

**CAROL**

**SAIVETZ:**

Welcome everyone. We're delighted that so many people could join us today. Very excited that we have such a timely topic to discuss, and we have two experts in the field to discuss it. But before I do that, I'm supposed to tell you that this is an event that is co-sponsored by the Center for International Studies at MIT, the Security Studies program at MIT, and MIT Russia.

I should also introduce myself. My name is Carol Saivetz. I'm a senior advisor at the Security Studies program at MIT, and I co-chair a seminar, along with my colleague Elizabeth Wood, whom we will meet after the talk. And we co-chair a seminar series called Focus on Russia. And this is part of that seminar series as well.

I couldn't think of a better topic to talk about in the lead-up to the US presidential election, which is now only 40 days away. We've heard so much in 2016 about Russian attempts to influence the election then, and we're hearing again from the CIA and from the intelligence community that Russia is, again, trying to influence who shows up, where people vote. They are mimicking some of Donald Trump's talking points about Joe Biden's strength and intellectual capabilities, et cetera.

And we've really brought together two experts in the field. Nina Jankowicz studies the intersection of democracy and technology in central and eastern Europe. She is currently a disinformation fellow at the Wilson Center Science and Technology Innovation program. Nina is the author of *How To Lose The Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict*. Her writing has been published by The New York Times, the Washington Post, and The Atlantic. She is a frequent commentator on disinformation and Russian and east European affairs.

I'm going to introduce both speakers at the same time. Peter Pomerantsev is a Soviet-born British journalist, author, and TV producer. He is a visiting senior fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics, where he co-directs the Arena Program. He is also an associate editor at Coda Story.

Pomerantsev has written two books about Russian disinformation and propaganda. The first is *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* and the most recent one is called *This Is Not Propaganda*.

I also should let you know that at the end of the talk, you will see links to purchase the books if you are interested. So Nina, please take it away and start us off.

**NINA  
JANKOWICZ:**

Thank you so much, Carol. I'm really delighted to be with you all today, albeit virtually. I thought I'd give a little bit more background about myself so you can understand what my perspective on disinformation is, because I think it's rather unique. Often people come at this from just a tech angle or just a regional angle, and I kind of combine all of those things.

I started my career at the National Democratic Institute, which is a democracy support organization that gets money, in part, from the US government as well as other organizations. And I worked on Russia and Belarus programs. And that was really where I got my first taste of what it is like to be the victim of disinformation and propaganda, because NDI found itself at the brunt of many of the blunt force narratives that the Russian government was using to try to discredit our work.

From there, I went to Ukraine, where I, under a Fulbright fellowship, was an advisor to the foreign ministry of Ukraine and the spokesperson there on strategic communications issues. And I happened to be in Ukraine during the US presidential election in 2016. Throughout my time there, all of my colleagues, both in the Ukrainian government and in other countries with whom I would interact, would always say, you know, it's surprising to us that you are surprised by Russian disinformation, because we've been enduring it for so long, decades, if you go back to the Soviet era. And certainly these tactics that were used in the United States in 2016 were used in central and eastern Europe for much, much longer, before that, even, more than a decade before.

So that's the idea for the book came from. I look at five central and eastern European governments-- Estonia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Republic of Georgia-- and look at how their governments dealt with this problem and tried to distill the lessons learned for the United States and the wider west, because again, I think we were very late to come to this issue, to understand it, and as I sat at my desk in Ukraine in 2016, reading about all the last ditch efforts to protect our discourse as we were waking up to this, it seemed like we were reinventing the wheel. And that's very much what I do not want us to do.

But I also come at these issues-- which can be very complex, you know, freedom of speech and expression issues-- from that democratic basis, from my work at NDI, keeping those values at heart. Because we don't want to give up those freedoms when we're trying to protect against the manipulation that we're seeing not only from foreign actors but from domestic actors as well. So I thought I'd give a kind of overview of some of the lessons from the book today.

And these don't only apply when speaking about Russian disinformation. They also can be easily extrapolated for our current struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic against dis- and misinformation, disinformation about the Black Lives Matter movement that has been fairly prevalent over the past couple of months, as well as disinformation about the democratic process itself and mail-in voting. I think the most important thing to understand about Russian disinformation in particular that is kind of distinct from other purveyors of disinformation is, we often refer to it as fake news. And even my publisher insisted that we put fake news in the subtitle of my book, because it's a moniker that people recognize and understand.

But really, most disinformation isn't fake at all. It's grounded in people's real grievances, real lived experiences, and it is highly emotional. The most engaging content online is the most enraging content. And that's why we're seeing so much, particularly, related to the very uncertain, worrisome time that we're in right now.

But one important lesson that I think gets overlooked a lot is that Russia is not just using fake accounts, trolls and bots, automated messaging in order to amplify its messages. It's using, often, homegrown actors and kind of laundering information. So I'll give two examples-- recent examples, actually, post-2016 examples of that.

The first is from the first chapter of my book, the story of Americans Take Action, which was a liberal protest group that grew up after Trump's inauguration. They stood up with RESIST signs at his inauguration, unfurled a RESIST banner at the Washington Nationals home opener. They were the ones that handed out those Russian flags at the Conservative Political Action Conference. So very creative protests that they did.

