

**Maryam Jameela (MJ)** There's supposed to be some idea that if you are capable of arguing for and then arguing against something, that means that you have a better grasp of "the truth", and if you can - even if it's temporarily - occupy a position of neutrality and objectivity, that is supposed to make you a better critical thinker, and then you have organisations that claim to be unbiased, like the BBC, when if you look at the BBC's homepage that does not mean that you're getting an unbiased view of what's happening in the UK. And it doesn't matter if you're looking at the *New York Times* or *The Huffington Post*, or whatever you're looking at, it's just not possible. And to claim that it is possible to be unbiased, I think, is colonial and western exceptionalism.

**Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (SMK)** Salaams, Peace, and blessings, you're listening to Breaking Binaries Season Two, with me, your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan. Known online as @thebrownhijabi. As a society, we're obsessed with explaining our world through the use of straightforward opposing categories. So good or bad, moderate or radical, pretty or ugly, victim or villain The list goes on. All these sets of binaries, though, tend to be quite superficial, and they hide the real complexities, the politics and the nuances of how we've been encouraged to think, following from the conversations of season one, every episode this series, I'll be sitting down with a different friend to break down, break apart and interrogate a different binary and see how doing so helps us think more critically about ourselves and our world, and therefore, how we transform it.

This episode I explored the binary of fake news and truth with Maryam Jameela. Maryam is a writer and researcher with a background in academia, working in researching trauma, Islamophobia, and power structures. She's recently started working for the *Canary* as an investigative journalist, and her work can also be found via her Twitter handle, @yammatron.

The concepts we discussed this week are obviously far bigger than an episode of a podcast can account for. Truth is bigger than any of us, I think, but fake news is also pretty complicated! So we did our best, we didn't cover everything, but I hope you can take something from this week and I hope the conversation and the questions raised are useful to you!

Asalaamualaykum Maryam, how are you?

**MJ** Walaykum asalaam, I'm good thank you, happy to be here.

**SMK** I'm really happy to have you. I feel like I always start these episodes in a really weird tone where I'm like "AsALAAMu-ALAYkum!"

**MJ** ayy!

**SMK** I am really happy that you're here and I've been interested to hear what binary you wanted to break. Because with some people I approach people being like "this is something that you are always talking about, please can you help me break this down", but I just really wanted to do an episode with you so I was like, "what binary do you want to break?" So what you've chosen, is Fake News,

and Truth. I think there's a lot in that and once you open that can of worms, there's actually so much than just the news that we see online or in the media, because this is also linked to ideas around "objective truth", and what we see as real or not real. Or even what we learn at school - what's seen as subjective and objective - when we learn to write essays, even in our personal conversations.

So, I think let's jump straight in. I'll start by asking you, what prompted you to want to do this as a binary? Where are these thoughts around Fake News and Truth coming from? How are we defining these ideas?

**M**, I think it's something which, in its most recent version is, the amount of times Donald Trump says it. I have been kind of seeing how individuals but also news media organisations react to that and I've found that incredibly frustrating.

**SMK** IN what sense?

**MJ** So Trump's initial usage was when he - as he was inaugurated, and he went on those rants about CNN is fake news, and he listens to Fox News all the time, but he claims that he doesn't. I feel that it started this really panicked response in the media, I saw *Buzzfeed* and the *Guardian* and *BBC* were really rattled by it and saying "we need to confront fake news and have better journalism than ever if we're going to combat Donald Trump" but now we can see, that combatting hasn't really happened in a sustained or effective way. I think that I've seen all of those news orgs will have something at the bottom of those articles, like a "read more" section, or have you read from other sites that you wouldn't necessarily go to, and I think that's been a lot of social media discourse - the idea that you should create your social media "bubb;e2 and burst it by following people that you disagree with, or people you wouldn't normally think to follow. But I think that is actually a really pernicious thing because in doing that you're kind of keeping the conversation on the terms of people like Donald Trump.

Because in creating this myth around Fake News, all of this culture around Fake News, Trump set the terms of the conversation to imply that if there is some sort of fake news - news that criticises him in some sort of way and is therefore "fake", there also has to be some sort of "good news" that sees him for "who he really is" as he would think. And I think that in having that initial reaction from various journalists, "how are we going to combat fake news!" all of these problems with technology and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and their role in Trump's circus of lies has kind of coalesce into this really bizarre discourse that I see playing out in away that suggests that "oh we need to combat fake news", when actually, I don't think that's the best way to go around solving whatever the problem is at the heart of this binary.

