

Module 2 video 4: Interview with Ali Breland, Reporter at Mother Jones

[00:00:00] **Jane** OK. Hi, Ali Breland. Thank you for joining me. Ali is a reporter at Mother Jones who focuses on the intersection of disinformation, technology and politics. In addition to QAnon, he's covered the nexus of politics and Internet culture and surveillance technology. His investigations, essays and features have appeared in The Guardian, Bloomberg, BusinessWeek, Vice and Logic Magazine. Thank you for joining me.

[00:00:30] **Ali** Yeah. Thank you for having me. Appreciate it.

[00:00:34] **Jane** So I wanted to talk to you because you've been covering QAnon, the online conspiracy, but also disinformation as a whole for a long time. And we're kind of in a moment where it's all reaching a boiling point. So for any reporters who are just coming into this topic, they're sort of, maybe they saw it in the periphery, but are now tasked with investigating it online and trying to put it all together. What should they keep in mind? How they should they begin their approach?

[00:01:09] **Ali** Yeah, so beginning that approach you're just looking at QAnon?

[00:01:13] **Jane** And online disinformation as a whole.

[00:01:16] **Ali** Yeah. I guess the important thing is to. Approach it all with a very critical mind and like.

[00:01:26] **Ali** Doubt everything you see until you have a reason to not doubt it. So, like, even if you find, like, a debunk of something, right. Like you should doubt the specific debunk until, like, there's some credible way, some source that you specifically trust, some multiple levels of sources that you trust that can actually show you like what reality is. I think that beyond any sort of specific technique, like the most important thing I think is just like thinking about everything super critically. And if you sort of like work through these things as though they're like mental math problems and like just try to, like, throw everything you can at them, eventually you'll get to solutions more so than, like, any specific singular technique or anything, just like the way of thinking, I think is the most important bit of it.

[00:02:14] **Jane** So I really like the term mental math problem. Can you unpack that a little bit?

[00:02:19] **Ali** Yeah, I'll go to specific example. So. There. Well, I got this tip for a story in like 2017 or 18.

[00:02:31] **Ali** And this is right around the time that we had started figure out about the troll farms and the Internet research agency in Russia. And like we were trying to unpack what was happening and like Congress didn't fully know the platforms knew to some degree. I don't think they fully understood what they didn't understand to some degree they were withholding. At that point, there was certain bits of information out, like we knew that this group, Black Matters US was a Russian front group posing as a American racial justice organization. And I got a tip like from someone pointing out to me that Black Matters was being featured on YouTube. And so I went to look at it and they actually weren't. But what I did realize is that they had supposedly organized this massive New York that thousands of people would attended and they didn't post a thing about it. But people in who attended the event, we're like you went to event organized by Black Matters today, and they're posting lots of YouTube videos about it. This is about a year later.

[00:03:31] **Ali** And I'd never seen like a story like that. I guess at the time daily Beast has done some really new reporting, but this was kind of a unique thing. And so I just sat down and thought my way through it. I was like, all right. Like, if Black Matters organized this, I need more than people on YouTube saying this.

[00:03:48] **Ali** There's probably news coverage of 5000 people showed up in New York for it. So I went and I found those stories. That was like, all right. So these people are saying it was organized on Facebook. There should be like 5000 to 10,000 people are attending. There's going to be like some sort of archive scrapes somewhere. It's just a matter of, like, me doing the steps

to find it. And so that night, I probably stayed up until 3:00 am typing up different permutations of things like figure out what the event url was? Figuring out different versions because it turns out Facebook sometimes has multiple versions of emails or multiple versions of urls for the same page. Until I can finally find an archived version of that, I wrap my brain thinking about. I remembered in my college that my friends had created this like seed startup that didn't really work. But the startups job was like scraping Facebook events and trying to show college students like what was going on in town. And so did that capability existed. And it turned out other companies were doing that still. So you can find like a repository of events. So just like through faking my way through that, I was able to find all the information I need and get the story up the next morning.

[00:04:53] **Jane** And did you end up speaking to people as well, or did you sort of rely on online tools and online searches to pull that together?

