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Media Framing, Claims-Making, and Risk
in Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Courtney Joshua and Kevin Walby
The University of Winnipeg

Abstract

This paper examines the claims made by Canadian media, government agencies, and citizen groups about the social and individual risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with the sociology of risk, we analyze media framing and claims-making in the Western provinces of Canada during the first three months of the pandemic. Analyzing 257 articles from CBC News, Global News, National Post, The Globe and Mail, and CTV News, we assess how discourses emanating from community regulation, policing, social media use, and government communications encode notions of risk, contagion, and disease related to COVID-19. We also explore the intersection of these communications with government social media messaging online meant to indicate levels of contagion. By doing so, we add to emerging criminological literature on COVID-19 as well as sociological literatures on risk and health regulation.

Keywords: COVID-19; risk; contagion; claims-making; framing; health; Canada; news

Introduction

Pandemics confront humans with their own fragility and failings (Lynteris, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of our world in ways that few events in recent history have. The implications of a pandemic for economic and health inequalities are enormous. In Canada and elsewhere, the state response to COVID-19 is ushering in sweeping changes to public policy as well as surveillance practices that trace movement and interactions (Kitchin, 2020). Government agencies are

policing the pandemic to force compliance with social distancing and other public health measures. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) and the Policing the Pandemic Project (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a great deal of social control. They note "that between April 1 and June 15, 2020 there were over 10,000 tickets issued or charges laid related to COVID-19. Across the country, this has resulted in over $13 million dollars in COVID-related fines to date" (CCLA, 2020, p. iii). It is imperative to assess how media and government communications about COVID-19 have shaped awareness and actual conditions of risk and health regulation in Canada during the pandemic.

To this end, this paper examines media framing and claims-making in Canadian news media spanning the first three months of the pandemic in 2020. It is vital to assess media representations of the pandemic to understand how COVID-19 is being depicted (Lupton, 2020; also see Davis, 2019; Roy et al., 2020; Staniland & Smith, 2013). Media analysis has been used to explore the social and cultural dimensions of previous pandemics and epidemics (Davis et al., 2014, 2013). Oxman-Martinez and colleagues (2009, p. 298) argue "the news, being socially constructed, represents the values of the dominant social order." We assess aspects of these claims made by government agencies and other claims-makers as filtered through news media. The risk of contagion is a dominant trope appearing in these discourses. People have varied understandings of risk, and many people lack trust in government accounts of risk and health (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). Risk discourses also contain moralizing undertones, which means notions of risk are never neutral (Lupton, 1993). Applying discourse analysis, we examine the tone and texture of these discourses related to COVID-19 and risk. Examining 257 articles from CBC News, Global News, National Post, The Globe and Mail, and CTV News, we assess how discourses emanating from community regulation, policing, social media use, and government communications encode notions of risk, contagion, and disease related to COVID-19. We also explore the intersection of these communications with government social media messaging online meant to indicate levels of contagion. We find that early media reporting on COVID-19 in Western Canada reproduced a logic of risk portraying individuals as the site and source of contagion, while

questions about connections to government negligence, corporate malfeasance, or environmental degradation and climate change were muted.

Literature and Conceptual Framing

Social Science Accounts of Contagion and Risk

Social science accounts of contagion point to the socially constructed nature of health and disease as well as the role of communication in governance. Stemming back to the initial period of colonialism and imperialism, racialized groups have long been portrayed as vectors of disease (Sargent & Larchanche, 2014) as a means of legitimizing surveillance and control. The ideas of contagion and infection are imbued with cultural and political meanings (Kinzelbach, 2006). Abeysinghe and White (2011) examined government publications as well as print media pertaining to the avian flu and found that discourses of risk and blame were prevalent. French (2009) found that public health discourses reflected militarized discourses of risk. In health campaigns, there is a visual rhetoric of risk (Kuperavage, 2017) that appears in the messaging, which conveys cultural and political meanings. The issue of disease is striking because it implicates not just the individual but also state agencies, surveillance, and the potential for social control (Lee et al., 2012).

One idea that defines the COVID-19 pandemic is risk. Risk is a focal point when talking about fears, anxieties, and uncertainties (Wilkinson, 2001). Knowledge of risk may quell anxiety and transition people into fear or absolve anxiety and fear altogether, leading to an attenuation of risk. Knowledge of risk may also highlight uncertainty, intensifying anxiety. Risk refers to the incalculable. Yet statistical procedures have made attempts at forecasting risk more feasible. Calculability leads in two directions. Risk can be calculated more efficiently with population statistics and big data, but that knowledge may generate further anxieties. There are thus contradictory and competing ways of defining and living with risk.

