Wenner-Gren Foundation
Criticism Inside, Alternatives Alongside
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Captioned by Joshua B. Edwards, RDR, CRR

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>> BILL MAURER: Good morning, everyone. We are just waiting for folks to file in from the waiting room here. And we will get started in just a minute or so. And once again, good morning, folks. We are just waiting a minute or two for people to come in from the waiting room before we get started with this, our second installment of a Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored series called criticism inside alternatives alongside, organizing otherwise to intervene in anthropology's futures.

This webinar is being recorded or will be recording starting pretty soon. And also there is captioning available, live captioning. If you click on live transcript at the bottom of your screen and would like to thank Joshua Edwards for doing that live captioning for us.

I think we will go ahead and get started. Jenny, are you recording? Yeah, you are recording now. And again, thank you all for being here. This is criticisms inside, alternatives alongside. Intervening in anthropologies futures. It's a

ten-part series sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the UC Irvine school of social sciences. I'm Bill Maurer, dean of the school and a professor here in the department of anthropology.

And I'm very pleased to welcome you. Again, there is captioning available should you require or desire. And also we are recording. If you have questions along the way, please enter them into the Q&A field at the bottom and our moderators who I will introduce in a second will help field those.

And with that, I am going to turn it right over to Taylor Nelms.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Hi, everybody. Thanks so much for joining us again. I know there's nothing else going on this week, so really appreciate you taking the time to spend with us on a beautiful Friday morning. As Bill said I'm Taylor Nelms. I'm the senior director of research at the Filene Research Institute, and the anthropologist by training.

Last time Bill and I talked two weeks ago, you know, we kind of laid the foundation we hoped for this webinar series. We talked a little bit about how the precarization of knowledge production had changed what's possible and what's expected of public scholarship and scholarly activism. We talked about the anxieties around the relevance of social science today and how that might be a red herring in the face of what we see as a real Renaissance of public scholarship.

We talked about the opportunity to refuse any sense of

a kind of great divide between academia and its altars. And what an anthropology of fellow travelers or as one of the participants in the webinars put it, fellow troublers might look like. We talked about what the alternative and -- means and we talked about the intervention as a practice form of public scholarship.

Today we are thrilled to be joined by Dr. Joan Donovan. Joan is the research director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard. And she leads the technology and social change project there. Among the really important exciting kind of public and scholarly outputs that Joan oversees there at the Shorenstein Center included the media manipulation case book, the meme war weekly newsletter -- that's a mouthful -- and a webinar series called Big If True. As a scholar, Joan is a leading thinker and researcher on the internet and on new digital technologies, especially as they intersect with the effects of online extremism, media manipulation and disinformation campaigns and the effects of those on culture and democracy itself.

In the words of a writer for *The New York Times*, the way that activists, extremists and propagandists serve or poorly moderated media system to gain attention in society. She's way too important to have a conversation with Bill and I, but we are really excited she's here anyway. And later on, we will be joined by three Ph.D. students. Bill, do you want to introduce them?

>> BILL MAURER: Sure. So the way this will go is Taylor

and I will have a conversation with Joan for half an hour or 40 minutes and then we will be joined by three Ph.D. students, Kim Fernandes from University of Pennsylvania, recently crowned Ph.D. candidate. Congratulations, Kim. Nina Medvedeva from the University of Minnesota and Nima Yolmo from the University of California at Irvine.

So after a bit of back and forth with me and Taylor and Joan, those three will jump in and carry the conversation forward with their own questions as well as questions that you who are joining us today post in the Q&A chat. And again I just want to acknowledge the support of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for this series as well as UC Irvine. And with that, why don't we kick it off.

We should warn you that Joan has sound effects. So that might happen here and there.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: What what? Come on. You don't talk to someone that studies manipulation and not get a few -- you know, (sound effect). Come on. I got a new toy.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: The sound effect of the week.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Amazingly. It's like election night. Eh, you know, (sound effect).

>> JOAN DONOVAN: All good. That's the last time I will do do that it.

>> BILL MAURER: You can bring it back if you need to. Joan, we wanted to start really broad brush strokes. Tell us about

your work. Tell us about your scholarship, how it enbe gauges the public, how you ended up at the Shornestein Center and what is a day in the life of Joan Donovan look like?

>> JOAN DONOVAN: So goodness, that's a lot. How did I end up where I am? Is a long and labeled question about why UCI never offered me a job, I think. I'm just kidding. You know, but I do love the folks out at UCI and so happy to be in conversation with you all. And that's where I originally had met Taylor and Bill. When I was way back in the days of being at UC San Diego, Ph.D. student in science studies and sociology.

And so kind of worked my way through the UC system as a post-doc at UCLA where I was dealing with white supremacists use of DNA ancestry tests. I always cared about how people get information and use it to change the world. That is just my big-picture question. It's the thing that has always drawn me to questions about information distribution, the study of boring things as Susan Lee Star has put it.

