



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Media Manipulation

MONITA BELL

In many ways, it's a tricky time to be teaching young people about civics and political processes. Even in our work here at Teaching Tolerance, we've heard from educators who, since the 2016 election, have just felt really unsure about how to talk about elections. Our country is so polarized, they don't want to be perceived in any way as partisan, and they certainly don't want to get in trouble with their administrations or students' families. Especially depending on the political climate in your community, these lessons and conversations can be sticky to navigate.

Here's the thing, though: We are seeing hateful perspectives and ideologies travel from obscure, random places on the Internet to mainstream media and political agendas. To be frank, we're seeing dangerous ideas and conspiracy theories from the extreme far right become normalized. Now I want to be clear: This is not about partisanship. This is about hateful ideas articulated by fringe groups who have found their way into the mainstream. For the educators who are listening, you should know that people with hateful agendas have become very good at manipulating not only media, but also impressionable young minds, and that's why we're talking about it today on *The Mind Online*. I'm your host, Monita Bell, and I want to thank you for joining me today. This podcast comes from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In each episode of *The Mind Online*, we'll explore an aspect of the digital literacy world, what educators and students alike need to know, and how educators can guide students to be safe, informed digital citizens. In episode three, "Did You Google It?" Safiya Noble, Heidi Beirich and I talked about the ways in which mainstream search engines perpetuate hate by allowing it to rise to the top of online searches, and hateful actors have taken advantage of this.

Today, Will Sommer and Melissa Ryan join me to talk about how hateful ideologies make their way from the fringes of the Internet into the mainstream. On one hand, it's happening very quickly, and things just don't look good. Will Sommer, a tech reporter for The Daily Beast and creator of "The Right Richter" newsletter, breaks down how this dissemination is happening. On the other hand, there aren't as many of these hateful actors as there seem to be. Melissa Ryan, author of the newsletter "Ctrl Alt-Right Delete," gives us some hope. First, Will Sommer explains how in the last couple of years, the fringes of right-wing media have "gone into hyper-drive."

WILL SOMMER

I'm Will Sommer. I'm a tech reporter with The Daily Beast, and for the past two years, I've been writing "The Right Richter" newsletter on right-wing Internet and media.

MONITA BELL

So, in this episode, we're definitely focusing on the ways that the information we receive gets manipulated by people and groups with political agendas. As you were just saying, as someone who follows this topic very closely, can you just kind of lay out the landscape for our audience? What's happening?

WILL SOMMER

Sure, yeah. Really, I would say since Donald Trump started running for president, I would say the conservative Internet and media and the various conspiracy theories have really just gone into hyper-drive. There's really a lot going on. I think that landscape has become, it's kind of overturned a lot of the otherwise establishment groups, I think have really been shaken up. It's really the Wild West out there right now.

MONITA BELL

If you could, would you just kind of distinguish, well, some people might be concerned that digging into this topic and exploring with their students might get them into partisan waters. When we talk about right-wing and conservative versus left-wing, we're not talking about mainstream right-wing, I don't know, actors.

WILL SOMMER

Absolutely. I think this is a very critical issue, and I think it's one of the thornier ones in this space. You're not even talking really about, say, Fox News or the National Review or something like that. We're talking about, like a lot of the kind of crazier conspiracy theories, it's stuff that's coming from blogs, from anonymous Internet forums and stuff like that. Nevertheless, it can be a very tricky issue because you see the president himself, of course, as maybe the world's most prominent conspiracy theorist. I think really the key is stressing to people and stressing to students tools about critical thinking and being able to distinguish between what is, say, in a newspaper or a magazine or even on cable news versus something that is an anonymous post on an Internet forum.

MONITA BELL

Right, but to a point you just made, a lot of this stuff isn't fringe anymore. It's not buried in some obscure forum; we're seeing conspiracy theories from, say, Reddit threads or 4Chan actually appearing in the mainstream.

WILL SOMMER

Exactly. I mean, we've seen the president cite conspiracy theories from InfoWars claiming that 3 million illegal votes were cast in 2016, for example. Really, this is something that I think has become impossible to ignore. Once, things that were really on the fringe of the Internet or the Republican Party have now really started to take center stage in our country and affect public policy.

MONITA BELL

If you could just maybe lay out some more detail for us, what does that path look like between, say, a conspiracy theory that started in 4Chan or 8chan and then how it makes its way into mainstream media. Can you just maybe provide a good example of how that might happen?

