

infodemic



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MISINFORMATION IN THE TIME OF COVID

Last February I had a brief but telling exchange on Twitter. One of my contacts, who has no medical or scientific background, was asked what she thought the long-term effects of COVID vaccinations would be. The vaccine would “undoubtedly” lead to a rise in autoimmune diseases, she answered. “How could it not?” When I suggested her assertion was scientifically false, she wrote “I was asked what do I think it will do and that’s what I think. In this case there is no correct answer.”

She’s right, I suppose. But therein lies the problem that defines public expression these days. The question “What do I think?” has usurped the throne of “What is true?”

This is profoundly dangerous at any time, of course, but especially during a global health emergency. And even more so since anyone “doing their own research” can so easily find “evidence” to support anything they choose to believe – regardless of whether their beliefs are true, false or absurd. As language becomes infected with untruth, misinformation about the virus goes viral.

Even actual information gets twisted, tailored and weaponized. Last March, for example, the anti-vax community seized upon a document by Pfizer outlining “adverse events” following vaccination. Vaccine opponents misinterpreted the data – deliberately, I suspect – to suggest Pfizer was trying to hide dangerous and occasionally lethal side effects of the vaccine. In fact, the report revealed the opposite, but this hardly dissuaded those who saw only what they wanted to see.

When I posted on social media about my own positive COVID test, a friend with a decided lack of bedside manner warned me “most of the damage from COVID happens much, much later.” As proof, he linked to a Lancet study that revealed a majority of patients who’d been discharged from hospital with COVID-19 did not feel fully recovered a year later. I pointed out that the study’s subjects were all unvaccinated and sick enough to warrant hospitalization, and that the findings likely wouldn’t apply to fully vaccinated individuals with mild symptoms.

But while the events of the past two years may have exposed the cracks in our culture, the pandemic hardly represents the birth of misinformation. Conspiracy theories and propagated lies have long infected discourse – in Canada and elsewhere.

My friend was furious. He accused me of minimizing the dangers of infection, suggested I give my “head a shake,” and demanded I “stop saying that kind of shit.” I’d betrayed his belief by pointing out the facts. And therefore I was a villain.

In this annual report, we at PEN Canada address the state of misinformation in these fraught times. We examine the role of social media platforms and tech companies in the propagation of misinformation. We look at how free speech has been weaponized by those who seek to undermine democracy, and how hatred in virtual spaces bleeds out into real life. We seek, ultimately, to advocate for those who continued to pursue truth in 2021 – a plague year – when truth felt devalued.

But while the events of the past two years may have exposed the cracks in our culture, the pandemic hardly represents the birth of misinformation. Conspiracy theories and propagated lies have long infected discourse – in Canada and elsewhere.

What’s different now, though, is that we’re obliged to participate. The nonsense used to be easy to ignore. Few of us need to engage with 9/11 truthers, say, or with unhinged QAnon disciples. Not if we don’t want to. But COVID-19 is in our homes, our schools, and workplaces. Increasingly, it’s in our bodies. For the last two years, the pandemic has altered the way we work and travel. Shop and socialize. Learn and love. Not only has COVID dominated the conversation at our family gatherings, the virus has determined whether or not our families gather at all. And, of course, COVID kills. As I write this, the Canadian death toll from the virus inches towards 40,000.

What we read and write about the pandemic matters to all of us. We don’t have the luxury of sitting this one out.

Marcello Di Cintio

FREE
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ARTICLE

19

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

EVERYONE HAS THE
RIGHT TO FREEDOM
OF OPINION AND
EXPRESSION; THIS
RIGHT INCLUDES
FREEDOM TO HOLD
OPINIONS WITHOUT
INTERFERENCE AND
TO SEEK, RECEIVE AND
IMPART INFORMATION
AND IDEAS THROUGH
ANY MEDIA AND
REGARDLESS OF
FRONTIERS.

President's Message

In last September's inaugural Graeme Gibson Talk, entitled "Hope in Strange Paradises," award-winning authors Omar El Akkad and Margaret Atwood discussed the moral force of literature. Moderator Nahlah Ayed asked El Akkad if he thought novelists make a difference. "We are citizens in this sphere," El Akkad said. "And what you do as a citizen of that community matters." Literature can change minds, El Akkad said, but he also acknowledged the work of PEN that "goes beyond that in a way that changes lives years later."

Atwood agreed. She recalled founding PEN Canada with Graeme Gibson and Eugene Benson. "You'd be surprised how many of these things are just individual efforts by people who decide they are going to do something," Atwood said. "And that is why I have hope. Because such people still exist."

Graeme Gibson never gave up on hope. "Hope is an attitude, so we might as well live as though we can really make a difference," he said. "And whether we can or can't doesn't matter. We have to live as if we can make a difference, and we do make a difference." That was the spirit in which PEN Canada was founded and it remains the attitude that guides the work of the board, advisory council, volunteers and staff to this day.

With cascading disasters in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Myanmar, the ongoing pandemic, and the "infodemic" of online disinformation and abuse — the theme of our annual report — we need hope. After Kabul fell to the Taliban, PEN Canada received hundreds of pleas for help from desperate Afghan writers and journalists. We urged the government to simplify the application process to come to Canada and advocated on behalf of dozens of Afghan women journalists. In one exceptional case we were able to help a family of 19, including several young children, travel safely to Canada in March 2022. A modest achievement given the general despair, but one we are grateful for.

Similarly, we are part of a team of organizations spearheaded by PEN America to assist PEN Ukraine. We facilitated Margaret Atwood's appearance in March in PEN Ukraine's Dialogues of War series. Regrettably, this year we have seen Putin crush what was left of the independent media in Russia, whose journalists are now at risk. PEN Canada also continues its partnership with PEN America to support the beleaguered PEN Myanmar in a country which PEN's 2021 Freedom to Write Index shows is among the top jailers of writers and public intellectuals in the world.

The crisis of online disinformation and abuse continues to engage PEN Canada. For over two years, PEN has been working with scholars to study the effect of online disinformation and attacks on journalists in an attempt to silence them. In July 2021, the Canadian government issued a detailed consultation paper laying out legislative means to address illegal online harm. It was widely criticized. In January at the Digital Media at the Crossroads (DM@X) conference, which PEN Canada co-sponsors, I moderated a panel discussion on the subject. In February 2022, the government announced an expert advisory group to consider online safety.

