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Unreality and Social Corrosion: Masha Gessen and Ethan Zuckerman in Conversation

Ethan Zuckerman, Masha Gessen

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Masha Gessen is a journalist and the author of ten books of nonfiction, most recently *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, which won the 2017 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Gessen is also the author of the national bestseller *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2012). Gessen is a staff writer at The New Yorker and a national fellow with New America Foundation.

JoDS guest editor Ethan Zuckerman directs the Center for Civic Media at MIT, and teaches at MIT's Comparative Media Studies and Writing program and at MIT's Media Lab where he is associate professor of the practice. The author of *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*, Zuckerman researches and writes about technology and social change, social media and the future of democracy.

Masha and Ethan met at Masha's home in New York City on May 20, 2019 to discuss the role of Unreality in the evolution of contemporary politics, the relevance of the Russian experience to understanding politics in the US, and whether the left is engaging in conspiratorial thinking in blaming Russia for Donald Trump's election. Along the way Masha and Ethan also explored the idea that many Soviet dissidents may have been on the autism spectrum, the loneliness that arises when conventional politics is abandoned and, with just a bit of hope, the idea that an appreciation for complexity coupled with the power of clear vision might help the world find a way through its current mess.

This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Ethan Zuckerman: This issue of JoDS explores what happens if politics becomes not about persuading someone that your interpretation of the facts is true, but persuading someone that the facts are other than what they are. By essentially constructing your own reality with these facts you are actually creating unreality. I want to understand the impact on society of this journey into the unreal.

You brought ideas about unreality to the table in [a talk you gave at the Media Lab's Defiance event](#) two years ago. You very cautiously said, "Conspiracy theory is always about oversimplification. It's always about making the world less complicated than it is." The danger now is that the left is oversimplifying as well as the right. Look at the whole Russiagate delusion; there's yet another conspiracy theory within it. It seems to me that in this style of politics the idea of reality itself is up for grabs.

Delusional politics, as I'll call it, seems to have started in Russia and has spread into Central Europe. We see some of it surrounding the debate with Ukraine, and we can argue that the rise of illiberal democracy and nationalism in Hungary and Poland also fit into it. If, in trying to trace this style of discourse to Russia, am I buying into yet another conspiracy theory or is there really something there?

Masha Gessen: Oh, wow, that's a really great question. I think I would answer it in two ways. First, one of the catchphrases I tend to use is, "just because there's a conspiracy that's no excuse for conspiracy thinking." I use this phrase because I believe conspiracy thinking is destructive to our thinking in general, and no conspiracy is so good that it explains everything. Even if there is a conspiracy, and I mean with Russia we know that there was stuff, but it just doesn't explain what happened to us. Those two things—Russian interference and the rise of Trump independent of Russia—can exist at the same time.

Second, I think that looking at Russia as a case study in conspiracy thinking is really, really useful. But looking at Russia as a cause of that kind of thinking is probably not terribly useful because the cause of that kind of thinking, that kind of politics, is humanity. I don't believe Russia is the birthplace of that anti-political impulse. I mean, we've seen it elsewhere, and certainly in the 20th century we saw it repeatedly. I don't know if we ever really saw it before the 20th century. I think that idea [is described by Hannah Arendt in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*](#).

So I think the answer to your question is yes, there is a conspiracy theory and yes, there's something real there. And as a case study Russia is incredibly useful.

Ethan: Okay. Let's look at Russia as causing this moment for us. Now, giving away too much agency to Vladimir Putin is not helpful. You've pointed out that Putin may be smarter than Donald Trump, but that's setting the bar fairly low. I'm curious to know if this style of competing realities is something that you experienced when you were reporting within Russia.

Masha: Oh yes.

Ethan: Can you give me an example of where you found yourself encountering this notion of leaders shaping reality rather than shaping interpretation?

