**Audio Transcript –** Environmental disinformation is getting weirder

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**I’m Nate Hegyi, and this is Outside/In.**

*News clip: This may well be the beginning of a historic weather event…*

**This August, Tropical Storm Hilary barreled up the West Coast and hit parts of southern California.**

**It was a *bad* scene. These are arid regions that saw months or even *years* worth of rain in just a couple of days.**

**People flocked to social media to document the destruction in real time.**

[SFX from social media video]

[mux]

**But useful as social media can be for spreading news quickly - it’s hard to know who to trust.**

**One guy posted a video on X - formerly called Twitter - of water cascading down the steps of a flooded subway.**

**“The LA Metro station on Wilshire/Vermont is flooding from the storm,” he captioned.**

*Clip: Oh boy, that’s a lot of water headed towards us.*

**Turns out, that clip was… not real.**

**Yes, Hilary did bring heavy rain and some flooding, BUT this particular video was from  the Earthquake ride…. at Universal Studios.**

*Clip: That was a simulation of an 8.3 earthquake, a great example of mechanical effects bringing a disaster to life…*

[mux swells]

**During natural disasters, and other emergencies. misinformation can be a distraction… or downright dangerous.**

**Especially when it gets amplified by powerful people.**

*Celeste Labedz: Some of Elon Musk’s favorite accounts are sharing climate misinformation and health misinformation, and stuff like that.*

**Today on the show, we’re talking to three people about recent falsities, fakeries, and fraudulent information spreading across our online ecosystems….**

*Caroline Orr Bueno: Emotions are high, and people are scared and wanting information.*

**And the bad actors who are using and abusing climate stories in ways you’d  never expect.**

*Jem Barthalowew: The top five think tanks and institutes that they’re are citing have all been associated with climate science denial.*

**Stick around.**

[ music fades]

**At some point in August, as that video of a flooding subway started going viral, a little note popped up underneath the tweet.**

**It said “Readers added context.” And then a single sentence:**

**“This is a ride at Universal Studios.”**

**This is what Twitter calls a community note, the company's version of crowd-sourced fact-checking.**

**And these little notes are doing a whole lot of work lately trying to keep things straight on a social media platform that changes its policies from day to day.**

**One of the people who writes notes just like these is Celeste Labedz. She’s got a PhD in environmental seismology, and spends her spare time scouring X for misleading or inaccurate tweets.**

**And when we talked - she told me that there are few Earthquake-related corrections that she has to make time and time again ..**

*Celeste Labedz: Let me see. So the main one is, you know, earthquakes can't be predicted. Volcanoes aren't actually, you know, bigger influences on carbon emissions than people are. There's no earthquake whether the positions of the planets don't affect earthquakes. And oh, of course, of course, you know, climate change is real, 99.9% more than that of peer reviewed scientific studies find that climate change is real and mainly human caused.*

*Nate Hegyi: And so, you know, people on Twitter or X are used to seeing community notes. How did you become a community notes writer and how did you get into it?*

*Celeste Labedz: So I got into community notes when it was still in pilot and still called Birdwatch, which I think is a much cooler name, much cooler. But yeah. So when I saw that Twitter was testing out like community based fact checking platform, I thought, oh, this is cool. This is maybe something I could use to help tackle the earthquake and misinformation that I've been seeing out here, whether that's, you know, people accidentally sharing myths that aren't true or people purposefully spreading misinformation. So I thought, hey, this is pretty cool. I signed up and yeah, I was one of the very early Birdwatch users. And yeah, it's it's been an interesting experience.*

*Nate Hegyi: So what is the job actually entail? And like how many hours a week are you are you doing this.*

*Celeste Labedz: So it's not a job. It's just a part of part of my social media use. It's just community and volunteer based, which is both good and bad in some ways. That's really cool. A lot of people contributing is really neat, but also that means, you know, if anybody can join it, then people can also use it for. Malicious efforts. There's people who attempt to put things like vaccine misinformation on posts that contain real vaccine information. People are trying to use it to promote transphobia with misinformation about things like gender affirming health care. And so yeah, it's been really cool in some ways. But also you see people attempting to use it to spread the same misinformation that it's supposed to be tackling.*

*Nate Hegyi: And so I guess I want to I want to take a little step back. And just for people who don't understand, like give me an example of something you'd see and then how you actually go about writing this community.*