In grand social theorizing, such as the works of Ulrich Beck (1992), who writes about risk and trust at the end of modernity, the focus is on the global, which obscures the importance of the self in relation to

risk. As McKechnie and Welsh (1994) put it, "issues such as the threat to human life on earth arising from the use of nuclear arsenals, ecological catastrophe, and the spread of lethal viral contagions arrive ready-made in much social theory" (p. 58), and there is a need to investigate how risk is construed and experienced in local settings and through diverse channels of communication. Yet during the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen that some citizens mistrust science. There is an interplay of regulatory agencies, individuals, and media involved in the production of discourses about the virus. It is necessary to examine this interplay of claims made by the state, by media, and by citizen groups about COVID-19.

Žižek (1997) likewise pushes back against grand theorizations of risk. There is no singularity (God) in charge in postmodern times. Those who are in positions of authority are not universally trusted. This contingency makes it so that more than ever we feel life is a matter of choice, and that each choice is anxiety provoking. The COVID-19 pandemic animates these postulations vividly. One more limit of the risk society thesis is that in its rejection of "zombie categories" like political left or right, it rejects the fact that private corporations continue to make political decisions that shape distribution of risk. We have seen corporations exacerbate risk and inequality during COVID-19, from the record profits of billionaires to evictions and lines at food banks, and it is crucial to assess how or if corporate and state entities are positioned and blamed in COVID-19 media discourses and reporting.

Media Framing, Claims-Making, and COVID-19

Literature on crime and news media shows how crime is constructed in ways that reflect ideological and political views (Dreier, 2005; Sacco, 1995; Surette, 2015). This approach suggests that public understanding is constrained because the issue is framed by news media in particular ways. There are parallels between media framing of crime and news framing of COVID-19. News stories often have a negative tone or an entertainment focus (Corteau & Haynes, 2006). Media reporting on transgression tends to be sensationalizing (Rapping, 2003). The same can be said for framing of pandemics (Staniland & Smith, 2013). Altheide and Coyle (2006) argue that "news sources, and especially social control agencies such as police

departments, have adjusted their messages to comply with the media logic and entertainment format criteria of news organizations" (p. 300). We explore whether news stories on COVID-19 have a negative tone or an entertainment focus. In the news, there is a limited ability to report on the minutiae of complicated social and political issues. Media reporting on COVID-19 is perhaps guilty of this in some ways as well. Crime is made into news in ways that reflect political and corporate agendas (Katz, 1987). We investigate how reporting on COVID-19 is not only framing the pandemic, but from a critical media studies perspective (Carah & Louw, 2015; Jackson et al., 2011) we speculate on how those forms of framing reflect political and economic positions and trends. Hans (1990) explores the representation of law in the media, which is a different sort of object than crime and which is always already affiliated with the legitimacy of the state. We assess how public health law and surveillance initiatives enacted after the emergence of COVID-19 are framed and portrayed.

Hallgrimsdottir et al. (2006) argue that "cultural scripts organize media narratives by directing what gets counted as newsworthy and what gets omitted from news accounts" (p. 278). What is omitted from media discourse is as significant as what is included. Awareness of absences is crucial for conceptualizing the significance of the claims made by authoritative bodies and the tone of the discourse. The authors also note "this means that analyses of media should include interrogation of the structural relations in which media practices are embedded" (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006, p. 267). This could include pressures from political bodies that have opinions on messaging related to COVID-19. News media also play a role in stigmatizing people and sorting so-called good from bad citizens: "defining appropriate symbolic labels for various types of membership is part of the process of constructing reality and maintaining order" (Altheide & Coyle, 2006, p. 299). Examining media accounts of COVID-19 is important to assess the ways in which media outlets divide good from bad, healthy from unhealthy, in our new terrain of pandemic citizenship and justice. We explore if these discourses are parroted in social media accounts or if social media becomes a site of counter-discourses during a pandemic.

