

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Nadia Brashier

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Nadia Brashier, where I ask her: How can we check ourselves with fake news? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this, a very important episode I'm going to introduce to you, our stunning guest, Nadia Brashier, who is an assistant professor in psychological sciences at Purdue University. She recently completed an NIH postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University. She studies why and how young and older adults fall for fake news and misinformation. Nadia, thank you so much for coming on today and sharing your expertise, your knowledge, your time. I literally have chills from your resume, and I'm so excited to ask you questions about misinformation.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:00:59] Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited.

JVN [00:01:02] Also, I'm just gonna tell the people before we get going: you have such pretty wavy hair, and I'm trying to do this thing where I don't compliment everyone, you know? But these waves, you guys, I wish you could see them, maybe in your headshot on our social we're gonna get your waves equally as popping because, just, we're slow clapping for the waves, they're that good, and then I'm going to dive in. I'm in Mexico with my husband. Random. We're there. We're on a little vacation. I turn on the TV and it's randomly tuned to Fox News, like, I don't know who was watching it in that hotel room before us, but it was there. They had this political pundit who is a Black man talking about how critical race theory is totally made up, it's incorrect, and should not be taught at our schools. Within five minutes, I was, like, "Ah! Yeah!" And then I was, like, "No, no, get it off. I'm getting brainwashed!" And I mean, I, you know, I listened to the 1619 Project. I'm a very firm believer in the importance of critical race theory. I understand that it's not teaching racism to children. I understand that it's that it's showing the lingering effects that segregation and the transatlantic slave trade, how it's impacted our culture and our society, and how it's permeated, you know, financial, educational, health care. It's been pervasive across our culture. But within five minutes of Fox News, like which, you know, I never really expose myself to, I was like...

So this is where I realized that there was, like, a huge issue that I think I've been kind of, like, ostrich-ing my head in the sand because I come from a very highly conservative city. Oftentimes people will ask me about Queer Eye, like, "Oh, what's it like for you being around people who are clearly, like, on the opposite political spectrum as you." And I'm, like, "Well, that's a lot of family members. It's a lot of people where I come up from. I, you know, grew up

on cornfields and soybean fields and hog farms and, like, that's what my truth was." So I think it's just something that I've known for a long time, But I've never really understood the psychology or, like, the science underneath what's happening when we watch these news stations.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:03:08] Yeah, it's, it's great to hear somebody admit that being exposed to maybe highly partisan or false information was starting to mislead you because I think this is a universal experience, right? None of us are immune. We're all prone to these cognitive biases that we've got. It's the way our brains work. And so the first thing I would say is that listening to that anecdote, it's like viewers aren't necessarily watching these programs or reading these stories or skimming through their news feed and thinking about accuracy. Right? We have a lot of other goals, especially when we're on social media, and so we often have to prompt or nudge people to even think about whether content is true or false. And it sounds like you are doing that for yourself. Towards the end of those five minutes. And simple nudges do work. They do make people more discerning. But this is why we often see a gap between what people will tell us that they believe and they're sharing behavior. Right? Those aren't necessarily the same thing. And it's because when we're going through socials, we're liking and sharing things we may not even believe if we thought about it for a second.

JVN [00:04:14] Oh shit. Wait, that was, that reminds me of couples therapy when, like, one of us says something really deep, and it goes over my head, because I just, like, want to move on so fast. What's not the same, what we believe and what we... what?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:04:31] And so what we believe to be true and what we might share with other people. So, for example, with a retweet or even just communicating it to someone else, those aren't necessarily always aligned because we're not always thinking about accuracy. We're not we're not always spontaneously thinking about that, we're thinking about what's entertaining, what's interesting.

JVN [00:04:52] That made me think of, like, closet Trump voters. Like when you said that, that made me think of people who might say to your face, like, that they agree with you or whatever you're saying. But then when they really go home and when they really like, go into the voting booth or whatever, like they don't really agree with the way or maybe they're not willing to share with you, like what their actual opinion is if it's super biased and racist and not along the lines of what you think.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:05:16] Right, absolutely. Sometimes people can have motivated reasons for that disconnect. But other times it's just because when people are taking in information, they're not even thinking about what they believe or what's true or what's false. Right? They're just sort of passively taking in that information. I always like to tell the story of, like I, an expert at this stuff, fell for a viral tweet in 2019 that Olive Garden was funding Trump's reelection. I was like, "Dang, I really like those breadsticks." I was in a funk all day. It's like, "I can't go to Olive Garden anymore." And it turns out their parent company Darden had never donated. Right? Someone just completely fabricated this. And it crossed platforms, and I started seeing it on Instagram in screenshot form with a list of other companies that supposedly were donating to the campaign, right? And so it's like we all fall for false information sometimes. So I think when we're, when we're encountering somebody who has false beliefs or who has shared something questionable, it's important to remind ourselves we may have done that. We've probably done that ourselves, right? And try to show compassion. If people are shitty people, that's a separate issue, right? But if somebody that you know and trust shares something questionable, there are different approaches you can take.