And I was living in Ukraine when I saw an ad for a musical theater protest outside of the White House. In my spare time, I love to do theater and go to the theater, so I

think that's why I was targeted for it. And I just remember thinking, how interesting. They're going to dress up as colonial Americans and sing songs from *Les Miserables* outside of the White House, demanding Trump's impeachment. Fast forward a little more than a year later and it turns out that those ads actually had been purchased by the Internet Research Agency out of Saint Petersburg, Russia.

And this is just an example to show, first of all, not only is Russia on both sides of the political spectrum-- it wants to divide Democrats and also pit Americans against one another. We often think they are just pro-Trump. But they're supporting liberal causes as well. But secondly, in this case, they're not creating content. They are glomming onto a pre-existing protest movement and supporting them in order to amplify that discord. And, of course, the organizers-- I interviewed one of them for the book. He had no idea who he was dealing with. He was happy to take money that he viewed as a donation to the cause, and it turned out that, actually, this was the infamous Russian Internet Research Agency that was supporting that protest.

But we've also seen this type of behavior continue as we head toward the 2020 election. Just a few weeks ago the FBI clued in Facebook and Twitter to an operation called Peace Data, in which the Internet Research Agency or Internet Research Agency affiliates were contracting with freelance journalists-- American freelance journalists-- to write liberal-leaning articles on a website called Peace Data that they then, rather than using, again, those automated bot and troll accounts, all they did was drop links into Facebook groups, where people are already segmented by interest and by vulnerability. And that content is prioritized in Facebook's algorithm.

Now the operation was caught before it got much traction. But I think this shows how Russia has adapted its tactics since 2016.

The second thing, aside from homegrown actors, that unite all of my case studies in the book, is that there needs to be a human element when we're thinking about countering disinformation. So often, especially in Washington, this issue is securitized. We keep it in the realms of the Department of Defense and the State Department, but it's inherently a human issue for exactly the reasons that I mentioned before. These are about the exploitation of real human grievances. And in order to fight disinformation, in order to counter disinformation and build a resilient society that's going to last beyond when Russia has the volition to stop

these campaigns-- it will protect us whether it's China, Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, you name it, or domestic dis-informers. It will protect us against the next campaign if we heal those fissures in our society.

And part of that is good governance and really trying to fill in the trust gap that has been created by issues like our endemic racism, like economic inequality, et cetera. But there are also more targeted programs that can help people navigate the information environment that we're in. And they've met great success in places like Estonia and Ukraine, which have really honed in on those societal fissures.

And part of that is media literacy-- I know that sounds kind of like fairy dust, but we do need to invest in it. The countries that have done that-- Estonia, Ukraine, Finland, Sweden-- have seen great success when giving people the tools to navigate the information environment. And I think there are ways to do this in the US federal system that might not seem obvious. It's not just about educating children. It's also about educating adults. And one way that I think is a great structure that we could use and lift from Ukraine, where this has been tried out, is our library system.

Libraries are looking for their new raison d'etre in the 21st century, but librarians are still highly trusted as sources of information and guides. And that's regardless of political party. They have way higher trust ratings than almost any institution in the United States today. So I envision some sort of grand program from the federal government, either through the Institute of Libraries or through the Department of Education, based on an apolitical curriculum that could teach people how to navigate the information environment that we're in today.

We also need to teach civics, that is very clear. So much disinformation, especially right now in 2020, is surrounding the voting process and the actual infrastructure of our democracy. And that is key.

And the other thing that many of the countries in the book who, I think are-- they've got a little bit of the upper hand in terms of building a resilient society-- have done, is investing in public media. I'm sure I don't need to tell the audience that's gathered here today that the United States only spends about \$3 per person per year on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And NPR and PBS stations in the US, especially in America's heartland, are the only news stations that are covering

local news in news deserts. So I think it's incumbent on the health of our democracy to continue to invest in public broadcasting and ensure that Americans have access to trustworthy information. Because where that doesn't exist, the vacuum is filled by sites posing as local news sites, which is another tactic we've seen Russia shift to as we head toward the 2020 election.

And then finally, probably the most important learning from my book is that we cannot counter disinformation when we are using those tactics ourselves. To me, it is not important whether disinformation is coming from outside of our borders or within our borders. And in fact, the use of domestic disinformation and the politicization of the entire concept of disinformation leaves us more vulnerable to these attacks.

So what we've seen in places like Poland and the Republic of Georgia, which have very clear-cut, cogent call-outs of Russia in their national security doctrine for Russia's disinformation activities, for its hybrid warfare, even though they have that, when their governments, the Georgian Dream party in Georgia and the Law and Justice party in Poland are engaging in very well-documented disinformation and influence campaigns, that allows Russia to continue to manipulate those societies. It allows those vulnerabilities to continue to be exploited. And unfortunately, we are seeing very much the same thing with the narratives about mail-in balloting that are coming from the White House today.