PEN Canada is part of a group of advocacy organizations following the proposed legislation with equal parts concern for freedom of expression and for protection from online abuse and disinformation. The goal is to ensure a better space for civic expression online. The challenge of finding a just, equitable and workable solution is immense.

With hope and determination PEN Canada will make a difference.

Grace Westcott

**“HOPE IS AN
ATTITUDE, SO WE
MIGHT AS WELL LIVE
AS THOUGH WE
CAN REALLY MAKE
A DIFFERENCE.”**

Graeme Gibson

HONORARY MEMBERS

ERITREA

Yusuf Mohamed Ali

Seyoum Tsehaye

Mattewos Habteab

Dawit Habtemichael

Medhanie Haile

Emanuel Asrat

Temesken Ghebreyesus

Dawit Isaac

Fesshaye Yohannes

Said Abdelkader

MEXICO

José Armando Rodríguez Carreón

SAUDI ARABIA

Ashraf Fayadh

ER

ERITREA

In September 2001, 13 journalists were arrested when President Afeworki closed Eritrea's independent newspapers. PEN Canada adopted the following as Honorary Members:

Yusuf Mohamed Ali (editor-in-chief of *Tsigenay*), **Mattewos Habteab** (editor-in-chief of *Meqaleh*), **Dawit Habtemichael** (reporter for *Meqaleh*), **Medhanie Haile** (editor-in-chief of *Keste Debera*), **Emanuel Asrat** (editor of *Zemen*), **Temesken Ghebreyesus** (reporter for *Keste Debera*), **Dawit Isaac** (writer and co-owner of *Setit*), **Fesshaye Yohannes** "Joshua" (playwright, poet and publisher of *Setit*); **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas*) and **Seyoum Tsehaye**, a TV and radio journalist who wrote a weekly column for *Setit*.

In 2007, reports indicated that four of the journalists—Abdelkader, Haile, Ali and Yohannes—had died in custody due to harsh conditions and lack of medical attention. Yohannes was reportedly tortured prior to his death. In May 2007, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights deemed the detentions arbitrary and unlawful. The commission called on Eritrea to release the journalists and pay them compensation.

Dawit Isaac, who spent a number of years in Sweden during the Eritrean war of independence, holds Swedish citizenship. In a 2009 TV interview, President Afeworki said he did not know what crime Isaac had committed and added that Eritrean authorities would soon release him or put him on trial. A year later, a senior adviser to the president said that Isaac was being held for his involvement in a "conspiracy" by a group of Eritreans "to facilitate" an invasion by Ethiopia during the border war. He declined to provide assurances that Isaac was still alive. None of the journalists has yet been charged or tried for their alleged crimes.

HONORARY MEMBERS



MEXICO

José Armando Rodríguez Carreón was a veteran crime reporter for *El Diario*, a daily newspaper based in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state. He was shot at least eight times by an unidentified person on the morning of November 13, 2008, as he was about to drive his daughter to school. José had covered drug-related violence and organized crime in Ciudad Juárez and, after receiving death threats, had briefly left Mexico to live in El Paso, Texas. On his return, he refused to stop covering crime stories despite receiving further death threats. Shortly before his death, Rodríguez told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): “The risks here are high and rising, and journalists are easy targets. But I can’t live in my house like a prisoner. I refuse to live in fear.”

In the weeks after his murder, several other *El Diario* journalists received death threats, as did other media in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. Two prosecutors in charge of investigating the case have reportedly been assassinated. On May 26, 2011, the Inter American Press Association sent a letter to President Calderón, signed by hundreds of newspaper readers throughout the Americas, calling on him to intervene in order to ensure that the stalled investigation into José’s murder moves forward and those responsible are brought to justice. There has been no progress on the case since then.

SA

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabian-born Palestinian poet, artist, curator, **Ashraf Fayadh**, was arrested in August 2013 and charged with “misguided and misguiding thoughts” after the Saudi Arabian Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice received a complaint about him. According to reports, the complaint contended that Fayadh had made obscene comments about God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Saudi Arabian state. Released on bail, he was rearrested on January 1, 2014 on charges including ‘insulting the divine self’ and having long hair. Fayadh has been held in a prison in the city of Abha ever since.

According to court documents seen by PEN International, during a trial held over six hearings between February and May 2014, Fayadh stood accused of numerous blasphemy-related charges, including ‘insulting the divine self and the Prophet Mohammed,’ ‘spreading atheism,’ ‘refuting the Qur’an,’ and ‘insulting the King and the Kingdom,’ among others. Evidence compiled against him included at least 10 pages from his collection of poetry, *Instructions Within*, published by the Beirut-based Dar al-Farabi in 2008 and later banned from distribution in Saudi Arabia.

On November 17, 2015, the General Court of Abha sentenced Fayadh to death for the crime of being an infidel (*kufir*) following a retrial. The court argued that Fayadh’s repentance for the crime of apostasy was a matter of the heart and should have no bearing determining whether or not the crime had been committed. Fayadh appealed the sentence. In February 2016, a Saudi Arabian court replaced the death sentence with an eight-year prison term and 800 lashes. Fayadh has further appealed against this conviction. Fayadh was chosen for PEN Canada’s One Humanity award in 2017.

RELEASED



SAUDI BLOGGER

RAIF BADAWI

Raif Badawi was released from prison in Saudi Arabia on March 11 after serving a 10-year sentence for organizing an online conference to mark a “day of liberalism” in 2012. On May 7, 2014, Jeddah’s Criminal Court sentenced Badawi to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes and a fine of 1-million Saudi riyals (CAD \$291,700) on charges of “founding a liberal website,” “adopting liberal thought,” and “insulting Islam.” Badawi received 50 lashes in January 2015 but has not been subjected to further punishment since. Badawi was awarded PEN Canada’s One Humanity prize in 2014.

Executive Director's Message

“What is the most valuable thing in this room?” It was 1983 and the man posing this question was the head of a relief agency with a daunting name, the International Institute for Environment and Development. I was one of sixty schoolboys in his audience. The Jesuits had trained me well so I knew the answer wouldn't be the large oil painting on the wall behind us, nor the chandelier overhead. I wanted to say something smart like “brain power” or “electricity.” The Director paused for effect, poured himself a glass of water, held it up to the light and said, “this.” Within ten minutes he had made an unanswerable case for the value of water. It has never looked or tasted quite the same since.

