda. So far, we've not seen that come out of the Biden administration.

Annie Henderson: Before this podcast, Reema and I were really excited to ask you about libraries and other offline in institutions of knowledge and what they can do to help combat disinformation, whether it be online or through these other avenues, like you've spoken about.

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, I'm really excited you brought that up. I really believe in libraries. I think they are just a great resource for the United States and other countries where they've been employed in the counter disinformation fight because they're so highly trusted. Librarians are among the most trusted individuals, even still today across political parties. What I would love to see is either through state-level funding or federal-level funding, see grants go out to libraries who can host information, literacy classes, especially directed at

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seniors. Right? People who might need to have a little help for how to FaceTime their grandchildren, but you can also throw in some media and information literacy into that training that you're doing with them.

Nina Jankowicz: Also, when you have circle time with a bunch of kindergartners in the kids section of the library, let's also educate them about advertising and how it's targeting them. All of that sort of stuff is things that are allies like Sweden, like Finland, like Ukraine and Estonia are doing and it is delivered by a trusted mechanism. Again, somebody that knows their community, somebody that is seen as impartial, someone whose job people view it as to navigate information environments.

Nina Jankowicz: I think that's so critical because if we do like a bumbling kind of top-down US government propaganda campaign about information literacy, everybody's just going to laugh at it. Historically, we're not very good at those sorts of things. I would rather hand it over to the experts. Librarians, civil society, organizations that have deep roots in their community and let them be the conduits of that information, give them the funding and the space that they need to do it.

Nina Jankowicz: Make it a priority and I think we'll see great results. In Ukraine, they had a similar program that was funded in part by the US government, the UK government in Canada and they saw such growth in people's understanding of the information environment. They were able to train 10,000 librarians who then went and trained, I think another 80,000-90,000 people in their own regions back home. This program is still going on today, I think both at libraries and in secondary schools in Ukraine.

Nina Jankowicz: If Ukraine can do it, smaller country than us, but still quite a large country, one of the largest in Europe, I think the United States should be able to implement a similar program to great success as well.

Reema Saleh: Misinformation often runs on kind of anger or existing tensions in our society and social media does as well. Like I'm more likely to see a post if it elicits a really strong reaction from me. What should we do when we receive this kind of information and how do we parse through it when a lot of it seems organic or homegrown?

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah. That's an excellent question. I'll preface my answer by saying it's fine to be emotional. Let's just make sure our emotions are grounded in something real, not something that's spun up by a political operative or by foreign adversary. Right? When I am counseling people on kind of how to navigate the online environment, I try to remind people that the most engaging content online as you pointed out, is often the most enraging content.

Nina Jankowicz: And as we've seen from the Facebook papers, which have been and trickling out over the last couple of weeks, that is certainly true on Facebook. And I don't think they're the only social media platform that traffics in outrage. That being said, when you see this content, when you feel yourself really getting emotional about something you see online, stop for a second. Practice what I call informational distancing, which was something that I started advising people to practice at the beginning of the pandemic and consider why you're feeling so upset.

Nina Jankowicz: Is this something that is based in fact? Do you know the source? If you don't know the source, do a little bit of research. If this is a publication or a Facebook page or group, see what's behind it. See who's behind it. Do they have contact information? Is this a real person or a journalist who's published

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this post? If you can, do a reverse image search on their profile picture or Twitter picture to see if it brings you to an organic picture, or if it's something that's been edited or misappropriated.

Nina Jankowicz: A lot of times I can identify fake accounts because I do a reverse image search and it'll bring me to like stock haircut photos. That's a great way to do it. And then also, when we're talking about breaking news and things like that, see if anybody else is reporting what is causing you this emotional configuration in a different way.

Nina Jankowicz: Is a mainstream outlet reporting the facts the same way? Is there an outlet on the other side of the political spectrum, that's reporting the same details? Just do a little bit of crosschecking or what Michael Cofield, who's at the University of Washington Center for an Informed Public calls lateral reading. Looking across the internet to see like, is this true? Is it being reported the same way elsewhere? Just getting yourself a little bit more context because there are so many manipulative people and outlets online.

Nina Jankowicz: When you do that, you're going to be more informed anyway. It's a bit like writing a book report, when we were taught to do this back in elementary school, you weren't allowed to just use one source. You need to kind of consider all sides of the equation before you come to a conclusion. If you find that there has been, let's say, an incident of police brutality and everybody is reporting this the same way, you've been able to confirm the facts across multiple outlets, you know they're coming from a verified reporter on the ground, if you're interested, you can even go a little bit deeper and do some open source investigation and try to confirm where a live video was shot, things like this.