**SMK** It's interesting isn't it because the way its talked about it's like Fake News is always coming from "somewhere else", so there's no one, no one is producing Fake News but everyone is worried about it. Because no one is putting their hand up and saying "yes we put out fake news", so you're right it becomes this thing that really just depends on who is talking about it, they get to define what "fake" is and isn't. And I guess that feels like something quite important here. Who defines what is fake and what is real when it comes to something as important as news, which realistically is any and everything, its what we decide is important or worth - BBC can decide what's worth telling us is an

important piece of information to have today. Do you feel there's something in there as well about "fake" itself as a concept, that news can be fake or real?

**MJ** Yeah. Yeah because the term itself implies that there's some sort of nefarious conspiracy here to take down Donald Trump from the inside, like the deep fakes and QAnon conspiracies and all of that kind of stuff, when fake news as a term doesn't make sense - those words have no business being together with one another. "Fake News" as a term has its currency socially based on what people think is the opposite of fake news. So like "where is the truth" - the little "nugget of truth"? and I think that little nugget of truth is present in so many different spheres of how people think and why people think. So, for example, I did an English Lit undergrad and I think the point of the degree was to teach you "how to think critically" and the thing that was drilled into us constantly was how to write in an "academic and critical way", and I feel like this is basically the principle in British education - that's what you want at GCSE, A-level, University - is to be able to write an essay where you have an argument and then you defend the argument. And I think, this is another one of those situations where truth and fake news is something that manifests in different ways.

So, in order to have an argument that you defend, you must believe it's true in some way, and then you defend the "truth" that you've come up with whatever that is. But I feel that speaks more to western epistemology as a universalising or totalising knowledge that thinks it can conquer, that thinks it can hold the truth about something and wrap it around what we would then call "information", or "fact", or "truth", and I feel like that is what Trump is tapping into and that's the whole strategy to kind of frame it in this way - it makes a really complicated conversation very flat, when it's not flat at all.

**SMK** So it sounds like what you're saying is that prior to there actually existing any information itself, there's already a decision around what types of information will be valued or put forward as the ones that we're going to deem to be "true", to be more "objective", to be "neutral". I think it was interesting what you're saying about your experiences of University and academia.

I studied History and I think those ideas of truth and fake news are obviously really evident there too and when you're writing an essay and you're being asked, there's usually this idea of two equally - or that idea of "argue both sides and reach a conclusion", there's always this idea that every piece of information has a neutral value in of itself. So you could have an essay about slavery and you need to write the pros, the cons, and the conclusions - or colonialism: pros, cons, conclusion. There's something about that that doesn't create space to kind of - if you brought in say, a personal example, or brought in an opinion about injustice, or said we can't talk about these things in a neutral way, that would be seen as a source of subjectivity - that you're contaminating the neutrality of the situation with your subjectivity. So what's "true" is what's depersonalised - which nothing can be, so pretending that it can be, that it's not linked to any politics or anybody's ideas of what's real and what's not or what's human and what's not; and then you are bringing in what's "subjective" or i.e., what's not quite true - it's like "20% true" type of thing, which is very dangerous and I think translates to the news where it's like "we're going to interview different people with different opinions" - they're not true, the real truth is what the institution decides, or what Donald Trump decides, or government decides. I think that works to then uphold those hierarchies that have historically also existed.

**MJ** Absolutely and I think that there's supposed to be some idea that if you are capable of arguing for and then arguing against something, that means that you have a better grasp of "the truth", and if you can - even if it's temporarily - occupy a position of neutrality and objectivity, that is supposed to make you a better critical thinker, and then you have organisations that claim to be unbiased, like the BBC, when if you look at the BBC's homepage that does not mean that you're getting an unbiased view of what's happening in the UK. And it doesn't matter if you're looking at the *New York Times* or *The Huffington Post*, or whatever you're looking at, it's just not possible. And to claim that it is possible to be unbiased, I think, is colonial and western exceptionalism.

