

Techtopia with Chitra Ragavan

Episode 8: Anjana Rajan

Chitra Ragavan:

When tech entrepreneur Anjana Rajan, whose expertise is applying cryptography to human rights and national security issues, joined Polaris as a chief technology officer, she thought she was setting aside her focus on domestic terrorism to help Polaris with its core mission of fighting human trafficking. But then Rajan learned that the far-right conspiracy group, QAnon, had been making outlandish human trafficking allegations against Polaris, resulting in massive internet denial of service or DDoS attacks by QAnon followers, who are even making death threats against the nonprofit.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello, everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is Techtopia. Many of you, of course, are familiar with QAnon from the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol and on democracy by supporters of former President Donald Trump, triggering a massive domestic terrorism investigation by U.S. authorities. Suddenly, Rajan found that her world had come full circle. Over the past year, she's had to bring all of her national security and technology skills to bear to expand Polaris' mission to investigate this nexus of human trafficking and domestic terrorism.

Chitra Ragavan:

Rajan's work and that of her Polaris team resulted in a recent report called Countering QAnon: Understanding the Role of Human Trafficking in the Disinformation-Extremist Nexus. Joining me now to talk about the report and what her investigation uncovered is Anjana Rajan, who I'm happy to report is also my former colleague at Palantir. Anjana, welcome to Techtopia.

Anjana Rajan:

Thanks so much for having me, Chitra.

Chitra Ragavan:

We spoke almost exactly a year ago when you were moving cross country from California to join Polaris as the CTO, just as the COVID shutdown was starting. You were coming to Polaris with a mission to combat human trafficking. Just to give a brief definition for people of what human trafficking is, how do you define human trafficking and Polaris' mission as you knew it when you first came onboard?

Anjana Rajan:

Sure. Yeah, it's hard to believe it's been a full year. But Polaris' mission is to end sex and labor trafficking and to restore freedom to survivors. Our approach is to be survivor-centered, racial justice-focused, and technology-enabled. The way we simply describe human trafficking is it's the illicit business of exploiting vulnerable people for profit. It's \$150 billion industry with 25 million victims worldwide, and that number is only going to grow unless something changes.

Chitra Ragavan:

You've had quite a whirlwind year in which clearly everything has changed, including your perception of what you would be doing at Polaris. How did you find out about the QAnon DDoS attacks on Polaris and tell us what the group was alleging?

Anjana Rajan:

When I joined Polaris, I didn't think that my work on domestic terrorism would be even remotely relevant, and it turns out I was very wrong about that. When I joined the organization, I had learned that in August of 2018, we were the target of a coordinated disinformation campaign that accused Polaris of being part of a fictitious child sex trafficking ring supposedly run by The Clinton Foundation. This outlandish conspiracy we discovered was driven by none other than QAnon.

Anjana Rajan:

That summer, QAnon followers doxed our senior staff and our board. They sent our hotline advocates death threats, and they led a cyber attack on our hotline, which made it impossible for victims and survivors to get the help they needed. As you can imagine, it was a really harrowing and traumatizing experience for the organization. When I heard about this after I joined, I was actually very terrified, because it's one thing to think about domestic terrorism in a very theoretical sense, it's a whole other thing when the threat is knocking on your door.

Anjana Rajan:

I was worried that the attack on Polaris was actually a leading indicator of something much bigger. Because while QAnon was not yet part of our mainstream discourse in the way that it is now, the patterns of QAnon followed a very similar disinformation playbook that we've seen used by other adversarial actors. It's the same way ISIS used propaganda to recruit women into their fold. It's the same way Saudi Arabia launched a disinformation campaign to discredit their enemies.

Anjana Rajan:

It's the same way the Russian internet research agency has subverted the 2016 U.S. election. The way that I saw it, the COVID pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the upcoming presidential election, it was all seeming to create this perfect storm of tension. It was clear to me that we were just barreling towards an inflection point that would seem come to head on November 3rd.

Chitra Ragavan:

In a weird, you were the perfect person that Polaris could have had because let's just look at your background for a minute, right? You were at Palantir, of course, which has a huge national security focus with domestic and global terrorism in terms of the clients for their data analytics platform, and you and I both worked at Palantir. And then you went to Callisto, which is a nonprofit that builds advanced cryptographic technology to combat sexual assault, and then you went to Aspen Institute where you were a tech policy fellow where you were working on preventing mass gun violence by white supremacist terrorists.