So on that very optimistic note, I will leave us, but also just implore everyone to, as we head into the 2020 election, really think before you share. Do your due diligence. And if there are any elected officials out there, we all need to recognize that this is not a partisan issue. The ultimate victim of disinformation is our democracy. It doesn't matter if it benefits one political party today. Tomorrow, the ultimate victim is going to be trust in how this institution works, and our ability to express our preferences at the voting booth and to our elected officials. Thanks.

**CAROL** Thank you. Peter, please jump in.

**SAIVETZ:**

**PETER** Hi there. Good day-- good evening, where I am in London, where it's just about time  
**POMERANTSEV:** to get to the pub, but I'm sitting here with you instead, which is much more

enjoyable. So I wanted to think a little bit more about what we mean by Russia information war. And the Russian idea of information war, which might help frame the rest of our discussion. Because I think there's a kind of paradox, or at least two ways that Russia talks about information war, both of which are quite dangerous and have a lot of consequences.

One of the ways is as a form of aggressive foreign policy. I think Nina just gave wonderful detail and case studies about one aspect of that, what we call disinformation. But the Russian concept of information war, they term as information psychological war. It includes what we would call information or influence operations. It includes corruption. It includes funding of NGO-like institutions or front organizations. It's a whole plethora of activity, which are basically all measures short of kinetic war.

That's something that's in the Russian military doctrine, in the foreign policy doctrine. There's a very vibrant debate among military scholars about how original the Russian information war doctrine is, how much it's based on their reading or misreading of the Western one or the Chinese one, but it's definitely a thing. And it's definitely something we have to think very, very carefully about.

I mean, maybe the term that we would use is a term that we had in the Cold War, political warfare. and Russian political warfare, they see as a very important part of their foreign policy toolkit. Globalization and open borders and open information borders obviously make it really, really easy to practice. And I think at the end of the day, we're going to have to-- we as in like the club of democracies, to the extent that we have them still-- are going to have to think of our own version of political warfare.

What is going to be our proportionate response to the corruption of-- or the Russian funding of far right parties, or what's going to be our response to the hacking of the Bundestag, and so on and so forth? I don't think we have that doctrine of political warfare yet for the 21st century. I think we need one.

I have to say I think that democracies are always going to be vulnerable on the information side of political warfare. We're open systems, we want to be open systems. We're not going to start setting up Chinese firewalls or using the sort of

ensorship that Russia does. Democracy should, actually, be vulnerable to information warfare from authoritarian forces. We can slow it down. We can try to minimize its impact through those excellent means that Nina talked about.

But really [INAUDIBLE] going to be another field. That's going to be through sanctions and through economic means, where we're very superior to Russia. And if it is going to be in the information field I, would think about things like, is it right that western advertising continues to be shown on Russian TV channels which engage in war propaganda as defined by the EU and anti-Semitic content and the abuse of minorities? At the end of the day, we are still funding their media system. It's full of Western advertising.

If you watch Russian TV you will find the sort of rhetoric that we really know from the 1930s in Europe, and then there'll be an ad break, and we will see ads for Volvos and IKEA and Procter & Gamble. So we are funding this. We have to be aware of this. So maybe that is a way to start thinking where we could slow down their information war machine.

So that is one way of looking at information war, as part of a foreign policy toolkit. But there is another way. And it's the other way that I've looked up more in my books. Where information war is used in Russian political discourse almost as a quasi-ideology, almost as a replacement ideology for communism.

So this process starts in the late 1980s-- sorry, mid to late 1990s-- where a small selection of really quite eccentric academics with a security service background start writing a revisionist history of the late Soviet Union. And they start saying that the Soviet Union lost the Cold War not because of its terrible economic policies, its terrible environmental policies, its terrible human rights policies, its terrible political system, but because of information war operations by the west.

Information war ideas, mechanisms, manipulations like freedom of speech or human rights were injected into the Russian system through a fifth column of covertly controlled reformers and dissidents. It was a way of re-explaining why the Soviet Union lost the Cold War.

These ideas weren't taken very seriously. They were, you know, stewing in the kind of slightly paranoid, conspiratorial bits of the security services intelligentsia which

exists in Russia. But then as the Kremlin needed to find a way to explain these reversals that were happening against authoritarian kleptocrats, you know, its cousins in kleptocracy and authoritarianism across the world, in the Middle East and Ukraine, these people-powered revolutions, they started reaching for this language, saying, well, no, no, no, that's not genuine protests during the Arab Spring or in Ukraine, that's just an information war operation. And when there were protests in Russia, they started going, no, no, no, these are not genuine grievances. This is just an information war operation by the dastardly west.

And it became more and more and more centralized. And nowadays we hear this information war-- I'd say it's a world view. It's a way of explaining everything that happens in the world-- being broadcast from Russian state media, from Russian state spokesmedia, and from the very many kind of Russian opinion makers and proxies that the Kremlin uses.

It's a deeply conspiratorial view of the world. It's deeply corrosive, for the reason that it kind of takes away any kind of ground for democratic debates. In the information war worldview, all information is manipulation. All information is a weapon. There are no values. There are no facts. Everything is manipulation.