[00:05:03] **Ali** I did. But after we published the story, because I was I was concerned that someone might beat us to it. And I don't think that that is a legitimate concern if you don't have everything you need. I felt confident from what I found online that there was more than a shadow of a doubt that this was real and that my reporting would stand up. But I definitely wanted to talk to people and I tried to. They just got back to me after we published. And in this case, ended up being the right instinct because we got we needed. It was a correct story. But then also, actually, your publication published the same story a day later. And so I would have gotten scooped if I had waited.

[00:05:42] **Jane** And now it's sound like [inaudible]. And so when you were sort of thinking through this story, the online elements that you relied on was, first of all, people posting about the events, but also local news coverage. And you were trying to find the event itself. Is there anything else that I missed?

[00:06:07] **Ali** No. Yeah, it's trying to find the event itself. I was trying to find like I guess like accounts of the even, news stories of the event, things that proved it was real and things that proved that Black Matters, a known Russian linked group, was actually behind it. Yeah, that sounds like a weirdly unique story. But like I've actually used those techniques for other similar stories and like that kind of, those skills, I think will help me in future stories. So it's like more than just this weird, bizarre nich or a thing.

[00:06:42] **Jane** Yeah. No, I think I think with a lot of the stories that we've seen over the years that have to do with social media manipulation or disinformation, it sounds like going digging through the Internet is like a one off technique. But really, it's a lot of it is sort of the crux of the reporting.

[00:07:06] **Ali** Yeah, exactly.

[00:07:07] **Jane** But I also wanted to ask you for your approach to breaking news situations. So the story that you just described, it was competitive, but it wasn't centered around one political event. But especially, especially in 2020, you know, between pandemic protests and natural disasters, there's a lot of breaking news events that reporters run towards. And almost always, if it's large enough breaking news event, there's going to be disinformation that kind of follows it almost immediately. So in those breaking situations, how do you approach monitoring or, the online conversations. And how do you approach monitoring these communities, these online communities that you regularly cover?

[00:08:03] **Ali** Yeah, I guess like that'd be like repetitive or reductive. But like the baseline being two is just goes back to again, like a thinking thing critically and like, not losing that in, like, high stress moments and so like. This comparatively was a lower stakes breaking news event. Like, I'm a recovering, I guess. Like last year, there was a big crowd noise, anti clash in Portland, and this sort of big thing became out of that was this this like rumor about cement milkshakes being thrown. And so, like in that specific instance, like the way I approach shows like cement milkshakes, like, I guess that's possible. But that sounds absurd. So, like one let's be critical of this. He's verifying it. The police. OK. They're an authoritative source. But also the police have a track record of like spreading misinformation. What are they basing this on? They're basing this on reports that they got. Not anything they've actually seen themselves. So there's actually no

proof there. So then, from there, I guess I just like went and ended up doing a story based on that, but like. You can just kind of do different versions of, I guess, like that kind of frame of thinking and being like, all right. Like, I don't know, like whatever information looking for like this popped up. Who's saying it? Why are they saying it? Like what interest did they have. What's their track record. Ian Miles Cheong, for example, you probably saw him spreading disinformation about the police shooting, the shooting of police officers in Compton. If you see an Ian Miles Cheong tweet, you think during a breaking news event it's probably not worth thinking about or if it is worth thinking about the sense that it's like potentially something for you to debunk. Does that get at your question?

[00:09:58] **Jane** It does. So it's sort of a mix of the critical thinking skills that you described earlier and sort of known places where this information comes from. And when you approach monitoring breaking news situations is there one platform that you stick with? Are there any techniques that you use to sort of get away from the main conversation that's happening and try to find what else to be going on?

[00:10:32] **Ali** Yeah. So I guess it depends on the goals and your aims of what you're doing. I think a different reporter trying give us a focus on accurate information has like a different role than me. Whereas, like, I I assume you do the same thing. Like we sit down and we're like, all right, where is this coming from? And so, like, what I what I do. If I'm trying to, like, determine the provenance or how something is spreading, I will. Try I'll start searching around on. I'm a member. One thing that's really useful is to join a bunch of Facebook groups in communities that you're interested in observing. And so, like, I'll search through my groups and see, like, if there's any sort of central stories being shared and I'll go to certain specific accounts that I've aggregated onto a Twitter list. And then I'll see, like, if there's any commonalities I'll find like with the articles and then I'll use. I'm sure that by the time this class comes out, you've talked about this for like CrowdTangle. I'd like to see where it's going. Through CrowdTangle, which is. Yeah. I use the free chrome extension. I should get better about using the actual powerful version of it, but I'll just see like where it's spreading on Facebook and Twitter. And then sometimes Reddt and see what accounts are pushing it out. And then go from there to like what. To see if I can find like the kernel of like where this information is originating from or what the cause of core of it is.

