

The Future of Democracy Ep. 22 - English

[00:02:39] Hi, folks. Welcome to The Future of Democracy, a show about the trends, ideas and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm your host, Sam Gill, on this show. We tried to do is take a major debate happening in our democracy and our politics and our society around the structure of our economy and take you deeper than maybe the article that you read or the debate that you heard on cable news, which is famously otherwise a font of truth and help you explore what is really going on. And some of the biggest challenges that we are facing are maybe facing in our democracy. And today we'll be talking about two crises that have occupied a lot of attention on this show. The ongoing COVID 19 pandemic and the endemic crisis of racial equity and really how those two crises can come together. Our guest is a scholar whose work sits firmly at this nexus. Alondra Nelson is president of the Social Science Research Council and a scholar at the renowned Institute for Advanced Study.

[00:03:42] Her books include The Social Life of DNA, Race, Reparations and Reconciliation After the Genome and Body and Soul, the Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination. Please welcome to the show, Alondra Nelson.

[00:03:57] Hi, Sam, how are you? Good to be with you.

[00:03:59] Thanks for joining us. Thank you. So I'd like to start by kind of orienting allowing you to Horia does in your work kind of concretely. What is what does it mean to study the way that technology and science and race come together? What are some of the events or phenomena that you have looked at and why?

[00:04:21] Yeah, so I would say I'll elaborate. But what it doesn't mean is to study the technological thing only. It means to study it in context and in process. And so, you know, it really technology and race were the first things that I studied as a young scholar, as a graduate student. I think my first publication was on computer. Sort of what we call them, cyber cafes at the time and sort of like placing them in communities of color and whether or not that would help to stem what we were coming to sort of call and understand as the digital divide and how to think about them as spaces of sociality and spaces of politics. And it was really in that moment that we were coming up. So this is in the mid 90s coming up with, I think, conversations that we still use or or kind of concepts to talk about the intersection of race and technology, the digital divide being one of them. But you know what? Myself and my collaborators identified early on is that even something like the digital divide, which is intended to suggest, you know, a kind of objective truth about inequality and access to technology packaged inside of it all of a kind of stigma and pathology, you know, that like that, that there is a digital divide not only because of the lack of the technology itself, but that, of course, these particular communities, poor, rural, working class, black, brown, like, can't quite keep up with the technology. So it was a concept early on. That was both. That was a kind of, you know, blaming people who didn't have access to vital infrastructure if we're not having it and saying it was their fault, even as it was. I think in social research, a concept that helped us to understand how important technology and technological infrastructure was becoming to life. And so for me, that's a very kind of foundational cornerstone of how to think about race and technology. And from the very beginning is something that begins with the fact of inequality, both in how we access to that sort of objects, the materials themselves and also and how we think about who should or should not be at the table.

[00:06:34] So, you know, my experience is somewhat outside as really a lay observer of science and technology in our society is that we just keep we keep discovering, you know, the racial implications of the way technology is used or the way science is to play. We discover Henrietta Lacks in the history of why we study DNA. We discover the digital divide. We discover that apparently Google search algorithms can be used to discriminate. We're now discovering something about who was affected by coded. And so the obvious explanation, of course, is that that's the reality of systemic racism, of racism as a systemic function. But is there something in particular about say at the discourse of science and technology, the practice of science and technology that makes it either uniquely vulnerable or vulnerable in a different way to being able to sort of ignore these dynamics until, as you point out, they force themselves on our attention.

[00:07:34] What a great question. So what? I think what's distinctive about science and then if we think about technology as it's application in the world, is that we think it is a space that is free of politics. So why we keep discovering it is because we, I think, allow ourselves often to get caught up in a narrative that says, you know, science is the place of pure truth and there's no inequality there and there's no politics there. And so when something happens, you know, there's been sort of controversy that bubbles up. We allow ourselves to be sort of surprised and shocked. But we should not I mean, we tend to sort of pull out an old example. If we think about, you know, a formative period of science, we can think about the Swedish sort of botanists, zoologist Carl, you know, Carl Linnaeus. So Linnaeus, you know, goes throughout the world and then classifies plants, you know, Flora. But he also takes it upon himself to classify humans. Right. So it's one thing to sort of say, you know, humans look different all over the world, OK? But Linnaeus said humans look different. And, you know, people of African descent are sultry and lazy and not clever. And people of European descent are, you know, clever. And, you know, folks of South Asian descent are, you know, I think it was sort of sneaky, you know.

