

# Techtopia with Chitra Ragavan

## Episode 2: Anne Speckhard

Chitra Ragavan:

The January 6th attacks on the US Capitol by violent supporters of former president, Donald Trump, were a shocking coming out party of sorts for technology enabled and deeply radicalized domestic terrorist groups in the United States. And they sent an unmistakable message to American democracy.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan. And this is Techtopia. On this podcast, we take a look at the addictive and inexorable forces of technology that are transforming people, society and humanity. I'm joined now by Anne Speckhard. She's director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism. Speckhard has interviewed hundreds of terrorists around the world and has provided expert consultation to the US, European and other governments, as well as the US Department of Defense regarding programs for prevention and rehabilitation of individuals that are committed to political violence and militant jihad. Speckhard has worked extensively with social media platforms, such as Facebook, to create and disseminate counter radicalization messaging against ISIS and other foreign terrorist groups. Anne, welcome to Techtopia.

Anne Speckhard:

Oh, thank you, Chitra. I'm so glad to be here with you.

Chitra Ragavan:

As an expert on radicalization, when you saw what was happening on January 6th, both outside and inside the US Capitol, what were your first thoughts?

Anne Speckhard:

My thoughts were what had been predicted was happening because I'm part of a number of groups that were monitoring and trying to diffuse violence from groups, such as this, before it happened. And, to me, it had been predicted and I was watching it play out.

Chitra Ragavan:

And over the past months and years, what were some of the things that you are seeing? I know your focus has been predominantly of radicalization of foreign terrorist groups,

such as ISIS. But I'm assuming you probably were seeing similar things unfold here in the United States.

Anne Speckhard:

Definitely. We were seeing groups forming on the internet or forming in real life as well. And what I would say we were really seeing is that online behavior and online threats were moving into real life, which is exactly what we saw with ISIS. That there was a huge amount of propaganda, and incitement. And that we watched people get wrapped up in it. And some of them, oftentimes, they went dark because they would transfer over to telegram. And then, you would see them do something. So, what was happening and being observed on their Facebook or Twitter profile would later translate into real life behavior.

Anne Speckhard:

But we should say that there were huge groups of people who were responding to this ISIS' online propaganda that never did anything.

Chitra Ragavan:

Interesting. So, what do you think was the trigger? What happened?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I would definitely say that President Trump incited this mob and he had been inciting them all along with what pundits are now referring to as the "big lie" of telling them that the election was stolen, and that they must stand up for democracy. And these are people, I mean, there are a whole array of people, they're not a monolith. But these are people that already believe that white rights are being stolen, they're disenfranchised, they're upset. And if they're a conspiracy theorist and QAnon, they believe that Trump is going to stand up to evil powers of the world.

Chitra Ragavan:

And having interviewed hundreds of foreign terrorists around the world, often in some very hostile countries and conditions, you've seen the evolution of these young people, especially getting radicalized, but others as well. What have been some of the things you've seen in that pattern of evolution that may apply in this case? Well, we're definitely seeing similarities in that as a person begins to align themselves, and find their identity with a group that they start to fuse their identity with the group and they narrow their focus. So, they only consume materials from that group. So, with the far right or white supremacists, QAnon, we're seeing that they no longer believe real news. And that they're in their own reality that is fed to them I'm sorry to say, in some cases, by the president himself. And also, from news sources that are in agreement with this type of thinking, that the election was stolen, that it was justifiable to move to violence. Or that, in the case of QAnon, that there's this horrible conspiracy and that only Trump can save the people.

Chitra Ragavan:

And I saw an interesting quote today in The Washington Post from representative Jim Heinz, a Democrat from Connecticut. And he said in the interview that, "The threats are real, but will not stop the transfer of power." And then he said, "We're not talking about a 90 person ISIS cell. We're talking mainly about a bunch of yahoos who yes, are very dangerous, people could wind up dead, but there's no danger that they're going to overthrow the United States government." The comparison that these are not like the 90-person ISIS cell, and they're a bunch of yahoos, given what you've seen with the radicalization of ISIS and what you saw the other day, would you agree with that? Or would you parse it in some way?

Anne Speckhard:

I would definitely parse that. And, first of all, I would say ISIS doesn't have any hope of overthrowing the US government either. And one of the reasons that they use suicide terrorism is that they're no match for our military and our might. And so, these people are no different. I mean, there were pipe bombs, they brought a gallows, they brought the plastic strips to tie people's wrists. And there's a policeman today. That's being reported out in the media that said they were grabbing at his guns saying, "Let's kill him with his own gun." These were people that... not all of them, there are some that were swept up in a mob mentality, but these are people that thoughtfully considered what they wanted to do and what they thought they needed to do. I mean, some of them refer to themselves as three percenters, meaning that only 3% fought in the revolution against the British, and that now they are these glorious people that are going to create a revolution and make sure that democracy actually happens.