Infrastructure is something I care deeply about. Telephones, I'm just an in nerd about how people connect with one another. Especially looking at the history of telephones and phone freaking and pranking. So all of these things have kind of come together in a weird way where there was this very strange job call out of Data and Society. And Dana just kind of pushed it in my inbox and was, like, interested?

Oh, I will put in an application because I'm putting

in an application 80 other places.

>> BILL MAURER:

>> TAYLOR NELMS: This is Data and Society --

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Data and Society in 2016.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And tell us what Data and Society is.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Oh, okay, yeah. It's a research institute, nonprofit in in New York City. But they had this really interesting program going around media manipulation and studying how information integrity and how people get information is basically open, our open-information environment has made it so media manipulators are more able to move bad information at scale.

And Alice Morowick had been really leading up this team that had some fantastic scholars on it including Becca Lewis who is someone I really adored the scholarship of over the last few years. Anyway, I got the job. It was awesome. And I was able to work with some of the most interesting scholars that I had really, you know,, didn't really think about, you know, what it would be to run a research team and have, like, massive collaborations with bunches of people that I respect. But it was a really nice job in the sense that I was able to do the kind of scholarship that I wanted on topics that mattered.

And we pumped out a ton of research about advertising infrastructure, about white supremacists' use of YouTube. We looked at the problem of the, quote/unquote, fake news problem, and how different imposters were showing up online and using the

affordances of the internet. I was able to collaborate with Amelia Acker on a paper about data craft and the ways in which it's not just the social part of manipulation that's interesting to me.

It's really about how our technical systems are built in a way that has these affordances that usually manipulators and disinformers utilize in order to push their political agendas forward. So that's all of that led up to an opportunity with the Shornestein Center to lead up similar research, but also expand beyond just media manipulation to look at what we do now which is what we call the technology and social change research project where we are looking at not just misinformation, disinformation, but also communication, communication infrastructure and trying to get a sense of, well, how are manipulators turning our communication infrastructure to their advantage? And what are the roles of media and political elites in this process?

And ultimately, I think our research right now is starting to look more at, well, who are really paying the true costs of misinformation? Journalists, civil society, public health professionals, researchers. Why is, you know, why -- why are so many folks having to deal with this problem of misinformation at scale?

And so that's, that's really how I ended up here, if not for the good fortune of just having met some of the right people at the right time that wanted to see the work that I wanted to do succeed.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Joan, when you think back to, you know, the first opportunities that you had to kind of engage in a real public way through your scholarship, right, obviously your background, some of your first projects were on activist social movements. You started to do work while at UCLA on white supremacist movements. Tell me a little bit about what was the impetus or how did you first start to think about the potential impacts of your scholarship in the public domain?

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah. When I first started doing research on activist communication networks during Occupy, you know, it's 2011 and something really strange is happening in the U.S. And I'm, like, all other graduated students grasping for a project. I just had, you know, I had just was, like, in the midst of writing my proposal. It wasn't really coming together. I was very interested at that time in medical sociology and looking at the ways in which stigma impacts how people understand mental illness. And that has always been a constant concern for me. I care deeply about the ways that people are able to access mental healthcare.

And so that was really what I wanted to focus on in my dissertation. But some of the medical sociologists at UCSD had gone onto different gigs. So I was kind of looking for a project that I could do that still resonated with me deeply, but also was a little bit more pragmatic in the sense that I could get, you know, the kind of mentorship that I needed.

And in doing that, I actually found myself working a lot with Martha L. who is an anthropologist who had kind of found an uncomfortable home in the sociology department, and she just really encouraged me to explore the things I wanted to look at. And so when the Occupy movement started happening in LA, I just kind of went around as an observer pretending as if I was an anthropologist just listening, learning, recording, doing field notes, thinking, you know, this is good practice for if I want to study things that have this component of, you know, dense online communication and then people actually changing their behaviors in public spaces.

And so through that time, that 90 days that the Occupy movement was really, like, tethered to public space, I was just a constant fixture trying to understand things which actually brought some weird media opportunities my way. I was on NPR. I was in the LA Times. And I was in Fast Company, I think.

And it was because not a lot of people that were studying this were thinking more abstractly about the bigger impact that the events are going to have on the way we conduct communication and the way in which it's going to impact either local policy or, you know, more public strategies about debt.

And so that moment was uncomfortable as a scholar because I think I just didn't really know what to talk about, to talk about with journalists. I knew what to talk about with my geek friends which is, like, isn't this technology cool? And look

what it can do? And why are we returning to the telephone in a movement when we have all of these affordances of social media?

