How Can We Fix a Broken (and Dangerous) Internet?

📅 Thu, 8/5 4:27PM   🕐 34:15

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, yasmin, platforms, disinformation, misinformation, aspen, government, election, vivian schiller, anon, foreign intelligence services, inclusive growth, pandemic, lead, krebs, digital economy, aspen institute, algorithms, chris, commission

SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Yasmin Green, support message, Vivian Schiller, Chris Krebs

---

S **support message**   00:00

This podcast is supported by the Center for Inclusive Growth, the philanthropic arm of Mastercard. The pandemic has accelerated the transition to a digital economy widening disparities, while also creating new avenues for inclusion, and the Center for Inclusive Growth. We're working to build a digital economy for all tapping into mastercards core assets to advance actionable insights, innovative programs, and partnerships for social impact. Learn more and subscribe at mastercardcenter.org.

T **Tricia Johnson**   00:36

This is Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. In the past, Americans banded together in moments of great peril, like during World War Two and momentarily after 9/11. That hasn't happened during the pandemic. Instead, we've seen extreme polarization skepticism toward expertise and mistrust of institutions. Vivian Schiller leads Aspen Digital. She says myths and disinformation online are partly to blame.

V **Vivian Schiller**   01:04

Much of this stems from malign actors, some whom are driven by profit, and others like foreign foreign intelligence services, who strategically weaponize our existing divisions against us, often using social media and other means.

T Tricia Johnson 01:20

Today, she talks with cyber experts about why public health, elections and democracy are at risk. Aspen Ideas to Go brings to compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Aspen Ideas Festival. Our information ecosystems are broken. We're increasingly living in different realities of news, politics and information. And those we would normally rely on to help unify people like political leaders, educators, news media, civic organizations and faith groups are battling increasing perceptions of mistrust, says Vivian Schiller.

V Vivian Schiller 01:55

They are fighting brushfires with water bottles, and losing credibility just when we need them the most. It will take the whole of society and time to climb our way out.

T Tricia Johnson 02:08

Cyber issues are destabilizing our democracy. So Schiller's Aspen Digital program at the Aspen Institute created the Commission on Information Disorder to find solutions. She speaks with two of the Commission's members, Chris Krebs, and Yasmin Green, about election related disinformation, the role of social media companies and why people join and leave conspiracy movements like you QAnon. Krebs led the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at the Department of Homeland Security. Green is the director of research and development for Jigsaw, a unit within Google focused on using technology to solve security challenges. Here's Vivian Schiller.

V Vivian Schiller 02:46

Last summer, our bipartisan Aspen Cybersecurity Group identified myths and disinformation and its many forms as a national security threat. Their work and interest led us to create early this year, something we are calling the Commission on Information Disorder. The idea was to bring together a cross section of experts across ideologies, backgrounds, experiences for dialogue and to build action oriented recommendations for civic organizations, government and the private sector, which by the way, includes big tech. It's a tall order, but intractable issues are what we do at the Aspen Institute. The Commission has three co chairs, Rashad Robinson, who is the head of Color of Change,

which is one of the most influential anti racism organizations in this country today. Katie Couric was of course a longtime journalist and an Aspen trustee. And here with us today is Chris Krebs, who was appointed by the Trump administration as the first ever head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security agency. Chris has a long history in both the public and private sector. He served under George W. Bush. He then was at Microsoft and is now a partner in the Krebs Stamos group and we proudly have him as a fellow with Aspen Digital. We have 15 other commissioners including researchers, civic leaders, business leaders, national security experts, current and former elected officials of both parties, journalists, philanthropists, and more. Among those is Yasmin Green, who is also here with us today. Yasmin is the director of research and development for Jigsaw, which builds technology to make the world safer from global security challenges. She has personally pioneered new approaches to can't counter violent extremism, and state sponsored disinformation. The Commission has been examining in just a few short few months together, core issues such as the harm that myths and misinformation has on populations, transparency and social media platforms and the media itself, and restoring trust without which our democracy cannot function. So my first question both of you is why did you decide to join this commission? Yasmin, I'll start with you.

