OCTOBER 10, 2024 / Hurricane of misinformation

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): A hurricane named Milton made landfall in Florida last night.

SCORING IN : Bubbling Over

SEAN: It left three million Floridians without power and coastal communities inundated

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: The trees are really taking a beating, the power lines are really starting to wave, we saw some sparks coming from some homes down there…”*

SEAN: Milton arrived just two weeks after a hurricane named Helene devastated North Carolina.

*<CLIP> QUEEN CITY NEWS: The death toll from Helene here in North Carolina now stands at 89 people…..”*

SEAN: But while government agencies are coping with these crises, they’re fighting on another front:

*<CLIP>* [*TIK TOK:*](https://www.instagram.com/thefrancog131/reel/DArCKy9SHY2/) *The Federal government is now STEALING the donations that the citizens have put together to help these people, and locking them away….*

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: At the White House, a remarkable scene: in the middle of an emergency response, having to knock down conspiracies.*

*<CLIP> TRUMP: “They send hundreds of billions of dollars to foreign nations, and you know what they are giving our people? 750 bucks…”*

*WHITE HOUSE PRESS SEC: This needs to stop, this needs to stop. If you care about constituents, if you care about Americans, you shouldn’t do this….*

SEAN: A hurricane of lies, coming on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. We got Juliette Kayyem on the show today. She worked in the Department of Homeland Security back when Obama was president. And she’s the author of a book on disaster preparedness. So we asked her to help us understand how B.S. became one of the biggest hurdles this hurricane season.

JULIETTE KAYYEM (author): Misinformation is not uncommon in disasters. They come on fast. People see things that don't end up being true. You know, there's sort of like eyewitness accounts. So someone says, you know, this community is flooded and it wasn't flooded. So responders are used to that in terms of trying to verify information. What we now have and I think in some ways, disinformation is just a euphemism for lie.

SCORING IN Embers Bounce Around You

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: “It’s all over Tik Tok, it's not going to be on the news, of course…but ”*

JULIETTE: What we’re experiencing now is just purposeful lying about the nature of the response.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: “The Federal Emergency Management Association, better known as FEMA, is now arresting volunteers if they don’t leave the Tennessee area …*

JULIETTE: If you look on social media, if you look in the sort of, you know, atmospheres of response going on right now, there's a lot of false facts about the response about how the Biden administration is responding.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: “FEMA has flown in like 10 or more helicopters and blocked a runway here at Greenville downtown, completely took over, or almost took over the operation just because they are doing some good here FEMA is going to come in and try to stop it.”*

JULIETTE: They are then amplified by, in particular, Donald Trump and Elon Musk, now the owner of Twitter

[*<CLIP>*](https://x.com/atrupar/status/1844040830065197168?s=46&t=xvN8DKGDL2-ZQoyfAZt49g) *CNN:*

*US Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigeig: I saw information that he was putting out that suggested the FAA was preventing emergency flights which was definitely not the case.*

JULIETTE: And create their own reality that then has to be shot down by already overburdened first responders, emergency managers and FEMA, which has put up a rumor page on their website just to combat this crap. So like one example is Donald Trump consistently is saying that:

*<CLIP> TRUMP: They stole the FEMA money just like they stole it from a bank. Kamala spent all her FEMA money, billions of dollars, on housing for illegal migrants.*

JULIETTE: Basic facts are that is not true. There was a separate line item to support migrants and sheltering that the Congress passed. That money was sent to FEMA to administer, but it wasn't replacing disaster management funds. It didn't even they didn't even overlap. It's just like it's just the same entity is distributing these funds. So. So what does that do in the atmosphere? This is it creates a false division between the immigrants who are not getting this money and Americans who might be mad that the money that they want for the disaster relief, yeah, is not available. And those are the kinds of things that then creates.I mean, they do a couple of things - they demoralize emergency managers and volunteers. But most importantly, it's confusing victims about what they should do, what they have access to and what's available to them.

SCORING OUT  
SEAN: And Trump’s spreading lies at his rallies, but also on social media, yeah?