*Celeste Labedz: Know one type of misinformation that I've put notes on is someone saying that, you know, human impacts on the climate are way smaller than volcanoes, and that's actually not true when it comes to things like carbon emissions. So I if I see a tweet that has that kind of misinformation in it, then I just click a little, little thing on the tweet that says write a community note. And then I, you know, it asks me a couple questions like, you know, does this post have an image that's digitally altered or does it contain false information, or does it contain outdated information? Stuff like that. So I click the ones that are relevant, and then it has a little box where I can write the text of a note. For the stuff that I usually do, I'm often just copying and pasting previous notes, like most of my notes are the same five notes because the same five myths keep popping up. So I copied that note and I paste it in and it says something like, you know, while volcanoes do contribute to the global climate, humans emit a mount Saint Helens worth of carbon dioxide every 2.5 hours.*

*Celeste Labedz: And then I list some links for places where people can go learn more about that. So then I have the text of my note. I have some sources for my note, and then I click submit. Now when another community notes user sees that tweet, they see a little icon that says rate proposed community notes. And then in order to become visible to all Twitter users, to show everybody that, hey, actually, this is a myth. The volcanoes aren't dwarfing people. People are dwarfing volcanoes in terms of carbon emissions. It has to reach a certain number of helpful ratings from people who have a diverse range of answers in their other note ratings. So they're trying to basically prevent partizanship. If you think about, you know, people supporting two different political candidates, if a lot of them saw a note that said a good thing about one, even if it wasn't true, then they could they could rate it helpful and it could it could go out even if it wasn't true.*

*Nate Hegyi: Why do you think people write these things.*

*Celeste Labedz: Write community notes or write misinformation?*

*Nate Hegyi: Know write misinformation. Yeah.*

*Celeste Labedz: Well, I mean, you know, some people see a lot of advantage of it. You know, a lot of our climate misinformation comes directly from fossil fuel companies, then, yeah, when you have political interests that are also on the payroll of fossil fuel companies, then it's in it's in their interest to spread that misinformation, too. And then, you know, a lot of people who are really well-meaning and not on the payroll of any fossil fuel companies, they can get caught up when you have a media environment that has so much misinformation in it, then even, you know, really earnest, good hearted people end up getting duped by this misinformation. And that's really sad. And they're part of the spread, too, even though they're also kind of victims of it if they're not trying to do anything malicious.*

*Nate Hegyi: Have you seen the community notes kind of program or I guess, how have you seen it change under Elon Musk?*

*Celeste Labedz: Elon Musk has, you know, sometimes advertised community notes and sometimes hated community notes when they point out misinformation that he is sharing or misinformation in some of his. Some of Elon Musk's favorite accounts are sharing climate misinformation and health misinformation and stuff like that. And, you know, the misinformation environment of Twitter has been changing under under Musk's leadership, some people have looked at the change in follower counts of climate scientists versus some popular climate misinformation accounts, and they have seen those diverge significantly. But yeah, you know, you can look at any climate scientist replies. And the people who have subscribed to Twitter blue with the little blue check mark, you can see them spreading misinformation and harassing climate scientists. And those get promoted to the top of the replies every time.*

*Nate Hegyi: It strikes me that this can feel somewhat like a Sisyphean effort. I'm curious, do you ever think about quitting? Like what makes you keep doing it?*

*Celeste Labedz: So, I mean, I'm kind of not really sure why I'm still writing community notes when Twitter and Elon Musk in particular are continually demonstrating that they see misinformation as more of a feature than a bug. Part of it's just habit. By now, you know, part of my little daily routine of checking Twitter is checking the earthquake misinformation accounts and pasting the same note in them. And, you know, a community based platform is really cool in some ways, but it also seems like a way that Twitter is sort of dodging accountability when it. Fact checking. If Twitter is writing the notes, then if they get criticism from things like politicians with fossil fuel interests, then that's criticism on Twitter. But if it's the people writing the notes, then Twitter can take credit for when it works well. But if somebody criticizes the way community networks, they can say, oh, that's not us. It's all community based, so they can take credit for the successes and but any, any criticism, they can just pass off onto the users. So it's just sort of strange. But I'm still writing notes.*

**That was Celeste Labedz. She’s a community notes writer on Twitter.**

*[music]*

**The thing about the internet is that sometimes misinformation gets put out there by random scammers who have nothing to do but troll the rest of us.**

**But global disinformation campaigns go back long before people were catfishing on AOL.**

**Like,Operation INFEKTION. That was a KGB-run disinformation operation that took place during the 80s… When the Soviet Union was  trying to spread the theory that the U.S. had invented HIV/AIDS in a lab while researching  biological weapons**

**The idea was to undermine the U.S.’ credibility and get other countries to go against it.**

**This kind of thing still happens today.**

**In fact, it cropped up again not long ago, when massive wildfires swept across Hawaii.**

**Soon after the wildfires, people on social media were showing their support… Some, arguing that the US has it’s priorities mixed up and sharing a hashtag: Hawaii, *not* Ukraine.**

**Caroline Orr Bueno is a researcher at the University of Maryland. She specializes in cognitive security, behavioral sciences and disinformation. She wrote about the Hawaii not Ukrain hashtag in her newsletter, called , *Weaponized*.**