[00:11:59] **Jane** And with with breaking news events, the other side of it is that there are sometimes efforts to manipulate the journalists themselves, so whether it's through presenting number of false narratives, that it involves documents, sort of false personas contacting them. How can reporters sort of inoculate themselves against that? And what are the signs that they should be looking out for that there's something they should be checking out a little bit more before relying on the information that sent to them?

[00:12:41] **Ali** I think that's like on a baseline level. You should just assume that most things that are being sent to you are false until they're proven true. Like, you can be optimistic. And I think we have to be optimistic because our job is like ultimately like figure out what is happening. But to just approach everything with, like, tremendous skepticism. There's also a certain little things that happen every single time. Like, again, like not just Ian Miles Cheong, like, you know, everyone is looking at us now, like benefit you to just Google, Sam Hyde and like Google image search Sam Hyde. H-Y-D-E and like, remember his face because every time there's a shooting, a group of trolls will say, like, Sam Hyde is the shooter or maybe they'll replace his name, but like post different pictures of him. For the unfamiliar he's like, alt-right comedian and who show got canceled from it also for being too toxic, but which says a lot because like it also is like a separate issue. But anyway. Yeah, stuff like that. I don't know. Yeah.

[00:13:47] **Jane** Are there any techniques that you're seeing now that you haven't seen maybe a few years ago?

[00:13:54] **Ali** I wouldn't say so, I haven't noticed techniques specifically, but it's more like, I guess like behavior because I think it's less intentional. But like, Facebook groups are absolutely just like. The disinformation is flowing out of Facebook groups. It is really, really difficult, as I'm sure you've seen, with the sort of antifa Oregon like wildfire claims. There were no, I haven't seen you reporting on it. And I myself haven't been able to figure out like anything close to what the origin of that was. I don't think that we even know because, like, it's just happening now and like private

places that reporters can even access. And so all we can do is like figure out when it's starting to gain mainstream traction. But even then, like going back and looking through all the Internet posts, it was already mainstream in these communities before anyone even noticed. And like, it's super hard to find, like the inflection point as to where it became common knowledge, in Oregon. Other than like what police told us. But I don't know. I mean, is there anything that you're seeing that, like, his behavior really different, that, like is like really striking to you?

[00:15:06] **Jane** You know, one thing that comes to mind is that we've had a couple of fake leaks of information.

[00:15:13] **Jane** Look, there was, you know, a bunch of existing, existing leaks stitched together, presented like there leaks from a hacking collective called Anonymous.

[00:15:27] **Jane** You know, that really focused on Bill Gates, you know, the classic Coronavirus conspiracies.

[00:15:33] **Jane** And that, to me, was really interesting because I think there was a real pause in that technique after the French election where there was a big leak about [unaudible] back home that was originally posted through this anonymous website called 4Chan. So that's something that sort of gave me pause and makes me wonder if, especially in the US as the elections approaching, if that's something that we should be hyper vigilant about.

[00:16:03] **Ali** Yeah, probably. I didn't. I can see how those kinds of things would be enticing, like I'm almost surprised. Maybe I've missed it, but I don't I don't think. We haven't seen, like fake manifestos from shooters. Sure, people have tried that, but they haven't seen the cash traction. But that's like something that's like really concerning. But I feel like it'd be really easy to do.

[00:16:24] **Jane** But we definitely see a lot of false information around shootings.

[00:16:27] **Ali** Aw yeah.