JVN [00:06:36] One of the things that we learned on our vaccine misinformation episode was that it has really stuck with me. Is that like if I read something and I feel like a vehement, like, strong like, like, you know, earth shattering reaction to it when I, you know, read it, that there could be misinformation in there, like, it's likely like if you're having like it's like, you know, like a vehement reaction. So there's been a few times since then where I'm, like, mid-tweet, like, after reading something just, like, [CLICKING SOUNDS] and then I'm like, I'm actually going to sit with this for like a few hours because I'm. So I've been doing that. So, but comma, misinformation and disinformation is still so important. And I think that, you know, when it comes to people's lived experiences, whether that's for, like, trans equity, LGBTQIA+ liberation, I think we're seeing a lot of misinformation around voting rights right now. Like, you know, with Republicans saying that, like, "You know, it's fine to close down every single polling station in this rural, like, county in Georgia, except for one." There are just, you know, misinformation is misinformation. But I think that the motives behind misinformation is different. You know, like, for, for everyone. And that's really hard to untangle. And one thing that you just said was like, "You know, I'm an expert in this. And even if all for misinformation," and when I was reading your fierce ass bio, you're an assistant professor of psychological sciences. So what does that look like when you're, like, studying, like, misinformation and the psychology behind it? Like, what's the day to day of a scientist who's studying that?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:08:05] Oh, I love this question. So I started studying misinformation and false beliefs before the 2016 election, actually. So I've been interested in these kind of weird beliefs that people hold since I was an undergrad. So I came into grad school, like, "This is

what I want to work on." And so some of that early work was on just sort of neutral misconceptions that people have, like, you know, "What, what's stored in a camel's hump?"

JVN [00:08:32] It's not water?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:08:33] It's fat! Who knew! [JVN GASP] Right? Or just, like, strange, true information like Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank being this being born the same year, right? Why does that feel false? Why does it feel true that, you know, vitamin C prevents the common cold? Like, that's false.

JVN [00:08:54] Was Anne Frank and Martin Luther King Jr., really, they were really born the same year, though?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:08:57] Yeah, that's true. That's true. Or like Scotland's national animal is the unicorn. That feels false, but it's true, right? So how are we going about our environment telling what's true from what's false? Then a lot of people took more interest in my work in 2016, obviously. Now that we have evidence that there was foreign interference from adversaries like China, Russia, right, now it's hot to talk about or be worried about misinformation. And for good reason. Now I spend a lot of my time trolling these fake news sites on a separate laptop. And it's a lot of nasty content day in, day out, just scrolling through what Infowars has posted. Also, hyperpartisan sites like Breitbart looking for examples or stimuli to use in my experiments. So that's... less fun.

JVN [00:09:57] How do you conduct an experiment?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:09:59] So we take true and false headlines, and usually we're careful to balance how many lean left versus lean right, so there's a whole dredging process of finding the content, making sure that in general people's impressions of it are what we think they would be. So the headlines that we think favor Republicans, is that actually true in people's minds? And so then we'll take a whole set of those and we'll show them to people either just behaviorally in a kind of survey format or in the scanner, the MRI scanner. And we have people tell us things, like, "Is this true or false?" "Would you share this with somebody else?" We sometimes have memory tests for who published this or is this exactly what you saw earlier? We ask people, "Do you remember the events in this headline actually happening?" And so there's evidence that people sometimes form vivid, false memories for events that never happened, just because previously they read a headline describing that event, that fictitious event. Right? So that's the day to day.