JULIETTE: Yes, at his rallies. At social media. So recently he suggested that resources weren't going to red states that more Republicans were dying. There's just no I mean, I'm laughing only because the absurdity of it. There's just no factual basis for it. but what's interesting is you're seeing Republican governors – Kemp, others, push back on that narrative saying we are getting the resources they want.

[*<CLIP> GEORGIA GOV. BRIAN KEMP:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_8Y3iSi9N0)  *We did get some good news yesterday: Director Stalin’s told me that the administration has agreed to cover 100 percent of cleanup costs for the first three months, which is what we were requesting from them…*

Why are they doing this? Because they know that they have to work with the federal government to protect their citizens and then also begin these recoveries. One of the most obnoxious, disgusting rumors that's being amplified out in the communications space is one that has gotten a lot of traction. And it involves whether FEMA would take your home.

[*<CLIP>*](https://x.com/eyeoftheSTORMsd/status/1843398927619633588/video/1) *TIKTOK:*

*They can seize all your land after a year and all your assets. ANything that you own, they can seize. If it’s a dollar, if it's 750 dollars, if you do not pay them back, they can seize all your property.*

FEMA has a process where they can buy your home. It's a very small program. If if you, the homeowner and FEMA agree for a fair market value and you don't want to live there anymore because it's been flooded four years in a row and this is like a rational transactional decision. And so you hear people now saying, well, I'm not going to leave because if I in terms of an evacuation, if I leave my home, the government's going to take it. I mean, that. So those are like the real world impacts of all of these lies.

SEAN: And it doesn’t help that the guy who owns Twitter is fueling the fire.

JULIETTE: Yeah, that I mean that he is he is probably the biggest amplifier of disinformation, retweeting things that are just clearly false. And what what they're trying to do is create divisions in communities in two ways. One is the divide between the citizen and government, which has always been a tactic by that wing of MAGA ism and then between citizens and their neighbors. And I think why you're seeing such a concerted pushback by, you know, GOP governors, but also by FEMA and others who are who are calling this out is because they know it can harm their their response capabilities. I should say this is being done at a time when we're seeing our very communication networks under stress. Communications are down. It's hard to communicate with people.

SEAN: Back in Hurricane Sandy, I distinctly remember social media being useful for people. It was, it was useful for people going through Sandy. It was useful for, for government agencies to get out information. Is that era of social media being a helpful tool in a disaster over?

JULIETTE: It's over.   
  
SEAN: It's over?!  
  
JULIETTE: Yeah. No, no, no. And this is, this is something that I I wrote: “Elon Musk broke disaster Twitter.”   
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
JULIETTE: Twitter's moment of birth, right, the moment that, that its founder realized its benefit was a minor earthquake in San Francisco, it had been a sort of, you know, just one of those other social media platforms,

But it was that real time authenticated information that was flowing in people's feeds. And it was then that the leadership at Twitter began to take its responsibility in a disaster very seriously. So they did a couple of things. One is, you know, when something broke or something bad happened, there was algorithms pushed forward. Government sources, authenticated weathermen. They had an entire team dedicated to disasters in Twitter. Elon Musk comes in and he breaks it up. One is he takes away any valid way of figuring out if someone is actually authenticated or if they've just paid for a blue check. He changes the algorithm. So, you know, his feed and MAGA feed are sort of amplified during a disaster. And so, so you had an entire system, including the government relying on Twitter to amplify good information, and that whole system is down. So this is like this is ~~t~~he first domestic disaster where that is entirely clear.

SCORING IN - Chemical call for two

NORTH CAROLINA REPORTER: I'm Lily Knoepp. I'm the. Senior regional reporter at Blue Ridge Public. Radio.

At our studios it's been pretty chaotic throughout Hurricane Helene. Right now, we still don't have water. And everybody really is on the ground working as hard as they can to try and get information.

People have mixed feelings about the federal response. One of the things that we've really had to deal with as reporters is dealing with misinformation about what it is that FEMA and the federal government is offering. That when the storm hit, FEMA wasn't here for about three days. So some officials are unhappy about that.

There have been so many examples of misinformation throughout the storm. One of the very wild rumors out there was that the federal government actually orchestrated this hurricane, that they created it. Just this week, our Congressman, U.S. Representative Chuck Edwards, who's a Republican, had to put out a whole email, kind of debunking different myths in western North Carolina. One of them is that, you know, FEMA is only giving folks that are impacted by the storm $750. That's not true. That's kind of the first immediate disaster response. But then after that, there's a lot of other funds that are available.

