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Hello listeners and welcome to another episode of Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. I'm Azsaneé Truss, a doctoral candidate at Annenberg and a member of the Center's steering committee. This episode of the podcast is a conversation I recently had with Professor Francesca Tripodi, a sociologist and media scholar who examines the relationship between social media, political partisanship, and democratic participation, revealing how Google and Wikipedia are manipulated for political gain. She is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Sciences, a senior faculty researcher with the Center for Information Technology and Public Life at UNC, and an affiliate at the Data and Society Research Institute. During this conversation, we discussed her recent work examining what algorithmic polarization means for society, how conservative elites use media literacy tactics to spread propaganda, and the role of race and racism in understanding dis and misinformation. We also drew connections to my own dissertation project, which focuses on conspiracy theorizing among black Americans. I started by asking Francesca about how her work on algorithmic polarization became a point of entry into the mis and disinformation space. So I would say in regards to your question about being in the disinfo space, it's funny because I don't really think of myself as a disinformation researcher. What I like to describe myself as is a sociologist who pays attention to socio-technical vulnerabilities in ways that like platforms or, um, you know, information systems or social media accounts, like other different ways that Society and communities use these in ways that programmers might not have anticipated or intended. So it's kind of like a through line between my research, looking at, like, way back when looking at Yik Yak, now thinking about search engines or how that might apply to Chatbots, um, you know, I think about that on Wikipedia, like, what are the systems in place for how these technologies are supposed to quote unquote, be used, and then how are these actually being used? And there's typically a disjuncture between like anticipated and um actual use. No, that's super 2, yeah, 2 things really funny. Um, I think as I'm working on my project, I'm realizing, you know, my interest in conspiracy, my working on my dissertation, my interest in conspiracy isn't. Necessarily in like the conspiracy theories themselves or like studying that in and of itself. I'm really interested in how form and mode become um or or like uh important to or fundamental to the types of ideas that can be communicated, um and how certain forms allow for like more subversive ideas of which like you might consider conspiracy theories to be relatively subversive ideas, um, like how those become Um, home to those sorts of ideas, and so hearing someone say, oh, actually I'm not a disinformation researcher, I'm interested in Socio technical, you know, vulnerabilities. I'm like, ah, yeah, of course, there's a broader, you know, agenda. No, no, I mean, and I think, I think there are some people who, who very intentionally get into disinformation space, but I would say the way in which I started understanding these patterns of like keyword curation or strategic signaling, they were not even necessarily miss info, right? Sometimes. Sometimes it is um actual. Well, and actually we can talk about this if you want to, but I think it's super aligned with your own, your own work, right, which is to say there are these kernels of truth layered in conspiracy, and so labeling or trying to determine like well is this true actually is beside the point. What the point is is that often these research campaigns or these mis or disinformation campaigns are wrapped up in Like Arley Hochschild's concept of a deep story and thinking about like what are the stories that have been told and retold so frequently in these communities that they feel true, even if they might not necessarily be 100% true. And I think that's like kind of the tension between um some of the work that I'm thinking about like sociologically speaking, and then Um, looking at like, well, is it factual or not? That's also important, super important. It's just not what I do, right. No, I think, OK, so you actually made my the segue for me. I was literally gonna ask him. I'm like I know deep stories are fundamental to the work that you're doing. Could you, I think just like super um You know, in, in the most basic terms explain kind of what that is and why they're so fundamental to like what this book or what your um latest work has been. Yeah, so this is a concept like I mentioned earlier, but it's always good to restate it. So Arli Hochschild is a sociologist in her book Strangers in Their Own Land. She talks about this concept of a deep story and the deep story that she uncovers is one inside the South. Amongst white, you know, persons who were sort of thinking about, well, the American dream that I was sold was one, you know, heavily embedded in meritocracy, one in which I do what I'm supposed to do, and by doing that I would get quote unquote rewarded. And what they see as an attack on those values or persons that they perceive to be cutting in line or um or or chipping away at that deep story. And so how I think about this deep story or how I've used her research into talking about deep stories for people who aren't sociologists or people who aren't reading Arle Hochschild is deep stories are these narratives that are told and retold, whether it's in the church or around a campfire or in school or around the dinner table, that you don't actually have to hear the whole story to understand the moral of the story. These are stories that feel true even if they are not particularly