Research Design and Methods

We collected content published between March 18 and May 1, 2020, from five news sources: CBC News, Global News, National Post, The Globe and Mail, and CTV News, the most significant national news organizations in Canada. The news organizations' official websites were used to collect content. Data parameters were narrowed to encompass the Western Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, to limit the scope of the analysis. We chose these four provinces as they are often referred to as Western Canada, and the volume of news in Quebec and Ontario was too tremendous to analyze in the same study. News articles were collected using terms such as "COVID regulations," "COVID-19," "quarantine," and "pandemic." Winnipeg (MB), Saskatoon and Regina (SK), Edmonton and Calgary (AB), and Vancouver (BC) became the primary focal points for data collection due to the volume of texts. However, the dataset is not limited to these cities, as some statements on Indigenous communities, rural areas, and interactions between federal and provincial agencies are also communicated.

Due to the variation in the types of messages offered on COVID-19 regulations and to ensure data collection was complete, "health regulations," "COVID crime," "COVID fines," and "COVIDIOT" were used as search terms. After collecting the news articles and collating these by their cities, provinces, and publishers, the stories were analyzed to interpret themes. In total, 257 articles were analyzed across the 5 news sources. Content varied due to the location of the news organization, news source type (print or film), and even social and political-ideological perspectives (see Table 1). While news outlets sometimes create sensationalized articles, National Post and The Globe and Mail produced less emotionalized discourses compared to CBC News, Global News, and CTV News. National Post and The Globe and Mail offered more consistent messaging related to quarantine laws, fines, and official events. The other news organizations offered many more stories featuring personal interviews with everyday Canadians. These interviews allowed more stories about emotions, injustice, and vulnerability to appear, adding

a personal character to the stories. CBC and CTV also encouraged readers and viewers to contact them with stories. Sensationalized articles can be described as attention-grabbing journalism, which stimulates dramatic emotion such as anger, fear, or empathy (Kilgo et al., 2018). Emotionalized news media articles differ as they reflect personal and emotional characteristics and messages of individual perceptions on the impact and associations with risk and contagion (Al-Rawi, 2019). These categories play out in media framing and the types of messages communicated as well as the themes expressed.

We used thematic analysis to decipher the messaging communicated in these data. We located eight themes derived from the dataset: containment, culpability, contagion, policing, risk, as well as corporate, societal, and government failures. These eight themes appear in different realms of discourse and practice, including community regulations, policing, social media, and government communications. We then used discourse analysis to assess the meanings and metaphors in these media and government communications (Lupton & McLean, 1998). Discourse analysis allows us to examine these news and popular media texts and explore the connotations, patterns, ideological messages, but also silences contained within (Lupton, 1992; Tonkiss, 2004).

We also searched Facebook for reactions to these stories as well as other community and government communications. As a result of the increased use of online communications due to the quarantine conditions across Canada, platforms like Facebook have become electronic channels for disseminating information by governments and other prominent agencies such as news sources, police, and non-governmental organizations. All four provinces used digital response plans to offer updated content on pandemic conditions, which included social media (Government of Canada, 2020). Each provincial government's Facebook page was analyzed for content.
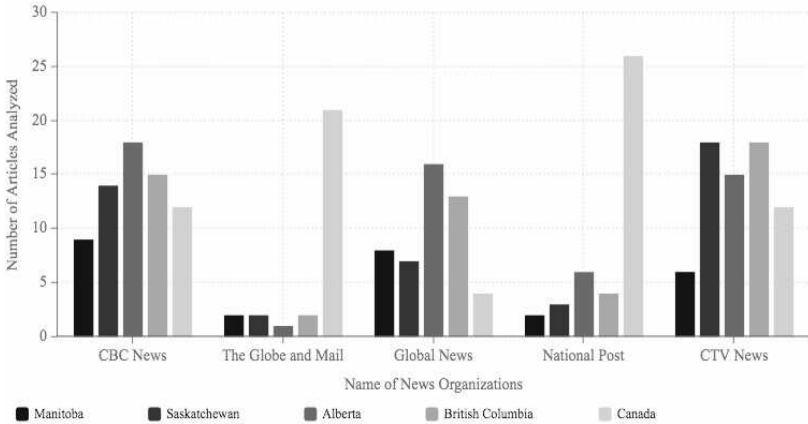
Table 1
Articles Analyzed

Figure 1: Articles Analyzed

Data Analysis

Community Regulations during COVID-19

Our data reveals a divide on whether or not citizens across Western Canada supported the federal and provincial governments' approaches to managing COVID-19 risk and contagion. As per the stories analyzed, many Canadians across the four provinces followed the community regulations set forth by the governments, as the number of fines reported was low. Community regulations were described as "quarantine regulations" (Tunney, 2020) and as a "country-wide shut down of everyday life" (Wilson & D'Emilio, 2020). All jurisdictions used different language when speaking of the pandemic regulations and new bylaws. The terminology of risk, danger, and anxiety is used throughout all platforms and within public health communications to represent the evolution, uncertainty, and governance of health issues (Lupton, 1993). We also uncovered stories about a number of individuals concerned about the types of regulations and the severity of these measures in relation to human rights, as well as Canadian and international law. These stories communicated messages about the severity of the regulations.

