

CANADIAN MEDIA AND CITIZEN PREPAREDNESS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION





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Over the past five years, Canadians have been introduced to a barrage of new terms introduced to describe the growing manipulation of our information and media environment: “fake news”, “disinformation”, “infodemic”.

The threats posed by disinformation to our society and democracy are complex and cannot be attributed to one single source. They come both from without and within and from various actors who use multiple delivery platforms in order to achieve their aims. The intent of these actors range from misguided benevolence to vicious hate.

Social media has become a primary venue for the spread of mis/disinformation. Stories are developed to maximize their chances of “going viral” - ie being shared widely - through strategically produced headlines that trigger psychological reactions, including, rage, joy and fear, by those exposed to them.

The barrage of information we are exposed to is polluting our information environment. While the impact of this phenomenon is not yet known, its destabilizing effect has been demonstrated in several western democracies. The threats it poses to our own society, democracy and public safety have been recognized by parliamentary committee and Canada’s intelligence agencies.

While the threat of disinformation to our democracy and society has been an issue going back to the Cold War era, the renewed threat that it poses to our democracy and society today, became much more clear after the 2016 United States Presidential election.

In 2019, the Canadian Parliamentary Standing Committee, Privacy and Ethics held an inquiry into various issues surrounding social media, privacy and disinformation. Greater media literacy was among the recommendations listed in its final report. The report noted that it is “important for people to be able to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate content sources and to be taught some quick and easy ways to evaluate the credibility or the quality of the source.”

Based on testimony from Taylor Owen - whose work contributed to the development of this project - the committee found “there needs to be a review of how to create more trust and more reliable information in the current ecosystem in the digital public sphere, and that requires reliable journalism.”

Finland, which ranked first out of 35 countries when measuring national resilience to disinformation, has long engaged its citizens in media literacy training, demonstrating that an informed public can lead to greater resilience against disinformation.

A 2019 Ipsos poll found that while nearly half of all Canadians received news from social media platforms only 14% of Canadians trust news posted on them. In that same poll, 26% of Canadians agreed that “they have no idea how to distinguish between real news and fake news.” Of greater concern is that 28% of Canadians polled agreed that if they disagree with a news story, it is likely false.

In January 2019, Karina Gould, Minister of Democratic Institutions, said that “Canada’s best defense against threats to democracy remains an engaged and informed public. By building their skills, Canadians can better understand online deceptive practices, recognize disinformation and be less susceptible to online manipulation.”

With the onset of Coronavirus, and what has become known as the “infodemic” of false news accompanying all aspects of the virus, from where it came from to how to cure it, the digital news literacy training program has taken on added importance, as wild conspiracies, fake cures, and other false narratives have further polluted the information environment.

A recent survey conducted by Carleton University found that half of all Canadians are unable to identify Coronavirus disinformation - and that they believe at least one conspiracy or myth about in - ranging from origin conspiracies to cures. A quarter of respondents believe the conspiracy theory that the virus was developed in a laboratory. One-fifth believe that a drug promoted by US President, Donald Trump, hydroxychloroquine, is effective in defending against the virus, despite evidence that it could, in fact, be harmful if consumed.

Canadian media and the public will be better prepared to navigate through the extremely polluted information environment through programs like this that build citizens’ resilience in such a context. Effective programs do this by building awareness and understanding of mis- and disinformation including:

- Who develops and promotes mis/disinformation and why they do it;
- What mis/disinformation looks like and what it is designed to do;
- What platforms are used to promote and disseminate disinformation narratives;

- How Canadians can identify mis/disinformation;
- Simple, credible fact finding tools we can all use to protect ourselves against mis/disinformation;
- How we can do all of this without becoming cynical and mistrusting all media;

Over the past 9 months, Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) partnered with Canadian journalists and disinformation experts to develop a mis/disinformation training curriculum. The goals: to train their fellow journalists and media professionals on how to detect and report about this phenomenon. These were carried out in multiple peer-led workshops across Canada and virtually, online.

The project also included a critically important component to provide training to promote digital news and media literacy among Canadians, with varying levels of experience and understanding of mis/disinformation.

The onset of the Coronavirus pandemic caused significant challenges for this project. Seminars and workshops that were originally designed as in person sessions required reconfiguration with a focus on an online only audience using primarily Zoom as well as Facebook Live. Ironically, in light of the significantly expanded number of participants, this may have made the workshops more accessible to the general public.