accurate. And how this aligns with my research is that propagandists and conspiracy theorists are particularly good at tapping into that deep story, so that you can signal to this concept with just one or two words, this idea without actually having to get into the whole idea. Um, so it's actually kind of aligning a lot of, uh, Lopez's work on dog whistles and thinking about like how do dog whistles intersect with deep stories cause dog whistles are wrapped up resentment, um, with just a few words you can understand what they are. And so I argue that part of how you make um dog whistle effective is by connecting it to that deep story. Right, and I think, um, oh, I guess, I guess to give the listeners context, uh, Francesca and I met in Lisbon this winter, um, and you gave like this really awesome presentation uh about all of this work and I think what helped to really concretize it for me was just the examples that you gave. So would you be able to like kind of give an example of like a deep story and then how that might translate into how it's leveraged for like SEO um by like a, you know, political or, you know, someone on the right or because obviously that's kind of the Basis of your work, you're focused on um how conservative uh propagandists, I guess you could say, um leverage this. So yeah, could you give like a an example of of how this all sort of plays out? Sure, I love to do an example first that's completely apolitical. Is that OK? Yeah, yeah, yeah, let's do that. The one that I love to start with is the color of the sky. Uh, in the US context, and I would say in many spaces within the Western, um, you know, hemisphere, you think about this idea of the sky being blue and you grow up, the sky is blue, and on crayons that are blue, it's called sky blue. And so it's very much part of our deep story that the you know, it's even part of phrases, as it's as true as the color of the sky being blue. We've we've heard these concepts, um, and so, but what what's really fascinating is that uh through contextual analysis, researchers have shown that if you go back to Homer's Iliad or Early translations of the Bible, they don't describe the sky as blue. They use other colors to think about the sky, and then you think about, well, blue, even though we think of it as this very common color, is highly synthetic. It wasn't until like mass production of blue that it was part of our everyday lives that we could literally see it in a way that we see it so frequently. And so there are still some cultures in which the sky is not blue. Um, if you ask them what the color of the sky was, they'd be like, that's a nonsensical question. The sky is many colors. So how does this translate into search? Well, I usually use Google cause it's the most common, but you can really do any search engine, or even, you know, I've been playing around on this with like Bard or chat GPT or Oh interesting, um, AI systems. And if you, if you start with a prompt that is rooted in this belief of a blue sky, so like, why is the sky blue or the sky is blue, you get instantly a bunch of links confirming that position. Oh, the sky is blue, this is fantastic. And so you have these great examples of a blue sky, but if you change just very slightly that context, right, to say the sky is red or the sky is green, or you ask a question like, why is the sky not blue, or what is the true color of the sky? You get different answers to your question, right? And what's interesting is that like through knowledge graphs, it sometimes they make it seem like the answer is static or or um static is a is a very like information retrieval concepts, but they're thinking about it as like less of a static search, more of something that can constantly change, um. They're actually using a lot of the same sources. So like the color of the sky is dependent on a lot of things, how much pollution is in the air at the time of day, like also how light reflects off of your eye and like the colors that our eyes are able to see. So it's interesting because the guy can, the sky can be like any color you imagine it to be, depending on your starting point or your search prompt. So a lot of my argument says that if the starting point is corrupt to begin with, it's really easy to um manipulate search results without having any kind of programmatic capabilities. So then an example I gave in my book or I wrote about this for Wired, um, so Nellie Orr is a person who was frequently evoked, um, when Trump was first impeached over the call he had had with President Zelinsky, and Because Nellie Orr had been married to a Department of Justice official and had worked for Fusion GPS at the same time, Christopher Steele had worked for Fusion GPS. It created this. Keyword or a dog whistle to evoke a deep story of, you know, Um, The Democrats are out to get Trump, that this is a witch hunt, that these allegations against him are inaccurate. So it's in a way of it being like political. Hm, no, that's helpful, thanks. Um, so yeah, as you were saying, like in the case of conservatives, a lot of these deep stories are rooted in white supremacy or notions of what America should quote unquote, be. Um, and I wait, wait, can we stop there? Cause I think the example I gave, like doesn't explicitly say that, but you are right and that we can talk about that one too. I think about it a lot in terms of election fraud. So election fraud is rooted in a deep story around how others quote unquote steal elections and WEB Du Bois. who is a sociologist that talks about this from the 1930s. And I'd love to use this because he uses the phrase misinformation in like 1935 to talk about systemic racism in the United States and the way that deep stories activated in white supremacy, um, further these claims. So I just wanted to Indicate that the