

# Techtopia with Chitra Ragavan

## Episode 5: Seyward Darby

Chitra Ragavan:

I was struck by the number of women taking part in the rioting at the US Capitol on January 6, by violent supporters of former President Donald Trump. Who are these women, I wondered? How have they exploited technology to expand their reach and influence in the alt-right movement? And have technology companies done enough to counter and combat their disinformation campaigns and hate messaging.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello, everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is Techtopia. Here to answer those questions and more is Seyward Darby. She is the author of *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*. Darby is the editor in chief of *The Atavist Magazine*, a forum for great long-form journalism. Darby previously served as the deputy editor of *Foreign Policy*, and the online editor and assistant managing editor of *The New Republic*. As a writer, she has contributed to *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *Elle*, and *Vanity Fair*, among other publications.

Chitra Ragavan:

Seyward, welcome to Techtopia.

Seyward Darby:

Thank you so much for having me.

Chitra Ragavan:

What led you to start researching the role of women in white nationalism and to write *Sisters in Hate*?

Seyward Darby:

I began this project immediately after the election that preceded this one. So I guess four years prior, so in 2016. Just like January 6th of this year and the aftermath of the election in 2020 has led a lot of people to ask questions about the state of the country and to ask questions certainly about women's complicity in the far right in this country. I had a similar question after 2016. But in that case, rather than number of women who were suddenly in the news, it was the opposite. There were no women who were ever quoted or mentioned as being part of the so called alt-right movement, which had gotten a good amount of press attention over the course of the election, because of the movement's affinity for Trump and the way that he projected dog whistles to them.

Seyward Darby:

So I would read articles about the alt right and find that there were always mentions of how they were angry white men, and it was so misogynistic, and a woman was never quoted, there were no photos of women. There was just a complete absence of women. And that struck me as wrong from the standpoint of how social movements actually function and what is required for social movements to function, particularly social movements that are all about making sure you're preserving an identity, a way of life, a race in this case. You literally need women for that. And history has shown us that women have been very deeply involved in many oppressive, racist regimes and organizations.

Seyward Darby:

So, I went looking for the women. They were quite easy to find. They were exactly where you'd expect them to be on YouTube, and Twitter, and Facebook, and all of these different platforms. I then dove into these questions of who are they? Why do they believe what they believe? How did they come to believe what they believe? But also, why are we not talking about them? Why have they been erased from the wider narrative about the far right? And so that was exactly four years ago, basically, that I kicked this into gear.

Chitra Ragavan:

When you use the phrase "dog whistle," for those of us who are not familiar with that, what do you mean?

Seyward Darby:

Dog whistle is essentially coded language, suggestive language. I mean, frankly, you could argue that make America great again, and America first are dog whistles, because embedded... Well, first of all, there are echoes of actual clan slogans from the 1920s. But then on top of that, within that is embedded this idea of America as being very much for white Americans. And so "dog whistles" are things where you're not... Trump isn't using the N word, or Trump isn't saying America for white Americans, but the language is coded such that people who do, believe these more hateful ideas, will hear what they want to hear in that language. That's a dog whistle, obviously, is something that only a dog can hear. And in this case it's language that people who know what to be listening for can hear the truth inside it basically.

Chitra Ragavan:

You were so deep into researching all of this when the January 6th riots took place at the US Capitol, and you see all of these women not just participating, but several of them taking the lead. Others had been involved in planning and two women actually died of the five people. In addition to the Capitol Police Officer, Brian Sicknick, there were two women. Ashli Babbitt, she was an Air Force veteran, a former Air Force veteran. You saw images of her pushing through the window and getting killed by a US Capitol Police Officer. And then you had Rosanne Boyland, who may have been crushed to death by fellow rioters while trying to push through a police line. When you

saw this unfolding, what were your thoughts having done all of this research that you had already done?