Yasmin Green   04:56

For me, well, I mean, just to reiterate what Vivian just shared, but this is a unique composition of working group on misinformation. I've been invited to many, and I've watched other ones, and they tend to be pretty homogenous and siloed. And this is as evidenced by the co-chairs. This is combining people with cyber and government experience in Chris, civil society experience in Rashad Robinson, who runs one of the largest online racial justice organizations in the country, and Katie Couric who represents traditional media. So this is not a group that is, there's no group-think. These are really lively commission meetings. There is no multitasking on these zooms, because it's such it's really energetic and charged stuff. And I knew it would be an it really is a unique and it's a price point for Aspen to to convene diverse groups. But this is an absolute first for this topic. And I feel privileged to be part of it.

Chris Krebs   06:01

So when I found myself suddenly unemployed in late November, I was, I was thinking of like the letter I was supposed to write leaving my desk to my successor and the incoming administration. And I had a list of things that I thought could could benefit from some additional leadership and strategy. But there are two key things that really stood out to me that I was passionate about. And I thought that there was a great opportunity for the new administration to take on first was stand up a ransomware Task Force, because it was

a massive problem that was really going to cause some problems, if we didn't get on top of it. And look what's happened over the last seven months. The second was take a leadership position on disinformation. What I found after being in kind of the eye of the storm for four years, was that there was a diffusion of responsibility problem, and that there was no clear leader and disinformation, the FBI had their part, the intelligence community had their part, you know, sitting where I was at DHS, and in the cyber agency, we had our part, but but it was always kind of like feeling around as you as you went about it. It wasn't a priority. And of course, in government, nothing's a priority until it's a priority. And my you know, my takeaway, and my recommendation was one, you need to put somebody at a very senior level in the White House in charge of in charge of disinformation as a key Advisor to the President. And the second thing was, you need to have a public private partnership style taskforce established to really get to the bottom of why things are like they are. Now as January came about January 6, you know, came and went. And then the new administration came in, and you just saw across the nation that the list of things that President Biden and his team would have to tackle, when when Aspen reached out and with the generosity of Craig Newmark, and his sponsorship, asked me to come in. And, you know, as the first chair, and we've kind of figured out who was on I jumped at it, because I thought it was that important. And if we could take six to seven months or so, to do a lot of hard work for the administration and for Congress and for industry. And we could turn over a roadmap and action plan that I think that was, you know, something that I could continue at least to give back to the community.

Vivian Schiller 08:19

And that's hopefully what we intend to do. So how did I want to just now step back and just ask you to talk about how we got here. We came together as a country during World War Two, we came together momentarily around 9/11. But it didn't last, we did not come together as a country around the pandemic, what has changed? What are the conditions that exist today that are causing us to be in this such intense polarized moment?

Chris Krebs 08:47

So I think that disinformation and propaganda are the world's It's the world's third oldest profession. We all know what the first is. The second is actually intelligence collection, trying to figure out what the other person's doing. But third is propaganda. Third, is changing a narrative to suit your outcomes and shape, shape the messaging, I something that's occurred to me is that it that I'm really looking forward to are the studies about just how human cognition and society in general changed during the pandemic because of the loss of community, the lack of community, how community has shifted from actually being out in the neighborhood, you know, going to the community centers congregating

at schools, and everything shifted to online and you're staying in your house. I have five kids. My wife's lucky enough to join us here today, get her out of the house. And like the way things changed in a year and a half. It's It's remarkable and it changes the way you think, changes the way you engage and all those communities went online. They went into various message boards and online groups. That's what gave rise to some of the more extremist movements like q anon and some of those those message boards Think about how it was such a radicalizing moment in lead us to these to this point where it's not just that truth doesn't matter anymore. It's that there are alternate realities that people live in. And the what is the North Star? What is the Trust Center? In, you know, whether it's restoring trust is is Vivian's and I'm not sure what trust ever was. But But going forward, how do we instill or somehow reintroduce some concept of what's real and what's not?

V Vivian Schiller   10:36

You know, Yasmin, you, you've been in the space for a long time. And you've seen you've been, I mean, I've known you for quite a number of years, and you've been working on issues around radicalization. In fact, you've done seminal work when it came to the recruitment and radicalization of of ISIS members in the UK and had quite effective interventions there. So you've seen this happening. we're now seeing it more in our own country. So how do you think it's why has it spread?