Masha: A very good example of course is Ukraine, and [I've written about this](#). Because I think it's such a great example of what Putin does, and it's related to how he instrumentalizes lying. Russian leaders kept saying, "There are no Russian troops in Ukraine." There was, if you remember, in the summer and fall of 2014, an ongoing debate in various circles about whether there were in fact Russian troops in Ukraine. This is quite extraordinary because we were actually having a debate about physical reality; about whether actual human beings in actual uniforms were actually riding on tanks in Ukraine.

Ethan: We saw statements like, "We don't know who these people are. Perhaps they bought the uniforms at surplus."

Masha: Exactly. Then, in the spring of 2016 I think it was, Putin suddenly said, “Of course there are Russian troops in Ukraine. Of course. What are you, idiots?”

Well, yes we’ve known all along that there are Russian troops in Ukraine, but you were saying there weren’t. He didn’t actually say this, but if I were to role-play it I’d say he might as well have said, “What are you, an idiot?” He knew they were there, so what if I said it?

It all has that surreal feeling of trying to reason with a bully in a schoolyard who is holding your lunchbox. You say, “Give me my lunchbox.” They say, “I don’t have your lunchbox.” You say, “It’s in your right hand.” They say, “There’s nothing in my right hand.” Then you look around for witnesses because that’s the only way to validate what you’re experiencing. You want someone to whom you can say, “You can see, right, that he’s got my lunchbox in his left hand now?” But there’s nobody there.

Ethan: One of the things you seemed to be suggesting about finding witnesses — and again, I re-watched your *Defiance* talk and I’ve read some of the pieces that have been written on this — is when we are paying attention to the Russiagate conspiracy we’re not paying attention to the other ways in which Russia is continuing to be abusive of global human rights, invading and occupying sovereign territory. We’re still dealing with a situation where a large chunk of Ukraine is being occupied by Russia.

You referenced Hannah Arendt, and I wonder whether she gives us a way to think about this. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she talks about the idea that when you’re made to support a falsehood, it’s a way of showing your obeisance to the leader. You have to somehow admit that he is sophisticated and knowledgeable in a way that you’re not, and there’s a reason why he can’t tell you now that the troops are in Ukraine, but then later he says it was his master plan after all.

Some of my writing for this issue focuses on QAnon, which is perhaps the most extreme of these different conspiracy theories, but QAnon loves the phrase “three dimensional chess.” They love to front the idea that Trump is playing a more sophisticated game than we could possibly understand. Is this part of Putin’s approach as well? Is this about flaunting power by blatantly lying? Or is it about trying to make him look even smarter than he is by making it clear that sometimes he has to lie to us for our own good?

Masha: I think there are elements of both. And I think I would still analyze them through the lens of power because acknowledging that the leader is going to feed you reality as they see fit is also acknowledging that it’s the only available reality. That’s how power is consolidated. I think that’s what Arendt writes about; that you enter into the agreement of “I’m going to inhabit this reality with you because inhabiting two realities at the same time is untenable.” It’s very hard on me to live in *my*

personally observable reality and in *your* reality at the same time, so I'll give up the struggle and go to live in your reality.

Ethan: Because you have more power?

Masha: Yes, because you have more power, and I'm too weak to try to live in my observable reality. It's too much of a struggle for me, so I'm going to live in yours.

Ethan: I love this idea of the tension between the two realities because conspiracy theory communities these days all seem to use the same analogy, which is “the red pill.” It comes from the movie *The Matrix*. The theory is if you take the blue pill you continue living in your illusionary state. If you take the red pill, you see the true reality that sits under the surface of your illusion. It's a binary choice. You can be in a reality they want you to believe, or you can choose to go into a much less comfortable reality.

The people who are peddling this framing are always peddling really terrible realities. I mean, it started with a misogynist group of men who firmly believed in their essential notions of male/female relationships. Once you accept these notions the world will make perfect sense to you. This process feels very consistent with the sort of totalitarian impulse that asks, “Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?”

