

The Breach 208: The Weaponization of 'Fake News'

Lindsay: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. I am your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. If you're enjoying the show, please take a moment to rate and review this show on Apple Podcasts. It really helps inform new people about these critical issues. Consider it an act of resistance. My guest today is award-winning journalist Brooke Binkowski, managing editor of the storied critical thinking promotion and urban legend debunking site, Snopes.com.

Brooke's here to talk to us today about fake news in the era of Trump. Both actual fake news like you might get from your unfriendly local Russian bot and false allegations of fake news such as you'll find at a Trump rally. Brooke, welcome to the program.

Brooke B.: Thank you. It's nice to be here.

Lindsay: Fake news has become Donald Trump's catch phrase. But he didn't coin that term, did he?

Brooke B.: No, no. Not at all. It's been floating around for some time, although it's been weaponized in the past several months.

Lindsay: It's weird because just before the election, fake news was a mainstream reality-based community buzz word. We were complaining things like Pizzagate. Then somehow, we've made this huge leap to it being Donald Trump's calling card.

Brooke B.: Yeah.

Lindsay: How did that happen?

Brooke B.: It just came with the territory. When you're extremely thin-skinned and you don't really dabble in the business of truth, you end up calling everything fake news. I think that this is the way to fling poo and fling mud at people, cloud the issues, muddy the waters and just confuse everything so that nobody really knows what's going on.

Lindsay: Can you give us a 30,000-foot overview of the fake news landscape?

Brooke B.: Yeah. The best way to look at it is that this is propaganda. This is exactly how propaganda gains a foothold and how it works and its pattern. If you study the patterns of how propaganda is used and weaponized, it starts out with flooding techniques so that people have so much going on that they're confused all the time. They're emotionally overwrought. They don't know what's real or what's not. Finally, they're just reacting to whatever they hear. To me, it just sounds like it should all be called propaganda at this point or disinformation. Take your pick.

Lindsay: It's such a complicated ecosystem though because you got things like obvious fakeries. You got the conspiratorial blogosphere, Alex Jones and info-wars and that kind of stuff. You got the Russian bots. How does this all fit together into one incoherent role?

Brooke B.: I don't think it does. I think incoherence is one of the end goals here. They talk about chaos agents. When you read intel stuff, there's always something talking about chaos agents to throw these wrenches of uncertainty into any one narrative. The incoherence is part of this message.

Lindsay: Can you talk a little bit more about what role, if any, Russia might be having in the rise of fake news?

Brooke B.: Yeah. Russia has been extremely good since at least the 1960s at weaponizing disinformation and misinformation. They employ it with a lot of precision and a lot of expertise behind it. With the advent of modern technology and big data, it's become that much easier to weaponize disinformation. When I say disinfo, I mean something truthful with a lie mixed in that makes the lie that much more powerful. That is a key force within propaganda. Russia's been doing this, like I said, for some time. It's been pointing these disinformation cannons all over the place, including at the United States for many years but it's never really been that effective until now.

I think that the difference is, the key difference is that the American Press has been basically cut off at their knees. There's the newsrooms that I used to work in that had 50 people, now have five people. There's only so much you can do. When you create this informational vacuum, misinformation always comes in to fill the void or disinformation or outright propaganda. They're doing what they always do and it's caught on this time around. It's being aided and abetted by a lot of unscrupulous people who stand to personally benefit within the United States.

As somebody who's now been on the receiving end of a lot of this stuff, I can tell you that it is extremely overwhelming and uncomfortable. Also, it can't last. It's doomed to fail. It's the sort of thing that always rocks the boat in a short-term and creates enormous problems that then the more sober people afterwards have to clean up for years afterwards.

Lindsay: Why do you think it's doomed to fail? I mean, it seems like it could be chipping our society into a closed authoritarian type structure where disinformation is simply the norm.

Brooke B.: It does seem that way. That's actually I think part of the propaganda process. Although I have to confess that at the moment, seeing a way out is really hard. But if you look at authoritarian regimes, they never really last. They're usually inherently, well, not usually. They're always inherently unstable because they're authoritarian regimes. So they can't usually last. They don't have staying power. I think that the world is now progressing beyond time in which authoritarian regimes can actually really work long-term.

I mean, you can't really stop the free flow of information. You can't stop people from knowing, at least not in the United States, from knowing what's going on in the world around them for very long. I mean, the truth always comes out. This sounds contradictory because you have authoritarian regimes like North Korea, but I have to point out that North Korea manages by virtue of being a relatively very small country

with a small population. They have effectively cut off information coming into the country as well as information going out of the country. So that's why it's sustained itself for as long as it has. Even that is an inherently unstable regime.