**SMK** I think that's a really important point - this idea that - I guess there's a difference between saying "everything is equally as true and untrue" - do you know what I mean? So instead of saying, "what you're saying is not 100% true", its more this idea, that "well nothing is 100% true".

To give an example of what I mean, when I was studying history, I wanted to do an oral history project about Pakistani women's experiences migrating to the UK in the 1960s, I felt this was a really important source of information because the archives don't say much about these women's lives. What I was told was if you're going to do an oral history, it's going to be very subjective because it's people's memories and ideas about what happened. So there was this idea that those women themselves who experienced something would be bringing too much of their own biases and perceptions to the history of their own lives, as opposed to, say, an ethnographer, or a sociologist, who, in the 1960s - who had very racist assumptions about these women's lives, who wrote randomly about something they'd been commissioned by Commission for Racial Equality, or a local council board - and that, sitting in an archive, is deemed to somehow be free of the subjectivity of the person who wrote it, there's no context to that document, But these women and their ideas about their own lives are inherently suspicious artefacts of the past.

So my thought was always "what makes one piece of this more subjective than the other? that archival piece of evidence is just as subjective as the other". So there seems to be something here also about what we think *truth* to be. What do we believe truth to be? And I think that sees surprisingly contested.

**MJ** yeah I think this may be best explained by another example. When I was thinking about what we should talk about, because we're talking about something so totalising and universal, like every human has some manner of experience with what is true or untrue, or lies, or fake. I was thinking about film and TV and fiction and representational politics. Because I think there's a discourse of authenticity whether we're talking about food or TV, for better or worse, the drive to have something that makes people feel seen, that represents the "truth" of who they are.

So one of my favourite books ever is *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, and it is, I think, semi-autobiographical and based on her own childhood and relationship with her mother. There's a really great article where she's in conversation with Brittnay Buckner They're talking about what is the best environment to be creative to write about yourself and experiences and life and create good art. I would highly highly recommend this conversation. And at the end, they talk about truth in art. So the quote goes, "you must persevere, and as long as you are true, the truth is your best friend, just

the truth, and the truth, incidentally, is multifaceted, a lie is one thing, one single thing" and I think I read that for the first time maybe five years ago and it's just been bouncing around in my head since then. I think it gets to the heart of what we're talking about.

When there's a new TC show or film that is by or for or depicts minorities in some way it starts the same conversation again and again about representational politics. And I think Kincaid's quote and her approach to her writing and her own life and the truth of her life as it appears in her work is a really fruitful thing to think about because I feel like using that quote then, if someone is able to tell a lie, if there is some fake news or something, by definition you can point at it. In order to identify that it's fake, you need to know what you think the truth is, whereas it's much harder to identify the truth as something that is authentic or real in some kind of way, to be able to point at it and say "this thing is true" because then I feel like the conversation shifts to like, "true, for who?" which brings us down another interesting path

**SMK** Yeah, a really present example I think reflects what you're saying is this conversation about the Churchill statue and Churchill's lionisation. So there's one truth that we've been told that Churchill was a "great man" "saviour", "leader of this country", "war hero", and if you contest that truth it's obviously really threatening because it's contesting something much bigger, a bigger narrative, but I think when you said about just pointing out the lie is where the power lies, I think we've seen this to be very true because as soon as you say, "actually this is a lie because of this piece of information" - whether that's the Bengal Famine, anti-suffrage, the war, colonialism, slavery, there's all these different truths that contest that one lie, and it is the lie that somehow - I mean not somehow but deliberately has the most power behind that narrative - the false narrative, is the one that seems to have the most power behind it. Does that reflect what you were sort of saying?

**MJ** Yeah! because I think then, when a lie is told, the lie becomes tangible in some kind of way and with the Churchill example, that lie, about who he is and what he should mean to Britain over generations of people the repetition of the lie is also what gives it its power, so then when people are in a position to talk about the Bengal famine and to talk about the things that he openly said and did, and what that means for the legacy of Britain, I feel like then what minoritised people are being asked to do is to put their entire selves aside in order to continue to repeat the lies because then it becomes even harder to counteract that with truth. I think the same thing happened with the Edward Colston statue. Taking the statue down is seen as violent to racists, because they see it as an act of destruction of public property and public memory, but for the people taking it down, it's an act of truth to combat the lie. I think maybe it's the repetition in all of this fake news discourse that is the factor that changes things in terms of truth-telling and freedom and justice.