You know, social media is branding itself as going to be this big breakout liberation technology, but we actually are organizing on conference calls, like, isn't that weird? Right. But public scholarship-wise, I have always been attracted to questions that are of important, you know, social consequence and so when I had the opportunity to do research with Aaron P. and Chris Kelty at UCLA, I remember very clearly we are sitting around the cafeteria and we are talking about, what are we going to do together? And Aaron is, like, you know, I have been looking at these posts from these white supremacists and there's something here about the way they are talking about DNA. And I'm, like, well, there's something here because they seem to be mobilizing in a different way around Science than we have seen in the past because they are negotiating questioning about identities and purity.

And at the same time, you start to see Trump, like, rising to power as someone who is this unlikely catalyst for these groups. And so that research, I will shut up in a second, but that research that we did at UCLA in 2015 gets published. The ASA, American Sociological Association conference is happening on the same weekend as the Unite the Right rally.

We put out a free print look all good nerds do before our presentation. And that paper that we had written about white

supremacist use of DNA ancestry tests becomes this way of seeing that community in that moment as people are trying to reckon with what just happened in Charlottesville. And so that paper even though it had been rejected by the American Journal Of Sociology, I mean, reviewer, too, right.

Even though we had, you know, gotten some revise and resubmits and things, we were still struggling with how to make sense of white supremacy and white supremacist society and wanted to reckon with that question. And I realize you can't play around with the media. They are going to quote you. Right, and so you have to be really succinct.

You have to be really matter of fact and you have to get your point across in 15 words or less. And so I was just really careful with what I was willing to say in the public. And as a result of that and then the work that I have subsequently done on how journalists get hoaxed has brought me deep into a community of journalists which some of which I think, you know, are just brilliant, brilliant writers and investigators.

And so now I'm, you know, fully enmeshed in the worlds in the work-a-day worlds of journalists. But it wasn't through academia that that came about. It was just a series of coincidences and, yeah.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: It really strikes me that your interest in media and obviously there's a sort of a biding concern with communication and communication technology. But in the role of

media, right, in framing up the kinds of public debates we can have and the ways that information then flows around through social networks or public conversations generally that comes out of your personal experience and trying to communicate other kinds of scholarly insights in and through media contexts.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah, definitely. And that's what's hard, I think. I have really looked a lot to the work of Coleman and that moment around how does what you study help you become a good translator for those communities into, you know, language that everybody primarily can understand and in venues that people are used to accessing, right.

I think the other, like, weird thing about having a preprint turn into a bunch of news articles and I think Aaron counted them at one point and there were over a hundred articles written about our paper, is that , you know, you don't want to be presenting research that hasn't been peer reviewed and vetted on a public stage like that, because you do, you know, you really deeply value the community of colleagues that are willing to read your work and tell you you're wrong.

And I think right now in this field with media manipulation and disinformation, you have hucksters and grifters hosting as information experts. This field is definitely much more treacherous than what we were dealing with in 2016 around just being people who were willing to talk about white supremacist communities online and what their form and function looked like.

Now I'm often really perplexed by, you know, some of the ways in which disinformation has taken a main stage in our public debate in the conversations about the roles of political elites and the media moguls and the consolidation of information through platforms; whereas some of the people that, you know, end up becoming considered disinformation experts have much less of a commitment to the academic rigor as well as the sort of commitments that we have as scholars to getting at some of these tougher questions about, well, who really benefits from disinformation at scale? And who really benefits from allowing advertising online to work the way that it does? Which essentially, you know, (name) really shows it in his Book Antisocial Media says this is basically an ATM machine. That's what they've built.

So, you know, I think as we weather 2020 and, you know, disinformation has played a huge role in how we understand our politics, I often wonder the commitments to public scholarship and how that gets you wrapped up in some of the other more thorny issues about power and information control.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's a really good transition, Joan, I think to a set of questions that we have about, you know, the role of public scholarship in kind of making a difference, right. So if you think about your own work, you know, and specifically the work that you do right now, right, so your day job, right, at the Shornestein Center in the technology project, what's

your -- maybe it's implicit.

But maybe help us make it explicit. What's your kind of theory of change for the work that you do? Right. So how do you imagine in an ideal, you know, way that it might have an impact? Maybe one way to ask this question is who is the audience for the work that you and your colleagues do, or audiences and what kind of change do you expect your work to make?

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah. I think it's -- I mean, I'm -- I'm in a research director position at the Harvard Kennedy School. So policy is a huge focus of the school, and is something that I've really kind of had to, like, fall backwards into in a way because I didn't, you know, there's an implicit, like, does sociologist -- does good sociology lead to good policy? And I think the jury is probably out on that.

(Laughter)

>> JOAN DONOVAN: So for us as a team and, you know, I will speak about my team in Shornestein in particular, Shornestein's always been really known as a fellows place and as a place where, you know, that people come sort of mid-towards the end of their career and they will write a retrospective paper about what it was like to be a governor or what it was like to be a mayor, what it was like to, you know, be the, you know, editor in chief of PBS or something.