Now when we start to think about how to deal with Russia's foreign policy political warfare, one of the risks is that as we look for Russian information warfare everywhere, we start repeating this framework and it eats away at trust in our own societies. And it eats away at our own capacity for having a genuine democratic public sphere. We start seeing manipulation everywhere.

America is really kind of-- not in the forefront of these challenges. It's a huge challenge in Ukraine, where there's a genuine, nonstop political and real war being fought. But then you hear politicians starting to use the information warfare excuse for all sorts of naughty things that they do.

So that's one paradox that we're stuck in. How do you fight the very real political warfare that uses information and not slip into a conspiratorial, slightly paranoid view of the world where information loses its capacity for being a medium for genuine, collective thinking and deliberative debate?

And, of course, we're also seeing maybe not the language of information war as

used in Russia, but definitely the same kind of thinking repeated in lots and lots of Western democracies. This idea that everything is manipulation. I mean, a lot of the current American president's rhetoric that's all about fake news, about hoaxes, reduces what should be a deliberative public sphere to just a set of manipulations. And we know the consequences. It means that two sides can't engage with each other in any kind of real debate anymore.

And we see it in Britain. We had a prime ministerial candidate recently, Jeremy Corbyn, who saw everything as one huge conspiracy against him. And when people go, there are genuine problems with some of your policies, no, no, no, that's just a manipulation and a campaign by the mainstream media against me. So debates leaks away.

So that's the very strange paradox that we're in. We are faced with genuine political warfare from Russia that has to be countered and stopped and overcome. But there's a greater sort of rot inside our own thinking, which is further propelled by the Russian political warfare, which means that we start thinking like the Kremlin elites.

I'll have to stop there. We can think about why that's happening. Why is this happening? Why is information war as a quasi-ideology, why has it replaced cold war, with its kind of faulty, but at least genuine normative thinking somewhere, with this kind of deeply conspiratorial worldview? Why is it so popular? Why is it so seductive right now? And why is it particularly in favor in Russia? But I'll stop there. I think we can deal with those issues in the discussion.

**CAROL**

**SAIVETZ:**

Thank you very much. Elizabeth is somewhere. I think that you touched on sort of opposite-- sort of a yin and yang. It fits together, what each of you have said. I'm really intrigued by this idea that the Russian bots, propaganda, public media, et cetera, is one piece, and yet our own vulnerability to listening to the information that's coming in from Russia almost magnifies it and makes it worse. And Peter just made the point that our rhetoric is beginning to mimic-- our political discourse is beginning to mimic what the Russians are trying to infuse into our system.

And I wonder whether or not there are sort of technological means, but as well as civic education mean-- I mean, Nina you mentioned civics classes and things like

that-- as a way, at least, to slow this process down before we've lost everything-- I guess, this is my personal opinion-- because we really are at that intersection of technology and knowledge and the way we speak about our political processes.

So I really want to thank both of you. If you want to respond to that, and then Elizabeth will moderate the rest of the questions.

**NINA  
JANKOWICZ:**

Well, one of the things that I've really been focused on this year is as much as possible trying to educate lawmakers about this stuff, because they think they know, but we know from how they've grilled Mark Zuckerberg, or really not grilled Mark Zuckerberg at hearings--

[DISTANT MOTORCYCLE ENGINE]

Sorry. One of my neighbors is really into motorcycles, so if you can hear that, I apologize. But they really lack the lexicon to deal with these issues. And in many cases-- I totally agree with Peter-- they fall into the patterns of disinformation and propaganda themselves.

And so from the very top of government, although it doesn't seem like there is political will for this right now, we need clear and transparent descriptions of the threat. And to their credit, DHS and the FBI, over the past couple of days, have been releasing a set of public service announcements. They look like they're from 1997, but they include a lot of good information about what Americans should be on the lookout for, the types of narratives that they're seeing. And this is the sort of messaging that we should have been getting from a from an apolitical stance this entire time.

And I think when we have that messaging-- and, at least, in the case studies that I've looked at in central and eastern Europe, where there is a clear description of the threat and political will that not only prioritizes communication about it, but prioritizes resource allocation, both monetary and human, that is where you have a cogent response to disinformation and a society that is a little bit more on guard.

And it's also-- because of the nature that it's more-- you know, it's got this bureaucratic nature, it also means that it's devoid of the bombast that our current discussion of Russian information warfare is usually saddled with.

**ELIZABETH**

**WOOD:**

So I'm going to jump in with some questions from the audience that I think relate to these questions. The very first question that came in is about academic collaboration with Russia. Does that help in any way? It's of particular interest to an MIT audience because of MIT'S own collaborations, but I think it's kind of a broader interest.

A related question-- I'm going to give you a couple at a time-- is about what citizens can do. I think it's obviously, very important that-- what you said about media literacy. Are there other things from below, somebody asked.

And a third question is what about reducing Russia's incentive to meddle, to intervene? Is there anything that can be done from the US side on that score?

Peter, you want to try?

**PETER**

**POMERANTSEV:**

Well, I mean, I don't know about the ac-- I suppose I work now at two universities. It depends what the collaboration is for, and what is it aimed at. There are some fantastic Russian universities which are still fighting for their independence-- the European University in Saint Petersburg. they need our support. They're being squeezed every day. There's a really bad squeeze going on.