Y Yasmin Green   11:06

It's interesting, actually, because we, part of the work that we get to do with my group Jigsaw is ethnographic research to work for a big technology company, but we get to spend time with humans in a more kind of profound way in their homes over several days to understand what's going on with the human being that is playing out online. And actually, because of our work on countering radicalization, which dates back a decade, we have been interested for several years and understanding conspiracism and what's happening with people that there seem to be so many conspiracy theories that are gaining traction? How does that play out online? And also, specifically, what? What are the attributes of conspiracy, conspiracy belief that might lead people to be violent because by welcome radicalization, so we don't need three of these deep studies of the last three years, one pre pandemic and two during the pandemic, the most recent one with people who left to anon so there's a lot of coverage of people. I think there's really good journalism on q anon as a movement, but it was interesting to hear about the people who've left but anyway what going into it I, I had not anticipated that there would be so much joy in it for people. Firstly, the euphoria of receiving the truth with a capital T. And the adrenaline and you know the addictiveness of, for example, with with the Q anon story of learning, and actually, it's a social movement, it's more than a conspiracy theory

for a lot of conspiracy theories, we kind of understood that they have this universal architecture of the secret cabal, the hidden agenda, the cover story and the proxy in the affiliates. And one of the takeaways was that the violence part is associated with how much you're focusing on identifying and vilifying the plotters. But in any case, so and also that people didn't just believe one, we, we said, we want to have like representation from all these different conspiracy theories. And then when we went into the field, the first study 70 people, there wasn't a single person that only believed one conspiracy theory. And it makes sense, because once you're kind of bought into that, that architecture, it's it's it's very plausible that other ones are true. But I would just say that I think one of the reasons is that in a, in a moment, during COVID, where we had so much fear and isolation and misinformation, it was like a perfect storm for people to get very engrossed in, especially misinformation narratives and movements that are based on...

Vivian Schiller 13:41

But what works? You said you've been able to there, you know, you also study people who leave the movement, what what tactics, what strategies work to persuade people to, you know, when they're so convinced that they have found, as you said, capital T truth.

Yasmin Green 13:56

We're going straight to the solution? Very efficient, Vivian! I'll tell you that we can talk about some of the things that I'm excited about, that maybe the commission will work on about what might work the tune and say we just finished, we haven't even published it. So this is breaking. These are breaking findings. I didn't get approval to share but there there were generally three reasons that people left q anon in our in our study. So we we should just describe the study it was with 35 people across the country, and very in depth. So some people we spoke to maybe like four or five times even. And the three reasons were hypocrisy, especially for example, if somebody is has a very strong sense of faith, and then it's like, here's that there are speakers or propagators of Q anon who are like, deeply racist or, you know, propagating racist narratives that didn't feel consistent to them. Obviously. Kind of false prophecies for some people at least The fact that the last year have played out the way that it did, did leave them to to disassociate. And the third was, there was this lady who said, when you told me that the third was that, that people just went too far afield to it was it became, it was like to register this lady said, we're and this lady was actually she was a an Ivy League law. Lawyer from her got her law degree from an Ivy League school. So this isn't like, this is everybody we had representation from across society. And she said, when you're telling me that, a pillow that's worth like, 300 bucks isn't worth isn't 300 bucks easy just getting a pillow, you're also getting a child that's trafficked inside the pillow, then you've just gone too far for me. If you just stayed

