Communication and the Spread of Information After the Pandemic and in the Future

Back in February of 2020, the WHO said of COVID-19 that it is more than just a pandemic – it is an infodemic (D’Amore, 2020). Much like a disease, maladaptive information can be nebulous, omnipresent, and infectious. The problem of misinformation is not a new phenomenon, it has existed for as long as humans have been able to communicate. What makes it so salient is precisely why this pandemic is so devastating, humans exist in a globalized world. Our supply-chains, our travel plans, our families, our information, all flow across varying nation-states, each touched by the culture and politics of each region. Information itself is uniquely incorporeal, you cannot track it as easily as one can follow pineapples from Hawaii or iPhones from China. It isn’t necessarily a product that carries receipts but an exchange that transpires through various vectors: a newspaper, a bulletin, a friend, to name a few. However, this generation’s flavour of globalism and interconnection is defined primarily by the world wide web. It is by this medium that an unspeakable volume of information is flooded into the newsfeeds of attentive consumers.

With the rise of social media giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, the curation of information for specific tastes and preferences has never been easier. Such catering has brought about innumerable advantages for people, but it also has come with an increasingly apparent cost. People can more readily connect with others who share their preferences. This innocent fact swiftly distorts into social myopia as the slippery slope of preferences pools people into their respective bubbles. Communities in isolation of each other have for some time now been multiplying, diverging, isolating, and, in some cases, warring because of how the internet and social media work to encourage the reification of ideas. When ideas are a matter of preference, say, pineapple versus. pizza, it is a relatively innocuous thing for random global citizens to be sparring about the matter. But when ideas are a matter of safety, where clear and consistent communication is vital, where voices that are most vulnerable can finally secure a platform to be heard, this is where the danger arises. This is how infodemics are born.

What the internet and its social media environments accomplish so handily is the disruption and redistribution of power. Where in a world without internet, it was governments, universities, institutions, and corporations that primarily determined the narrative for the public to ingest on various issues (Pew Research Center, 2019). The internet has since shattered that arrangement. Such normative narratives required the belief of a norm, and, by extension, a belief in the abnormal. For instance, it has long been established since the time of Galileo that the earth is a sphere. There exists a contingent of people who identify as ‘flat-earthers’ that argue that the earth is not only flat, but that it is a conspiracy, orchestrated by the world’s governments and space-fairing institutions, to convince the people of the world that the earth is indeed flat. Besides the reckless amount of assumptions that would have to be verified to make that theory true, there are already numerous papers that explore how statistically improbable it is for such conspiracies to be sustained without someone tattling on these crafty institutions (Grimes, 2016). Despite all of this and the breadth of resources one can easily access online to dispute these conspiracies, not only do ‘flat-earthers’ exist, but they have grown in number. Apply this phenomenon to the present day, to a pandemic that, as of the time of this writing, has infect over 18 million of the world’s people, locked down countries, and has a confirmed kill rate much higher than a conventional cold or flu virus (D’Amore, 2020). Hundreds of companies and institutions are working on vaccines while the primary interventions at hand are: social-distancing, wearing masks and other protective gear, increased hand-washing, and persistent cleaning of areas, surfaces, or objects in frequent contact with people (Boulianne, et al., 2020). Without these interventions, it is foreseeable that countless others would either be infected or have lost their lives. There exists a sizeable force of people out in the world, Canada included, that dispute some if not all of these realities. Realities that have been repeated with excess by scientists, politicians, and experts – those who we are supposed to trust. Yet, to the detriment of millions, so many in the world do not.

What our interactions on the internet, which spill into how we manifest in everyday life, bring into clarity is the relationship between truth and authority. Long have people challenged information presented by institutions with purported esteem and authority. What the internet enables though is a medium where those who reject well established realities can isolate themselves as the majority in their own internet community. Communities can reject and accept people through manifold means whether by blocking someone on social media to constructing fringe sites that share links only on trusted forums (Vincent, 2020). This creates a milieu where communities can reject conventional epistemological methodologies used by most conventional societal bodies and construct their own theories and ‘alternative facts’ based off of assumptions they aver are true. Institutions, experts, and citizens alike attempt to combat these groups with evidence and facts that, by nature of the assumptions of many of these groups, are already rendered null. There are several reasons for this, but of primary concern is the tendency of these groups to wield confirmation biases when considering contradictory information. Show a flat-earther pictures of other planets and they will likely respond by saying that the pictures are falsified propaganda touted by the very institutions designed to deceive the world’s people. Show a COVID-19 denier the COVID death and infection rates of the globe’s population and they may retort the stats are contrived, that governments are lying, or that people are dying of other causes and that COVID is just being assigned blame as a means of controlling the people and keeping them indoors.