[00:08:54] So all of these sort of stereotypes and all of this kind of all of these ideas about stereotypes and qualities of race get embedded and to science and to ideas about humans. And so I it's very early on. So that's one example. Another is, you know, in the technology world, we get so we might think about Linny and, you know, he's a little today and kind of scientific racist categories as being an affordance. Right. That like sort of creates the parameters for science as we build it forward to use a language from technology. Similarly, if we think about the text and we think, you know, the past is not always the future. So I don't want to say that it over determines always what becomes. But if we take about the formation of the Internet, you know, sort of out of Dafa, you know, out of sort of defense R&D, which is intended to sort of exist and last under forms of catastrophe. Right. So it's meant to be decentralized. It's meant to be hard to sort of corral and hard to sort of, you know, organize. And so so that's the early days of the Internet. We're now in sort of Web 2.0, 3.0, whatever, you know, whatever you want to call it. But, you know, I think there is something to those foundational affordance is that are playing out and the challenges that we're facing to democracy with Facebook. Right. So part of it is that, you know, companies are making decisions about the profit and the incentives and not controlling the technology. But partly the affordance of the technology is to be decentralized and to not be sort of controlled in a particular way. And all of those have kind of implications for for inequality and for racial inequality in particular.

[00:10:39] Yeah, I mean, we don't we're actually sort of getting questions about this. Right. Like, is is the is should we be thinking about, you know, covered misinformation? Q And on, you know, anti Chinese racism, sort of all of these things that are swirling around in the technology space as an example of the kind of affordance that you're pointing to, the

affordance to actually embed systems of discrimination. And, you know, in addition to whatever the liberating potential is, do you see these things as related or or or distinct?

[00:11:09] Sure. I think they're related. I mean, again, one doesn't want to. I don't want to make like a you know, a quick and breezy causal relationship. That's not what I'm saying at all. But I'm saying that if you create if you have if an infrastructure is created to effectively be uncontrollable, you know, and if we think about sort of the early days of the Internet as being partly that, then one has to sort of work against that sort of original intention of design. And so it's not enough just to say, oh, you know, people are going to do what they're going to do. There has to be sort of ways of kind of understanding that original design, that original affordance and sort of working against it. So some of that is in the space of technology. And I think that we get ourselves in trouble when we think it's only in the space of technology. But a lot of that is in the space of regulation, in the space of forms of legislation and enforcing legislation. And also, I think in the form in the space of creating actual new norms about what is kind of appropriate or inappropriate behavior for how we use people's data, whether or not they're surveilled, how they're surveilled and the like.

[00:12:19] So I want to pivot a little bit, too, Cauvin, which is sort of a more analog kind of science discourse, which is, you know, the it does seem during the pandemic that we've. And probably as a function of or at least related to the really intense and widespread racial reckoning at least, is a conversation that's happening. We seem to have gotten faster to a discussion about the way about the the the inequitable effects of Kofod or at least the disproportionate effects of covered by race. And then also skepticism and anxiety about public health and whether public health is a field is going to accelerate or exacerbate those disparities or actually be able to respond to them in both around sort of the first stage of the disease. But you can already see this is going to become a discussion around the vaccine and to a potential vaccine is made available for how under what conditions? What is your scholarship tell you about how we should interpret or understand what's happening in that discussion?

[00:13:32] So I think we should have a lot of humility about what scholarship can tell us or not tell us, because this is a moment that is like, you know, none, none, none, none other. So but I think that we a couple of things. I mean, one thing that's been as someone who's worked on kind of, you know, race in science and technology and medicine for all of my career, I was actually gratified and heartened to see that we were able to have a sort of national and international conversation about structural inequality and about structural racism and increasingly about antiblack racism in particular. And I think that does oh, in some part to a couple of scholarly generations of scholarship that helped us to see that there were structured sexual inequities in health said that I think that you had a kind of a critical mass finally with the sort of pandemic and kind of social disaster of the pandemic and all of that, that sort of, you know, sort of pain that it is has caused and is causing where people were able to sort of get, you know, that all of these things are this kind of edifice is the layering of inequality is happening because we were having to confront the issue of, quote unquote, essential workers, the fact that people, even after the Affordable Care Act, don't have access to health care, the fact that people who have access to health care couldn't, you know, there all of these examples or some some very poignant ones in Detroit in particular. There was a woman who Diane Hargrove, who was a phlebotomist who had worked in a Detroit area hospital for 30 years, and she had COPD symptoms, went to her very own hospital and would they would not see her or test her. Right. So that's the sort of we were seeing and sort of, you know, vivid fashion before us, all of the ways that different forms of inequality worked. And it wasn't it was clear that it wasn't just