Surveys were conducted among those who participated in both the media training and digital news literacy training sessions. These were done to assess participant awareness of mis/disinformation, which platforms they receive their news from, their overall trust in those platforms, and their understanding of the issues and the tools they were trained to use to detect after the workshops.

The data JHR collected demonstrates a clear picture. Most Canadians who participated in the JHR workshops do not trust news that is shared on social media. Yet Canadians were almost evenly split when asked whether they were confident about their skills in spotting disinformation when they saw it. After participating in the workshop, 86% of participants felt confident in their ability to spot disinformation.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In late 2019, JHR contacted a number of leading experts to prepare a curriculum and materials for training journalists about how to identify and report on disinformation, and then reached out to potential trainers to lead training workshops.

Trainers working to engage journalists participated in a two day seminar held in Toronto in January. Trainers working to engage the broader populace in Canada came together online in March. Seminars were led by curriculum developers to train them on how to lead and run disinformation workshops.

Materials for both the journalist training and digital media literacy workshops were created by Craig Silverman of BuzzFeed Canada and the team at the organization CIVIX, led by Taylor Gunn.

“For the past two years, CIVIX has been consulting with experts around the world to build digital literacy tools for educators. These have been successful in schools, but the habits and skills of informed citizenship apply to everyone. We look forward to contributing our resources to this crucial project,” says Gunn.

Craig Silverman says that “Canadian journalists play an essential role in stopping false and misleading information from taking hold. I'm thrilled to work with JHR to train journalists in newsrooms big and small in order to help them spot disinformation, understand how social media can be manipulated, and use their skills to create a more informed public.”

For journalists, the curriculum covers how to expose disinformation, misinformation and mal-information in news-gathering and news production, and how to use innovative online tools to strengthen reporting on the topics discussed. For the Canadian public, the curriculum topics focused on tangible skills to improve digital and news literacy skills. Materials include curriculum for trainers to deploy throughout the project and, tangible learning tools and resources for both audiences to practically use day to day.

In January, ten trainers and JHR reached out to journalists across Canada to invite them to participate in a series of workshops held in cities across Canada through February and March. The ten trainers from across the country engaged on the project to train journalists on how to identify and combat misinformation, disinformation and malinformation in news, media and their own reporting.

The same team created a curriculum in January 2020, for general digital news and media literacy workshops that were scheduled to be held in cities across Canada.

Journalists and disinformation experts were identified as trainers for the workshops and were invited to participate in a full day curriculum training seminar in Toronto, but were forced to move the seminar online due to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in late March.

The series of workshops that were to be held by trainers in cities across Canada in April, were also reconfigured to be held online, via Zoom, which required additional training as well as additional measures to address concerns about widespread reports of trolling and virtual graffiti being applied to other Zoom based webinars.

By the end of the workshop the participants learned new tools to identify disinformation leading to greater confidence in their ability to safely navigate the information environment. After the webinar they will have acquired:

- Understanding what 'information pollution' is and its implication on our information environment
- Three key 'lateral reading' strategies to assess the credibility of online information. (Claim check, source check, image check.)
- Ability to apply information-evaluation skills to real-life examples to determine reliability of various types of information.

The workshop was updated in early April to include examples relevant to the context of the current Coronavirus related infodemic. These included examples of hoaxes, miracle cures and conspiracy theories that have been promoted on social media.

WORKSHOPS

JOURNALIST WORKSHOP AND WEBINAR CURRICULUM

For journalists, the curriculum covered how to expose disinformation, misinformation and mal-information in news-gathering and news production, and how to use innovative online tools to strengthen reporting on the topics discussed. It also outlined how journalists are targeted by trolls - both foreign and domestic - and how they can safely report.

Materials include curriculum for trainers to deploy throughout the project and, tangible learning tools and resources for both audiences to practically use day to day.

- How our information environment is enabling new forms of fakery, manipulation, and deception.
- How to verify digital photos and videos to avoid being tricked and help you find the origin of a piece of media.
- How to investigate social media accounts and websites to recognize inauthenticity and identify their true purpose and owner.
- How to connect websites, Facebook pages and other digital entities together – even when people are trying to hide.
- How to analyze the spread of content across social networks, and identify key amplifiers.
- How to set up a beat dashboard to track content on Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit.

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DO YOU TRUST IT?

Is this COVID-19 miracle cure a real miracle cure?