Why is it so hard for us to live in tension? Why is it so hard for us to live with warring binary states? Why do we so badly want Trump to be a Russian agent?

Masha: I think there's the human condition question, which is easier to answer. Then there's the case study in Trump. The answer to the human condition is that it's psychologically very, very difficult for humans to not have a straight story. We know that people who have been in situations of unpredictable reality—whether it's in cults, in camps or in totalitarian countries—display what psychologists call fragmentation, because that's the only way the human mind can deal with such unpredictability. You just inhabit whatever is given to you at any given time and that's how you cope. It's possibly the best adaptation there is because otherwise you just can't take the pressure.

Part of it is also magical thinking. If we discovered that there's really a simple explanation the world would make sense, right? Because Trump was unimaginable. Also, if we discover that he's a Russian agent then somehow he will just go away. Maybe that was why everybody was waiting with bated breath for the Mueller report?

If you work through the logical consequences, the situation would be what we're seeing now. Even if we assumed from the beginning that the House was going to initiate impeachment, we could also assume from the beginning that the Senate wasn't going to. We knew that, but somehow we were magically convinced that—poof!—Trump was just going to vanish.

Ethan: We speak the words and suddenly he is dispelled.

Masha: Yes. I think that's the difficulty of living in a complex world. Trump is not an easily solvable problem. If we get rid of the Russia pill, the Russia "cure," then we're left with 60 million Americans who voted for Trump. The task of convincing a critical number of them not to vote for him—

Ethan: To change their minds...

Masha: ...or of living in the same country with him, even if we succeed in him not being re-elected; those are really, really difficult concepts to wrap our minds around. They're incredibly messy, and there's no solution. There are no solutions to a lot of the Trumpian dilemmas. [I've written about this](#), and there's no solution to the Trumpian tweet dilemma for journalists. There's no option of not reporting it, and there's no option of reporting it well. You are trapped.

Ethan: I love this language of the tweets dilemma and this idea that we can't report responsibly because it's deeply irresponsible speech. On the other hand, how can you not report on someone who is directly reaching 40 million people with these tweets and having enormous influence?

Masha: Right, and who is also making policy by tweets. I mean, it has direct consequences for our lives.

Ethan: You've mentioned fragmentation, and I see you calling back to Erich Fromm and his book, [Escape From Freedom](#), in this. How do we deal with this explosion of choices and explosion of interpretations? We look for the simplest answers. But what about the moments where there's no simple answer? You can't ignore them, nor can you participate. What does it do to us as journalists to be perpetually in that moment? We're probably cresting four years of that moment once we accept that Trump's 2016 presidential campaign is where this all started.

Masha: I don't think everything that these "moments" do to us is bad. I think some of what's happened in journalism and in politics is good. It's been energizing. It's made people think. It's certainly invigorated investigative journalism, and I'm a little bit jealous of those people because they know what they're doing. They can just keep plowing ahead.

In the end—and I think this is the part that's really hard to come to terms with—it can't *not* be corrosive. We can do damage control. We can have harm reduction strategies. But in the end, this clash of realities is corrosive. It's corrosive for all of us. Is it more or less corrosive for those of us who work in the media than for those of us who don't? I don't know. It's like working as a firefighter: you know you're going to be breathing carbon monoxide, and that's what's happened to us. We're breathing toxic media fumes all the time.

Ethan: Is there something we can learn from this, from watching Russia under Putin having gone through a much longer period of exposure to this reality clash than we've been through here in the US?

Can we see those chronic health effects on Russians over time, based on that exposure?

Masha: Yes, and I think the scariest part is that...Russia, and this may sound like a bit of a digression, but this is why [I wrote about climate activist Greta Thunberg](#) very early on, before she became a worldwide celebrity. I had heard about her when I was in Sweden and I asked to interview her. I thought, “This is the kind of person that Soviet dissidents were.” I’m convinced that they were all on the autism spectrum. Those dimensions didn’t exist then or in the Soviet Union, but they exist now and she is diagnosed. And Greta Thunberg is very clear about how her unusual ability to focus and her complete inability to absorb any bullshit is part of her activism. I think that if you look at the Soviet dissident movement there were some men and women who simply could not tolerate or accept any reality other than the observable reality (or the written reality) as the only available reality because they knew it wasn’t the case.