Seyward Darby:

It was certainly horrifying to me what happened on January 6, and it was definitely one of those moments I don't think I'll ever forget. It's like watching 9/11 transpire on TV. You're watching this protest that is suddenly moving closer and closer, and then suddenly is inside the halls of government and you're witnessing history in that moment. So I certainly was horrified, but I was in no way surprised. And I think that there were two reasons for that. One was that they had literally been projecting online, I should say, using the Internet as a bullhorn to say, "This is what we're going to do. We are going to go. We are going to do this. This is the plan." I don't know how they could have been more explicit in a way that would have gotten media attention or... Governmental attention is obviously difficult to get when the administration is on the side of what you want to do, but they had literally been spelling it out.

Seyward Darby:

And then I think on top of that, the reason I was not surprised about women specifically, was that in the course of my research, I had been hearing the ways in which for the last four years, but also stretching further back in time, the far right has been making appeals to women as important actors or telling them they can be important actors in this space. That in times of great struggle and in times when revolution is necessary, which is the way that they talk about the present moment, that women will need to be on the front lines, shoulder to shoulder with men. That in better times and in good times, women can be at home with their families and taking care of children and doing the things that "women are supposed to do".

Seyward Darby:

But in moments where it feels like something has been taken away, when it feels like the enemies of all that they stand for and all that they believe in, are winning, which this is how the election and the Biden administration was cast by the far right, that women should be on the front lines too.

Seyward Darby:

And I should say, just as a quick aside, I do not know the specific politics of every single woman who showed up there. I do not know if they would all consider themselves white nationalists. I'm sure that many of them would in fact not identify that way, but I think that what's interesting about the evolution of the far right is that identification matters less in some ways than what it is that you actually believe, the actions that you take based on those beliefs, and also where you're getting your information. I think that the far right has done a very good job over the last several decades, frankly, of poisoning different wells on the Internet, if you will, of information and saying, "Oh, you're interested in natural living." Or, "You're skeptical of vaccines. Oh, let us pour a little bit of what we believe into the water."

Seyward Darby:

And so you start consuming the same conspiracy theories and grievances, or what you're told should be grievances, even if as you're consuming them, you're not necessarily thinking, "Oh, this is making me a white nationalist." So that's a long way of saying, "I was going to be an aside and here I am going off. I'm more of a tangent." But I think it's important to recognize that the people who were at the Capitol, they were absolutely about white nationalists, white supremacists. But then there were people who would say, "No, no, I'm not that. I'm just a patriot." But that, in fact, they are and had been consuming the same ideas, regurgitating the same ideas that the white nationalists and white supremacists had.

Chitra Ragavan:

I think that's a really important point and a fair one to make, just so that we can better represent who may have been there that day, but also sort of some of the underlying subtext to what's out there on YouTube and all of these other channels. We'll talk about that in a minute or two. But one of the women that you featured in your book, Lana Lokteff, said in a speech in Stockholm in 2017 that, "It was women that got Trump elected." And I guess to be really edgy," she continued, "It was women that got Hitler elected." That was an interesting point that she was trying to make and I wonder if you could give us a little bit of history. Obviously, there were many, many women on the front lines fighting against Hitler and Nazi Germany. But at the same time, there's also this history of women who were deep into white nationalism, who were really fighting on behalf of Hitler.

Seyward Darby:

Sure. Yeah, the Third Reich is such a fascinating example of white nationalism made manifest in the most extreme way possible and coming into real power, real institutional power. There was for a long time... In the decades immediately after World War II, there was kind of this... I don't know. Idea that women were not as complicit as men in the regime. And this actually tied in ultimately with my fascination with how women were not being included in narratives of the alt-right. I think that a sort of benevolent sexism that dominates media, dominates certainly or has dominated the study of history, means that women are seen as better angels. That they are seen as having better instincts than men, more compassionate instincts than men. And after something terrible has happened, that many people were complicit in, women sort of get swept to the side in terms of their accountability and their complicity in these regimes. You certainly see that with regard to the Antebellum South.

