

## **Spin Doctors**

# **How Media and Politicians Misdiagnosed the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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UNEDITED EXCERPT

\*Note that highlighted sections will include up-to-date numbers added just before it's printed

Fernwood Publishing

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## CH Introduction

It didn't occur to us to cancel our March Break plans. When I flew to Toronto from L.A. on February 29, 2020, someone I worked with suggested our annual conference might need to be cancelled. She worked in the airline industry and I thought she was being dramatic. While the world would change less than two weeks later, on March 2, I didn't feel it. COVID-19 was still thousands of kilometres away.

We left Toronto for Philadelphia on March 3. Aside from the giant jugs of hand sanitizer in the hotel lobby, everything was normal. Museums and bars were open. We watched the Flyers play against the Colorado Avalanche, my first live NHL game. Like thousands of other Quebecers, we flew home on planes that very well could have had COVID-19 cases in the cabin, a threat from the United States that was barely evident by the time the kids and I returned on March 7.

That next week, school was only in session three of five days. There was a PD day and a snow day and then, nothing. School was cancelled. My partner rented a car and drove north through Western New York State just as the border was closing, hands clutching the steering wheel through a barrier of disinfecting wipes as he listened to American talk radio insist that COVID-19 is just a hoax. In the space of a year since that day he fled, more than 2200 residents of Western New York State died from COVID-19 and just under 100,000 people caught it, in a region of about 2.6 million.<sup>i</sup>

We all have our own memories about where we were at the start of the pandemic. March 2020 will be tucked away forever in our minds as a time where everything ground to a halt and our dreams and plans for the foreseeable future turned into dust. If I close my eyes, I

can still think about the May I was supposed to have, the trips, the concerts in July, the four weddings, the fun.

But that's not how life works in a pandemic; it becomes one hundred percent oriented towards surviving, trying to rebuild a life based on our new circumstances. I was transformed into a stay-at-home mom, with the rhythm of a day that moves slowly and very quickly, arriving at the end with the singular thought: *I hope I didn't get COVID-19 today*. Wake up the next morning; do it all again for as long as it takes.

The beginning of the pandemic was a giant shock to the system and had the potential to be an explosive moment of change: in an instant Canadians could see that money was available to help people out of poverty, that the state had the power to make massive new social programs in a matter of weeks. This demonstrated that every excuse that underpinned the previous four decades of neoliberalism were lies. There was no reason whatsoever that similarly large changes couldn't be implemented in non-pandemic times, and activists saw that the moment was ripe to start talking about these changes.

Every social problem embedded within Canadian society was torn open by the pandemic. From racism to poverty, from the environmental crisis to healthcare, COVID-19 blew open the myths that had allowed problems to fester for so long. With the right social movement structure, the right spark, or the right confluence of events, much of what underpinned modern Canada's status quo could have come crashing down. But governments allowed the pandemic to get worse, and in so doing allowed the status quo to entrench itself much deeper—a status quo that guarantees profits for private companies, even in the provision of essential needs like food. A status quo that sees Indigenous lands as free and open for the

taking to enrich a small group of white people. A status quo with a labour market so deeply racially segmented that the lowest-income workers are the least white, the highest-income workers are the most white, and the profits are extracted from the poorest workers, causing incredible stress and hardship. A status quo where social services have been so viciously hollowed out over forty years of neoliberalism that the only thing holding it together is the sheer will of workers.

The neoliberal period in Canada was marked by massive divestments in Canada's social safety net. All Canadian political parties played a role in this divestment, but the turning point was the Chrétien-Martin budget of 1995. The status quo can trace its origins to that moment, where deep cuts to social spending undid years of welfare-state reforms, undermined public healthcare and created the social crises that COVID-19 so easily exploited. The result has been XXXXX dead and XXXXX infected, with an untold number of lives changed, new chronic illnesses developed and the course of history being unquestionably altered. The confluence of the incredible havoc that COVID-19 wreaked in Canada, the clear impact that failing social systems had on allowing COVID-19 to propagate and the years of corruption and mismanagement that lead to this moment made 2020 a very interesting year, if you opposed Canada's status quo.