The image shows a screenshot of a New York Times article. The headline reads: "That 'Miracle Cure' You Saw on Facebook? It Won't Stop the Coronavirus". Below the headline, there is a sub-headline: "Gargling warm salty water, taking vitamins or heating your nasal passages won't eliminate the virus or keep it from reaching your lungs." A large green circle with the word "FALSE" in white is overlaid on the right side of the article. The author's name, "Santidad Gobcan", is visible. There is also a small text box at the bottom of the article that says: "Hello. I can't confirm it, because there are a lot of workers in the hospital and I don't know exactly who has recorded this audio. However, we can tell that the 'advice' in this audio are fakes and extremely dangerous."

DIGITAL NEWS LITERACY WORKSHOP AND WEBINAR CURRICULUM

The curriculum offered in the Digital News Literacy workshop was a simplified version of the journalist

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REVERSE IMAGE SEARCH

The image shows a social media post by Mike Allen with a photo of a person in a military-style uniform. The text of the post says: "Mexican police are being brutalized by members of this caravan as they attempt to FORCE their way into Mexico - And WE are supposed to believe these are just poor, helpless refugees seeking asylum??? I am 100% behind POTUS deploying our military! #mad". To the right of the post is a screenshot of a Google Images reverse search interface. A blue box with the text "Clicking here" points to the search bar. Below it, another blue box with the text "Give us these options" points to the search button. The search bar contains the text "Search by image" and "Search Images with an image instead of text. The images on image here." Below the search bar is a small text box that says "Paste image URL (e.g.) Label an image."

training workshop with a focus on offering everyday tools and skills that all Canadians can use to identify mis/disinformation on various platforms.

- What is fake news - the difference between misinformation and disinformation
- Understanding who creates disinformation and how its is spread
- The forms of disinformation: hoax, conspiracy theories, hyper-partisan, satire, sponsored content, astroturfing
- Source evaluation techniques: checking the claim and source, and reverse image search.

Using the Zoom meeting and webinar platform, trainers reached out to their own networks and communities and were aided by boosted social media posts about webinar sessions, resulting in attendance of up to 217 participants in individual webinars.

The Zoom interface allowed for trainers to present the curriculum using screen sharing and Google slides, as well as video of themselves. Participants were given the opportunity to use several interactive examples to test their own skills - including the fakeout.ca platform and a practice worksheet which featured a number of examples.

Interaction with participants achieved through three Zoom options including a running live chat interface; a Q&A function whereby participants could post questions - and were answered either on a rolling basis or collected at the end of the webinar; and a function whereby participants could virtually raise their hand to ask an audio question. Feedback received after the webinars was overwhelmingly positive, with 97% of participants responding that the webinar presentation methods were effective.

OUTCOMES

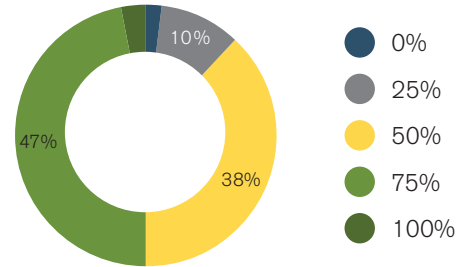
DIGITAL NEWS LITERACY TRAINING

1,086 individuals participated in online Digital News Literacy Training webinars through the end of April 2020 on both Zoom and Facebook Live over 35 webinar sessions, exceeding the initial target of 500 participants by a considerable margin. There were 319 respondents to a survey disseminated at the end of the Digital News Literacy Training webinars.

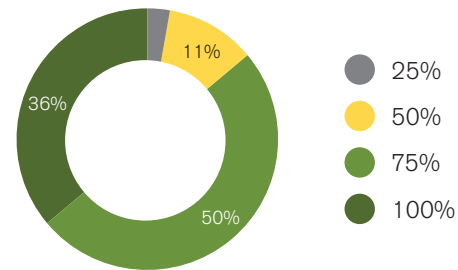
At the beginning of webinars, trainers were asked to post a poll question asking participants about how comfortable they were with spotting disinformation online. Participants were split before participating, with almost half stating that they were confident 50% of the time, which is consistent with earlier national polls.

At the end of the webinar, participants were polled again with the same question. After participating, a full 86% of participants reported feeling confident in spotting disinformation. Those who felt 100% confident increased from 4% before the webinar to 36% after participating.

How confident are you in your skills to spot disinformation (before webinar)?



How confident are you in your skills to spot disinformation (after webinar)?