Anne Speckhard:

And I talked to one yesterday, I've been interviewing people in the far right. I talked to Jason Kessler who ran Unite the Right. And Jason was telling me these people are really tired because they feel that they don't have representation. That the people that have been elected are beholden to special interest groups. And that they need to go and fight for what the founding fathers actually wrote on paper and tried to make the foundation of this country, that it's been lost. And then, to some degree, there is some reality in that. That a lot of our congressmen are more beholden to special interests than to the people that elected them to get there.

Chitra Ragavan:

The other interesting thing is how some members of these groups were perceiving themselves. I saw a really interesting moment on CNN where the reporter was doing a live interview and saying, "These rioters were doing this," and there was a gentleman who was not rioting, who interrupted the live interview and said, "We are not rioters, we're not rioting." And so, it just seemed really an odd moment where someone who is part of this violent incursion on the Capitol says, "Look, we're not rioting," and that may go to some of what you're saying of how they perceive themselves.

Anne Speckhard:

Well, that's what I keep finding in all the far right interviews that I've made up to this point, talking to white supremacists and so on is that they believe that they're heroic. That they're doing something good and right. That they're standing up for their people. And the difference that I find between them and a group like ISIS, and I'm not justifying ISIS in any way, but at least people that join a group like ISIS, most of them have become convinced that ISIS is carrying out Islam in the correct way, and that they must do the same, and that anybody can join Islam. It doesn't matter what color you are, or what country you came from. But these people, if they're white supremacists, believe that they have to fight for their rights, for their group, and everybody else be damned. And that's frightening. But they definitely have self-reference as idealistic, heroic, in the right, righteous. And I, of course, think that they're totally wrong, but that's not how they feel about themselves.

Chitra Ragavan:

You delve deeply into the role of social media and technology in the recruiting efforts of ISIS and other radical foreign terrorist threats. What are some of the things you've seen in their evolution of the use of technology to promote all of their own propaganda? And how does it compare to what you're seeing with right-wing conspiracy groups?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, it's really interesting Chitra because all the main social media platforms came into agreement to kick ISIS and other inciters of violence and terrorist groups off of their platforms. And they haven't been completely successful in doing it. They have something called hashing where a picture from ISIS, or a film from ISIS will be recognized by machines, and just immediately kicked off. But still they managed to get on these main line platforms where most of the people are, and attract them into encrypted platforms, mainly telegram, in the case of ISIS. And now we're seeing the same thing with the QAnon and white supremacists, that they're being de-platformed, and even Trump, himself, being kicked off of Twitter and Facebook. And we saw a mass Exodus to Parlor, and then Parlor getting kicked off of Amazon.

Anne Speckhard:

And we're seeing the same thing that happened with ISIS, that all of these people still want to talk to each other, and they want a safe place to gather and to make their plans. So, many of them have gone to Signal and to Telegram. So, we're seeing the exact same thing happening again, where this is a nightmare for law enforcement, because when they were on Facebook they could be watching them. And, of course, they're not going to discuss everything on Facebook, but it's much easier. And you can pretty much track the identity in an easier way than if they're on Telegram or Signal.

Anne Speckhard:

But the troubling thing, now, is that half our country voted for Trump, half our country is offended by this huge de-platforming, and what does that mean? Are we pushing people that wouldn't be extremists to more extreme positions? I don't know. And that

worries me. And it worries me that now we're making it so difficult to follow these people. Law enforcement we'll figure it out, but it's difficult for them.

Chitra Ragavan:

And how would you describe the efforts and success of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to-date to track these groups and to prevent attacks given what happened on January 6th? The absolute stunning failure, maybe not of intelligence since they seem to know a lot of these groups and individuals, but failure to convert that into execution. Where's the gap?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I think more and more FBI and other analysts, but when you think about a small police force in a small community, they just don't have the capacity to do what the FBI does, but there's data analysts that are scraping data now, and following social media platforms. I remember when ISIS was in its heyday, FBI, and others would come up to me at conferences and say, "I really can't tell you about my work 'cause it's classified, but I'm following this one particular person. And at what point do you think that I can make a judgment that they're really dangerous?" And what a difficult question to answer because people flip from endorsing violence, and following these groups, and being very strong adherence of them to suddenly moving into violence. And when they do decide to be violent, in our country, if they go buy a gun they can be violent the next day, the same day. And that's a nightmare for law enforcement.