People often say that data is the new petroleum but water may be a better comparison. On any given day, we flood our brains and devices with oceans of it. Algorithms and other obscure processes filter and divert our data-stream, syphoning and sifting it for nefarious purposes, or polluting it without our knowledge and consent. Currently, a third of the planet drifts through at least 2 billion hours of “recommended” video each day, oblivious to the undertow pulling them towards the shallows and reefs. In the more exotic digital archipelagos, one may learn that the earth is flat, that COVID vaccines contain microchips or aborted fetuses, or even that senior members of the US Democratic Party are paedophiles who drink the blood of trafficked children as an elixir of youth. A decade ago, such lunacy would have sounded too ridiculous to be harmful. After the storming of the US capitol and a month-long siege of Ottawa, this nonsense now looks like a credible threat to free speech and democracy.

Sixteen years ago, Jürgen Habermas worried that “the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms” within liberal democracies might break down our “large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics.” He was mocked for being out of step with the emergent “network of networks,” for misreading the democratising essence of the blogs and message boards that were then so prolific. His concern was dismissed without much argument and almost forgotten. Today it seems prescient. For what else has the digital empowerment of the lunatic fringe and the meteoric rise of white nationalists, Truthers, Birthers, Incels, and cults like QAnon been if not a metastasis of “isolated issue publics”?

The economic forces dismantling our attention are well documented but we have barely begun to understand their erosion of the public sphere. In his 2019 book *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, Peter Pomerantsev interviews Thomas Borwick, the lead digital officer of the pro-Brexit Vote Leave campaign. He learns that “the most successful message in getting people out to vote [was] animal rights. ‘Vote Leave’ argued that the EU was cruel to animals because, for example, it supported farmers in Spain who raise bulls for bullfighting.” Pomerantsev writes: “within the ‘animal rights’ segment Borwick could focus even tighter, sending graphic ads featuring mutilated animals to one type of voter and more gentle ads with pictures of cuddly sheep to others.” Shortly afterwards, the Trump campaign weaponised similar tactics to drive millions of angry white men into voting booths. We have lived in a different world ever since.

Any group concerned with freedom of expression must address these seismic shifts in the ways we gather, share and absorb the news. In the last few years, PEN Canada has begun to study the impact of digital platforms on journalism in Canada and beyond. We have partnered with the Global Reporting Centre in BC on a project called “Shooting the Messenger,” which will track journalists who are threatened, harassed and discredited online. As many recent events have shown, projects like this will become increasingly important as Canada, the UK, and many other countries consider legislative remedies for disinformation and other online harms.

With the agonies of Afghanistan fresh in my memory, and the tragedy of Ukraine still unfolding as I write, it is difficult not to view the year ahead without a measure of anxiety. For this and many other reasons, I am extremely grateful for the good cheer of my colleague Theresa Johnson, a model of diligence and efficiency, likewise for the boundless energy and commitment of our new president, Grace Westcott. Both have been an invaluable counterweight to my instinctive gloom and pessimism. Even so, despite our best efforts, groups like PEN have been largely unable to help more than a few of the thousands of writers and journalists imperilled by these catastrophes. Our few successes have made it clearer than ever that there is no moral alternative but to keep trying.

Brendan de Caires

Pitching Disinformation



Over the past few years, social media has become almost synonymous with disinformation, or at least an integral part of it. Both are now endemic to our mediatized landscape, and have been so for many years before the COVID-19 outbreak and the invasion of Ukraine.

We might be inclined to posit disinformation as one in a long list of harms cultivated by the online dynamics of social media platforms. Many have pointed to platform algorithms as the source of the problem. Others have pointed the finger at the inherently inhumane nature of the business model that social companies deploy online – namely the reselling of platform users’ emotions, fears, and everyday desires. Consequently, platforms seemingly reward the loudest voices, most obnoxious users or hottest takes. Given the brevity of time posts remain visible online, or otherwise remain in “friend feeds,” a competition for attention has erupted in almost every corner of the internet and on all of our socially mediated apps, interfaces, and hand-held devices.

As proponents of rigorous debate and free speech, PEN and other organizations – including universities – have faced a growing challenge to their support for uncensored communication. Proponents of freedom of speech have largely assumed communication as an authentic act intended to inform, entertain and influence. In this regard, the popularity of the content did not matter. The growing influence of social media platforms on free speech has increasingly defined communication as a contest: not merely a war of words and ideas, but as a challenge to users to “game the system,” to raise one’s voice above all others.

Another challenge to the paradigm of free speech, namely the rise of online crowdfunding platforms like GoFundMe, was highlighted by the recent trucker protests, blockades, and occupations. These groups raised millions of dollars on the back of speech that spans the unpopular, the ridiculous, the inflammatory, and the factually incorrect. Online communication, in short, has become increasingly financialized through the help of crowdfunding platforms.

Mass fundraising appeals have faced scrutiny for decades, dating back to the early 1970s when personalized language was found to increase political donations. While this form of “mass customization” gave the appearance of personal attention – through the use of a person’s first name in a funding appeal, for example – it also soon led to the targeting of individuals. Politicians not only personally attacked their opponents in the public arena, they also did so with greater hyperbole through their fundraising appeals.

Today’s crowdfunding platforms further weaponized this customization beyond the ‘70s-era strategists’ wildest dreams. The platforms are ready-made sites of personalized communication and, at the same time, sources of misinformation, toxic political discourse, and other online harms. Such platforms are intentionally designed to function as viral machines. With a click of the mouse fundraising pitches can be sent to a bevy of other online properties, platforms, followers and “friends.”

In addition to the integration of networked content – such as YouTube videos, and blog posts – into crowdfunding appeals, such campaigns are anchored by a specific form of communication: the financial pitch. As we’ve seen on television programs like *Dragon’s Den*, pitches are not judged solely on their financial merits. They are also judged on their persuasiveness, which includes the passion with which contestants present their business idea.

The same is also true online where crowdfunding pitches make wild, unsubstantiated, hateful and potentially libelous accusations in their search for users and contributors. This is not to suggest that all such claims are inauthentic or fake, but they do raise the stakes by coupling inflammatory communication and misinformation with financial appeals. Such pitches thus have the potential to become harmful super-spreaders, not only by individuals on crowdfunding platforms, but also by others that purport to conduct journalism online.