one of these things, that it was all of these things cumulatively can be cumulatively together in aggregate, that we're creating the sort of conditions that we're living in now. So so there's so there's so there's that. I mean, I do think that there's a, you know, one in the win column for scholarship that has helped us to understand racial inequality, but also how it intersects with health inequality and particular the public health piece. I mean, you know, I think, you know, it's both, I think, daunting and promising. On the one hand, there's more access to information that allowed, I think, many of us in the face of uncertain or uneven information coming from formerly very trusted institutions of health information to be able to kind of make our, you know, make our own if we could sort of decisions or at least try to balance for ourselves what might be going on. But, of course, it's that shouldn't be the case. And, of course, that only goes to create and potentially other forms of inequality know trusting people to rely on. Increasingly, this is the info demick, you know, increasingly unreliable information. And moreover, information that is intended to be a reliable that's intended to create to sow kind of confusion and distrust of public health expertise and other kinds of expertise as well.

[00:16:53] What I want. I would actually circle back to that. But I have kind of a substantive question about that. And then and then I guess what I'd call a political question about it, which is the substantive question is what does a sort of socially aware like what does a WOAK public health field look like? Right. Because I think to your to the point you made earlier about some of the susceptibility of scientific discourses, you know, public health is a paradigm mantic example of a field where people get trained and a set of a kind of utilitarian methodologies. And I think when they're confronted just with an analytical argument, say that this doesn't. Racist impact to the way this way of a lot and care is being determined. You know, on a personal level, that's very destabilizing. This is a community where a lot of people probably say, first of all, like I thought I was in this to do good. And second of all, you know, this is why I became a scientist or a public health official. Like, I didn't want to get enmeshed in this debate. I thought this was the right way to make socially responsible decisions. What are there are there kind of concrete ways of approaching these conversations that you think can help, you know, institutions, public health institutions, the medical institutions, scientific institutions to to to take advantage of these insights? This awareness about these disparities while retaining ideas of objectivity, of method that are just so important, you know, to these communities sense of self and truly to some of the applications of what they're trying to do to help society.

[00:18:29] So, yes, I mean, I don't think it has to be WOAK. I think it just needs to be fully realized. You know, so that public health begins from an understanding that there is a public obligation to health, that that there is a kind of common good here and that all of us of sort of responsibilities to the common, you know, to the to our other to other people, as well as freedoms and liberties. You know, and that and that at moments of crisis and pandemic that there needs to be a kind of toggle or pendulum swing and how we think about those things. But, you know, public health tells us that, you know, people need potable water. And, you know, we need warm water. That's not like the water that people in Flint had to live with for far too long and are suffering the repercussions of, you know, people need access to, you know, food, healthy food. So I think there are things in public health already. It's not that we necessarily need a new public health, although I think all of our fields should always be emerging. It's that some of many of the insights that we have from public health are not able to be fully realized in the context of health care system that has a profit motive. And that's not just willing to sort of say at a baseline, you know, people should have access to clean water, fresh, healthy food, you know, basic preventative health care and the like. So you can have the most woke or the least woke, you know, public health infrastructure in the world. But if you don't have those kind of basic things

that all of us need, then there's not going to be a lot of success. But I think so. That said, there are people who are working really hard to sort of try to help us think better about this. And to your point about objectivity, which I put is, you know, and I quote, precise debate or size.

[00:20:20] I want that in your show. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:20:22] I think that there are people who are who have been very good at sort of using the sort of tools of scientific inquiry, even understanding their limitations to help us better understand this. So, you know, people like Nancy Krieger at the Harvard Chan, you know, public health system is very much interested. And, you know, for example, you know, helping us to try to understand that extra judicial police violence is actually a public health crisis. Right. That you are traumatizing communities. That you know, that some of the reasons that lead to these moments in which people are killed by police have everything to do within the context in which they're living and, you know, the resources that go to policing and don't go elsewhere. So. And then we've got people like Arlene Eurononymous, who brings to us the concept of weathering, which suggests how dealing with racism in your day to day life has physiological implications, then wears down parts of your body that make people, you know, and that sort of language of that's been, you know, covered 19 pandemic preexisting conditions. They're not just that people have, you know, faulty bodies. It's that we create societies that create conditions that sort of heighten those things. And then we have folks like, you know, Helena Hanson and Jonathan Metzl who have been able to begin to build out sort of, you know, public health and medical school curriculum that they call structural competency, which is really about how clinicians, people working in medicine should you have to have an understanding of the kind of social and context in which someone is coming out of, you know, when they enter the medical system in any fashion. So we do have tools, but a lot of the tools can't be it can't be fully realized. And the current context that we're you know, they sort of health care system that we've created that's partly owned by private equity companies that, you know, is, you know, requires people to have, you know, be employed in certain sectors. I mean, as you know, having a full time job does not guarantee anybody health care anymore. And so, you know, there are lots of other issues that precede the questions we might pose to public health.