Conflicts have been highlighted in areas such as freedom for movement, parental custody battles (McGinn & Freeze, 2020), and access to hearings/court services (Fine, 2020a). Some believed that the human rights moniker should have been applied in different ways, such as concerning elder rights to healthcare (Picard, 2020) and in relation to civil liberties (Patel, 2020). Though some Canadians began to frame the COVID-19 restrictions as related to human rights, no specific information on actual human rights violations experienced in the general population are discussed in our dataset.

Across Western Canada, provinces were encouraged by the federal government to regulate public and private spaces due to risk and contagion of COVID-19, regardless of ownership or use. News articles suggested this was to contain the spread of the virus, to protect lives, and reduce economic costs. The social nature of public and private spaces varies in each city and province, leading to a lack of regulatory consistency from provincial, municipal, and federal governments across Western Canada. From urban to rural, and from city to city, quarantine conditions have been an uneven terrain. White (1993) cautions that urban environments are complicated due to the distinct ethnic, gender, class, and age differences that influence the uses of private and public spaces. Inconsistency regarding community regulations was especially prominent when viewing the articles on Indigenous communities. Several Manitoba First Nations communities went into lockdown with curfews and restrictions on gatherings. Several of these communities had zero positive cases or fewer than 10. Curfews were not established in Winnipeg or in non-Indigenous communities (Deer, 2020). Media did not detail the reasoning for these differences or any conflicts arising from these limitations. Some regulations are unprecedented, even compared to the SARS pandemic in the early 2000s. The new Quarantine Act allows RCMP to enter homes on account of a health order (Mckenzie-Sutter, 2020). Canadians who refuse to self-isolate for 14 days after travel are subject fines of up to $750,000 or imprisonment for up to 6 months, as a last resort. Some reports even state Canadians could see fines of over $1 million (Brean, 2020).

In addition to federal measures, all Western provinces created bylaws to allow stricter forms of punishment for those disobeying the 14-day

isolation (Globe and Mail, 2020). Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia implemented different fees for fines ranging from $486.00 to over $500,000.00. Additionally, inconsistent spatial regulations for both public and private spaces were evident across the provinces (Turnbull, 2020; also see Image 1). The inconsistency is highlighted when analyzing stories on community regulations within provincial borders. Our data reveals confusion from citizens about what is banned versus what is recommended. This may be a result of the manifold actors involved with monitoring community regulations. The list includes health officials, city staff, and community members. In cities like Calgary, citizens called for clarity after a teenager was given a fine for driving in a vehicle with someone who was not a part of their household (Dao, 2020). While this ticket was rescinded, the public also experienced uncertainty regarding what was essential or non-essential in cities like Vancouver. Health research shows that when news media is involved with disseminating information there is a tendency to "over-dramatize and simplify information" about risks, leading to misinterpretation of claims (Lupton, 1993, p. 431). These data echo messages of confusion and criticism by citizens living across Western Canada in the most significant cities and the smallest towns, who also commented on the lack of cohesion among leading officials. The mass quarantine appeared to be at odds with the individualized approach to risk that Canadians espoused and seem to have embraced.

Carmona et al. (2019) describe three important features to ponder when considering definitions and uses of public and private space: ownership of, control over access, and the designated uses of public space. When applying these ideas to regulations during the quarantine, data reveals that questions about all three features have been raised (The Canadian Press, 2020a), leading to scrutiny regarding the control and allowance of designated uses, for both private and public ownerships (Fine, 2020b). This increased distrust, in turn, placed more pressure upon governments through stricter forms of evaluation and observation. There were also fears among Canadians who debated if government officials were educated enough on the virus (Malone, 2020; also see Davis et al., 2014), though this became racialized and sexist in some critiques of some public health officials. Divisions, regarding the approaches, severity,

and attitudes toward managing the uncertain public and private nature of the pandemic, are evident in our data.

Image 1: Community Regulations, The Globe and Mail (2020).