Greg Elmer is Bell Media Research Chair at Toronto Metropolitan University

Canadian Issues/Legal Affairs Committee Report

This year, the Canadian Issues and Legal Affairs Committee devoted significant time and resources to two mandates. Firstly, an internal review and audit of its policy for legislative and judicial interventions. Second, tracking new legislative initiatives which will likely require comment and submissions from PEN Canada as they make their way through Parliament.

In light of last year's successful court interventions – and the significant number of legislative initiatives tabled in Parliament and litigation proceedings to come before the courts – the Canadian Issues Committee recommended a review and audit of how it can best use its resources to advance PEN Canada's mission and causes.

The Canadian Issues Committee is working on draft of an intervention policy that, once finalized, will be recommended to the board for discussion. The intent of the intervention policy is to establish principles for when PEN Canada should consider devoting its resources to intervening and making public submissions – whether before parliamentary or legislative committees or the courts. The policy will also establish how PEN Canada will articulate its position on the relevant freedom of expression issues at play.

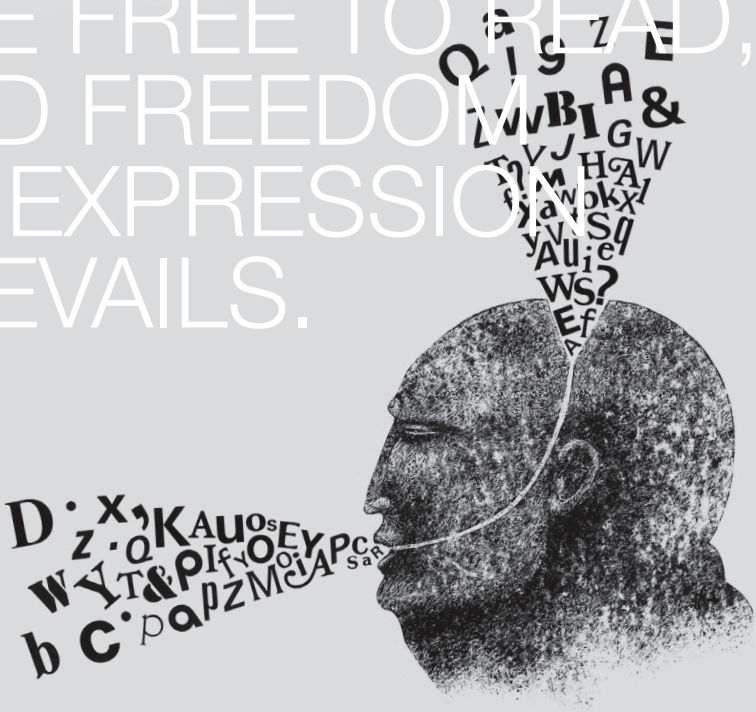
In addition to this internal review and audit, the Canadian Issues Committee is tracking significant legislation to be tabled before parliamentary committees that will likely have consequences for freedom of expression issues. These include Bill C-11 which was tabled on February 2, 2022 regarding how streaming services may be regulated by the CRTC. Heritage Canada has also struck an expert advisory group which will assist in making recommendations for regulatory schemes to address online harms. As well, the federal government has announced intentions to amend the Criminal Code specifically with respect to Holocaust denial.

PEN Canada will have an active year ahead, no doubt, in terms of public expressions of our position in respect of these issues as they make their way through the legislative and judicial proceedings.

Michael Bookman

PEN CANADA

ENVISIONS A WORLD
WHERE WRITERS
ARE FREE TO
WRITE, READERS
ARE FREE TO READ,
AND FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION
PREVAILS.



Writers in Exile Committee Report

This has been a year of changes, losses, and accomplishments.

On May 1, 2021 our great friend and leader, Writers in Exile chair Aaron Berhane, died of COVID-19. His passing devastated us. Aaron had not only been an amazing friend and leader, but also the motivator for all the programming and ideas WiE was pursuing. While working towards regrouping ourselves and giving space to process our collective loss, WiE sought ways to honour Aaron's legacy.

In the summer of 2021 Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie emerged by consensus as a leader of the Writers in Exile community. Gezahegn brings his knowledge and experience as a journalist and as a long time member of PEN Ethiopia, where he held a leadership position. He has clear proposals on how to move its work forward. Paola Gomez joined the board of PEN Canada and has acted as a liaison with the Writers in Exile community. The WiE chair on the PEN Canada board has remained vacant this year.

Our loss brought the group closer and we started meeting more often than before. We met every other week for several months. Then, during the fall, we went back to our monthly meetings. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, we hold our meetings online.

In the summer we welcomed the Iranian activist, Hoda Karimi Sadr and her partner, whose arrival in Canada was supported by PEN. Members of the WiE Committee actively engaged with the newly arrived couple and invited them into the group. They joined writers from Angola, Algeria, Kenya, Turkey who came through PEN Canada or through other means to the group. We will continue expanding our membership base.

Through the work and advocacy of our active members, and thanks to the partnership with George Brown College, we created the Aaron Berhane Scholarship and secured five English for Academic Purposes scholarships for writers in exile. We also signed on with a publisher for the anthology of WiE writings, entitled "The Uncaged Voice," which will be published in 2023.

Keith Leckie led successful writing workshops during the lockdown, and plans to continue offering them in the year ahead. The Writers in Exile community has created a website and a social media presence. We are planning activities to make the WiE community a more active space for Writers in Exile and ensure our presence is known in Canada and abroad. We aim to become a stronger platform and voice for Writers in Exile.

Paola Gomez and Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie

“We are planning activities to make the WiE community a more active space for Writers in Exile and ensure our presence is known in Canada and abroad.”

ON

THE ROLE



OF

BIG TECH

The concept of “fake news” seemed to become prominent after the 2016 American elections. While the Democratic Party cited Russian disinformation as a cause of their loss, then-President Donald Trump popularized the use of the term by directing it at mainstream media outlets, even “awarding” some with his fake news awards. The discussion of fake news brought about much debate about what the role of tech companies should be in mitigating this problem, which understandably carried over to the COVID era.