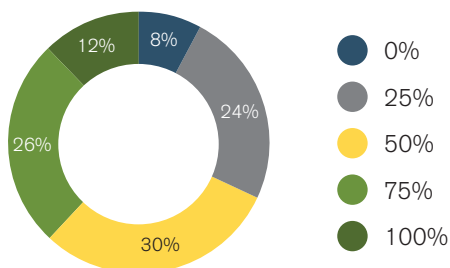


MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS AND TRUST IN MEDIA

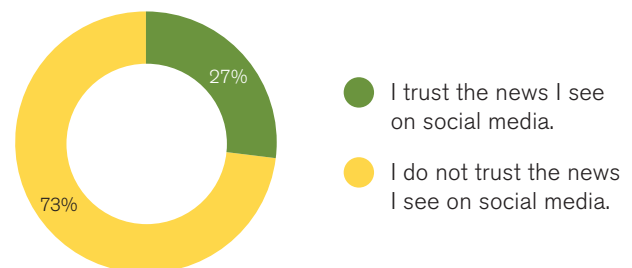
Participants were queried about their media consumption habits: where they received their news and their level of trust in the platforms that deliver that news to them.

A significant majority of participants (68%) reported receiving 50% or more of their daily news from social media platforms. Yet 73% of participants said that they do not trust news that they see on social media and 84% said that they question the sources of news they see posted on social media.

What percentage of your daily news do you receive using online social media platforms?



Trust in social media content



While most participants receive their news via social media platforms, they do not trust the news that they read or consume on these platforms.

When participants were asked after the digital news training webinar whether they would use the skills they learned to verify the credibility of news posted online, 99% said that they would use the tools presented in the webinar to check sources, claims and photos posted online.

After the webinar, 96% of respondents said that they feel more comfortable identifying online disinformation campaigns.

It is worth noting that 98% of respondents also replied that they would like to continue learning about the issue of mis/disinformation and the skills that they learned in the webinars.

Based on the surveys of participants in the Digital News Literacy webinars, the majority of participants felt that their skills in identifying mis/disinformation had dramatically improved after receiving training.

JOURNALIST TRAINING

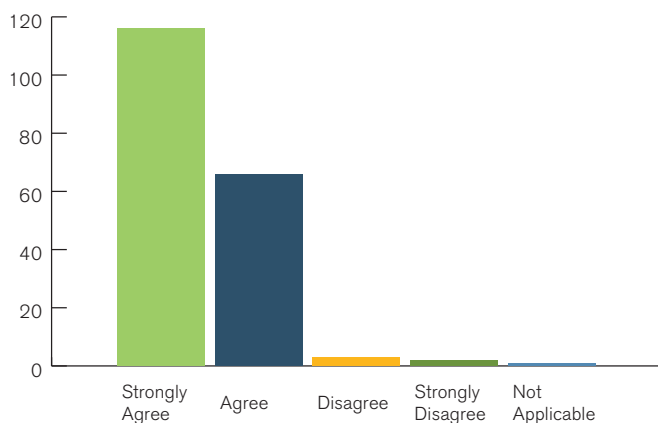
297 journalists from across Canada and working in print, television, radio and online participated in journalist training sessions in person and online, of whom, 192 filled out surveys about the training workshops and their own skills.

After receiving training, 78% of participants believed that their understanding of how to handle mis/disinformation in their reporting had improved by 75% or more, with 96% responding that they would use the skills they learned in their own reporting.

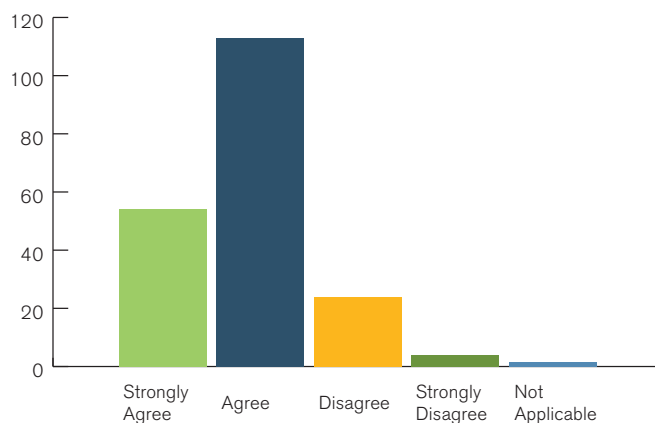
95% of the journalists who responded to the survey felt more comfortable using tools covered in the workshop to verify the credibility of information and to identify disinformation.

