

Alyssa Milano: Sorry Not Sorry
Episode 68: How to Lose the Information War with Nina Jankowicz
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Alyssa Milano [00:00:08] Hi, I'm Alyssa Milano. And this is Sorry Not Sorry.

Alyssa Milano [00:00:08] Hi, I'm Alyssa Milano. And this is sorry, not sorry.

Alyssa Milano [00:00:34] In 2016, disinformation from foreign sources like Russia had a devastating effect on our domestic politics, and we're still paying the price. And they're not stopping in 2020. Their tactics are expanding. It is so important to understand what's happening and what we can do about it. So I've invited Nina Jankowicz on the show. Nina is the disinformation fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She is also the author of the new book How to Lose the Information War. Russia Fake News and the Future of Conflict.

Documentary Clip [00:01:14] U.S. officials say that they have no reason to believe the Russian cyber attacks will stop. You are fake news charges. Twelve Russian military officers by name for conspiring to interfere with the 2016 presidential race, like our intelligence community just came out and said in the last few days that the Kremlin, meaning Putin and the Russian government, are directing the attacks. The hacking on American accounts to influence our election, fact checking, especially in these highly emotional times, doesn't always work as well as we want it to, in fact. There's a lot of research that shows that it does the opposite. We are in an information war and we are losing that war in Russia. If you're listening.

Nina Jankowicz [00:02:04] I'm Nina Jankowicz, and I believe our government should protect our democracy from foreign interference. Sorry, not sorry.

Alyssa Milano [00:02:11] So Nina we talk a lot about Russia, right? When it comes to voting and election hacking, because it's a concrete thing that we can point to and say, hey, you know, this happened. But I think we get a lot fuzzier when it comes to our understanding, really, of the information warfare. So can you just walk us through exactly how this works?

Nina Jankowicz [00:02:34] Sure. And I think, unfortunately, a lot of people will use these terms interchangeably. And that's really something I try to tackle in my book. Information warfare is broader than just fake news. It includes funding of illicit financial operations of political parties that the Kremlin or other bad actors might think serve their interests. And lately, more and more, because the social media companies have put in a few restrictions against bad actors, the Kremlin and other nation states, and even domestic dissent formers, which I think is a really important point to make. We have people in our own country who are doing this. They're using things like groups and encrypted messengers to spread disinformation. So it's a lot broader than just a fake news article, which is how we originally conceived of this crisis or Russian bots being controlled from St. Petersburg. Right. There are real people behind these messages. And not only that, they are targeting real feelings of American people again. We often talk about fake news. But it's really so much more than that. It's the fissures in our society that are being exploited by actors like Russia, by folks in the GOP who are trying to drive our society apart and keep people from participating in the democratic process in a wholesome, discursive way.

Alyssa Milano [00:03:54] It's unbelievable to me, especially when I tweet something and it depends on, I think, what words I use that trigger some sort of response. And it can be anyone from a Make America great follower to a Bernie bro follower. And the discourse that happens with in a thread of a tweet is really unbelievable. And it gets everyone so angry and irate. And I very rarely go into my replies now because I think whoever is the bad actor in this situation who is aware of my activism, they definitely know that my replies are a place that they can sow division.

Nina Jancowicz [00:04:37] Absolutely. And I think that's how, you know, it's an indicator for me, too, although I have very far fewer followers than you do, that you've hit the nail on the head and you're really getting at something that bothers people a lot. Right. Because if you're getting people angry on the left and the right, that's a ripe situation for people to exploit. And again, that might be folks in our own country and it might be people sitting in St. Petersburg or somewhere in China as well. And we're increasingly seeing China using the Russian playbook, especially during the Coronavirus crisis. It's happening more and more. So I think the important thing for people to understand is that this isn't something new. This is something that has been going on for decades. And especially the online component has allowed bad actors to target us with more precision through things like ads and microtargeting that the social media platforms allow. In fact, it's part of their business model. It's in their best interests to allow that to happen and not to stop it. So those messages are getting driven to us with extraordinary precision so that we are pitting ourselves against each other. And again, without participation, the democratic process doesn't work. And there are times I don't know about you that I just need to walk away from the Internet, work all of ours. And sometimes that can be good. But when it ultimately affects people's decisions about participating in civic life or going out to vote, that's when we have a real threat to our democracy.

Alyssa Milano [00:05:58] And I can totally see that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union would have had a real vested interest in manipulating our elections. Did it happen then or how did it happen then?

Alyssa Milano [00:06:10] So it looked a little bit different then. And I think the big differences in the word we use and that gets back to your first question. A lot of the information operations during the Soviet period were more in the realm of cut and dry propaganda. They were looking to promote Soviet interests and the Soviet worldview. So the most famous Soviet, quote unquote, active measure, as we call it, that was done by the intelligence services of the Soviet Union was Operation Infection, which was the campaign to get people to believe that the United States created the AIDS virus in a laboratory. And that never really caught on the way that we're seeing a lot of these other disinformation narratives today catch on because they didn't have a way to distribute that information as quickly and as targeted a manner as we do today. So that's the main difference that these tools allow those messages to. Read the other difference, though, is that the disinformation that we're seeing today doesn't necessarily reflect to the Russian worldview. The point is to cause chaos and undermine Western democratic systems and put us against each other, as I said before.