The concern is understandable to me. For one thing, we began dealing with a virus that we knew little about. Some may reminisce about wiping down their groceries until learning that was unnecessary and did not prevent COVID transmission. Another reason why misinformation was ostensibly a concern was that COVID seemed like a massive coordination problem: people needed to be on the same page about reducing transmission.

Then came demands for social media and tech companies to be more involved in tackling misinformation. On Instagram, any mention of vaccines would produce a disclaimer on your own post providing information on the COVID-19 vaccines. YouTube moved to ban all anti-vaccine content due to its aim of preventing misinformation.

One of the more well-known misinformation controversies was when Neil Young left Spotify in protest of Joe Rogan's deal with the platform. Rogan, Young and others alleged, was spreading disinformation about COVID vaccines. Young was displeased with Spotify's response, namely that it does not wish to be a content censor. Nonetheless, Spotify has joined Instagram and other platforms in placing a tag on COVID-related content.

The actions of YouTube, or the demands of people like Young, have been a bit disturbing to me. This is not because I am necessarily aligned with Joe Rogan on his views on vaccines, nor do I wish to discourage vaccination for those that wish to obtain it. Rather, I find it concerning when media companies cease being a mere conduit for content and become arbiters of truth.

Tech companies do not necessarily have the same kind of stakes in COVID outcomes as the general population. While school closures and lockdowns, for instance, have negatively impacted the mental health and literacy of students, they have been a source of a profound upward wealth transfer to major tech companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Zoom. As such, these companies have an interest in particular COVID narratives, and we should be wary about what kind of content they wish to censor or what their aims are in doing so. If Big Tech profits from a work/school from home model, they will be interested in propagating a narrative that encourages working and schooling from home. Because tech companies are not neutral and benefit from certain narratives and policies, there is no reason why their content moderation will be for the common good as opposed to their own.

Spotify, for all its other faults, had it right in wanting to be a more neutral platform for content. On top of the different stakes that tech companies have from the general population, they should not be arbiters of truth in trying to fight misinformation precisely because information about COVID is susceptible to change based on further research. Permitting different kinds of content on a platform does not mean they are all equal in truth. Rather, it is a way of restraining the powers of tech companies from asserting truths that may be subject to change anyway.

Mila Ghorayeb is a Vancouver-based columnist, podcaster and law student

Writers in Peril Committee Report

Since 2020, PEN Canada has sought to become a nominating agency for a prospective refugee resettlement program announced by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The Human Rights Defender Program would resettle 250 human rights defenders and family members every year, and the IRCC would pay for their living expenses for one year. This seemed like a practical means to profoundly assist refugee writers by facilitating their resettlement to Canada.

In Fall 2020, we nominated an Iranian refugee journalist, H., for the HRD program although it had not yet been implemented. At the time, H. resided illegally in Turkey with her partner. By early 2021, the HRD program still was not implemented and the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship agreed to grant H. and her partner a temporary residence permit to come to Canada. Due to a legal technicality, she could not be included in Canada's regular Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) resettlement program. H. arrived in Canada in June 2021 and her partner followed in early August. PEN Canada provided them with financial assistance. At this point, their application for permanent residence is pending, they both have work permits, and they should soon be self-sustaining. To be cautious, we have budgeted for continued financial support until August 2022.

In July 2021, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship finally announced the implementation of the HRD program, but the program has not been fully implemented. There remain no eligibility criteria nor a clear nomination role for Canadian NGOs. Instead, the program is managed by two international NGOs, Front Line Defenders and ProtectDefenders.eu. We conclude that the nomination process is opaque and unaccountable, although it might be possible for PEN Canada to make an HRD nomination through ProtectDefenders.eu. We will pursue that course of action.

With the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, PEN Canada was overwhelmed with requests for assistance from Afghan journalists – both individuals and groups. It was a period of great urgency and confusion when thousands of Afghans were in hiding from the Taliban, access to the airport was chaotic, and IRCC was not responding to urgent communications.

Finally, in mid-August at a Zoom conference, IRCC stated that in-country applications would only be accepted for Afghans who were at risk due to connections with the Canadian government. Other journalists qualified for a second, humanitarian group that could only apply for resettlement from outside Afghanistan.

IRCC announced 40,000 resettlement spaces within two years for Afghans at risk from the Taliban. PEN Canada presented a resettlement application for 73 women journalists and their families, all residing in Afghanistan at the time. PEN Canada sought visas to allow them to exit Afghanistan and enter Canada, either as government or privately sponsored refugees. Our application included detailed information including identity documents and proof of professional credentials. We had an additional list of more than 150 journalists if our first submissions were successful.

The aftermath of the Afghan crisis has not been happy. Representatives for both groups of Afghans have had little success gaining cooperation or coherent communication from IRCC. Afghanistan is dangerous, it is very difficult to escape from the country and the overseas resettlement process is bogged down by IRCC's insistence that all applicants to the Canadian program must apply through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which itself is overwhelmed by past and current refugee inventories. We have participated in an informal advocacy group that has been urging the Canadian government to waive the UNHCR referral requirement and process Afghan resettlement applications more expeditiously. Despite well framed internal submissions to the government, little progress has been made.

We have not maintained communication with those journalists inside Afghanistan because international communication is dangerous and we have had no meaningful advice to offer them at this time. We have managed to share in one successful Afghan resettlement by helping Journalists for Human Rights to bring one Afghan woman journalist with her extended family to Canada. We are hopeful that we can use her in-country knowledge to explore ways that we can assist writers still inside Afghanistan.

To date, less than 11,000 of the 40,000 promised Afghan resettlements have arrived in Canada. For those who do manage to escape Afghanistan, two years is far too long to remain in precarious circumstances in a neighbouring country waiting for a potential but unguaranteed relocation to Canada.

For the past two years, PEN Canada has sought to use Canada's relatively generous refugee resettlement program as the most practical means of assisting writers in peril. We have had limited success. Given the urgency of the Afghan crisis and PEN Canada's limited financial capacity, we are now asking if there are other means for PEN Canada to assist writers in serious peril.

Peter Showler

The Other Plague

Free Expression at Risk Due to Disinfodemic Online

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, social media, online journalism and user-driven forums became timely resources for evolving public health and safety guidance. These digital spaces also provided the safest form of interaction with others, especially during lockdowns.