Further, of the journalists who participated, 87% believed that they would pitch stories about disinformation to their editors in the future, after receiving training.

I will use the skills I learned today in my own reporting.



I will pitch stories related to combatting or exposing mis/disinformation campaigns in my reporting.



JOURNALIST NETWORK CREATION

Both the journalist training and digital news literacy training programs had the effect of creating an informal journalist network for sharing new tools, reporting and other disinformation related information which will serve to update the knowledge and understanding of participants. Since May, journalists who have participated in trainings have published 21 articles on issues related to mis/disinformation.

ONGOING TRAINING, PROGRAM MICROSITE & MATERIAL AVAILABILITY

The microsite created for the journalist and digital news literacy training within the Journalists For Human Rights website, which listed webinar training schedules will house resources used by trainers as well as training videos for ongoing training and use by other organizations and institutions.

CONCLUSION

Despite the significant challenges posed by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, both the journalism training and digital news literacy training, achieved their stated goals in fulfilling the initially proposed activities for this project. Experts were identified and engaged as trainers. The project met the target number of journalists trained and more than doubled the number of individuals that

were initially targeted to participate in the digital news literacy program. Since the program ended, JHR has had outreach from hospital systems in Texas, journalists in New York and librarians in Toronto to continue the training. Further, we have negotiated and secured support from three foundations - the McConnell Foundation, Rossy Foundation and Trottier Foundation - to continue the training and expand it in Canada.

Post workshop survey results demonstrate that the developed curriculum and expert trainers effective in raising awareness of the problem of mis/disinformation in our information environment, with 98% of digital news literacy participants stating that they felt more comfortable identifying mis/disinformation after participating in the online workshop.

With 68% of participants reporting that they receive at least 50% or more of their news online, it is critically important that these online workshops be made available on demand through the production of professionally edited videos of the workshops.

Most participants in the digital news literacy workshops, 98%, reported that they would like to continue learning about mis/disinformation, while 96% of journalists who responded to our survey said that they would like to continue learning about this issue.

EXPERT JOURNALIST AND DIGITAL NEWS LITERACY TRAINER BIOS

ALIA DHARSSI is a freelance journalist, editor and researcher based in Vancouver. Her writing and investigations on sustainability, global development, human rights and immigration have been published by a range of media outlets, including the New York Times, the Guardian, Al Jazeera, the National Post, the Financial Post and Reuters. She is also Deputy Editor of Asparagus, a magazine that tells the small and large stories of how we can live sustainably.

AMARA BANGURA is a Sierra Leonean journalist based in Halifax with more than 10 years reporting and producing programmes for international media organizations such as the BBC and Journalists for Human Rights. He also has extensive experience working on development communication projects, including training journalists in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. He holds an MA in Media and International Development from the University of East Anglia, UK and is also a recipient of the prestigious Gordon Fisher Journalism Fellowship at Massey College, at the University of Toronto.

ANITA LI is a journalism consultant and the former Director of Communities at The Discourse, a digital media company that produces community-powered journalism informed and funded by the public. She's also Editor-in-Chief of The Other Wave, a website that covers media from a multicultural perspective.

ANNIE DEMELT is a veteran journalist with 18 years of experience and has overseen the production of the CTV News Montreal weekend newscast since December 2018.

APHRODITE SALAS is a journalist and professor at Concordia University in Montreal. Her most recent work is a short documentary and multimedia collaboration with CTV called: "from shore to sky: a reconciliation story." She is a research associate at the Concordia University Acts of Listening Lab and a regular member of the Concordia Centre for Broadcasting and Journalism

Studies. Her experience as a journalist is extensive. For the last decade at CTVMontreal, Aphrodite worked as a video journalist, assignment editor and line-up editor. Prior to that, she was senior anchor at Global Quebec, hosted her own current affairs radio show on 940 Montreal and covered Parliament Hill for CityTV's Toronto and Vancouver stations. Before her time in Ottawa, Aphrodite was a national correspondent for CTV News in Montreal and Toronto.

BILL FORTIER is a Senior Reporter/Anchor at CTV News Edmonton. He has been working as a broadcast journalist for 19 years. Bill's documentary on the one-year anniversary of the Slave Lake wildfire won a Canadian RTDNA award and an American Murrow award. He was also part of a team that won an RTDNA award for breaking news coverage during the 2016 wildfire in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Bill's personal career highlight is his experience working with Journalists for Human Rights in Gaziantep, Turkey. He spent two weeks providing training to Syrian journalists who had escaped the regime of Bashar al-Assad by fleeing to Gaziantep, just across the border. Besides his local duties, Bill occasionally files for CTV National News.

