

KennanX Interview: Jill Dougherty speaks with Nina Jankowicz
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Jill: Nina Jankowicz, it's a pleasure to talk to you. We've talked a lot quite a bit recently because of your new book and you have a lot of people who are tuning in, listening to what you're saying on Zoom calls, etc. So, I'm happy to get into this discussion and, welcome.

Nina: It's a pleasure to be with you, Jill. You are really a beacon of inspiration for me, so just a pleasure and an honor to be with you today.

Jill: So your book is called *How Not to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict* and you know, as I read it, it seems to me that you're saying the West is losing the information war because it doesn't understand what Russia actually is doing. You're saying that basically this influence campaign has been going on in Eastern Europe for decades and you give examples: Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic, etc. So let me start with this overall question, do you believe that this is actually an information war?

Nina: I do, I at least think that Russia sees it that way, and I think it's important to recognize that Russia sees it that way, if we're going to create the sort of response, the holistic whole-of-government, whole-of-society response that we need, to really counter what Russia and other bad actors are doing. And I think that's another important point too. You know, the book is just about Russia, but the conclusions are important, not only for foreign disinformation, but for domestic disinformation as well. We need to understand that the informational battleground or our information ecosystem is increasingly a place of competition. It's not just, you know, democratic lilies and fields with bees buzzing around some idyllic pasture somewhere. It has now become a battleground both domestically and internationally and we need to shore up our defenses.

Jill: There are a lot of countries that are spreading disinformation, but this is KennanX so we talk about Russia, and when you look at Russia, and we're talking about a war, wars usually have a very structured approach, you know, you have the military, you have the Foreign Ministry doing something, there's a strategy, a "strategic endeavor," as you put it. With Russia specifically, is this information war carried out on all of those bases, would you say? Military, Foreign Ministry, media, etc.

Nina: Yes. I think it's even beyond that. So often in the West we think of disinformation as cut-and-dried fake news, but it not only involves the stuff that is part of an online influence campaign, those trolls and bots and, you know, fake articles, and things like that. It also involves offline influence, whether that is through cultural organizations, it involves monetary influence in the funding of protests and political parties. It is truly an all-encompassing endeavor for Russia. And also, you know it involves the creation of fake experts and organizations to lend credence to all of those narratives that it is seeding elsewhere. So I think we really need to understand that it involves not only all parts of the Russian government but Russian society as well, that

patriotic hackers are duped into or forced into sometimes participating in these campaigns as well as the media, as well as think tanks and other organizations.

Jill: Okay, so if you look at some propaganda today from Russia, it does appear to me, at least with my experience in Russia, kind of Soviet. There are a lot of things that they were doing back in the old Soviet days that are similar. You'd, of course, have to talk about digital, but are we talking about the same kind of approach?

Nina: I think it differs in one key area aside from the tools and tactics, which we can get to in a little bit. The most important thing is that I don't see necessarily that the goal for Russia is to promote a Russian worldview the same way it did during the Soviet era. The goal is really unscrupulous and, in my opinion, looking at different sides of the political spectrum and trying to manipulate grievances and fissures in order to turn ourselves against one another, to create more discord in Western society, to undermine our democracy, rather than putting forth that Soviet worldview the way that we saw with Soviet propaganda. The tools and tactics are of course different as well. I shudder to think about what the Soviet Union might have achieved had the internet been around in those days because it allows anybody with a social media account and a credit card or, sometimes, even just knowledge of how to target social media messages online, make things go viral, to target those messages at exactly the people who are going to be most vulnerable to them. And that's what allows Russian disinformation of today's day and age to travel faster and farther and be more effective in the long run.

Jill: You point it out, one thing that I jotted down, "the most convincing narratives are those grounded in truth that exploit divisions in society." I actually underlined "grounded in truth" because I think that's important.