One of the brilliant strategies of the Soviet dissident movement was the “observe your own constitution strategy,” where the Soviet constitution was the constitution of a democratic state. One guy who was a mathematician read it and said, “Huh? It says I have the right to assembly. I’m going to go protest.” He went out in central Moscow with a poster and was immediately arrested. He asked, “Why are you arresting me?” They said, “Well, we’re not arresting you.” He said, “You’re not arresting me?”

The authorities also knew it was written in the law, but they knew that because that *other* reality—that power dynamic—was so well established they could easily get people to come to the police station, and stay in the police station, and stay in prison, without actually telling them that they were under arrest. The protester said, “Well if you’re not arresting me, then I think I’m going to leave.” He walked out. Eventually he was diagnosed as crazy for thinking that his actions could change the Soviet regime.

Ethan: So his diagnosis was based on the futility of trying to make this change?

Masha: Essentially, yes. I mean, this story is particularly funny because a friend of mine who was researching a book ended up actually obtaining that protester’s diagnosis document, and I had the pleasure of delivering it to him in his assisted living apartment in Revere, Massachusetts in 2008. He was delighted. He was just absolutely delighted because there it was on paper. They admitted that it was crazy to think that a citizen had agency in the Soviet Union. It was the best thing ever.

Ethan: Masha, we were talking earlier about the idea that dissidents may be on the autism spectrum in certain ways because there’s no way of resolving those two opposing realities, and second, about the long term corrosion of these opposing realities within the system. I think the idea of corrosion is critical. Let’s unpack it a bit more.

Masha: You were asking me about what Russia can teach us about long term corrosion. I think that those Soviet dissidents were constitutionally incapable of adapting to that society. They had their own constitution that was stronger than the written—the governmental—constitution.

There were no other choices. You were going to be corroded by the system because the essential tools of living with others are taken away from you. Language is taken away from you, it is abused and warped and made to mean things that it shouldn't mean.

Ethan: Fake news.

Masha: Right. When this happens we become isolated and we start disintegrating as a society. And, going back to Arendt, we know that the defining condition of totalitarianism is loneliness. I think this is something people often miss in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* because it's the last section of the last chapter. But I think it's the most important chapter of the whole book.

The last section of the last chapter, which talks about what happens to human beings, is that they become lonely. The reason they become lonely is because politics, in its truest sense, is completely destroyed. Politics as a negotiation—on how we live together in a building, a city, a country, a world—disintegrates. You're left alone. You can only receive reality from on high, and you can't share it with other people.

Ethan: Maybe that sense of loneliness is why there's such pressure to share these realities. I'm trying to understand this as a moment where unrealities seem very close to the surface. And we're talking about multiple unrealities, not just the QAnon delusion, but the anti-vax view of the world. I'll even give you Russiagate as a version of another reality. Right now it feels like the temptation to take the red pill, to reject someone else's view of the world, and suddenly my reality becomes your unreality...it's symmetric, right?

Masha: Right.

Ethan: At that point you're absolutely correct; communication is impossible. We don't trust each other's sources. To a certain extent we don't trust each other's language. I'm trying to figure out if this spreading of unrealities is being weaponized. I'll give you two examples. We know about some of the work people are now doing around agnotology, the idea of consciously constructing doubt. They're using doubt as a weapon. Not accepting ignorance as just a human condition, but actively working to make you ignorant. I'm thinking about how Naomi Oreskes in her book, [*Merchants of Doubt*](#), talks about the ways tobacco and oil companies weaponized doubt. By making you doubt, I can make you politically inactive.