Policing COVID-19

Policing the uncertain, fast-changing pandemic has created several new challenges for both officers and members of the public due to contagion and risk. The pandemic has been marked by the rise of the COVID-criminal or #Covidiot as well as the police and regulatory response to such activity. COVID-policing narratives are tied up with voluntary self-regulation and harsh judgments offered by citizens on the bylaws enacted to protect Canadians and economic activity. Our data reveals a lack of consistency across municipal, provincial, and federal jurisdictions that led many to disregard regulations (also see Simons, 2004). Encouraging statements from both the government and news media to take responsibility to "protect and promote" community health through a preventative approach focused on individual choices are prominent (also see Davis et al., 2013; Lupton,

1993). Community regulations have been advanced by COVID-watchdogs, a title applied to citizens who choose when, where, and how they report individuals they categorize as COVID-criminals or #Covidiots (Dittrich, 2020). Whether these are individuals not following the quarantine by inviting friends and family over, not following social distancing rules in businesses or public parks (Warnica, 2020), or individuals who have spit or coughed on others (The Canadian Press, 2020b; Turcato, 2020), all are labelled as #Covidiots. In statements from official channels, such as RCMP press releases, it is clear officers are left to make decisions to enforce bylaws based on discretion (Dunham, 2020; Rosen, 2020). Consequentially, this results in variation as it regards which #Covidiots are caught and which penalties are applied. Therefore, policing discretion influences the application of fines and regulations. These regulations draw from the idea of shaming as a way to deter wrongdoings, as these data suggest there is a significant number of calls to authorities to report fellow community members who break regulations or even benefit off the pandemic. Yet, Alberta has seen a phenomenon known as "COVID challenges" (Franklin, 2020), such as calls for individuals to lick products inside food stores (CBC, 2020a). In an attempt to flatten the rise in #Covidiots, a man was charged for participating in the online prank in Taber, Alberta (Franklin, 2020). Another attempt to deter poor behaviour occurred through the COVID–call lines created by police organizations to filter the increased communication while monitoring interactions. However, with the preference for educating instead of fining, the extent to which police used these call lines or "snitch lines" to enforce the laws in Western Canada is unclear.

COVID-policing practices are not only related to new quarantine and social distancing policies. Crime types and frequencies in neighbourhoods (Humphreys, 2020) are influenced by the quarantine. The pandemic has reduced some types of transgression, such as impaired driving and weapon offenses. However, it has resulted in an increase in property theft (Humphreys, 2020) and hate crimes (Woodward, 2020a). Cities like Regina (Stephanow, 2020) and Vancouver (Woodward, 2020b) are reported to have seen an increase in crime during the shutdown. Winnipeg reported increases in drug use and unsafe disposal of syringes thought by advocates to be a

marker of the closures and restructuring of essential health and community services (Thompson, 2020).

Canadian residents are not entirely escaping police, as people have been arrested (Romero, 2020). Many of these arrests end with additional assault charges from individuals spitting or coughing on officers (Mertz, 2020a). Not all disputes are in public spaces, as many are private domestic disputes, and data shows household conflicts increased (Bartko, 2020; CTV News, 2020). Several provinces described an upsurge of threats due to COVID-19 for officers as Western provinces have reported several instances of transit workers (CBC, 2020b), local police, and RCMP being spat and coughed on (Lawrence, 2020; also see Image 2). These data did not reveal exact numbers on how many reports, fines, or charges across Western Canada were issued between March and June. Our dataset reveals the several layers of life influenced by pandemic regulations. COVID-policing is not only defined by traditional law enforcement narratives but draws from other tropes regarding contagion as well. COVID-policing has transformed into a practice that blurs the lines of what is acceptable, or agreeable, leading to confusion and possible negative outcomes for both police and the public.

Image 2: COVID Policing, CBC News (2020).

Risk, Contagion, and Vulnerability

Analyzing the risk and contagion narrative, one may argue that policing, pandemic regulations, and healthcare education are neither powerful enough to permeate Canadians' opinions nor are they suitable for the diverse needs of Canada's many communities. As per our data, citizens were puzzled by the information on risk and contagion being distributed, which frequently changed, as well as the differences in opinions held by the actors enforcing safety and access to information. COVID-19 is described as a disease that has a strong risk and contagion capacity and most commonly affects the elderly and vulnerable. Vulnerability is an idea that has also been contested in public opinion (also see Stephenson et al., 2014). Other than the elderly, the risk and contagion narrative in our data does identify three population groups as most vulnerable: Asian Canadians, people without housing, and prisoners within and leaving prison.