Nina: Oh, absolutely. It's a huge misconception here in the United States and in some other Western countries as well. And I think that's because, you know, the term "fake news" has become so popularized, and yet it means very little, but people think that it's grounded in cut-and-dried fakes, but especially with what we've been seeing over the past couple of months during the coronavirus crisis, I think it's become increasingly clear that emotional narratives in disinformation are the ones that are most successful. They will seize on something that is pre-existing in society and amplify that fissure, manipulate that fissure, in order to drive more animosity, whether that's in the online environment or in policymaking, etc. And again, I think this is a key misconception not only in our policymaking. It's not just about debunking something. You can't just debunk people's feelings, right? These are deep-seated beliefs that they've had for many, many years that they're being fed more information and more manipulative narratives about.

Jill: That's interesting, because there have been reports about, let's say, the way that Russian propagandists had kind of enticed people to become part of this ecosystem, which began a number of years ago. They might have a site, or some type of interest group, which has nothing to do with politics. It has nothing to do with really anything negative. It's positive, it might be

interest in sports or something like that, and then slowly, but surely, it morphs into something more insidious.

Nina: Yeah, that is a great point and something that Russia is very practiced at doing across Central and Eastern Europe, but we especially saw it in 2016 in the lead-up to the presidential election. All of the Internet Research Agency Facebook properties, these pages that were called things like "Blacktivists" or "Being patriotic," they were all very positive at the beginning. My favorite example, and I know you've heard me say this a million times, but I love this one, is a meme that the Internet Research Agency posted on its "Being patriotic" Facebook page. It was a golden retriever in a red and white star bandana, between his paws, he held an American flag, and the text on the picture said "Like if you think it's going to be a great week." That is very typical of the content they were posting early on and that's not disinformation, except for the fact that it's coming from an inauthentic account, right? Something posing to be an American, you know, grassroots organization. There's nothing wrong with a patriotic dog. I would probably like that picture, but over time they used these positive techniques, sharing things like history about African-Americans and their contributions to society, positive memes about American patriotism, you know, depending on the audience, building that community, building trust, and then gradually having bigger and bigger asks, so that might have been sharing a post on Facebook, changing your profile picture in support of a cause, signing a petition, and then eventually even asking people to show up in real life. There were protests that occurred that were part of an Internet Research Agency's disinformation campaign. They organize from the ground up and some other ones they supported, ones that were already going on. So again, it's not just about those cut-and-dried fakes. It's organized by vulnerability, by interest, by emotion that is exploited over time.

Jill: Well, that makes it very difficult for people, doesn't it, to even recognize what's happening?

Nina: Yes, that is one of the key problems, and I think one of the key genius points of these disinformation campaigns, not just Russian ones. It's very difficult to crack down on authentic local voices. We don't want people's free speech to be quashed. And at the same time, that openness is being exploited to share this information. So my tips to people are often just you know, we're have to be really, really careful, just like we don't trust emails that we get from Nigerian princes who claim they're going to make us rich, we need to not trust everything that we see on the internet. We need to have a bit of a filter to understand that there are plenty of people, both inside and outside of our borders, who want to manipulate us and we need to have our guard up. Just because we're in a Facebook group that is meant for local moms, for instance, doesn't mean there aren't people who are inauthentically posing as a local mom and sharing divisive narratives in there.

Jill: Nina Jankowitz, let's go into your book because you give these examples, again: Estonia, Georgia Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic. So give me an example of something you say was actually going on in Eastern Europe for maybe even decades that ended up being used in the United States later.

