

Testimony by Dr. Brian Hughes before the Commission on Security and
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Antisemitism is the oldest hatred and the oldest conspiracy theory in the world. Despite, or perhaps because of that, antisemitic tropes must constantly be “rebranded.” New narratives and styles of rhetoric are constantly necessary to update antisemitism for the present day. In our digital age, this evolution is rapid indeed. New tropes emerge on a nearly weekly basis, making it difficult for those working to counter antisemitism to intervene effectively.

We can compare this process to the way that a virus evolves. While the essential character of the infection remains the same, it must adapt the ways in which it exploits vulnerabilities in the population. In other words, antisemitism has to match the social and cultural moment. We no longer drink from wells, so Jews cannot be libeled for poisoning them. Instead, conspiracy theories now accuse Jews of producing “goyslop,” that is, they blame Jews for orchestrating our public health problem of unhealthy, processed foods, which they claim are promoted to poison non-Jews. We no longer live in a world enchanted by the mysticism of the medieval Catholic Church, so Jews do not kill babies in remote villages for matzoh. Instead, they orchestrate mass casualty events as part of elaborate occult rituals to control the global order.

These adaptations move at the speed of communication. In the Classical period of papyrus and clay, they evolved rather slowly. In the age of mass print, they evolved more quickly. And in the age of digital media, they evolve on a nearly weekly basis. Tens of thousands of amateur Julius Streichers can experiment with new ways to make antisemitism relevant to the news and entertainment of the day. Indeed, they must, to

keep the attention of their audiences. Perhaps they can piggyback off a popular ad for blue jeans to extol the superiority of Aryan womanhood. Or, perhaps they can seize on the geopolitical crisis of Gaza to revive the canard of Jews as a bloodthirsty, disloyal fifth column.

Simultaneously, digital media offers an effectively infinite reservoir in which every antisemitic trope in history can be retrieved, retooled, and rereleased. Only this year, we have seen the libels against Leo Frank dusted off and recirculated. Each week's most compelling tropes go viral and spread the pathology of antisemitism, and the less successful are automatically archived away, to be revisited at some point later down the line.

While this presents profound danger, demonstrated by rising statistics of antisemitic attitudes, harassment, and violence, it also offers us ongoing opportunities to intervene. This is the good news. We have solutions that work, if we implement them. The very cycle of rebranding that allows antisemitism to seep into all areas of our discourse also creates vulnerabilities where it can be attacked.

One of the most promising ways to accomplish this is a technique called "attitudinal inoculation," or "prebunking." It is best described as preventive communication strategy that builds resilience against misinformation and manipulative rhetoric. Using short form video, we can expose individuals to a weakened form of misleading arguments, explaining their manipulative techniques before people encounter them in real-world scenarios. The data is very clear: this effectively helps individuals recognize and resist such tactics more effectively.

Prebunking differs from debunking in two key ways.

- 1.) Debunking seeks to reach people after they have come to believe something false and potentially harmful. In many such cases,

damage has already been done. People have already acted on their false beliefs. By contrast, prebunking tries to reach people before they adopt false and harmful viewpoints. This allows prebunking to reach more people and reach them before harm is done.

2.) Debunking addresses factual matters. However, persuasion science shows that people are highly persuadable by emotions and instincts. This is especially true for false and harmful misinformation, which people believe *despite* its factual contradictions. Prebunking is different. It addresses the emotional and instinctual reasons why people adopt false, harmful viewpoints.

Prebunking has a decades-long history of success, originating in the 1960s. Its principles have been applied to topics ranging from dental hygiene to false advertising, public health to teen dietary habits. These decades of research show that inoculation works. However, it has only recently been applied to racially and ethnically motivated hate. I, along with colleagues at American University and the nonprofit Boundless Israel, were the first to apply inoculation techniques specifically and exclusively to preventing antisemitism, and the results were striking.

In 2024, we produced a 90-second video addressing the antisemitic trope that Hamas is a force for liberation or “decolonization.” It was the largest inoculation experiment dealing with antisemitism ever. It attempted to educate college-aged Americans about key manipulative tactics that antisemitic propagandists use to promote sympathy for Hamas.

Compared to people who did not watch this video, people who watched the above video became:

- 17.7%** more likely to **understand** the idea behind the propaganda is manipulative and harmful
- 7.3%** more likely to **disagree** with the idea that Hamas is a force for good
- 12.4%** **angrier** when presented with the idea
- 19.4%** more **disgusted** by the idea
- 13.6%** more **irritated** by claims that Hamas is a force for good
- 23.9%** *more likely to challenge* that trope if they encounter it online or offline.

These outcomes are very good for a messaging campaigns aimed at sparking attitudinal or behavioral change. A subsequent roll-out as bought advertising suggested that we can effectively inoculate viewers for less than \$1 per successful inoculation.

Granted, prebunking is not a panacea. It cannot deradicalize committed antisemites. But it can and does effectively reach the movable majority who ultimately determine the power, or the impotence, of these tropes. The literature tells us that people need regular boosters. And the constant, rapid evolution of antisemitic libel offers us countless opportunities to do so. It's true that we need to use every tool at our disposal to counter antisemitism in both its acute and chronic forms. But we have strategies that are shown to work. So amid all the bad news, I want you to leave this room with that hope. This is not a lost cause. We do have the ability to act and we can stem the tide.