example I gave wasn't a good example of that, but there are better examples, so I just wanna make sure. And also I always like to make sure I cite the people that they came from they came from. No, I I literally was about to um to to bring up the Du Bois citation just because that was like, if there was one takeaway from the presentation that I got, I was like, oh my goodness, like. Du Bois was talking about misinformation in the 30s, um, which, you know, of course. Yeah, this is like in the 1930s, you have A black scholar writing around writing about black reconstruction in America to document how what we consider to be trusted sources of information, like children's um historical textbooks and encyclopedias being written by persons of industry who have a vested interest in making it seem like reconstruction failed because of black um Because of black people, right? Not instead of showing reconstruction was failing because of of capitalism, right? And so I think, I think that um Du Bois makes that argument much more eloquently than I did, but, um, but yeah, that was, that was really like eye opening for me is I think we often think about like this info as this like new phenomenon, but it's, I mean, Yeah, it's almost 100 years old now, right? The thing that I found most interesting about this was just in my work I've kind of developed a converse argument or not even really converse, it's the opposite side of the same coin, whereas if we think about white supremacy as this sort of misinformation campaign that makes people believe that just by virtue of having white skin that they are better than others and therefore deserve certain rights or, you know, deserve full personhood. Then on the opposite end, I've been thinking about the construction, the social construction of race and specifically racialized blackness as a way to designate subpersonhood and then thereby justify certain um treatment to uh black people obviously within America, but then if, you know, we can think about this as a global system. um, so with that in mind, I'm like, well, one might consider that in and of itself a conspiracy, um, so when black Americans who are the focus of my work, um, when we're conspiracy theorizing. Um, we're often trying to just, it's makes sense of our lived and embodied realities of anti-black racism, so it's the vernacular theorization of how racism is kind of manifesting in our day to day lives. Um, so yeah, so I mean if that sparks anything, I'm, I'm totally interested in hearing that, but my more my really simple question is how you see conspiracy coming into play in all of, I think kind of. I think we're doing like similar research. It's just two sides of like I'm saying the same coin, you're interested in how this all of this maintains white supremacy via, you know, conservative propagandists and everything, and then I'm like, well this is how um black folks respond to white supremacy via this sort of maintenance. So if any of that sparks anything, yeah, how do you see conspiracy playing a role on the other end of things or how does that all kind of like factor into the No, I think this is really, I mean. I have so much good stuff to chew on. We should write together. I think we would have so much fun writing a paper together. Um, first you get all your other stuff done, but I, I'll work on that. I think that, so let me see if I'm answering your question, and if not, like, push back. One thing I think a lot about because It's talked a lot about as this manufactured grievance amongst poor white persons. Now, to be clear, the persons in my study were not poor at all, right? The people that I interviewed are highly educated. These are people with, um, you know, college degrees, graduate degrees, they they are able to donate a significant amount of time to their um To their candidate of choice. So I do think it's different. I think there is this element of manufactured grievance that gets plucked from those who actually experience grievance, right, who are, who are profoundly, um, food insecure, housing insecure, job insecure, and we know, I mean, this stems all the way back from like Marxist theory, right, which documents how um Working class persons and, you know, laborers were intentionally fed mis and disinformation, uh, so that they didn't rise up against the people that were paying them well, right? I mean, the reason why we have like less people joining labor unions and more people scapegoating. Uh, what they think are persons who have stolen their jobs. So it's not the grievance that's manufactured, it's the, the villain, I would say, right, or the reason behind this grievance that becomes a very solid mis and disin campaign for white persons, um, I would argue for white poor persons in the United States explicitly. Um, so I don't know if that's, so I think that's a little bit different than what you're saying because, but maybe not in the sense that like, I think the reason why these conspiracies resonate is because it resonates with their actual lived experience, right? If you can't pay your mortgage, if you can't, if you have um if you're at a manufacturing plant that that is closed down, right? If you um If you never went to college or never graduated high school, like, these are things that are are actual lived experiences of many white persons throughout the United States, and by tapping into that lived experience and manufacturing uh A villain that is not the people that they, you know, the, the persons who are, um, navigating search engine optimization and really like pushing, uh, these narratives are high-level politicians and pundits, right? These are not, um, These are not, uh, those who they represent, but I would argue part of the reason that Um, they are so effective, it's because they tap in to the stories that resonate with