Asian Canadians are not a population described as vulnerable to the risk of COVID-19 directly. Similar to Sargent and Larchanche's (2014) findings, we see racialized groups being portrayed as vectors of disease and contagion. Vulnerability for Asian Canadians can be described as harmful experiences that have resulted from community discourses blaming them for the virus. In general worldwide discourses of COVID-19, there has been an increase in blame and discrimination toward the Asian Canadian population, making them vulnerable to hate crimes. This is a collective experience, as blame for disease is historically applied to a perceived outsider (Abeysinghe & White, 2011). In defining health risks, there is also an urge to create a dynamic between the self and the Other to identify risks and place blame (Lupton, 1993). This is an issue as it regards blame attributed to Asian Canadians and China. During public health crises, news framing tends to blame local but also distant figures construed as vectors of contagion (Roy et al., 2020). Abeysinghe and White (2011) suggest we must be aware of the conception of the Other, which is critical as Asian Canadians make up the most significant visible minority in Canada and are experiencing hate crimes in Edmonton (Mertz, 2020b) and Vancouver (Woodward, 2020b). Irrational violence and discrimination directed toward those treated as scapegoats is not only a concern in relation to risk but can also be

used to maintain existing political and social power structures such as racial hierarchy (Lupton, 1993).

The second vulnerable sector regards populations experiencing homelessness. With citywide shutdowns and curtailed access to services or resources, many were left exposed in unsafe conditions. Advocates stressed that homeless people are unable to abide by the regulations and cannot afford to pay fines. People feared the risk of spread of COVID-19 across the homeless population, but also noted their vulnerability as targets for fines due to transient living situations (Britten, 2020). These conditions led to a group experiencing homelessness to break into and take over an elementary school in British Columbia to access shelter and washrooms. Ultimately, 14 people were arrested for this action (Britten, 2020; also see Image 3), leading to anti-homeless advocates to push the province for more adequate support for these members of the public (Alam, 2020). While thousands of Canadians were quarantining, countless people without homes were anxious for their wellbeing. Self-isolation spaces, access to protective gear, and sanitation methods were not easily accessed by unhoused individuals (Britten, 2020). This experience caused many community members to question if risk and contagion management was working for the entire Canadian population or just those with privilege (Bresge, 2020; Lindores, 2020).

To fight the risk of outbreak in prisons, many have called for decarceration to protect prisoners and staff members (Zakreski, 2020). Across the country, non-violent prisoners were released (Zakreski, 2020), as many prisoners were seen as vulnerable due to congregate living spaces, unsanitary conditions, as well as health concerns such as asthma (Brend, 2020). Risk for prisoners is linked to the rise of COVID-19 numbers and the increased demands on medical systems when outbreaks occur inside prisons (Zakreski, 2020). For prisoners unable to leave prisons, institutions and governments mandated routine changes to prevent outbreaks, such as at the Mission Institution in BC, but this resulted in semi-permanent lockdowns. At least 298 prisoners were administered COVID-19 tests, 120 of which were positive (Correctional Service Canada, 2020). Researchers, family members of incarcerated persons, and

prisoners have voiced concerns with the new preventative practices, which have left prisoners locked up in their cells for up to 20 hours a day, the maximum amount of time legal for solitary confinement (Bridges, 2020). Some prisoners even reported human right violations such as limited or removed access to needs like outdoor time and showers, prompting investigations of all sites from federal authorities (Desson, 2020). Prisoners are paradoxically seen as vulnerable to COVID-19 risks but still treated as a threat themselves. However, as with Canada's homeless community, our data reveals variation in the vulnerabilities that are experienced, suggesting a lack of serious preparation and consideration by government and health authorities.

Image 3: Risk and Contagion, National Post (2020).

In these news media accounts, private social life is also described as a possible site and source in the rise and risk of new cases. News outlets mainly disseminate information about individuals rather than businesses. There was only one mention of a business, Tim Hortons, which was forced to close due to a suspended license from operating with too many people inside (Holliday, 2020). Canadians in the West primarily applauded the plans the government had put in place to

close the federal borders and prevent travel. Yet, not all were pleased with the government's actions. In news accounts, criminologists have also argued that the harsh policing and fines are not adequate means for risk/contagion reduction (Valiante, 2020), and are unfair methods (Snyder, 2020). Amnesty is being sought for individuals who received fines during harmless recreational activities (CCLA, 2020). Not only are government officials weighing in, but doctors (Moritsugu, 2020), lawyers, and RCMP analysts have warned Canadians about different conflicts, creating a more engulfing fear narrative (Balsamo et al., 2020). The concern is that the punishments and public health orders are not effective as deterrents or as a means to decrease contagion and may increase vulnerability for some groups. If neither current deterrents, nor education are effective measures, unsafe experiences may increase both for those enforcing COVID laws as well as populations that are already vulnerable.