And so we really try to turn Shornestein around into a more research-focused center. And I think what that means in

terms of public impact of our work is that, yeah, I mean, being at Harvard makes a huge difference because people take what comes out of Harvard as, you know, very, very seriously. And so you have to bring to that a kind of rigor and clarity of purpose that I think my team, you know, really cares a lot about information integrity in the public sphere. We care a lot about accurate information, especially during the pandemic. You know, when I was at UCLA in the Institute for Society and Genetics we talked about the negotiation between scientists when did they become public figures? When do you step out and say everybody thinks it's like this? But that's actually political spin and what's really going on is this other thing.

So for us we take up as our audience not necessarily other researchers, but we think about policymakers can this research be useful to them? And so we engage quite a bit with policy-minded folks and in some instances I have testified in front of Congress which is a torture unlike no other. It's, like, cramming for your dissertation defense when you've never met your committee. Right.

(Laughter)

>> JOAN DONOVAN: You don't know how things are going to hit. You say the word "democracy," and a few of them are, like, wait, what's that or what do you mean by that? Or you say we need to have more content moderation because white supremacyists are really able to make their conspiracy theories stick and they are,

like, wait, we don't want any moderation at all. We don't think government should be in the business of information.

And then you are, like, oh, okay. So, you know, that audience is a tough one because I think I know that it matters that they understand what we are doing, but it might not be their priority to understand what we are doing. And so we have to work extra hard to make sure they see it and understand it.

Then we are also very interested in understanding how technologists see and make sense of this problem. You know, I have been hanging out long enough in California to know there's a kind of ethic and approach to technology in California that is like no other in the sense that people are drawn to building things without being pragmatic about the plan for how that technology might not necessarily be full of all the good things you have pitched your VCs on.

And so there's always these strategic blind spots in technological innovation and development that there's been so much great scholarship on lately, especially of course the work of Sophia and Sara at UCLA. So in that sense, technologists have to read and understand our work and know where it applies, and so that's been difficult just making sure that they get it. And now they get the hate speech problem which is in 2016, 2017, they would say to me, well, that's not a behavior. I can't make a difference here.

Because that's just content and we don't touch content.

We look at behaviors, and the algorithm serves things based on people's behaviors. And so we've really had to put algorithms at the center of the debate about what technology does because that is really about how it serves people information.

Journalists have been something that a group that have been probably most receptive to our research, not only just writing about it, but being the subjects of it. And so they are very much folks that we will send, you know, drafts to and say does this resonate with your experience? And journalists are very quick to take up any kind of tip sheet or any kind of advice you want to give them.

They are really receptive to changing their approach if you can convince them that the approach is change. And there's a bit of a generational divide now in news rooms. I was watching a great Knight Foundation podcast or webinar yesterday about this very thing, where the standards of journalism and especially around what we might call "both sides" coverage, that's now up for debate. That's no longer really industry standard.

And that problem is manifesting in the workplace where some people who have been trained in this you got to go to the source, you got to ask both sides are now being challenged by, well, what if the source is a white supremacist? Or what if the source is actually lying to you? How do you talk about that? Right. And so that question is something that our research as well as the research of others including First Draft News has put on the table.

And then lastly new to me is the world of doctors and public health professionals who are, I mean, they are really afraid of how misinformation at scale is changing their practice and actually leading to the death of some of their patients who are, you know, refusing a vaccine that doesn't exist. They are not wearing masks because they are being told it's not important.

And that's showing up in the doctor's office. So much of our work over the last two months has gone to looking at medical misinformation, working with folks at the WHO on understanding this problem and how it shows up globally.

>> BILL MAURER: Joan, I just want to pick up on a couple of things you said here with respect to the journalists on the one hand and the technologists on the other. And this may be, you know, I want to try to get to one of the chief challenges of your work, I think, which is that the one constituency, the journalist is used to a mode of reporting based on fact-checking, right.

But that doesn't really work anymore or if it works, it's not believed because the journalists are seen as the kind of mouth piece of elite perspectives that have been delegitimated by other elites in our society.

So the whole, you know, let's just get the correct information out there thing, right, clearly doesn't work. So how do you work with them on that question? That's the first part. And the second part is you mentioned that you sort of have been working with the technology people to get them to really

understand, you know, hey, your algorithm does stuff. It is not just a neutral thing.

But then, you know, how do you get them to kind of shift their practices too to really take more some of the lessons of folks who you mentioned like Sophia Nobel about the way algorithms work about entrenching inequalities and creating new ones?

