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FORUM Q&A: AIMEE RINEHART ON MIS- AND DISINFORMATION IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

Aimee Rinehart is Deputy Director of First Draft's New York Bureau. She serves as project lead on First Draft initiatives and builds strategic partnerships with complementary organizations to support and enhance First Draft's work around the world. She managed Comprova, a project to monitor and analyze mis- and disinformation around the 2018 Brazilian elections. She started working online in 1996 and was a digital originator at the New York Times. She was an editor at the Wall Street Journal Europe in Brussels and upon her return to New York, worked in the communications departments at the American Civil Liberties Union, the Overseas Press Club of America and Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. She graduated from Indiana University School of Journalism and has an MFA in creative writing from Rutgers-Newark University.

The pace of COVID-19's international transmission is mirrored by the spread of mis- and disinformation around the disease, its implications, and its origins. The magnitude of events has forced new and more expansive responses from communications platforms trying to contain misleading content about the virus. The crisis has given rise to a battle of narratives between governments struggling to affect how publics understand the pandemic.

Dean Jackson of the International Forum for Democratic Studies spoke with Aimee Rinehart about how journalists, platforms, and other stakeholders in the information space can respond to mis- and disinformation around COVID-19 and the larger geopolitical struggle to control the narrative around the pandemic.

Dean Jackson: Online life is changing dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. What changes have First Draft and its partners observed?

Aimee Rinehart: There was a lot of naysaying about what this could turn into, and a lot of information that wasn't getting out from China—both because political leaders were turning a blind eye to lessons learned there, but also because information was being suppressed. This left the international community guessing about what the virus could mean for each country's civic life and economic stability. People were really scrambling to understand what was headed their way.

One of the first things we saw online was a reversion to retro, 1990s-style chain emails with messages like, "I've got the inside track because my friend's brother's cousin works

in the military, and he says there's going to be a lockdown; go buy bread, milk, and eggs." The messages we saw on email later emerged via SMS, WhatsApp, and other peer-to-peer messaging applications.

This is what our partners in the United States were seeing two or more weeks ago. Now our colleagues in the United Kingdom—who are about five days behind the United States on the pandemic's timeline—are seeing similar things about potential lockdowns. People are also sharing what they thought would be remedies, whether it was gargling salt water or putting a blow dryer on your throat because the virus doesn't like heat. It gave people something to do in a time of uncertainty, and it came from people they knew and trusted—in some cases much more so than news media.

Pandemic conspiracy theories in the UK seem to trail the US by about five days, too. One of the biggest conspiracy theories is about 5G as a factor in the outbreak. In the US, this narrative took hold about five to seven days ago; it has since been replaced by other conspiracy theories, but the UK is really focused on it right now.

Whenever there is an information vacuum, people look for stories they can tell themselves to fill that vacuum. Those kinds of narratives help people make sense of their day. Uncertain situations like this pandemic are ripe opportunities for junk information to infiltrate the conversation.

Jackson: First Draft recently released a resource guide for reporters confronting mis- and disinformation about COVID-19. What have been the biggest lessons for reporters facing these problems, and what are their biggest remaining needs?

Rinehart: They need to have managers who embrace the social web as a valid source of information. Not all newsrooms have done that for a variety of reasons, whether they are tech-phobic, just don't want yet another thing to have to deal with, or feel that the information on social media isn't valuable.

Another factor is that in many countries—the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom, India—local newsrooms are dying on the vine. News deserts are expanding and surviving newsrooms are shrinking.

Those journalists who remain are asked to do more with less. And so the suggestion that they do something like go into a closed Facebook group to find out what their community is saying can be hard to take up. But going into Facebook Groups or looking at Google Trends is a way to understand the data voids in a community and fill them with good journalism.

Some of the tools and techniques we suggest to newsrooms are not hugely different than what many people do already. For instance, if there's an image associated with questionable content: do a reverse image search. Every journalist who's touching a story, whether it's a reporter or an editor or even a copyeditor, should know how to do a reverse

image search, because then you can explain to audiences how they found out that photo wasn't original or how it was manipulated in some way.

We also encourage them to frame headlines with the truth up front. The idea is that you have about forty characters on mobile to convey what people will see and make a judgment on, and about 60% of all people now get their news on mobile devices first. So it's important that headlines be clear and don't restate falsehoods in ways that might cement them. When we work with newsrooms, we explain that this is "inverted pyramid" style for headline writing. Inverted pyramid style writing gives you the most critical details—who was shot, where, and when—right up front. Journalists started writing articles this way in case the telegraph were to be cut off. We want people to think about headlines in the same way: you have a finite amount of characters to explain the truth to a busy audience that is just skimming.

Jackson: I didn't realize the structure of news articles was designed around a new technology—the telegraph—and now you are teaching people to change their headlines in response to another new technology.

Rinehart: But referring to an old way that people used to get their information as well. For some editors, especially old school editors, this puts them at peace somewhat. We're not asking them to change their writing for search optimization. We're suggesting a rationale which is similar to why journalism uses inverted pyramid style to begin with.