JVN [00:11:11] So I, like, on my Apple News, I get a lot of Fox News because it's just like Apple News, and I don't press no because I want to know what those headlines are, right? It's not like, I'm, like, you know, seeking it out. But I don't take notes. I want to get, like, a full picture of the world. So they're constantly coming for Leah Thomas, the fierce trans swimmer who's, like, swimming for an Ivy League school. And so there's a lot that I feel like there's just a lot of misinformation around, like, trans athletes, trans sports, and I feel like it's always written in this way to, like, protect, you know, "protect" the fairness of sport. But there is, but it's a lot of it so transphobic and uses, like, faulty science. And it's also really good at making you feel like someone's fairness is being encroached upon. And what we so often don't talk about is how, like, capitalism, access, gender, biology, like, you know, Michael Phelps just commented on Leah, on Leah Thomas and Michael Phelps has, like, size 16 feet, not literally 16, but they're, like, he just has some big ass feet and some double jointed ankles. Yes. And so he has biological advantages that make him a really good swimmer, not to mention he had parents who had money and proximity to a pool and coaches. So sport was not really fair to begin with.

But there's not a lot of information out there that shows, like, how these, how this misinformation against trans people. It's like little girls and little boys and little non-binary people, like, being able to play sport, like, being able to, like, go to dance class or join a dance troupe or, like, just do like a recreation, like, I'm never going to, I would have never won tennis. Like, a lot of trans kids, are going to become state tennis champ, but now they don't even get to play. And so really, it's like this they're creating this, this sense of threat, this perception of threat against women, unfairness in sport against women. But there's not very much information out there as far as like how this is really impacting, like, thousands of people, like, most people. Like, so what the fuck's that about, first of all!

Second of all, I read this Fox News article: the Macdonald–Laurier Institute. And that's what it says "Trans women athletes hold competitive edge even after testosterone suppression." That's what the Apple news article headline was. So then I googled it. Macdonald–Laurier Institute and they are a hardcore right wing think tank out of Canada that is funded by anonymous millionaires and billionaires. And so often what happens with these right wing news channels is that you have people who will use these hot-button social issues that often favor the hate machine of Republicans. But really, what they're doing is it's like it just furthers inequity because they're really just trying to get taxes because they don't give a fuck about trans people. They don't give a fuck about female athletes. They don't give a fuck about unborn babies. They just want to turn out people and use bigoted information to, like, inflame the base, their right wing base. So then I googled the Macdonald–Laurier Institute, and it turns out there are huge Big Oil hardcore right wing think tank. But Fox News quotes them as being

scientists, doing science, work on hormones and how hormones affect trans people. So, ew! So how do we all? So am I just like basically like a hardcore bitch who's like knows how to like, expose? Am I also a misinformation expert? Or is that not that cool that I Googled them?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:14:43] Maybe! I don't know what I am hearing throughout this conversation. Is you reminding yourself that heavily emotional information might be false, reminding yourself to fact check things right? So I don't think that's typical, so that's good.

JVN [00:15:00] And?! Also I'm not an expert on information, so but keep Googling the people who are the sources..

NADIA BRASHIER [00:15:06] Keep doing what you're doing by all means because you're doing a lot of the things that we're trying to train people to do. So what, what you were describing with the think tank, this is actually a really old strategy. So fake experts, right, like tobacco companies used fake experts to sort of deny the health consequences of smoking. Right? And so this is actually a pattern and something that we can teach people. So there's this idea of inoculation. It sort of draws a parallel to getting a vaccine. And so the idea is that you initially expose people to weak versions of misinformation and you teach them about the kinds of strategies that people might be using, that bad actors might be using. So then you can be on the lookout for them so we can teach people, "Is that an expert or is that a fake expert?" Right? Don't just take take people at their word to don't take it at face value that that is a scientist, for example. Yeah. And I mean, and broadly, that's a strategy that we can use and teaching people what our common disinformation strategy is: like bots just publishing tons and tons of false things. They're not actually people, right? How often do people actually click on the Twitter account and check for signs that this might not actually be a human?

JVN [00:16:30] How do we check for signs that a Twitter account might not be human!

NADIA BRASHIER [00:16:34] So a lot of these bots tweet at just, like, a ridiculous rate. So many tweets, right? Maybe they don't have a picture or they have a weird picture or things in the bio seem contradictory, like different identity hashtags that actually seem contradictory. Maybe they have no followers, things like that, right? And so that's like a general strategy. Instead of debunking this one specific headline, right, that turns out to be false, giving people a sort of toolkit ahead of time.