*Nate Hegyi: Let's start by getting into your Substack article you wrote about a viral hashtag, Hawaii, not Ukraine. On first glance, it looks like it was domestic misinformation campaign, but your findings show that's probably not the case.*

*Caroline Orr Bueno: So what I found was, as you described, what appears to have started as a domestic misinformation disinformation campaign. I will say it's a little bit hard to trace it back to its true origins, because almost the exact same disinformation campaign appeared in the aftermath of the train derailment in Ohio back in February. But like you said, it appears to be a campaign that started domestically spread within a network of linked accounts, which helped it spread because they retweeted and co retweeted each other. And simultaneously, as this was breaking out, Russian and Chinese media started picking up the primary narratives. Essentially, it was trying to say that the aid that was provided to Hawaii was inadequate, which that part. Yeah, I think there's some legitimacy there. At least it's a legitimate viewpoint that people hold. But then the disinformation came in when they tried to link that narrative, to say that the reason that the aid was inadequate to Hawaii was because we are sending so much aid to Ukraine. All of our attention is on Ukraine. And basically we are neglecting Hawaii.*

*Nate Hegyi: And were these starting picked up here in the US.*

*Caroline Orr Bueno: You know, domestic right wing influencers, looking at this as a broader campaign, you might find that it did originate outside of the United States because this is so classically Russian narrative. You know, since the the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has primarily tried to influence public support through various social media and media campaigns. And a lot of them have tried to portray Ukraine in a couple different ways, either as criminal and greedy and, you know, like they're accepting aid from the US and selling it or, you know, doing things with it that they're not supposed to or otherwise kind of portraying Ukraine as undeserving because of some factor. So, you know, they have portrayed Ukrainians as Nazis. And this kind of fits into that theme of, you know, greedy, undeserving and kind of appealing to the nationalist, isolationist tendencies among some Americans. And this really taps into that quite significantly.*

*Nate Hegyi: You mentioned the train derailment in Ohio in the spring. Can you tell me what you saw as the parallels between the misinformation campaign that happened then and the one in, in Hawaii?*

*Caroline Orr Bueno: So the underlying narrative was almost the exact same. It was that the administration is ignoring Ohio, the people in need there. The administration is not, you know, attending to a huge disaster. And people were comparing it to, you know, Chernobyl and basically saying that Biden and just sort of the country as a whole was so concerned with Ukraine that we were ignoring people in our own backyard. One of the problems with this, besides just being, you know, misleading, is that it also distracts and diverts away from some actual real problems that we do have problems with our disaster management in the US. And when we when we're constantly looking elsewhere and saying, you know, this or that, that's causing these problems in disaster response, we're not talking about the fact that, no, actually, this happens after almost every single major disaster in the country and has since the 90s. And we should probably do something about that.*

*Nate Hegyi: What is it about the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster? That's like good timing for bad actors to start a misinformation campaign.*

*Caroline Orr Bueno: So there's a lot of factors that kind of combine. Emotions are high and people are scared and people want information, and it ends up creating a sort of dark space where people are really needing and wanting information. But that information isn't yet there for them, and that dark space ends up getting filled often by bad actors, whether that's scammers, whether it's. You know, extremists or disinformation. And we see that quite frequently, whether it's after like a mass shooting or a natural disaster.*

*[mux swell]*

**Nate Hegyi: Caroline Orr Bueno is a researcher at the University of Maryland who specializes in disinformation.**

**After the break… what happens when a GOP megadonor in Wyoming gets upset by climate coverage?**

**BREAK**

**Nate Hegyi: This is Outside/In, I’m Nate Hegyi.**

**Journalists talk a lot about the danger of news deserts: places where small-town papers have gone belly up, and reporting on local issues is slim or non-existent.**

**But what if someone with a lot of money, and a *different* idea about what local journaism should be, decides to swoop in and fill the gap?**

**That’s exactly what happened in rural Wyoming, when a GOP megadonor funded a new outlet in 2019 — the Cowboy State Daily.**

**In a way, it IS filling the gap. I’ve seen some legit reporting  there - including on grizzly bear management the state.**

 **But not everything you read there is based in fact.**

**Jem Bartholomew is a reporting fellow for the Columbia Journalism Review’s Tow [TAO like “OW”] Center for Digital Journalism. He looked into the kinds of things that the Cowboy State Daily covers.**