Chitra Ragavan:

And last but not least, you're an independent consultant for the Homeland Security Advisory Council that supports the country's top national security advisors on cybersecurity policies. In a

weird way, you had a perfect mix of skills that brought you to the point at Polaris where all sudden there were these QAnon attacks. What were your thoughts then once you started to learn more about the QAnon attacks, how they evolved and what it meant for Polaris?

Anjana Rajan:

Yeah, it's a strange coincidence that the timing worked out the way it did, I suppose. I think for me when I joined Polaris a year ago, what worried me the most was that QAnon was a triple threat, right? Not only is it undermining the anti-trafficking movement, but it could threaten our democratic institutions, our elections, and worst of all, it could be a force multiplier for violent extremism. This feeling was really deepened in July 2020 when QAnon launched a child sex trafficking conspiracy against Wayfair, the online furniture retailer.

Anjana Rajan:

Even though Polaris wasn't the direct target of the attack this time, the deluge of dis and misinformation had devastating impacts on the anti-human trafficking apparatus. In that moment, Polaris decided we need to attack.

Chitra Ragavan:

What was the Wayfair conspiracy theory that was promoted by QAnon?

Anjana Rajan:

The Wayfair conspiracy claimed that the furniture retailer was actually trafficking children in their overpriced cabinets. While that sounds absolutely ridiculous, what made it particularly concerning is that this narrative actually spilled into more mainstream forums. It was one of the first conspiracy theories that manifested on Reddit, not just these fringe platforms. What you're now seeing is that the folks who were calling the hotline were not just people maliciously spreading disinformation, but it was also your mom on Facebook who was calling the hotline, concerned about these poor children.

Anjana Rajan:

It was a watershed moment in the movement when we started to see these conspiracies spill over into the mainstream.

Chitra Ragavan:

Wow! Before Wayfair, when QAnon started to attack Polaris and make these human trafficking allegations, what started that? That's an amazing story. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Anjana Rajan:

Sure. I hate to say that I'm now a QAnon historian because I know way too much about their origin story, but this goes all the way, if you want to kind of think about where this started, around the time of Pizzagate, which was actually a predecessor to the QAnon movement. And this actually again is building off of the 2016 election after the email leak from the DNC. A number of highly motivated folks on Internet message boards started pouring over the trove of John Podesta's emails and started to make these nonsensical connections between a pizza shop in Washington DC and a child trafficking ring.

Anjana Rajan:

We then saw in a few months later the Pizzagate attack on a pizza shop here in DC, where an armed gunman went to a pizza shop and thought that he was rescuing children from a basement and there was not even a basement to be had. Fast forward to after Donald Trump was elected, that's really when the QAnon movement actually first came to light. An anonymous poster posted pretending that they were in fact a government insider with top secret Q clearance who had the insights on this very insidious deep state Satanic cabal of human trafficking.

Anjana Rajan:

Where that then led to involving Polaris is in the aftermath in 2018. All of that chatter resulted in a Q drop that distinctly targeted Polaris because of a Twitter kerfuffle between Chelsea Clinton and some Twitter trolls. The Q drop literally accused the trafficking hotline of being part of The Clinton Foundation and the rest is history from there.

Chitra Ragavan:

Wow! And a Q drop for those who don't know what that is, is what?

Anjana Rajan:

It was essentially a post by who... We have a theory of who this person was, but at the time, it was an anonymous post by someone pretending to be Q that would leave these breadcrumbs for their followers to follow the rabbit hole and figure out the secret behind this global cabal.

Chitra Ragavan:

How was Pizzagate affiliated with the Clintons?

Anjana Rajan:

The crux of a lot of these conspiracies was centered around Hillary Clinton in the aftermath of the 2016 election. One of the conspiracy's origin stories was centered around The Clinton Foundation being the antagonist behind this child pedophile ring with global reach. When we came into the fold, it actually was through this accusation that Polaris was part of the Clinton Foundation and therefore that the hotline was actually a front for something more sinister that obviously wasn't true.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anjana, why do you think so many people believe in a lot of these really crazy, wacky conspiracy theories?