JVN [00:17:08] So I think the thing when I was thinking about that question is like, what are the types of misinformation that you all are seeing the most of? Is there is I feel like I see a lot around trans issues, but maybe that's because I am non-binary. And so I feel like it's affecting my, like, trans and non-binary like siblings more. So I'm just very like, I'm I think maybe I'm like

looking for it more. But what types? What areas of misinformation are you seeing a lot of right now?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:17:37] I mean, right now, the obvious ones are misinformation around COVID. We're still seeing misinformation around the integrity of the 2020 election, which will probably cause problems going into 2024, right. So those are, I mean, just tons of false content there, and people repeating themselves on those topics. I think there is this intense focus, both research and policy-wise and you know, from the public's perspective on blatantly false information, so blatant fake news. And that's really just like the most flagrant example of misinformation, right? And a lot of ways that's really the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more hyperpartisan news, and that's really what Fox News deals in. So they're not describing events that never happened. They are describing events that occurred, but with a really strong partisan bias, right? And we see this on both sides, more on the right, but on the left and the right. And so that's something to keep in mind.

JVN [00:18:39] So how do we, what, what factors inform how we process a news story? Is it, like, information type or information source?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:18:48] So one unfortunate thing is that if we're talking about a social media context, people are very rarely actually clicking on the story. So some data suggests that as many as fifty nine percent of the links shared on Twitter aren't clicked on first, and headlines themselves can be even more inflammatory, even more biased, even less true than the body of the article. And when we're not clicking on the link, we're kind of missing this opportunity to see if this is a sketchy website as well. Because I spend a lot of time on these sites trolling for news stories. And it's, you know, it looks like a 12 year old made some of these websites, right? So that's a missed opportunity to spot shoddy website design. And so people are just left with this headline that's designed to incite shares, to incite likes, right, and to get engagement. So that's one unfortunate thing. We also know that people often overlook or confuse or forget the publisher or the source of information, which is concerning, right? Because that's another valid cue for whether or not you should believe claims around you. And so even some interventions, like making the publisher really obvious with, like, a big logo banner, it doesn't decrease belief in fake news. It doesn't increase belief in factual news, right? And often when we're asking people to make judgments about news, they're disregarding the quality of the outlet and instead they're going based off of whether the headline seems plausible to them.

JVN [00:20:22] One thing that is striking me is that, like in my inception story, in this episode, it was that little bit of Fox News from the hotel room, but there's a difference between like. Or

is there a difference in how we take on information from, like, a TV source versus a written source? Because for me, right off the bat, it feels. Well, I was going to say that it feels easier to vet a written story because I can, like, turn around and Google it a little bit quicker, but it's like if you're holding a phone while you're watching Fox News, you can, like, Google the guest, you can look at the guest's Twitter. So what are the psychological differences and how we take in different mediums of information?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:20:58] Yeah, this is a great question and one that people are really worried about deepfakes, for example, right now. So deepfakes are created with artificial intelligence, and they depict events that never happened. So a politician giving a speech that they never actually made, for example, and those can be pictures or videos. So the government, the federal government, is very worried about those. We're, we're worried about those. It does seem like it doesn't matter whether misinformation is text based or visual. So people are coming away with false beliefs regardless. So that's interesting. I think that's counterintuitive for a lot of people who would think that the visual form would be more compelling or persuasive. Which isn't to say that deepfakes aren't a concern. They absolutely are. They typically, though, aren't the only, the thrust of that entire misinformation campaign, right? They accompany text or they accompany other kinds of media. I do think one thing about watching Fox News that can be challenging is that they don't really distinguish between opinion shows and news shows. And in general, people are bad at telling the difference between opinions and facts. So that network in particular, I think, poses that challenge to viewers.

JVN [00:22:15] You know, another thing that's happening around misinformation in the 2020 election that I think is really striking, and I think that Donald Trump has really been frankly genius at. What I'm noticing from the election is, is that he keeps saying, like, "It was a very, very bad thing that happened in 2020, and we should never let it happen again." So he's not saying necessarily, like, that they're, like, but so he but he just says that over and over, "It was a very bad thing, what happened in 2020, we should never let that happen again. Our rights are being trampled. Our," you know, and he says these things too, over and over and over. And it's almost like it's getting worse. Like, he's, I feel like he's regressing in some of the misinformation around the 2020 election is even regressing as far as like, "It was stolen! It was, like," it's like there was a moment where people were like, "OK." And then it was, like, "No, like, we didn't lose. They lost. And this has been stolen." So what is the idea around just constant repetition of opinion? And how that makes people confused?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:23:19] Yeah, you're picking up on a strategy that politicians and advertisers have known about for a long time, and that's that repeating information makes it