Seyward Darby:

Only recently, there's a fantastic book that came out a few years ago about women who were very, very important, or how women were very, very important actors in the slave trade and in the actual ownership and management of slaves. And how they were just written out of history for the longest time. And so something similar, I think, happened after World War II. I say that based on... There are two really wonderful books about... Well, wonderful if you can really bear reading about the Third Reich. But there is one

called Hitler's Furies by Wendy Lower, who is a historian I believe, at Claremont McKenna. And then there's another great book, kind of a classic in the field called Mothers in the Fatherland, by Claudia Koonz, who is a professor at Duke University.

Seyward Darby:

Hitler's Furies is a history of women who specifically served on the Eastern Front of the Nazi regime. And by served I mean, because it was a hyper traditional "regime" that believed very deeply in traditional gender roles, that they were secretaries, they were wives, they were mistresses. They were in these kind of supportive roles on the Eastern Front, and some of them to be clear, were in more of supervisory roles where they could actually commit violence. But point being, the book is a look at the ways in which women were complicit in upholding the structure of the regime on the Eastern Front.

Seyward Darby:

And then Mothers in the Fatherland is a bigger look at Nazism and women's role in it, at the ways that women were cast, yes, as mothers and wives, but that being a mother and being a wife was very much presented as a political act. Being those things was political, because the importance of a wife and a mother, and by extension the home that she builds and the children she raises and the things that they believe, that was all vital in the Nazi's belief system to the perpetuation of the Aryan race.

Seyward Darby:

And so, again, after the fact, I think a lot of people looked at the Third Reich and said, "Oh, well, women, they didn't have a choice because this was a misogynistic regime and they were they had to do this. They were just wives. They were just mothers." There was this minimization of what those roles actually meant to the regime.

Seyward Darby:

And to Lana's point, and that's really quite a speech that she gave at this far-right conference in Stockholm. It's true that women got Trump elected, because as we all know, a plurality of white women voted for Trump both times. And then with regard to Hitler, it's fascinating because Hitler technically wasn't elected, he lost a presidential race. And I have a footnote about this in the book. The Nazis got enough votes in a subsequent parliamentary election... I believe, subsequent. Parliamentary election to become the dominant party in the Reichstag. And that is actually what led him to be appointed chancellor.

Seyward Darby:

And if you go back and look at the history, and there's a particular study that I found that that explains this, between 1928 to 1932, the Nazis on the parliamentary front around the country did indeed win an increasing number of votes from women. And the women who were surveyed or... I forget exactly how the research was done, but they reported casting their votes out of self-interest and a concern for the future of German society. So you can absolutely imagine that transplanted onto the Trump era and white women

today saying, "I'm voting out of concern for my community, my family, and my belief in 'America first.'" So there are definitely eerie parallels between those two points in time.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you find some of these really interesting themes you uncover them as you started, reaching out and talking to dozens and dozens of women and doing all of the research that you did. Can you paint a broad picture of the Sisters in Hate, as you call them? Sort of the age, race, other demographics, education, socio economic levels, and some of the themes that you were starting to hear over and over again. Living the traditional life, anti-feminism, all of that, having more children, things like that.

Seyward Darby:

Sure. Well, I think with regard to your first question, one of the important things and... I don't know. Maybe one of the more dispiriting takeaways from this research is that there isn't a clear pattern in terms of who becomes a white nationalist, why they become a white nationalist. Like, yes, they are white. Certainly, there's that. Although there are people who identify as part of this movement who consider themselves "nationalists" and support white nationalism, but are in fact of other other races or backgrounds. But think that yes, in fact, everybody should keep to themselves through their own kind, but that's a whole aside. But if you're talking about white nationalists, they are white, yes, but then they come from quite a mix of backgrounds. They come from different socio-economic circumstances, different educational circumstances, different families circumstances.

Seyward Darby:

I think there's a desire when we think about people who radicalize to imagine that something terrible happened to explain this. That there was some great trauma or seismic event that made them think... To curdle them somehow. In the way that like milk curdles, or whatever. But often, that's not the case.

