

DISTRUST, DEMOCRACY AND DELINQUENCY: A COVID DILEMMA

di Geoffrey Woodling,

Is the world's worst fear facing a post-pandemic digital nightmare? That is not to diminish the reality of infection, illness and sadly death for so many. The past year has witnessed a degree of paranoia that can be attributed only in part to the stress of Covid. Other social grievances have aggravated these concerns. A particular worry is the increasingly aggressive behaviour towards one another in public life. Fuel for such intolerance seems to lie in the digital realm. The apparent ease with which social media can influence people through the propagation of extremist views has incited more conflict and vilification among those of differing opinions. Social media rapidly became the primary forum for challenging the veracity of how, why, where and when the virus erupted into our lives. The "China virus", to use one phrase propagated by those we might politely call "Delinquents" on social media, demonstrates the search for a scapegoat to divert attention from authority's failings much closer to home. In so doing, the pandemic has heightened awareness of the lack of control of social media content.

It rapidly became apparent that much of what was being shared on social media was of doubtful veracity. This could be attributable to so-called official messaging as much as to individual ranting. In due course this morphed into outright fear of vaccination. However, other social issues, notably BLM (Black Lives Matter), have fuelled the clash between those who see social media as an expression of free speech and those who see it as a source of sedition of the kind perpetrated on January 6 in Washington. Storming the Capitol reignited the debate between those who consider social media organisations should have a legal duty to exercise responsibility for content they publish (or transmit) and others who regard such constraints as a denial of the right to free speech on the Internet. While this is hotly contested in the US, where social media seek

to preserve their commercial freedom, the ramifications of this conflict of views reverberate around the globe and threaten their independence.

At its heart is a clash between the belief that freedom of speech is not a licence to injure, or even deliberately seek to mislead others with falsehoods or worse, and the right to express one's views on media, free of any form of imposed restraint. These are not mutually exclusive, insofar as individuals may be expected to exercise self-restraint. However, the very structure of social media creates a positive feedback loop that automatically exacerbates the impact of any incitement to hatred, faster than it can be withdrawn. In a similar way, the views of those who deny the efficacy of the approved vaccines have been magnified by social media to the detriment of trust in public health. The consequence of social media companies restricting access or content has been to encourage the migration of those excluded to more obscure and unregulated platforms such as Signal and others on the 'dark net'.

All three instances of media abuse, conspiracies, BLM and vaccine mistrust illustrate the growing vulnerability of societies to corruption of facts by media sources and the demand for government intervention to prevent such vitriol. This has to some extent tainted governments suspected of seeking to restrict access to inconvenient data, fuelling the politicisation of Covid strategies and programmes and casting doubt on the veracity of both politics and science. The distrust of both public and private Covid data is a by-product of political efforts to reduce criticism of national governments' failures and their resort to competitive vaccine nationalism.

These, then, are especially trying times for democracies; for the extraordinary impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across the world has forced everyone into an emergency situation, with its attendant limitations on 'normal' life and curtailment of citizens' freedoms. What has happened, in particular, to our freedom of speech, the free media and freedom of information? In this information age, democracy is an

uninformed public, with ‘all the world’s information at their fingertips’, but without the inclination to question sources or to look up the facts, it seems; inclined instead to violently attack any opposing opinion or ‘tribe’. Ironically, this violence mirrors exactly that which happens where neither speech nor the media are free, and democracy is but a word: places we were tempted to admire for their strong and seemingly effective handling of the pandemic.

Politicians can now target messages to discrete media channels, much in the way that social media “influencers” promote their lifestyle choices of products. Perhaps these are the new role models for politicians, who must seek to portray the glamour and style of JFK or Obama or Reagan.

Getting things done is no longer the sole metric for success. Sensory appeal may count for as much. Going to a Trump rally was the appeal, not what was said there that had been heard a thousand times before. The political circus may only be imitating a wider tendency of leaders to use their position and power to deceive those they seek to influence.

While in some societies politics has a dirty name that may deter many from voting, some, such as in Japan, have a different perspective on the politics of democracy. There, democracy is seen to convey freedom to a point beyond which that freedom is entrusted to those in authority. It is not a freedom to do as one pleases or get what one wants, or possibly to say what one wishes. It may be that some societies have found their procedures for the conduct of political discourse have become inadequate or obsolete.

Now it is clear that the pandemic will remain among us globally for a long time, societies are starting to prioritise economic wellbeing above the health of those most at risk, inevitably among the most socially and economically disadvantaged. The glaring disparities in the risk of infection in society have highlighted the growing inequalities among different minorities or disadvantaged groups. It is as if there was a collective economic dementia, suddenly ignoring the fate of the most vulnerable,

whether children without food or the old in care homes, and failing to provide for their security.