seem true. We call that the illusory truth effect as scientists. And it's really insidious. So it happens to smart people for claims that we know come from unreliable sources when we're getting contradictory advice from someone that we can trust. And even when we know better, if I repeat contradictions of something that is very well learned for you over the course of those exposures, you might be swayed. So I can repeat something like, "The fastest land animal is the leopard." And even though you have stored somewhere that it's actually cheetah with multiple exposures that'll still seem truer, right? And I think there's this really wild finding where repeating quotes made by Donald Trump influenced Democrats who should be motivated to reject those statements. What we think is happening is that the more times you hear information, the easier it is to process. And so we infer that that ease of processing means it's true. And so there is this brain region, it's called the parietal cortex, and that's the region that we see that's active when information is repeated to you.

And so it's just this really basic feature of how our brains work. And it turns out, like, in a lot of situations, it makes sense to infer that things we've heard multiple times are true. Right? There's only one true version of a claim. Most of the time and an infinite number of ways, you could falsify it, right? Think of, like, "The capital of France is Paris," right? Only one true version we could falsify in a bunch of different ways. We could say, "The capital of France is Madrid," we could say, "The capital of France is Tokyo." Right. So over time, we learned that things we hear multiple times tend to be true, and misinformation is just hijacking what is really an adaptive heuristic a lot of the time. So an adaptive shortcut that saves us time and energy. And so it's it's really concerning is that even one additional exposure to a fake headline like, "Mike Pence says that gay conversion therapy saved his marriage," something that sounds truly outlandish. Even one exposure to that headline makes it seem more truthful later.

JVN [00:25:49] Was that a headline?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:25:49] Yeah. Fake headline.

JVN [00:26:52] Interest. Sometimes, when I'll start talking about, like, issues that are close to me, whether it's, like, LGBTQIA+ liberation, women's rights, you know, political beliefs, sometimes I'll think, like, I feel like the things I said first aren't political beliefs. I feel like those are human rights issues. But then, like, health care, law enforcement and the need to reform it, et cetera, sometimes I think, like, "Well, wait, like, you know, we say that we shouldn't take people's opinion from the internet. And then here I am with like five point however many million followers and I'm talking about my opinion, you know, like, constantly." And I even said it today on my stories. But it's the thing I did on my stories today is about, like, how we've had

this abortion ban in Texas that, like, you know, authorizes civilians to turn in doctors or people who they think have had an abortion after six weeks. And then it, like, allows them to sue people. And that's what this and that's why we don't have abortion providers in Texas. It's like this whole thing.

So that is factual, but it is my opinion. But how do we get people to see the truth if you know the truth from opinion, but it's like, I just feel like people who are engaging in this hardcore misinformation, they're like, but you still you still like they just say you do. You know what I mean? They're like, "You have your opinions and you have your beliefs," but I'm like, God, but they're from fact. And then they're, like, "Well, ours are, too." But how do you fucking deal with people that are fucking brainwashed? But then they call me brainwashed!

NADIA BRASHIER [00:27:26] Right, yeah, so we call that naive realism where we believe that we see the world objectively and that members of the opposing party are uninformed, irrational, biased and in, like, extreme cases when we're considering conspiracy theories, anyone who disputes the claim is seen as part of the conspiracy. Right? That's why conspiracy theories are closed loops. And so it is really difficult to challenge people's opinions if they view you as being an outgroup member or someone who. Is just paying lip service to the government who's fooling them, right?

JVN [00:28:04] But then the other thing that I feel like I want people to understand is that like, I can attest to this attention feels good. Period. Attention feels really good. And for me, if I do say something fucked up or if I do something on Twitter that like whatever, like, there's an multiple times where I have like said, like Nicki Minaj lyrics that I like. You know, it's like, we shouldn't be saying this, and the people are, like, "Shut the fuck up!" So there's I stepped out of line multiple times on Twitter, and when I get called out on Twitter in those ways, whether it was something that I did, it was actually like I could have sat with longer or things that were, like, really fucked up and mean and people were just like being really vengeful and hateful to me and like, it really wasn't based in anything that I could have done better. It was just, like, really, you know, people that doesn't feel good. Like for me, right? For provocateurs like, you know, your Joe Rogans or your Candace Owens or those type of people on the right, they like thriving off the attention, whether it comes from someone being angry with them or someone agreeing with them. They are into this attention. They really like it, whether it's negative or positive. Whereas, for me, like, if it's super negative or someone tells me, like, they hope I die of AIDS or whatever, it hurts me and I don't really like it.