Lindsay: It's kind of the tribute that vice pays to virtue of fake news because they're conceding in a way that we can't stop the flow of information so the best they can do is to pollute the streams so that nothing is worth anything informationally.

Brooke B.: Absolutely, absolutely. That says a lot to me about the power of media that's strong and vibrant and the power of journalism that has all of what it needs in order to practice journalism. It's an extremely powerful force for democracy and for personal freedom. That's another reason I'm predicting that it can't last.

Lindsay: It's heartening that the people who are most optimistic about North Korea say that really the biggest force to destabilize the regime is things coming in on sim cards, even Disney movies and South Korean soap operas.

Brooke B.: Wow. I have not heard that but I'm not surprised at all. It's almost sad, in a way that Disney movies and things like that are what could inherently destabilize an authoritarian regime. But there you go.

Lindsay: Just models of the market. John Oliver had a great bit on this in Last Week Tonight, which we can link to in the show notes, where he talks about how North Koreans are fascinated by things like crime dramas where people are read their rights. It's like, "What are rights and where might it be the norm and the law that we get them?"

Brooke B.: My goodness. Yeah, that's really ... I will say this though, I kind of caution against believing too much about North Korea as well besides what they put out there because I don't know how much of what comes out of North Korea is disinformation as well. The intelligence you see around North Korea and the stories you see about North Korea is ... I just want to caution people to take that with as much of a grain of salt because they could also be very carefully pruning their image in the world and geopolitically.

Lindsay: For sure. Then they've got dissident testimonies where people have not only an ax to grind but they're often several years behind the times. It's just a perfect storm of confusion and disinformation.

Brooke B.: Exactly. It's very difficult to maneuver. Again, this is why I think that a free press should be nurtured and given the resources that it needs to practice and I mean that throughout the entire world, not just in the United States.

Lindsay: There's been a proliferation of fact checkers of various kinds since the election but Snopes goes way back. One thing that I think is really interesting is your emphasis on techniques for analyzing folklore as a lens in which to view fake news and disinformation. Can you talk about how that informs your analysis?

Brooke B.: Absolutely. On the most basic level, it is a tool for analyzing folklore and how it spreads and how humans have always told themselves and each other stories in order to make

sense of the world around us. I mean, even journalism as much as there is this championing of facts and here's how it went. there's the drive for a narrative. There's a drive for a story, like what happened and why. How do we learn? What do we learn from this? I think that applying that kind of folkloresque lens to the fake news that comes out, to look for the final message that is being communicated either discreetly in stories or in the aggregate is an important thing to watch. That's really helped me see the higher patterns that have emerged with this fire hose of fake news.

Lindsay: It's interesting how fake news has come to serve many of the functions of so-called urban legends in terms of giving people an avenue to broadcast their prejudices while seeming fact-based. So a person who wouldn't tell a racist joke or a classist joke on their Facebook wall might share a piece of fake news about a woman shoving a chicken into her vagina. It makes the same claim as commentary, but can at least be couched in some semblance of veracity.

Brooke B.: Yeah. That's what makes it exactly that powerful because then people can use it to justify their own, otherwise baseless biases and racism and classism. They can say, "Oh well. I always knew those people were doing that." I saw that kind of fake news pick up last year around April or May. It started to get really strong back then. What they do is they recycle, the people writing this, for whether it's out of ignorance or whether it's deliberate and part of an overarching effort, the effects are still the same. What it's doing is allowing people to say what was unsayable before. I do think that there has been a coordinated effort to exploit these particular cracks in American society.

Lindsay: How have fake news companies weaponized our inherent confirmation bias?

Brooke B.: Well, what they do is they take these old stories, these old urban legends and stories that have circulated for years that are sort of "funny criminal stories" or "stories about stupid people" or things that are completely made up and were always completely made up. They were the kinds of thing that school kids passed around. I actually know this because some of these stories, I passed around myself as a kid like, "Oh, did you hear this story about the woman with the chicken in her vagina?" Kind of thing.

Lindsay: Or the man who goes to a prostitute but it's his own daughter?

Brooke B.: Oh god, I'm so sick of that one. That keeps recurring like malaria. It's incredible. Yeah. They'll show that same story over and over which would be just an amusing story except that there's this subtle emphasis of the person doing it being lower class or being not White. That one has been hit really hard actually, this sort of racist tropes within fake news is going to be the subject of a lot of academic papers in the future.

