INFORMATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Joanna Anneke Rummens, PhD, is a transdisciplinary health systems researcher and Associate Professor in Nursing, Faculty of Community Services at Toronto Metropolitan University. Her work focuses on the interconnections among diverse identities, social inclusion/exclusion, health/wellbeing outcomes, and on knowledge transfer governance.

Asher Alkoby, S.J.D., is an Associate Professor at Ted Rogers School of Management and Chair of the Research Ethics Board at Toronto Metropolitan University. His interests include civil society engagement, corporate social responsibility, and access to justice.

"Can I get COVID-19 from the vaccine?" The question from an experienced registered practical nurse at the beginning of a second year of pandemic stunned.

As did the revelation by a registered nurse that her advanced practice colleagues removed their protective N95 masks when taking selfies in the staff room on COVID-19 wards during the earliest waves of the pandemic, when the donning of full personal protective equipment was both mandatory and life-saving safety protocol.

So too the minimal usage by a senior cohort of health professional trainees of complementary electronic subscriptions to a leading newspaper known for its robust investigative coverage regarding what was then a rapidly emerging, clearly serious, and completely unknown viral threat.

How to explain the gap in essential knowledge, its uptake and its application during uncertain pandemic times?

It is perhaps the greatest irony of our age that despite the ready availability of a plethora of information of all kinds shared via multiple mechanisms and modalities within our knowledge economy, having the right information at the right time in the right place and geared to the right purpose remains such a tremendous challenge.

Why is it that our immediate access to an abundance of disseminated and exchanged information does not necessarily translate into greater uptake of science-research-based or practice-informed evidence, lived experiences, and diverse knowledge systems, into actual decision-making to then also inform policy, programming, and practice?

How exactly do our newly emergent information and communication channels shape our thoughts, reflections, and perspectives and guide our behaviours and actions? To what effect and with which consequences? Are we engaging or increasingly disengaging in knowledge-seeking?

And why is it that the exponential rise in exposure to a wealth of knowledge, expertise, and considered opinion facilitated via the worldwide internet in conjunction with more traditional television, radio and print media does not necessarily bring with it the anticipated enhancements in the quality, nature and types of discussions and deliberations among us? Instead, our societal discourses are all too often left riddled with disruptions, distortions and disconnects.

Why exactly do these communication challenges exist? How might we perhaps best seek to overcome them?

The rapid technological shift from the more content-driven Web 1.0 upload-and-push-out of information via static organizational websites to the rapid, dynamic, interactive information sharing via Web 2.0, with its user-generated content and concomitant growth of social media, currently very effectively circumvents our existing gatekeeper checks and balances for veracity, evidence, accuracy and bias. Exposure to mere information without critical appraisal, fact-checking, evidence review, cross-comparison with other sources, followed by thoughtful reflection, disrupts this essential process and all too often translates into increased prevalence of things demonstrably untrue and yields unintentional misinformation.

Instead, the intertwined strengths and limitations of our newest communication channels now have us communicating more with ourselves or perfect strangers—within increasingly siloed virtual bubbles and algorithmically driven echo chambers, as opposed to deeply connecting and truly engaging with each other as social actors and fellow human beings. Even our existing societal divisions and chasms are now virtually articulated, experienced, reified, challenged, negotiated, resolved, and impacted. Such disruption in our social interaction and lives not only leave us increasingly isolated from each other, but it also distorts our social weave, lives and realities. It renders us that much more vulnerable to intentional dissemination by politically motivated or ideologically driven actors of information that is demonstrably not true or accurate, namely disinformation. With loss or compromise of social discourse we lose our informational veracity checks-and-balances against unintentional misinformation and intentional disinformation alike.

Context matters too. In a time when climate change is no longer dismissible as distant warning and has instead become lived reality, when long-existing social fissures become more visible and acute, and when our geo-political world order is quickly shifting, the additional threat presented by a viral worldwide pandemic discombobulates, disorients, and distresses. These new uncertainties impact our perspectives, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, and bleed all too readily into our social narratives and interactions. Untruths often become that much more appealing when confronted with the stark reality of the unknown. There are also those who would much prefer a good and beautiful lie to an unhappy or ugly truth.