But for people that profit off of misinformation like Candace Owens and Joe Rogan, that's what they're profiting off of. So it's like they're trying to make you mad and they're trying to

fill you with rage because they profit off of that. So anything that's going to drive their bottom line or their interactions or their impressions, and it's kind of this comparison I'm always making that like Taco Bell is tastier than a salad, even though when I make a really good salad home, I'm like, "Oh my God, this is really good." And that to me is, like, what the truth is, you know? But Taco, it's easier to just go to Taco Bell and get some misinformation, and you know that it's easier than it is to, like, seek out truer information. And I hate that Taco Bell is misinformation in that analogy, it sucks, because I do love Taco Bell, but I think a lot of us like to revel in the rage that misinformation-, it gives us a sense of identity and a sense of belonging and a sense of, like, trying to protect or something.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:30:06] Yeah. First of all, how are you going to do my Baja Blast like that? [CROSSTALK] We'll forgive it. Yeah, I mean, partisanship definitely satisfies needs for belonging, needs for status, right? And so there's this concern that people are going around and engaging in motivated reasoning or processing information in line with their prior beliefs, specifically their political beliefs. And so it's definitely true that overall, Republicans believe more right-leaning headlines. Democrats believe more left-leaning headlines. But when you, when you look at discernment, so the ability to tell true from false information, it is the case that it's lazy thinking that's often the issue. So we measure something called analytic thinking. So we ask people questions, like, "Imagine you're running a race and you pass the person in second place, what place are you in?"

A lot of people will jump to say first place. There's this intuitive, wrong answer. The answer is actually second place. And so people who are good at taking a pass and answering these questions correctly, so analytic thinkers, they're better at discerning true from false headlines, even when those are headlines that suit their beliefs that fit their political ideology. And so politics definitely matter. But so does slowing down, pausing, taking a moment. But like the analogy made earlier, you know, that takes, that takes energy. That's not the Taco Bell approach, that's the making salad at home approach. So, yeah, people's politics and, and confirmation bias and seeking out specific kinds of information processing information in a specific direction can matter. But that's not the case that we're doomed. Right. And a lot of the time, what we just need to do is encourage more analytic thinking.

JVN [00:32:12] So how do we decide if something's true or false, then? Like, anyone, like, how does any one person decide that what they think is the truth?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:32:24] Yeah. So for better or worse, a lot of the time people are leaning on these heuristics or these shortcuts. Right. So people aren't necessarily maybe they aren't even thinking about accuracy to begin with. Let's say that they are thinking about accuracy.

They're relying on things like repetition and that feeling of ease. They're relying on their own affect. So there's some data showing that when people rely on their emotions, they're more likely to accept fake news. It makes sense, there's a lot of misinformation that directly appeals to our emotions. You've brought up some examples. Think of the claim that Donald Trump sent his plane to transport 200 stranded marines, right? That hits you in the feels. And so if you are just going off of your emotions, you might not be as discerning and less able to sort the true from the false.

JVN [00:33:11] Was that a really big story in, like, right-wing news sites? That wasn't true?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:33:15] Yeah. Yeah, it didn't turn out to be true.

JVN [00:33:17] My friend's grandparents are, like, obsessed with Fox News, and it's all they watch and like every time we go to New York City, they're, like, "Be careful. It's, like, lawless and anarchy over there." And, like, it's, and we're, like, "LOL, it's really..." I mean, bad things happen all over the country. Like, bad things happen in every city, like, people get killed, people go missing, people get attacked. Everywhere, like everywhere, like literally big, small cities everywhere, it's happening. But they really, like, charge big cities of being these, like, lawless, crazy, fucked up places. And so what, what are examples of misinformation that we see on TV and online? I think I just gave one. And how do these stories seem true at first?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:34:03] Yeah. Well, like I said, I think people aren't thinking about whether they're true or false, right? They might share it without thinking. Maybe it suits their impression of the person involved, right? Maybe they, they don't like Trump or they do like Hillary. Right. A lot of them describe events that honestly sound kind of improbable. Like the example I gave you earlier about Mike Pence attributing the success of his marriage to gay conversion therapy. Like, when you take a step back, that sounds wild. But those kinds of claims do go viral, right?