This book examines the tension between the problems that COVID-19 laid bare and the work that politicians and journalists did to ensure that as little as possible would change, in spite of how obvious the need for change is. They did this in very different ways, of course. There isn't evidence of widespread collusion between politicians and the press. In fact, most of the daily press conferences during the pandemic demonstrate that the journalists present did what they could in very constrained circumstances to try and extract answers from politicians.

While there was some love between some journalists and politicians, especially at the start when columnists heaped praise upon provincial leaders for their steady hands and sage decisions, to characterize the relationship between journalists and politicians during the pandemic as cozy would be inaccurate. It isn't cozy, but it doesn't have to be. Canada's mainstream media is just as invested in protecting Canada's status quo as are Canada's politicians, and they found themselves on the same side.

Politicians exploited the fact that during the most confusing times of the pandemic, they would be able to get away with things that normally would have been unacceptable: making lockdown announcements, creating expensive new social programs, and protecting and enriching the business class. On the balance, their actions would cause harm to average people while leaving Canada's elites in a better place than when the pandemic started. In choosing to protect the status quo over the safety of individuals, Canada's emergency response could not stop COVID-19. In fact, it ensured spread among the most marginalized people. It would be disastrous in Indigenous communities. It would spread in racialized neighbourhoods while white neighbourhoods had fewer cases and better access to testing. It would force people to put themselves and their families at risk to continue to supply Canada's beef exports to the world. It would make the rich even richer. For politicians, the stakes were high, especially as this rare moment left them exposed to a potentially historic uprising of Canadians fed up with the status quo.

On the other side of politicians but still in the same room were journalists. Journalists explained what was happening. They replaced jargon with plain language. They challenged government logic; reported on daily numbers, press conferences, and briefings; researched,

analyzed, and dug into issues. But it was rarely deep enough. For example, Doug Ford was a racist, corrupt and inept politician, but he was often given the benefit of the doubt (even praised!) by journalists who didn't want to lean too far into analyses that would call into question the fundamentals of the system. At the same time, there was tremendous pressure on journalists that constrained reporting even further. In 2020, thousands of journalism jobs were eliminated. Journalists had to work from home, with fewer resources, fewer colleagues and the same challenges as everyone else related to infection control, schooling and caring for loved ones. Where politicians had their gilded suburban lots and little threat to their existence, most journalists wrote through extreme anxiety, never knowing if the hammer would fall on them when their paper was sold for the third time in just a couple of years, or if their managers would lay people off again because of persistent government underfunding. The beginning of the pandemic was the moment for journalism to demonstrate its worth in Canada and far too many media owners saw it as a good time to fire, downsize and even close up shop completely.

I imagine there will be a few journalists who will balk at the idea that they participated in spinning any part of the pandemic. But Canadian media is notoriously conservative, and this did not change during the pandemic. Issues like vaccine hesitancy and rollout were over-reported while information about ownership of private care home residences or racist healthcare systems was consistently under-reported. Canadian journalism's natural default is to defend Canada's status quo. From CBC's vacant Canadian nationalism and nostalgia, to a refusal of media organizations like the *Globe and Mail* to understand Canadian genocide as such, mainstream media was not going to transform into a bastion of critical, intellectual thought over the pandemic, especially considering funding constraints. Owners are allergic to critical

journalism at best and hostile at worst. The critical investigations that did happen should have helped to challenge how journalists reported about workplaces, food processing, residential care and government planning, but it couldn't—it was hived off from the day-to-day, uncritical reporting that created a tsunami of media coverage so overwhelming that many readers found it easier to tune out than to read everything.

Much of the analysis in this book is based on how I experienced the pandemic, not just in my day-to-day life but also in the interpretations I read. This information formed the foundation for how I've been thinking about the pandemic, but it also created the breath, and limits, of my own research. For example, on April 13, 2020, after having recorded an episode of the podcast I co-host with Sandy Hudson called *Sandy and Nora Talk Politics*, I realized that deaths were increasing so quickly in long-term care that there would need to be a record of this that was easy to reference. I asked on Twitter if anyone was doing this already, and the answer seemed to be no. That night, I made a public spreadsheet that accounted for 250 deaths that I could find by searching through media reports alone.