Anne Speckhard:

But I also have to say they really missed it on this one because I was part of groups where we were all discussing, that the groups themselves, the Proud Boys, other groups had been discussing violence and discussing that they were going to come to the Capitol. So, there was a failure of law enforcement to be ready. And I worry that part of that might not be a tech failure. It might be a bias failure. That even though our DC police force is Black, I mean, not totally Black, but a lot of Black people, I think all of us have a bias that because of TV shows and movies that we watch, that Black people are more likely to be criminals. Arabs are more likely to be terrorists. But white men should be safe according to pop culture. And I think that bias crept in, and they didn't prepare themselves for that these people too can be horribly violent and act exactly like ISIS. I mean, there was a gallows and there were people talking about hanging our elected legislators.

Chitra Ragavan:

Going back to this question of technology there seems to be this growing sophistication from, as one reporter put it, using the phone for selfies to actually generating live stream events of these attacks. You saw a lot of these leaders walking around live streaming, as they were moving around the Capitol, and doing the crazy things that they were doing, and violent things that they were doing. Do you have some sort of comparison to how that evolved with ISIS? Sort of that growing sophistication and were you surprised by what you saw?

Anne Speckhard:

One of the things that we learned with ISIS is that journalists were no longer necessary. So, it used to be that a terrorist group... I mean, I remember when they took over Nord-Ost in Moscow, the theater, and held all those hostages they had prepared a tape and they had to get it to Al-Jazeera, so it can be aired. And then, after Al-Jazeera aired it, it was replayed on all the networks what was happening inside the theater and what the demands of the hostage takers were. And that's old time, the way it used to be. Osama Bin Laden used to have to get his, whatever he wanted out through a journalist. Basayev, the same thing. But not anymore. Now, with social media, ISIS, and all of the terrorist groups learned that they can create their own content and put it out on the Internet. Same as Trump learned that he doesn't have to deal with journalists. He can just tweet until this week. And so, that's a real change that came with tech.

Anne Speckhard:

And then the live streaming, for me, I asked myself, I read up on mob psychology this weekend because I was so interested in what social psychology has to say about mobs. And I know that there's this whole theory that people de-individuate, they fuse with the collective consciousness of the group. And especially if they cover their faces and they're anonymous they may be much more likely to engage in violence. And I wondered was this a phenomena where they got swept away? But there's a competing theory that like-minded people come together in crowds and mobs, and that they have the intention of doing the things that they do. And I think it's a bit of both that happened in this crowd. But the fact that they did take pictures, that they did brag to journalists, that they did post their videos, even on YouTube shows me that they had a temporary criminal insanity in a way that they thought that they were so right, and that they acted with impunity that they could do criminal things that they knew were wrong, and show them to the world.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yes. And publicize them, even though in a weird way technology, then helped because people could identify them either directly from friends and family, and neighbors, or through facial recognition technology.

Anne Speckhard:

Right. And that's the other side of this. I was reading today about how, when citizens decide to try to track and figure out who these people are, if you're handing it into law enforcement, good. But if you're putting it up on social media, there are really good examples of where that's gone wrong. And innocent people have been identified as criminals by other citizens, and it takes on a whole life of its own.

Anne Speckhard:

So, when the Boston bombing happened, there was a young man with mental illness issues that was wrongly identified as the Boston bomber. And, of course, he suffered even more then. He was probably in a fugue state and had disappeared temporarily. And so, he was suspected by someone that put it on social media. And there's all kinds

of examples of that. So, we have to be very careful on how we hunt people down too, and that we let law enforcement do their job. And if we're engaging in that hunting that then, we give it to someone that can actually verify it before posting it yourself.

Chitra Ragavan:

One of the things I really wanted to talk to you about was the role of women in this Capitol Hill riots. There seemed to be a large number of women who are not only taking part but, in some cases, directing where some of these people that were breaking in should go, as you know. And they were also breaking in and one of them actually got shot and killed by a police officer. Did that sort of resonate with you in any way to see these very angry women leading the charge in some ways?

Anne Speckhard:

That brings up a number of issues. One is that there's this very famous book on terrorism that is called Shoot the Women First. And it was written about anarchists and leftist terrorists in Europe saying that the women are the most dangerous. And we haven't found that as true with ISIS and Al-Qaeda because they tended to only use women when they had to, when they couldn't get them across checkpoints, or when they were really hemmed in. But women playing a role in this is interesting, of course, because women sometimes have the exact same motivations as men. And other times they have very different motivations.

