

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Our guest this week is Dr. Samuel Woolley, a researcher and writer who examines how emerging media tools are used for both democracy and control. He's a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin and directs the Propaganda Research Lab at UT's Center for Media Engagement. He's published four books, including the recently released *Bots* and the forthcoming *Manufacturing Consensus: Understanding Propaganda in the Age of Automation and Anonymity*. He has testified before the US Congress regarding the impact of electoral disinformation on communities of color.

His work has been presented to and cited by the UK Parliament, NATO, and the United Nations. He joins us today to discuss his paper recently published in the *Journal of Democracy*: "Digital Propaganda: The Power of Influencers," which examines how attempts to manipulate public opinion using social media and emerging information communication technologies continue to proliferate and evolve internationally. Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Woolley. I really appreciate your time.

Samuel Woolley

Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question we like to ask all our guests is, can you tell us your academic origin story? What led you to your field of study?

Samuel Woolley

(laughs) Usually what I say when people ask me this is that I'm kind of a generalist. When I was doing my undergraduate, I was studying anthropology and (laughs) I just found a teacher, a professor I really liked, and he was actually a nautical archaeologist. But he was a phenomenal professor and teacher. And so, I ended up getting this specialization in nautical archaeology, even though I like, you know, I actually kind of hate scuba diving and it was never anything I was going to do. But what it got me really interested in was the study of culture and the study of society. And so, from there, I went to - I had a brief, like, blip where I thought maybe I wanted to be a filmmaker. So, I started a program at USC Film School and dropped out after like two weeks because I just realized, no, this is not for me and ended up doing a degree in cultural studies and fell in love with the means of studying culture as an engine for political change for both, you know, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And at the time I was studying specifically Saul Alinsky and the ways that this famous labor organizer from the 60s and whatnot. And I was studying the ways in which the Tea Party was using this, like, leftist labor organizer's writings to get their own movement to propel. And I was fascinated by how they talked about it a lot online and these sorts of things. And so that led me to kind of being interested in political organizing and I ended up doing some organizing work for a couple of political campaigns and realized like, wow, like, you know, data is so central to all of this, but there's only one side of the story that really

gets told. This was, you know, I'm dating myself a bit, this is, you know, well over a decade ago. And that's the side that data is the best thing ever and that it's going to like save the world and that social media is the savior of democracy. And so, I thought, maybe I'll go do a PhD and study how it creates problems and like, you know, how it's mismanaged.

And so, I went to the University of Washington and worked with a guy named Phil Howard there who's now at Oxford at the Internet Institute. And Phil and I landed on studying bots and we wanted to study how bots were used on social media to amplify particular kinds of content to make it look artificially popular and also to suppress particular streams of content through spam. And the rest is history. We called it, we called it computational propaganda. We put together a book on the subject and I ended up going to Oxford for a few years and then a couple of other places and landed here at the University of Texas.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That is, that is an excellent journey and I love that you started out underwater and you ended up-

Samuel Woolley

I did. Yeah. I've never really like gotten above water. I'll be honest. (laughs) I'm kind of trying.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Metaphorically speaking.

Samuel Woolley

Metaphorically. Yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughs) Excellent. Can you tell us about the Propaganda Research Lab, which you lead at the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas, Austin? What is the Center's mission? What kind of work do they do?

Samuel Woolley

That's a great question. So, as I mentioned prior to coming here, I spent some time at University of Oxford at the Computational Propaganda Project. I was the research director there, and we were really concerned with how automation and algorithms were used to perpetuate propaganda. So, how did bots get used? How did algorithms get manipulated to regurgitate, you know, the messages of the powerful or to falsely hype stuff? When I came to Texas, there was a slew of different projects doing work on disinformation, and disinformation animates me and interests me. But I think of disinformation as sort of one problem among many in our information sphere. And so, I'm much more interested in propaganda, not only because of, you know, it being used as an umbrella term, but also because there's a long history of studying it.

And so, there's a lot of people out there that, in the past, that are way smarter than me that have written great theory about propaganda and how it works. And so, I was able to build upon the work of those brilliant scholars, everyone from people like Herman and Chomsky, who wrote *Manufacturing Consent*, to Jacques Allul. And so, when I started the - when I came to Texas, I started the Propaganda

Research Lab as a team to study the meeting point of emerging media tools. So, things like TikTok and encrypted messaging apps that are popping up and propaganda. And so, it's really focused on the digital media space and the manipulation of public opinion. And it's not just focused on cataloging the problem, crucially, we're also very much focused on solutions. And very interestingly – I think – we're not a big data outfit.