ELIZABETH MCSHEFFREY is an award-winning reporter from Ottawa, currently fumbling her way through her first television job after eight years of working in print. She's a video journalist for Global News in Halifax and a former Indigenous Reporters Program instructor for Journalists for Human Rights. She has worked as an investigative reporter for the National Observer, and an East Africa stringer for outlets all over the world. Her interests include coffee, puns and complaining about Canada's ATIP system on social media. Elizabeth McSheffery, Global Halifax, Nova Scotia (TV and radio).

FRANCESCA FIONDA is a data/investigative journalist with the National Observer and journalism instructor at BCIT's Broadcast and Online Media program. She's worked with national investigative teams at

Global's 16x9, CBC's fifth estate and Marketplace and at the community-driven start up The Discourse. Most recently she was the investigative correspondent for the podcast, Attention Control hosted by Kevin Newman. Her reporting on issues like fake Indigenous art in the tourism industry, the criminal justice system and Canada's mobile workforce have earned nominations and awards from; the Jack Webster Association, Online News Association, Canadian Association of Journalists, Canadian Screen Awards, Radio Television Digital News Association and the New York Festivals Worlds.

GEOFFREY LEO has been an investigative journalist since 2013. In that time his work has ended political careers, launched investigations and changed public policy. Geoff's reputation is perhaps best summed up by this tweet from University of Regina political science professor, Tom McIntosh. "Scariest phone call in #skpoli. 'Hi, it's Geoff Leo from the CBC... I've got a few questions I'd like to ask.'" Geoff has produced feature-length documentaries and hosted TV and radio programs. He began his career as a video journalist for CBC in Yorkton, SK in 2001. Geoff is the recipient of a Canadian Screen Award, a CAJ and multiple RTDNA awards and was honoured with the 2017 UN Press Freedom Award.

JEREMY NUTTALL is a Vancouver-based investigative reporter for the Star. Before that Jeremy worked with CBC Radio Vancouver. In 2009 he moved to Beijing to host China Drive on China Radio International. Upon his return from China he took on the role as senior reporter leading to city editor of 24 Hours Vancouver.

JOSH CRABB is a video journalist at CTV Winnipeg with more than 14 years of reporting experience. He got his start with the station in 2010 in the Brandon, Man. bureau as the lone video journalist in western Manitoba covering floods, rural crime and human interest stories. Josh eventually moved east to Winnipeg for a job as a sports reporter and anchor and then transitioned back to news in the role of reporter. Lately, he's been covering a mix of topics including crime and court stories. This past summer he spent a week in Gillam, Man. during the manhunt for the two B.C. homicide suspects.

KAT ESCHNER is a Toronto-based freelance science journalist. Her work regularly appears in outlets like Popular Science, Fortune, CNBC and The Guardian. She also published a weekly newsletter about human-animal relationships. It can be found at quickfox.ca.

MARCUS KOLGA is a foreign policy analyst, columnist, documentary filmmaker and expert on foreign disinformation and influence operations. He is a Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. He writes and comments regularly about foreign affairs and disinformation in national and international media and his articles have been published in Macleans, The Globe and Mail, New York Daily New, Toronto Star, National Post among many others.

MAX LEIGHTON is a journalist, producer and photographer from Waterloo. He has reported in Whitehorse, Iqaluit, Winnipeg, Toronto and recently returned home to KW, where he works as an associate producer and reporter with CBC. His freelance work has appeared in Pacific Standard Magazine, American Public Media, NPR the National Post and elsewhere.

PAUL KARWATSKY is the CTV anchor for News at 5 and Late News in Montreal. Paul began his career at CTV Montreal in 2005 as a researcher. He soon moved up to on-air reporting, covering such stories as the de la Concorde overpass collapse, the Dawson College shooting and its aftermath, as well as a series of federal and provincial elections at a time when minority governments meant a very tumultuous period in Quebec and Canadian politics.]

SUSANA MAS is a freelance Parliamentary reporter who has spent the past decade working for CTV, CBC and most recently Postmedia Network. As a multimedia journalist, her work has appeared on all platforms from print, radio and TV, to online where she focused on immigration and Indigenous Affairs. She is a two-time RTDNA winner and in 2016 was nominated by the Canadian Association of Journalists for a story she wrote about temporary foreign workers during the 2015 federal election.



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