COVID-19 on Social Media

One increasing focus for researchers is assessing the images and discussions circulating in electronic communities. Social media communication as a tool for shaming others is increasingly studied in different contexts (Lauricella, 2019). There is also a flood of misinformation about COVID-19 online (Caulfield, 2020; Hannan, 2020), which could influence citizen levels of trust in government. Past studies on health and disease have shown that social media is used to blame and chastise groups when diseases and pandemics, such as HIV (Cortes et al., 2014) and H1N1 (Earnshaw & Quinn, 2013), are on the rise. Online shaming becomes entrenched in community monitoring systems. This targeting creates stigmas preventing access to care and information, placing community members at higher risk (Earnshaw & Quinn, 2013; Lauricella, 2019). Similar to Wallis and Nerlich's (2005) research on SARS media, a common metaphor in our data was present framing the virus as a killer with three stages: a significant problem, spreading out of control, or already out of control. This killer is framed as non-tangible through messages that communicate contagion and risk of COVID-19 as a complex problem. Similar to the findings of Abeysinghe & White (2011), discourses of risk, contagion, and blame

are common throughout this framing. These messages also present sentiments regarding societal and governmental failures.

The lack of ability by some citizens to "behave" (The Canadian Press, 2020c) or be serious (Picard, 2020) created apprehension due to concerns about the effectiveness of quarantines and fear of contagion. Here we see links to Wilkinson (2001) as fears, anxieties, and uncertainties, related to risk of contagion spread along with the virus. These data suggest most Canadians were gripped by fear in the early weeks of the pandemic. However, the idea of using shame to stop Covidiots also led to vigilante-type ambitions. These actions have the possibility of increasing risks related to COVID-19. This is seen in news articles that describe an increased experience of crime and discrimination within the Canadian Asian population. At the same time, Canadian news organizations perpetuated stigma (Altheide & Coyle, 2006) in Western provinces by identifying good and bad citizens through both the sensationalized and emotionalized articles. The language utilized to shame individuals is unforgiving, and not always in private social media spaces. News articles report details on these comments, noting that one citizen was charged with uttering threats via Facebook to spread COVID-19 across Indigenous communities (Fletcher, 2020). Articles report that government officials have also been involved with shaming, publicly noting there are "special places in hell" (Lawrence, 2020) for people who need to be punished for not letting "us have nice things" (Thomas & Lambert, 2020). In these stories, we also see claims about the ways corporate and government actors navigate the complex pandemic, focusing on failure.

Government Pandemic Communications on Social Media

In Western Canada, provincial governments used Facebook as a primary source for COVID-19 education; Facebook offers flexibilities compared to other social media (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovich, 2017). All four governments opted to use appealing infographics as well as videos to disseminate information. There was a mix between using real images of people (Government of Alberta, 2020) and drawings, cartoons, or creative designs to promote information (Government of British Columbia, 2020). British

Columbia and Alberta also included other visual aids such as graphs, charts, and maps to show provincial progression and cases as well as international comparisons. Many of the visual aids were limited in size, leading to inconsistencies and generalities across the provincial posts. Almost all posts redirected readers to other government websites for details. However, in comparing many statements from news media sources, this style was not received positively by all citizens. We found citizen statements on the confusing nature of the information offered by the governments, especially from those who do not speak English as their first language (also see CCLA, 2020). Poor communication has compounded harsh policing of public and private spaces, high fines, and tighter restrictions for many Canadians. When many citizens report that information across the country has been unclear, it highlights government failures in building communities that can work together to promote public health.

Image 4: Government Social Media, CBC News (2020).