normal, I would have remained in the movement. So it's actually some of the wackiest stuff actually might be a saving grace, because I think you know, for some reasonable people. So I think the challenge for us next is, and then what do you do? One of the interesting things that people said was that one day, sorry, fine, I'm just monologuing. And you're the interesting. This will just be my final thing that I say is that when we were studying radicalization, 10 years ago, one of the things I was surprised to learn was that people who leave extremist groups, whether they're gangs, or neo nazi groups, or jihadi groups, it's a process. Like I said, if you're a neo nazi, surely, now that you've left, it was one day you woke up and said that? Absolutely. Like it's over the light, the light switch, flipped, but actually, no, it was a process like becoming, you know, recovering from alcoholism or something. And it takes time, and you have to change your life and you can relapse. It's amazing finding somebody, hearing somebody say that 911 was the waking moment for them. But then they still felt drawn back into violent Islamism, anyway. But I understood that that comparison, and people who left you in and said, I know that I know that this, this is not what it claims to be. But some of the narratives suck them back in and their online environment. Because algorithms start to reflect what you've looked for, and what you've enjoyed watching before. And you've subscribed to pages and groups. And so I think that's a really interesting problem from a tech perspective is how do we give people a fresh start, just like in the physical world, you would want to get out of a community that is drawing you back into extremes.

Chris Krebs   17:18

The pivot I want to make off that is that, and I think you mentioned in your opening about polarization, we heard a little bit on the prior conversation. So so this is not about polarization. This is not about right or left political, this is orthogonal to democracy. This is an alternate reality. This is leading us down to some sort of false prophet or, or autocracy in that's what to me makes it such a remarkable house on fire moment. And there are you know, I maybe I kind of overreact a little bit. I did have a nickname when I was in government as catastrophic crabs. Oh, I was always right. Sorry that I know that I was always right, though. But But, you know, I really do feel as if we are in one of those defining moments in American history. And how we respond in the in the next year, is going to be pretty important. And the real problem, particularly with some of the the election related disinformation, it's easy, particularly the amount of content that I consume, on social media and on some of the other media outlets. It can, it's easy to dismiss, like, Oh, that's crazy. Nobody believes that. The problem here is it's cumulative. It aggregates it build, to build to build, and it spins out into these additional stories that become very, very, very difficult to debunk. Because you're tired, you know, you tell a big lie long enough. That's what becomes the accepted truth.

Vivian Schiller 19:00

So let's talk about, you touched on it a little bit, Yasmin, let's talk about the role of the social media platforms here. It is not a coincidence that a lot of the phenomenon we've talked about the increased polarization, the lack of trust, the ability to disability, to talk about distance, across differences, has to do with the way some social media platforms are designed. And they do move us by design, towards content that we will want to engage with, which is often content that we agree with. So what what did you see, Chris, let's start with you, you know, in your, in your role in government, particularly around issues as you were preparing for protecting the election, and then, you know, immediately after the election, how did you look at the social media platforms and what do we need to do there?

Chris Krebs 19:50

So, so I'll say this, so 2016, I think was an eye opener for a lot of people in what you know, I tend to call the 2016 election and the Russian interference Our Sputnik moment and purely for the reason I think it was the first time that the American people kind of grasped the fact that cyber issues and disinformation could be destabilizing to democracy. And so as we build out the plan for protecting the 2020 election, while we started initially, in the the cyber security space, ultimately through three and a half years of scenario planning, we ultimately landed on the spot of it was going to be a perception hack, it was going to be disinformation, that was ultimately the thing that that would disrupt or lead to a potential disruption of the election. Okay. So as we sat back, we had to think about who our key partners were, because the government's not going to fix this all alone. Who do we have to work with. So just right out the gate, we were working in a collaborative fashion, with the dissident with the social media platforms. And they, I, you know, I will give them a whole lot of credit for stepping up their disruption activities, it's it's not a week that goes by that Facebook, for instance, doesn't talk about one of their, you know, disrupting a coordinated, inauthentic campaign. That said, those are, you know, just like we were in Cisco operating at the security operational level, that's what they were doing within the platforms, what we have to have is, is a shift at the top about what is, you know, eight within acceptable bounds and how the the platforms themselves the algorithms actually generate those outcomes, you could actually probably from a disruptive perspective, create a condition where you don't have to deal with disrupting the coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns, because the the platform itself does not tolerate is not permissive enough for those things to happen.

Vivian Schiller 21:49

Just a quick follow up, and then I want to ask you a question related to the platforms. He

talked about, of course, that that Sputnik moment of 2016, when we saw the kind of manipulation that was coming out of the internet research agency, which of course is an arm of Putin's government? What as we move towards 2020, how much what what did you perceive as the balance of what was foreign intelligence services versus home ground, or a symbiosis between them?