The legitimate grievances this generates among the most vulnerable have been drowned out by those who choose to deny the efficacy of the vaccine or resent the obligations for social distancing and mask wearing. The latter are often exponents of unbridled freedom and right-wing conspiracies, sharing rage at their economic hardship due to lockdown. They are not a group of the uneducated, ageing, disgruntled white men of media folklore. On January 6 they did not get their information from hidden, dark net kinds of sources. Facebook seems to have been the common source for these people. The more they clicked on Trump or Giuliani or any of the other Trump supporters, the more intensely they got feedback on the most radical of their comments. People became radicalized by the algorithms themselves. They were revealed by the diversity of those involved in the Capitol ambush and their populist sympathies have found an echo around the world within the EU and elsewhere.

The consequences for our economic system are as profound as for our democracy. While social media corporations must take responsibility for the way their algorithms feed people disinformation, the recipients of the disinformation, regardless of their level of intelligence or education, are neither trained to, nor inclined to question or verify the information they are receiving. Such news content attracts our interest and network algorithms allow media to identify our preferences for advertisers, while they have our attention. Traditional media also sensationalise news, but unlike social media, they cannot exploit network effects that allow market dominance to develop, often entrenching first mover advantage in ways that limit competition. To do so, social media have been able to leverage public investment in the internet and datacomms infrastructure at almost no cost. It is no wonder social networks seek to preserve their commercial interest in maintaining this kind of oligopolistic behaviour to the detriment of effective competition.

Perhaps our fear of Covid has dulled our awareness of the wider economic impact of unrestricted access to social media. One is the rampant extent of what has been called a cybercrime pandemic that is exploiting systems to steal or disrupt vaccination programmes, a small symptom of a far deeper ‘nether economy’. In many cases it seems that the goal of cybercrime is economic extortion that may however hide a more insidious undermining of truth, democracy and freedom, and whose goal is to pervert the very foundation of electoral supremacy. Governments of all persuasions and degrees of legitimacy are both practitioners and combatants in cyberconflict and cybercrime. Indeed, some may be using it as a covert form of economic advantage. It matters little whether the threat comes from authoritarian regimes or supposedly democratic ones when we are the target.

Such fear has profound consequences when it undermines trust even in science or healthcare systems, as appears to be happening in many societies struggling to cope with the Covid pandemic. Once upon a time, it was a given that freedom, democracy and capitalism went hand in hand. Now we see that they can diverge along different trajectories. We can see the result in the widespread “distrust” in the outcome of the recent presidential election and in criticism of pharma companies. For many of that persuasion, there is a fear of “democracy” that comes with the tyranny of the majority. For some, perhaps democracy should not deny access to whatever content its citizens desire. Formerly individuals were free to decide which kinds of shops they might visit to satisfy their desires, whereas today there are few such shops to choose from.

Can society demand that social media networks prevent “delinquents” of all persuasions from distributing deliberately fake news to amplify unfounded conspiracy theories? One route is to vet those who are fuelling the pandemic of lies. That might begin with determining who is fit to be trusted. It is but a short jump to recognising that such untrustworthy individuals, the new global “Delinquents”, may indeed be working for malign forces engaged in cybercrime.

At the very top of this hierarchy of responsibility for the threat to our security comes our own leaders' mental fitness. Our failure to heed the psycho-neurological sciences' diagnosis of mental illness or instability is itself a victim of lack of trust in the scientific establishment. While many may dispute such diagnosis, we shall be obliged to heed the science that will determine whether we shall soon be free to resume our "normal" lives. As we move beyond the Covid pandemic, we will increasingly need to recognise that our future freedom and security will demand that we can demonstrate our Covid-free status. This is likely to require adopting a version of the much-discussed digital vaccine passport. That will almost certainly reside within an app on the ubiquitous smartphone. Its utility depends on global agreement to a digital record that identifies each of us and can track our location at all times, so that we may be able to travel across jurisdictions, or potentially attend high-risk events closer to home. Maybe the prospect of freedom to travel will trump others' fear of mental incapacity, but will it defeat those who will see the vaccine passport as a step towards creating the means to deny our right not just to travel but to access social media? For the vaccine passport could become the platform for creating a unique, even global, record to protect our individual identity. It would certainly prevent rogue FSB agents from posting on Facebook, just as it might make it harder for them to travel abroad to administer nerve agents. "Delinquents" who have yet to accept any constraints on their freedom to access or abuse ubiquitous social networks, will need to recognise that only those with health data fit to be trusted and whose identity can be both validated and protected, will be free to travel beyond their own virtual reality. Perhaps that is an acceptable trade-off for them and the rest of us.