

EVENT SUMMARY

Expert Roundtable on Science Disinformation in a Time of Pandemic

OVERVIEW

On June 11th 2020, The Public Policy Forum convened over 40 experts to discuss the content and release of the report **Science Disinformation in a Time of Pandemic** written by Christopher Dornan. The event began with a panel discussion including Christopher Dornan, Andre Picard, and Dr. Samantha Hill, moderated by Linda Solomon Wood. Expert participants were then moved into smaller breakout rooms where they discussed both the report and science disinformation more generally. The event wrapped up with breakout groups reporting back to the main group.

DISCUSSION

Many common themes threaded through various breakout groups. It was indeed clear that COVID-19 provides an opportunity for a case study on science disinformation, but that science disinformation expands far beyond COVID-19.

Participants spoke of responsibility -- responsibility of scientists, of journalists, of governments, of social media platforms, of education, of individuals, to help curb the creation and spread of disinformation: “we are all broadcasters now.” Further, they spoke of the opportunity of further collaboration among and between these various groups.

There remained questions about how and why disinformation spreads. This included conversations about moderating online content, the economics of disinformation, algorithmic accountability, the downstream effects of disinformation, and the roles of government intervention.

It was apparent from conversations that disinformation spreads both within siloed so-called echo chambers which are often private, while also spreading across national and international borders. Both instances bring forth major regulatory challenges and highlight again the question of who is responsible.

Participants raised that falsehoods seem to have a lower standard of truth. This recognition is further amplified by a general lack of understanding of scientific inquiry – indeed, science continues to evolve and without a concrete understanding of the scientific method, it is easy for people to develop distrust in scientific evidence. Participants highlighted that in a time of an overabundance of information, trust may seem difficult. They also noted however, that covid-19 has demonstrated an overall trust in public institutions in a challenging time.

Many participants raised the need to encourage the spread of good information instead of just the spread of bad information. They spoke of sharing what science is, and what it isn't. They said there also needs to be a recognition that complex science needs to be communicated clearly and transparently – this may increase trust like was seen with various public health officials during COVID-19.

Overall, participants recognized that more work needs to be done to understand disinformation and that we all have a responsibility to play a part in stopping the spread of disinformation.

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The paper discussed, *Science Disinformation in a Time of Pandemic*, was written by Christopher Dornan, a professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University who holds a degree in the History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Cambridge and a doctorate in science communication from McGill University. Most recently, he is the author of “Dezinformatsiya: the past, present and future ‘fake news’,” a 2017 reflection paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, and “How to Navigate a Media Environment Awash in Manipulation, Falsehood, Hysteria, Vitriol, Hyper-Partisan Deceit and Pernicious Algorithms: A Guide for the Conscientious Citizen,” a 2019 study for the Canadian Committee for World Press Freedom and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

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