Documentary Clip [00:07:18] According to U.S. intelligence agencies, Russian President Vladimir Putin directed the campaign, which had three elements online propaganda, stealing documents and leaking them while targeting U.S. state election systems. The Russian disinformation campaign sprawled over Facebook, Twitter and Google through fake Web accounts and pages shared with more than 100 million people. Russian

operatives led posts in the millions of Americans newsfeeds, devising fictitious content targeting specific groups of voters and millions of Americans share.

Nina Jancowicz [00:07:48] So that's why in 2016, we saw Russian trolls supporting not only Donald Trump, but supporting Bernie Sanders, supporting Jill Stein. And we're seeing that again as the 2020 election unfolds. There is intelligence that was released earlier in the year that showed that once again, Russia was supporting Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in order to split apart the American electorate and pit us against each other so that we couldn't coalesce around a single unifying candidate.

Alyssa Milano [00:08:17] It's interesting, though, because the playbook is kind of the same, right? I mean, we've been hearing disinformation about China starting the Coronavirus in a lab. So, I mean, that part hasn't really changed as far as the messaging goes and the narrative goes. But I think what is so different now is that these campaigns are so much more effective. I see a lot of people talking about Russian bots or when they see someone particularly divisive in their rhetoric. Are they bots or is it someone is actually behind the computer screen sending out these messages?

Nina Jancowicz [00:08:53] So there's a couple of different possibilities. And I will assure your listeners that the presence of bots, we've not eradicated them yet. But I think that they're a lot less common than they used to be about four years ago because they're easier to detect. Bots are actually computer code running accounts on the Internet. Right. And so they behave in a certain way. They'll often tweet out the same messages around the same times. They'll have a high follow count and very few accounts following them. It's a little bit easier for the social platforms and for researchers to detect them, although not with 100 percent accuracy. However, the trolls, that's when there is an actual human behind them. That's a lot harder to detect because they can mimic human behavior a lot more convincingly and write like a human. So we've got two things there. But again, lately, I think we're seeing a lot less of both of those tactics because the social media companies are a little bit better at what I call playing whack a troll and just deleting those accounts and taking them off. They look for the behavior that is a signature of all of them and they take them away. But instead, we've seen a lot of these tactics go underground again to those groups, private and secret groups to messengers. And interestingly, one thing that I've witnessed on my own in Ukraine, where I do a lot of my research, last year during their presidential election, the one that got Volodomir Zelensky of impeachment fame elected, the Russians were trying to recruit Ukrainians to rent out their Facebook accounts because there were ad restrictions on the Ukrainian elections. So while purchase ads from Russia and they were looking for ways to pay Ukrainians around one hundred dollars a month, which in Ukrainian terms, that's about a third of a monthly income in order to use their accounts and place ads as authentic real Ukrainians and get around those ad restrictions. The Ukrainian security services found them out. But there's evidence that that's still going on in Ukraine and there has been evidence of regular advertisers using those same tactics here in the United States. And I think there's not enough attention paid to those sorts of nefarious covert things. And we need to be educating the American people about that.

Alyssa Milano [00:11:07] It's interesting because I noticed that the way in which I'm targeted on my Twitter account, it seems to come in waves. There will be, I don't know, like a week where it seems as though the trolls are at a minimum and then all of a sudden it'll get ramped up. And I'm wondering if there's some sort of systematic way that they go about, like moving on to the next person and then going back to someone else that's a target.

Nina Jancowicz [00:11:36] I think it's a lot less systematic than we might like to imagine. I think a lot of people like to think of Putin sitting in the Kremlin directing his troll army. But actually and I use this metaphor a lot. It's a lot more like spaghetti at the wall because it's so cheap for the Russians and any other bad actor, again, to take those narratives, those spaghetti narratives and just fling them at the wall and test them and see what's working that particular week. So it might be. That that week, Alyssa, you've hit on something that's a really sticky issue and that is causing a lot of consternation on the Internet. And so they are targeting you and your followers in order to create that discord that week. But it's so cheap for them to test out those messages. That's why in 2016, if you look through the ads and some of the content that was released from the Senate investigation into all of this, you'll see some of the stuff has really poor engagement. And a lot of journalists were pointing to that and saying, oh, actually, this wasn't effective. It's actually that those weren't the narratives that ended up being effective. And some of those posts had a ton of engagement. The ones that got traction, those were the narratives that they punched over and over again in order to drive that division leading up to the election in 2016.

Alyssa Milano [00:12:47] Let's just talk a little bit about the bad actors that we know are out there that exist. Right. So it's Russia. China?

Nina Jancowicz [00:12:54] Yeah, China. Certainly Iran and Venezuela have been shown to engage in this type of behavior. Saudi Arabia also has done this. A lot of countries, I think, especially our adversaries, have now begun investing in this sort of thing.

Alyssa Milano [00:13:10] How about political parties like the GOP? Are they actively using this method?

Nina Jancowicz [00:13:14] So one of the things that I think is most important for us to know as we're countering disinformation is we cannot successfully do this if we are engaging in the same behavior ourselves. And I would say absolutely 100 percent.

