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# Misinformation and the decline of shared experience

**Canadian Ken Goldstein looks at how the under-threat mainstream media have contributed to our collective view and knowledge of the world. He is concerned that short-term solutions will not address fundamental structural change**

‘Misinformation’ has become one of today’s media buzzwords, as audiences fragment, and the internet and social media make possible not only alternative opinions, but also what often appears to be alternative information claiming to be facts.

At the outset, we have to understand that the current situation is not only a result of the addition of the new ‘media’ of all types, but also the result of the subtraction of the old media that once served as a common core for information about public affairs.

The growth of misinformation is partly the result of the fact that the new alternative media have, for many people, replaced, rather than just supplemented, our traditional media. In other words, the nonsense being peddled by some of those new sources might have less of an impact if they were co-existing with our previous mass media. But the collapse of the traditional media model – for newspapers in particular – has created a vacuum that now is being filled by the purveyors of ‘alternative facts’.

## **How did we get here?**

For much of the 20th century the tangible form of the daily newspaper provided a mix of continuity and familiarity, while at the same time, for a few moments each day, it also provided the illusion that the events of the previous day had been frozen in time. Community (weekly) newspapers and magazines were also part of the mix of print media.

As the century progressed, we added radio, and then television, in both cases, initially in limited numbers – a byproduct of a mixture of technology, economics, and regulation. So, the mass or mainstream media were characterised by three important characteristics:

- First, the coincidence of oligopoly;
- Second, the economic benefit of protectable scarcity; and
- Third, an unplanned, but very real, role in helping to shape our shared experience.

In 1991, Newton Minow, former chairman of the US Federal Communications Commission, made the following observation:

*We see 400- and 500-channel systems on the horizon, fragmenting viewership into smaller and smaller niches, and we need to remember that for all their presumed benefits these developments undermine the simultaneous, shared national experiences that comprise the nation's social glue.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1991 the fragmentation of media was just starting. The internet had not yet become a consumer-facing platform. But a few years later it did – and challenged not only the economics of local journalism, but also the parallel role of local media in contributing to our shared experience.

### **What the internet changed**

In the pre-digital, pre-internet era, local media benefited from the scarcity premium, from the ability to define territories, and from the ability to earn revenue from a gatekeeping function for content produced in other places. All of that helped to subsidise local coverage.

When that internal cross-subsidy was challenged by the new technology, most local newspapers did not respond well. Some adopted the slogan of ‘digital first’ – but that did not always take into account that ‘digital’ meant no boundaries, and increased competition for enough of the pieces of the bundle to make what remained less profitable.

The internet unbundled the traditional media model, and one of the early challenges came from the free classified advertising services, which shattered what had been one of the most profitable sources of revenue for local newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

And while there was the obvious negative economic impact, the classified ads, in their own way, also told the story of their community – help wanted, houses for

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<sup>1</sup> Newton N. Minow, address to the Gannett Foundation Media Center, Columbia University, New York City, May 9, 1991, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005, classified advertising revenue in Canadian daily newspapers totaled C\$875m. By 2019, that had fallen to C\$69m – a decline of 92 per cent.

sale, apartments for rent, furniture to put in that house or apartment. And who was born. And who had died.

At the same time, the internet created an opportunity for a limited number of titles to transform themselves into national (or international) news brands, by leaving their local roots behind, in an attempt to aggregate enough users across wider geography to achieve viability (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian* are three examples).

And, of course, it created an enormous opportunity for tech platforms, like Google and Facebook, to become new intermediaries in the information business, through a combination of search functions, algorithms that reinforced specific interests, and advertising that used data to promise greater targeting.

By the mid-2010s, all of those changes were disrupting the local media model – particularly for newspapers. And along with that decline came a decline in shared experience.

### **Death of the daily (newspaper)?**

While many comments on misinformation or fake news deal with the role of social media in spreading that false information, it might also be argued that the rise of fake news and the decline of the daily newspaper – and its physical, printed form – are (to some degree) connected.

Not much more than a generation ago, paid print daily newspaper circulation in Canada still reached about two-thirds of our households.<sup>3</sup> The tangible physical presence of the daily newspaper, in addition to the specific content in the newspaper, was part of the nation's shared experience.

The physical presence of the newspaper meant that most people knew the broad scope of the material that their fellow citizens were also seeing. That does not mean we all read the same thing, but it does mean that we all had access to, and were aware of, a similar menu of information.

And the implicit assumption that many others might be reading the same content could motivate argument as well as agreement – but, unlike the current situation, such arguments would be more likely to start from the same point.

Even earlier than the rise of fake news, the changes in the physical distribution of metropolitan daily newspapers may have been a factor in a growing divide between urban and rural areas, particularly in the United States.