I had another idea that brings us back to Russia. When Russia Today launches in the United States, the motto of course is “Question More.” Their first major release on television is a 9/11 documentary which basically supports the 9/11 truther belief that jet fuel on fire isn’t hot enough to melt steel beams. It’s a very strange way to introduce yourself in a new country. It’s not necessarily one of those conspiracy theories that has a very wide audience in the US.

Masha: It does.

Ethan: It’s an interesting question. Do you want to say, “We are here to appeal to those of you who are rejecting official narratives.” Is there a conscious strategy in, “Here is the state outlet and what we want to do is increase weaponized doubt in Americans.” Am I now buying into the Russiagate theory when I ask these questions about the launch of Russia Today in the United States?

Masha: No, I don’t think you’re buying into the Russiagate theory. Then again, observing what’s out there is not engaging in a conspiracy theory.

I think the question you’re asking is, “Was there a brilliant plot behind RT starting with this 9/11 documentary, or was it just dumb?” That can take us in the conspiracy direction if you are using as your premise that there has to have been a brilliant plot. I mean, I would argue that these guys are pretty incompetent. They’re capable of making a slick picture. They don’t know a lot about American culture. They tend to have a monopoly. They don’t have to show much for their work. They’re not accountable to anybody. The state that’s funding them is not going to ask them to—

Ethan: Justify their reach numbers.

Masha: Well, and also they faked their reach numbers. Everything is faked. Moscow has these tourist buses now, and they’re advertising RT on the sides of the buses in English with slogans like, “The best propaganda.” Because nothing is real. It’s the ideology of total cynicism that’s also part of it.

I don’t think we should start with the assumption that the concept RT chose to start with was the best thing for them.

Ethan: Right. Don’t assume competence where you could just assume—

Masha: Exactly.

Ethan: It feels to me that these wannabe authoritarians, the actual authoritarians like Putin, the wannabe authoritarian Trump, benefit from a culture, as you said, that has a sort of deep cynicism embedded in it. Nothing’s real. Believe nothing at face value. To me that feels like a deeply conservative impulse.

If we can all agree that carbon emissions are why we're having an 85 degree day in May, and that's a real problem, then maybe we can all get together and try to do something about it. But what if the reasoning is "no, no, no, the global warming is a liberal plot, but here's this other theory that it's not anthropogenically created," so on and so forth, that makes it much harder for us to get together and organize? If this is a condition that's good for a particular type of leadership, should we expect that these leaders are actually encouraging it or should we just assume that it's more the spirit of the times?

Masha: Well, can't we assume both? Then I think—and this is actually where Trump and Putin are fairly similar—those leaders have pretty good instincts. And I think Trump more so. He's a natural performer. He reads the feedback very well, and so of course he encourages whatever it is that encourages him.

Ethan: At that point it might just be a feedback loop.

Masha: Yes.

Ethan: One of the other contributors to this issue is Peter Pomerantsev. I asked him, is weaponized unreality an agenda? Is it an intention? I take this culture of complete cynicism to be the conclusion of his book, [Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible](#). He told me, "Look, you're putting too much agency in this. Propaganda is like art, it just reflects the mood of the times."

His diagnosis, which I'm hoping he's going to draw out in detail for this issue of *JoDS*, is that the rise of unrealities is what happens when you no longer have governing ideologies. When you no longer have uncomplicated capitalism and neoliberal freedom. When you no longer have communism, you're left with nothing. You're left with competing narratives and no clear way through them. What is it that leads us to this moment?

Masha: I can see that argument, but I also think there's a fallacy because I think we always overestimate the role of ideology in the past. We do it for obvious reasons, because history is written by historians who base their writing on text, which privileges ideology. If you look at contemporary accounts, you will see the Germans in the 1930s writing about the vacuum of ideology. I think in that sense Peter's diagnosis is right. I just don't know that it's the function of a lack of vision in the world. Certainly, the way we think about the 1930s now is we think about competing grand visions, not the Cold War dichotomy of communism versus capitalism, but the endured dichotomies of these really grand visions. At the same time, we see people like [Victor Klemperer](#) describing Hitler as an opportunist. Fromm actually writes, "He has no ideology." In 1940 his writing is very explicit, there is no ideology.