Jackson: Observers have noted that many internet platforms have embraced new responses to mis- and disinformation around the coronavirus, including promoting content from public health authorities and removing misleading information. Do you think these responses are working? How can we know

Rinehart: Because the pandemic is this huge, slowly unfolding event, we have to take a longer view. We have not yet seen disinformation in the amounts that we saw in the 2018 US midterm elections or during the Brazilian 2018 elections. Six months to a year from now, we can see if platform responses are truly effective by the number of conspiracy theories still rebounding across the internet and by how many groups are able to connect around problematic content.

But the platforms are much more active than they have been in a long time. For example, if you go to YouTube, you see shelves of content. The first two shelves are usually things that are recommended based on your previous views. But the third shelf is all CDC videos.

YouTube could do more, especially around conspiracy theories and people profiteering from the pandemic. Facebook has banned ads from profiteers who are sowing conspiracy theories. Pinterest has been the leader in confronting problematic content: they started with anti-vaccination content, telling users that they don't get to have reach on Pinterest if they're discussing anything about vaccines.

What's frustrating for people in this space is that platforms will take down problematic content that dips into public health concerns, but not do the same for politics—even though public health can tie back into politics, as we've seen when Twitter did remove tweets from two world leaders. It's frustrating because so much of politics is about bending the truth to your advantage. It's getting to the point where they probably should take a very hard stance against political advertising and not allow it at all on their platforms, as Twitter has done. Although with Twitter's ban, there are loopholes, too.

Jackson: In addition to reporting on pseudoscience groups, conspiracy theories, and grifters, First Draft has also reported on state actors around the world pushing false and misleading information about the virus. What are the challenges for journalists facing state-sponsored disinformation?

Rinehart: States, especially those led by strongmen, do not want to admit the numbers of coronavirus cases. That has huge ramifications for global health and for our understanding of this virus. It's clear that states are underreporting deaths from the virus. In China, for instance, there is a disconnect between the officially reported number of deaths and the observed number of urns that have been bought to hold the ashes of the dead.

The Chinese government has a narrative about how many deaths occurred there. Others push back on that narrative, blaming the Chinese government for the crisis. And now, some Chinese officials have started pushing conspiracy theories claiming that the US government created the virus. Those theories are starting to take hold in China and other places where people want to believe them.

Jackson: There are two things there I want to follow up on: First, the question of how journalists should treat the reliability of official statistics, and second, the use of social media by diplomats and government officials to promote conspiracy theories. Unlike in cases of coordinated inauthentic activity, platforms won't—some say **shouldn't—act against those official accounts. How can journalists and platforms better navigate those problems?**

Rinehart: It's incumbent upon newsrooms to understand who benefits from the different narratives around this global pandemic. When members of the Chinese Communist Party tweeted that the United States created COVID-19, many of them linked back to a Canadian think tank known for laundering Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories.

If I were a local news reporter in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, I might not do a story about that. But if I did, I would ask: who else is tweeting this out? What is this think tank? Think tanks nowadays can sound very official and very neutral, but in this case, that's not true. And so it's incumbent upon a reporter to not just be a stenographer and copy what

somebody else is telling them, but to really track the digital footprints and ask who stands to benefit.

Jackson: It's interesting that national reporters were once urged to find the local elements of the stories they were reporting on, but today it seems as though reporters with local beats need to understand global context.

Rinehart: I don't know if it's necessarily a reversal. If you open up a newspaper in most US cities today, you'll see that sometimes 75% of the copy is written by a wire service, whether it's the AP, Reuters, or the wire service from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.

Certainly, there are internationally savvy reporters in places like Detroit that are aware of how much of what we rely on in the United States is not produced in the United States. But around the world we've seen shrinking newsrooms, with more layoffs announced in the past few weeks. So reliance on wire services is only going to increase, and those services will become even more of a gatekeeper for how local audiences understand international stories. And that's too bad, because a lot of journalists at that level don't have the same perspective as a journalist closer to a community.

Jackson: From newspaper closures to press crackdowns to new forms of surveillance, the fallout of this pandemic could long outlive of the spread of the virus. What long term threats are First Draft and its partners watching for?

Rinehart: Government use of untrue narratives to push political interests is a real long term threat. China, Russia, and even Iran would benefit from reframing the narrative around the pandemic. And when a government is obstinate about something that is untrue, it can be hard for reporters to gain credibility with audiences, especially if political leaders attack the press. That kind of friction continues to erode trust in media gatekeepers whose traditional role has been as spokespeople for the truth. Without that, the populace becomes very cynical.

In a way, disinformation around natural disasters and elections was like a dress rehearsal for the pandemic. Elections and natural disasters are prime areas to test methods of sowing disinformation. When a hurricane happens, it's isolated. But this pandemic is something we're all experiencing. The stakes are very high, and the actors who stand to benefit from disinformation have primed the pumps in these smaller events as a test run for mis- and disinformation campaigns that are poised to be global in scale.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy.