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Lessons from an extraordinary year

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In hindsight, 2020 will have been a momentous year to study politics, misinformation, and the media. It may also seem a very disorienting one.

As the year began, a much-needed scholarly course correction was well underway. A raft of studies carried out since 2016 has cast doubt on common assumptions about the influence of echo chambers and so-called ‘fake news’ on the internet. Growing numbers of scholars recognise that a kind of moral panic around online misinformation – not least among academics – was set off by events like Donald Trump’s election and the UK’s Brexit vote (Marwick 2018; Carlsson 2020), in which alarming statistics about viral Facebook rumours supplied ‘a tidy narrative that resonated with concerns about potential online echo chambers’ (Nyhan 2019). Repressive new laws from Kenya to Singapore further underscored the risk of ‘knee-jerk policy responses’ to misinformation (Jiménez Cruz et al. 2018).

At the same time, 2020 has produced extraordinary, unrelenting reminders of the profound and even deadly consequences of misalignment between what Walter Lippmann (1922) called ‘the world outside and the pictures in our heads’. In the United States, the year began with the president’s acquittal after impeachment hearings that featured top lawmakers citing widely debunked conspiracy theories to defend him. The impeachment had barely faded from headlines when the global COVID-19 pandemic struck, accompanied by what the head of the World Health Organization called an ‘infodemic’ of ‘fake news [that] spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous’ (Ghebreyesus 2020). A tide of misinformation, from bogus cures to conspiracy theories, overwhelmed fact-checkers and alarmed public officials around the world (Brennen et al. 2020). Sensational reports of people killed by consuming dangerous chemicals to fight the disease only hint at much graver questions: how can we measure the human costs of rumours and rhetoric that undermine public health recommendations? What role do the features of different media systems, with varying levels of ‘resilience’ to misinformation (Humprecht et al. 2020), have in explaining the sharply diverging policy responses and health outcomes seen in different countries?

Events like these offer a reminder that debunking crude assumptions about the effects of false messages is only the first step in understanding how our media shape public discourse in a moment of high polarisation and resurgent populism. This chapter uses the questions raised by the ‘infodemic’ as a platform to articulate several heuristics for thinking about how mediated
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misinformation matters in public life today. Each of these reminders is based on gaps or caveats that are often acknowledged, though only rarely addressed, in the growing literature on effects of misinformation, reviewed below. Taken together, they may help illuminate new priorities for scholars working in this area.

The minimal effects of misinformation

Compared to the burgeoning literature on the effectiveness of fact-checking, few studies have systematically explored how misinformation influences political beliefs or behaviour (Li 2020). However, current evidence points to fairly limited direct effects. For example, Guess et al. (2020) find small increases in misperception with exposure to dubious content under experimental conditions as well as in tracking data. Studies around the 2016 US election suggest ‘fake news’ played a negligible role (but see Gunther et al. 2018): false stories were shared widely but made up a tiny part of most news diets, with heavy use concentrated among extreme partisans who are least persuadable (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan, et al. 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018). Interacting with Twitter accounts associated with Russia’s Internet Research Agency – which operated massive online disinformation campaigns in 2016 – appears to have had no significant impact on political attitudes or behaviour (Bail et al. 2020). Similarly, Garrett (2019, 3) finds social media use associated with only small increases in partisan misperceptions, suggesting that ‘the limited media effects paradigm persists in the face of these new technologies’.

Nothing about the COVID-19 ‘infodemic’ directly refutes this ‘limited effects’ consensus. Together with evidence that informational ‘echo chambers’ are less prevalent than has been widely assumed (e.g. Eady et al. 2019), misinformation research shows, yet again, how reluctant we should be to attribute complex social or political phenomena to new media technologies. In hindsight, the current panic about virus-related rumours (though not about the virus itself) may seem excessive. And health-related misinformation can be seen as a special case, both easier to identify and more obviously harmful than ‘fake news’ about politics. ‘False information about COVID-19 can be deadly’, Kreps and Nyhan (2020) stress in arguing that social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook should not extend aggressive content moderation rules devised for the pandemic to misleading political speech in general.

However, the line between medical and political misinformation can be difficult to draw in a deeply polarised moment, when the choice to observe or ignore health guidelines itself has become a badge of partisan identity (Clinton et al. 2020). It is one thing to measure the potential influence of an item of ‘fake news’ as it affects individual health behaviours. But it’s something else entirely to ask how patterns of misinformation, as a feature of contemporary landscapes of political communication, are implicated in the divisive politics or incoherent policies around the virus seen in many countries – most notably, in highly populist and partisan environments like Brazil and the United States.

What the pandemic underscores is the narrowness of the paradigmatic approach to misinformation in political communications research, centred on the individual effects of accurate or inaccurate information. The notion of an ‘infodemic’ itself reflects a model of informed political reasoning that treats bad information as a kind of virus whose effects are false beliefs and poor decisions (Graves and Wells 2019). This continues to be a tremendously productive paradigm; its narrowness and internal rigour are what have allowed easy assumptions about rumour-filled, belief-distorting echo chambers to be tested. But it also sharply limits the ways we think about the relationship between changing media and political systems and the role of misinformation in those shifts – limits that have become more apparent as populist attitudes and leaders come to the fore.
The pandemic raises questions communications scholars too rarely consider in a comprehensive way about the mutually structuring relationship between political culture – especially the shifting norms and practices of elite political actors – and the media environment. These are vital questions at a moment marked by profound political changes, most notably the populist turn, which, while not caused by the media in any simple sense, is profoundly tied to it. The following four heuristics use examples drawn from the pandemic and other events of 2020 to highlight what the ‘limited effects’ paradigm misses in thinking about how misinformation matters as political discourse.

1 There’s no such thing as ‘online misinformation’

One outcome of rising concern with internet-borne rumours, conspiracy theories, and ‘fake news’ has been to establish online misinformation as a distinct phenomenon, addressed by a growing research literature of its own. There are some good reasons for this; misleading information spreads in distinctive ways on social networks, and deceptive memes often originate in online subcultures. However, this reification of online misinformation as an object of analysis tends to obscure its active links to elite political rhetoric in general and populist rhetoric in particular. Just as ‘fake news’ is often crafted to exploit real political divisions, political actors and partisan media outlets continually draw on, amplify, and recontextualise online discourses.

The ‘infodemic’ around COVID-19 makes these links unusually clear. During the spring of 2020, President Trump promoted numerous coronavirus-related conspiracy theories circulating online and in right-wing media. Often these messages seemed designed to distract from the US response to the pandemic or cast it in a better light – for instance, the claim that officials suppressed the virus’s infection rate in order to inflate the mortality rate and ‘steal the election’ for Democrats, or that China nefariously allowed flights from Wuhan to other countries after restricting internal travel. The US president has also repeatedly endorsed miracle cures trafficked online. Even his shocking, televised musings about the possibility of using disinfectant to treat COVID-19 echoed a long-standing internet discourse promoting dangerous ‘bleach cures’ for autism and other ailments (Jacobs 2020). There is no way to know whether Trump was directly influenced by such medical hoaxes (conservative promoters of bleach-based Miracle Mineral Solution sought his endorsement). But the effects of the president’s suggestion – where it was taken up and what influence it had – can only be understood in the context of those discourses.

The growing research literature on ‘fake news’ notes its relationship to elite political actors and rhetoric. Marwick and Lewis (2017, 21) stress that politicians and celebrities serve as ‘amplification nodes’ for online rumours and conspiracy theories by drawing media coverage to outlandish claims which otherwise would receive little attention. Similarly, computational studies suggest ‘going viral’ is actually a poor metaphor for how information – true or false – spreads on social media, given the crucial role of media and celebrity accounts with many followers (Goel et al. 2015). However, these links have been easier to acknowledge than to address in a systematic way, at scale, in studying the influence of online misinformation. One overview identifies this as a key gap in the literature, observing that ‘relatively little is known about how politicians and the media help disseminate myths or the process by which they become entrenched in partisan belief systems’ (Tucker et al. 2018, 63).

Crucially, understanding how myths become ‘entrenched’ means seeing politicians and political elites not only as amplifiers, but as contextualisers and meaning-makers, who forge connections between discourses in the crucible of political campaigns and controversies. This gap is especially urgent in the context of populist political actors and rhetoric, whose animating critique of illegitimate elites depends on a notion of hidden facts and agendas ignored
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2 Misinformation works by allusion, not reason

To understand misinformation as a meaning-making resource requires attention to the role of allusive references in political discourse and identity-building. The question is never just whether a particular unit of misinformation changes belief states or political preferences; true or false, individual political messages generally have small direct effects, particularly in a polarised electorate (e.g. Kalla and Broockman 2017). Rather, the vital question is how characteristic patterns of messages reinforce discourses or narratives that shape identity; affirm affiliations; and, in that way, influence individual or collective behaviour at the margin.

Thinking about the mediated influences that shape our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic brings this difference into sharp relief. Alarm about the ‘infodemic’ has centred on false medical advice, which can have grave consequences. Cases like that of the Arizona couple who poisoned themselves by drinking fish-tank cleaner containing chloroquine, a drug promoted by President Trump to ward off COVID-19, lend themselves to analysis under a straightforward message-effects model. In such an instance, a specific action can be attributed directly to new information from a specific source or sources on a question about which the recipient likely had no well-formed views. (Of course, political attitudes and personal experiences, perhaps with the medical industry, certainly played a role.) That straight line from bad data to dangerous behaviour helps account for the aggressive responses by social media companies to pandemic-related misinformation (Barrett et al. 2020).

Such instances are relatively rare, however. Vastly more significant patterns of health behaviour cannot be traced to specific messages as cleanly. In the US, for instance, party affiliation has been identified as the primary predictor of both individual attitudes and state-level policies with regard to mask-wearing and social distancing (Clinton et al. 2020; Makridis and Rothwell 2020). That does not mean that party ties predetermine behaviour; rather, an active process of politicisation, informed by elite cues, played out in the news cycle as anti-lockdown demonstrations gave way to a backlash against mask requirements. Rhetoric from media and political figures helped turn public-health choices into ideological ones. One anti-lockdown organiser told a reporter that his pre-existing condition prevented mask-wearing: ‘It’s called freedom’ (Burling 2020). That stance might have been informed by any number of narratives circulating online and promoted by conservative media figures like Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh, centring on the view that the virus threat had been exaggerated by Democrats and/or the ‘deep state’ in order to weaken the economy and hurt Donald Trump’s re-election chances.

Understanding how mediated messages inform the decision to wear or not wear a mask means being sensitive to the social and discursive contexts in which people form what social scientists recognise as opinions (Eliasoph 1998; Cramer 2016). It draws attention to ‘conventional discourses’ (Strauss 2012): patterns of language tied to the shared schemas – what Lippmann called ‘stereotypes’ – we use to make sense of the world. And it means recognising what Polletta and Callahan (2017) identify as the allusive quality of narrative – the way the moral force of a story about, for instance, ‘welfare queens’ or ‘climate-change deniers’ operates by suggestion rather than rational argumentation. As they suggest,

people’s political common sense is shaped by their experience but it is also shaped by stories they read and hear on TV, stories told by friends and acquaintances, stories that
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substitute memory for history, stories that make the experience of others seem as if it is their own, and stories whose truth is relatively unimportant to their value.

Scholarly critics have noted that the current moral panic over online misinformation evokes the so-called ‘hypodermic’ model of early mass communication research that putatively attributed powerful effects to mediated propaganda (Kreiss 2018; Marwick 2018). But as Marwick (2018, 485) observes, studies demonstrating the limited effects of ‘fake news’ usually share the underlying model of the claims they refute – one that ‘prioritizes causal effects on user activity while disregarding the structural influence of problematic patterns in media messaging and representation’. Resisting crude causal assumptions about either media messages or media technologies should not mean being blind to the role that patterns of media use play, especially for political elites and politically active citizens, in sustaining the ‘deep stories’ (Hochschild 2018) and ideological frameworks that anchor political identity (Kreiss 2018; Peck 2019).