JVN [00:34:43] But, like, you are seeing right now, like, I mean, there is like that big issue in San Francisco and all over the country with like, you know, shoplifting and, like, people breaking into stores, but people shoplift from little cities and little stores all the time, like, it's an all the time thing. But if it suits a confirmation bias of someone like Fox News to say, "Look, these left-leaning cities, Portland, San Francisco, New York City, Chicago, they're out of control. People are just looting. People are, you know, x y z." It takes certain things that did happen and it blows them out of proportion, puts them out of context, and then also doesn't factor into the story that actually these same things happen all over the place.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:35:23] Right. And I think, sometimes what news media does, is creates the illusion that there is a debate or an issue where there is none. Right, think of immigration. At one point, there was hysteria about people crossing the border illegally. And when you crunched the numbers, the net movement was actually out right. The net movement of undocumented immigrants was out of the country, not in. But both sides debating and engaging on it creates the impression on both sides that this is an issue, and we might just disagree on how to handle it.

JVN [00:36:01] That's actually one big story that we're seeing right now. I'm keen to ask you about is like how we're going to get just killed in midterms, like the left is is going to get killed in midterms. And if history was to be an indicator in 2010 and that midterm election, when we hold the White House, the Senate and the House, the White House, Senate and then the House of Representatives in 2010, we did experience that the biggest loss of electoral seats in state and federal history there was like over a thousand Democratic seats that were lost, according to Sister District, who I interviewed on this podcast. So people are really scared about midterms, and all of the headlines are so, are you, like, "Yeah, that's true we're fucked." Or do you feel like it might be OK?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:36:43] I'm not a political scientist, so I can't make predictions about who's going to win or lose. I just deal in like, what will the misinformation campaigns look like or what kinds of specific things will they traffic? I think we'll probably be seeing a lot of the same, a lot of false claims about COVID and how the government is handling COVID and vaccination. Things about, you know, the outcome of the last election.

JVN [00:37:10] But also I feel like trans issues on FOX and reproductive issues like abortion rights, access, access to abortion, the villainization of abortion and then the villain is a silly trans athletes. I feel like it's really hot on misinformation or on, like, these, like, social hot button issues are really I just see them so much. Do you see that, too?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:37:33] Yeah, CRT, abortion and reproductive rights, which I'm seeing commentary that it feels like a regression in some ways that these issues are popping back up and inflaming people again. I think that implies it wasn't an issue a year or two ago, which I'm not sure is true. But we're definitely seeing—

JVN [00:37:55] Oh, it's every year, it's every year, it's every midterm. It's every, every election cycle. I feel like those issues come up because it inflames the right, the base of the right and like law enforcement like that, really inflames the right wing base. [CROSSTALK] So when we're dealing with someone like my friend's grandparents or a family member or a loved one who's really entrenched in misinformation, how do we talk to them about the risks because of

sustained exposure to fake news? Is there any way that we can change the narrative with a loved one? Is it something you just have to live with? Let them go into the quicksand of the abyss and hope they get out some day? And obviously, you know, there's a little bit of a difference between, like, thinking that Trump is really JFK Jr. and that, you know, that whole thing. I feel like hopefully there is a little bit of a differentiation between like a full on QAnon person and then like a Fox News obsessed person, like hopefully that introspection is that becoming like or like those I can like the overlapping circle graph, like, hopefully that isn't becoming like one. But I think it's moving closer. Is there any hope for people that have been completely brainwashed by misinformation?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:39:08] So on the one hand, it is extremely challenging to counter false beliefs. And again, this is because of the way our brains work. So even if corrective messages convince people initially and that's a big "if," misconceptions creep back in over time, and that's because myths or falsehoods are never erased. Brain data suggests that we're retaining both that original piece of misinformation and the correction and the correction might fade from memory faster. And then you're just left with whatever that false belief was originally. So we call that the continued influence effect where you've been explicitly corrected, there's been a debunking message, but we're still seeing this influence of false information on your beliefs, your judgments. And so it is a very tricky problem. Some things that can be helpful are making sure to replace those false beliefs with correct ones. So not just saying no, that's wrong. What is the alternative? What is the correct information? More detail?