Documentary Clip [00:13:28] There is a new and sophisticated suite of tools that are being deployed right now in the United States by political operatives and various political coalitions to actively advance disinformation that helps their candidate in the case of this story. And what I was focusing on, the coalition to reelect the president, that includes the campaign partisan media, pro Trump political operatives, all of them are working in concert to advance false narratives, fan conspiracy, fear theories, and basically to confuse and disorient the electorate.

Nina Jancowicz [00:14:08] And now that he is able to win reelection, President Trump and the Trump administration and some portion of the GOP is actively engaging in these tactics. We saw that during the impeachment investigation and the impeachment inquiry, where certain GOP representatives were amplifying conspiracy theories and absolutely 100 percent Russian disinformation about Ukraine and Joe Biden to the detriment of Ukraine and the detriment of the American image abroad. And, of course, to the detriment of truth and democracy. That's certainly true. But we're also seeing some actors on the far left use the same tactics and be unwilling to recognize that our democracy doesn't work when we don't have a shared understanding of truth. And that means sometimes yelling on the Internet isn't the best thing to do. We're just opening ourselves up to more manipulation, especially by those foreign actors.

Alyssa Milano [00:14:59] And then how about special interest groups? Can we look at someone say, like the NRA? Do you think that they're involved in these tactics?

Nina Jancowicz [00:15:07] Certainly, I don't have specific evidence that the NRA itself has been engaging in it. But the one important thing to note is that especially when it comes to micro targeted advertising, these are tools that are available to everyone. And you don't need to be sitting in a troll factory in St. Petersburg to use them. Anybody can pretty much invest in these ads. And what's happened is because this issue has become so politicized and directly related to Trump's legitimacy, we have not passed any sort of commonsense regulation, even the simplest stuff. So the example I'll give is the Honest Ads Act, which Amy Klobuchar and Mark Warner put forward. I think now almost three years ago after the 2016 election, all the Honest Ads Act does is impose the same regulations that we already have on political ads for TV, print and radio on online ads. Right now, it's the Wild West out there. We don't have any idea how we're being micro targeted and by whom. And there are certainly a ton of super PACs out there who are trying to hide who's actually behind that advertising. And we've seen that with a lot of groups on the right. And we've not passed any of those regulations yet, let alone the stuff that's a little bit more difficult, like defining what disinformation is and how we handle how disinformation travels around the Internet and still respect the First Amendment.

Alyssa Milano [00:16:27] I mean, we don't even know what to do with deep fakes as the technology gets better and better. We're in a different time where they have, you know, more tools at their disposal to spread disinformation.

Nina Jancowicz [00:16:39] Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, deep fakes are certainly extremely scary. But still, bad actors don't even need to invest in those because it's the cheap fakes that are still getting the most traction, again, for very, very little money, very little investment, human and time. They're able to get just like dank memes to spread across the Internet because of the tools available to them and because of the polarization of our society. So I like to say, really the most important thing for us to invest in is people's resiliency to this stuff. We need to be investing more in civics. We need to be investing more in media and digital literacy because there are so many people who are voting age. Frankly, we often talk about this stuff in the context of education, but it's not the kids who need the stuff very much. It's adults. We need to teach people how to protect themselves online from phishing attacks, from informational attacks. A lot of this stuff, once you have your kind of Spidey sense calibrated, it's a lot easier to spot, although it's a generational response and it needs to be coupled with things like regulation and strong sanctions against actors like Russia that are interfering in our democratic process. The countries that have been successful in fighting disinformation have always invested in their citizens themselves. And it's something that we've really just left on the table so far.

Alyssa Milano [00:18:00] Well, and now we have a president that talks a lot about fake news when complaining about real news. So that kind of muddies the water even more so. How do you think there are ways that people can identify false messaging?

Nina Jancowicz [00:18:12] Well, I think the most important thing, and this is something I've really been advocating as Coronavirus disinformation has been overtaking us, is informational distancing. Kind of like social distancing. You need to understand that disinformation runs on emotional manipulation. So when you feel yourself getting really, really upset or although it's rare these days, if you feel yourself really happy or elated, any strong emotion, that's a good indicator that something about that piece of information is manipulating. You know, a piece of well reported news should generate anything that's really making you burn up. Indignation, of course, related to our democratic process. That's allowed. But if it seems like really out there, that's a good indication that you need to

walk away and then consider the source, you know, who is this coming from? Is it a reputable media outlet? Of course, people need some help recalibrating what is reputable because the indicators of reputation have been taken away by social media companies. All of that curation that mainstream media used to do is gone. But looking at an outlet and saying, OK, does this have an editorial masthead? Does it actually have contact information that I can reach out to a human being and talk to them about what I think their reporting looks like? Does this author or journalist have other similar articles that they've published before, or do they seem to be just a made up person? What about the image on the article? A lot of the time audiences that I talked to aren't aware that you can do a reverse image search right in Google Chrome or in other browsers. If you. Right. Click on an image, you can see the first instance of where that image was used on the Internet. And a lot of times in disinformation, we're seeing images recycled. So in reporting on Ukraine, for example, that the Russians use, they'll use images from Bosnia in the nineteen nineties that show death and destruction and murder. So that's a good indication of that stuff as well. But mostly just looking to see if other outlets are reporting the same thing. If something seems way out there and nobody else is reporting it, that's a good indication that that story does not have legs. So it takes a little bit of time. And in the Internet age, that's really difficult sometimes to kind of have your little alarm bell go off in your head and say to yourself, OK, I need to take a deep breath and consider the source and think about where this is coming from and what that source might have in it to manipulate me in particular. And the more people learn about how information gets to them on the Internet, I think the better off we'll be. But right now, our literacy in that area is so low, I think most people don't even realize that their Facebook feed is curated, that they're not getting 100 percent of the posts that they're subscribed to.