**SMK** Well I guess it's kind of like, let's come back to what you were saying about film and TV, because what you've just said reminds me of something that - at the end of the Truman Show, I remember watching that a lot when I was younger and we watched it recently - so it's about this man, Truman, who it turns out his entire life has been a reality TV show, but he doesn't realise, he thinks he lives in the real world. But something that the maker of the TV show says is, - somebody asks, "why has he never questioned this reality?" and he says, "well, because we never question what is presented to us as reality, and truth", and I think that is really interesting and feels applicable to what you're saying - and I wonder if I can use that as a prompt to bring you back to what you were

saying earlier because I took you away on a tangent but I want to know if there's any of those examples you want to go into that kind of shed some light on, I guess what this binary is hiding. You've already said a lot about what it is hiding but-

**MJ** Yeah, so I've been watching a lot of horror film and TV shows and, I love talking about ghosts and time, I think it's so interesting and I think that ghosts are a really useful way of talking about difficult concepts that are to do with power and symbolism and I think coloniality lends itself really well to ghostliness. So I think that when you're watching a horror film or something that is fantasy or sci-fi, the thing that you're watching tells you something about who the creators imagine to occupy space in the present, or future, or past. The useful thing about the ghost is that when they are conjured, the appearance of the ghost tells you that something has gone wrong. Whether that's something in the past that needs to be fixed in order for the present to move to the future. So I feel like if we think of colonialism as a ghost in this TV show that is our Truman show, or our real life - the spectre of colonialism is something which I think is only seen by certain people. Not everyone can see the ghost that is colonialism and we're here to be talking about the binary of what is True and what is Fake, to think about what it's hiding - in this very extended metaphor, the thing it's hiding is the ghost. So why is it that the people who conjured the ghost - whiteness, or white supremacy or colonialism, the thing that did the harm, the thing that means that something has gone wrong, is the thing that can't see the ghost. So I feel that sometimes ghosts can be an expression of guilt, and I think that's the case in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where it's this treatment of ghostliness and slavery and guilt.

So when we have these discussions about Churchill and Colston and who these people were, the discussion really is "who is Britain as a nation?" Does Britain have a guilty conscience? And I think that's our past, *our past*, and those ghosts of coloniality are spectres of death and violence and genocide, and in this horror film that we're in maybe, this horror Truman show, we're trying to imagine a future where those people are recognised as ghosts, as spectres of some kind. In order to do that, we need to know, who is Britain really? who are those ghosts? who is conjuring them? who is scared by them? who is not scared by them? And I think that so much of this discourse, when something happens when the country has a "race panic", for whatever reason its happened, I think the ghosts, in a very strange way, can be a useful way to think about who is scared, what they're scared of, what they can see that other people can't see.

Because I feel like Edward Colston in particular was something which, was so symbolically powerful, it was powerful in an intangible way, you can see people's understandings of who they think we are as a society playing out in the media. It plays out via discourse and content and it's really complicated and it's hard to grasp hold of. Which is another reason I think ghosts are useful, because when you watch horror and sci-fi it's a projection of the future, it's an imagination of the future in some kind of way

**SMK** That's so interesting I think you did such a good job there of connecting all the things that we've spoken about in this signifier of the ghost, which I think, and I know you've talked about it before, but I do think it's really fascinating. What stood out to me quite starkly was what you said about this idea that people who, or the thing, that has conjured the ghost is the thing that also doesn't see the ghost, and I think there's something really - quite - it feels hard. That feels hard. That

feels what's the centre of a lot of the politics we see online and elsewhere - it's like, "this is what happened", "no it's not, this is what happened" and it's just a back and forth, back and forth, because as you say - this ghost, either you feel it or you're not seeing it. And I think that feels at the heart of a lot of things.

But also when you were talking about the ghost, there's something else that brings up. Even if we take ghosts more literally in the sense of - the supernatural. I guess what it makes me think about is that there are types of knowledge and beliefs that are already marked by western categories of knowledge to not be "real" in of themselves. So, whether that's religious knowledge for example, so secularism becomes this, the only objective and true way of knowing something, but religious knowledge is not, it's "subjective", "prone to being fake", closer to being "superstition". So I think - even that in of itself made me think about the ways there is embarrassment I think around people who believe in actual ghosts as well right? And I bring that up just to say this is also connected to that idea of whose truth gets to be The Truth?