You seem to go to the core of the work that journalists and technologists do and also at the core of kind of their self-identity, who they think they are. So I wonder if if you could just reflect in your work how you are dealing with that, that really difficult problem. You are confronting in some ways the very foundation of the professional identities of journalists and computer scientists.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah. I mean, so it's a question, you know, I'm not obviously not the only person dealing with this. I think Mary Gray's work her book Ghost Work is really influential in the sense that it helps us understand that there are human beings all enmeshed in this. And this goes back to some of my work on telephones where I was really obsessed all of the pictures of female telephone operators who had to have arms of a certain length so that they could plug into the boards and AT&T preferred if you were unmarried so that you could have, you know, more time to be at work. And so there are kinds of laborerers and different kinds of infrastructural work where, you know, there are some folks in my field who, like, really, really focus in on C suite, the suit

and tie executives and try to get close to power. If you could just convince Mark Zuckerberg that there was a problem, then maybe things would change.

Our work really tries to get at folks that are doing the work, right, to reveal to them something deeper about the work that they are carrying out daily that will help them do their job better. And most people are fairly receptive to that if you don't dismiss exactly what it is that they are trying to do and the social conditions that got them there, and the kinds of, everybody plays these games in their offices, right.

But how do you get that person that is now attuned to what's happening, how do you get them to start telling their own co-workers, yeah, well, if we do this, then this actually is what happens? And so that's been -- that's been rewarding in the sense that at least with the technologists and journalists is I try to meet them where they are. I have been brought into these different companies to talk to people that work there.

I have been brought into different news rooms to talk to staff and just, you know, and then when they ask me questions, I answer them honestly which is, you know, if I don't know, I say I don't know. But by and large, the kinds of questions that I get from the people in these professions is really about what is the role that social media is playing that is different from before?

Right. They don't always understand, I think this is where academics really shine, is that we can take a step back and

see a bit of the connections between order and power, like, the way that Chris Kelty writes about moral and technical order and how when you are building a technology you actually have an idea about how you are going to sell it and who the market is going to be and what the users are supposed to be like and what the purpose is.

And those building blocks also apply to journalists in the sense that when they write a story, they don't want to miss a big part of the story. They don't want to be embarrassed and publish something and be told, hey, you missed the mark here. And so if you can give them frameworks for understanding questions they can ask that help them get to the bottom of these things in their practice, it does help. Our media manipulation casebook, for instance, we just launched this this week, but I have been going around and giving this talk in different places about the life cycle of media manipulation campaigns.

And it's basically about, you know, if you look at these five different points of action for any media manipulation campaign, you can really make sense of it quickly. And then you can actually assess if you really need to report on it or do something about it which is to say that most media manipulation campaigns fail because nobody responds. Nobody newsworthy responds.

So the first two stages are, planting and the origins of the campaign. Usually there's a breaking news opportunity and

you see media manipulators kind of rush in. And they have a plan of attack. Maybe they have a viral slogan or hashtag they want to use. Yesterday it was all about the hashtag Stop the Steal. And then from there, you know, when people react, journalists started writing about this hashtag saying it was full of misinformation.

There were some calls to violence. Platform companies then intervened like Facebook removed a page, a group page that had, like, nearly 400,000 people in it. And then they removed a series of event pages. So that's stage three, who is responding? What are the mitigation efforts around stage four? What are platforms doing? And then the last stage is the adaptations by the manipulators. And so that's what we are going to be watching for today.

But that framework actually works across these different professions as a rubric for, well, should I do something? And I think that that's what's at stake. You know, years ago, Alanna Schwartz said to me about this kind of research and about research on the net is really, like, you have to train your attention to what matters in terms of what's scaling, and how people are sort of inventing new uses.

And so I have, you know, I have always kind of kept that advice in the back of my mind which is to say, like, there's going to be normal misinformation out there. There's going to be lots of, like, lies on the internet. That's not the point. The point

is when it scales. The point is when people in power take it up and wield it.

So that's where our work I think can help bridge those gaps between journalists and technologists, especially through the lens of misinformation.

>> BILL MAURER: Great, thanks. That's super-helpful and it also really is nice and scary that it's, like, right about what's happening today. So, you know, we are going to transition now to the next part of our conversation where our panel of grad students are going to take it over and start posing some questions.

I am going to hand it over to Kim first. But for those who are watching and listening in, feel free to also drop some questions or comments in the Q&A field as well. Kim?

>> KIM FERNANDES: Yeah. Thank you so much for these really useful and sort of, I'm very I'm sitting very much with the range of things you captured, particularly in response to Taylor's question about your audience. And I was wondering if you would be able to say a little bit more about your choice of method, both in terms of how investigative digital ethnography has been influenced by anthropology, other areas, and also what it means to, like, how does your audience speak to your method and vice versa, I guess?

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah.