Alyssa Milano [00:20:52] And what responsibility do social media companies have in this fight?

Nina Jancowicz [00:20:56] Well, I think they've really abdicated their responsibility and lost a lot of important time trying to argue with us in 2016 and 2017 that the mistakes that were made and they were made by government, they were made by the media, but they were also made by social media. They said they weren't their fault. You know, I think Mark Zuckerberg had that famous quote where he said he thought it was pretty crazy that Facebook could have had any impact on the election. So they wasted a lot of time hemming and hawing. But they've also been on a PR circuit for a long time trying to basically do the bare minimum that is acceptable to addressing these problems and constantly throwing up their hands and saying, you know, these are hard problems. We're never going to be able to solve them fully. Now, basically, they say that they're unsolvable problems. They've moved away from hard problems. And like, we're gonna make mistakes, too. We're never gonna fix this because the world is just too effed up at this point, which I think is really concerning.

Documentary Clip [00:21:50] Social media platforms in general do a terrible job of policing misinformation because their algorithms are actually designed to promote disinformation and fake news. Right. So the top 10 fake news around Koban 19 that we just saw. It was really easy. In just a couple words, a brief headline to see what that information is. And it's also negative information. And that type of simplistic hyperbole, dramatic, sensational information is really what social media and its algorithms promote.

Nina Jancowicz [00:22:30] They've not really invested not only in people in order to curate that content and see if there's hate speech, if there's disinformation. People with local knowledge, they've hired a bunch of contractors. Thirty thousand contractors. That's

nice. Most of them are underpaid and they have PTSD because they look at horrible stuff all day. Right. So they've hired those people. But in terms of local knowledge, they've really, really not done a good job. I mean, looking at communities in Eastern Europe that I cover. They don't have people that speak their language that are looking at the political posts related to the future of their countries. They're using Google Translate to do that here in the United States. And the African-American community is not well served by companies like Facebook at all because they'll speak in and write in a different way. And often those posts are undecipherable to the A.I. that is coming through to decide what is a post to be amplified and what is a post to be suppressed and their algorithm. It's just really, really disturbing. And I think it's clear that self-regulation for the social media companies has not worked. But again, because of the politicization of this issue, Congress has not moved to regulate these companies. Instead, we've just tried to shame them and that's moved them into some action. But we need clear definitions that have human rights and freedom of speech at their core in order to move forward to an Internet that's more equitable and one that can actually support our democracy instead of tearing it down.

Alyssa Milano [00:23:55] How much is the intelligence community involved in all of this?

Nina Jancowicz [00:23:59] I think they're increasingly involved. That is one area where I actually will command the social media companies. I think there are increasing links between folks in the CIA, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security working with the social media companies in order to detect foreign interference online. Of course, it would look a lot different and be at a much higher level if we had recognition from the top of the U.S. government that this was a threat. Instead, we have Donald Trump standing next to Putin joking about fake news. Our response could look so different if on January 20th, 2017, President Trump had said, I'm going to create a disinformation czar at the level of the National Security Council, it's going to be an interagency working group that's going to pull in the smartest minds working on this all around our government. And we're going to help them connect with folks in Silicon Valley and civil society leaders who are doing things like civic education, media literacy, et cetera. Instead, what we have is essentially the monkeys see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. And Trump doesn't want to hear about anything to do with disinformation again, because it challenges the legitimacy of his election. And because of that, we have some really smart people all over the U.S. government who are doing their best, but their best is not supported by the behemoth that is the U.S. government. And so their work is kind of undermined from the very top. I can't imagine what it must be like to be some of those folks in the intelligence community at the State Department who are working on these issues every day. And then to see the U.S. president calling out Voice of America, for instance, which is one of our soft power outlets that broadcasts to places like China and Russia and is one of the only independent journalistic sources in those places. And the White House is calling them out in their morning briefing, saying that they're propagandizing for China, which, of course, is not true. It's a real blow to the image of the United States, and it's leaving the world, frankly, without a leader on these issues. The United States, because these companies are headquartered here, should be the one setting the standard, the Democratic standard for how you counter disinformation. And instead, we've totally abdicated our leadership.

Alyssa Milano [00:26:10] I think we all remember Donald Trump taking the side of Putin over our intelligence community when he was even just questioned about Russian election interference.