Nina Jankowicz: That's a little bit more skilled than we have time to go into today, but people do that. That's how you get information that is grounded. In fact, you remove the emotion from your initial reaction, and you are just thinking about what is true to inform your opinion. And then you can go forth and use that to fuel your activism, use that to fuel your interjection into the online discourse. But it's so important that we take those few extra steps and I've probably spent more time talking about it than it would take you. It's just a couple of quick Google searches and a couple of deep breaths before we click share. And that matters so much. We're kind of the front lines of the information warrant.

Annie Henderson: We've spoken a lot about your first book and I'm personally very excited to hear about your second book as well, which is called *How to Be a Woman Online: Surviving Abuse and Harassment, and How to Fight Back*. Specifically, I'm curious if you see a connection between the harassment women face online and some of these broader disinformation campaigns that we covered and that you've covered at length in your first book.

Nina Jankowicz: Yeah, absolutely. Actually, that's how I got into the whole gendered harassment space. I am a woman online, so I get this stuff myself, but it really started becoming an issue I cared even more about when I heard from interviewees during my first book, women in Georgia and Ukraine who had been the victims of targeted gendered disinformation campaigns coming from the Kremlin.

Nina Jankowicz: That's when I really started thinking about okay, we've heard a lot about how, how disinformation affects marginalized communities or different ethnic groups, but we really haven't heard about how it affects women. It was clear to me looking at like the Russian ads in 2016, that actually Russia was quite misogynist in its treatment of Hillary Clinton. The way that Russia had treated during the Obama

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administration let's say Jen Psaki who's now, of course, the white house press secretary, extremely misogynist. Russia doesn't have a great track record with feminism in general in its own domestic policy.

Nina Jankowicz: So, I started thinking about this more and I was lucky enough to do some research at the Wilson Center earlier this year with a great group of researchers that looked into not only the quantitative background of how women are treated online. We followed 13 candidates for office in the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Canada over a period of two months at the end of 2020 and found a staggering amount of gendered abuse and disinformation against them. I think something like 330, 6,000 pieces of content.

Nina Jankowicz: 78% of which was directed at vice president, well at that point, candidate Kamala Harris. So really just truly, truly staggering amounts of hate. But we also saw through some structured interviews that we did with journalists and other women in the public eye, a very specific and deliberate use of gendered and sexualized tropes against women who were covering Russia, Iran, and China.

Nina Jankowicz: For me, this isn't just an issue of I'm a woman and people think it is part of my job just to endure this hatred online, which is bad enough, but it's also that the longer that we let this fester, it becomes a national security problem, right? We're in the age of deep fakes and most of the deep fakes that exist today, over 90% or 95% even are deep fake pornography. It's only a matter of time before convincing deep fake porn video is released of someone like AOC (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) or Kamala Harris or someone else.

Nina Jankowicz: We really, really need to get a handle on this, and the platforms don't do anything about it. There's no protections for women in our legal code. Law enforcement don't know what to do when they're presented with claims of cyber stalking or cyber harassment. It has an effect on you.

Nina Jankowicz: As somebody who's gone through this stuff myself, it makes it almost impossible to do your work and in the book and you know, I've used this analogy in real life too, because people don't understand how much it affects you, I compare it to, let's say you were walking down the street and suddenly there was a swarm of people, mostly men picking apart every part of your appearance, reducing your degree and all your hard work to your gender, telling you to get back in the kitchen, telling you to make babies and stuff that I can't say on this podcast, that would be something that we wouldn't tolerate. We'd take out a restraining order. The police would help you.

Nina Jankowicz: Online, we don't have that protection. Instead, as the internet has really even more so during the pandemic become an extension of ourselves, particularly for people who have a large online presence, journalists, academics, et cetera. It's just debilitating to undergo this stuff.

Nina Jankowicz: Women are just expected to endure it. "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen." That's something my trolls have said to me before. So, I'm trying to change that. I do think that this is very, very closely aligned to the disinformation campaigns that we see both coming from foreign actors and domestic actors.

Nina Jankowicz: Just this week as we're taping this podcast, we saw representative Paul Gosar sharing cheap fake of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were face plastered down an anime character's body, which then he proceeds to kill. I would say that is gendered abuse and disinformation. This is something unfortunately that I think is only going to become more and more common as we have more and more women in public life. I do not want it to affect the participation of my future children in public life.

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Nina Jankowicz: I don't want them to look at my Twitter replies or look at Kamala Harris' Twitter replies and see shocking things and say, "You know what? I'm not going to run for public office. I'm not going to put myself out there." We need women in the conversation. And that goes doubly so for women of color and women of marginalized backgrounds who receive even more abuse than their white peers do.

Reema Saleh: I was genuinely surprised when that Twitter video wasn't taken down. How should platforms be responding to gender disinformation and harassment? What should policymakers be doing?