Every night thereafter, I added to the list. To do so, I combed through news websites, public health unit data, provincial ministry websites and obituaries to try and get a picture of just how many people were dying in residential care. And to my surprise, I was the only one doing it. Every night I would read between 20 to 50 sources trying to account for the dead. These deaths were an alarm signal sent weeks after the outbreak was at a crisis level. By June 2020, the patterns became obvious and by fall 2020, the patterns became an obsession. By the time I had finished writing this book, I had read nearly 20,000 articles and web pages from news organizations and public health units from across Canada.

So much of COVID-19 reporting relied on two sources, at most: a public health official and a politician. If the article explored something more in-depth, it would usually feature a doctor or an academic. Isaac Bogosh, Samir Sinha, David Fisman, Abdu Sharkawy, Jennifer Kwan, Michael Werner and Vivian Stamatopoulos became media regulars, explaining epidemiological curves, outbreaks within long-term care, new COVID-19 restrictions and the progression of vaccines. So did Dan Kelly from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. Reporting didn't really evolve, the format of each article stagnating as if it could have been written in May 2020, September 2020 or March 2021. There was no innovation in how this story was told: instead, it was a daily stream of data and some analysis, all contained in a very strict set of political parameters.

And confoundingly, the data didn't get much better over the course of the pandemic either. In some cases, it even got worse. Death statistics were often approximative, incomplete or totally absent. It made analyzing provincial data very difficult. News organizations routinely made data errors or reported on death and infection rates from a current outbreak with no mention of previous death and infections that had happened at the same facility. The data errors helped to feed the emerging anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine crowd who tried to demonstrate that foggy data was proof the pandemic was entirely made up. The pandemic started with journalists and politicians united in their criticism of China's approach to containing the virus, both levelling charges against the nation of suppressing information. And yet, data suppression was a major problem in Canada too, hiding and obscuring everything from the origins of outbreaks to the numbers of deaths from outbreaks within Canadian hospitals. Data changed from region to region, day to day. Death counts were added to and subtracted from,

and data was obscured through debates about whether or not a death caused indirectly by COVID-19 should count as a COVID-19 death. The lack of information was another of many tactics that were used to distract from understanding a full picture that should have been clear and easily communicated.

While the breadth of my nightly research underpinned my understanding of the pandemic, analyzing how journalists spun the pandemic required intense research that was specific to the topics in this book. I tried to be as broad as I could in my sources referenced. I reference XXX news sources and XXX journalists, XXX of whom were Canadian Journalism Initiative-funded journalists. I quote news from XXX capital cities, XX national outlets and XX from small communities. There are XX French-language sources referenced, XX from Ontario, XX from BC, XX from the prairie provinces, XX from Atlantic Canada and XX from the territories. While my research is not exhaustive, I have tried to ensure that I am fairly reflecting the way in which each chapter's theme was generally covered in the media.

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Telling the story of the pandemic is impossible if it isn't told through the experiences of how we lived it. It wasn't a theoretical exercise; the pandemic had material impacts on Canadians, and analyzing these impacts required that people be understood as being connected to their work, home, family and community lives. One of the more common ways in which the pandemic was spun to protect the status quo was to zoom in very closely on an individual and tell a story through them. Through this frame, the pandemic became individualized. Struggles were detached from broader social forces and therefore solutions were elusive, difficult to

understand or far too complex to be seriously considered. This had a very big impact on how people came to understand the pandemic: worker deaths were explained through obituary-style features that rarely held anyone accountable for a death; deaths in residential care were broadcast through the voices of sons or daughters or friends in mourning; the plight of a front-line worker was used to illustrate the struggle of working through a pandemic, though the profits that were extracted from their labour were almost never mentioned in the same article. It atomized people, erased the connection that they had to a broader community and made it impossible to understand how COVID-19 was so deftly moving from individual to individual. After all, those community connections were so critical to being able to understand community spread. It's no wonder that community spread was one of those nebulous terms that we never really got a proper sense of, despite the fact that it was frequently talked about by politicians and journalists.

The way that the pandemic was explained at the start would set in motion so much of how it would be explained for the rest of the pandemic. In Chapter One, I examine how the earliest discussions of the pandemic would lay the foundation for how politicians and journalists would frame COVID-19 for the following year. The intense focus on China helped to obscure the responsibility that Canada held for not being prepared for a pandemic. This set off a marked rise in anti-Asian racism and made it acceptable for politicians to avoid responsibility for the actions they took or didn't take.