Documentary Clip [00:26:19] Do you hold Russia at all accountable for anything in particular? Yes, I do. I hold both countries responsible. I think that the United States has

been foolish. I think we've all been foolish and I think we're all to blame. President Putin denied having anything to do with the election here, Ference in 2016. Every U.S. intelligence agency has concluded that Russia did. Who do you believe? My people came to me. Dan Coats come to me and some others. They said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin. He just said it's not Russia. I will say this. I don't see any reason why it would be.

Alyssa Milano [00:26:57] I'm wondering - what do you think Trump's relationship with Russia really is?

Nina Jancowicz [00:27:01] It's a hard one for me to answer, you know, I think we've seen indications that he absolutely has business interests in Russia, even during the 2016 campaign. People in the Trump organization were still trying to pursue a Trump Tower in Moscow. He certainly had business interests across the former Soviet Union for a long time. But I think based on my analysis of how Trump has behaved in his foreign relations, especially with difficult leaders, I think Trump wants to be seen as someone who can build those relationships, congenial relationships with the most difficult people in the world. And so I think he viewed Putin as a kind of a conquest. And especially since taking the side of Putin with regard to foreign interference meant that he was going to have what he views as a good relationship with him. I think that's a win for him. He doesn't view it as we should keep Russia as an adversary. He wants to be friends with Putin and solve the problems that Russia has inserted itself into and in many cases created like Syria, for instance, like the war in Ukraine. He would love to be able to solve and end the war in Ukraine and bring peace to Ukraine. And he doesn't care at what cost that is because Trump wants to be viewed as a problem solver. But Putin is an expert, being a former KGB agent, at playing people like Trump. And we saw there was one instance early on where they had kind of a brush by at an international conference and Trump tweeted something about establishing cyber security cooperation unit with the Russians. And everyone who's a Russia watcher is just scratching their head and laughing because, of course, we know, you know, Russia is one of the foremost cyber powers in the world and we're going to establish cyber security cooperation with them. Of course, that got walked back the next day. But, yeah, I don't think Trump really has the depth of knowledge to understand why it is problematic to try to court a nation like Russia that disregards flagrantly international law and commitments and is just violating human rights left and right. I don't think Trump has any conception of that.

Alyssa Milano [00:29:02] I also think they just have something on him.

Nina Jancowicz [00:29:05] Oh, yeah, it's possible they have something on probably all of us at this point, especially with all of our private information being broadcast on the Internet and listened to by Alexa. But, yeah, certainly I don't think Trump's been cured.

Alyssa Milano [00:29:16] Yeah, exactly. And despite all of his denials, a number of Russians were arrested and charged with election interference. Can you just run us through that plot when it started before 2016? How long before the election? What it entailed.

Nina Jancowicz [00:29:34] So the Internet research agency was established around 2013 as the war in Ukraine was getting started by Russia, as there were these protests going on in Ukraine that were anti Russia. And originally it was targeted at Ukraine. There were people, many smart young people hired in St. Petersburg, many of whom had a journalistic background, usually with really strong writing and video skills, who were hired to essentially manipulate public opinion in Ukraine. Eventually, the group grew and was

funded by this guy, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who's known as the Kremlin's caterer, because he also has a catering business. He's a rich oligarch, very close to Putin, as all of the oligarchs in Russia are the remaining ones. And so eventually, probably with some indication from Putin who hated Hillary Clinton because he viewed her as having challenged his power when he came back to power in 2012, they got some direction to make some mischief, almost certainly from the Kremlin.

Documentary Clip [00:30:39] Oh, man, this is fucked up. So if this totally legit American accent didn't already tip you off. This video is a fake. It's the handiwork. And I'm using that term loosely here of a shadowy Russian organization with ties to the Kremlin called the Internet Research Agency. The agency does a lot more than video fake Russian accounts posing as Americans have released a barrage of social media posts. The topics of these posts vary, but the goal is always the same to spread fear and drive Americans opinions to the extremes.

Nina Jancowicz [00:31:13] The America unit, the U.S. unit of the IRA, was born and started interfering as early as 2014. So two years before the 2016 election, they even sent a few agents. And this as mentioned in the Mueller report to the United States who conducted reconnaissance. And I don't really think there was much for them to learn. I think they probably just got a nice vacation because these were young people who probably knew a lot about America. Anyway, a lot of Russians consume American TV and pop culture and things like that, but they went to some swing states to talk to people, to gather ostensibly some intelligence about the types of things that they could spread narratives about. And that began as early as 2014 on Facebook and some other platforms, Twitter in particular, and Instagram as it grew in popularity.

Documentary Clip [00:32:01] They posed as American citizens to amplify and spread content that is divisive in our society in order to, in some cases, pump up the Trump campaign. Break down the Clinton campaign or deflect to the vote. Suppress voter turnout, especially among minority groups, in order to create more chaos within our political system.

Nina Jancowicz [00:32:23] What's really interesting is that it wasn't necessarily about cut and dry fakes. It wasn't just making up things that Hillary Clinton did. It wasn't necessarily about pizza gate. It was creating community. So if you look at the pages that the IRA created early on, they weren't spreading false information at all. They were spreading mostly positive stuff. So my favorite example from the Being Patriotic Facebook page, which is one of the more famous ones, it was kind of a nationalistic jingoistic page. They shared a picture of a golden retriever and an American flag bandana holding an American flag. And it said something like like if you think it's going to be a great week, I don't know about you, but I would have definitely liked that picture.