What is the central issue in deeming these two things to be opposite, is it just as we've said, that there's so many truths, that the truth is multifaceted? Or is it that there's no such thing as these things in the first place? I don't know, I guess I'm wondering what is it that makes these things not oppositional?

**MJ** Yeah - I think, in forming a relationship between what is the truth and what is a lie, it's what we talked about in the beginning with Donald Trump and fake news, in calling something Fake News, Trump has controlled the boundaries of the debate. So in connecting - at the centre of this discussion - truth, with lie - it's the connection itself which controls the terms of the conversation and where we go with it. Because we've spanned colonialism and religion and spirituality and more tangible examples like film and tv and books which shows you that it takes a lot to be able to confront this incredibly expansive thing. I think the relationship between what is true and what is a lie, just to go back to Jamaica Kincaid, is that, the thing that's painful about truth is when it tries to tell you about yourself.

So to use one example, I was thinking about Archie Panjabi who plays Kalinda Sharma in *The Good Wife*. She has been in a bunch of films that fall into the realm of representational politics. So she was the sister in *Bend it Like Beckham* and she was in *Yasmin* - I find that film to be very painful to watch because it's like if the *Daily Mail* made a film. Basically. So she like she takes her scarf off at the side of the road, she puts a pair of jeans on and 9/11 happens in the middle of the film, and it happens in the way that me and you would expect it to happen. Its kind of like your worst fears contained in this one film, like not to hate on Archie Panjabi, she's great, but em the thing about that is the figure that she plays, the figure of this oppressed Muslim woman whose at odds and is having a clash of civilisations is, I see it as a lie, and it's a lie that is repeated in so many ways, but that one single thing takes many forms.

The reason that I think that the conversation around this depiction of Muslim women can sometimes be quite flat or not very nuanced is because of the relationship between truth and lie. Because there's an implication that if you say "this representation is a lie, that's not what it's like to be a Muslim woman", the next question then becomes, "ok so what is like to be a Muslim woman?" and

that's where you get caught up in trying to explain yourself, and to account for your existence and explain yourself away. But I feel like in that example, it's the relationship between truth and lie, and I feel like maybe it's more productive or fruitful for us to think about it in terms of: what are other lies that we've seen about Muslim women?, and how do we imagine better? Because I don't think I could turn around tomorrow and like write a different screenplay about what I think it is "actually" like to be a Muslim woman. Because the terms of the debate are messed up. They're not a good place to start from.

**SMK** Definitely. that's such a good example because it reminds me of something Toni Morrison says, "they will tell you that you have no history so you spend twenty years proving that you do, they say your skulls are too small so you spend twenty years proving that they're not", and then she says - "in that time forty years have gone by" etc etc and I think what you're getting at there or what I take from it is that in this whole connection between truth and lies - Fake News and Real News - it's that you're constantly having to respond to the lie, so you build your life up defining yourself in terms of the lie even as much as you're trying to say the lie is a lie. That whole thing about "what would true representation of a Muslim woman look like?" It's such a - you know as somebody who does performance work and spoken word stuff, this is something I grapple with a lot. People want you to represent something closer to the "truth", the *authentic* experience of being a Muslim woman. And like you, I think that's such a big burden for anybody to carry because we know - I think the point is not that there is "a" truth, but that we are multifaceted, that it's as messy and complex and we don't *want* - it's not one or the other, the lie or the truth; in a world where every single TV show had Muslim women in it, then it would be a completely different conversation wouldn't it? It wouldn't be this conversation.

That then brings me to the point about well what's going on behind this binary right? Because it's clear that it's constructed, it's hiding things, it's obscuring the reality. And, it seems that in an example like that, the reason it exists is to oppress. It upholds the oppression of Muslim people and Muslim women in particular who then have to - I would say in my own experience - spend your life doing this work that doesn't contribute to your liberation, your safety, your justice. And in that way, obscures and deflects from work that would essentially change the world - is how I would put it!