Anjana Rajan:

I think the widespread coverage of Jeffrey Epstein's indictment and arrest and death have only served to fuel this idea, because it really allows those who are aiming to spread conspiracies to really bait people in with a very true, but very extreme case of human trafficking. In many ways, Epstein's method of force, fraud, and coercion are actually very typical of human trafficking cases. He was a very wealthy and powerful man who used his resources to identify and groom and recruit and exploit vulnerable girls, especially those coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Anjana Rajan:

But QAnon followers were much less interested in exploring the underlying systemic inequities that enabled Epstein to commit his crimes for so long and instead focused on these very partisan and extreme details of his private islands and his famous friends, which then fueled the false narratives about a celebrity pedophile ring at the highest levels of power.

Chitra Ragavan:

Fascinating. You mentioned how many women are prone to believing a lot of these rumors. One of our previous guests who was on this podcast wondered if maybe the high numbers of women who say they have been the victim of a sexual assault of some kind may also play a part in some of that. Have you seen that and what do you think of that theory?

Anjana Rajan:

I think the recurrent takeaway here is as we counter disinformation about trafficking fueled by QAnon, we have to continue to remain survivor-centered. I think this is why it's so important for organizations like Polaris to be leading the conversation and holding that nuance. We can denounce QAnon without denouncing the realities of sexual violence, and I think that is incredibly important to do.

Chitra Ragavan:

How did Pizzagate affect Polaris?

Anjana Rajan:

Ultimately, the conspiracy around child sex trafficking lingered on long after Pizzagate. The accusations of the democratic and Hollywood elite became a core tenet of the QAnon conspiracy. Ultimately, the conspiracy theory accused Polaris of being part of this global cabal.

Chitra Ragavan:

Here you were, you were CTO of Polaris and all of a sudden, you were dealing with a crazy organization and a very serious threat. What were your next actions and recommendations for Polaris?

Anjana Rajan:

Right after the Wayfair conspiracy, it was clear we needed to do something. We decided to build a security strategy that can protect our organization against this threat. Simply put, in order to defend our mission, we need to do four things. We need to defend the reputation of our movement and our organization. We need to defend the operations of our hotline. We need to defend the physical safety of our people, and we need to defend the cybersecurity of our data. In order to do all of this effectively, it has to be rooted in a systems change data driven approach.

Chitra Ragavan:

What did you do next?

Anjana Rajan:

Because I had realized that this problem was incredibly complex, we wanted to take a very multidisciplinary approach. We established a strategic partnership with The Soufan Group, which is a leading global security firm, and their partner Limbik, which is a content science

company, and we worked together to build an AI model that can analyze disinformation on the major social media platforms by looking at two key factors. The first factor is how believable is this content, and the second is, is there foreign influence on that content.

Anjana Rajan:

By defining these thresholds, we could start to quantify the risk of disinformation going viral before it actually happens. We were then able to integrate our hotline call line into the model, so we could start seeing when these online behaviors converted into offline actions. By the time the election came around, we had really shifted from a very defensive stance to an offensive posture.

Anjana Rajan:

We were not only able to predict the emerging QAnon narratives that were becoming prominently tweaked, but we were now able to build a daily forecast of call volume to the hotline based on the rising disinformation. As a result, we were now in a position to prepare for that stochastic demand, and that's been hugely transformational for us.

Chitra Ragavan:

How has that changed things? As you were going into the November elections, you were not probably surprised to see the chatter, right? And leading out of the November elections, none of that was coming as a surprise to you because you had already started to look into it.

Anjana Rajan:

Yeah. Once we got ourselves into a secure posture, put our own oxygen mask on, we started to then translate our knowledge into advocacy work. In the fall, we had launched an entire comms campaign focused on debunking rumors and myths about human trafficking. We had helped bring together 90 organizations in the anti-trafficking movement to sign an open letter denouncing QAnon. We had called upon Republican House leadership to deny committee assignments to the members with openly promoted QAnon theories.

Anjana Rajan:

As the year was ending, we started to see some disturbing patterns of how human trafficking disinformation was being used to radicalize susceptible audiences into violent extremist behaviors. Our team felt that we should share our findings in a policy paper to share with the new administration. Little did we know that we were just days away from an insurrection.