Anne Speckhard:

And I've been trying to wrap my head around why someone would respond to the QAnon conspiracy? And one of the answers that comes to me is that if you really look at the statistics of how many people are sexually abused in this country, and how many women are raped, I mean, a conservative estimate is 1 out of 10, 1 out of 5 might be more likely. And in the case of child sexual abuse, usually, the abuser tells you, "If you tell anybody," and sometimes in the case of rape as well, "If you tell anybody they'll die, or I'll kill your mother," or something. So, there's this whole hidden layer inside of many people that they're walking around with big pain, but they can never tell anybody.

Anne Speckhard:

And then, suddenly we have this conspiracy of children are being sexually abused, and the authority figures are involved. And doesn't that sound like uncle molester? So, I'm thinking men and women probably respond to QAnon possibly because they themselves were hurt. And they want to make sure that there's not more victims like themselves. And if you relate to the victim-hood of someone else, particularly a child, you can be quite lethal. I mean, I think that is probably the only circumstances where you could see me kill, if you tried to hurt my children.

Chitra Ragavan:

How would you summarize the role of tech companies in trying to combat the stuff that's on their platforms?

Anne Speckhard:

That's a great question. Well, we've been working for a long time, and we've been in partnership with Facebook and Instagram as well on making counter narratives. And we're a big believer that if you get insiders from a group to talk about why they went into the group, so that there's this instant rapport of other people that are thinking about going in, are already in. And then, how the group actually was for them, and how they left, and denouncing the group that that's very, very powerful because we learn by story. So, if we put a story that a person that's thinking about joining, or in the group can relate to, and can help them to get out, that's fantastic. And that can be done on social media. And we've proven that with our breaking in the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative project, and now we're replicating it for the far right.

Anne Speckhard:

So, we've got a couple of videos, we've got 225 ISIS videos, but we only have two or three far right at this point. But we're working on getting more made. And social media companies need to help get a narrative that's strong out there, both the counter narrative to denounce the groups, and an alternative narrative to empower people to do something, so they don't feel powerless. And that means creating a parallel network. And here I'm quoting Jesse Morton, who's a big advocate of parallel networks, so that, "You can leave the network that you think was going to serve you and doesn't serve you, and is in fact violent. And go into an alternative parallel network that actually does serve you." And social media companies can be really instrumental in that.

Anne Speckhard:

The other side of that is while we do need to take down policies, and we do need to stop people from inciting violence on social media, we also can be really strict about what is taken down. And all terrorist content for sure should be taken down. But when you get into these gray areas, maybe consider doing interventions with the people. Having actual interventionists that reach out to the person and say, "You're getting in this gray area where we're going to kick you off the platform. But could we talk to you?" And you might see great results. We're talking to doing something exactly like that with minds.com. And it would be a little bit different approach than just totally de-platforming people.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's kind of interesting when you talked about parallel networks, because one of the things I want to explore in Techtopia and why I called it Techtopia is this idea that technology has created a parallel universe almost with different rules of engagement, different measures of success, different ways of governing. And you're kind of seeing that emerge even with these groups that rioted on January 6th, them living in a parallel universe almost. And that's why they were able to go out there and do live streaming of their violence thinking it wasn't going to amount to anything.

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I think they were thinking that it would amount to something, but not to their arrest.



Chitra Ragavan:

I meant in terms of retaliation.

Anne Speckhard:

Yeah, not to their arrest. And exactly. I mean, we have now probably two generations that have grown up really tech savvy, and they know how to switch from platform to platform. They know how to get their messages out. They're influencers. And it is a parallel universe. And we need to get good at creating networks for good. And networks that believe in our... or that promote our democratic values in a way that people can resonate to because ISIS and white supremacist groups have learned how to message in a way that resonates to people's grievances, and then engages them, and takes them down a trajectory that, for some, ultimately ends in enacting violence. And that's not good.

Chitra Ragavan:

President Trump will be gone from office by the time this show airs, this episode airs. But, obviously, that movement that he created with his rhetoric and hate speech will remain. What do you think law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and other interested groups need to do in coming weeks and years? It seems like a very dark period ahead. And seeing what you saw with ISIS, where will these groups go from here after Trump is gone?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, first of all, I don't think that Trump is going to be gone. I've heard talk that he's fundraising to create the Trump News Network. And I think that's a misnomer, it won't be news. It will be propaganda.

Chitra Ragavan:

I meant when he's gone from office.