WILL SOMMER

Absolutely, sure. For example, the Seth Rich conspiracy theory about the murder of a Democratic National Committee staffer, Seth Rich. The idea that he was murdered by Hilary Clinton is absurd, but

I think it provides a good example of how this ecosystem works. Initially, this idea starts bubbling up on various fake news sites and Internet forums like Reddit or 4Chan. Then from there, it goes onto the blogs and the sites that are sort of feeders for the mainstream right-wing media. These would be sites like InfoWars or The Gateway Pundit. Those are sort of the proving grounds, and then if something catches on there, then it can end up making it onto something like Fox News. We saw Newt Gingrich talking about Seth Rich's murder, stuff like that, and Sean Hannity of course. There are different stages, and then eventually it makes its way up to the president sometimes.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, yeah. I know one, like it's kind of a similar path that you've been talking about recently and that's really relevant to current events, is with the migrant caravan coming from Central America.

WILL SOMMER

That's absolutely right. That was something that, the idea of this caravan as sort of an onslaught of invaders is something that was floating around Twitter with pro-Trump Twitter users. It was floating around various marginal sites, and it really started to pick up after it was embraced by members of the Republican Party, notably Representative Matt Gaetz from Florida tweeted that maybe George Soros is behind this. When a conspiracy theory like that can get some sort of a Republican pickup, that's really when it starts going.

MONITA BELL

Right, yeah. We also want the educators who are going to be listening to know—what are the ideologies out there that their young people might be vulnerable to. What kinds of ideologies are we seeing brought into the mainstream because of this manipulation of the media?

WILL SOMMER

I mean, this is something that a lot of extremist groups are very aware of. They're actively trying to recruit people, especially young men. We've seen white supremacist groups try to recruit young people through the kind of things you would expect them to be on: edgy forums like 4Chan, through video game chat rooms, stuff like that. These sort of ideologies, whether they be white supremacist or various conspiracy theories or a mixture of all of those, they're very active and very consciously trying to recruit young people on the Internet.

MONITA BELL

Speaking of these spaces that these dangerous actors are using to recruit people, I know you've written recently about Instagram. I think a lot of us think of Instagram as maybe a safer or more neutral space, right?

WILL SOMMER

Yeah, absolutely. I think Internet extremists have figured out how to infiltrate just about any social network there is. In the case of Instagram, I think people don't think of it, as you mentioned, as a particularly political place. It's kind of a place to share vacation pictures and stuff like that—

MONITA BELL

Right.

WILL SOMMER

But in practice, it's often worked out to be that because it's a site that doesn't really seem prepared for these extremist groups, that was a place they flourished after being banned from sites like Facebook or Twitter.

MONITA BELL

Right, right. Even though Instagram is owned by Facebook, which I know might confuse some people.

WILL SOMMER

Exactly.

MONITA BELL

So, I know you were saying earlier that after the 2016 election, we saw this explosion of more radical and hateful content, but is media manipulation a new phenomenon? How is the current climate different, and is it more dangerous than before?

WILL SOMMER

Sure. I would say the big difference here is the Internet, which makes it possible for people to link up in ways and find people who can reinforce their beliefs. It makes it possible for these fake news things to spread a lot faster.

MONITA BELL

Right, yeah, and then once again, particularly for young people as these more maybe subtler ways of manipulation are easier to master or to use.

WILL SOMMER

Right, exactly.

MONITA BELL

Yeah. Teachers often feel ill-equipped to help their students navigate the vast online information ecosystem; there's a lot, and as you've pointed out, it's a place where bad information and conspiracy theories can masquerade as truth. Considering your expertise and what you've learned in your work, what do you think teachers need to know and what should they be telling their students?

WILL SOMMER

You know, I think it's something that can be very difficult to address because you don't want to come off as seeming partisan. I really think the thing to make students aware of is the ability to distinguish between different sources of information and credibility and thinking about various steps. I think stressing to them that at a newspaper, for example, they're not just making things up, that that would be a very serious issue if a reporter was; whereas online, an anonymous person can just post anything and get away with it. And also stressing, I think, having a diverse media diet so you're getting exposed to different viewpoints I think is key.