There's mixed evidence on whether detail is helpful, but it can't hurt to be more detailed in your explanation. Again, showing compassion and not making it to the extent that you can, right? That's hard. That's hard for me. But I like to share the Olive Garden story or story of something that I fell for. That was false, right? And I think I mentioned teaching people strategies, teaching people tips to spot fake news so that it's less of an emphasis on this one headline that they believe. So you want to encourage people to do things like read the article, click the link and read the article, Facebook has offered users 10 tips to spot fake news, and in some empirical studies, that actually makes people more discerning a couple of weeks later.

So things like look closely at the URL because often those URLs look like credible news sites, they might be just one letter off. Or advice like consider the photos: are they out of context? Or maybe from a totally other event that are meant to increase belief in the text that's accompanying it? We talked about bots, and teaching people what those are and that foreign actors are using those to sow discord. So teach a man to fish, right? With those kind of general tips. And for the specific ones, yeah, just repeating the true information because we can harness the power of repetition, which politicians are using for evil. We can use that for good.

So there are studies showing that repeating accurate information about COVID increases belief in those accurate pieces of information. So repeat yourself verbatim, replace false beliefs, and be detailed.

JVN [00:42:06] Yes, Queen. OK, obsessed with that. I really hope that you watch Getting Curious on Netflix. It's already out, so if you haven't seen it, give it a watch.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:42:15] I absolutely will.

JVN [00:42:17] And then I want a full, like, post-doctoral breakdown of, like, how you know, on point the information is. I don't know what do you charge for that, but let us know.

[CROSSTALK] No, I'm just kidding. But I would like for you to watch, I think that you'll like it and have fun. But no, but what's next for your work? What are you going to be focusing on coming into this year? What keeps you up at night?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:42:40] Yeah, so. Deep Fakes keep me up at night. Figuring out the best way to let both young and older people know that media has been manipulated, altered, or is completely fabricated. And just more generally tailoring fact-checking interventions and making them more effective. Of course, fact-checking can't be the only approach, right? There's so much misinformation out there and only so many professional fact checkers. But to the extent that we can make it as effective as possible, I'm working on that and we'll continue working on that. I don't think we've paid enough attention to older users who shared the most fake news ahead of the 2016 election. I think there are a lot of different reasons for that, and they might be the hardest to reach with fact checks. So developing some strategies to for belief change and promoting accurate beliefs for people over 65.

JVN [00:43:38] Mm. So you feel like there's a big issue there? Older people.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:43:44] So they see more misinformation, but they, they share more misinformation by several factors. So it's a huge effect and the effect of age holds even when we control for things like partisanship or overall sharing behavior. So it's not the case that they're just sharing lots of stuff. And I think a lot of the research so far has focused on young adults, which makes sense. But I think that we could do a better job reaching and intervening on the older people who are on social media.

JVN [00:44:16] And then what do you think? Like, what do we all need to know more of about your work just in our day to day that you've set? But just as we start to wind down this episode, what do we really need to integrate into our daily lives around misinformation?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:44:38] Yeah. So I think obviously a lot of the approaches that I would suggest take time and effort. So maybe they aren't appropriate for every single topic you're reading about. But when it comes to something important, like a big purchase or who you're voting for, beliefs about groups of people, right? Slowing down, asking yourself if things fit with what you know, looking for these signs that this is a shoddy publisher, or I haven't heard of this publisher before. Looking for fact checks for things that sound implausible, too good or too bad to be true. Figuring out what your go to places are to look for those. I like Snopes and PolitiFact, I think they do great work, especially before you're sharing information with other people. So reminding yourself that you don't want to be exposing people on Twitter or Facebook to information that isn't true. If you can avoid it. So before you hit, retweet or share doing a quick Google.

JVN [00:45:43] That's really good. Yeah. Obsessed with that.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:45:48] Oh yes, you do, do that.

JVN [00:45:49] Well, I better, better sometimes than others, but I feel like that was really good. Nadia Brashier, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious and giving us your time. And where can people find you? Like, Are you active on the Twitter? Where can we find your work and stay up to date with you?

NADIA BRASHIER [00:46:05] Yes, I am on Twitter. Just my, my name. Yeah, it's very, very creative handle. Yeah.

JVN [00:46:14] Love it. Well, I'm glad that it was available for you because the nice thing, you never know where those handles go. So Nadia, thank you so much for coming on the show. We appreciate you so much and thanks for coming on Getting Curious.

NADIA BRASHIER [00:46:23] Thank you. It's great to be here.

JVN [00:46:28] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Professor Nadia Brashier. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.