3 Misinformation is an index of political incentive structures

The point that politics is as much about telling allusive stories as making reasoned arguments is hardly new to campaigners, journalists, or scholars. But the kinds of stories told vary depending on the audience and the medium; they also vary in different eras depending on how mediated publics can be assembled and how that alters the calculus of perceived risk and reward in addressing particular audiences in specific ways. The apparent ease with which some politicians traffic in overt falsehood and conspiracy in today’s media environment lays bare what Karp (2019) neatly calls the ‘load-bearing’ myths that have worked to constrain elite behaviour and sustain democratic norms.

The pandemic offers many examples. For instance, President Trump’s dismissive, even mocking rhetoric about mask-wearing through the first half of 2020 almost certainly reflected a calculation about how that stance would be presented in conservative outlets; as caseloads surged in mid-summer and Fox News changed the tone of its coverage, the president was forced to follow suit. But a better illustration, because it highlights institutional norms beyond the White House, is the conspiratorial rhetoric that featured in the impeachment proceedings six months earlier. The crudeness of the falsehoods being peddled by Republican lawmakers in such a solemn setting (such as baseless insinuations about Ukrainian interference in the 2016 elections) drew widespread condemnation. One analysis argued, ‘Each round of GOP questioning is not meant to interrogate the witnesses . . . but instead to create moments that can be flipped into Fox News segments, shared as bite-size Facebook posts, or dropped into 4chan threads’ (Broderick 2019).

A tradition of media scholarship has explored how events like congressional hearings are staged for mediated audiences (Page 1996; Carey 1998). Politicians, like all of us, say things not only for particular audiences but also in specific discursive contexts – a campaign ad, a press conference, a meeting with donors – governed by varying standards of truth. For public figures, the logic of these encounters is sometimes just ‘cover’: having something to say, an allusion or argument that navigates the moment while advancing, or at least not damaging, strategic aims.

Arguably, then, the conspiracy-laden performance was unusual only in degree.1 Still, it highlights the fragility of institutional norms such as the expectation that members of Congress observe basic standards of evidence, engage with reasonable arguments, and make a show of appealing broadly to the American public. Norms governing the behaviour of political elites in a democracy depend on the ‘democratic myth’ (Karpf 2019) or ‘regulative fiction’ (Nerone 2013) of an attentive, reasoning, and unitary public: what matters is that elites generally act as
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if an abstract public is paying attention and will hold them accountable when lies or abuses are exposed. The power of the press as a democratic watchdog depends on the same reflexive assumption embedded in political culture; it ‘resides in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is influenced by the mass media’ rather than in the media’s influence itself (Schudson 1995, 121). That faith in the link from publicity to accountability, in turn, supports the ability of monitory institutions, civil society actors, and political elites to enforce democratic norms on behalf of a wider public (e.g. Page 1996; Schudson 2015).

These useful fictions are harder to sustain in a post-broadcast media environment where even the notion of a broad public tuned in to more or less the same things – never the whole picture – has become not just less accurate, but less natural. Both the moral panic around misinformation and the research refuting it draw attention to underlying realities of electoral politics that, while long understood, may increasingly be common sense. As Karpf (2019) writes, ‘Disinformation and propaganda are not dangerous because they effectively trick or misinform otherwise-attentive voters; they are dangerous because they disabuse political elites of some crucial assumptions about the consequences of violating the public trust’.

Related myth-eroding pressures exist within journalism. The self-serving ‘audience-image’ (Gans 2004) constructed by twentieth-century journalists, with neither means nor motive to know much about their actual readers and viewers, was a mechanism of ideological uniformity, social exclusion, and professional self-justification. But it also helped preserve a space for professional news values to cohere, making it easier to write for an idealised, information-seeking democratic public (Ananny 2018). Conversely, while every news organisation strives to build ties of emotion and identity with its audience, scholars of partisan and populist media emphasise the deeply affective editorial logic that governs their news production (Mazzoleni 2008). Explaining the ‘emotional pull’ of Fox News’s appeal to working-class values, for instance, Peck (2019, 92) points to the ‘historical rootedness of the enduring political themes and narratives’ that its on-air personalities return to again and again.