That I think is how it has especially been weaponized because you see enough of these stories and they're being targeted to you and served up to you on social media. After a while, even if you're not thinking about it at all consciously, if you have any subconscious prejudices, they're just going to get reaffirmed and strengthened by this constant attack of, "Look at those people. Look what those people think, look what those people are saying. Aren't they stupid? Aren't they dumb?" That kind of thing.

Lindsay: It's fracturing a winning democratic coalition to be fomenting these kinds of suspicions of our neighbors and criminals and non-White people and all that stuff.

Brooke B.: Yeah, absolutely. The Democrats, they're not really doing much to help themselves either. I've seen their latest message which is just get on Trump for not building the border wall when he said he was going to. I admit, I've been doing immigration news for more than ten years at this point so I am biased towards this type of news. But they are fracturing themselves by not staying on their own message.

Are they the party of human rights or are they the party that protects undocumented people? Are they the party that doesn't want a wall? Are they the party that does? There's this divergence in messaging on the Democrat side of things that is not helping the overall sense of unity of the nation. I'm not trying to pick on them in particular. I think Republicans are doing a great job disintegrating the political structure as well but I really have to say that falling for this kind of thing is not going to help.

Lindsay: Steve Bannon has recently left his perch as a strategic advisor at the White House to return to Breitbart News to wage some kind of as yet undefined war against the enemies of his brand of populism. How do you think that's going to affect the fake news landscape?

Brooke B.: I think it's just going to add to an already weaponized and overwhelming fake news landscape. How much more overwhelm can you add, right? I think that he's going to do what he always does and take out his personal rage on people using Breitbart as platform. I mean, that's what he's been doing for years. With the help of this whole network of trolls and bots and "pepes" and "kekistanis" and whatever they all call themselves, it's going to spread and make people uncomfortable. But I don't think that he has as much sway as he's getting credit for. I don't think he has as much influence even as he thinks he does. But I suppose time will tell.

Lindsay: I was perusing the top 50 page on Snopes. I noticed how many of the top 50, like a couple of them are actually basically political dirty tricks, things like the fake Antifa Manual. It's interesting how those things go together and go together in the Trump campaign that you guys got like Steve Bannon of the fake news and Roger Stone of the dirty trick. They just seem to have this natural affinity for one another.

Brooke B.: Yeah. Isn't that weird? It just goes to show you, well, I could pick any number of salty-sounding proverbs for this. But I'll just go with birds of a feather.

Lindsay: It goes to how interconnected these things are about sowing confusion and disinformation in one sphere versus another whether it's in the guise of news or whether it's in the guise of physical documents out there in the world confusing voters and stuff like that.

Brooke B.: Yeah. It also goes to show you, this is something that I think is probably the most offensive thing at all. It's the fact that there are no new ideas. Just recycling the same old sad crap like they're courting White supremacists. Oh, there's a new one. We've never had anybody court White supremacists before or they're talking about Jewish

people being bad. Oh, great nobody in history has ever talked about Jewish people like that.

Lindsay: Globalists. We didn't see that one coming.

Brooke B.: Yes, oh my god, globalists, yeah. Well, I mean, it's just all ridiculous. It's ridiculous and yet it's dangerous for all of that because people are taking these dog whistles and these key words literally. It translates into not just death threats but actual assaults. Not very often compared to how much is going out there and how many calls to arms there are but enough that it's definitely a worrying trend.

Lindsay: I find it fascinating that there are now fake news purveyors who are playing both sides of the fence so they'll do something like, "Kellyanne Conway Fired, yay for the Democrats and boo for the Republicans." Then they're reaping the traffic from both sides of the spectrum.

Brooke B.: Yeah. It's pretty venal. It's depressing. But yeah, it's interesting how they're doing that. There's also a site, Media Mass that anytime a celebrity dies, they pick up some of the traffic by doing a fake debunker. So they're like, "Oh, well, Jerry Lewis, you may be hearing he's dead but actually it's a fraud. Here's why." They pick up quite a lot of traffic that way. It's just SEO and being contrarian. But yeah, I mean, God bless capitalism.

Lindsay: I had no idea there was money in celebrity death denialism.

Brooke B.: It's 2017.

Lindsay: Yeah. Every kind of disinformation has been monetized by now.

Brooke B.: Yeah. I mean, this is what we get when ... Well put, this is what we get when disinformation is monetized to the level it is now. It's been democratized. It's incredible. It used to be disinformation could only come from a certain small number of key players, right. Now, the internet has made it possible for everybody to be a "dis-info purveyor." So great, I guess.