So what to your mind, why does this binary exist? And I mean we can maybe begin with the actual binary that we've started with - Fake news and Truth - it sounds like that's something that has benefitted Donald Trump or other governments, and how is that so? And what is the role of news media then? How come news media doesn't manage to divest from this idea of fake news?

**MJ** I suppose because the news media is engaging on the level that was mentioned. It's saying "ok we've been accused of pedalling fake news, let's pedal true news" but there's no such thing, there's no such Fake news, there's also no such thing as true news.

I think that the idea that you can combat it in that way or if you - if only you read more widely, if only you were better at identifying fake news, then there wouldn't be all these people who are misinformed. When, I don't know that people are misinformed, we live in an age of information, we live in an age when it's more possible than ever to have access to more information. But clearly, access doesn't mean everybody is incredibly well informed



**SMK** Right, and I think that's linked to the idea that ignorance is the reason for racism or oppression or - yeah I think that's such a good example of how we have all this information and it seems to be in fact the opposite - that it's upholding those oppressions

**MJ** Yeah because the news organisation is going to reflect the values that it holds. It's going to reflect the values of what it thinks to be true. So pre the popularity of phrases like Fake News, if that organisation is still white supremacist and capitalist, it will continue to be so even while it thinks its combatting fake news. I think it becomes a distraction then to say "we're going to fight fake news", it becomes a distraction from white supremacy and capitalism and way to disguise their values and what they're trying to do. Because what they're trying to do is not just give people news for the love of news, or truth, or integrity, or justice, or whatever. In having this discussion about fake news, it allows people to think that it's about individual responsibility, when I think it's also about social and collective responsibility.

It becomes what we mentioned before about what is Britain? What does British society think it is? and if it can't accept these things about itself, where does that leave us in terms of how we speak to one another and the boundaries of the debates that we have?

**SMK** Yeah, I think there's something here about capitalism - as you mentioned - I think it's also interesting to think about. I was in an event recently - undercover - I went under not my own name, just to witness it. It was several of the senior editors of the Daily Mirror, Daily Express, BBC, what was really fascinating was that nobody acknowledged at any point that particularly with those newspapers, there's somebody who owns those papers, this is also a business model, it's not just people who love news and information and "we just want to share it with you". There's actually a transaction here that's happening, somebody is making a profit and somebody is buying something. So I think that was one of the questions I wanted to raise. Well, hang on, you're acting like this is a neutral space and that whatever information is important to share you're sharing it. But there are shareholders that own your company, there are people that make profit off your sales, so you want to sell papers. If you want to sell papers you're going to tap into certain types of news currents that are profitable, you're not going to necessarily post, "we want accountability for the hostile environment", that's not going to be something that sells --- except, except what's interesting there is that, actually there's a reality in which that could be what sells but because the news media itself has cultivated an environment where what sells *is* hostility, and what sells taps into what Britain believes itself to be.

I think there's then no coincidence for me that the people who own shares in these big companies and corporations are also people who probably historically and presently are invested in - whether materially or ideologically - that notion of Britain that is, a civilising force for good, a saving force, you know - nothing bad, basically. And so I feel like capitalism is a really important force behind also Fake News and Truth

**MJ** Yeah, because I think when we think through capitalism in this conversation - it takes these very conceptual ideas and gives them a materiality. If we're talking about accessibility of news and information and bursting your bubble and all those kind of things that are supposed to combat fake

news. There's material things you need in order to do that. An internet connection, the space and time are very difficult to come by in terms of money, for regular working-class people. You need to be earning enough so your belly is full, your kids belly is full, so that you have time to sit down and think about these ideas and to consume the news media in a sustained way.

In order for that to happen there are things that can happen. You could just as well combat fake news, if that was what you wanted to do, with a Universal Basic Income, or more funding for people that are unemployed, people that are disabled, free breakfast for kids that are going to school, free school meals. All of those things make information accessible, all of those things combat fake news, but in order for that combatting to happen. We need to accept "truths" about the material conditions of the world.

**SMK** That's really interesting because it also proves the point that when fake news is purely about information, that has no material reflection or reality, I think that's why we're able to say "oh, racists exist because they're misinformed", rather than ever pointing to these material concerns, that information both shapes but is also an outcome of. That's a really interesting way of putting it, that if you wanted to combat fake news, if we even kind of want to go down that road, then it would involve system change - you can't - what's the point of you know, censoring the internet, that in of itself plays into the "truth" of a state with ever increasing authoritarian powers.

