Sickness and Health in the Information Space
Reflections from the First 10 Months of COVID-19

By Dean Jackson

A robust information space is a crucial part of democracy's immune system. When high-quality, fact-based journalism thrives and informed citizens can freely deliberate, democracy can flourish. When the information space weakens, however, opportunistic infections set in.

Beginning in June 2020, the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy convened a series of virtual workshops on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the integrity of this crucial democratic organ. The essays in this inaugural collection of Global Insights are the result of those workshops. Select experts from civil society, media, government, and donor sectors around the world discussed the health of the information space and its post-COVID future. They were asked to describe how civil society and independent media could weather the pandemic and also rise to the challenge of restoring a vibrant public square despite adverse political, economic, and technological trends.

Where to start? One place is the diminished revenue for fact-based, independent, high-quality, public interest journalism. After years of declining revenue, the COVID-19 pandemic sent the media industry into worldwide freefall. One international study found that 40 percent of media outlets planned to cut jobs after the new coronavirus spread globally.[1]

Dapo Olorunyomi, the publisher and editor-in-chief of the Nigerian newspaper *Premium Times*, points out in his essay that public interest journalism has never been a quick path to wealth, but was at one time a sustainable business. Now it struggles to merely survive. As the COVID-19 pandemic brings news of closures and layoffs across the industry, independent media must seek innovative paths to sustainability, including creative means of garnering philanthropic support for investigative reporting, original delivery mechanisms such as newspapers published entirely on WhatsApp, or new means of leveraging journalistic expertise into business-to-business services. Olorunyomi lays out an impressive list of experimental approaches to newsroom funding across the African continent.

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Globally, independent media's retreat is ceding space to profit-driven sensationalism and politically motivated efforts to manipulate and mislead publics. Writing from Latin America, **Vladimir Rouvinski**, a professor at ICESI University in Colombia, describes the way that the space vacated by independent media has been taken up by state-subsidized broadcast outlets sponsored by authoritarian regimes from beyond that region. This trend is especially acute with regards to reporting on international affairs. Over the course of the pandemic, media outlets owned by the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian governments have used conspiracy theories, bad faith arguments, half-truths, and coverage out of context—what might, taken together, broadly be called disinformation—to play up their domestic responses to the new coronavirus and their contributions to international relief efforts, while arguing that liberal democracies are unsuited to meet the challenge (or may even have created the virus in the first place).[2]

The authoritarian media outlets Rouvinski describes existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. More novel is evidence of their growing coordination.[3] **Andrea Kendall-Taylor**, director of the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, describes signs that Moscow and Beijing may be coordinating their information operations—or, at least, that their operations complement one another in ways that are mutually beneficial and more corrosive than either country could accomplish alone. Both Rouvinski and Kendall-Taylor's suggestions for responding to coordinated cross-border disinformation include expanded resources for local media outlets, researchers, and other information professionals who are struggling against the twin headwinds of diminished finances and authoritarian alternatives. This support could come, for example, in the form of subsidized newswire subscriptions or funding for research into the narrative overlap between information operations, so policymakers might better identify the areas where corrective information is most sorely needed.

Of course, not all—or even most of—the mendacious actors in the COVID-era information space are authoritarian powers reaching across borders. Some are commonplace digital grifters, and others are domestic political actors looking for advantage. On the front line against these challenges are fact-checking organizations. Demand for their work has never been higher: at the time of this writing, the International Fact-Checking Coalition, working across seventy countries in forty languages, has published nearly ten-thousand fact-checks since the start of the pandemic.[4] Yet fact-checking still struggles to keep pace with digital disinformation—and speed is not the only challenge. Another concern is the way in which human beings seek out and respond to novel information, often welcoming that which is politically convenient and discarding the rest.[5] And there is always the challenge of making sure, when publishing a fact-check, that the people who were exposed to the untruth also see the correction.

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What can fact-checkers do to continue upping their game? **Will Moy**, chief executive of the UK fact-checker Full Fact, offers some suggestions based on recent experience. One method is attempting to gain scale through automation.[6] Another is experimenting with crowd-sourced fact-checking.[7] Yet another is what some fact-checkers are calling "next-generation" fact-checking, moving from "publish and pray"—putting out corrective information and hoping it sticks—to "publish and act," advocating to policymakers for improvements to the media ecosystem.[8] By working across borders, fact-checkers can learn from each other's experiences and prepare for shared emergencies. They also possess an asset of great interest to researchers and policymakers: a tremendous trove of data about falsehoods and where they appear online.

In the simplest terms, support for public interest journalism and fact-checking are ways of amplifying "good" content while minimizing the impact of "bad" content. But the "good-to-bad" ratio is not the only change ailing the information space. The *systems* which curate content have also changed, from print and broadcast media to a disparately connected internet to, most recently, social media platforms and the tech companies that own them.

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Joan Donovan, research director at Harvard's Shorenstein Center, describes what has gone wrong with the curation of knowledge on the internet today. During a global pandemic, the public found itself frantically searching for guidance in an information ecosystem "where conspiracy and medical misinformation thrive." Insights from medical experts often failed to rise above the muck of scam products, scientifically unfounded claims, and political polemic. This is a tragic outcome: the internet was supposed to exponentially expand humanity's access to knowledge, not lethal pseudoscience.