4 Just don’t call it an echo chamber

The main thrust of the course correction in studying online information and misinformation has been to challenge the received wisdom that the internet traps us in ideological bubbles of news and opinion we agree with. This pervasive notion among academics, policymakers, and journalists – one overview calls it the ‘echo chambers about echo chambers’ (Guess et al. 2018) – finds little empirical support in large-scale studies of online media habits. Still, the refutation only highlights the need for a better vocabulary to describe the deeply partisan dynamics of the media ecosystem in many countries. As the preceding discussion suggests, a structural view is essential to studying misinformation: where and how it circulates, how it reflects shifting incentives for political elites, and how it becomes a resource for political identity and influences behaviour as a result.

Research on echo chambers and filter bubbles has focused on what might be called the strong version of the hypothesis: that in a high-choice media environment, the preference for congenial information from like-minded sources leads citizens broadly to ‘sort themselves into echo chambers of their own design’, in Sunstein’s (2009, 6) phrase, through selective exposure and/or algorithmic selection. Studies suggest only a small minority of partisans inhabit such bubbles; while evidence is mixed, for most users who do engage with political news online, search engines and social media appear to be a source of diversity (Flaxman et al. 2016; e.g. Dubois and Blank 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018a, 2018b; Eady et al. 2019). An important caveat, though, is that the minority with narrower, ideological news diets also tend to be the
most politically engaged (Guess, Lyons, et al. 2018; Tucker et al. 2018). Nyhan (2016) calls this the ‘paradox’ of echo chambers: ‘Few of us live in them, but those who do exercise disproportionate influence over our political system’.

That caveat becomes very important when we consider how misinformation spreads and takes on political valence across discursive networks of media and political actors. For instance, the pandemic offers several cases of flawed research being rapidly ‘weaponised’ to downplay virus risks in a cascading dynamic across right-wing news outlets, conservative voices on social media, and Republican politicians (Bajak and Howe 2020; Starbird et al. 2020). A starker illustration is the perplexing political influence of QAnon, the far-right online subculture and ‘conspiracy movement’ born in the wake of the 2016 US election. QAnon metastasised during the pandemic, gaining adherents and absorbing COVID-19 conspiracies into its core narrative of a ‘deep state’ scheming against President Trump (LaFrance 2020). Remarkably, dozens of candidates in 2020 US congressional races endorsed QAnon – some obliquely, others quite openly – in a bid to court Republican primary voters (Rosenberg and Steinhauer 2020). Beliefs cultivated in something like an echo chamber can resonate far beyond it.

Some scholars approach echo chambers in this wider sense: as coordinated, mutually reinforcing patterns of messaging among politicians, partisan media outlets, and outside issue or interest groups (Jamieson and Cappella 2010; Benkler et al. 2018). This is broadly in line with how scholars understand the potential structuring influence of populist or tabloid media, which offer a ready outlet for populist messages, help define an audience for populist politics, and also ‘serve as vehicles reflecting people’s sentiments back’ to populist leaders (Mazzoleni 2008, 54). The question becomes not whether the typical media user is in an ideological bubble that promotes specific attitudes, but how the bubbles that do exist affect political discourse and behaviour more broadly.

Finally, this looser definition of echo chambers raises a thorny question, one that provides a useful cautionary note to conclude this argument for scholarship that looks past individual effects to take a more structural view of mediated misinformation. The question is, what separates harmful echo chambers from the cause- or party-oriented press that forms part of a healthy, pluralistic society? As Nielsen (2020) has observed, ‘the women’s movement, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement were arguably echo chambers in many ways’. Likewise, contemporary movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter take shape across ideological media networks used to share information, develop arguments, and build social ties.

What distinguishes harmful echo chambers from healthy digital activism is, precisely, the extent to which they promote dangerous misinformation like QAnon conspiracy theories. Making this distinction requires judgment and may invite disagreement – but no more so than other normatively freighted categories, such as ‘misinformation’ and ‘populism’, which communications scholars employ widely. More important, though, this offers a reminder that the same structural arrangements can and do produce very different outcomes in democratic terms. The challenge is to take seriously how media structures and mediated discourses matter in public life while avoiding the pull of determinism that too often accompanies such perspectives.

**Note**

1 It certainly fell short of McCarthyite demagoguery during the second red scare – a powerful counter-example to arguments that see only decline from an idealized broadcast era.
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