Chitra Ragavan:

Wow! That leads us to January 6th and all of the madness of that day. What was that like watching it unfold on television after all of this deep research and analysis that you had done and all of the things you were finding?

Anjana Rajan:

I mean, the attack on January 6th was horrifying for everyone in this country, because it was a domestic terrorist attack on our democracy's most sacred space. I'm not alone in saying this, but the imagery was so haunting. The gallows and the noose outside the Capitol conjures images from The Turner Diaries. Confederate flags were being waved, right? These are flags that represent a fictitious white supremacist nation. People were wearing sweatshirts that said Camp Auschwitz and other holocaust and Nazi paraphernalia.

Anjana Rajan:

It was incredibly upsetting, and January 6 will always be a very dark day in our nation's history. I think for us at Polaris, it was especially bone-chilling because the very worst thing we had been saying could happen actually happened. The people who were showing up in our weekly briefings were now suddenly all over our television screens attacking the Capitol. These very people who had been sending us death threats for years were now all over the news. Yeah, it was especially painful.

Anjana Rajan:

And at the very same time, it was also a wake up call and it was very motivating for our team to put pen to paper and very forcefully and full-throatedly say what we wanted to say about this, and that's what we ended up doing in our report.

Chitra Ragavan:

People like Jacob Chansley, also known as QAnon Shaman who was sort of one of the most visible on the Hill that day, those were people you were already investigating, right?

Anjana Rajan:

Yeah. Again, we were doing it more just to protect ourselves. It was more, where are these narratives coming from and how do we counter that disinformation? Now suddenly his face is incredibly infamous across the country.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell me a little bit about how this report that you've produced, Countering QAnon: Understanding the Role of Human Trafficking in the Disinformation-Extremist Nexus, came about?

Anjana Rajan:

Well, it was something we had been planning on writing for a long time, but the sense of urgency wasn't as high. We thought we'd put our findings in our policy paper and share it with the administration maybe after the first 100 days or so, so that they could settle in. And then on January 7th we said, "Okay, I guess we need to write it now." I think for us at Polaris, it was really about as we have a national conversation about what happened, yes, we need to talk about the role of social media platforms and disinformation.

Anjana Rajan:

Yes, we need to talk about the future of prosecuting domestic terrorism crimes. But the question that we also need to be asking is, what brought people to the Capitol in the first place? That really comes down to the role human trafficking played. The report that we wrote in collaboration with The Soufan Group and Limbik really focused on four key findings that we're able to share publicly.

Chitra Ragavan:

What were those findings?

Anjana Rajan:

The first one says that disinformation about human trafficking serves a gateway narrative that radicalizes susceptible audiences to condone and even perform acts of violence and terrorism. This ultimately poses a threat to the national security of the United States. The insurrection is actually really a tragic case study because two of the women who died, Ashli Babbitt and Rosanne Boyland, whose names we now come to become very familiar with, they were both radicalized by human trafficking conspiracies.

Anjana Rajan:

When we analyzed Ashli Babbitt's social media, we can see that her radicalization patterns were rooted in child human trafficking conspiracy theory for several years. But in contrast, Rosanne Boyland had been radicalized extremely quickly, and she first started posting QAnon content after the Wayfair conspiracy itself, just only a few months. The takeaway for us is that human trafficking narratives are a very effective topic to "red pill" people into violent ideologies.

Anjana Rajan:

What's really interesting is that women are more susceptible to being radicalized by these narratives and we think it's because it appeals to their altruism to protect children. Our data showed that women are 50% more likely than men to be classified as QAnon fence-sitters, meaning they are more likely to fall for these narratives. That ties in well with previous research about counter terrorism because we've seen especially with Salafi-Jihadist groups, women are also using narratives about children being harmed to recruit.

Anjana Rajan:

What this means is that it forebodes that these type of narratives will be used in the future by other groups as well.

Chitra Ragavan:

What else did you find?

Anjana Rajan:

Well, the second finding has a direct impact on how harmful disinformation is to victims and survivors of human trafficking. At Polaris, we actually analyzed the amount of time we spent on nonsense calls about the Wayfair conspiracy theory. A typical human trafficking case results in about 2.5 signals of the hotline. In contrast, the Wayfair case alone was 536 signals, each of which contained no actionable information for us to use.