And so for folks who still don't have power, they're really relying on word of mouth, friends of friends kind of sharing this information. And so I don't think these are all malicious. I think some of it is just a lot of folks are really scared right now. People haven’t had water for a long time, some people haven’t had power for a long time.

But at the end of the day, the most important thing about the recovery efforts of Hurricane Helene are the people of western North Carolina. You know, we've never seen this amount of fatalities before, this amount of devastation. This is something that's going to take years and a lot of money to be rebuild. This is going to be a really long process. And so I hope that people stay focused on that and that this stays a part of the national conversation about the region, beyond just the crazy rumors that have been swirling on Facebook around this storm.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: We’re gonna talk about FEMA and Milton when we are back on *Today, Explained*.  
  
 [BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: This morning *Today, Explained* reached out to Sumi Somaskanda. She’s a BBC reporter who’s currently covering Milton just outside Miami.

SUMI: Sumi Somaskanda (BBC reporter): We know misinformation, disinformation, that has been a big theme in this storm, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Helene and the politicization of the hurricane response efforts that we've been seeing. And I spoke with Tampa Bay City Councilman Bill Carlson, and I asked him about this, and he said they had encountered in Tampa rumors and swirling misinformation, but he felt that government had been able to get ahead of it. And I asked him specifically about FEMA and whether there is mistrust of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in particular. And he told me that people were eager to get help, but he did say that many people were rejected by FEMA after Hurricane Helene, but they had put in claims that, and that those claims were not accepted. So, in other words, he also said FEMA has to get in and explain what is needed. And when I pressed him on that, he said, let's see if they get in quickly after the storm……

SEAN: A lot of the focus has rightly been on FEMA, so we asked Juliette Kayyem how she thought the agency was doing.

JULIETTE: Yeah, So it's FEMA is doing much better than when people remember it in 2005 and Hurricane Katrina because it learned its lesson. So people will remember it. It it failed miserably. It will admit it failed miserably. Its leadership wasn't strong. It didn't deploy fast enough. The White House wasn't on this. And we lost nearly 2000 Americans, not not solely because of the federal response, but it just contributed to not saving a predominantly black American city. Right. And that narrative, you know, held on for a long time.

SEAN: We asked Juliette if the mis- and disinformation around Milton was as bad as that which we saw after Helene.

JULIETTE: You saw it more online than, say, from political leadership. But you saw two things going on. I mean, one is just the misinformation that the forecasts were incorrect, that this was government overreach, it was government hype - which then, you know, in terms of what's the effect of that? Well, that then gets people, citizens confused about what they're supposed to do. And so that is sort of, you know, one major thing that happened leading into Thursday. You saw much more aggressive, though, government FEMA push-back on that. They were sort of ready now.   
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
JULIETTE: Helene was I think they were sort of caught, cause for shock, like, my God, this is happening. So you saw just a lot of outreach, a lot of push back on the misinformation and even from DeSantis who who who pushed back on some of that…

SEAN: But you are saying there was pushback even from Ron DeSantis, I assume was was pushing back on misinformation more broadly and not on specifically say, his former opponent?

*<CLIP> FOX NEWS:*

*Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: We will utilize them to support some of the things we’re doing, you are not going to see FEMA running amuck in Florida… I know that’s been out there on the internet, that is not gonna happen. I’m the sheriff thats in charge here, and we will make sure to protect you. Don’t worry about it.*

JULIETTE: No, no, he did not he did not target his party, did not target Donald Trump. I mean, part of this is - why is this happening now with the governors, the gov…you know, we saw this also with the Governor of Georgia, Republicans pushing back on on Trump trying to have sort of factual statements. I mean, one is, of course, they, you know, disasters and lots of dead citizens are not good for them and not good for them politically. I'll just be blunt here.

SEAN: So do you feel comforted looking at what we learned between Helene and Milton? Do you think this makes an agency like FEMA more prepared for the next hurricane and for the next storm, if you will, of misinformation?