Seyward Darby:

And in the women I researched and spent time in some cases getting to know them, but in other cases really getting to know about their lives via the way they had documented them online over the years, it was more of an accrual of things over time. A sense of life is not turning out the way that I wanted it to turn out, which didn't necessarily mean that something catastrophic had happened, but more jobs weren't showing up in the way that they'd been told they would if they got a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree, or feeling like they didn't have a voice in the way that they wanted to have a voice.

Seyward Darby:

A lot of these women, particularly women who were in their 20s 30s, early 40s, very much grew up as creatures of the Internet, where so much of your life is lived and so much communication happens online. And there was this sense of, "I'm not being heard. I'm lost in the cacophony of things." Or a sense that too much was being asked

of them, because they were being told, "Well, actually, that thing you said was racist?" Or, "Have you considered this?" Or, "Have you considered that?" And feeling very targeted somehow, which I mean, to be clear is in my view, ridiculous from the standpoint of what really matters. What are the gravity of these grievances?

Seyward Darby:

So, they have these ideas, these kind of senses of harm that they are nurturing inside themselves, and then white nationalism tells them that they are right, not only that they're righteous, because the things that are being done to them are wrong on some almost like deep, ethical, existential level. And it also says, join us. And if you join us, you will have those things that you feel like you are lacking.

Seyward Darby:

One of the interesting things about studying this space is realizing that radicalization is a very individualized process. Which isn't to say that there are trends and currents and things to pay attention to, but it really does have to do with an individual's need set and a feeling that some piece of their need set that is not being met, and white nationalism meets it from the standpoint of the narrative it gives them to explain their place in the world, the power it gives them, the sense of belonging it gives them. I could go on and on about the needs that white nationalism might be filling.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, and I think that those needs are seen very clearly in the three women that you focused on. Tell us a little bit about them and how you selected them and how they kind of represent the movements so to speak?

Seyward Darby:

The first woman is Corinna Olsen, who was a neo-Nazi between about 2008 and 2012, I want to say. Her story was interesting to me because it showed both the dynamics of radicalization and deradicalization. And there are certainly plenty of people who fit that mold, but I think that Corinna's story had a very, almost foundational quality to it, where in presenting her story, readers were really able to see this is what radicalization looks like, this is what deradicalization looks like. And then this is what the aftermath of that looks like.

Seyward Darby:

She grew up in Oregon, she is trained embalmer. Actually, I've been in touch with her recently, and she's had quite a year because of COVID and the number of deaths. She now lives in the Seattle area. The number of deaths she's been dealing with. I don't need to go into too much detail, I guess, but her story is very much one of feeling like she didn't have a sense of purpose and a sense of community and white nationalism, which she did discover online, gave her that.

Seyward Darby:

The second woman is Ayla Stewart, who goes by or went by when she was more active online, the name Wife with a Purpose, and her entire mission is about building a traditional life being a traditional wife. She's part of a community that in the last few years has gotten some attention, an online community called Trad, short for traditional. Her story is one of, she used to identify as a liberal feminist, she was pro immigration, anti-death penalty, very much kind of a crunchy leftist. But she was a person who was always seeking to be the best mother in the room, the most unique mother in the room, to be the person who everybody looked up to as a mother. And over the course of embracing that identity... She has six children. Over the course of embracing that identity and trying to differentiate herself from other women, she started moving further and further to the right, getting very disenchanted with feminism as she defined it. And ultimately, she became a very vociferous anti-feminist and white nationalist.

Seyward Darby:

And so her story is interesting because it allows some delving into these issues of traditional gender roles that permeate the history of white nationalism, and also to look at religion and its role in white nationalism, because she ultimately became a conservative Mormon and then kind of left Mormonism behind but very much still considers herself a conservative Christian. And also to look at anti-feminism as very much intertwined with white nationalism and also as an important gateway to white nationalism.

Seyward Darby:

The third woman is Lana Lokteff, who you mentioned earlier, and she is a bit of a queen bee, as I have described her before in white nationalism. She and her husband run an alt-media platform called Red Ice, which for a long time was not banned from social media. But recently, in the last year and a half, has been banned, but still very much operating. And it is a hub for white nationalists. It is a hub for conspiracy theorists. It is just a platform for really dispersing any number of bigoted and paranoid ideas. But Lana is interesting, because she presents it all under... She's attractive, intelligent woman and she too is from Oregon. She's, for instance, better known and more widely quoted and recognized on the far right than her husband. And she puts a palatable face on things, which really is both savvy and terrifying.

Seyward Darby:

Her story is really one of someone who wanted to be that kind of person, who wanted to be a figure that people listen to, a figure that helped people realize things about themselves, a figure that people turn to for some kind of wisdom, so to speak. And she came from more of a... I guess, kind of libertarian, almost slightly anarchist, like grungy mid-90s mentality, but she ultimately radicalized about... I guess, nine or so years ago, to become arch conservative white nationalist ultimately. And she and her husband's platform has been very influential.

Seyward Darby:



The research nugget that I think about a lot is that what when the massacre happened at the mosque in New Zealand, there was a research paper done looking at the rhetoric that the shooter had used in various I think online... I don't know if it was a manifesto or just an aggregation of language that the shooter had used online and then compared it with rhetoric of various far-right figures. And Lana was one of the people whose rhetoric was most similar to his rhetoric.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, it was so fascinating to read that. I mean, the way that they were able to identify those patterns I think was super interesting. And when you look at these women, one of the underlying themes, if you look at how they've evolved, I think their evolution as leaders in white nationalism evolved parallel to the rise in technology. Social media and all of that, with Corinna starting with Stormfront, the old dial-up Bulletin Board System. And then slowly as social media began to evolve with Facebook and Twitter and YouTube and of course going on to Discord and Telegram, and all of these different... You can just see that evolution, and you even saw it going back through the Wayback Machine which shows you the history of websites and things like that.

Seyward Darby:

Yeah, it really was interesting to see, first of all, every single one of the women that I found was radicalized online to a certain degree, and usually to a very large degree. Which isn't to say that they're not things that were going on in their personal lives that had nothing to do with the Internet, but the Internet was absolutely the tool that got them from point A to point B in a radicalization sense.

Seyward Darby:

I think what's interesting to me is that the Internet has been a boon for racists and has been since its earliest days. Like in the early 1980s, when you had... Not even dial up, like what they called BBNs. I always forget exactly what they were called. But the very early ways of dialing into a system and having a conversation with people, white nationalists started using them very early on, and had conversations and published articles about how the Internet was going to be this great tool for them, because it would allow them to communicate over distances, it would allow them to communicate outside of traditional channels, and would keep prying eyes away. And so this is a long way of saying that when it comes to the Internet, white nationalists have always been ahead of the curve.

Seyward Darby:

Stormfront, as you mentioned, has been around since the mid-90s. It's still going strong, it's very creaky and old-fashioned by Internet standards at this point, but it is still frequented, and we've seen white nationalists be early adopters and very vigorous users of many, many different technologies over the last 25, 30 years. What I will say, though, is that if you then look back in time, so in the pre-Internet period, white nationalists have often been at the forefront of thinking about ways to use new

communication strategies that are evolving and coming to be democratized. They have always been very savvy about utilizing those tools.

Seyward Darby:

So whether you're talking about creating newsletters, making their own magazines, starting their own publishing houses. Certainly in the '80s and '90s, there was a lot of talk about how they were using music, popular music, and starting their own record labels and things like that. And so it is very much yes, the Internet without question has been a huge asset for the far right, in a way that something along the lines of magazines was not, but at the same time it is in keeping with a tradition, it is in keeping with the ways that these individuals and people who believe in white nationalism have utilized communication tools over time.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you say something really fascinating that even though as far back in the 1990s, you even had people like Don Black, Alabama's former KKK leader, saying, "The potential for organizations and movements such as ours," he said, "is enormous. We're reaching tens of thousands of people who never before had access to our point of view." But you also say that till like 2003, it was very much what you describe as a cloaked strategy and that the whole intent was to widen the so-called Overton window. Can you describe what that is and what the strategy was and how that changed over time?