Anjana Rajan:

Now what that translates to is that the time we spent responding to disinformation about Wayfair could have instead been spent responding to an additional 42 trafficking cases. Now, when you consider that in all of 2019, there were only 600 federal prosecutions of human trafficking, 42 is a really big number. Wayfair is not the only conspiracy theory we dealt with that summer. When you compound that number with all other disinformation, you can start to see how this has a devastating impact on the anti-trafficking movement.

Chitra Ragavan:

What is interesting to me, maybe you can talk a little bit about this Wayfair conspiracy theory and what they were saying about Wayfair, is that most of these ideas are so farfetched, and yet

it generates a massive following which goes back to your point of the susceptibility particularly among women who want to do the right thing, to fall for these kinds of ideas.

Anjana Rajan:

Exactly. That actually what our third finding shows, which comes from a study we ran called A Believability Classification survey, and this was driven by our partners Limbik who came up with this proprietary survey. We ran the survey between November 4th, 2000 and January 7th, 2021 with a nationally representative sample of nearly 16,000 respondents, so a very large sample size. And through the survey, we learned that 21% of U.S. adults self-identify as QAnon believers, which is alarming.

Anjana Rajan:

When we asked the question, to what extent do you agree with the statement, "I believe elites, politicians, and celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings and we need to #saveourchildren," a whopping 41% of U.S. adults agreed or strongly agreed.

Chitra Ragavan:

What does that tell you?

Anjana Rajan:

Well, it shows that many people are susceptible to these narratives. In contrast, only 18% of U.S. adults firmly rejected the idea that elites, politicians, and celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings. What this means is the remaining 82% of the U.S. population are at risk of being susceptible to believing this narrative, which means that if you are a violent extremist organization, this becomes an incredibly potent gateway narrative for you to recruit folks into a more radical and violent ideology.

Anjana Rajan:

We're seeing that happening right now, which is what the fourth finding shows, which is that violent anti-government extremists, white supremacist, and the Neo-Nazis who were not originally associated with QAnon, have appeared to caught onto the allure and the trick of using conspiracies about child trafficking to radicalize and recruit new members. This is very concerning because they are co-opting these disillusioned QAnon followers into these more violent groups, and that can expand the pool of individuals who are willing to commit acts of violence and terrorism.

Anjana Rajan:

What we've seen in the deplatforming on social media is that now these groups are migrating to encrypted chat platforms. What we saw in January was that a white supremacy channel on Telegram with almost 3,000 followers posted about how to use a narrative of elites being baby-eating pedophiles as a way to specifically recruit QAnon followers. What this forebodes is this will continue to happen in the future agnostic of the extremist group or the technology platform.

Chitra Ragavan:

Where do we go from here? I mean, what's the solution?

Anjana Rajan:

Yeah. I'm afraid I'm a bearer of more bad news. Even though Trump is no longer in office and QAnon has been deplatformed from mainstream social media companies, the landscape ahead of us is still very dangerous for the anti-human trafficking movement. There are a couple of trends that I think are very concerning. First, QAnon will remain an enduring threat because it has become a big tent conspiracy and the movement is splintering. The next four years will be pretty important for the QAnon movement because they perceive that the so-called deep state is in political power.

Anjana Rajan:

This can give birth to more conspiracy theories within the QAnon umbrella. Since at its core, the conspiracy is centered around human trafficking disinformation, this is a big concern to us at Polaris. The second trend actually came from the ODNI's recently released unclassified report on domestic violent extremism. They have labeled racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists and militia violent extremists as a most serious threat to the U.S. homeland.

Anjana Rajan:

As Polaris continues to fight forcefully for racial justice, it means we increase our risk profile from these violent actors. The other really interesting trend, and frankly concerning trend, is something that the field calls salad bar ideology, which basically means that violent actors are picking and choosing ideologies to fit their hateful creed. The most well-known example of this is actually in the climate change movement, which we call eco-fascism, which is when someone combines very militant environmentalism with white supremacist extremism.

Anjana Rajan:

Given that human trafficking is equally a complex problem with intersecting narratives, it means that our movement is also at risk of being cherry picked by extremists to justify their hate and the violence in similar way. And then finally, today's disinformation landscape is more diverse in terms of capable actors, including state and non-state actors, especially Russia and China. What we've seen in recent weeks is that the Chinese Communist Party is willing to target organizations and governments who comment or post human rights abuses in the region.