C Chris Krebs 22:19

So first thing's first. So the internet research agency, or is it evolved into what is known as project locked, was sponsored by a gentleman named prigogine. And he was the he was, he's literally a chef. He's Putin's chef. He also is one of the supporters of the the Wagner group, the vogner group that sends mercenaries in Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, Syria, for instance. So this guy's a jack of all trades, and none of them good.

V Vivian Schiller 22:49

He could cook at least.

C Chris Krebs 22:52

I would not eat it. We've seen what happens, right? I could riff here, but we don't have enough time. So what happened, though, because the government stepped up, because the intelligence community, the FBI, were more focused on disrupting disinfo out of St. Petersburg, and fit in the platform stood up and did their work. And what would happen is we took the ability of certain techniques off the tables, to change their behavior. So then they started moving out of Russia, they moved for the 2020 election, they stood up operations in Ghana, Spain, in Mexico. And they were in the Mexican case. And in the US, they were using proxies paying out of work us journalists to write stories. So they evolved their techniques because we, we made them change. And that shows that we're dealing with an intelligent adversary now to the punch line. 2020. They didn't have to do a lot, right. I mean, there was enough disinfo about about mail in ballots about even COVID. That gave just plenty of fodder. And that's really this sort of insidious thing about the way that foreign intelligence services work is they use, there's always a kernel of truth. There's an element of fact that they that they push and they propagate in they their idea there, they're not trying to get you to actually, you know, most of the time to make a single decision. They want to undermine confidence. They want you to lose your grasp of reality and that your government, our government, is doing the right things for us in in that again, that when you talk about restoring trust, that's what we're trying to get back to, trying to get back to a position of understanding what reality is.

S support message   25:00

This podcast is supported by the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth. The shift from an analog to a digital economy has spurred progress and growth over the past 30 years. And in the last year alone, digital connections have provided a critical lifeline to keep societies functioning. However, far too many people are still left out of the digital economy. Since the start of the pandemic, one in four micro and small businesses have permanently closed, low skilled workers around the world are facing slower than expected job recovery. And for the first time in 20 years, global poverty is back on the rise, there's a clear imperative, we need to do more than just build back better, we must rebuild for all. That's why we're partnering with the Aspen Institute to host the virtual Global Inclusive Growth Summit on October 14, where we'll be bringing together purpose driven leaders from around the world and across sectors to catalyze innovative solutions and partnerships to build more inclusive and sustainable economies. To learn more, go to globalinclusivegrowth summit.com and register today.

V Vivian Schiller   26:24

Yasmin, coming back to the platforms, and we should disclose that you were part of the broader Google family, what can the platforms do? That they are not doing today, too? Chris makes an excellent point about the excellent work that...

Y Yasmin Green   26:37

Wait, he gets to say that the platforms can make themselves inhospitable to...He said it, I didn't say it. That's not fair. I have to say how. Yeah. I think one of the things that Chris said is, that makes the problem really difficult is, if you if it's real people, I mean, the the basis for prosecuting the foreign influence campaigns, was that they were foreign. That's Yeah. And they were are they were they were pretending to be other people. Right? Yeah, if you're, if it's organic activity, then I don't know if you're all familiar with the term that the platform's use that they don't want to be arbiters of the truth, because they can't be professing, we don't share a sense of truth. And, and it's technically kind of very challenging for them to do that. So they they have, I think the area where they've invested incredibly, is in algorithmic approaches to spotting you know, the first it starts with, they have some policies about what's allowed and what's not allowed. And they add to what's prohibited all the time. So for example, q anon didn't used to be prohibited. And now it is on most major platforms, so the Android all the time, and then they train these algorithms with real videos and posts to spot that type of content. And then they go after it algorithmically. So that's really impressive how sophisticated these algorithms have become, and they're going to become much more sophisticated, which is promising. And they're still not going to get us to where we want to be in terms of tackling misinformation.