What emerges from all this is a pattern of people challenging the mechanisms and structures that generations of curious minds have struggled to build. Without a shared agreement of how to structure, observe, and critique information, institutions cannot hope to penetrate the thick shells of communities that effectively rebuke these means. This is concerning as these structures and mechanisms that institutions speak to have been humankind’s general attempts to sidestep our innate subjectivity and biases in favour of more objective information. With information untainted by special interests or cultural proclivities, the idea is that the information is more valuable to the global population and presents a truer understanding of phenomena in the world. This is especially important for widespread crises like the COVID-19 pandemic as swift, data-driven action has been observed to reduce rates of infection and deaths due to the virus (Hutchinson, 2020). This also has the implicit effect of allowing nations to restore their battered economies much more quickly.

The threat of misinformation generated by these groups is amplified on the internet as the increased exposures makes such information seem legitimate, more akin to simply having a difference of opinion than a complete denial of widely regarded facts. This encourages among average citizens, the vast majority who are not experts on issues such as pandemics, to consider themselves equal voices at the table discussing how to interpret and approach these issues. Because of how the internet disrupts power relations, such groups are able to generate communities that appeal to the average person’s sense of intelligence and control, that they can deign a different path than the perceivably inconvenient solutions that established authorities provide. Many of these groups rail against the sacrifices and consequences that have emerged because of COVID-19 interventions.

With the slowing of Canada’s economy and the physical restrictions in place, Canadians were forced into precarious economic situations. This, coupled with the strain of maintaining isolation, has created a wide-spread burnout among Canadians (Ranosa, 2020). Despite their exhaustion, most Canadians still trust information from institutional sources (D’Amore, 2020). However, there still remains a sizeable number that fall prey to the promises of denial-oriented online groups that preach immediate gratification and a return to normalcy to spite the perceived overreach of global institutions. This effect has been far more eminent within Canada’s southern neighbour, the United States. Unfortunately, due to the physical and cultural colocation of both countries, Canada is far more prone to American media and ideologies than other places across the world (D’Amore, 2020). Despite many in America supporting COVID-19 interventions, there exists sizeable portion of the population that aggressively refuse to comply with regulations that restrict them in any fashion. Among other factors, America’s case is unique in that their federal administration has actually engaged and appealed to denial and conspiracy oriented groups for political gain, thus, institutional authority in America has been granted to those pundits of misinformation in this pandemic.

The net appraisal by many of these groups and of the information they espouse is that it poses an imminent threat to the health and safety of Canadians. This is why the Canadian government has allocated BLANK funds to combat the spread of misinformation (CITE). Further, as has been evidenced in the burgeoning Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, those who are systemically disadvantaged are more multitudes more prone than people with privilege to not only contracting but dying due to COVID infections. In Canada’s case, Aboriginal people are most vulnerable in this pandemic. For instance, one of the most touted of interventions is to wash one’s hands. For many in Aboriginal communities, access to the clean water to do so isn’t even possible (Carling, 2020). Further, they are far more impacted by perturbations in the economy than are any other group.

This push to combat misinformation has led many to begin calling out the catalysts for the efficacy and power of today’s misinformation surge – Google, Facebook, and Twitter. For years these companies have been charged with providing secure spaces for fringe groups, hate groups, and misinformation to run with reckless abandon. These companies have responded to such criticisms by trying to increase monitoring efforts and expand policies as to what constitutes a violation of use regarding their respective platforms (Vincent, 2020). Much of their efforts, according to critics, have been lukewarm or not readily enforced. This is also a product of how huge these companies and their mediums are. It’s difficult to, in a timely fashion, follow-up with breaks in violation and other users flagging down problematic posts, accounts, and groups. Sometimes the policies these social media giants implement are abused and their tools are used to silence others who a user or group simply disagrees with. There have even been instances where fringe groups retaliate against those who call them out by trying to get their accounts shut down with copyright claims, reports, flags – whatever the means of problem signalling are on the respective platform.

Recently, Twitter took a highly publicized step and began adding fact-check warnings and even flat out taking down tweets from powerful purveyors of misinformation, like the U.S.’s President Trump (Ortutay & Hazell, 2020). Long have these companies demonstrated unease in clamping down on misinformation from powerful sources as they wrangle with balancing the right for people to see what these powerful societal entities are communicating while also trying not to bolster or support harmful perspectives or viewpoints. Twitter’s competitor, Facebook, on the otherhand, took a different approach. It’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, remains adamant about not taking down a message written by Donald Trump that, in response to the looting accompanying BLM protests in the U.S., said “when the looting starts, the shooting starts. (Stanely, 2020)” This phrase originated during the 1967 race protests to expand and defend the rights of people of colour, particularly black people, in the U.S. In Twitter’s case, it added fact-check warnings to tweets that directly expressed such falsehoods as mail-in-voting being fraudulent, which is dangerous not only in not respecting social distancing but also to democracy, whereas Facebook’s case was not one of misinformation necessarily, it was nonetheless a corporation’s attempt to mitigate harm arising from a social media post.