[00:16:28] **Jane** Videos, makes up fake profiles, fake suspects, fake victims. It's always a pandemonium. Yeah. And then for my last question, I kind of want to ask you about how you think of. About what your thought process is when you're putting it all together. So for a lot of readers, these online concepts can seem a little bit alien or far away, something that doesn't really concern them. And there's been a lot of anxiety, both from reporters and researchers, about striking the right balance of making sure that we don't amplify false information, but also that we inform our readers that this is going on and that they should know about it. As someone who explains QAnon so frequently, but also reports on that, from my perspective, very effectively. What are some of the things that you take into account when pulling together your research into this story?

[00:17:40] **Ali** Yeah, I think one of the first things I do is assess the worth of the story from the get go. I was speaking with the researcher Whitney Phillips earlier today and who's like just, you know, a great resource, like every disinformation reporter. But she was talking really smartly about how, like if when you're trying to do a good job, like trying to be critical of QAnon, you're still amplifying it. And so, like, for me to take away that was like, you have to sit down to do a cost benefit analysis of like is the story going to be, in my opinion, like is this story going to be more valuable than like the amplification work that you're doing? And so I think that can be measured by like. Accountability like what in what way you framing this, like what what are you bringing to light? A really good example of that I think would be Kelly Weill, I think her last name is, Kelly Weill's Daily Beast story on how ex Navy SEALs were getting into QAnon. That's like really important, like these people are. Some of them are potentially violent. In the story, she talks about SEALs who have acted on these sorts of beliefs. And even the ones that aren't inclined to do dangerous things are still very influential in social media. People watching this may not be familiar, but like in some parts of the country, like Navy SEALs carry just so much clout and they have like social media followings and their influencers in their own right.

[00:19:05] **Ali** But like. I guess when I sit down to try to do stories like I'm thinking about the worth of what I'm doing to make sure that that's what it like, any potential amplification, and it will go to more granular level, it's like framing like things like in a critical way. And not, this is a problem. I

don't think that I think journalists are mostly past, but like not credulously taking something and being like people or saying this. Like if people were saying something bizarre and ludicrous, like you could frame it in that kind of way and you don't have to make fun of them in doing so, you can just be like this just isn't true. And you don't have to give credence to the fact that people, like some people, think it's true.

[00:19:48] **Jane** Were there times where you sort of came across something and said, you know, this is not really worth the story, are there any examples that you'd be able to do?

[00:19:58] **Ali** Yeah. Off the top of my head, like, no, I know. Definitely seen things. That are just laughable. Both like related QAnon. But then. On 4Chan as well, on like not QAnon things, so I'm trying to think if there's, like anything good sitting him in mind.

[00:20:22] **Ali** No, in a way, I'm like self-censoring right, I'm keeping. I'm not amplifying because I can't because it's just out of my memory. But yeah, there's like tons of absolutely absurd things that these people post that are funny and that are maybe like worth sending to your friends or something like that. But that are not worth amplifying because it's like they don't, there's, like, no specific end to the story. It's probably not worth anyone's time. And even if it doesn't make QAnon ridiculous, there are plenty of things that QAnon produces that are also ridiculous, that are also dangerous and do legitimately need to be reported on. So there's no reason to, like, lower your standards. It's not like there's a shortage of stories coming from these spaces.

[00:21:07] **Jane** That's all the questions I have for you except for. If you have any resources to recommend to reporters who are just starting an online investigation or just starting to think about disinformation.

[00:21:19] **Ali** Yeah, I mean, I think everything I do is super basic and I probably should get into more technical things. But like, if you haven't already recommended it, the CrowdTangle Chrome extension is free and it's an easy way to understand everything that's happening. And then like this, this isn't a tool, but like creating a burner account and then using that to aggregate all of your information, like I have a second Instagram that I use just for work where I follow a bunch of, like, deeply brain poison accounts and the same thing with, like Twitter lists and things like that. There are more technical ways to do things for sure. But like if you do that, you can just get a handle on so many stories without, like, stressing yourself out or confusing yourself. If you're interested in this, you already know how to use platforms already. So it's an easy thing you can do.

[00:22:15] **Jane** Well, thank you again for sharing all of that. Hope that people learned some good tips and also approaches. But I definitely agree with you. A lot of this stuff just takes a little digging and is not overly technical. So I'm loving that you said that.

[00:22:36] **Ali** Cool. Thank you.

[00:22:38] **Jane** Cool. Thank you again for joining me.