I think, thinking more strategically, something that was done in the Cold War and I would say that needs to be done now, is to create a free Russian university, whether in Holland or in Prague, for example, that could be not a bad idea. Somewhere that Russian students could come and where the professors that are being squeezed at the moment inside of Russia, who want to keep on teaching Russian students, who don't want to go all the way to MIT, you know, go to Estonia, for example. I think that that might be something that we have to start thinking about.

But the question of-- yeah, so that's my thought about the academic thing. What was the third question? I remember the third question was one I could [INAUDIBLE].

**ELIZABETH**

**WOOD:**

How to disincentivize the Russians to continue this.

**PETER**

**POMERANTSEV:**

I suppose this is all about-- it is all about punishments. What is the proportional response to, let's say, an operation like we saw during the 2016 election? Do you-- I

don't know. Do you set off a stink bomb in Yekaterinburg? I mean, what is the proportionate response to a troll farm? Is it sanctions against Russian money? We've got to find-- this is a diplomatic game. What is the thing that's going to hurt them to disincentivize next time?

Something that would slow them down, is, I think, what I mentioned about, like, slowing down the advertising and the selling of TV formats, for example, to Russian media. But targeted sanctions can probably have some sort of effect.

But at the end of the day, look, Russia is a belligerent power with a self belief that it belongs on the greatest stage of politics. And it will continue to have that. So we just have to be prepared. This is the way, this is the course they're going to chart. And there is only so much we can do. We just need to be prepared to deal with this reality.

**NINA  
JANKOWICZ:**

I definitely am a proponent of academic exchange. I am the product of many of them. I was lucky enough to-- that's how I got my interest in Russian studies, and part of the Fulbright program was, of course, living and working in Ukraine for over a year. And I think these things are invaluable. Unfortunately the Russian government has decided to undermine some of those long and storied exchanges, including the ones that are run by American councils. They've had to move one of their language programs out of Russia to Kazakhstan, which I think is a real shame.

Because they go both ways. FLEX students coming here get a sense of what America is like and vice versa. And I think part of the reason that I get frustrated with some of the rhetoric around Russian disinformation is because it's coming from people who don't speak the language, who have never been to Russia, who don't know the first thing about Russian culture or know any Russians. And they are often demonizing them in ways that I do not think is appropriate. So exchange can help with all of that.

I'm, again, a product of FLAS, Title 8, Fulbright. These are all programs that we should continue investing in, and I hope to see the next administration do and not constantly threaten to cut our educational and cultural exchanges. Not to get too political. I think everyone should be able to get behind them. It should be a nonpartisan thing.

What individuals can do. So obviously we're not going to see a nationwide media literacy program instituted in the next 40 days. So here's your crash course. First of all, I like to say we all need to be practicing informational distancing right now in addition to social distancing. Understanding that disinformation manipulates your emotions. If you feel yourself getting really worked up about something, the best thing you can do is to close your device or put it down and walk away for a little while. And if you still find something gnawing at you, then you can start to do a little bit of due diligence.

So if you're on a weird website you've never seen before, does it have contact information? Not just a Contact Us form, but an actual physical address and a phone number? Does it have a masthead for its editorial staff? Has that author ever written anything before, and is it of the same caliber? Is it also that manipulative emotional stuff?

If it has interesting visual content, and by interesting, I mean your spidey senses start to tingle, you should teach yourself how to do a reverse image search. This is an easy thing to do that's built into most browsers these days. And basically, what that allows you to do is find the earliest instance of that image on the internet, or similar images, so you can track and see where it's coming from.

Often disinformation will misappropriate images. So we see the Russians, for example, using images from the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s as images of Ukraine today. This is a great way to spot false information.

And finally, just thinking before you share. Understanding that, again, they're playing on your emotions and hoping for that organic engagement. That's what makes this stuff blow up. It's not about ads anymore. And understanding the role that you play in that ecosystem. And finally, if you're going to engage with a friend or family member and tell them, you know, this is actually wrong, here's the Snopes link, psychologists-- people who actually have studied these interactions on a massive scale have shown that it's actually better to do that in a personal format. So whether that's a direct message, picking up the phone, sending a text message, or having a conversation.

And rather than just sending the fact check immediately, because most of the

people who have been taken in by this stuff don't want to be told they're wrong-- they don't want to be fact checked, and they usually think that fact checkers are part of the deep state-- the best thing you can do is say, why do you believe that? And get into a conversation about it. It's not going to be a cut and dry, let me just debunk that for you. That's not going to work, and it's actually going to cause people to get a little bit more entrenched.

So that's what I've tried to employ in my own personal life. It gets frustrating sometimes. I do have a QAnon believer in my extended family. But it's part of the engagement that we all have to do as active citizens these days.

**ELIZABETH**

Which segues great to a next set of questions. We have a number of questions--

**WOOD:**

thank you to all the questioners-- about specific Russian targets. So somebody has asked about why the targeting of black Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement. Why is-- do you think that the QAnon could be coming from Russia? Another question about the Chinese syndrome. Is it possible that the Chinese and the Russians are actually in cahoots in some way?