Anjana Rajan:

As Polaris continues to speak out against human trafficking, both domestically and globally, it can carry significant cybersecurity risks for us as well.

Chitra Ragavan:

Where do nonprofits like Polaris fit in this fight, right? One thinks of nonprofits traditionally, at least in the old days, as sort of somewhat staid, perhaps slow moving entities, perhaps marred in a lot of bureaucracy. And then, of course, you've got very cutting-edge organizations like Polaris and all of this amazing work that you've been doing over the past few years. Where do nonprofits belong? Do they all have to be like Polaris in adoption of technology and thinking through a different lens?

Anjana Rajan:

I mean, I'm obviously very biased as a technologist myself, but yeah, I think this is exactly why we see our approach as being technology enabled. Because at the end of the day, this has to be an evidence-based movement, and we need to be thinking about what the facts are based on the data that we're seeing. The human trafficking movement is notoriously data poor. It's a

very hard problem to quantify and measure. Every time we publish our data, we caveat very heavily about what this data does tell us and what it doesn't.

Anjana Rajan:

I think one of the things we need to continue to support is how do we think about using technology responsibly in a way to not only help victims and survivors, but also be good stewards of data ethics, because too much data collection can also open up some privacy and some liberty concerns that are equally concerning.

Chitra Ragavan:

What do we need that we lack right now in terms of technology tools? I mean, you've used some very cutting-edge tools like cryptography in domestic violence and you've testified before Congress about the role of technology in fighting human trafficking. What are the things we have and what are the things we need, things like cryptography and encryption, or other tools?

Anjana Rajan:

I think in the survivor centered space, technology can be actually a really powerful weapon in the arsenal in these fights. I think as people are building products, the key tenet I think is to constantly be centering the victim and the survivor. Because I think one of the challenges we're seeing when building technology products is sometimes in an effort to move this movement forward, we take on a bit of a paternalistic approach. What we talk a lot about at Polaris is that we don't want to be in the rescue business.

Anjana Rajan:

It's not our job to rescue anyone. It's our job to restore power, and that's a really key tenet I believe in survivor centered work. I think, again, this goes back to why this is such a complex system and it's not as simple as pulling just one lever. We have to think about all of the levers, whether that be policy levers, market dynamics, cultural dynamics, all of these things actually need to inform the way we think about these problems.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's been an incredibly eventful year for you. Looking at all the work you did prior on cryptography and domestic terrorism, human trafficking, all the stuff you did at Palantir and Callisto and the Aspen Institute, looking back at this year of learning for you, what would you say has been the biggest takeaway for you on all these things and this year that it's been?

Anjana Rajan:

Oh man. I mean, I think as you mentioned, the first... I'm an engineer by training, and I did my undergrad and graduate work at Cornell. I do credit them for getting me interested in these complex and gnarly problems. But I think the complex system that I'm always been the most interested in has been human rights work. Because when systems are broken, injustice happens. I think for me the takeaway is having the patience and the confidence to sit in the complexity rather than trying to over simplify something.

Anjana Rajan:

But at the same time, making sure that we're communicating this in a way that is easy to understand. That I think is not an easy task and one I think Polaris as leaders of this movement are excited to shift in the way we talk about human trafficking. What I've noticed especially in

the last year is even though we're seeing the rise of QAnon and we're aware of the role of disinformation, it doesn't make human trafficking any less of a real problem. I think at the end of the day, that's a really important thing to remember.

Anjana Rajan:

When a lot of people think about human trafficking, they envision Liam Neeson from Taken and that is not an accurate representative at all. It's actually the end result of a range of other persistent injustices and inequities in our society and our economy. Simply arresting traffickers will not by itself end human trafficking because it's too complex. There's too much out there. If we want to fundamentally reduce the amount of trafficking, we have to actually change the conditions that make trafficking possible in the first place.

Anjana Rajan:

Traffickers, they pinpoint what people need and then they pretend to give it to them. Maybe it's a job or an apartment. Maybe it's love or a sense of belonging. These traffickers, they target communities where the needs are greatest, right? These are communities struggling with poverty and addiction and trauma. If we want to disarm the traffickers, we have to actually create a world where those needs are met by somebody other than the trafficker.