(Laughter)

>> JOAN DONOVAN: So I'm not a trained anthropologist,

though I've shown up to the AAA a few times. So I get the feel for it. And from my vantage point, one of my closest collaborators, Brian freed Berg is trained in cultural anthropology. We honed in on this method called digital investigative ethnography.

There's a white paper on our website about it. It blends the work of investigative journalists with a more steady anthropological approach to being with these communities of manipulators and white supremacists for the long haul. And so Brian and I had been watching this content develop over years. We have been sort of in the working everyday our worlds of white supremacists, media manipulators and violent misogynists and online trolls.

So this work isn't without its vicarious trauma in the sense that, like, we often will be, like, oh, oh, yeah, I just saw something terrible today. And then we have to cope with that. And so anthropologically, I think the ethnographic method is something that I have really over the years cared a lot about and cared to understand what communities what they are doing that think the other parts of the world are working against them.

What's been really revealing about studying these groups over time and actually and also coming from having studied more pro-social movements is that everybody feels like there's an ambiguous "they" that is trying to prevent them from living their best life. And the way in which they conceptualize that, the way

in which different communities conceptualize the "they" leads to different forms of action in public space.

And I will even consider and say out loud that I consider the internet more broadly public space, but there's lots of carveouts and caveats. But things that happen online are just as important to me as things that happen in meet space or IRL or whatever kind of dichotomy you want to bring about. And Tom B.'s work on, you know, digital spaces and, like, the idea that you are never not on your phone or never not online, is something that I often think about when -- and also D. L. Taylor's work as well.

When I think about what does it mean in this moment to have antisocial movements? People who are, like, against other people existing, these people are mobilizing. They are showing up in public space. They are not in the shadows like they were in 2015 when I was studying white supremacists. So we take that approach very seriously as researchers where we try to get as close to that action as we can, and then we try to translate it for publics to understand what the importance is of countering these groups, right. Like, countering vicious white supremacists, that kind of work is something that's difficult to do and isn't always clear about, like, how research plays into that. Some journalists do this, nonprofits do it. But in terms of research for us, it's very cut and dry. Did they say this? Where did they say this? Where did we see it show up in public space? And, like, how do we draw the clearest lines possible to say this group of people were

planning this; they were using these technologies; they were either hiding who they were or hiding what their intent was; and then it looks like this in public space. And downstream of that, how do we then counter some of that organizing and that messaging? And that to me mostly is done in the work of a handoff in the sense that we do those -- we do that research and then either the platform companies make a decision or civil society organizations take up the charge like Change the Terms Coalition has been using lots and lots of research of white supremacists online to create model policies for platform companies. So, yeah, that's, you know, it's an approximation of an answer, but methodologically, I mean, you got to know, you got to know where to look for those things. You got to document them. And you got to cut out the hyperbole. You have to understand yeah, there are stakes to this, but you have to get at what you can know.

And I think that that's the last thing I will say is that this field of disinformation research, some people run it as a cover to try to get massive amounts of data from platform companies to actually conduct other studies. We don't use massive amounts of data. We are not in that world. We do much more steady engaged research in the sense that, like, we will watch several hundred hours of YouTube videos if that's going to help us make our reports better.

And, you know, that's not a lot -- that's not what a lot of other researchers are willing to commit to in order to try

to make sense of this world.

>> NIMA YOLMO: Thank you, Joan. That was kind of really helpful. I have a related question and this relates to your work has emphasized the need for accountability and responsibility in design and also the maintenance of systems that bring publics together, internet for one.

And you have also spoken at length about the importance of, like, the practices involved in journalism that evolved over time of ethics and protocols. So I was thinking of this in relation to instruction and pedagogy within academia, particularly at this moment where we are, like, moving to, like, more instructions. And I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the moment, the renewed interest of how social scientists, anthropologists and sociologists in particular could approach education and pedagogy with a public-facing work in mind?

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah. There's a great book called Design Justice by Sasha K., as well as R. Benjamin's Race After Technology or two books I often look to to think about how do you get people to understand the research that they do can serve a broader public? And what are those handoff points?

And not just handoff points, but what are those touchstones? What are those places where you are asking for feedback or input or actually collaborating with folks that are going to be impacted by either the technology that you build or the concepts that you bring into this world.

I know at UCI, Roger Crux has been leading a significant effort around how do you link together research and pedagogy as well as make it serve a broader public? And so at Harvard Kennedy School, I have had the good fortune of being able to teach two courses on media manipulation and disinformation. And I learn a ton from my students because a lot of people come into this work thinking, you know, thinking that it's hyperpartisan.

And that has a lot to do with the fact that our media ecosystems are shaped really differently when we talk about center and left media versus when we talk about right wing or conservative media. And I'm not talking about far right. I'm just talking about, you know, right wing.

And the reason why I think it matters for us to understand research-wise why this might be a kind of, like, difficult zone for people to do education in is because you don't want to be saddled with partisan issues at the same time that you are trying to demonstrate concepts. You are trying to say, hey, this is how a certain kind of media manipulation tactic works.