It is undeniable that this pandemic has and will continue to change the world radically. It is difficult to predict the resonant technological and social implications of the virus on Canada post the pandemic, but the controversies that have reared during this time period may grant insights as to what we can expect to see moving forward. The rise of communities around the globe that balk at institutional information of any kind or facts that are inconvenient for their interests will face a reckoning. Ultimately, it is the corporations that dominate the social media market that will bend to the outrage of people fed up with patience and accommodation being granted to the online agents that seek to generate lies and distortions. With the damage of unrestricted communication and information posting becoming increasingly apparent, corporations will begin to follow Twitter’s lead in directly shutting down these agents. Corporate arguments that weigh free speech over responsible speech will begin to crumble when it comes to blatant examples of miscommunication. This period of time has produced a multitude of traceable examples of damaging free speech and one need not look far in any journal or newspaper to find examples of the price Canada and the world pays when people are encouraged to follow their own opinions on matters of global crises. Citizens attacking store workers for being asked to wear masks; citizens flooding beaches devoid of masks or social distancing; politicians actively denying the virus’ lethality or even its very existence; the list goes on (Hutchinson, 2020).

Given the strength of correlation between misinformation and the behaviour of citizens that follows suit, corporations of how publicity will have little choice but to expand efforts to not only monitor, but actively shut down accounts that defy community policies around misinformation. Users on these social media sites may become more empowered and vigorous in flagging down erring accounts. Eventually, it is likely that this will emerge as a pattern of internet activism. Companies will begin to hire more people into roles specialized in teasing out users that violate more strictly defined terms of use specifications around informational accuracy.

In order for companies to even execute shutdowns or warnings regarding violations of policies around accurate information, they will first have to endeavour to define what specifically qualifies as miscommunication. Deciphering opinion from fact, misleading information from outright lying – these will become battlegrounds that activists, legal communities, governments, and corporations will spend a great deal more time hashing out.

The communities that ultimately find themselves collapsed by more aggressive monitoring and shutdowns by social media corporations will not simply disappear. Likely they will recede back to the nascent online forums and sites that housed them initially. However, given the popularity accrued by agents of misinformation, there will be, and even have been, apps and websites developed to specifically host and churn out the distorted realities that these agents deign to pander whether by their own principles or ends. Parler is one such app that has been lauded by alt-right partisans as a clear alternative to Twitter. This gained popularity once Twitter began actively flagging and taking down Donald Trump’s tweets about COVID-19. The app itself exists as a means for those who preach misinformation about the virus among other things to feel legitimized, to exist in a community that verifies the laws of the world that most appeal to their sensibilities. Again, the communities are most defined by their repudiation of objective analysis for their own subjective, gut instincts about the world about them. The future will see more of these apps and mediums crop up and gain popularity.

The result of corporate action against misinformation will be a further sequestration of communities and perspectives. Those who identify with specific realities will seek the mediums that justify them. A core difference from this present era will be that societal institutions that preach for more objectivity will be emboldened by the support of corporations working in tandem with them – a shared agenda to combat misinformation. Misinformation is not only compromising to our social fabric, it’s compromising the bottom-line of powerful corporations. Even corporations not bound to media are being pressured to make statements about COVID-19 and Aboriginal and Black lives that have business implications regarding who chooses to purchase their products or services (Copeland et al., 2020). This will have the impact of undermining what has been the swelling influence and power of groups that peddle misinformation. No longer will it be seen as impressive to “think differently” from the norm if the norm is being slowly recognized, at least in respects to health and safety, as the more legitimate, just option.

Communications between people, online or not, will have this backdrop in play. Specifically, the downfall of strong individualistic, instinctual perspectives. It may not matter as greatly what stats or information you can quote as much as where the information came from. Who one follows or references may become more important to the average Canadian than just how much information one can quote on a subject. This will not necessarily bridge differences between opposing subjective versus objective positions, but it will likely reduce the seductiveness of arguments and facts built on appealing to people’s innate biases and predilections.

Unfortunately, as observed in regard to BLM, when a group perceives a loss of privilege or power, they may grow more feverish in their mission to overrule trusted institutions and sources. There likely will be more protests, revolts, and violence as a consequence of agents of miscommunication losing public favour, or at the very least, seeing their opposition swell in strength. It may become risky for people to be open about their opinions on conventional topics. Even in today’s world, as indicated earlier, civilians are being attacked by others in the community for even doing such things as simply wearing a mask or asking others to do so (Hutchinson, 2020). The Canadian government wields enough clout and support from its citizens, according to surveys, that they should be able to respond swiftly should such incidents begin to rise (D’Amore, 2020). Laws may become more defined regarding protestors’ rights, conduct in public, and how law enforcement/social services are to mitigate or respond to such instances.

The spread of information will continue to be dominated by social media giants, even should there be a rise of alternative sources. What will be interesting to see is if a company that provides false or misleading information will rise to such heights as Facebook or Twitter in mitigating a social environment complicit to discourses that are appealing to such people. It is unlikely. In the future, successful corporations, particularly in social media, will abide by a newfound understanding: It isn’t profitable any longer to appeal to the ignorant.

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