Seyward Darby:

Sure. I think that there's this assumption for folks who aren't acquainted with white nationalism, and I certainly count myself in this pre-2016. This was a space that I knew about. I grew up in the south and I was very aware of white supremacy and the harm that it does, but I was not acquainted with the actual inner workings of the far right. And when I started looking into it and becoming better acquainted with it, it's not that if you're in this space people are using extremely racist language necessarily, or are saying things that are just completely, "Oh my gosh, I've never heard the N word used so many times." Or, "I've never heard people say such anti-Semitic things." Yes, absolutely, that material exists, but that exists deeper. And if you think of it as almost like concentric circles, that's at the very heart of white nationalism, and at the very heart of available information on the far right.

Seyward Darby:

And as you move outward in the concentric circles, you get this widening of the Overton window, this idea, the sociological idea that if you are constantly widening the topics that are considered acceptable, or the viewpoints that are considered socially acceptable, you're starting to let in people who might otherwise be considered on the fringes. And white nationalists have definitely been for years trying to find ways to widen the Overton window to get their viewpoint into what would be considered a more socially acceptable space.

Seyward Darby:

Certainly, in the later 20th century, there was a lot of discussion amongst like the David Dukes of the world, and other white nationalists, who were prominent to say, "Okay, let's stop with the Ku Klux Klan robes and the Nazi symbolism and think about how we can appeal to the average white American, and make this seem like just another way of thinking about politics." I think that people who get radicalized into white nationalism, those are the channels through which they often come. That it's not, "Oh, don't you hate people who aren't like you? Don't you feel angry about the existence of Black people or Jewish people," or whoever a target might be? It's more something along the lines of, "Do you consider yourself a patriot? Do you consider yourself a good American? Do you miss the way things used to be? Do you value your safety and the integrity of your community?"

Seyward Darby:

What is baked within that, and I'm certainly you know riffing, and there are lots of other types of language that service similar function, but what is in that is it is veiled and coded language about what is normal, and this idea that whiteness and that white Americanness is kind of normal, and the thing that we should all be striving to protect and to inhabit, certainly. And then once people buy into that language, yes, then absolutely, it's a slippery slope into well, I'm just saying what everybody else is thinking by using racist language or believing racist things. But that entry point, it can seem very benign, but in fact is not. And they have worked hard to make it seem benign.

Chitra Ragavan:

You discuss a lot of the different digital platforms that are online platforms that are out there. Obviously, you've got 4chan and you've got BitChute and you've got Twitter and all of these channels, but you give YouTube a special mention, for becoming perhaps like the biggest channel for spreading hate and hardcore conspiracy theories, because even if you're searching for something relatively benign, like Tucker Carlson, you quickly get pulled into this rabbit hole of fake news. How do you see YouTube's role compared to all of these other platforms? They're all powerful, and they've all been buffeted with these issues, but YouTube seems to be one of the worst.

Seyward Darby:

I mean, first of all, I would say Tucker Carlson is not benign. I mean, we could go down a long rabbit hole about, or I should say digression about Tucker Carlson's full-on dive into-

Chitra Ragavan:

I mean, if you even look for like a Fox News-

Seyward Darby:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. I understand what you're saying.

Chitra Ragavan:

... The algorithm pulls up more and more negative things for you very, very quickly.

Seyward Darby:

Right. And I think that, first of all, YouTube is very slow to react to the fact that there was hateful and just false information on the platform. It also has this powerful algorithm certainly. And the far right also has been very savvy about flooding YouTube. And then when YouTube started to actually ban white nationalists, to flood other platforms with their content. And so the whole idea is not just the algorithm's going to push you in a more extreme direction, which it absolutely does, but also that if you're just flooding the market, so to speak, people are more likely to wind up at the content you want them to wind up at, because there are just more opportunities for them to do so.