I'm actually, because of my anthropology and cultural studies training, I'm an ethnographer. And so, all of our work tends – most of our work tends to be qualitative in nature, tends to be focused on talking to the people who produce propaganda rather than just studying massive swaths of data. We do have some big data scientists – computational social scientists that work with us that are super smart and doing really cool work. But that's not my work. Now, Center for Media Engagement, the five second version of it is that we work really specifically to work with journalists and people that engage with the news in order to help them to make a better product or help them to better understand what's going on in the world.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Got it. Got it. No. And that – actually, what you said before about your work being more qualitative leads me to my next question, which is: your paper that was in *Journal of Democracy*. Your paper, which is titled “Digital Propaganda: The Power of Influencers” – it looks at three trends in the way influence operations, which are full-scale organizations dedicated to coordinated spread of false information, how they are evolving the way that they do their work. And you analyze some of these companies by interviewing the company owners and operators. So, my question, as I read this, I thought, well, how did you land those interviews? How did you find and engage with these companies? Were these people receptive to your research or were they concerned about you sort of digging in and openly kind of looking at their trade secrets? I'm really curious how these interviews came about and how you pitched that.

Samuel Woolley

Well, that's a really, really great question. And it is that has been the perennial struggle of doing ethnographic research, studying the producers of propaganda. When I first started out doing this work, I basically knew no one in the space. And so, I like, did everything I could to get to know people. So, I would go to PR and advertising conferences. I would go to political digital marketing conferences and workshops. I would, you know, do whatever I could to get in front of these people. I also like, subscribed to a bunch of magazines where I, like, was able to find out – these weird trade magazines – where I was able to find out who was doing what.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right.

Samuel Woolley

The reality is that like, propaganda is a business. It remains a business. It always has been one. And it's a business that is not just political. It's firmly planted within the commercial sphere as well. And so, the people that do this stuff work for companies as well as for politicians. There's little differentiation a lot of the time between the two. They're very proud of their products. They like to talk about the things

that they make. They like to talk about the tactics that they come up with. Propaganda is just a word that gets used to describe any form of informational manipulation that appeals to something other than logic if you think about a really simple definition. And so, these folks aren't really shy of talking about what they do in terms of propaganda or in terms of persuasion or in terms of marketing or PR. It's taken a while to get them to understand why I do what I do and how I do what I do. But, because when I interview these people, I grant them anonymity, it makes them much more willing to talk.

The other thing is like, there's an incredible amount of hubris in this space because it's like the confluence of the propaganda space with the tech space. And so, a lot of these people feel like they're – they use the word the terminology of being a pioneer, or an innovator, or an entrepreneur. And so, you know, they kind of, you know, they foist themselves on their own petard, so to speak. They're willing to talk to me about it because they want – they so want to brag. And it's led to some crazy interviews of people that work for politicians at the very highest levels in the United States, but also in other places as well. And really – what I think about this is that it really helps us to understand the intentions of the people who are in power, what they're trying to do with the technology. It doesn't necessarily tell us what the effects are, but it tells us a heck of a lot of other things.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Interesting. Interesting. And you painted a really good picture of the why behind that, so thank you. I might be speaking just for myself, but looking at research like yours can overwhelm a reader, at least for me, leaving you feel like nothing we read or see online can really be trusted. What positive changes happening right now do you see? Do you think that misinformation online and this sort of – the last 10 years of things just getting, you know, what some people will call worse and worse, do you think we'll reach kind of a rock bottom at some point and the tide is going to start to turn? Will there ever be a public demand for transparency from sources and platforms? Do you see that happening?

Samuel Woolley

Yes. I do see a lot of positive momentum in combating purposefully spread falsehoods or disinformation and also combating more organized propaganda campaigns. I think we've already kind of hit rock bottom when it comes to like the disinformation/misinformation crisis online. There's been a lot of mea culpa moments for many of the social media companies for the failures that they've made. We have seen a lot of substantive changes in how social media companies operate. We've also seen the creation of regulation. Is it as much as I would like? No. I would like to see a lot more change happening towards the platforms designing with democracy and human rights in mind. I would like to see better, smarter regulation that's actually co-designed alongside technologists who understand how social media works. But there is momentum in the right direction.

There's also simultaneously a lot of hysteria around the problems of disinformation and misinformation that, frankly, sometimes serves the people who spread disinformation and misinformation. We have to be really careful about what we give oxygen to. Whitney Phillips, who's another scholar here in the United States, has this amazing paper called "The Oxygen of Amplification." The premise of that paper is, you know, journalists must be very careful about how they cover extremism, white supremacy, these sorts of things. I think the same thing is true, though, in covering disinformation and propaganda. We have to be careful who we give oxygen to. And so, sometimes when I do these interviews with people, I don't report on what I find out because I think that I'm just doing them a service by hyping what they

say. Also, a lot of the time, I'm sure that they're lying or exaggerating what they do. And so, when I cross-check and find that they're lying, I don't report on it.