I don't know if this is a post end-of-history condition. I actually think that it's a feature of these kinds of leaders. They traffic in emptiness, but I don't know that the emptiness is necessarily created by this

particular moment.

Ethan: By these kind of leaders, do you mean these post-political, post-ideological, in some ways post-idea leaders?

Masha: Yes, or maybe anti-political, post-idea leaders, but these are not a new phenomenon. When I started writing my book, *The Future Is History*, that was actually my assumption, that it was a new phenomenon. But, because Arendt writes about ideology and terror, I realized I have to make the argument that Putin's ideology is cynicism, that everything is for sale and everything is rotten.

Then I realized, oh no, Putin didn't invent that ideology. Nazi Germany was very much trafficking in the idea of everything is rotten, everything is for sale, and human beings are crap...kind of. I think Arendt describes it as taking a single idea, encapsulating it, and there's your ideology. I think she may even be giving it too much credit, because even the single idea is actually a shifting thing.

Ethan: What do we do?

Masha: What do we do? Well, obviously, I've had so much experience with success at this. [Laughs.] I have no proof, but my hypothesis is that we create future-oriented politics. That hypothesis is based on all of these ideas, and Fromm, who tells us that what leads us to this predicament is a fear of the future—that the future asks so much and offers so little in terms of certainty that it becomes unbearable.

I think we need vision. I think we've actually seen indications of that vision for a long time, like Barack Obama with his messages of hope, but we're not very good at interpreting them or making changes; but yes we can. I mean, there was no articulated vision from Obama, but it was more than Hillary Clinton was offering at that time, which was competence, confidence, responsiveness. These are all really good things.

Ethan: Do you mean predictability?

Masha: Yes, but no. By the time it was Hillary versus Trump, it was a battle of the past and the present. Basically, Trump is appealing to people who are terrified of the future. He says, "I can take you back to an imaginary past." And Hillary responds by saying, "But the present is just fine. We're great because we're good."

Her campaign centered on a parade of minorities, and basically what that communicates is that even if you don't see yourself onstage when she's calling up every person, there's still a representative of every group. If you don't feel that the present is just fine, then this is not for you. You would rather go back to the imaginary past.

Think about Bernie Sanders, who it's now hard to remember because he's become so mainstream, but his campaign was like seeing that lady outside of the food co-op in white sneakers handing out leaflets suddenly competing for the Democratic nomination. I say "lady" not coincidentally because if he had been a lady he wouldn't have been a candidate, but there he was, this crazy Jew, talking about free college and Medicare for all. He gives you just a hint of the possibility that you might wake up and feel differently than you do now. That you will wake up without the sense of overwhelming anxiety, because there's free college and because there's Medicare for all. Those are real reasons to wake up without overwhelming anxiety.

I think of the way that the tools we've used to interpret this message are the wrong tools. We've used tools of the left/right political spectrum, and people have said, "The Democratic Party needs to go left." The point is not left. The point is temporal. Left is like geographic, and future/past is temporal, which is why Elizabeth Warren, who is finally getting some attention and whom I love, is framing her platform as policy. I think she should really be framing it as vision.

Ethan: I love this distinction. The book I just finished writing and have in production uses words that Chris Hayes introduces in his book, [*Twilight of the Elites*](#). Those words are "insurrectionist" and "institutionalist." In that language Trump is a right insurrectionist. Bernie was a left insurrectionist. And Hillary was a left institutionalist. The 2016 election was an insurrectionist's election, and that anyone who was willing to say, "This framework as it is isn't going to stand. We have to go one direction or the other" was going to win.