Seyward Darby:

And so YouTube is interesting, in no small part because of the algorithm, yes, but then also just the power of video. And that people, anybody could get a microphone... Not even get a microphone. I've watched white nationalists' videos that were shot on somebody's iPhone or whatever, but that people could put their information out there and find ways that they intersected with other content creators. And so, "Oh, you agree with this. We can start making videos together." Or, "I'll feature you on my channel or recommend your videos." And it starts to become this very interconnected ecosystem.

Seyward Darby:

I think that simultaneous to people beginning to really put their content on YouTube. And certainly, I should say too, you have more power of not just individuals, but more powerful media entities that are on the far right, like Red Ice, for instance, that Lana and her husband run. We've seen a new number of... I wouldn't call like the Epoch Times or Newsmax white nationalist, per se, but these arbiters of disinformation and bigotry, starting to create YouTube channels and really push their worldview through that platform. But I think too, this all happened simultaneous to the rise of this anti-media sentiment that certainly Trump spent four years hammering and saying, "Fake news. Enemies of the people. Mainstream news is bad news." And certainly, there were people who then said, "Well, Fox is the only news I care about." But then I think there were a lot of people who... And I heard this when I was doing my research. People who said, "The first place I go to when a news event happens is YouTube. I go to find the voices that I trust and care about on YouTube to tell me the real story, to pull the cloak back and tell me what really happened."

Seyward Darby:

The problem with that, of course, is when the content is always filtered through a white nationalist lens, truth is not really the point. Propaganda is. And so I think that YouTube and content creators on YouTube, white nationalist content creators on YouTube, very much benefited from YouTube's lax approach to their content, to the algorithm, the ability to flood the platform with information. And then on top of that, the fact that more and more people who considered themselves on the right, conservative, or even further to the right, were starting to turn to alt media, because they were being told that the mainstream media was bad. And maybe this is where we're going next, but I really do

think that powerful platforms like YouTube were just incredibly slow to respond to all of this, and to see it as a real problem.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's exactly where I was going. You read my mind. I mean, I was struck by another quote from Lana in your book. She says to her followers, "Be loud. When women get involved, a movement becomes a serious threat." What can we expect to see from the Sisters in Hate in coming months and years? How serious a threat is it? And what do tech companies and the US government need to do to counter and combat what we're seeing unfolding every day?

Seyward Darby:

I will confess to not being terribly optimistic. I think I say this at the end of the book, that I'm just a bit of a pessimist by nature. And having studied this and seeing the ways that white nationalism has actually been very resilient over time, I think that certainly in the Obama years, there was the sense of, "Oh, we're post racial. We've passed this important milestone. We're on our way to a better America," was a lie that we were telling ourselves. Meanwhile, the far right was gathering a lot of steam in no small part online.

Seyward Darby:

And now what we're seeing and the reason that I feel rather pessimistic is that we've gotten to a point where there's really no middle ground between people who have a vision of a more progressive America, a more inclusive America in which the dismantling of white supremacy is an ongoing project. And people, millions of people who voted for Trump, some of whom identify as white nationalists, some of whom are white nationalists without even realizing it, who have pretty much the polar-opposite view. I think what's scary about that is it's not as though the pendulum will settle in the middle somehow, I think it's going to keep swinging back and forth. I'm not a political scientist, and maybe political scientists are listening to this and saying, "No, you're wrong and you're just a sad sack pessimist." But that's very much where I am from thinking about politics writ large standpoint.