So even yesterday one of my researchers or senior editor, she doesn't like to be called a researcher, Emily Dreyfus, she works on our team helping us get to the bottom of things, so publishes in the *The New York Times* a case we had been working on related to why Trump misspelled Biden crime family. For us it's not about Trump misspelling Biden crime family.

It's actually the demonstration much a media

manipulation tactic that's been going on for a long time which is a kind of typo squadding. Twitter had shut down "Biden Crime Family" as a search term. So if you searched for the hashtag, you got zero results. And we were, like, that's weird, because these companies need to be more transparent about the content moderation that they take, because otherwise it leaves manipulate ors open to say hey, this is biased, secrecy, collusion.

Transparency has political implications for the rest of us. But in seeing Trump had misspelled "Biden Crime Family," most people would read it and say okay, this guy misspelled something. For us, that was a clue that there was something else going on and we took that clue. And then we started to see that people were actually using the misspelled hashtag on other platforms that weren't even throttling or blocking search routes of "Biden Crime Family."

For us, the story is about the tactic and the manipulation, but also Rob Ferris's work and Y B.'s work point us to the fact that these tactics tend to show up in the right wing media ecosystem more primarily. So we try to balance the way we do education with a healthy dose of understanding that this is going to get people into the realm of discussing partisan politic, but, you know, usually, like, most conservatives I know get it. They understand that there's a pretty big propaganda campaign underway right now about voter fraud. And until we get evidence of voter fraud, the journalists are not going to cover it without

solid evidence. And so, yeah, when it comes to education about this, I think there's a deep fear about being labeled some kind of, like, social justice warrior partisan professor.

And I think I might be in in at advantage being at Harvard Kennedy School. Hey, my boss used to work for John Kerry and he used to be the mayor of Newton, Massachusetts. So he's a blue Democrat. So people understand that partisan politics doesn't necessarily mean that you've got a political agenda, but you have to be really, really careful about how you explain it to people.

Because you want them to understand the concept, not necessarily just the, like, the more scandalous part of the example.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: Thank you for that. So I guess just as a follow-up question, I'm kind of interested in the relationship between your research and the policymaking that it inspires and sort of surveillance. And to kind of expand on that, so there are folks who are, like, in specifically antifascist groups or in more radical left anarchists spheres who feel very comfortable actually going into sort of an encrypted loops or discords and finding out who is it that's responsible for certain types of dialogues coming out and they feel very comfortable making that information known and trying to ban people from those platforms. And I was kind of wondering how does your work negotiate sort of that tension and the sort of ways that you decide to focus on specific tactics or

discuss certain actors?

I don't know if you are going into these groups or if you are focusing more on the public-facing side of things. But I was wondering how you are approaching that relationship, research and what I'm calling surveillance. That might not be the right word for it.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Yeah. So there's a rich literature around anonymity and the internet and sort of the kind of ethic that gets us here. And one of the ways we envisioned the net politic of anonymity playing out was that everybody would be anonymous. And over time with social media platforms being so closely wedded to people's social networks, that's become increasingly more and more difficult if you want to remain anonymous.

The other thing about organizing online is if you are going to organize to manipulate some algorithms to get something to trend, you actually have to do it in public. You need a massive amount of people to make something happen. And we noticed the same thing with networks of harassers or people who are trying to bring together white supremacist rallies. For the most part, the organizing has to happen in public.

The reason why we know something is a foreign operation and it's more difficult to track is if something just starts trending on Twitter and there's no ephemera in any places you can find online, that to us more than likely points to, you know, some

kind of boardroom decision where people are, like, okay, this is the thing we are going to do. And here is how we are going to do it.

And usually that was sort of uncovered in the research that people have done on the Russian IRA stuff, just to say they couldn't find any evidence of other identities of groups doing this. And so and then once people got data from crowd tingle about paying in rubles and Russia being behind it, it started to make sense.

I think I wrote about this for PBS about doxing. I wrote about it in Chris Kelty's magazine as well about doxing used to be a technique to hold the powerful to account. And a lot of the early doxing that we saw around Anonymous, especially around the hashtag Operation Pig Roast or Op Pig Roast was about when police officers overstepped and either pepper sprayed people or arrested people in a very violent way, you would see a bunch of people jump into action to get the name of that officer out into the public. We saw this actually with UC Davis and Officer Pike with the pepper spraying cop incident. That technique, though, we've seen used time and time again to hold the powerful to account has been just individualized and made manifest that anybody can do this now which actually introduces a new and potentially more dangerous situation for folks like me who grew up on the net not really thinking a lot about what my personal information is going to look like and who is going to want it, whereas younger folks

I think are much more attuned to surveillance and the net and what that looks like.