All of this to say, like, in policy, in substantive technological change, and – even in the education sector, in the media literacy sector – we're seeing momentum, we're seeing change, we're seeing money being put down. The crucial thing is that this is a long-term project. There's no one technological fix or law that is going to solve the problems that we have. It is going to take institutional change, and it's going to take education. The biggest part of the problem that we have here in the United States, for instance, is that our education system is pretty broken and that a lot of people do not get taught critical thinking at a young age. And so they're particularly susceptible to the problem of propaganda and misinformation. Americans hate being tricked. They hate being manipulated. But unfortunately, we've set a lot of Americans up to be manipulated and to be tricked.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well said. And thank you for that. I agree. I agree. On that same token in terms of education, what advice do you give your students on being critical thinkers and informed users of social media when it comes to political propaganda and messaging? What do you tell the young people?

Samuel Woolley

Yeah, I teach a class, actually, at University of Texas at Austin called Social Media, Propaganda, and Elections. And one of the things I tell them is if you're on social media, you need to know what the terms of service are. Like I'm not saying you need to read like all the fine print, but you need to know what your rights are and what the mechanisms that exist on that platform for you being able to promote your own privacy and to keep yourself safe. Oftentimes, the social media companies – Facebook, TikTok, Twitter – put the onus upon the user to – and even Google as well – to protect themselves.

And so, with a few quick Google searches and watching a few YouTube videos, you can figure out how to actually like prevent tracking in a big way. You can also download tools like Privacy Badger or Adblock Plus that just help you prevent, you know, becoming someone whose data is out there being bought and sold every second. So that's the biggest thing. Think about your data. I tell them to protect their data. I tell them to think about what it means to live in a system of “surveillance capitalism,” as Shoshana Zuboff calls it, and what it – what it would mean to go in a different direction. Because propaganda is not just a problem of persuasion – it's a problem today of persuasion using incredibly granular data over the Internet, right? So it's like – it's like propaganda of yesterday on steroids, like, you know, TV ads like, you know, from politicians in the 1970s or one thing. But now it's completely amplified, automated, and it's data that is actually good at being used to pull your heartstrings.

So, those are all things I tell my students. I also tell my students, and I tell young people, to have hope, and to not allow themselves to be pulled in by messages that try to make them apathetic or make them check out of democracy. That's the core means and mechanism of the Russian disinformation model, which many disinformation folks around the world now use, including folks here in the United States. It's to get you not to get you to change your mind about a particular politician or a particular idea. It's to get you to check out and not engage in democracy. It's to get you to not care about the things that you care about. And so, if you actually can care – if you actually buy in – then you're actually fighting against disinformation. And that's the biggest thing that young people can do.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Amen to that. That's very well said. And so, what's next for you, research-wise? Are there any books or studies that you're working on right now that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Samuel Woolley

The biggest thing that I have is a book that comes out in January. It's called *Manufacturing Consensus*. So, it's a riff on Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*. And *Manufacturing Consensus*, the subtitle is *Understanding Propaganda in the Era of Automation and Anonymity*. So, what I do is I take up the work that Herman and Chomsky did and the work of folks like Jockolul and Bernays and others who very famously worked on propaganda and extend it for the digital age. And so, I say like, Herman and Chomsky created this really cool propaganda model that allows us to understand how the media can become a shill for the powerful. How is social media operating in that fashion?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right.

Samuel Woolley

What can we do about it? How can we understand it? What are the different frames or lenses or filters that we can look at? And so, I'm excited about that book. I also have a book that just came out about a month ago in August of 2022. That's the year we're in. Sorry. (laughs) I had a book recently come out called *Bots*, and *Bots* is just a primer. It's kind of like extended literature review on all things bots. So, it's written for broad audiences. And so those two things I'm really excited about.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's really interesting. And so, the *Bots* one's already out. We'll put a link to that in the show description—

Samuel Woolley

Yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

So that folks can get to that. That sounds fascinating. As does your next book, which I'm sure I'm going to check out.

Samuel Woolley

Oh, I was just going to say the next book is available for pre-order as well. So, I would greatly appreciate you putting a link to that as well.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Absolutely. Where is it published from?

Samuel Woolley

It's Yale University Press. So, *Manufacturing Consensus* is Yale University Press.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent. Thank you so much. This has been so fascinating. I can think of 17 other questions to ask you, but I will pause. I just want to say thank you so much for your time today. This is such an interesting conversation with so many – much direct impact on everybody's lives. You cannot be alive on this planet and not have this influence you and be and touch you in some way. So, it's really important work and I want to say thanks again.

Samuel Woolley

Thanks for having me, and a reminder to listeners: stay hopeful. There's still a lot of potential out there for these tools to do good.

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