Anjana Rajan:

What that ultimately means is we need to fix the broken systems that fail to meet those needs, and that includes fixing our foster care system and having affordable housing and worker protections and immigration and criminal justice and on and on. But it also does mean that we need to go deeper, because preventing trafficking means facing the fallout of racism and sexism and economic discrimination.

Anjana Rajan:

That's why at Polaris, we see the fight against human trafficking as a fight for social justice, because it means that we need to repair the damage done by these unjust and unequal policies that have over generations led to greater needs in some communities over others.

Chitra Ragavan:

I was thinking that when you first started talking to folks at Polaris about what QAnon really meant, the threat that it really represented, you were barely, what, 90 days into your job at Polaris and they'd never had a CTO before. Here you were, all of a sudden, you were just raising alarms about something that they knew was serious, but all of a sudden, you are putting it in an entirely new light, right? What was the response?

Chitra Ragavan:

And I'm curious, looking back, are you glad you were right? Were there moments when you felt like, "God, I hope I'm right about this thing."

Anjana Rajan:

I mean, I wouldn't go that far. I mean, I hope no one... I think part of security work is preparing for the worst and hoping for the best. I was actually pleasantly surprised at how quickly Polaris grasped the problem. I think it's not surprising because at the end of the day, Polaris is in the business of dismantling human trafficking networks and taking down dangerous adversaries.

Our hotline advocates spend every single day responding to calls of survivors in crisis and helping them build their safety plans.

Anjana Rajan:

When you go to an organization like that and you talk about security and you just reframe it as, "This is what we already do. We are now facing a new adversary called QAnon, and we're building a safety plan for ourselves," then it clicks. I have to commend not just the leadership at Polaris, but everyone at the organization is taking the values of security to be really tightly aligned with our mission. Because at the end of the day, if we're not able to protect ourselves, it doesn't help victims and survivors either.

Chitra Ragavan:

One last question I had in wrapping up is a lot of the political temperature in this country has been lowered, at least for now, compared to where we were in November, December, and, of course, January leading up to January 6. But the sense I'm getting from you is even though the political temperature is down, the threat remains from QAnon and similar groups, that it's simmering under the surface just ready for the next provocation. Would you agree with that?

Anjana Rajan:

Yeah, definitely.

Chitra Ragavan:

What do you see from what you are seeing in the data that's coming in as to how it might manifest itself or how things are right now, the things that we don't see under the surface?

Anjana Rajan:

I think at the end of the day, and we talk about this when we talk about the disinformation-extremism nexus at large, right? The way this grows is by exploiting political fault lines. Human trafficking is one of the few issues that is a bipartisan issue. The over politicization of human trafficking is I think the red flag we need to be very careful about. Because once you start to politicize something, then you've now created sides. And when you create sides, that's when these narratives become exploitative.

Anjana Rajan:

And when it becomes exploitative, that what leads to political violence. I think what we have to be very careful about is as we speak about this issue, we need to be disciplined. And I say this not just Polaris, but everybody who cares about this topic needs to be very disciplined about speaking about this credibly, with truth. And that applies to people on all sides of the political aisle, not just on the right.

Anjana Rajan:

I think we need to be very committed to saying, if you care about protecting our democracy, if you care about fighting for racial justice, if you care about preventing violent extremism, then you need to be really thoughtful about how do we talk about human trafficking in a way that recognizes that this problem is not as simple as we like to think it is.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anjana, thank you so much for joining me today and for this fascinating conversation.

Anjana Rajan:

It was so great to speak with you.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anjana Rajan is the Chief Technology Officer of Polaris, a non-governmental organization that's leading a data driven social justice movement to fight human trafficking. Rajan's expertise is applying cryptography to human rights and national security issues. She's the former Chief Technology Officer at Callisto, a nonprofit that builds advanced cryptographic technology to combat sexual assault. Recently, Rajan was a tech policy fellow at the Aspen Institute, where she worked on preventing mass gun violence caused by white supremacist terrorists. She's also an independent consultant to the Homeland Security Advisory Council that supports the country's top national security leaders on cybersecurity policy. Rajan has testified before Congress as an expert witness to speak about ways technology can protect survivors and victims of human trafficking. 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 Cruz. 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 Podcast or your preferred podcast platform.

Chitra Ragavan:

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