So I'm very thankful for all the education of groups like Media Justice are doing to make sure that young people know not to put your address online, not to put your phone number online, and in some instances, not even to use your real name.

That being said, these white supremacist groups on Telegram or Discord or any of these chat apps, people mess up. They use the same avatar or the same picture and then it's tied to -- and there's a way of linking them back to their Facebook group or their Facebook page or linking them to their college if they accidentally mention they went to a football game the day before.

So there are all these things that are leave-behinds, these digital traces, these digital clues that antifascist organizers are picking up on and making it known, and also investigative reporters are doing that work as well. But I do think that the same kind of techniques are playing out where I just feel that a call from folks in New Mexico about leftists getting doxed and what can they do to protect themselves?

From my vantage point, we need to think about personal information online and policy-wise there should be a way to get your information off the internet short of having to, like, just take on a whole new name. You know, it's, like, one funny story. I know we have to wrap up, but my parents-in-law, they had their phone number was listed on Googles the local FedEx fax number.

So six, seven times a day they would get a fax phone call and they were, like, Joan, what do we do? I was, like, change your phone number. You are not going to get Google to change this listing. We are at this point at this big inflection point on the internet where we need some norms. And I'm reminded of other industries like the airline industry. The first few people to build a flying machine, you know, the real harm was going to be if they crashed, right.

They were going to get hurt. They didn't start by building an airport. And I think at this point we do need some plans and industries to start to be built up around internet and social media so that we can get access to timely local relevant accurate information, but also that when information is out there about us, that imperils us, that we should be able to take it down or have it removed or to have some kind of process by which we can adjudicate these things.

Because otherwise it's always going to be the advantage of disinformers and media manipulators to use this open environment against the rest of us who are, you know, mostly just trying to avoid any serious harm.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Joan, I want to thank you for joining us. We want to wrap up and we do have a question that has come in, a couple of questions. And unfortunately we won't be able to get to that. But I just wanted to wrap up by saying it really strikes me, it's such a tough question for you that I'm sure that

you have to sort of think about it day in and day out about how to study efforts to undermine truth, to undermine confidence in information. While also seeking to equip people and organizations and policymakers to combat those efforts with the tools of empirical social science, right. There's this really kind of tough nut, right, to crack at the center of your work that I think is really important is to kind of emphasize as a kind of takeaway for me.

And it also strikes me, some of the really critical themes or sort of recurring themes that I've heard you talk about over the course of this conversation, right, the importance of discomfort I think has been really interesting to hear you talk about, obviously the importance of coincidence or accident, right, in your own personal journey.

The other thing I want to point out you have used so well that's a model for all of us is how important it is for you to name the relationships that matter to you, right. We were talking about in our first conversation we build out a kind of social science of fellow travelers so important to maintain and make explicit the relationships that sustain and maintain us, right. Your ability to weave in the named relationships that matter to you throughout this conversation have been so important and I just want to point that out for our listeners as well. And then, of course, really critical, your skill at becoming an ethnographer of your audiences, those with whom you hope to have

an impact. Part of the work you do you may not ever write about it, but is to understand the ways they operate, what motivates them. What ways to build out a relationship or a rapport with them so your work can gain a foothold.

So being an ethnographer of your intended audience is a great lesson for all of us seeking to make our way in public scholarship or public domain. Those are some of the things that really struck me listening to you throughout this conversation.

Thank you very much for joining us.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Thank you. I know we are at home. No applause line at the end of the conversation? There we go (sound effect).

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Sorry. I had to do the laugh track.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Oh, the laugh track. That's better.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Sorry. I had to do it. I really appreciate everybody staying on the line here and inviting me in. And I'm really sad that we can't be all together in the same -- in the same space. Hanging out and riffing on these issues. I have been really the fortunate benefactor of Bill's generosity bringing me up to UCI I guess it's a few years ago now to talk about white supremacy and free speech on campuses and, you know, students are I think at the center. We didn't talk a lot about this. But I think at the center of all of our work is a desire to educate, a desire to teach, the desire to help people understand things. So that's really where I feel like this work really fits in. And I'm

excited to see graduate students take up media manipulation and disinformation as dissertation topics. And I'm excited to see other folks try to understand how disinformation touches down in their communities, what kind of chaos and havoc does it cause. And I'm also really excited to think about digital public infrastructure and what the next iteration of the web is going to have to be given that the experience -- the experiment with social media is now, seems to be coming to a close.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And with that, we will bring things to a close. So Joan, thank you very much again for joining us. This is the second of a 10-part series, and so next time I believe we will have newly minted Mary Gray from Microsoft with us. Please come back and join us for that. Thanks, Joan.

>> JOAN DONOVAN: Thank you. (Thank you's).

>> JOAN DONOVAN: See you on the internet.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: See you in the virtual space.