Alyssa Milano [00:33:06] Oh, 100 percent.

Nina Jancowicz [00:33:08] Right. So classic stuff like that on pages related to Black Lives Matter. There was this Blacktivists page, which was also quite famous, had more followers in its height than the official Black Lives Matter page. They would share positive stories about the African-American community. There were similar pages for Latinos, for LGBT folks, and they went from this positive messaging, gradually increasing their asks of the community. So once they created the community, they'd say things like on the Blacktivists page. Here's an example of police violence. If you want to show your support for the victim of this crime, change your profile picture or on the being patriotic page. They'd ask people

to sign a petition and eventually that turned into showing up to protests in real life. There were dueling protests that were quite famous, although they didn't attract very many people. But it just boggles my mind. Hundreds of thousands of people not only liked these pages. Some of those people then showed up to protest and they had unwitting Americans who were supporting that stuff, helping them organize those protests because, of course, they didn't have people here in the United States. And I think that's something that's really overlooked. It's not just about fake news. It's not just about Russian trolls. They got real American citizens on their side. And this continued, you know, it didn't stop after the election, even after the expulsion of Russian diplomats and spies in late 2016, when the intelligence community whose report came out, this continued well into 2017. One of my favorite examples, and unfortunately, this wasn't in the full Mueller report, but it was in one of the criminal complaints that was put out in October of 2013. There was a flash mob outside of the White House on July 4th, 2017. And I remembered seeing an ad for this in my feed because in my spare time, I do musical theater. And this ad was a bunch of people dressed up in colonial attire. Singing songs from *Lame is parodies of Socks from Lame is in front of the White House* that were anti Trump. And so I tracked down one of the guys who is involved in that protest. And I talk about this in the book. He had no idea that the Russians had been supporting their group with advertising. He remembered one of his co organizers saying, hey, these people want to give us eighty dollars in advertising. You think that's okay? And he thought to himself, yeah, as long as it's not like politicians for killing puppies or something. Of course, we want free advertising. And hundreds of people showed up to that protest to sing, play, miss parodies that were countered Donald Trump in front of the White House in 2017. And we've done nothing to stop them. Since then, the same things are continuing to happen today. Just with a few more obstacles on the part of the social media companies, but the Russians have no indication from the White House or anyone else that this behavior is not going to be tolerated. And that scares me.

Alyssa Milano [00:35:56] It's frightening. That's probably why it scares you. It should scare everybody. You mentioned your book, and I want to talk about your book a little bit. It's called *How to Lose the Information War Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*. And the thing that I find so amazing about it is it shows the effects of this conflict around the world. So just talk to us a little bit about the lasting effect of all of this global turmoil.

Nina Jancowicz [00:36:25] I think the most important thing to know is that this has been going on, as we talked about before, for decades, especially in Eastern Europe. These countries are used to dealing with Russian interference. And the examples that I highlight in the book, which might be countries that your listeners are really never thought of before, like Estonia, I think the thing that they highlight is, again, that Russia exploits fissures in our societies to sow doubt and distrust and discontent and divide populations from our governments. And the ultimate goal is to undermine democracy, in particular the American variety. Right. That shining city on a hill. We've always thought of ourselves as an example for other countries to follow, and they want us to drive citizens to disengage. And when we stop debating and protesting and critically engaging with the news and holding our governments accountable like you do when we stop making our voices heard. That's when the Kremlin's achieved its goal. And that's the reverberation that we're seeing around the world. The book is called *How to Lose the Information War*, because very few of the countries that I profile have really hit the nail on the head with how to solve this problem. And in fact, many of the governments are following a similar path that we are right now engaging in the very same tactics to try to keep citizens at home, to try to keep them from critically engaging with the news like Trump does. And that's extremely scary. When we buy into those tactics, we're essentially buying into the slow death of our own democratic

system, which is the most un-American thing I can think of. And that's why we really need to start fighting back, not siding with a government full of human rights criminals with no respect for the rules based international order. It's time for us to engage more. And that's the best antidote for any of this disinformation. As I was finishing the book is when the impeachment process was wrapping up and my publisher asked me to write an epilogue reflecting how disinformation had played a role in impeachment. It was before the final vote, although we all knew at that time how it was going to end unfortunately, and I end the book by saying, you know, impeachments might be once in a lifetime, but elections are regular and we need to make our voices heard. And that's the best antidote to any of this. Campaigning against our democracy.

Alyssa Milano [00:38:41] Are there other nations fighting this effectively that you can point to and say, you know what, they're doing a good job on this.

