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Disinformation & backlash: CT experts on recipe for Capitol riot

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Members of the military stand guard outside Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, in response to supporters of President Donald Trump who stormed the U.S. Capitol earlier in the week.

Photo: Patrick Semansky / Associated Press

Disinformation. Social media. Backlash to civil rights and demographic change. A deep belief in conspiracy theories.

Those are some of the factors Connecticut experts say drove a mob to violently storm the nation's Capitol building.

“You just overwhelm people with a lot of information, much of which is at least misleading but in some cases downright ... deceitful, and there’s a lot of people who fall for it,” said Michael Lawlor, a former state legislator and professor of criminal justice at the University of New Haven.

“That’s the phenomenon that we see playing out in our country right now,” he said.

Thousands of President Donald Trump’s supporters rallied at the Capitol Wednesday, and at one point a mob of people broke through police barriers, smashed windows and roamed the building. Lawmakers were forced into locked rooms. Five people, including a police officer, are dead as a result of the melee.



A woman walks past security fencing protecting the West Front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, as preparations take place for President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration after supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the building. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

Donald Trump repeatedly has said that the November election, won by former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., was rigged.

However, across the nation, local and state election officials and courts have found no credible evidence of significant fraud in the 2020 election.





Mike Lawlor is an associate professor, Criminal Justice Department Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences at the University of New Haven.

Photo: Contributed

Some of those who stormed the Capitol potentially also are associated with QAnon, a conspiracy theory that holds Trump is fighting a “deep state” ring of pedophiles.

That includes Ashli Babbitt, the woman who died after being shot by a Capitol police officer. She had posted QAnon content on social media, according to media reports.

“If you really think that the leaders of our country are involved in sexual exploitation ... you’re going to act out on it,” Lawlor said, in reference to QAnon.

Social media

But what primes people to become extremists?

“Fear, anger, resentment and credulity,” according to Lawlor.

Richard Hanley, a journalism professor at Quinnipiac University and expert in social media trends, compared the radicalization of the “domestic terrorists” at the Capitol to the radicalization of ISIS militants.

“What we saw (Wednesday) is not surprising to any of us who have tracked movements over time, more so in the Mideast but increasingly so in the United States,” he said.

“They inadvertently followed a narrative trajectory of people who joined ISIS.”

Though radicalization through propaganda has happened throughout history, social media – a “gateway drug to conspiracy theories” – accelerates the process by giving





Richard Hanley, professor of Journalism at Quinnipiac University.

Photo: Autumn Driscoll / Quinnipiac University /

And “when disinformation transfers into the reality of day-to-day life, it kills people,” Hanley said.

Real worries

Other experts, including Wesley Renfro, a professor of political science at Quinnipiac University, acknowledged social media played a role, but said there’s another piece of the puzzle.

“Huge numbers of people voted for Donald Trump in 2020,” Renfro said. “They are not all the same.”

“Why are there significant numbers of Americans who are so inclined to believe in conspiracy theories?” he asked. “Why do so many people think that Donald Trump won?”

Renfro cautioned against lumping Trump supporters into one category, and said some may suffer from a large amount of economic and cultural angst.

“It’s easier for people to believe Donald Trump when he says that things have been rigged than to contend with the fact that society is different and not the way that they want it to be,” he said.

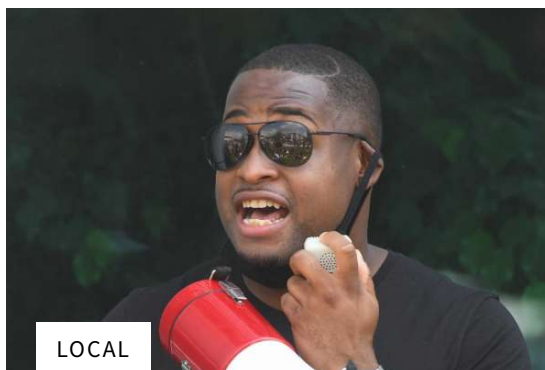
As an academic, he did not label Trump or Wednesday’s events as fascist. But he did call them “amoral,” “criminal” and “reprehensible.”



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"It actually doesn't matter, I think, that much if the president is a fascist," he said. "The better question is did the president and the people who, you know, broke the law (Wednesday), were they behaving well or not, and the answer is obviously no."

Changes in society

Jeffrey Alexander, a sociology professor at Yale University, called Trumpism a "backlash movement" against social movements such as the civil rights movement, multiculturalism and feminism.

Those prone to it "feel displaced, and they feel afraid of the movements that have transformed the society," he said.

Alexander guessed those who participated in mob violence may have been "alienated, probably with little to lose" and "felt themselves to be outsiders in their own society."

Because he believes it unlikely the rioters believed they could stage a successful coup, the professor took issue with calling them "insurrectionists," instead favoring the phrase "far-right militants."

"I'm sure they knew they could never overthrow the government," he said.

tremendous amounts of anger, have little to lose, are filled with hatred,” he said.

The professor predicts the riot will backfire, further diluting the president’s support.

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