Lindsay: I have a question about a particular genre of fake news that I've been noticing more and more. It's some crazy story like the KKK mass grave story. Then it shows up in a publication, an online publication with a name that sounds really normal like the Jackson Telegraph. If you look at the other stories on the page, they'll be really boring stuff about traffic and local news that you could totally believe would look like a credible local newspaper. Is there a name for that genre? It seems to be tripping people up a lot lately.

Brooke B.: We just call it fake news. I mean, it doesn't seem to necessarily ... Well, no. Let me back track. I've been watching that happen. It seem to have started with things like Now 8 News and Associated Media News. It seems to have started and maybe continues as just a way to make quick money using controversial story. So far, I haven't been able to see whether or not there is an actual propaganda push behind it that goes beyond, "I'm going to put this story out here to upset everybody and get the advertising money." But

I haven't seen enough stories coming out of those to be able to figure out whether or not there is an undercurrent of disinformation propaganda as opposed to just pure financial gain. But yeah, just fake news.

Lindsay: What are social media companies doing to combat the flow of fake news?

Brooke B.: Well, not enough I'd say. But I understand that it's a big undertaking. We've been working with Facebook for some time now to isolate the fake news purveyors and figure out what stories are real false and track the patterns. Facebook has taken my advice and the advice of other people, which is flood it out with real news. If you see a fake news story going around, make sure that you offer the actual version of that story without the disinformation aspects added in. Make sure that that's more readily available than micro-targeted dis-info that we're seeing. So there's that.

I really think that when it comes to targeted harassment campaigns and targeted smear campaigns, that Facebook and Twitter need to do much more than they are doing because it's being picked up and magnified by this loosely connected network of bots and trolls, people who are just doing it for fun, people who are doing it for endgame, people who are doing it because they personally hate whoever is being smeared and targeted. Facebook and Twitter aren't doing anything to stop that.

I understand their concerns about free speech but when that free speech is being used to effectively silence or no platform or sensor somebody else, they need to step in. I don't think they had come to that conclusion yet.

Lindsay: Do you think Twitter should cancel Donald Trump's account?

Brooke B.: [laughs] I have no opinion. There was a point that I used to be agnostic politically and very very ... Well, I still am a very defend free speech at all costs type. But I have to say, 2017 has changed or at least, temporarily altered both of these things considerably. I don't know. I'm still not there yet so I can't give you an honest answer, yes or no. I'm sorry.

Lindsay: It's such a tough question where you've got Facebook that's this one of the largest publishers and distributors of information in the world now dabbling in content creation and co-creation. The head of it is thinking about running for president in 2020.

Brooke B.: Oh my god.

Lindsay: Yet the same company is being tasked with controlling what information we see. How does it strike a good balance?

Brooke B.: I don't know. I wish I had the answer to that. I think that in the future, we're probably going to see a lot more separation between social media and news media outlets. I think we're going to see a lot of soul searching when people have calmed down a little bit about the role of business and the role of politics and when the two should meet. I think we're going to see a lot of soul searching about how to separate out fake news on social media from actual news. I don't think it's going to really necessarily change how

journalism works. I think what it's going to do is change how journalists work within social media.

Lindsay: It's a difficult question because people do have a right to be wrong on the internet. I worry that trying to round up fake news will end up discriminating against people who are merely going against consensual reality as is their right as opposed to-

Brooke B.: Yeah. That's a big fear of mine too. That's why I don't believe in censorship. That's why I don't believe ... That's why I keep on going, "Oh god, I don't know." I don't know if Twitter should cancel anybody's account. But they've got to do something, right? It's a difficult, very tricky one, and a very frustrating question that I ask myself a lot. But I really do believe that the model of flooding out fake news and flooding out misinformation with actual verified journalism is going to go a long way.

Lindsay: A hobby horse of mine is making the decisions, editorial decisions within Facebook, more transparent so that Facebook takes the same kind of accountability that a community newspaper editor might take, that you can write to the editor. The editor will feel some response to write back to you and explain their decision-making.

Brooke B.: Yeah. I mean, I think that that's a good idea. But what about when you're getting caught in the middle of these bot-directed flurries? What about when somebody is telling their friends and their colleagues to start a letter-writing campaign to complain? What about when your reporter is getting doxed and getting death threats? I don't know that model's-

Lindsay: Seb Gorka did that just last week.