Masha, you're right that there's an enormous difference between a future vision and a past vision. It's hard to characterize Elizabeth Warren as an insurrectionist. She's clearly a policy wonk, which in many ways is a characteristic of an institutionalist, but she's a policy wonk with the possibility of a big vision. Do you find someone like AOC with A Green New Deal sort of indicative of this? Who are the avatars of the future with visionary approaches?

Masha: I think the secret of Elizabeth Warren's success and appeal is that she is a visionary. She is constantly talking about the future, and she's willing to take great leaps. The future is how she understands politics, which is of course right.

Here in the New York State Assembly elections there was another come-from-behind candidate, Julia Salazar, whose election was so unlikely. Same thing as Warren. She was bravely talking about the future, and it was so refreshing that people voted for her despite all the other stuff going on during the elections. This, by the way, also teaches us a lot about what people hear and don't hear. Of course, my favorite, Greta Thunberg, puts it in very stark terms: "By the time this planet is too hot to live on, I should be only halfway through my life." She's a very prophet-of-doom type of future-oriented person, but she is talking about the future. She is making it come into focus.

Ethan: Bringing us back to our conspiracy theme, the conspiracy is your response to an uncomfortable reality. There's a reality that is too difficult to confront—it's too complicated—and so we end up with a simplified version of this reality in which someone is in control. Is there a danger that the vision can end up in the same trap? Can we end up in the same place where the utopian vision (or the dystopian vision) is an oversimplification of the facts and we get lost in that instead? Or are we so far from such a place that we don't need to worry about it right now?

Masha: No, of course there are all sorts of dangers. I'm working on a new book right now that looks at these kinds of future-oriented projects; very small scale projects, but that contain a vision of the future. I think it's very difficult to avoid being prescriptive because of course that's what we want. We want an explanation of what's right. But what's right in Palestine is not what's right in the United States. Does that mean all politics is relative? No. It's all terribly complicated, and what's right for now will probably stop being right a little later than now.

Utopian visions are always simplified. Can we have a utopian vision that is simplified but that we engage in it knowing it's simplified? How do you have a simple vision while allowing the politics to be complicated? How do you live in complicated politics? It's very hard to sort out, and it's particularly hard when we live in such a simplified media reality.

This is an easier thing for me to talk about because it's what I think about all the time. That's probably a place where we have to start, we have to complicate the language of media. We have to complicate our coverage of campaigns. We have to complicate our coverage of politics in general, and that will at least facilitate being able to live together in some semblance of complexity. Because if we keep having to make things simpler and simpler and simpler, then we end up with Donald Trump.

Ethan: Who's going to do that? Who's going to add or help people understand such political complexity?

Masha: Well, I'm trying. I mean, we all have to try. That's what we do. Some days I'm kind of optimistic about it because I think that things have happened, in part or even sort of outside of our intentions. Because web-based publications have created a different kind of universe, a different ecosystem. For example, at *The New Yorker* I can ask to write about something or ask if somebody else is writing about something and 90% of the time the response is yes, the more the merrier. Because the imperative online is to produce more pixels and if somebody doesn't read [John Cassidy](#) on something maybe they'll read me on the same thing, or vice versa. Which is very different than it was in the past, when editors had to choose which columnist was going to write about something because they had a finite number of column inches. That environment creates complexity because my take is going to be...not necessarily on the other side of the issue, but different from John Cassidy's, because we have different eyes and brains and viewpoints.

This is happening now, and it's really, really good. But I wish it was more intentional. I kind of wish we understood more of what we were doing then, because I think the added perspective and complexity we have now is a wonderful thing. Obviously, *The New Yorker* is not the only place that's adding the sort of thoughtful complexity I'm talking about. Every publication that's digital first at this point is doing it. But at the same time, I look at campaign coverage on TV and I just want to hang myself.

Ethan: I've been spending a lot of time lately thinking about whether Facebook is good or bad for democracy and whether social media is starting to erode the civic fabric in one fashion or another. Civic media, the field that I study, is about how activist groups create, propagate, and try to make change through media. Ironically, all the great things about this kind of change-making—the Me Too, the Black Lives Matter, the pervasive sense of oppression, the “my voice isn't being heard and now I'm bringing it into the dialogue”—these things are now coming from the conspiracy theorists.