Seyward Darby:

With regard to white nationalists, specifically in the far right, they lost something. And so far as Trump losing the election, means they don't have someone in power, who they... Even if he was frankly never far right enough, for the most avowed white nationalists, but he was about as close as a president can get. And they lost something in so far as he's not in power, but I mean, the far right has always thrived on having a lost cause, quite literally. The lost cause of what happened in the Civil War, and this attempt to rewrite history after the fact and to create a new America in their racist, retrograde image. I think that the Trump era is already becoming something similar, where something has been lost, which means that we need to fight to regain it.

Seyward Darby:

I think you'll see white nationalists taking advantage, or certainly actions and certainly taking advantage of that almost outsiderly position, even though what's fascinating about the way that they center themselves as outsiders and say, "We're fighting against power." Really, they're not fighting against power... Sorry, they are the power. White supremacy is like the baseline of everything in the United States. And so they're fighting to keep something in place as opposed to dismantling it, but they will act as though it's the opposite because that's beneficial to them from a propaganda standpoint.

Seyward Darby:

Point being, I think you're going to be seeing a shifting of rhetorical strategy to a certain point, taking advantage of new technologies, which we're already seeing. I remember right after the election when a bunch of far-right types and also just Fox News types were like, "I'm going to Parler. I'm done with Twitter. It's banned the president. This is terrible. I'm going to Parler." And I remember on Twitter at the time, there were a good number of progressive pundit types or journalists who were mocking, and certainly just average people who happen to use Twitter were mocking of this. They were like, "Yeah, yeah, go use your knockoff Twitter platform, good riddance."

Seyward Darby:

And I remember talking to a historian who studies the far right, and specifically the late '70s to early '90s. We were side messaging and I was like, "I find this terrifying, because literally what they're saying is, 'We're going to go create our own echo chamber over here.'" And the creation of echo chambers is something we should always be scared of. And then lo and behold, a couple of weeks later, January 6 happens, and we find out that Parler was a very important platform from an organizing standpoint. I think that certainly Parler has been put through the wringer since then, and we've seen various technologies be put through the wringer when they are found to be useful to white nationalists. But the problem is that they keep creating new ones, it becomes a game of whack-a-mole.

Seyward Darby:

To your question about solutions, I think that it's a very difficult... It is such a existential problem, not just for technology, but for the United States, frankly, that there's no, "Oh, here's how you do it. Here's how we end the scourge." It's an all-hands-on-deck situation where you need people at tech companies putting humanity and the wellbeing of individuals over profit and expansion. You need people who are willing to recognize hate speech for what it actually is, and not kowtow in the way that we've seen Facebook do again and again and again. "Oh, conservative commentators say that we're not being fair to their content. That we're censoring them, when in fact, no, that's not happening," but giving ground where ground should not be given.

Seyward Darby:

I think too there are law enforcement questions. Absolutely. I mean, in the wake of January 6, arresting, prosecuting individuals who literally attempted a coup in the country, but law enforcement and tech regulation internally at companies and whatnot,

those are just pieces of the puzzle. The solution also lies in how we think about education and how we think about raising new generations of people to recognize where white supremacy is in their lives, how to combat it, and how to have a more progressive vision of the country. I think it has to do with empowering voices of color and voices of other people in the United States who are not white or do not identify as white, and helping just bring new voices into the various halls and institutions of power.

Seyward Darby:

So, this is a long way of saying I don't think in my lifetime the scourge of white supremacy is suddenly going to be gone, but I do think, depending on... I'm a writer, and I got interested in this topic and kept going with this topic in part because I felt like this was the way that I could contribute. I could learn as much as I could about something that I had never been taught and share it with the wider world. And people who work at tech companies can do their part inside tech companies, people who work in the government can do their part inside of government, etc, etc. But point being, it's an all-hands-on-deck situation if we really want to make inroads into white supremacy and make it such that the pendulum doesn't want to swing back and forth. That instead it does start to settle over a more generous vision of America as opposed to swinging toward one that's more laced with grievance and a false idea of what the country isn't and should be.

Chitra Ragavan:

Great. Seyward, thank you so much for joining me and for this fascinating conversation.

Seyward Darby:

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.