While the visual posts are vague, they can be classified into three types: informative types allowing the governments to share details and facilitate action on regulations and reopening; motivational types enabling offers of support from governments to citizens undergoing financial impacts and self-isolation; and expressive types allowing

governments to disseminate details based on certain populations, such as religious populations or vulnerable citizens (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovich, 2017). In a cross-provincial analysis of the informative, motivational, and expressive types of posts, several inconsistencies are prevalent. The Government of Manitoba promoted information that was more motivational, whereas the Government of Saskatchewan offered more expressive, emotive compositions. The Government of Alberta focused on informative messages, while the Government of British Columbia emphasized both informative and expressive styles. Informative types were the most inconsistent across the four provinces, as each used unspecific language and pictures to offer details on what was mandatory. Expressive types were also irregular, as each province tended to focus on a different vulnerability. This influenced the types of aid and information available related to housing security, financial security, smoking habits, and pandemic scams. The similarities are also noteworthy. All four provincial governments emphasized citizen wellbeing as the highest priority, possibly the reason why all four provinces prioritized information regarding narratives of contagion. Daily news conferences, updates about the number of cases, tips for prevention, and reopening phases were the most common subjects addressed in the infographics and videos. Narratives of national duty appear within posts, which place unrealistic responsibilities on citizens, such as when governments sought assistance from citizens in obtaining personal protecting equipment (PPE) for frontline workers while simultaneously ordering a widespread quarantine (Manitoba Government, 2020).

Our data reveals mechanisms such as surveillance, processing, and physical regulations of public and private spaces through laws and signs have been implemented across the provinces, which entailed increases to authority for agents monitoring regulations. Government Facebook pages do not define exactly which agents are responsible for monitoring and enforcing regulations. News articles suggest these agents range from provincial park officers, police officers, and public health employees who are all granted the ability to issue tickets for social distancing infractions (Panza-Beltrandi, 2020; Proctor, 2020; Tkach, 2020).

Image 5: Social Media and Government

Our data depicts political and medical personnel as experts on risk and the pandemic as it regards both disseminating information and strategies of regulation (also see Lynteris, 2016). This is apparent across government Facebook posts and the news media articles. These government communications as well as forms of signage used to disseminate information on the virus can be analyzed by applying the idea of official graffiti as a method of social and personal control (Lee et al., 2012). Resembling regulatory forms of signage, all four governments used appealing infographics constructed with information offered by expert political and medical personnel. Hermer and Hunt (1996) analyze how authorities like governments use official and legitimate graffiti as a form of social and physical regulation, most common in the form of public signage, as warnings, directions, advisories, or alerts. Hermer and Hunt's theorization resonates when considering the abundant social and physical signs appearing in public and private spaces, and the colourful infographics and videos containing prohibitions, warnings, and directions produced by Canadian government agencies. Government communications on COVID-19 are a daily dose of physical and online official graffiti attempting to steer collective behaviour and bodily functions.

Our data shows the use of graffiti styles in communications online as well as forms of signage. The Government of British Columbia, for example, uses a style similar to stencil graffiti that differs from the other governments using real imagery or cartoon icons. The use of graffiti styles in communications online as well as forms of signage may be an effort to connect with younger Canadians or an attempt to have the message stand out among the myriad warnings we now all face daily. There is no clear justification by governments about the purpose of this style. However, Altheide and Coyle (2006) remind us that cultural and political symbolic messages are embedded through these forms of information to maintain order.

Conclusion

What we have shown is that early media reporting on COVID-19 in Western Canada reproduced a logic of risk in which individuals were portrayed as the site and source of the contagion. Across the four provinces and the news outlets, messages prioritized community safety through risk discourses, but also tended to individualize risk and responsibility. News media stories and social media websites offering COVID-19 information invoked several binaries such as good/shameful, healthy/unhealthy, and legal/illegal in reporting on pandemic risks. Examining news media stories, government communications, and social media websites offering COVID-19 information, we also found many discrepancies. Each prairie province shared information on the medical, financial, and legal aspects of the pandemic that at times was unclear and inconsistent.

State and corporate failures in Canada are rarely portrayed in these communications. Media reporting on COVID-19 has not questioned capitalism or globalization with much depth, instead focusing on individual transmission and responsibilizing citizens. The focus of most media discourse is on health and economic risk, not the politics of exclusion and inequality experienced by Canadians. It is crucial to examine how risk discourses exacerbate inequality (Olofsson et al., 2014) as well, which requires future research. Our analysis uses a small sample of news media and social media communications in Western Canada, and the scope of our new pandemic reality is more engulfing. Given the impacts the pandemic has had on the cultural,

political, and economic dimensions of life, there will also be new forms of surveillance that emerge based on logics of risk and precaution (French & Monahan, 2020; Thomas, 2014), which will require study. More research is needed on the intersection of news media communications with government social media messaging to see if these themes appear in other jurisdictions or whether cultural tropes vary in other locales.

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