Nina: Sure. So we saw, I think, something very pertinent for the climate in the United States today in Estonia in 2007, when Russia used the removal of a Soviet war statue from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery on its outskirts as a flashpoint to create protest and division and eventually a riot. They had been pushing basically pro-Soviet nostalgic historical narratives for a long time that exploited grievances that ethnic Russians in Estonia had about how they were treated by the post-Soviet Estonian government. And again, the removal of the statue was a flashpoint for these protests that had been basically urged by the Russian-language media. And not only that, the Russian intelligence and diplomatic services in Estonia as well. So it's a bit more of a cut and dried case than the sort of things that we are seeing today here in the United States, but certainly we've seen RT and Sputnik really, you know, manipulating the narratives around the George Floyd protests here in the United States and the removal of Confederate monuments. And I think it's a really interesting kind of example that holds a lot of lessons for the United States. Because the result wasn't to say, "Oh, you know, this was a Russian narrative and anybody who supported it is a traitor," no, rather than, you know, playing what I call whack-a-troll in real life. The Estonian government decided to invest in education, invest in Russian-language media, invest in integration activities to heal that fissure in society, that ethnic fissure, that governance fissure, and make themselves more resilient in the long run to those sorts of narratives.

Jill: In your title, you use the expression, "fake news." What does "fake news" even mean right now?

Nina: That's a great question. I actually had a little bit of a tiff with my publisher about that. They wanted "fake news" in there as a signpost for curious readers because that's how most people refer to disinformation and information operations. "Information operations," you know, has a very wonky ring to it. It's not very appealing. What does that mean? I think, you know, "fake news," most people kind of at least understand the realm of what you're talking about, but it's not a term that I really embraced because I think it's been politicized in many ways. We've seen President Trump use it to disparage any reporting that he finds inconvenient to him and his plans and then we've seen that behavior replicated in places like Poland with Yaroslav Kachinsky who leads the Law and Justice party; in the Philippines, Duterte has done this; Bolsonaro in Brazil has done this; Viktor Orbán in Hungary also mimics this behavior and that's really dangerous because it's, you know, getting at freedom of the press and freedom of expression, writ large. So I prefer to use much more specific terms, again, "information operations" to describe the realm of information-related campaigns that bad actors use in order to score policy points or rearrange the global negotiating table, "disinformation" to describe misleading or false information that is shared with malign intent, which is different than "misinformation," right? which is not shared with that malign intent. And then there's a number of other terms that we also use in there. But I think those are the most important ones and it's important that we be consistent and specific in what we're talking about because these terms are being used as political footballs these days.

Jill: Speaking of political footballs, I've talked with people about, let's say, the 2016 election and, you often hear: "Yeah, but no votes were actually changed" and even in the Muller report,

there's no definitive "Due to Russian interference, 2% of the vote was changed" or anything like that. So if you could explain to me and also, to people who are listening and want to understand this. What is the objective if they are *not* reaching into a ballot box and changing votes? What is the objective here?

Nina: The objective is to undermine the participation in and functioning of democracy, basically by flooding the zone with information, by creating dismay and discontent in the population. People are going to participate less whether that's an action such as going to the ballot box to vote, or even just engaging in the consumption, the responsible consumption of information. Some people are just turning off, and when people aren't learning about what's going on in our society, they're not going to write to their representatives to demand more responsive governance, right? And ultimately that allows Russia to point to everything that's going on in the United States or the United Kingdom or any country in the West, this civil unrest, this lack of functioning governance in the European Union, things like this, and say to Russian citizens, "Is that the sort of government you want? Is that what you're protesting for?" It really fuels that what-about-ist narrative and basically buoys Putin's position, not only domestically but internationally. One of the greatest tragedies of his life was the collapse of the Soviet Union and he seeks to return Russia to that great-power status and I would say that, over the past four years, there's been very little time that we have gone a week without mentioning Russia. Certainly that's a return to some sort of superpower status that Russia hasn't achieved in a very long time. So I think those are the goals and to me it's not important that we can't pinpoint that votes were changed. If you look at the sheer amount of engagement in the disinformation generated just by the Internet Research Agency, it's really staggering. It's billions of engagements and interactions and not only that, we can pinpoint it more specifically with the hacking-leak operation that affected the Democratic National Committee in 2016. The fact that the Russian Security Services hacked into the DNC, released documents through WikiLeaks - that changed how the campaigns behaved, how they talked about themselves and each other, how the media covered the election, and that ultimately, we must understand, had an effect on how voters thought and behaved in the election.