their constituents, and then with the manufacturing part or the mis and disinformation part or the conspiracy part, right, is about that scapegoating, right? How do we diffuse what is What is perhaps some might argue like justified anger or frustration. How do we diffuse this frustration and just pin it on someone else that's not us. Does that make sense? That totally makes sense and I think Um, it's super validating because I've been trying to draw that exact distinction between folks who are poor and white, you know, and, and why the conspiracies resonate with them because of their, like, you are oppressed, you know what I mean, like there is an oppression that is happening. That oppression, however, is on the basis of class, not on the basis of race. So by like manufacturing, like you're saying, this sort of like. You know, oh, it's the Mexicans stealing your jobs, or it's, you know, it's, I don't know, the liberal elite, the coastal liberal elites who are all colorful and queer um are out to, you know, completely uproot your way of life, um. That, you know, it, it resonates with those deep stories that they've they kind of already believed, but those deep stories are rooted in white supremacy, so that I think it's all very interesting because I wouldn't argue that like you're not oppressed. I'm like, you know, there are so many issues that you have that you're facing, you're just not facing them because you're white and that's what they're convincing you of. Well, and also it's, it's so fascinating, absolutely, and I would say there's two distinctions, and I think you're making them really well, but like, it's there is a legacy of white supremacy that is embedded in the fabric of Land grant institutions and um, you know, uh, who got the right to vote, right? I mean, these are, these are things that are like embedded and that's different than saying someone is a white supremacist, and I and I and I love that. I think that that's an important distinction because I think there are Active like white supremacist groups, and by and by. Being able to like differentiate themselves from that, I think it like, I don't know if I'm saying how to say this right. I hear what you're getting at though. It's saying like by individualizing white supremacy as like as this as persons or groups rather than systemic underpinnings. You know, it creates that cognitive dissonance of like, oh, but there is a black member of my organization. So clearly I'm not a white supremacist and so nothing's wrong with this system, right? Um but rather saying like, well, no, uh, this is a legacy of that, if that makes sense. I think that's actually part of the conspiracy and the and the mis and disinformation is like there has been exactly what you're saying, right, this um Creation of victimization around race that is not true or real for white people. Um, and so I think that that is the, uh, and like you're saying, yes, you have experienced disenfranchisement due to class precarity, and that is, of course, real, but that is different from race and you are not being victimized. Because of your whiteness, which is I think a big disinfo campaign happening right now. Later on in the conversation, I asked Francesca about how deep stories connect to search, algorithms and the perpetuation of mis and disinformation online. One of her latest projects, which she writes about in her most recent book, was an ethnography of both online and offline networks of conservatives, which then led her to studying how their entire information ecosystems, especially as they are shaped by search engines and search practices, are constructed by a discriminatory worldview because I had some tabling for a conservative group, and then I had volunteered at a call center for Um, by learning about it through someone in my other group, I had gone to this call center for a conservative action group that was like calling, and it had a script, and I was like, and the script had this very specific number around Um, like fraud and the Democratic candidate, and I thought that's so interesting, like, What is this story, right? Again, like I had no, and so afterwards, I searched, you know, name of candidate, like I think it was like Ralph Northam at the time, like Ralph Northam, Chinese fraud, and nothing really came out, and then I put in the number, cause I was like, oh yeah, what was that number? And then I went back and I had taken a screenshot of the my script. So I put the number in, and then when I put the number in, it was like an entirely different set of search results, right, that had been very clearly connected to that phrase, right, had had utilized SEO around that number. Mm. Um, and then that's where I started, like, basically every time a story was breaking, I would search for phrases used in the content that I was reading, and then I would search for phrases that were just slightly different variations of the of the subject, but that took a different stance on the subject. So the example also that I give in my report in my book is like NFL ratings up, NFL ratings down. Um, OK, in response to Colin Kaepernick's, uh, you know, protest, and Trump had said the NFL ratings were way down, and so everyone used that as an example of NFL ratings being way down, and when you searched for that NFL ratings way down, you received articles that furthered That argument that NFL ratings were down because of this protest, but when you searched NFL ratings up, You got different, you got. It was an it was like an entirely different internet and that's when I started to realize like we think about the internet is this like window or like this way of seeing new information, but it's so parallel, it's like we're it's like we're running on these parallel internets and I think that's different than saying filter bubbles