So one of the areas that I'm I'm personally really interested in, and we've done a lot of, I think, really promising research with academic partners at jigsaw. And I think is a big opportunity for platforms is how can we help people, once they are confronted with misinformation? It's laudable and vital that we try to prevent them to be you know, from being confronted. But not even all misinformation will be, you know, policy prohibited and algorithms aren't perfect at finding the stuff in any case. So what can we do, and the Behavioral Sciences community of researchers has, has some really promising strategies that, that I would like us to adopt. I'll just give you know what we do. Basically, by the way, right now, as an industry, if you're seeing misinformation, we'd like to put a fact check there. Or we put a label that tells you something about the information that you didn't know already, which is good, like the the studies suggest that that does work, does it it does help people correct false beliefs a little bit. And that little bit is really fragile, too, if you had pre existing beliefs, you know, that are contrary to that information. And what we found when we went out and spoke to people was we would do research sessions with people who are heavy disinflation consumers. And when they when they came across a fact check that was contrary to their beliefs. Not only did they not revise their beliefs, they also kind of threw the baby out with the bathwater in that they thought the platform is now in on that now, it's the fact checkers are biased of platforms of minors, that so there are limits to the strategy of fact checking.

V **Vivian Schiller** 29:44

And it has to be said there is also you know, you there is a tradition, even though the platform's themselves, they are not government so they people don't have a First Amendment right on the platforms. We do have a grand tradition in this country of free expression and just saying something false or something you don't agree, don't agree with is not a reason, of course, to take something down. This is where it gets very, very complicated and where a lot of the heated discussion is, I just want to mention, I'm going to throw it to you, you know, we've been talking about, we've been bouncing around here a little bit. And the reason I'm, it's by design, whether we're talking about the Russians, or Q and on or the platforms, it's because to understand information disorder, we need to look at the whole picture, we need to understand all the root causes that are coming together to cause this set of issues. And to lead us towards figuring out how we come up by the end of September. With these with and by the way, I wanted to mention one thing we did not talk about by design is about the collapse of local journalism. And I not talking about it here, because we have a session tomorrow and that in which we will talk about I hope you all come. But all of this is critical towards driving to find some kind of solutions. Chris?

C **Chris Krebs** 31:00

I think the last point I want to make here is that the way we ultimately it's just a thought about disinformation in general, was is a supply and demand problem. So when you talk about the supply side, that's where the disruptive actions come in, whether it's on the platform, or the intelligence community, I think we have the greatest opportunity on the demand side to inoculate the public. So you don't have to get to a position where you're fact checking or you're the base is already trained and ready to react. And so a lot of election disinformation, for instance, was successful because the average American thinks that the voting experience is showing up on November 3, casting their vote and waiting for CNN or whatever to, to to announce the winner. But it's obviously much greater than that. So we need more civics education. We need more communications from our officials on how things work. So when a message that, you know, 2.7 million votes were cast when only a million voters were registered, the recipient of that information immediately knows that it's not true and they're being lied to.

V **Vivian Schiller** 32:10

Yeah. Well, Chris, Yasmin, thank you.

T **Tricia Johnson** 32:20

Chris Krebs co chairs the Commission on Information Disorder and the Aspen Cybersecurity Group at the Aspen Institute. He was the first director of Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security at the Department of Homeland Security. In November 2020, President Trump fired Krebs after he refuted that the election was rigged. Yasmin Green has pioneered approaches to counter violent extremism and state sponsored disinformation, including seeding the first online network of former violent extremists and survivors of terrorism. Vivian Schiller leads Aspen Digital at the Aspen Institute. Her program's Commission on Information Disorder will release a set of recommendations next month for civil society, government and the private sector. You can find more information about the Commission and its work at Aspeninstitute.org. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's show was produced by the Aspen Ideas Festival team, Kitty Boone, Killeen Brettmann, Katie Cassetta Christen Cromer, Libby Franklin, Ava Hartmann, Marci Krivonen, Jon Melgaard, Azalea Millan and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

S **support message** 33:45

This podcast is supported by the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth. Philanthropy alone can't fix poverty. The problems of the world are just too big for any one sector or industry to solve alone. At the Center for Inclusive Growth, we're committed to building partnerships that combine the strengths of business, government and nonprofits to scale sustainable, equitable and inclusive economic growth. Learn more and subscribe and mastercardcenter.org.