Jill: Nina, you and I go to a lot of conferences on this type of stuff and invariably, there's a question, what can we do? Should we just hack back? Should we fight back? Should we disinform them too? And it's a big debate because there are some people who say "Yeah, we ought to do that, and more!" And then there are other people who think there's not a lot that you can do. You have to educate the public. You know all of these debates, so where do you come down on all of this?

Nina: I think, in any response, we need to keep democratic norms and human rights at our core. I really worry that, by launching counter-disinformation attacks, we are just stooping to the level of the Russians themselves, and I would not want to see us do that. We need to stand by transparency and openness and freedom of speech and all of this work. So I'm not necessarily of the opinion that we should launch counter-offensives. I think reinvesting in our democratic values at home is one of the best advertisements that we can make in terms of a counter-disinformation narrative.

Unfortunately the polarization and, you know, just lack of any movement in Washington, our paralysis right now, our lack of responsiveness to citizens and these movements is basically doing a lot of Moscow's work for it. In terms of more concrete ways that we can push back, I'm a huge proponent of media literacy, civics, just basic information and digital literacy that we've not really invested fulsomely in here in the United States. If you compare us to a country like Finland or Sweden or Estonia or even Ukraine which has made media literacy part of its secondary school curriculum these days, we've not done anything like that, and that's partially due to our federal education system. But you know, it always comes back to education in these discussions and I like to remind everyone that we also need to reach the voting age population. We can do that through grants to libraries which are still fairly trusted institutions here in the United States. We can involve the social media companies which have nearly ubiquitous access to many Americans' lives, in order to build these awareness campaigns and we can enlist trusted third parties to deliver these messages because, let's face it, the US government is not the most trusted entity right now. And if someone from some fed came on my screen telling me to think before I share, I would be quite dubious myself as well. So we need to think creatively about this and then, finally, something that I keep coming back to, especially as we head toward the 2020 election, is we need to make an investment in journalism as a public good. The fact that the United States only spends three dollars per person per year on our Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and we're seeing increasing restrictions on our federally-funded broadcasters abroad like RFE/RL and Voice of America. We need to understand that that investment in information benefits everyone, and it certainly benefits Americans in news deserts where sometimes NPR and PBS are the only local stations they have covering issues in their communities. I think that's key. I think, when there is a vacuum of local news, some spurious information is going to fill that vacuum and that's what we're seeing a lot of especially during the coronavirus crisis. So I think, again, investing in those core principles of our democracy, giving citizens the tools they need to navigate this information environment and be more informed and active, that is the best antidote to me.

Jill: One last question, which is kind of a personal one, you wrote this book because you had something that you wanted to say, and there are a lot of personal memories in this, incidents that happened in your own life, that encouraged you to write this. Is there any one thing that you can remember that really encapsulated what you're talking about?

Nina: So, I spent a year in Ukraine as a Communications advisor to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, and this was under a Fulbright Grant which, in and of itself, is kind of a counter-disinformation activity, creating mutual understanding between the United States and countries all over the world. And, in 2016, sitting in the Foreign Ministry, watching the election results come in, seeing the aftermath, seeing the Russian interference revelations gain steam in the US media, and being in Kyiv where, every day, my colleagues at the Foreign Ministry were just under a deluge of Russian disinformation, and then seeing the United States react as if it was something new. Ukraine wasn't even the first country that this happened to - we've talked about Estonia already. It was just stark to me. I felt like we were reinventing the wheel with our responses and not learning the lessons that our allies in Central and Eastern Europe had really learned the hard way, and I didn't want us to do that. And that's where the impetus and the

inspiration for the book came from. And I was just so inspired by the commitment of my colleagues in Ukraine and you know, my colleagues around Central and Eastern Europe to defeating disinformation, that I felt I had to tell their stories.

Jill: Well, thank you very much, Nina Jankowicz, *How Not to Lose the Information War*. Good luck with your book. Thank you again.

Nina: Thank you so much, Jill.