Tragically, though, the escalation in casual users' online engagement became a daily "super-spreader event" for the other global pandemic: a real-world assault on the basic rights and freedoms of already at-risk citizens – online and off. These harms include coordinated efforts to co-opt and confuse any common understanding of free expression online.

UNESCO labels this highly contagious parallel plague – the persistent, viral dissemination of deliberately deceptive, hate-laced expressions related to COVID-19 – the "Disinfodemic." Carefully crafted by a spectrum of online predators who profit by abusing free expression, the Disinfodemic weaponizes data we volunteer every time we engage online. Agents of the Disinfodemic target, groom, recruit and radicalize "carriers" seeking "alternative explanations" that affirm their own worst pre-existing conditions: the baseless belief that "someone else" is "secretly responsible" for their pandemic-related fears and personal inconveniences.

Pandemic-related disinformation online has contributed to an extraordinary escalation in threats, harassment, intimidation, loss of livelihoods, and verbal or physical assaults aimed at identifiable groups of Canadians. Journalists, healthcare workers, first responders, mask-wearers, duly-elected government officials and Asian and South Asian Canadians – especially women and children – have all reported chilling expressions of ignorance and hate "in real life" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While correlation is not causation, the damage caused by Disinfodemic is apparent. According to the latest findings on fighting "Covid Racism" by the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) and Project 1907, for example, reported anti-Asian racism incidents rose 47% in the second year of the pandemic. In their report, the CCNCTO cites Moonshot, an anti-harm social enterprise firm: "This uptick in disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric tying East Asian communities to the origins and spread of COVID-19 virus echoes existing anti-Asian tropes and narratives."

The Disinfodemic eroded press freedom by increasing threats and derision expressed against journalists in the field and online. In tandem with online disinformation campaigns, the Disinfodemic also undermined peer-reviewed science and challenged healthcare workers' traditional role as trusted sources. A search of the word "pandemic" on the Canadian Anti-Hate Network's website provides an extensive catalogue of independently verifiable real-world incidents and events. COVID-19 is not the cause of these harms. It is the excuse.

Those who've so far escaped direct harm are not immune to the plague of disinformation. In early 2022, we witnessed the Disinfodemic's messiest manifestation to date: the so-called Freedom Convoy which disrupted the nation's capital as well as strategic points along the US/Canada border. An ominous fracas of mainly white Canadian men organized online and assembled to protest "vaccine mandates" that either did not exist or were already set to expire – and were never determined by the federal government of Canada anyway.

Subsequently, courageous reporters and online data researchers have revealed that online hate-based extremists and white nationalists fostered the convoy performances. The ultimate target of the Disinfodemic, then, seems nothing less than the destruction of liberal democracy and free expression for all.

Karen Walton

literary events and prizes

The new format for events has underscored, in its limitations, the problematic of a digital community. When virtual space takes precedence over the immediacy of in-person attendance, misinformation and critique can easily diminish the power of human stories and connection. PEN's members have not gathered since the 2019 Annual Gala paid tribute to Graeme Gibson and Margaret Atwood. Nevertheless, like many other centres, we have worked with a small but dedicated team to make our work visible and to highlight PEN's role in the global community.

LITERARY

The inaugural Graeme Gibson Talk was launched in September 2021 in time for the 100th Anniversary of PEN International. “Hope in Strange Paradises” was a conversation between Omar El Akkad and Margaret Atwood, moderated by CBC Ideas host Nahlah Ayed. The inaugural talk series was promoted as a free event in 2021 thanks to the founding sponsorship support of Penguin Random House Canada and our collaborators, CBC Ideas and the generous folks at TIFA.

The “Pen By the Book” series was launched to improve member outreach beyond the borders of central Canada. The series started on October 4, 2021 with a lively conversation between novelist Colin McAdam and the classicist and poet Jack Mitchell about the challenge of turning the Star Wars myth into an epic poem.

AWARDS

Deepa Rajagopalan won the 2021 RBC/PEN Canada New Voices Award. Her short story *Peacocks of Instagram*, was chosen ahead of more than 130 submissions by jurors Donna Bailey Nurse, Kaie Kellough and Thea Lim. The jurors described Rajagopalan’s story as “Painfully vivid” with “a rich nest of subcultures, traumatic past experience returned to haunt the present, and a protagonist both comical and tragic, whom we could not forget.”

The journalist and legal scholar Amy Lai won the 2021 PEN Canada/Ken Filkow Prize for courageously reporting on “threats faced by both individuals and democratic institutions” in her native Hong Kong, and for groundbreaking scholarship on freedom of expression. She has been particularly outspoken since Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement began in 2019, and after the passage of the controversial National Security Law which notionally grants Beijing the power to prosecute its critics, including foreign nationals, anywhere in the world.

The 2021 PEN Canada-Humber College Writers-in-Exile Scholarship was awarded to Arzu Yildiz, a Turkish-born investigative journalist, senior reporter, editor and public speaker, and the author of four books. Yildiz built a career at the liberal, democratic daily *Taraf* where she reported on human rights issues, corruption, and arms trafficking. Jailed and stripped of guardianship of her children for reporting on the trial of state prosecutors, she spent five months in hiding after a government crackdown on press freedoms before fleeing to Canada via Greece. “I want to write refugee stories,” said Yildiz of her plans for the mentorship. “I take every step I take for refugees who are in despair anywhere in the world, and I tell them, ‘We must move forward.’”

**PANEL DISCUSSIONS, SCREENINGS
& PERFORMANCES**

Conflict Is Not Abuse*

April 13

Award-winning writer and queer activist, Sarah Schulman discussed ideas of overstating harm, community responsibility, and the duty of repair with Lana Dee Povitz.

Cancel Culture in Theatre:

What is to be done?*

July 4

Chilean-Canadian Carmen Aguirre – award-winning theatre artist and author, spoke with Marilo Nuñez about discourse instead of purge in the theatre community.

**How Should Democracies Regulate
Speech Online?***

August 12

Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, spoke about the intersection of free speech and technology.

**Can Tougher Hate Speech Laws Stem
the Tide of Hate? Examining Bill C-36***

September 15

Panelists Faisal Bhabha, Ena Chadha, and Richard Moon explored whether Bill-36's amendments to hate speech provisions are suitable for the task of reducing hate in Canada.