Anne Speckhard:

Right. But I think that's something that we need to face. That this man is still going to be a force. And he's been very good at turning people against each other. And ignoring the real issue of elites maybe have too much. And that there are these whole groups of disenfranchised people that we somehow need to consider their needs for healthcare, for housing, for basic rights and needs. And so that's, to me, a real issue that I think he's still going to be fomenting for strong social divisions, and possibly even violence.

Chitra Ragavan:

And so, how do you see that evolving? And when you see how other US government and other governments are dealing with foreign terrorists threats, what are the things we need to do here?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, it always comes down to, if there's no grievances, then there's not people that can be so easily manipulated. So, we really need to look at what are the grievances, and what are the legitimate ones, and what should we do about them? And how can we build our society, so that people want to be invested in it and believe in it? Because I think there really is some truth in the idea that a lot of the people came to the Capitol thinking, "Democracy is not functioning for me." And that is the most important thing that we can address in this country.

Chitra Ragavan:

And going back to what you said about Trump may be gone from office but, obviously, he's going to be a force in politics, and in sort of continuing efforts to foment unrest, I saw the political cover of this Magazine that said he might even be even more powerful because people will see him as somebody who's been attacked unfairly. And so, that is another thing that will have to be dealt with.

Anne Speckhard:

That's probably true. I mean, if we see QAnon possibly tapping into people's sense of victimhood, and then Trump will be able to do the same, "Look, I was unfairly victimized."

Chitra Ragavan:

And he's done that very effectively in the past.

Anne Speckhard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chitra Ragavan:

One quick question, which is you're seeing these comments by law enforcement, and the videos that show that at least some in the military and in the police may have been involved in this. What are your thoughts on that?

Anne Speckhard:

It's very worrisome. And white supremacist groups forever have tried to recruit people from the military because they're disciplined, and because they already have weapons training. And they've also encouraged their members to take weapons training or go into the military. And same with police. So, it's very worrisome that we've seen there were two officers from a small town in Virginia that were taken off of duty because they were in the Capitol. And we've seen other examples where police and military have been involved in these types of things. And we need to develop good policies, and good prevention, and intervention strategies, so that that doesn't happen.

Anne Speckhard:

Police, generally, vet before they hire. They look what's your record? Are you a member of any of these extremist groups? But they really need to be looking ongoing because people aren't always the same as the day you hired them.

Chitra Ragavan:

And one of the markers of the evolution of Al Qaeda and then subsequently other groups like ISIS was that they were putting that effort and money into military training for their soldiers, as they called them.

Anne Speckhard:

Definitely. But I think in this case, it's turned around. But white supremacist groups like to attract military because they are already arms trained. So, they go after vets.

Anne Speckhard:

We've got on our ICSVE YouTube channel, a wonderful video of Ryan Lo'Ree. And Ryan tells about getting home from Iraq. And that it was a pretty tough tour. And he couldn't get a job. Left the military, couldn't get a job. He's in, I think Flint, Michigan. And his uncle took him to a white supremacist group meeting. And the leader immediately recognized here's a talented guy, I can use him. And flattered him, and played up to him, and pulled him into the group. And Ryan's talking about his time in the group, and how he realized how wrong it was, and warning other people not to join. But there's a perfect example. A disillusioned vet, definitely capable of doing some real harm because he has been trained, and he's been on the battleground, sucked into a group that's both criminal and violent.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne, thank you so much. Do you have any other closing thoughts?

Anne Speckhard:

No. Thank you. It's really nice talking with you.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, great having you here on the podcast.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne Speckhard is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism. She has interviewed hundreds of terrorists all over the world, and has provided expert consultation to the US, European and other governments, as well as the US Department of Defense, regarding programs for prevention and rehabilitation of individuals committed to political violence, and militant jihad. Speckhard has worked extensively with social media platforms, such as Facebook, to create and disseminate counter radicalization messaging against ISIS and other foreign terrorist groups.

Chitra Ragavan:

This is Techtopia. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

Techtopia is a podcast from Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups with brand strategy, positioning and narrative. Our producer is Jeremy Corr, founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions, with production assistance from Kate Kruse. Our creative advisor is Adi Wineland. And our research and logistics lead is Sarah Möller. Don't forget to subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, or your preferred podcast platform. And if you liked the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review, and do recommend it to your friends, family, and colleagues. For questions, comments, and transcripts, please visit our website at [goodstory.io](https://goodstory.io) or send us an email at [podcast@goodstory.io](mailto:podcast@goodstory.io). Join us next week for another episode of Techtopia. I'll see you then.