MONITA BELL

Mm-hmm. I would say on the fact-checking front, you're a journalist, and so obviously fact-checking is very important in your line of work. It's essential to maintaining your credibility. On another episode of

this podcast, we have talked about the things that fact-checkers do really well that most of us don't. If you think to what are some of the common things you do, some of the practices that you engage in when you're working on a story or you're doing your research, what do you think are some of the key things that young people might be able to employ from what you do? Yeah.

WILL SOMMER

Sure. Yeah, absolutely. I think trying to look for primary source documents, for example, or considering what a story is based on. Certainly, when a story comes out, even in the mainstream media, that is based on a lot of anonymous sources, for example, you have to consider "How credible is this versus something that can be based on court records or police documents?" Something that happens a lot is I'll write a story based on government documents and someone will say it's "fake news." That's something that there's a hard record of it. I think that's a key thing for people to consider is, is what the evidence that goes into a story is.

MONITA BELL

Right, yeah. You've been mentioning some key things here just when it comes to media literacy and digital literacy. You talked earlier about critical thinking, and now looking at hard evidence that can't be refuted, at least not reasonably. Thank you for that. Can you recommend any resources that teachers might be able to use to just help them learn about the phenomena that you've been describing and that you're uncovering in your work?

WILL SOMMER

Sure, yeah. I think it's a very fast-moving space. I think if you wanted to understand the world of online trolling and how that blends into the Internet right-wing, Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies* I think is a great example. David Neiwart's book—which escapes me right now, the name of it—on the alt-right, I think are all good examples. Really, a lot of it is, I think, following news coverage sites like The Daily Beast, my newsletter, various people, I think because it is such a fast-moving space.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, yeah. Okay, well can you think of anything else that you feel is important for educators to know that they may not be thinking about in this realm?

WILL SOMMER

No, I think that's about it for me.

MONITA BELL

Okay, excellent. Fantastic. Thanks so much, Will.

WILL SOMMER

Okay, thank you.

MONITA BELL

That was Will Sommer, a tech reporter for The Daily Beast and writer of the newsletter "The Right Richter." Next, Melissa Ryan has a lot to say about the normalization of far-right ideologies in the media

too, but she also reminds us that the haters use digital media to make their movements seem larger than they really are.

Did you know that Teaching Tolerance has other podcasts? We've got *Teaching Hard History*, which builds on our framework *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*. Listen as our host, history professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries, brings us the lessons we should've learned in school through the voices of leading scholars and educators. It's good advice for teachers and good information for everybody.

We've also got *Queer America*, hosted by professors Leila Rupp and John D'Emilio. Joined by scholars and educators, they take us on a journey that spans from Harlem to the frontier West, revealing stories of LGBTQ life that belong in our consciousness and in our classrooms.

Find both podcasts at tolerance.org/podcasts, and use them to help you build a more robust and inclusive curriculum.

Well, Melissa, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I know you're very busy doing very important work, so I really appreciate it.

MELISSA RYAN

Oh, thank you so much for having me.

MONITA BELL

Will you just introduce yourself and tell us a little about what you do?

MELISSA RYAN

Sure. Well, my name is Melissa Ryan. I write a weekly newsletter, "Ctrl Alt-Right Delete," which covers all things online hate and online toxicity, and I got into the work as a digital political strategist.

MONITA BELL

Can you talk more about what actually got you into doing this work? You talked about the advocacy that you had been doing. What led you into this path of tracking the hateful practices of the so-called "alt-right" online?

MELISSA RYAN

A lot of the work in digital strategy is you're spending a lot of time in digital communities, and you're trying to find who your people are and figure out the best ways to mobilize them. What I saw in 2016 just didn't look like what I expected online activity to look in a presidential year. Nothing that the left was doing was popping or getting people excited, and then everything that the right was doing, they were completely dominating social media—they were dominating Facebook and Twitter. I had read a couple of articles about this burgeoning so-called "online alt-right movement," but it really hit home for me in October of 2016 when I found myself at the center of some pretty vicious online attacks from an innocuous tweet that I made during one of the presidential debates.

Initially the response was really quite good; it was retweeted 12,000 times and it was liked over 20,000 times, but the backlash to that was swift and very intense. What I ended up with was days and days of

death threats and attacks and insults on my Twitter account. They found my Facebook, they found my spouse's social media. They tweeted at the consulting firm where I worked, they found my personal email. It was scary, but the organizer in me was like, "Oh, this is really well-organized. I want to understand where this comes from."