The problem was rooted, at least in part, in pressure from advertisers for daily newspapers to focus their circulation on the suburbs, which led to cutbacks in statewide coverage and circulation in smaller towns and rural areas. And that, in

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<sup>3</sup> Sadly, today, paid print daily newspaper circulation in Canada is equivalent to only about 10-12 per cent of Canadian households.

turn, led to a situation in which both metro and non-metro residents were learning less and less about each other.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of the internet, of course, the ability to receive information from anywhere increased, but, in many cases, that electronic connection did not provide the same sense of general community connection as did the physical presence of the newspaper.

Within those broader trends, something else was happening – a dramatic change in the way that citizens, particularly younger citizens, interact with media.

Perhaps most important, the last 30 years have seen the emergence of a new fundamental reality of media content – the means of production and distribution, once in the hands of intermediaries, now are also in the hands of individuals.

Today, anyone can be a publisher/broadcaster, or – another current buzzword – an ‘influencer’. By lowering the threshold for celebrity, fragmentation has also contributed to the fulfillment of a prediction attributed to Andy Warhol that in the future ‘everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes’.

### **The rise of the smart phone**

Not only is there a new platform (the internet) with many new participants, there is also a new method of news consumption. A food analogy might be useful. In the old routine, reading a newspaper, or listening to or watching a newscast on radio or television, might be thought of as a meal – professionally-prepared, usually consumed at a fixed time, and containing a number of different elements. Increasingly, however, and for younger news consumers in particular, the new approach to news might be characterised as a series of ‘snacks’, consumed in a very different context than traditional news presentations.

In Statistics Canada’s 2016 General Social Survey, a number of important questions were asked about the way Canadians get the news, and particularly about the relationship between getting the news online (from any source) and getting it from print newspapers. And the answers indicated that whether you got your news online or in print was clearly linked to two factors – your age, and whether you had a smart phone. (And smart phones are even more ubiquitous now than they were five years ago.)

In terms of age, the younger the consumer, the greater the likelihood that reading news online daily would exceed daily reading of a print copy of a newspaper.

In terms of smart phone ownership, the survey indicated that, compared to those without smart phones:

- Smart phone owners were almost twice as likely to read news online daily; and

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<sup>4</sup> Bob von Sternberg, ‘Rural areas feel information gap, blame metro media’, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 15, 1990, p. 1B.

- Smart phone owners were less than half as likely to read a print copy of a newspaper daily.

Can we consider the smart phone a news medium? That depends on what we mean by media, of course. There are many overlapping definitions in today's media world. Years ago, media were viewed in separate silos, based on formats – print, radio, television, etc.

And those separate media formats were often received on separate devices with the same name – for example, radio on a radio, television on a television set. Then the internet emerged, allowing numerous formats to be received on a single device, and from far more sources than was previously the case.

To the extent that we include devices as part of our definition, and because the nature of the device – portability, size, etc. – can influence the formats, then it might be argued that the smart phone has emerged as an important news medium in Canada. (Which raises another question: if 'local' is difficult, and 'digital first' is an incomplete answer, might 'smart phone first' be part of the solution?)

### **Now for the hard part – what do we do about it?**

The focus of that discussion has had many ebbs and flows in the last decade, with most current attention directed at finding some way of getting Google and Facebook to compensate traditional media – sometime based on competition law principles, and sometime based on copyright principles. And there are significant questions around the degree to which the large tech platforms should or should not be shielded from issues involving libel.

Various other forms of economic assistance for traditional media have been proposed, including government assistance for journalism, tax credits for digital subscriptions, and an expanded role for philanthropy.

And there is also a variety of proposals aimed at dealing directly with misinformation and fact-checking.

Many of those proposals have merit. But it is important to ask whether some of them are (a) too focused on specifics, and/or (b) of insufficient scope to make a long-term difference. If that is the case, then we run the risk of thinking we have solved the problem, only to find that we have not.

So here is a suggestion – while pursuing the specifics, let's also add a broader, holistic view of the future of the media industry. Because that is what seems to have been missing from too many of the proposals currently under consideration.

In short, we need to spend more time on what comes next, including:

- A range of possible futures – where the industry might be in five or 10 years;
- Determining which of those possible futures are best for public policy goals (like local news and trusted content relevant to the community); and

- Determining the best combination of corporate structures and public intervention that might bring us closer to the most positive of the possible futures that appears to be achievable.

Let's not fall into the trap of proclaiming that some specific solution has solved the problem, while losing sight of the bigger picture. Because there is an important question that urgently needs an answer: How will a modern democracy function if we all have less in common?

**About the contributor**

Ken Goldstein is President of Communications Management Inc, based in Winnipeg. He is one of Canada's leading authorities on media economics and media trends. He has an MSc in Journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, and has served as Associate Deputy Minister of Communications for the Province of Manitoba.