Something I was also thinking about is - you said something about internet connection - it got me thinking about my own lack of knowledge about technology and data surveillance - but I think that's relevant here because from my limited understanding, what I do know is that even when we're talking about like - I know a lot of this conversation revolves around social media and fighting fake news on social media. But I guess a big part of that is - again, money is made by the sale of time, our time online. And so fake news is then, there's something there about, it's not just oh some random people at the end of your road are just making memes and putting them online and this is turning the world fascist! I think instead there's so many other forces at work that are much less obvious, so much less easy of a conclusion to come to; but I think, that actually seem to be shaping things - and that's connecting like elections and governments between India, Russia, America, whatever, there is more going on than meets the eye.

**MJ** Yeah, and I think, I find it so hilarious but frustrating that people who are into their conspiracy theories, like flat-earthers, are so invested in these conspiracies, even the people who think COVID is a hoax or government conspiracy, will put so much energy into creating spaces for themselves online to meet with others who share their conspiracies - when there's real legit conspiracies, like white supremacy is a conspiracy in that it structures the world as you see it and there are forces that wield it to control people's lives

**SMK** - and hide it from you

**MJ** right. And people will not have that but they will have the "oh the government is making me wear a mask so you have to stand a bit far away from each other", and that's seen as a conspiracy.

**SMK** but I think there's also something interesting there about - in my own experience, intrigue about conspiracy theories like the ones you've mentioned, I feel are also a result of what happens when you deprive communities of knowledge that would actually lead to those material changes. Because you hide white supremacy so well, it becomes easier to believe in the illuminati - or masks. Because I think there's a huge correlation between communities where we do have this deprivation of knowledge, the deliberate elision of the truth, and those kinds of conspiracy theories. And I don't think it's a case of you know, yeah, I think basically the fault for that doesn't lie with people themselves necessarily

**MJ** Absolutely. and the way that that's confronted has to be part of the conversation when we're talking about combatting fake news. Because I feel like I've seen a lot of think pieces about "these people who believe in such and such thing are isolated and unhinged and psychotic in some kind of way" and it's like, well if that's your starting point to try to understand why they think those things, what room have you left yourself to be able to combat it? it's the exact same pattern as the conversations about "why are people racist? is it ignorance or what is it?" it's the same thing.

**SMK** Yeah. And that's like essentialising some form of lack of knowing the truth, into some sort of ableist discourse around "you just don't have the capacity to understand"

So I feel like we've been on quite a journey, this is one of the more complicated topics that we've tried to cover because this binary as you said, is just seeped into every area of our lives really. Even personal relationships, how much of communication is based on my perception of what was true, and your perception of what was true in this interaction? you know, gaslighting, interpersonal level of telling you that what is not true is true, all of that.

I think we can only scratch the surface of this in many ways, but I think what we have scratched, what you have helped us uncover is really important, really beneficial. So I wondered if like for you to bring this to a conclusion in some way - what do you feel is something that we, or you would suggest or encourage us to take forward in terms of finding maybe a better framework or language to think about information, or knowledge, outside of the binary of fake news and truth?

**MJ** I think it's that movement that you just said, "outside the binary", to be able to take a step back and take in the perspective of what the conversation is, and who the conversation benefits, and I think that applies to whether we're talking about authenticity in film and TV representations or if we're talking about how Universities classify what is critical thinking and what is scholarly thinking, and interpersonal relationships with the truth of who we are as individuals and who we are as a society. It is always worth asking, who the discourse or argument or debate benefits, and where you stand to go from there in terms of intellectual paths, creative paths, spiritual paths. Is it an interesting way to think? Does it give you hope for the future? can you imagine some sort of future with it? So, just to, as usual, go back to the ghost thing, I think that ghosts can be a symbol of the future, and when a ghost is exorcised, or a ghost leaves in some kind of way, you have a solving of the problem. And I think in a lot of the examples that we used over the last hour or so, they're examples that speak to systemic violence, and I think if we can think about who the harm has been done to, for our pasts and our presents, it makes for like a more stable future, or a future that you would actually want.