MONITA BELL

Oh wow. That's very focused of you.

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah, so I started tracing back. I found the tweet on a now-defunct white supremacist website where they were saying, "Come after this person." I found the tweet on the Donald sub-Reddit, and I just started to see all these nodes of where some of these attacks and activity was coming from, so I started making notes on it, and it was like, "Oh, no, this is now. This is what the Internet is. This is what's dominating the Internet, and I need to understand it to do my job, to keep working in advocacy."

So, I started this newsletter thinking that a couple hundred of my friends and colleagues might be interested in learning along with me. It forced me to do some writing, it gave me a deadline and much to my shock, it's grown. Within a month, we had about a thousand readers. Now we're coming up on two years at the end of November, and we have 15,000 readers.

MONITA BELL

Oh wow.

MELISSA RYAN

It's activists, it's colleagues, but it's also folks who work in the tech industry, it's folks in media, it's folks in academia, and just because it hit so many different industries. Two years later, we're going strong.

MONITA BELL

I would love for you to just clarify something for folks who may be listening. I think at this point, most people have heard the term "alt-right"—

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

But I think just in case there are still some folks who don't understand, when we use that term, how that's distinguished from the "right."

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

Can you just touch on that a bit?

MELISSA RYAN

Well, it's actually harder and harder. I think the so-called "alt-right," as we understood them two years ago, were this radical, white supremacist movement who were using the Internet to sort of infect the mainstream right. But two years later, post-Charlottesville when we've got a president that refuses to denounce white supremacy, that refuses to call for unity and times of national balance, I actually think it's much harder to think of them as a sub-movement and more that the white supremacist ideas of the alt-right have become the ideas of the right at large.

MONITA BELL

Okay, yeah. I think this is getting into something that I discussed with Matthew Johnson, who works with an organization called MediaSmarts in Canada.

MELISSA RYAN

Mm-hmm.

MONITA BELL

We talked a lot about pretty much how these fringe ideologies and opinions are increasingly becoming more mainstream and acceptable. I did want people to understand that when we talk about the so-called "alt-right," we don't necessarily mean the "right" politically, but we do see the kind of acceptable nature of some of these ideas. I think what you'll probably touch on, I don't want to presume, but what we'll touch on is how some of these ideas get taken, say, from Reddit threads, and then we hear them come out of politicians' mouths, for example.

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah. The spread and the radicalization has been really quite shocking. There have been a couple of good studies: Jonathon Morgan at New Knowledge AI has written a lot about the radicalization just using comments from Trump's Facebook page over the course of 2016. There's also a study of Reddit comments from the University of Amsterdam, which I believe it's like over 3 million comments, and just showing that all these disparate far-right groups and even more mainstream right groups, the language that they're using has become more consistent and the ideas, it's not as decentralized or as disparate as I think we would've understood it even a year ago.

MONITA BELL

Yeah. Right now, you're already sharing some things you've learned, that we see the... I guess I'd say "normalization"—

MELISSA RYAN

"Normalization" is a good word, yeah.

MONITA BELL

Of some of these ideas, yeah, in our discourse. Can you tell us a little more about what you've learned in the course of doing this work?

MELISSA RYAN

I mean, I think the most interesting thing to me is the feedback loop between the Trump administration

and these disparate online communities. I think there is a sense out there that they're getting their marching orders from Trump, and that's not necessarily always the case. You have the case of memes that make their way from Reddit or 4Chan to President Trump's Twitter feed. You recently had that with a slogan that he started using: "Jobs, Not Mobs." The New York Times, a couple of days ago, was able to trace that all the way how it got up. Then you know, the president has a staffer—he has Dan Scavino—whose job is to, basically, from the White House, liaise with these online communities. I think there's a lot of constant communication, and I don't necessarily think it's one leading the other; I think the way that we would traditionally think of far-right communications is it's top-down and they get their marching orders. That's really not what's happening anymore.

MONITA BELL

So you're saying it's more like a back-and-forth kind of—

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah, it's a back-and-forth. They're feeding off one another, and frankly, I think they're feeding off one another's worst instincts. It's been really shocking when you think about how much of it has crept into campaign rhetoric. I was listening to, I live in DC but we get Virginia local radio, and it was ads for Corey Stewart yesterday. I don't remember the specifics, but I remember being shocked that it made it on the air. Then of course, there's the Trump ad that CNN and NBC and even Fox Network actually have refused to air and pull down.