And, an interesting question, how much of the Russian disinformation campaign is reactionary-- [AUDIO OUT] --sertive Russian foreign policy in the context of imperial resurgence, similar to state-sponsored resurgence of the orthodox church, revival of Kazakh militias-- in other words, are they being reactive, or conservative, or are they being proactive and empire building? And in fact, there's also another related question-- sorry, so many at once, but I think then you can play with it-- I'm going to throw it to Peter next. Also about the role of the Russian Orthodox church in this. Has either of you looked at that?

So very specific questions coming in about Russian targeting of particular audiences in the US. Any thoughts on that-- or in Britain. I mean, it's not-- the two audiences, I don't think, are that different. So that's a mouthful, but why not? They're all related, I think. Possibly.

**NINA**

**JANKOWICZ:**

OK, I'm going to jump in because Peter gave me a knowing look. So I'll take the Black Lives Matter question. Russia has, for a very, very long time-- I'm sure there are people here who have seen the 1930s Soviet film *Circus*. These tropes have been around in Russian narratives for a long time. I love that film because at the

very end-- cliff notes, there's a American circus performer who is on tour in Russia. She has a secret black baby and a baddie, basically, threatens to expose her. But at the end all of the people of the Soviet Union sing the child a lullaby and pass him around the circus. Because racism exists in America, and it was one of the things that Russia used in order-- then, the Soviet Union-- used in order to fuel its whataboutist narratives.

And the same continues today. Also our endemic racism here in the United States is clearly a very divisive issue. Even at our conventions a couple of weeks ago we saw Republicans saying that racism does not exist. I think many of our people of color here would beg to differ, and this is exactly the sort of hot button issue or societal fissures that Russia loves to amplify and exacerbate. And it's an easy one. They don't really need to create very much content. All they need to do is out what is obvious to either side, and target those narratives.

Which, again, the social media infrastructure makes it very easy to do that. There's plenty of pro-Black Lives Matter, anti-Black Lives Matter pages and groups that they can target to. And as we know, in 2016, the Blactivist Facebook page was more popular than the official Black Lives Matter Facebook page.

And one of the interesting things that they did was, again, not all disinformation. It was positive narratives built up over time, so they built trust in those communities. Sharing, for instance, historical pictures and stories about contributions of black Americans to the country, et cetera, et cetera. And then, gradually over time, making bigger and bigger asks. Change your profile picture, sign a petition, show up to a protest. And that's basically how they gain the trust of these communities.

But around these hot button issues, it's very, very easy to do that. And again, the infrastructure of social media really supports it.

I don't think QAnon is Russian. I think this is a uniquely American thing, although, of course, we have seen evidence that Russia has supported QAnon narratives. But I think it is an American creation. And I'll let Peter handle the rest of them, unless he doesn't want to.

**PETER**

The question was about targeting, yeah?

**POMERANTSEV:**

**ELIZABETH** Yeah. Which groups are they targeting in the US and the UK?

**WOOD:**

**PETER** There's much less Russian activity that we know about in the UK than in the US. I

**POMERANTSEV:** mean, firstly, the problem is we don't know-- [INAUDIBLE] these digital campaigns, [INAUDIBLE] covert digital campaigns is a very small part of what Russia does. We always focus on it because it's fun and you get these fun Congress inquests.

But it's really not-- it is worth looking much broader at, sort of, financial influence, which in Britain is very strong, oil and gas, which is used as a weapon. So I wouldn't make it much, much bigger than that. [INAUDIBLE] these kind of sneaky covert disinformation campaigns that we saw in the 2016 election, we don't have a huge amount of evidence for them in Britain. But that's partly because we don't-- Facebook can be very, very unhelpful in providing data, and we never really had a Mueller-style investigation. So there hasn't been that government pressure on social media companies to release the data.

I was an advisor on the parliamentary committee on disinformation, and we kept on calling Mr. Zuckerberg up, but in the end he didn't come, and in the end it became quite farcical. There was, like, a little Toblerone with his name on the table. But he never showed. So we never had that investigation.

But there has a lot of activity after terror attacks, for example. We saw some of the accounts that had been active in the US, which would turn out to be Russian, repurposed to focus on Britain, inflaming tensions between Muslims in Britain and non-Muslims. So that's something they play.

And look, any social divide, they'll play in it. Scottish independence, there's some evidence that they try to seed doubts about Russian accounts and Russian pseudo-NGOs, try to seed doubts in the veracity of the Scottish referendum, where Scotland voted to stay in Britain. Then there was a little bit of a campaign saying, ah, the referendum was rigged because the ballots were the wrong size or something. So that there's little bits. But nothing as coherent, as strategic, and as massive as the American campaign.

From what we know from digital sleuthing, the other large kind of efforts were in the

German language in Germany. We know about support for the far right party in Germany. We made a little think tank at the LSC, which is now at Johns Hopkins. We monitored the German elections in 2017. We saw the same sort of activity that we'd seen in America on a much smaller scale supporting the AfD, the far right party. Boosting its candidates, putting out, for example, fake maps of immigrant crime. Look at all this immigrant crime in Germany. That obviously helps the far right's agenda.