The frustrations with the distortions promoted by social media companies and the algorithmic amplification of mis- and disinformation have been thoroughly documented.[9] It is essential that observers in this field offer more than mere criticism of the current state of affairs. Donovan's essay suggests that too much research today focuses on monitoring and detection, essentially amounting to "glorified content moderation" for a trillion-dollar sector populated by behemoth corporations. She would rather see academic and civil society researchers think more about mechanisms to protect vulnerable communities and accountability for platforms and the bad actors who abuse them, calling for researchers to rise to the occasion and "come up with forms of research that rely less on platform data and suss out how people truly reckon with misinformation daily." (She also suggests platforms hire an army of librarians to assist with content curation.)

Renée DiResta, technical research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, also recognizes the challenge that lack of data poses to researchers attempting to understand the full societal impact of information traveling across social media.[10] Most of the platform data that researchers receive relates primarily to how many people engaged with a piece of content, not whether that content changed minds or contributed to social polarization. DiResta suggests data relevant to those more complex questions could be shared through a "multistakeholder" model in which platforms provide select data to independent researchers. In the case of foreign information operations, governments may also be involved. More formalized approaches to partnerships between these groups might "turn the process of detection and investigation into a multidisciplinary effort."

Both Donovan and DiResta also highlight public communication as a crucial area of improvement. How can civil society and public interest initiatives better connect with audiences in the cacophonous modern public square? These actors are perhaps best *suited* to pushing back against mis- and disinformation narratives, but they are not (at present) the best *equipped* to have their voices heard. Support for ambitious, civil-society-led communications and outreach efforts, undergirded by research, is an underutilized response that can go beyond exposing disinformation in order to challenge false narratives.

Finally, joint partnerships between private industry, civil society, and government can serve as a vehicle to govern another troubling aspect of the post-COVID information space: the threat that pandemic-era technological tools for tracing and containing the spread of the virus will accelerate trends toward pervasive state surveillance. **Mallory Knodel**, chief technology officer of the Center for Democracy and Technology, outlines the many challenges

to protecting user rights while implementing new tools for contact tracing and exposure notification. Even when such efforts are jointly led by governments, the private sector, and civil society, there is little agreement on first principles or benchmarks for success. A crucial challenge for open societies, then, is a vision for technological governance that starts from a clearly articulated democratic framework.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened and accelerated the many afflictions ailing the public square. By the time the pandemic subsides, what look like differences of degree may add up to differences in kind. Some have called these trends a "wicked problem"—a term for problems "so complex their boundaries and interdependencies become too difficult to define, rendering them inherently unsolvable."[11] If true, this suggests a grim prognosis.

But what these essays (and the workshops that preceded them) suggest is that it is possible to break "wicked problems" into discrete pieces, offering well-wishers of democracy a way out of a defeatist mindset. Many of these require greater coordination within sectors—as with multiregional fact-checkers working jointly on a global problem—or greater cooperation across sectors, as with researchers and civil society assisting public officials with how to better communicate with citizens about issues vulnerable to false narratives.

There are innovations and adaptations out there for those willing to look. Journalists are blazing new trails to sustainability; entire research agendas are waiting to be taken up; bold visions for technology's democratic future are waiting to be articulated. In the fight for the health and integrity of the information space, resolve and creativity may be the best medicines.

Endnotes

1   Alan Soon, "The Splice Lights On Survey Shows That Over 40% of Media Orgs Expect to Start Cutting Jobs in the Next 12 Months", Splice Media, 17 April 2020, *www.splicemedia.com/splice-lights-survey-cutting-jobs-in-the-next-12-months*.

2   For more on the definition of disinformation, as opposed to propaganda or misinformation, see: "Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and 'Fake News,'" National Endowment for Democracy, 17 October 2017, *www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news*.

3   See Daniel Kliman, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Kristine Lee, Joshua Fitt, and Carisa Nietsche, "Dangerous Synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations," Center for a New American Security, 7 May 2020, *www.cnas.org/publications/reports/dangerous-synergies*; Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "Converging Chinese and Russian Disinformation Compounds Threat To Democracy," Power 3.0 blog, 26 May 2020, *www.power3point0.org/2020/05/26/converging-chinese-and-russian-disinformation-compounds-threat-to-democracy*.

4   "The CoronaVirusFacts/DatosCoronaVirus Alliance Database," Poynter, n.d., *www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation*.

5   Samuel Woolley and Katie Joseff, *Demand for Deceit: How the Way We Think Drives Disinformation*, National Endowment for Democracy, January 2020, *www.ned.org/demand-for-deceit-how-way-we-think-drives-disinformation-samuel-woolley-katie-joseff*.

6   "Automated Fact Checking," Full Fact, n.d., *https://fullfact.org/automated*.

7   Şükrü Oktay Kılıç, "This Fact-Checking Site Tried Crowdsourcing a Story. Here's What It Learned," Poynter, 26 April 2019, *www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/this-fact-checking-site-tried-crowdsourcing-a-story-heres-what-it-learned*.

8   Laura Hazard Owen, "'First-generation fact-checking' is no longer good enough. Here's what comes next," NiemanLab, 21 June 2019, *www.niemanlab.org/2019/06/first-generation-fact-checking-is-no-longer-good-enough-heres-what-comes-next*.

9   For a well-done example, consider: "It's the Business Model: How Big Tech's Profit Machine is Distorting the Public Sphere and Threatening Democracy," Ranking Digital Rights, n.d., *https://rankingdigitalrights.org/its-the-business-model*.

10   For more on the history of data-sharing between platforms and researchers and the obstacles that have hindered it, see: "Forum Q&A: Kelly Born on the Evolving Field of Disinformation Research," National Endowment for Democracy, 24 August 2020, *www.ned.org/forum-qa-kelly-born-evolving-field-disinformation-research*.

11   Millie Tran, "Wicked," NiemanLab, December 2019, *www.niemanlab.org/2019/12/wicked*.