MONITA BELL

Oh wow.

MELISSA RYAN

It's just amazing that the kind of language that you saw that was common on Internet message boards a couple of years, it's now crept into our political mainstream discourse. It should be shocking, but we're so used to this creep of radicalization that it's sort of ingrained in all of us, even if we disagree with those views strongly.

MONITA BELL

I'd love for you to talk about that a little more. I was about to ask you a question, "Why should we be concerned about these trends?" You're definitely giving us that, but can you just maybe break down a little bit more, especially for educators who are the main folks who are going to be listening to this podcast—

MELISSA RYAN

Sure.

MONITA BELL

What are some key things we really should be concerned about and paying attention to along these lines?

MELISSA RYAN

I mean, words have power. Words have power, and the effect of finding yourself, I think for educators in

particular thinking about their students who might find themselves having access and ingrained in these online communities, you look at so many of these recent incidents of violence, whether it was the pipe bomb or the synagogue shooter, and they were radicalized online. You can go back and you can see their social media profiles. That started with words, and it's a progression. I think for educators in particular, I know a couple of the teachers' unions have done a lot of work on the "Trump Effect" in terms of what it is for students who are bullied, but I think there's also a great concern about particularly teenagers, particularly teenage young men, of being radicalized online by these spaces.

MONITA BELL

I think it's really important what you talked about in terms of how it starts with words, and there's a progression. After the shooting in Pittsburgh, we shared a resource from the Anti-Defamation League: the Pyramid of Hate. Are you familiar with this pyramid?

MELISSA RYAN

A little bit, but I wouldn't feel comfortable speaking to it.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, I'm not going to talk much about it, but it definitely starts at the bottom with words and how those words can then lead to discrimination, and it goes on up to violent acts.

MELISSA RYAN

Mm-hmm.

MONITA BELL

I think that your point is well-taken that we have to be concerned about these words because those words can transform into action, and that's really important for educators. Yeah, thank you for that.

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah. You know, it's interesting; when we're talking about some of these young men and Internet, like 4Chan and Reddit, they'll say, "Oh, I'm just joking," or "I'm just trolling" or "It's just ironic," and I think they feel like it gives them an out, and I think that's another thing we really have to push back on. "No, that's not acceptable." If you're joking using racist language, that's an act of racism. I think we've allowed too much of a pass there.

MONITA BELL

You know what? Since you just waded into that, I have a follow-up.

MELISSA RYAN

Sure.

MONITA BELL

I would say definitely within the last couple of years, because of this normalization of hateful rhetoric that you were talking about, I think we've been having—and you can... see what you think, because I think you would've been exposed to this in thinking more about it in your work—but these increasing

discussions about the First Amendment and the right to free speech. When we have, say, educators who may be encountering young people who are using offensive language in the “It’s just a joke” realm of things, do you have any advice, and I realize you’re not an educator, but just noting the work that you do, do you have any advice for how they can respond to that or how they should respond to that?

MELISSA RYAN

You know, I think we’re not talking enough about the right to be safe and the right to be free from harm. I think it’s like a version of “Fire!” in a crowded theater; your free speech is not more important than someone else’s safety or life. For me, that’s a pretty clear line. It’s interesting, I now produce the newsletter with Hope Not Hate, an organization in the UK, and the researchers and I are always talking back and forth about the nuances, the primacy of free speech in America versus other countries where that’s not necessarily the case; it’s one of many values. I’m obviously pro-speech and I’m anti-censorship, but I do think it’s important to acknowledge that your free speech should not be more important than someone’s life.

MONITA BELL

Yeah. So, what if it is just a joke? What if someone’s life is not in danger? What then?

MELISSA RYAN

Well again, I think that’s where you start to lead down that radicalization path and it’s really important to realize the potential power of that joke. I think for educators, it’s very important to be able to say, “That’s not appropriate. That’s not the right language.”

MONITA BELL

Yeah, yeah. I’m glad you mentioned Hope Not Hate because I wanted to ask about your work with them. Can you talk about who they are and what they do, and how you’re working with them?