[00:22:42] And I think this points in especially in sort of the apex when when debates about, say, issues of objectivity are happening in professional institutions, at the sort of at the fever pitch of those debates, I do think it's easy for lay it lay audiences, especially for observers, to overlook examples like you just gave. You know that to critique objectivity doesn't mean to have a nihilistic view about this body of knowledge. But just to widen the body of knowledge does mean to expand the toolkit and really concrete ways that we that we're not inventing on the fly that, you know, that's got scholars of public health themselves are thinking about and arriving with. But I'm sorry, what is your political problem, though, which is one you alluded to along these lines, which is we're at this moment where on the one hand, there is this incredible power. Moment of critique about particular ideas of objectivity. This is happening in journalism, it's happening in plateauing in every institution that sort of separates kind of the divides, whatever information is from knowledge. And particularly with regard to Kofod, we're in this terrifying moment in which people register have incredible skepticism about these institutions and not only skepticism of what's true, but skepticism that these institutions are even trying to serve them. And some of that skepticism is kind of conspiratorial populism. But a lot of it is exactly what you've been describing. It's communities that are actually saying, believe me, I know that this institution hasn't served me for all of these reasons. I've got deep knowledge of the

way in which I have not been served. My family has not been served. My community has not been served. How do we can we shore up belief in institutions? Because we need to because we need people to shelter in place during a wildfire and we need people to wear a mask and we need people to use the vaccine if it's safe and available and also encourage the critique so that the institution is better serving our society going forward. How do you how do you confront that challenge? How should we.

[00:24:42] It's fantastic. You know, I love this question. I mean, you know, as you said, I mean, I emerge you know, I come out of a community. I live in a community that has understandable, expected mistrust of many institutions, particular health care, most institutions and, you know, mainstream medicine and science. And a lot of my research and writing, you know, I've written about the Black Panther Party's health activism. I've written about African-Americans who are actually some of the kind of early adopters of the turn to direct to consumer genetics. And, you know, part of my I guess I'd offer a couple of kind of explanations that I think would be important for us moving forward. One is that in both the case of the Black Panther Party who were engaged in creating a national network of health clinics in black communities and also with many, often senior citizens, who were these early adopters of the direct to consumer genetic tools know they understood that there could be a category called trusted expert. So you don't trust all the experts and all people who bring objective knowledge to the table, bring an objective knowledge that can be trusted. And so in the case of the Black Panther Party, that meant that they, you know, would put sort of young doctors and nurses working at Montefiore and San Francisco General and the like through these kinds of political education classes. It was at that point that they would say we you know, we're happy now to refer people to our community, to you and go to see you at Highland Hospital or Mount Sinai or whatever. And in the case of the direct to consumer genetics, I mean, here you some may set the kind of dystopian scene. It's like here you have, you know, African-Americans, middle class, upper-middle class, many of them highly educated, who know a great deal about the sort of history of mistrust of institutions regarding science and technology who make the decision. You know, they make their own kind of cost benefit risk assessment that I find fascinating and that they that folks don't get. And the day to day enough credit for, because I think we are seeing a lot of this with Koban 19. You have individuals, families, communities really having to do their own risk assessment and the day to day. And like bringing in all of these variables to think about how you might do that. But in the case of the direct to consumer genetics, they felt like there were companies that they could trust in, companies they couldn't trust. And we're very clear about, you know, how they went about that. So I think that there's this there's a way that one can have trusted experts and different individuals and communities think about that differently. And then it doesn't have to be a kind of insider outsider, Zero-Sum. So one of the things that's been interesting, I think particularly we go back to the Black Panther Party case, is that or actually the long sort of history that I try to map it partly in that Black Panther book of a black health activism in black into the African-American activism around kind of site ideas from scientific and medical research is sometimes you wanted to be an insider. So sometimes you were working inside of the institutions and working to change them, like working to make them more Dimmick Kraddick, working to make them more diverse, working to make them not Jim Crow, like battling Jim Crow hospitals, Jim Crow medical schools. But sometimes you're working from the outside. So you would be a gadfly, activist, social radical anarchist. And sometimes those were the same people. And so, you know, that that that that one can have both an investment and wanting the very best medicine and the very best, you know, technology can also be deeply critical of it. And so I think that, you know, the African-American sort of liberation tradition brings so much to the world. And this is that kind of, you know, debitois

we call a double consciousness. That dual strategy, I think is one that. Is important for today.

[00:28:31] Well, I like the idea of the Black Panthers of getting initiated in the mysteries of the community that you're trying. But what I just. If I were someone who could add more than three numbers and could be a doctor, I probably would have just enjoyed it. But I also think I think there's something about. It's not a request to change your practice. It's a request to understand the people you're trying to serve on their terms rather than on your terms. And and and it takes away, I think, the threat that expert. I think sometimes when confronted with this request, expert communities, expert institutions feel that what's on the table is something that's important about the practice as opposed to what's being on the table, is understanding another person and what it takes for them to have actually trust and trust in the practice and also trying to certain find ways to bridge a chasm of not just historic distrust, but power differentials.

[00:29:23] Right. Like, how do we how do we meet each other somewhere in the middle.

[00:29:28] So tell us before we let you go, I do want to hear a bit about some of I know you're building work in your scholarship and at the Social Science Research Council to put some of these questions on the table in a more forceful way. And so I'd love to hear about that.

[00:29:42] Oh, yeah. I would love to tell you about that. So we have a we're building a program called Just Tech, just technology that we hope will be a fellowship program. But right now is some workshops and some grants. And we're trying to do a few things. We're trying to work with researchers who are not only academics. Right. So there can be, you know, journalists, folks with other kinds of research skills, social researchers broadly to sort of work to kind of think about what sustainable technological futures might look like. So how can we think about working with, you know, technological tools that create different kinds of outcomes and different possibilities? And also, how can we create a pipeline of researchers that know how to do that? And, you know, from your work and work that you've done with the SSR, see that you know, that we don't have as many of the researchers that we would want to kind of help us understand the problems that we're facing around, expertise around, you know, the sort of perils and possibilities of technology and what it poses for democracy and the like. And so we're really delighted to be able to make a attribution there. But most of all, you know, the work this project will take on will really put issues of power and justice at the center of developing new research and scholarship and also kind of a new cohort of researchers. And this is led by Dr. Mike Miller. And we're really delighted to be able to contribute in this way.

[00:31:05] And what do you hope comes out of the work in a wider sense?

[00:31:11] I guess our hopes would be to be able to have a kind of critical mass of kind of insight and information. Right now, we have we're lucky to have a lot of amazing trailblazers. You know, Dana Bway, Kate Crawford, you know, Syfy Ennoble. You know what? If we had one hundred of those people who were working not only on A.I. or not only on the census, but we're working on, you know, all of the things that science and technology touch and build in our world, which is increasingly everything. There's kind of increasingly not a single thing. And in human societies, that's not really touched by science and technology. So want to help to think through that. And then, you know, also to think through issues of what we call ethics, which I think, you know, data ethics, test tech ethics, what are really issues about power and justice and frankly, regulation. You know, how can

we think about kind of frameworks, models, concepts that help to to move that a little bit further and that are not positivistic necessarily, but empirical that are not just in the realm of ideals, ideal types and philosophy, but are really helping us to kind of work through issues of ethics and power. With regards to science and technology.

[00:32:26] Fantastic. Well, unfortunate. This is a dangerous time for empirical assertions. We don't have evidence is evidence as an endangered species these days. So we wish you luck for folks watching the show. You can follow Alondra on Twitter at Alondra and you can find more about what she is working on and these incredible topics at our Web site. Alondra Nelson, dot com.

[00:32:46] As always, we'll send these links, some recent essays and work by Alondra Links to just talk out after the show. But Alondra, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:32:54] Great to see you and talk to you, Sam.

[00:32:57] All right, folks, we have some incredible shows coming up on October 1st. Nick Pickles, who leads Twitter's work around misinformation, is going to join us on October 8th. Rashad Robinson from Color of Change, who is a leader.

[00:33:16] Looks like I disappeared. But I do want to tell you about some shows that are coming up. If you're still listening, we'll have Nick Pickles from Twitter October 1st. Rashad Robinson from Color of Change, October 8th. Stephen Hawkins. For more in common on October 15th, as a reminder, you can watch this episode of the website later and watch any episode on demand and KFI dot org slash after your show. You can also subscribe to the Future of Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. E-mail us at F.T. Show at Camp Dot org or if you have questions for me, just send me on Twitter at the same Guille. And as always, we will end the show to the sounds of Miami songwriter Nick County. You can check out his music on Spotify. Thank you for joining us.