JULIETTE: Yeah, I think it will, on the misinformation and the lies front, I think it's just going to be part of your emergency management plan. Right? You're going to like push back on the rumors in a very formal way. It used to be done, but it was very piecemeal. I saw language coming out of FEMA spokespeople, which I'd never seen before. I mean, essentially just calling out the lies, calling people liars…

SEAN: Hmm!

JULIETTE: …in particular on social media. So they're using the language, the sort of freewheeling language of of social media, which I think is important, rather than the sort of more formal language of of of government. And I think there's there's - it's important to to recognize why they're doing that. One is that they're incredibly demoralized - its demoralizing to be working 24 seven to try to save lives and then have these jerks, you know, come in and tell people to do the exact opposite. It it adds to their vulnerabilities as first responders going out to these communities, if there's people hostile to FEMA. It just confuses the population about what they're supposed to do in a disaster when time is so short to to to evacuate, to get your house ready, to get your family ready.

SEAN: I think from the hype around Milton, there was this sense that, like, it could destroy Tampa. And it's early yet, but I don't think that happened. Do you think that sort of confirms and fuels this misinformation engine after an event like this?

JULIETTE: Yeah, I definitely will. It will be viewed as overreach, as the government's incompetent. It doesn't know what it's doing. It you know, and and it will breed a counter-narrative that they got everything wrong. Why does that matter? Well, one is there’s going to be another storm. And so I think the next evacuation will be harder if if if you don't see the kind of damage and the kind of death that everyone was worried about. But I also, you know, this this is something that's common, it has a name. It's wonky, but it's called the preparedness paradox.  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
JULIETTE: if you are ready, right, you get houses ready, you get communities ready, you get them to evacuate. And the thing comes through and the damage is less than you were worried about. That's why you wanted the evacuation. That's why you wanted the houses to be ready. People will say, well, why? What were you so worried about in the first place? In other words, your the the government's reaction, which may have minimized harm and damage and death, may very well, paradoxically, be viewed as the government's original assessment was wrong. So I do think that this narrative will be pushed, and to say government incompetency.

SEAN: It's funny, you know, you're making me think, like the only way to really combat that level of distrust is to just present a unified front. But we're less than a month out from an election, and that seems beyond our capacity right now. I'm thinking back to the halcyon days where, like, Chris Christie hugged Barack Obama. And those days just seem, like, of another time.

JULIETTE: Year, Exactly. I mean, it is there's no incentive for Donald Trump to, you know, just to shut the F up.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
JULIETTE: Right? I mean, there's just sorry. I mean …it's like just you don't have to have an opinion, like just let the hurricane go through and let government do it. But his incentive is, of course, to show incompetency and an overreach. That's part of his narrative that only he can fix it.

SEAN: Juliette, you've been on the inside of all of this. You've been on the outside at all of all this. You're an analyst. You're writing about these disasters with experience from working inside the federal government. If you could get one thing out to all of the people who are affected by Helene, who will be affected by Milton, who will be affected by the next disaster, what would it be? I mean, in a world where you can't trust social media, where you're maybe not getting the right information from the government, from the news, whatever.

JULIETTE: Part of the plan, part of the response plan is you.

SCORING IN - Phrygian the chills

You can do things now to make things less bad. Some of them are big. You know, can you get your house ready? Right. So we have a mantra “72 on you,” which is essentially – if you can have enough water and food for 72 hours, it's just going to ease the pain. Also, think about what media and information resources you will have available that are going to help you and your family in a moment. Do you have a radio? Do you do you have access to information? Do you know where your adult kids would be if something happened? This is when government needs to work. But our culture of preparedness really went dry in the post-Cold War era. We just weren't thinking about it. We weren't thinking about our vulnerabilities. That changed a little bit after 9/11. But the climate disasters, it now really has to change. And we all, if we have the resources, if we have the capacity, it is on us.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Professor Juliette Kayyem. She’s at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

And she’s the author of a book called *The Devil Never Sleeps: Learning to Live in an Age of Disasters.*

This episode was produced by Haleema Shah, Victoria Chamberlin and Miles Bryan, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

And we’re missing Patrick Boyd at *Today, Explained.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]