**Co-sponsored event at Ryerson's Centre
for Free Expression (CFE)*

**20 Years of Dictatorship in Eritrea: A Case
Study of the Global Assault on Media
Freedom by Authoritarian Regimes**

September 30

The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), PEN Eritrea, PEN Canada, the RWI-70, and the Buxus Foundation hosted a panel discussion which looked at 20 years of dictatorship in Eritrea as a case study of the global assault on media freedom by authoritarian regimes.

Inside the Red Brick Wall

December 3

PEN co-sponsored the JAYU's Human Rights Film Festival screening of *Inside the Red Brick Wall* a documentary about the Hong Kong democracy fighters trapped by the police inside the Polytechnic University – a powerful collection of films taken by heroic filmmakers inside the siege.

Best of The Shoe Project 2021

December 9

The Shoe Project returned to the stage in Toronto to celebrate the best of its stories in the past decade. The Shoe Project is a writing and performance workshop where immigrant women tell the stories of their arrival in Canada – through a pair of shoes. They are coached by veteran Canadian writers and theatre professionals. It is a Canadian charity founded by Canadian novelist Katherine Govier and incubated at the Bata Shoe Museum in 2011.



“The Shoe Project is a writing and performance workshop where immigrant women tell the stories of their arrival in Canada – through a pair of shoes.”

**Past winners of the
Ken Filkow Prize**

Franke James
Raihan Abir
Desmond Cole
Justin Brake
Tim Bousquet
Amy Lai

**Past recipients of the
One Humanity Award**

Jiang Weiping
Zarganar
Lydia Cacho
Nasrin Sotoudeh
Dieu Cay
Raif Badawi
Eskinder Nega
Azimjon Askarov
Ashraf Fayadh

**Past winners of the
RBC/PEN Canada
New Voices Award**

Claire Battershill
Emily Izsak
Nadine Sander-Green
Laura Legge
Mikko Harvey
Jaclyn Desforges
Noor Naga
Em Dial
Deepa Rajagopalan

WITH 2021 NEW VOICES WINNER DEEPA RAJAGOPALAN

Deepa Rajagopalan is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph, and is a graduate of the Creative Writing program of the University of Toronto. She is an editor of *Held Magazine*, and is the co-host and curator of the Emerging Writers Reading Series in Toronto. She is working on her first book, a collection of short fiction. She currently lives in Guelph, Ontario.

PEN Canada: As a curator of the Emerging Writers Series and as an MFA candidate at Guelph, what does it feel like to have your work recognised by a jury and an award like this?

Deepa Rajagopalan: The obstacles to publication for an emerging writer often feel insurmountable. To be recognized by PEN Canada, especially coming from this jury, is such an incredible honour. It brings validation, and much-needed encouragement. As an organization that supports refugees, and advocates for the right to freedom of expression, PEN Canada is doing such important work in today's climate. In addition to being paid for your work, the opportunity to work with a mentor is invaluable.

PC: The New Yorker archivist, Erin Overbey, recently published data about the lack of diversity in the magazine's bylines. In 96 years the print version of the magazine has published only 4 book reviews by African-American women; in the last 30 years only 7 reviews by Latino writers and 12 by Asian-Americans have appeared, and less than 1 percent of the total are by Indian-Americans. In your experience, do Canadian writers face similar barriers? If so, what could be done to address this?

DR: Overbey's data was sobering, but not entirely shocking. In answering this question, I think it is useful to think of another question: Who gets to be called a "Canadian" writer, unhyphenated? While more diverse voices are being heard now, the stats are still heavily skewed. A disproportionately large number of underrepresented writers, including Indigenous, Black, racialized, LGBTQ2+, disabled writers, continue to face barriers in entering the literary scene.

Acknowledging that we are operating from a colonial context would be a step in the right direction. As Overbey suggests, mastheads at prestigious publications need to start looking different. Re-evaluating what gets to be called "good" literature, what is coherent and what isn't, is necessary. This would result in better, richer "content," which is ultimately good for everyone.

The University of Guelph offers a workshop taught by author Carrienne Leung called Decolonial Fiction. Such a workshop should be essential learning for all of us, writers and publishers, because it gives us language to talk about these things, and challenges the status quo.

At the *Emerging Writers Reading Series*, we try to ensure that at least 60% of our readers are from underrepresented communities. As opposed to thinking of representation as checking off a box, I like to think of it as highlighting stories and voices that we haven't seen before.

PC: Many argue that our increasingly post-literate culture fosters populism and may be producing a “re-tribalization” of society. Do you agree? What role might creative writing play in resisting this tendency? Which writers do you think have done so most effectively?

DR: Populism in our post-literate culture is amplified because of this increasingly binary way of thinking. The lack of dialogue and nuance is frustrating. Writers resist this tendency by supplying the nuance, sometimes as the quiet voice of reason that helps reach across aisles, and sometimes with the fervent rage needed to make a point.

In an interview with *The Paris Review* this year, Arundhati Roy said she feels uncomfortable being described as a “writer-activist” and likened it to the term “sofa-bed.” She doesn't consider herself an activist at all. Roy's work, both fiction and her essays, has been suffused with this obsession with understanding how to think about power, and keenly resisting populism.

PC: Which writers would you like most of your generation to have read? Why?

DR: Oh, this is so difficult. I'll try to keep it short. Arundhati Roy, especially her novel, “The God of Small Things,” for what she does with language, and her pointed irreverence. Kazuo Ishiguro, for his deceiving simplicity, and the haunting characters, and worlds that they inhabit. Alice Munro, for her subtle brilliance, and the art of surprise. Toni Morrison, for her precision and emotional profundity. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, well, for being Marquez.

PC: You have lived in four countries (India, Saudi Arabia, the USA and Canada). How has the interplay of these experiences influenced your writing?

DR: I come from the state of Kerala in India. I was born in Saudi Arabia though, where my parents were working at the time. It was a common thing, this economic migration, despite having to live in a restricted country like Saudi Arabia. At the age of twelve, I moved to a boarding school in Kerala. As a young adult, I moved to the USA, and later Canada.