Even in something as far out as QAnon folks will sort of tell you that they're being oppressed. On the one hand you want to laugh at them, but on the other hand you don't. They probably are being oppressed by late stage capitalism. This system is not working particularly well for a lot of people.

One version of this kind of media plurality is the one that you just gave: We don't just get your voice, we get a bunch of different voices and we get a much more complex view of things. The flip side is that the complexity now includes viewpoints that may be dangerous for us, that may be unhealthy for us. Do you have any sense of, outside of the journalistic world, how we deal with that plurality? Is plurality becoming a complicating factor in all of this?

Masha: I don't know. I'm sure that you feel the same way, but I can't help but find the Facebook debate a little bit humorous, mainly because I was actually at Harvard in 2008 or 2009, working on a project on the web in Russia and how we had to stop thinking about social media as inherently democratic. At the time it seemed like a very, very strange idea. Then of course there was Arab Spring, and you know, naysayers like me weren't completely proven wrong.

Now we can't even remember that. The answer to your question, is Facebook good or bad for democracy, is it's both.

Ethan: Yes.

Masha: I have a really hard time with this because I don't want to be one of those people who say, “Well you know, nothing has changed. Technology is just an instrument, it's neutral.” Because it's more complicated than that. At the same time, I have very little patience for this whining about how technology has ruined our politics, because that's not what's happened. There's a consensus that's broken down. And ultimately, in order to have a politics, we need to have a broad agreement on our

reality. We have many different ways of destroying that broad agreement. Arguing about technology is just one of the many ways. That's not a great answer to your question, but it's an observation.

Ethan: No, but the observation that unreality, which is what we're sitting here discussing, makes politics impossible is a really helpful point. It may in fact be the most cautionary note in all of this. It pulls back to those themes of corrosion and the ways in which the rise of unreality may be damaging to us over time. The tension between wanting a media space that is more inclusive, that gives us plurality, that lets us hear some of those voices we haven't heard from before, is clearly a good thing, but it is also a space where other realities are now spawning and growing. And we know how corrosive these multiple realities can be. I think we're in a moment where we have leaders that clearly feel very comfortable working within a multiple-reality environment and they're taking advantage of it. Even if they had nothing to do with creating it they're very good reacting to it. That seems like a fearful moment.

Masha: Yes. It is. But that said, I'm remembering a kind of unreality that I think is actually really useful. It's like willing things into being, a kind of politics. I touch on it my "Futures" book. My framing for this unreality is the concept of the parallel polis, which appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1977. During [Charter '77](#) a mathematician named Václav Benda wrote an essay called "[Parallel Polis](#)." It was very mathematical, and it fits into my autism spectrum theory of dissidents.

Benda's take was that in the society that his fellow dissident (and former Czech president) Václav Havel described, a society in which we're all rendered powerless and we're looking for the power of the powerless, we can create parallel societies that have an articulated rule or set of rules that differs from the rules of the larger society. It can be the economic rules. It can be the social rules. It can be the religious rules. It can be the political rules. Or it can be a combination. Then, when the larger edifice on which we have no influence falls apart, there will still be a vision of the future.

That idea was very influential in Czechoslovakia and in Russia, but in Russia it was very influential for a different reason. It was because Benda also included this idea of the small steps. In Russian, it's actually called "The Theory of Small Steps." It states that you can't change this regime because you have no place of interaction with them, but you can take small steps toward normality and toward humanizing the situation. And small steps will take us toward our goal.

Ethan: Masha, thanks for making time for this conversation. My main takeaway is that there's no simple path through these questions about unreality because the unreal is fundamentally about reducing complexity. Embracing and cultivating that complexity is the only way through these crazy, unreal times. Thank you.