MELISSA RYAN

Sure. Hope Not Hate is one of the largest anti-racism organizations in the UK. They do a combination of education and campaign work, but also just really amazing research. We started having conversations a while ago—they were readers of the newsletter; I was big fans of their work. Working with them allows us to just take the newsletter to completely new levels because we’re able to, in addition to analysis and links, we’re able to debut a lot of original research that’s done by the Hope Not Hate team. It’s just been a really great partnership. We’re wrapping up our first year. I think the world of them. I love bringing their work to American audiences, and especially since these far-right movements, they’re organized internationally. They call themselves “nationalists” but they’re organized as an international movement, and I find that’s something that’s been missing from the left quite a bit. Just to have an opportunity to start to make those trans-Atlantic connections has been very rewarding for me.

MONITA BELL

Can you just tell us a little bit about the latest research they’ve done?

MELISSA RYAN

We had one on Sunday about online safe spaces that some of the far-right perpetrators of violence in the U.S. have been. We did a great series of different alt-right movements around the world, including Japan,

including far-right nationalists in India. Then my favorite one that we've done this year is hating and dating online: how the people in the so-called "alt-right" movement find love.

MONITA BELL

Oh, wow. That's a whole 'nother podcast episode.

MELISSA RYAN

"The World's Worst Dating Websites," yeah.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, but I definitely think especially for young people, you mentioned a few minutes ago about how young men, in particular, may be vulnerable to this radicalization—

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

And we see the partners who stand alongside them and support it even if they're not leading it. Maybe for another day, I think that would be very interesting to see the educational implications of that kind of research.

MELISSA RYAN

Mm-hmm.

MONITA BELL

For sure. Okay, thank you for that. So, our listeners may feel overwhelmed; I mean, I'm overwhelmed—

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

Just by what you're talking about and from the work that we've been doing at the Southern Poverty Law Center and in Teaching Tolerance as well, but there's so much out there and it's spreading so far. As you said, we're not talking about just an American thing; we're talking about international movements that are rooted in hate. Educators and all of us really may feel overwhelmed by the task of having to sort out reliable from unreliable information and then, let alone to have to help students do it. Do you have any advice for them?

MELISSA RYAN

So, I would say that one thing that's important to understand about this movement is they have used online spaces to amplify themselves to make them seem far larger than they actually are. While it's sad that their ideas have become so mainstream, they are still very much in the minority. I think for educators, it's such an opportunity to be a counterweight to anything that young people may be experiencing online. It's such a wonderful opportunity to be sort of on the front lines of defense, and I think it's overwhelming but at the end of the day, there are way more of us than there are of them.

MONITA BELL

You know what? Yes, I think that's really an important note to hang onto, right? I think it was also Matthew Johnson who talked about the loudest 10 percent—

MELISSA RYAN

Yep.

MONITA BELL

Those are the voices you hear. But it's 10 percent.

MELISSA RYAN

Yep, and we just know so much of this conversation is being driven by bots and bot networks, which are obviously controlled by a human. For me, it was very sobering when I realized, "Oh, it's not 50,000 men coming after me on Twitter. It's 20 very bored guys with a bot net."

MONITA BELL

Mm-hmm.

MELISSA RYAN

That just puts it in perspective. It's like, "Oh, well it's not as overwhelming. Everything isn't as horrible." There's still a lot of horrible and there's still a lot of work to do, but I would say that we outnumber them vastly and greatly.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, and I'm glad you just returned to your example of having experienced extreme trolling. "Trolling" probably isn't even necessarily the word for that.

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

I'm really sorry to hear about that. We know increasingly, people who are opinionated and vocal about certain issues experience that kind of thing. For young people who may go through that, and we know young people are using their voices too to speak out against hate and just to make themselves heard, which is a beautiful thing about technology these days and how young people can use them. Do you have any advice for young people who may experience or who have experienced the kind of thing that you did?

MELISSA RYAN

You know, it's interesting—some of my work that I did this year was around misinformation and conspiracies that spread around the Parkland student survivors, which was really awful on its face. There was a moment when one of the students who was still a minor was asked to confirm on live television that she was an actual victim and not a crisis actor.

MONITA BELL

Right.