*Nate Hegyi: Hey, Jem.*

*Jem Bartholomew: Hey. Great to be here.*

*Nate Hegyi: So why did this GOP mega-donor start this outlet?*

*Jem Bartholomew: Yeah, it's a great question. So person we're talking about is a guy called Foster Friess. He's actually passed away now, but he was one of the first Republican mega-donors to embrace Donald Trump the first time around. And back in 2018, he was running for office in Wyoming. And the story, as it was told to me by local reporters that were covering his campaign, is that he didn't always like the coverage he was getting. There was a piece in particular by an outlet called Wyofile, which reported on some unsavory things in one of his staffers past, and he actually asked the outlet to take down the story, to which the editor replied no. And Foster Friess replied by saying, well, I'm paraphrasing, you know, well, I'm going to have to find another way for the people of Wyoming to find the news about their lawmakers. And about six months later saw the launch of the Cowboy State Daily. So, yeah, that's that's what happened back in 20 1819.*

*Nate Hegyi: And so this is like a this is a super popular news outlet in Wyoming. Like I've ran into articles here living in Montana from them. And you see headlines like is Greta Thunberg actually smart or is she just a propped up celebrity armed with a PR machine? Or Biden's war on oil and gas continues full steam ahead. And then study says climate change fearmongering severely impacting children's mental health. Why do you think they're so focused on misinformation surrounding climate change? Like, what's the end game here in.*

*Jem Bartholomew: Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, first thing to know is that Wyoming does sort of rely on oil and gas for a lot of its jobs and, you know, contributes to the state budget. So, you know, they're bound to be covering this industry quite closely. But what we found when we scraped the website for all of his content dating back to 2019, was that in their coverage of energy, the top five think tanks and institutes that they're citing have all been associated with climate science denial. And that's according to Smog's climate disinformation database. So, you know, I can't get into their heads as to why they're focusing so much on this, but there certainly seems to be a kind of agenda on their part to maybe question some of the climate science which is prevailing among scientists, and think what this story shows is that American news deserts are really quite vulnerable to these wealthy partizans that may have political agendas or topics that they're interested in to kind of muscle into a local area and sort of do what they want if they have the money to, to invest. And we can see that with the Cowboy State daily, it's traffic is now really, really high in the state and is overtaken by other long standing outlets.*

*Nate Hegyi: Zooming out for a second, conservative outlets aren't the only ones filling in these news deserts. There's also some progressive ones doing the same. So what are some of those outlets popping up, and are they also pushing misinformation?*

*Jem Bartholomew: Yeah, you're so right to raise that. This isn't just something we're seeing on the right. We think about other newsrooms like Career Newsroom, for instance, which is an initiative founded by Tara McGowan, who used to be involved with Democratic politics. And, you know, in many cases they do really good journalism and they fill a need in local areas. But they also have been criticized for, you know, only pursuing particular types of stories and really being driven by their values. And I think this speaks to a wider point that in some cases, journalism is just becoming another means of political campaigning, you know, for the left and the right, if you have the money and the political will and you want to pursue an agenda, setting up a newsroom is often a good way of doing that now. And, you know, that's quite concerning to some people.*

[mux swell]

**That was Jem Bartholomew with the Columbia Journalism Review’s Tao Center for Digital Journalism.**

[mux fade]

**Earlier in the show, I asked Caroline Orr Bueno why misinformation gets worse after a natural disaster.**

**Emotions are high, she said. People are scared.**

**But it’s not just *natural* disasters that bad actors capitalize on.**

**This has been a really hard news week.**

**It’s been hard to parse out the reporting from even the most reputable news outlets. I’ve gotten angry listening to even my beloved NPR, because I think they are missing voices and context about the conflict in Israel and Gaza.**

**But then you add the thousands of other media outlets out there, the circus that is Twitter these days… The risk for disinformation is incredibly high.**

**So I wanted to share a few tricks I try to use to parse through the bull.**

**First… don’t trust what you see on social media. Take it with a massive grain of salt. And if you see something that does perk your interest… do a google search.**

**And if you’re trying to gain a handle on something as devastating and divisive as a war or a natural disaster… read *multiple* news outlets.**

**I’ll check the New York Times, then I’ll try and get a more progressive take from the Guardian, then I’ll take a peak at the Wall Street Journal or Fox News to see how that same event is getting seen and filtered through a conservative eye.**

**Be patient. Sometimes it takes hours or even days for reporters to vet the information you may have seen on social media.**

**[**pause**]**

**Now, that’s all advice for getting *news*.  If what you’re looking for is *perspective…* that’s even harder to find.**

**But I wouldn’t look for it on Twitter. Community notes can only do so much.**

[mux]

**This episode was written and produced by Jeongyoon Han with help from me, Nate Hegyi. Jeongyoon, by the way, was our editorial fellow and she just got a job at NPR! Congrats.**

**It was edited and mixed by Taylor Quimby. Our team includes Justine Paradise and Felix Poon.**

**Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer.**

**Music by blue dot sessions.**

**Our theme music is by breakmaster cylinder.**

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