Nina Jancowicz [00:38:49] So nobody's got it perfect. But I'll pick on Estonia again. You know, a tiny little country, one point two million people. The interesting thing about Estonia, and I think it's one of the reasons that they're so well equipped to deal with this is because they're really technologically savvy. They're the creators of Skype. They're a very online country. They were paying their bills and doing banking online long before we were. And in 2007, just after they had joined NATO and the E.U., the Kremlin got kind of angry that they were so rapidly Westernizing. You know, one of these post-Soviet republics that it had influenced for so long was oriented toward the west. And so the Kremlin launched a cyber attack that took down their banking sector, took down a lot of their media. And it also launched what I'll call like a beta version of disinformation through Russian speaking media. Because Estonia has 30 percent Russian speaking population there. And wasn't investing in those Russian speakers. They essentially were like second class citizens. Many of them didn't even have new Estonian citizenship. A lot of them didn't speak Estonian. They didn't have the same access to jobs and education like Estonians did. And the Kremlin tried to foment a bit of a revolution there, and it worked. There were riots in the center of Tallinn, the capital. And that was a real wakeup call for the Estonian government. So they started to invest more in cybersecurity, of course, but they also started to invest more in their people. And then they really doubled down on that after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 because they thought that could very easily be us. We share a land border with Russia. In fact, if you go to this town, Narva, which is on the east of the country, you can just look across the river into Russia. And they were really worried about that. So they doubled down and they started investing in education, in Russian speaking media and integrating the Russian population. And again, that's that citizens based response that I think is so important. And now you look at all these integration statistics in Estonia and the Russian population is gradually becoming more integrated with an Estonian identity. There is a lot less of that segregation happening. And it's a process and they recognize it. But it's one that they're really prioritizing in this day and age. And I think it's easy for a country of one point two million people to do that. Right. There are more people and many of our big cities, then that. But the tactics are still the same. Russia exploited the fissures there in Estonian society. And because the United States is such a diverse place. We've got many more challenges than a country like Estonia does. I think there's just a lot more to exploit. But we have to start by looking at what is causing people to seek out these bad sources of information in the first place and try to mend those gaps.

Alyssa Milano [00:41:29] And what do you think that is? What do you think that is? That's just a feeling of wanting to belong.

Nina Jancowicz [00:41:35] Yeah, there's a feeling of feeling left behind as well. You know, I think especially with the death of local news. People are searching for a lens on events that makes sense to them. So if somebody in North Dakota or Kansas, all they have is The New York Times or The Washington Post to interpret what's going on in the capital, because most states don't even have an accredited reporter in the capital anymore reporting on what's going on in D.C.. I think they feel really left behind. And there's different things for different communities, right? We're seeing different stuff coming out of white nationalist communities that are coming out of lower income communities that were targeted by, for instance, that Blacktivists page or folks who are fighting for LGBT rights. There's plenty of things that we just need better governance, more responsive governance. We need to get out of this polarization because we're leaving ourselves open to manipulation. I know that's not a satisfying answer, that good governance needs to come along with all these other things, like sanctions on media literacy. But it's something that I think we need to recognize that there are countries with fewer of these fissures, for instance, like Sweden or Finland, that also have a long and complicated history with Russia that are much more resilient in terms of their response, because they just are more cohesive societies. So we need to start thinking about that, too, and start putting citizens first. And along with all the other stuff, it's going to be a process. There's no magic wand. We can't snap our fingers and fix it. But if we have somebody in the White House who actually recognizes that this is a threat and it is inspiring governance, that's going to be more cohesive and pull people together and not drive them apart on a daily basis. That's going to be a big start.

Alyssa Milano [00:43:15] I read the piece of yours in The New York Times where you laid out how Russian state sponsored media is now persuasive in the US. Why is that and how do we fight that? That seems like something that we could actually control. And yet we're not controlling that.

Nina Jancowicz [00:43:33] Yeah. So we've started to kind of push back on things like RT and Sputnik. Unfortunately, I think that's given them more notoriety. You know, we've made them register as foreign agents. I think that has given them kind of the what about us tactic to be like, oh, we're being persecuted in the United States. And that gives us even more cred. So if you're looking for the real story about what's going on there. Go to RTies so that you can get around what the mainstream media are trying to sell you. And I think a better tactic, rather than giving them amplification and oxygen, is just to invest more in our own media. We have some of the best media organizations in the world. Our public media, despite being severely underfunded. Does a really great job. And I would love to see the next president end up that funding for PBS and NPR. Because in many of those places that we just talked about, the heartland of America, NPR and PBS are the only stations that people can actually access their local affiliates there. So we should be investing way more in them to connect with those people. I don't fully buy into the idea that the best antidote to bad information is more information. I think people are overwhelmed, but there are programs that we can build to reach out to these communities where people are feeling left behind. Also, you know, I think libraries, for instance, are looking for a new raison d'être in the 21st century and we can be investing more in them. They're still really highly trusted in this day and age, which is hard to come by in the United States of America. And we can have them be those trusted vectors of information where people we don't necessarily want to change people's outlook. Some people are going to disagree with us politically, and that's fine. This is the United States. That's what we're built on. Right. But I at least want people to have arguments that are based, in fact. Yeah. And be able to find worthwhile information to support those arguments.

Alyssa Milano [00:45:21] Do we actually do the same thing in Russia? Do we engage in similar dis information in Russia?