The vantage point from where I view the world is somewhat fluid. There is a lack of groundedness, which can be disorienting at times, but also liberating. I like to joke that I feel at home nowhere and everywhere. There is a sense of tingling possibility, at all times. There is also a sense of unabating loneliness. When I write, I am drawn to characters who have a fluid sense of home. Many of them don't have the luxury to think of things like belonging and are just trying to get by, either financially or emotionally. A lot of writing is about keen observation, and I think it comes with the territory of being the outsider.


PC: What are you currently reading? What books have you found most helpful during the COVID lockdowns?

DR: I am currently reading *Shuggie Bain*, by Douglas Stuart. Reading and writing have held me closely during the pandemic. So many books. A lot of Alice Munro, Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith. Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* is one book I have read many times in the past year. You can enter the stories from anywhere and they are flawless: every sentence, every word, in place.

HEALTH COMMUNICATORS IN THE DIGITAL CROSSHAIRS



The use and misuse of digital media during the pandemic has sharpened our awareness of the defects in our online information system. My hope is that, in 2022, we take real, positive steps forward.

 HEALTH COMMUNICATORS IN CANADA RESPONDED TO THIS VORACIOUS APPETITE FOR INFORMATION. JOURNALISTS CREATED AND SHARED CASE COUNT INFOGRAPHICS THROUGH TWITTER THREADS, VIROLOGISTS CREATED EXPLANATORY TIKTOK VIDEOS, AND DOCTORS SHARED INSTAGRAM POSTS ON DIY MASK-MAKING.

For many of us, social media were indispensable during the first weeks of the pandemic. People wanted information and they wanted it fast. They wanted to hear about virus transmission pathways, World Health Organization decrees, alleged shortfalls in national toilet paper production, and new public health measures.

Health communicators in Canada responded to this voracious appetite for information. Journalists created and shared case count infographics through Twitter threads, virologists created explanatory TikTok videos, and doctors shared Instagram posts on DIY mask-making. Some efforts focused on reaching communities in Canada whose information needs weren't being met. For instance, the South Asian COVID Task Force and South Asian Health Network launched online town hall meetings and created online resources in six languages to create accurate and accessible information.

More malevolent uses of social media were present from the beginning of the pandemic, too, including abuse and threats directed at health communicators. That is the focus of a research project that my colleague Heidi Tworek and I are leading, based at University of British Columbia's School of Public Policy and Global Affairs.

I have interviewed close to 30 public health officials, health journalists, and medical and scientific experts who are active online. Many have experienced threats or wishes of harm, and all face regular doses of uncivil or abusive content. The drivers of this toxicity are complex. Grievances and false narratives have been amplified by foreign actors, snake-oil salesmen, and politicians. Conspiracy theories spread globally and are referenced to justify violent acts or – at minimum – a deep disdain for health officials and medical practitioners.

As a result, many health communicators I interviewed have a love-hate relationship with social media platforms. They appreciate the ability to share insights to diverse publics and advocate for effective pandemic responses. However, they resent the platforms for not finding ways to address abuse and false claims more effectively. Some describe how their enthusiastic online engagement has become more fatiguing and futile as the hostility continues.

What can be done about this?

The federal government solicited feedback in mid-2021 on a regulatory framework to address harmful online content. It proposed a new regulator with powers to address hate speech, terrorist content, content that incites violence, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and child sexual exploitation. The proposal raised concerns about definitions and enforcement powers, many of which are detailed in the government's analysis of feedback received from experts and civil society.

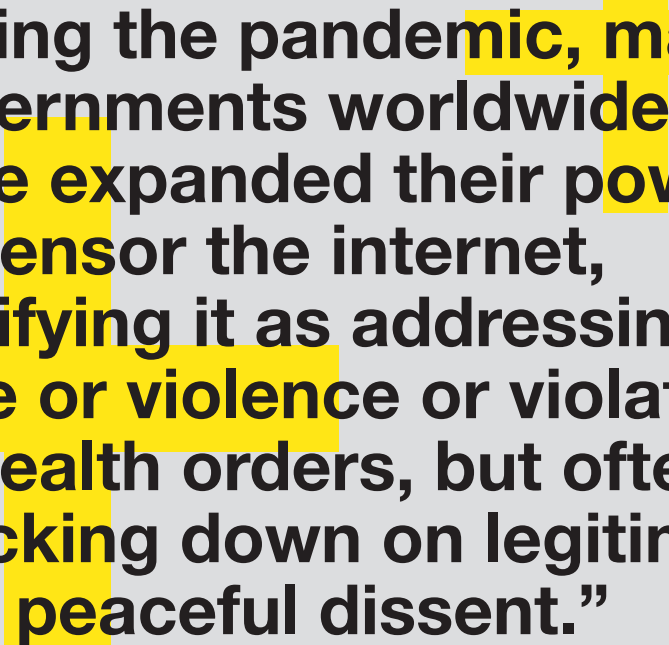
If this proposal becomes law, it may help address types of content that are already illegal. It would require platforms to act on this content. Currently, Canadians have to either appeal to platforms to take action (which many health communicators have told me is unproductive), or they have to engage in long, costly, and often unproductive criminal or civil actions against the content producers.

My hope is that an updated framework, which addresses concerns from rights advocates, is legislated. Certainly, there are risks to empowering governments to remove communication it deems hazardous, as PEN supporters know well. During the pandemic, many governments worldwide have expanded their powers to censor the internet, justifying it as addressing hate or violence or violations of health orders, but often cracking down on legitimate and peaceful dissent.

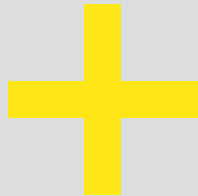
At the same time, much of the abuse and disinformation that health communicators face would not and should not be addressed by this regulatory approach. Instead, social media platforms must improve their design and content moderation policies to discourage toxicity and provide users with more effective control of their online experience. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have certainly taken steps in this direction, but they have not provided independent researchers with the data needed to evaluate those improvements. Certainly, the health communicators I interviewed join countless others in the belief that the status quo is not acceptable.

My hope for 2022 is that we see the dominant social media platforms develop new approaches to reduce toxic content and provide real evidence that they work. I also hope to see new social media platforms emerge, with different business models and missions, and which address our needs for information in ways that are, in a word, healthier.

Chris Tenove

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“During the pandemic, many governments worldwide have expanded their powers to censor the internet, justifying it as addressing hate or violence or violations of health orders, but often cracking down on legitimate and peaceful dissent.”



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