Nina Jankowicz: There's so much. The platforms have gotten ever so slightly better or a little more attentive over the past couple of months since our first report came out and I will say they have been at least willing to listen to the critiques we have for them. But right now, the biggest problem is that the onus of detecting and reporting and dealing with the harassment is on the target of those being harassed. It's on women. It should be the platform's job to protect their users from harassment and abuse.

Nina Jankowicz: Twitter has just introduced safety mode, which I think is an improvement. It's essentially something that will auto block people from your replies, who are using nasty language for as long as you like if you're undergoing like a trolling campaign. But again, the onus is on the user.

Nina Jankowicz: What I would like to see is more proactive detection of this content. If we were able to find 336,000 pieces of gender abuse and disinformation over a two-month period, attacking 13 different women, imagine what the platforms can find if they just put together a list of classifiers that they are updating fairly frequently.

Nina Jankowicz: In addition to that, we need to see consequences for those who are using this type of abuse. Right now, they just get a slap on the risk. They might get their account suspended. They might be asked to delete the offending tweet. Very rarely are they kicked off the platform, particularly if they are a large follower account that is essentially sending dog whistles to their followers to go and harass someone which has happened to me and happens to a lot of people. Those instigating accounts never have any consequence. So, there's a lot for platforms to be doing more proactively to protect women.

Nina Jankowicz: There's a reason that on Reddit, on Twitter, women make up less than half of the online population. It's because we are dealing with so much more abuse. On the platform side, I would just say they really just need to enforce their terms of service. All of the thing that I've mentioned are things that go against terms of service, and we don't see them taken care of. That's number one.

Nina Jankowicz: And then policy makers, I think there is some attention to this problem, particularly among women politicians, Jackie Speier of California is very, very interested in these issues. And we've spoken with a number of other members of congress as well. The problem is anything that has to do with gender becomes a polarizing issue in this Congress in particular. The violence against women act still hasn't been renewed.

Nina Jankowicz: I think there are some provisions being discussed in BAWA to add support for women who have undergone online harassment and perhaps to equip law enforcement with training and tools that they need to deal with some of these claims. But unfortunately, I think anything that Congress is able to pass, that's going to help normal people, isn't going to be implemented for a couple of years.

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Nina Jankowicz: So, in the meantime, we really need the platforms to step up again. The one other thing that I would love to see introduced in the House and Senate individually and then in other parliamentary bodies around the world is rules for people who are sharing gendered abuse. So, for the representative Gosars or others, if they're sharing this sort of abuse or violent abuse from their official accounts, they need to be censored. There needs to be a consequence for those who are engaging in this sort of behavior to their colleagues.

Nina Jankowicz: This is supposed to be a civil deliberative institution and it's not supposed to be somewhere where people have to deal with violent threats from people they go to work with. Make no mistake, the idea there, again, isn't just to silence Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the interim, it's to send a message to all women, especially women of color or progressive women that they're not welcome in those spaces.

Nina Jankowicz: That is just unacceptable. So, I hope to see something like that introduced at least in the house sometimes soon as a result of what we've seen this week, but we've seen other issues that have met no resistance from the house rules committee or others. Just a few ideas. There's more in our report, malign creativity, which you can find on the Wilson Center website.

Annie Henderson: I think you've already answered this for online harassment that women face. But what are some of your big takeaways for policymakers when you're talking to them about disinformation more generally? You obviously speak to policymakers about this topic. What are your big points that you really need them to understand and take back with them?

Nina Jankowicz: The one that I repeat over and over, and I still think, unfortunately, is not heard by some politicians is that disinformation is not a partisan problem. It's a democratic problem. It doesn't matter what political party is being helped in the interim by disinformation. It might help your party today, but it might come to attack you tomorrow. It really is going to affect all of us. It's going to affect faith in the democratic system as we've already seen. It takes years to recover from something like that. I have served on election observation missions in countries like Ukraine and Georgia, where there is this deep-seated distrust of the electoral system because of legitimate fraud that existed there for many years. And so, I often think about in the wake of January 6th in the #StopTheSteal movement, how many people go to the ballot box now and don't trust that their vote is being counted?

Nina Jankowicz: I really do worry about that. It's not just our democracy that suffers, but as I've been saying the whole time, our public safety and public health, these institutions are important to the functioning of our society, to the peace and prosperity of the United States. It's ultimately extremely selfish to say, "It's okay." When disinformation happens, as long as it's not affecting me.

Nina Jankowicz: If any policy makers are listening out there, remember the ultimate victim of disinformation is our democracy and people's participation in it. And without that participation, you're not going to get elected and the system isn't going to function anymore.

Nina Jankowicz: And that's the biggest takeaway for me and something that I find myself again, repeating every time testifying on the Hill or briefing policymaker, otherwise.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Nina Jankowicz. This episode was produced and edited by Aishwarya Kumar and Reema Saleh.

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Annie Henderson: Special thanks to UC3P and The Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.