Nina Jancowicz [00:45:29] That is a great question. And I can tell you absolutely not. We do not. And that's one of the reasons that we are losing this fight, because we have scruples and we have morals. Right. I'm talking about the overt stuff. Every nation has intelligence operations that do lots of things. What the Russians are doing is overt. It's not necessarily always run by their intelligence people. The IRA certainly wasn't. It was not even a government organization. But we are not going to do counterpropaganda counter disinformation in Russia or any other country because it doesn't align with our standards and our values of open, transparent communication. That's not what democracy is built on. So instead, we're investing. And I hope we invest more in the future in things like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe that bring trustworthy, credible information to these environments. We're investing in training civic activists how to campaign and how to do activism in authoritarian countries. And we're training political candidates as well. And from all across any political spectrum. You know, I used to work for an organization that did democracy support in Russia. And if somebody from Putin's party wanted to show up to one of our trainings, more power to them, perhaps that would make them a more responsive official. Of course, they never showed up. But we were always really open about the work that we were doing. It was clear we were funded by parts of the U.S. government and other governments. And we were there to not necessarily to bring down any system in Russia, but we were there to help people connect with their government and connect with constituents and have something that. More resembling a democracy, which is what Russians deserve. You know, I'm not a Russophobe. I love Russia. I studied in Russia. The people in Russia deserve someone much better in the Kremlin than someone like Vladimir Putin. They deserve to have their voices heard, as does everyone across the world. So that's the sort of stuff that America favors. And unfortunately, because Russia doesn't have those scruples, they are willing to undermine us and be much less transparent in their communications with us. And it puts us on the back foot. But if we increase awareness of the threat, if we are messaging with one voice from the U.S. government that this is not going to be tolerated and then there are actually consequences that follow through to that interference. And then we work with our partners in the private sector to actually create some common sense policies against this stuff. We'll, at least be moving more in the right direction. But we've a lot of work to do. I mean, social media has upended the way we communicate and the way we take in information. And that's one of the biggest hurdles. And once we kind of gather our horses, we should be able to move more in a productive direction. But it's going to take time. You know, Estonia, like I mentioned before, 2007 was one, the beginning of their information war started. They're still working on it today.

Alyssa Milano [00:48:12] I mean, it just feels like this issue is so huge and insurmountable. And I want my listeners to leave you with some sense of hope. So I'm wondering if you could just give my listeners where is their hope in this situation?

Nina Jancowicz [00:48:30] I think there's hope in the fact that we as Americans, our country is built on democratic, respectful discourse. And even if the person in the White House doesn't recognize that we do right. And we have the power to change the course of our country. And that's what the Kremlin doesn't want us to do. That's what domestic dissent informers don't want us to do. So we need to rise up and make sure that we take advantage of that gift that's been given to us and not take it for granted. And I find hope in that. I find hope in the fact that the democratic system is still, despite all of the pressures on it right now, still uncovering and exposing all of this stuff and that we have recourse.

And so I will be getting out there and voting in November and doing everything I can to bring truth back to our democracy.

Alyssa Milano [00:49:20] Well, thank you for being a part of the podcast. And thank you for all you do. Your book is called *How to Lose the Information War Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*. And it's really great. So I hope people pick it up. Thank you, Nina.

Documentary Clip [00:49:36] It has been four years since Russia interfered in the U.S. election. Four years. And our information environment is more polluted than ever. Russia still runs disinformation campaigns set in China, Iran, Venezuela. What would they be deterred? We'd done little to stop them. And what little we have accomplished has been undermined by disinformation shared from the highest office in the land. It has been four years since the information war came. We are losing. The presidential election is in four months. We've been hitting the last six with disinformation about Coronavirus, about the George Floyd protests, about mail in ballots. These are not new problems. Some countries have been dealing with them from. Their experience tells us it's up to all of us, not just government, not just them, to solve.

Alyssa Milano [00:50:42] In so many ways, Donald Trump is the worst symptom of our diseased information system. Bad actors play on our biases, feeding us increasingly bad narratives, which we swallow up because they validate our world views. It's how we get a cult of people so far gone that they honestly believe Chrissy Tiegen and I sit around eating babies while Hillary Clinton runs a George Soros funded child sex ring out of a pizza parlor. I'm not kidding. That's QAnon. People believe that shit. That's why it's so important to fact check everything. Don't believe any meme, especially the ones on your side. Memes are making a stupid and all you have to do is check a couple of reliable news sources like PBS, C-SPAN or NPR. Don't take anything on faith, even if you really like what it says or the person who showed it to you. If you see a video of something saying something, check it with another source because those deep fakes are real. And when you see the actual fake news, the stuff that is truly incorrect and flooding your social media. Call it out. Present the evidence that is contrary when you see it. Don't just let it glide by. Our social media companies have the responsibility to shut it down, but they are largely failing in this work. So we need to do this work every time on all sides of an issue, or we'll end up with Donald Trump again and we will no longer be recognizable as America if that happens.

Alyssa Milano [00:52:27] Sorry, not sorry is executive produced by Alyssa Milano. That's me. Our associate producer is Ben Jackson, editing and engineering by Natasha Jacobs and music by Josh Cooke, Alicia Eagle and Milo Bugliari. That's my boy. Please subscribe on Spotify, iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like the show, please rate review and spread the word. Sorry. Not sorry.