How else to explain the association between high usage of internet and social media and higher vaccination hesitancy despite ample available scientific evidence of both the efficacy and effectiveness of our vaccines for population health and against severe illness and death for individuals?

Trauma occurs when our sense of safety in the world is disrupted. In our need and search for certainty, for meaning, for solace, for comfort, for connection and belonging, we begin to believe what others believe. In the face of fear, we are sorely tempted to consider true that which simply makes us feel safe. It is this loss of safety in the world that leaves us vulnerable to the disruptions of misinformation, distortions of disinformation and to ultimate disconnects. With simultaneous non-information and sheer information overload, we retreat yet further and begin slowly but surely to fully disengage.

Response to the rapid emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in early 2020 began with profound concern regarding an unknown and very real global threat. We transitioned into caution when more became known about its properties and when effective protective strategies could be devised and implemented. With the arrival and demonstrated effectiveness of new vaccines developed and manufactured at an unprecedented speed and of responsive treatments came increasing complacency. Throughout, consistent challenges in cooperation, coordination, and clear communication by our leaders have all too often left us bewildered, frustrated, and confused. Exactly three years into the pandemic, we now find ourselves in a current collective state of dissociated numbness even as the newest variants prove able to bypass our existing treatments.

Amidst these breaches of civic leadership and breakdowns in social accountability and ensuing lack of information, or non-information, responsibility for knowing, sharing, deciding and acting has now essentially been downloaded to the individual. As the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown us, regulating behaviour for the purpose of managing public health has become extremely challenging due to constitutional limits, enforcement challenges, and lack of trust in institutions. Many governments resorted to downloading collective responsibility for managing health risks to individuals, encouraging them to consider the impact their behaviours would have on others, even when it is not legally required. We are used to making decisions about risks that affect us.

In a pandemic we are expected to consider the risk to others and to the community. The ethic of care here diverges: those who only look to protect themselves, those who think about risks to themselves and their immediate loved ones, and those who also consider the risk of their behaviour on complete strangers in the community. Our responsibilities to each other as a community and as communities are now increasingly out of our actual conscience as well. We seem somehow to have lost sight of our social ties and responsibilities, our interconnectedness and interdependence, as each looks more deeply into our virtual world rather than to each other.

Perhaps it is the very profusion, overabundance, and excessive amount of available information itself that all too readily gives traction to misinformation and dis-information. Perhaps

too it frustrates and thus translates into retreat and the false comforts of non-information. We are easily lost and begin to rely on what is close at hand and familiar rather than putting effort into exploration, inquiry, and both truer and deeper engagement.

Yet it isn't simply a matter of availability of information. Accountability for accuracy remains critical and it is this that we appear to have lost sight of along the way. Trust in the informational source is key to uptake, and so we need to re-establish mechanisms—and also develop new ones—via which to verify credibility within the more rough-and-tumble world of Web 2.0. Quality matters too... and we appear to be awash in mere quantity. Overload.

How do we address this?

In times of emergency and inevitable information vacuum, trust in institutions is critical. It has traditionally been our professional journalists and investigative news reporters who have attended to the monitoring, information finding and fact-checking regarding significant happenings and events in our day-to-day world as they prepared for us the rough drafts of our histories. This needs to be acknowledged, supported, safeguarded, and now more than ever, deemed essential public service.

Equally pressing is the need for practical and effective mechanisms by which to assess the veracity of content shared via our internet and social media and, at minimum, to convey any irregularities or untruths. The need is great, and it has in fact increased within our information economy for trustworthy, skilled, timely, and knowledgeable appraisals of content for credibility and accuracy. In addition to knowledge mobilizers we now need knowledge content 'curators,' 'distillers,' 'synthesizers' and 'streamers.' Greater transparency is needed too of information flow, uptake, and actual use to inform our decision-making in policy, programming, and practice. All of this necessitates the creation of new systems and supportive structures to securely anchor these information-sieving and appraising initiatives.

We also need to recreate places and new spaces through which to truly engage again with each other in open dialogue, discussion, debate, deliberation, and decision-making. This matters because it is our shared knowledge, or lack thereof, and our collective values that shape our perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, informing our behaviours, practices and actions. And we can't really know nor assess in a vacuum, virtual or otherwise. It is interconnectedness and interdependence through true engagement with each other that most readily translates into greater confidence that what we think we know to be true... is in fact so.