But a lot of the stuff they do is for, actually, for policy purposes. So they will cede this kind of account, which are popular with the, for example, far right communities. And then start bombarding them with information, disinformation, and biased information, definitely information-- basically content that's very, very profitable for Russia's foreign policy aims in Ukraine and in Syria.

So a hell of a lot about Syria. A hell of a lot about, for example, humanitarian groups like the White Helmets who rescue people from Assad, and Russia's bombing of civilians, that these are actually all al-Qaeda crisis actors. So it moves with the foreign policy agenda and they'll find any audience that works.

So yeah. There was another question about defensive or offensive. So, look, I'm not an expert on Russian military thinking. But in Poland they'll tell you Russia is a partition opponent three times, each time in self-defense. You know Rome conquered half the world. It's always, always in self-defense. All empires always talk about self-defense. If you look at the First World War, the rhetoric of the Russian Empire at that period was all about self-defense there, where we simply have to have half the world to defend ourselves. And it's still framed that way.

So look, I don't want to start psychoanalyzing, but I will. You know, interviews with mass murderers, they think somebody is out to get them. This is-- when very belligerent, aggressive, massive powers start saying they are under attack from Estonia, and therefore they have to invade Ukraine, we are dealing with a very deep set of political psychological complexities.

**CAROL**

**SAIVETZ:**

Can I jump in and ask a follow-on question? Peter, particularly, you kept talking about how the propaganda dovetails with the Russian foreign policy agenda. So around the 2016 election year, the big question has been, well, was it just to sow

discord in the United States or was it indeed to make sure that Donald Trump got elected? When we look at Britain, I mean, my understanding is that the Russians helped to fund the Brexit campaign because it would weaken the EU.

Do you see it as that specific, or is it more generally just to sort of sow discord and thereby weaken the west?

**PETER**

Look, we have no hard evidence of Russia funding the Brexit campaign. Certainly **POMERANTSEV:** not the official campaign. There are rumors-- unsubstantiated, and at the moment purely speculative and quite defamatory, that they funded some of the people on the unofficial Leave campaign, who are much further on the right. But really, we have no hard evidence on this. There have been non-stop investigations inside Britain.

I'm not saying it didn't happen. There were definitely meetings between these people. They're definitely in a relationship there. I'm not saying the smoke is nothing, but while we don't have hard facts, I would be cautious about slipping into that kind of pattern of conspiracist thinking.

Look, we don't really know what's in their heads. You know, it's all speculation. There is a Russian idea, an old idea that in order to-- you keep your enemy busy in their backyard. You keep them rowing amongst each other. So sowing discord is a good one. It's an old one. We saw that during the Cold War, in a way. A lot of these ideas are not new. They're just turbo-charged today.

But is there any contradiction between plunging America into paralysis and discord and electing Donald Trump? Are these themes which are in any way contradictory?

**NINA**

**JANKOWICZ:**

If I could just add to that really quickly, I do think there is a domestic benefit for discord in the west as well, that benefits Putin. And that is, when he has protesters on the street who are demanding more democratic representative government, he can point to what's going on here in the United States, or protests in other countries in the west, and say, is that really what you want? Don't you prefer order to freedom? And that's a narrative that really rings true with a lot of Russians, I think.

And certainly when we saw the protests erupting after the murder of George Floyd over the summer, the Russian state media picked up on that immediately. We've

seen Margarita Simonyan several times, most recently in response to RT's involvement in Belarus, say that the US has no standing to criticize Russia's media freedom anymore, and that's going to be haunting us for, I think, decades now, and fueling those whataboutist narratives in the domestic sphere.

**ELIZABETH  
WOOD:**

These are great. I have one or two more questions and then we have to wrap up. We've got so many excellent questions.

I'm going to ask a sort of hard one. A couple of people-- one person asked, is this all our-- our seeing Russia as worse than all the other interveners, is that still kind of a Cold War mentality? And a question about US waging offensive political war against the Soviet Union, starting with Eisenhower throughout the Cold War. Where is that now, and what should the US be doing? That question has come in.

My apologies to all the other questions. We're not going to be able to get to all of them, but we'll keep trying. Do either one of you take those two questions, or do we tend to see Russia as a villain because of the Cold War mentality? We still make James Bond movies and it's about Russia. And to what extent is it also that they are doing a tit for tat? This is a whataboutism question, but also an interesting one.

**NINA  
JANKOWICZ:**

So on the question of, is Russia really worse than the others, I'm going to speak just from the researcher point of view without the foreign policy angle at all. Of course, those tropes really make me angry as well. But when you look at the difference in the campaigns, what Russia is doing is more sophisticated than what China is doing.

China is still mostly in the overt realm. The times that they've tried to manipulate or create these inauthentic campaigns using trolls and bots, it's been pretty, I would say, bumbling. And certainly they don't have these targeted campaigns for each country, and even within each country, the same way that Russia does.

And I would say from what I've seen of Iran and Venezuela, it's very similar. They're more in kind of the old school propaganda side of things that is promoting their ideology, promoting a positive image of their countries, promoting the narratives that they want to be heard, and it's less about this kind of subversive sort of thing.

I always answer the tit for tat question, the pot calling the kettle black question, harkening back to my days at NDI, which Putin loves to call a color revolution

organization. Again, disinformation. We were not involved in color revolutions. What we did was train activists on how to be responsive to their constituents, how election monitors should do monitoring.

Now, of course, there were activities during the Cold War that are more similar to what we're talking about now. But what the US government is involved in today in terms of democracy support is very firmly grounded in openness and transparency. And we are not masquerading around, pretending to be Russians. I don't think there is any comparison between what the governments are doing. And frankly, if a United Russia operative wanted to come to one of our trainings, we would have welcomed them with open arms.

So it's a very different approach to those problems, I think, and I strongly reject the comparison.

**ELIZABETH  
WOOD:**

Let me try one last question. I think this is about as much as we can hit. Somebody asked about the Ukraine situation, which is about to come back full force into the US political setting. How do you assess the situation in Ukraine in relation to its involvement in disinformation? Ah, [INAUDIBLE]. Recently USA put under sanction the Ukrainian member of parliament Derkach, because of the Biden-Poroshenko tapes.

What do you want to-- do you want to weigh in on that issue of Ukraine-Russian tensions and Ukraine-US?

**NINA  
JANKOWICZ:**

So I would say that this is a case of very high level information laundering, and it has been from the very beginning. I was on a train in Ukraine covering the Ukrainian election in 2019 when I first saw folks like Donald Trump Junior start tweeting about the former ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, and it was clear then that they were getting their information from very, very untrustworthy, self-serving sources in Ukraine.

Not only is it possible that they have links to Russian intelligence, but again, these aren't trustworthy people. They are trying to get in with the powers that be in the Trump administration for personal gain, and basically using their lack of knowledge about the situation in Ukraine in order to do that.

And I despair every day when I think of Ukraine being used as a political football. The country deserves so much better. And this most recent report that was released by the Senate Homeland Security Committee, frankly-- OK, I really hesitate to say this in a public forum, but I'm going to because I think it's important. It's disinformation itself. It leaves out large portions of the facts. It manipulates the order of events. And, in fact, in many cases, it's factually incorrect.

One of the things that leaves out is that Andrii Telizhenko, who was a Ukrainian diplomat and has now been one of these sources of information for this investigation, met with the Obama administration. Yes, he did. Because he was the Ukrainian diplomat at the time. He later moved on to consulting. But again, it's a willful manipulation of the facts. And it's basically just ignorance disguised as due diligence. And I'm very, very-- I'm saddened that it's coming out of the Senate and that the Senate has demeaned itself in that way.

**ELIZABETH WOOD:** Yeah. Peter, would you like to make some last comments? Thank you, Nina. You're muted. Yeah.

**PETER POMERANTSEV:** I think Nina-- A, I'm in London, and I don't dare to comment on American domestic politics, which Nina knows so much better than I do. I wanted to end on a positive note.

So we have talked tangentially a little bit about the chaos of our information space. And this is a strategic problem that Russia and other forces focus on and exploit. I don't know. I really hope that as we move forward over the next few years, we can define these things. We can define what is a valid case of foreign involvement in your country, because we want open borders. We want NDIs to go to Russia and we want Russian academics to come here. And we want open exchange.

We really need to define what we think is normal and abnormal, what we find acceptable and unacceptable. As Nina said, it's very hard to say that Russian covert disinformation campaigns are unacceptable when they are pretty much the same kind of campaigns that are waged domestically by all sorts of actors-- political, extremist, et cetera.

We really need to define the rules of a democratic information space. Democracies have to do that together. The great danger is that the EU will come up with one

bunch of rules, including regulation of tech companies, and America will come up with another set of rules. We have to do them as democracies. And it goes everything from algorithmic transparency through to what is a normal campaign online through to setting indicators of a healthy social discourse. We've got to unite as democracies around this. And we have to do that in a robust contrast to the authoritarian information model.

This crisis has led us to think about these things. How do we regulate against Russian campaigns? And it's leading to a lot of good conversations at elite levels among policy wonks, some policymakers, and so on. It's a real moment where democracies can club together and define what a healthy information environment is. And maybe Russia is like that heroine in Goethe's *Faust*, which trying to do the worst ends up trying to do the good because it's forcing us to focus very hard on these issues.

**ELIZABETH WOOD:** Nina, last word? Thank you, Peter.

**NINA JANKOWICZ:** I love that, Peter. I don't want to say anything else, because it was very positive, and makes me want to go out and fight. Yeah. I'm really delighted to have been here. Thank you so much for hosting.

**ELIZABETH WOOD:** So on behalf of Carol Saivetz and myself, I want to thank you both, Peter and Nina, for these excellent, excellent talks and interaction with the audience. Thanks to the audience for the questions.

If you're interested in future events, I say to the audience, you can google the Center for International Studies at MIT. Special thanks again to our sponsors, the Center for International Studies, the Security Studies program, and MIT Russia. And above all, thanks to Peter and Nina for just really leading us in the most interesting conversation.

[MUSIC PLAYING]