So to summarise that ramble, I think it's very useful to be able to step back, think about who the argument benefits, and who the argument harms, and I think a lot of the times, there's a lot of overlap between those two things. And I think that's good, I think it's really really important that conversations are multifaceted, that you're including the fact there is more than one truth, I think that is the most important thing I've found to hold onto when we're thinking about the future, and in relation to this particular binary, like, what next in this debate or argument, or discourse?

**SMK** I think that's such a useful set of tools there, because it feels really practical as well, like I think one question about who benefits, and who is harmed from this, I think that really brings us closer to something, and also what that leads me to feel is that it's a reminder that perhaps the ways we engage with information themselves need to change because I think sometimes the ways we're encouraged through the education system to approach information is almost competitive, in this way where you're trying to get the information that will present you to be the one who knows the most, or the cleverest, or the one who understands the best. I think this is very gendered too, this way of using information. That's why you have at Oxbridge this real valorisation of men debating, and the most "persuasive" debate wins. What I'm getting at when I'm saying that is that there is another way to approach knowledge, which I think is what you're getting at, where it's not an object that I want to own and prove to have the "best one" or the "most amount" of. Instead, I understand all pieces of information require questioning, are themselves questions, I think one of the things that has helped me to be a bit more critical - not in an academic sense necessarily - is to approach information neither as something that is fake or true, but that simply exists, and I want to approach it as evidence, as you might in an investigation, this is a piece of evidence saying more about the person who's saying it, or the society they're in, rather than the thing itself.

So when someone says, "immigrants go home", it's not about "immigrants or good", or "they're bad", it's actually like what does it mean for that person to say it? why are they saying it? what impact does that have on society? who benefits? so I think that's a really useful set of tools that you've given us, and I think it helps to move away from that binary because it is such a convoluted binary in a way. Even just discussing it proved it's not really useful, it's not felt a helpful way to think about things. It's even made this discussion hard to organise because I don't really know what these really big and broad things are that we're talking about.

So thank you, that's really really helpful. Just before I close up is there anything you want to add or anything you feel we've missed?

**MJ** I guess I was just going to say that I think because it is such a gigantic conversation, I feel like, thank you first of all for wielding it in a way where you kind of moved us through this conversation, I'm really grateful for that and I think that that last thing as you were talking made me think of connection - so when you see something about "this is something that we know about immigrants", when you hear that piece of information, I feel like if there's one take away from this podcast, it would be, what is the connection there? what does that connect to what I already know? Because you know, it's a process. Knowledge is not a stable entity, it's something that you do, you don't just hold your knowledge, because then it's kind of useless. So when you were talking, that's what it made me think of - how does this connect to other things that I know.

**SMK** That's really useful - knowledge as a process, brings it back to praxis - which I enjoy with a lot of these podcasts. That we, I hope most of what we do isn't just aiming at some end goal of "owning knowledge" as you say, but what are we doing in the world. Just to reflect one final point, what you were saying about does this feed into the future I want to build? does this give me hope or not? I think that's also such an important set of questions because realistically I know what I want to do with my time on earth is actually contribute to some sort of safer, more just, more liveable world essentially right? And I think that does require - I'm only looking for the things that will contribute to that, and I think that helps, also having some sort of direction to move through all the information that we see, so that - yeah I think that reflection you shared on the future was just a really nice thing that you've given us as well.

So thank you so much for contributing all this time and having to grapple with such an interesting binary. I'm definitely going to be taking seriously your notion of the ghost, I really like that notion so thank you for that! It's been a pleasure to host you and maybe some time in the future we'll have you back to break another binary!

**MJ** Yes of course! Thank you for having me, it's been wonderful!

**SMK** Thank you for listening to this episode of Breaking Binaries. I hope you, like me, can take something from our guest this week. Look out for episodes fortnightly and if you enjoy, please share. The music you've been hearing is made by an old high school friend, that came through, so shoutout to Violence Jack at [@getviolencejack](#) online. Thanks to all my guests for chatting to me every week and helping us to think a little more critically, and I hope, humbly, about our world.

I do believe that part of the way we transform the world is by transforming the ways we think about it. Thank you for listening. I've been your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, bye!