MELISSA RYAN

It was just awful, especially seeing once they spoke out. It was like, “Oh no, people are going to come after them in such a big way,” but the amazing thing about these students is they’ve been on social media all their lives. They were very savvy. Just watching them push back in very effective ways and becoming very effective messengers for their movement, and now they’re doing very effective messaging for getting out the vote. Usually, when I talk to teenagers, I’m not giving advice so much as asking them for advice and absorbing the way they use the Internet. They’ve never lived without it, so they just experience it in a very different way than I do.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, yeah. That’s a great point, especially what we saw in the wake of the Parkland shooting and the way young people came out. I think I read, it was an interview with, it might have been Emma Gonzalez’s mother, I think, who was talking about, “I have to remember sometimes that she’s still a child even though she seems so mature,” and that she’s handling things so well that she still needed to be taken care of in ways as a child. That’s not to diminish the power of these young people and their leadership for sure.

MELISSA RYAN

Mm-hmm, yeah. I’ve been just continually inspired and impressed by young people over the past couple of years. They give me a lot of hope.

MONITA BELL

Me too. Sometimes, like I was saying before, all of this can seem so overwhelming, especially the rate at which we’re seeing hateful ideas spread, but young people today are doing what young people have always done—and that’s stand up when change needed to be made. We’re definitely seeing that happen today, and again, they’re using the technological tools at their disposal to advance their messages. Yeah.

MELISSA RYAN

Yeah, they are fluent in social media.

MONITA BELL

Mm-hmm. Of course, you talked about your work with Hope Not Hate. Do you have any other recommendations for resources or just sources for information for educators who want to learn more about how these kinds of things are spreading and that just want to increase their capacity and their knowledge base?

MELISSA RYAN

Sure. Well, first of all, I would encourage everyone to subscribe to my newsletter, ctrlaltrightdelete.com. Had to get in my plug first.

MONITA BELL

Oh yeah, absolutely.

MELISSA RYAN

I would also say the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have both done a lot of work around what they call the “Trump Effect.” I believe there’s a woman at the Aspen

Institute that does some work with AFT that's done some work on this as well, and then I think there are just loads of groups who are covering this more. I think for dealing with issues of online harassment in particular, which I know a lot of students and teens are, Feminist Frequency is great for helping to understand how to lock yourself down digitally. Then, there's just a lot of great reporting that's being done on online radicalization in general; I think BuzzFeed does the best job consistently. I'm also a big fan of The Verge for just starting to understand this stuff and put it into context.

MONITA BELL

Mm-hmm. Yeah, and for our listeners who may not know, Teaching Tolerance also has a report called "The Trump Effect." It's actually two reports: one before the election and then one after to see how things may have changed post-election. That's something to look out for on our website tolerance.org.

MELISSA RYAN

I will be looking at that right after this podcast.

MONITA BELL

Oh yeah, definitely. Check it out, check it out. Well, Melissa, thank you so much for your time. I think you have shared here, well, some very sobering, troubling information, but these are things we need to know, especially as we go out and work with young people and work with them. I won't even say "help them" necessarily in some ways, but work with them as we all combat the tide of hate that is kind of proliferating in digital spaces. Thank you.

MELISSA RYAN

Well thank you so much for having me.

MONITA BELL

That was Melissa Ryan, creator of the weekly newsletter "Ctrl Alt-Right Delete." For help with addressing the messages of the alt-right and recognizing signs of vulnerability in your students, check out the Teaching Tolerance magazine article "What is the Alt-Right?" as well as its accompanying toolkit and on-demand webinar. It's all free at tolerance.org/alt-right. Thank you for taking the time to join me for this episode of *The Mind Online*, a podcast of Teaching Tolerance, which is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm your host, Monita Bell, senior editor for Teaching Tolerance.

This podcast was inspired by Teaching Tolerance's Digital Literacy Framework, which offers seven key areas in which students need support developing digital and civic literacy skills, and features lessons for kindergarten through 12th-grade classrooms. Each lesson is designed in a way that can be used by educators with little to no technology in their classrooms. The Digital Literacy Framework and all its related resources, including a series of student-friendly videos, a professional development webinar and a PD module, can be found online at tolerance.org/diglit. That's tolerance.org/D-I-G-L-I-T.

This episode was produced by Jasmin López with help from Rachael London. Our production supervisor is Kate Shuster. Adrienne van der Valk assisted with the writing, and music for *The Mind Online* comes courtesy of John Bartmann. If you like what you've heard, rate, review and subscribe—and share with your friends and colleagues.