Brooke B.: Yeah, I know. Actually what's I was thinking of, it's that kind of thing. When you're politician, however loosely I'm using the term here, if you're working within politics, I'll put it that way, and you're doxing people and putting their home address out there, that's not the kind of thing that anybody should have to be responding to because that's not the kind of thing people should be doing.

Lindsay: No, we've got, as we saw originally, a bunch of armed Nazis running around.

Brooke B.: Yeah, and a bunch of malicious and a bunch of sovereign citizens, a bunch of people who are very invested in there not being a government anymore. I mean, a lot of this has been abetted by disinformation techniques and tactics but a lot of this is just homegrown. We need to address it in this country.

Lindsay: Do you think that the attacks on the news media are taking away a common narrative that we once had or have we always contesting the most basic factual things and we just didn't notice?

Brooke B.: Oh no, this is new. This is totally new. I mean, it's not new. It's a recycled regurgitated effort but within our memories, this is relatively new. I'm not going to deny that there has been misinformation and disinformation in media. I mean, there have been tons of dis-info campaigns, some of them spearheaded by the United States and directed at the

United States, some spearheaded by the US directed to the other countries and some by other countries directed at the United States. This has all been going on for some time.

Lindsay: What can people do to stop the spread of fake news in their own information consumption? To avoid being taken in or avoid sharing things that are questionable?

Brooke B.: Donate to news organizations that you like, make sure you support them. Turn off your ad blockers. Make sure that newsroom, since we're now in this situation in which newsrooms have to rely on advertising money to survive as opposed to being seen as a public service which was how historically, they were seen until I believe the 90s, donate. Just share stories, make sure you support reporters and journalists. We're doing a difficult job that is often dangerous. We're doing it because we believe in the truth. Please don't forget that. Don't just trust as blindly. But make sure that if you distrust us, it's for a good reason.

Lindsay: Do you feel like your job has become more politicized since Trump came to power? A lot of the times, you're just pointing out basic factual stuff that happened or didn't happen. Do you think it's taken on a more political valance simply to assert these things?

Brooke B.: Oh god, yeah. I went from being a regular journalist, fact-checker, to an opposition journalist overnight and not on purpose. That's how I started to be categorized. I'm just pro-truth. I'm not pro-anything except let's live in a fact-based world and plan our lives accordingly, not in the world we want it to be not in the world that other people say it is. But in the world that relies on basic facts as a bed rock. That has somehow become incredibly politicized.

I'm coming out of a smear campaign that has lasted about a week right now. So I can tell you that we have a long way to go. I would rather be smeared for basic facts rather than what somebody is saying that I said. But that's where we are. This is what is happening to journalists all over the place now. It's coordinated and it's exhausting. It's very frustrating.

Lindsay: What's it like to be in the cross-hairs of that kind of campaign? How did yours get started?

Brooke B.: I'm not really sure how everybody got on my Twitter account but I think that just people were trawling for those to fight with. I guess I'm one of them because I do tend to mock disinformation pretty regularly. What it's like is, well, it's a bunch of people telling you that you suck on the internet. Luckily, I'm used to this. I mean, I've been getting it for years because I've been on the internet for a long time as a journalist.

Even though it's become more politicized, it's still always been to some degree, a lot of people delighting in telling you that you suck. I think the best way I can describe it is draining. I have been stalked in the past. I've had people come after me in the past. I've had some pretty scary experiences with people physically coming after me. So I can tell you by comparison, this is pretty minor. But it's still a big energy suck.

Lindsay: Was the physical stuff here in the US?

Brooke B.: Yeah, yeah. I've had people try to trap me in parking garages. I've had people try to take a swing at me. I've had people come up to me and threaten me in my face, telling me I should be killed, that kind of thing. I'm 5'3" and 125 pounds. I mean, I'm not exactly a hulking towering broad, either. But there you have it, it's been like this for some time.

Lindsay: Brooke, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Brooke B.: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Lindsay: Now, it's time for Recommended Reading, a handpicked selection to deepen your understanding of our current political moment. Today's reading comes from Gabriel Sherman in Vanity Fair. It's about Steve Bannon's much anticipated return to Breitbart after his stint in the Trump White House. Check our website for the link. A senior Breitbart staffer told Sherman that if Trump doesn't govern the way Bannon wants, Breitbart News will help Paul Ryan rally the republican troops for impeachment. That's it for recommended reading.

The Breach is produced by Nora Hurley for Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is Dark Alliance performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments and questions to @Beyerstein on Twitter. See you next week.