because these aren't somehow programmatically created. These are the construct of our own way of seeing the world, which is like profoundly shaped by others around us. That's such an interesting. I think that's such an interesting way. To like understand this because so much of it, I think we blame on like algorithms and like algorithmic curation and kind of it, how it pigeonholes us into um seeing content that already aligns with our own worldviews, but then Thinking about, you know, how people leverage um SEO in and of itself, or uh how people and it's not even necessarily in the ways that you're um describing it in some ways it's not even necessarily intentional because you're just putting on the internet, you're you're titling it the way that you see it. So others who see it the same way that you see it are going to search using the terms that you are using to search. So there's like this, you know, obviously there is still um Algorithmic blame to go around. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and I think Sophia Noble says it best, right? Where like she it was initially in her book when that I read about like Dylann Roof and him searching for black on white crime, right? And she talks a lot about how like that search itself existed in a racist vacuum of like, Right, On information available in response to that query. is garbage, right? Nobody out there is writing information that's like at the time, right? I mean, and again this is temporal um and so, so that, but, but, you know, also to channels, you know, Doctor Noble's amazing research is like, um, there is still a capitalist endeavor, right? And even when the intention of the user might be biased, um, There is still like Monetary uh constraints at play. Um, there's actually a paper I have coming out that shows, you know, when people search abortion near me or alternatives for abortion. Um, You know, CPCs, which are anti-abortion centers, are routinely the top returns, regardless of the intention of the seeker. So, So yes, like, part of my argument is saying we can't put all the onus on the algorithm, like we have to also be mindful of like how our starting points, how our search prompts are going to dictate the way information is ordered and the way information is returned to us. Nonetheless, um, you know, Doctor Noble is very right, and that there are still these are corporate interests at play. These are not the helpful librarians. We I think they are. Right. And also, what my research also demonstrates is that there are very clear power players, like pundits and politicians who have a profound understanding of how search engines work and are really driving the conversation around these keywords and phrases, um, which is different than someone being like, oh, I'm super curious, you know, that's why I do think, I mean, I think part of it is search literacy. I think part of the problem is search literacy, but that's only Part of the problem, right, of course it's it's, it's always complex, it's this and um yeah um but OK, so yeah, just say I think kind of wrap things up. Usually I'm I I think I'm just kind of curious about where um where you see this going, like, you know, not to do the whole like, what's your next big project because you're like I just just finished this really big one. Um, but yeah, I just, I, I think, how do you see this growing or changing or shifting and, you know, I'm sure even just since finishing it, you probably have tons of new insights. Sure, yeah. So I, I like I said, I, I have this new paper coming out and that is actually part of a larger research project where I was able to sit down in libraries with information seekers and I asked them a series of political prompts. In order to gauge their opinion on these topics, and then I asked them to search for information based on these topics, and true to what I thought, um, the way people conceive of a subject or the way people think about the subject will dramatically change the kind of starting points that they start with, which in turn very much, um, you know, Uh, change the kind of information received. Um, and also sometimes people aren't even going to search, right? They're going directly to the website itself. um Right. However, uh, search is changing like super fast right now. I mean, there's so much happening with these large language models and chatbots. We know at least through like market research that a lot of young people prefer apps like TikTok to things like to things other than um You know, traditional search engines, and so I, I think the search the search environment is so complicated and so new and so my new research project, the one that I'm trying to get off the ground and part of my grant applications this summer, is looking at like what I really want to create is a search prompt integrity and learning lab to think about. Um, you know, how are search prompts created? Like, what are the ways that people come to like think about how they search for things and then what are the mechanisms they use to find answers, um, because I, we know that age definitely makes their Um, but I'm also interested in things like geographic location, right? Like mobile device. We know very little about mobile search. Um, and also talk, talking, not typing. We know a lot of people are utilizing that, you know, asking things like sorry or Alexa, um, answers. So, the future of my work is just thinking more about like, how to search complicate, um, The way we find information and like how do, how do our uh Deep stories, if you will, intersect with with the way we search and and what we search for. Thanks so much for listening to another episode of the Center for Media at Risk podcast. You can learn more about our work on our website, ASC Mediaisk.org, and by following us on Twitter at ASC Media Risk.