In Chapter Two, I explore the carnage in residential care. The system was in such rough shape before the pandemic that it should have been obvious COVID-19 would be devastating if it got inside the walls of Canada's thousands of residential care facilities. The confusion around

what was happening, made possible especially thanks to a lack of uniform data and clear reporting that consistently named who was responsible for the operations of each facility, made it hard to understand how these facilities could have been better protected, even improved.

By May 2020, the first mass workplace outbreaks were appearing in meatpacking facilities in Alberta, and the spotlight was finally placed on food processing industries. In Chapter Three, I examine the combination of low-paid work, workers who have precarious status and an overrepresentation of racialized workers that created the conditions for food processing to be one of the industries hardest hit by the pandemic, though it took months before journalists started paying closer attention to the role that these facilities played in propagating COVID-19 and causing harm to racialized communities. I explore the racial impact of COVID-19 in Chapter Four, looking at how the first mass rallies held during the pandemic were sparked by the murder of George Floyd and police-involved death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet. Though data was hard to come by, the impact of the pandemic on racialized communities was undeniable by June 2020, and yet, journalists rarely wrote through a racialized lens to help explain how COVID-19 was impacting whom the most. Politicians didn't enact targeted measures either, even after data did become available that demonstrated the toll COVID-19 was taking on racialized communities in cities and small communities across Canada.

As the summer months moved people outside, politicians started talking more about the role personal responsibility played in reducing case numbers. In Chapter Five, I examine how politicians used this narrative to shift focus off of workplaces and family dwellings as a

source of COVID-19 spread, and onto individuals. This both rendered action ineffective, as individuals alone didn't have what they needed to stop COVID-19, and it reformulated responsibility from a collective one, tiered by how much power a group of people had in society, to solely an individual one. The COVID-19 alert app played an important role in this, sold to Canadians as an effective tool to stop the spread of the virus, while evictions continued, housing continued to be unsafe and people were forced to continue working. The personal responsibility narrative dovetailed with the government's most important aid program, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which was intended to help individuals weather the pandemic. When CERB was supposed to end in August, it threw thousands of people into chaos, as they scrambled to try and find a way to supplement their income. In Chapter Six, I explore how the government managed CERB while also deciding to reward employers with a mass cash transfer called the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), which came with very few strings attached and tied worker aid directly to the whims of their employers. The government did all of this while not demanding that managers take extra precautions for their workers during the pandemic.

Chapter Seven examines the way in which schools became a proxy war to make arguments that were both for and against public health orders. Where residential care facilities were Ground Zero for COVID-19 death in the first and second waves, schools got an incredible amount of attention both for the harm they were causing by propagating COVID-19 and for the health benefits of keeping children protected from uncontrolled family bubbles that were vulnerable to allowing COVID-19 to propagate within. The start of school year 2020 coincided with the 2020 harvest, which put the spotlight again on seasonal migrant workers and how

badly their bosses treat them, especially during the pandemic. In Chapter Eight, I examine how the successful and relentless advocacy of migrant workers and their allies allowed this issue to pierce through a media landscape that was still mostly ignoring the role that workplaces were playing in spreading COVID-19. and how a program that had given all power to farm owners, had made it a location where workers found themselves in horrible living conditions, infected with COVID-19 and struggling to travel, thanks to restrictions and precarious status.

By November, the world had its first hope that a vaccine wasn't too far away. In Chapter Nine, I look at how the vaccines were reported and how journalists too often promoted narratives about vaccine hesitancy more than they explained how the vaccines were being made. This helped to fuel the rise in far-right, anti-mask/anti-vaccine movements, which politicians did not take seriously as extremist movements, and which journalists gave far too much air time to. While Canadian politicians were arguing over how fast vaccines could be distributed to Canadians, the Canadian government was purchasing more vaccines than any other country in the world and lining up with other Western nations to oppose waiving IP rules around vaccine development, blocking information—and safety—from flowing to poorer countries. Neither issue received as much coverage as the anti-mask/anti-vaccine protests, and this lack of information allowed for politicians to make vaccine demands that were impossible or ridiculous simply to boost their political popularity.

In Chapter Ten, I examine the pandemic through a gendered lens. Women, especially disabled and/or Black, Indigenous and racialized women, bore the brunt of the economic losses that the pandemic dealt. While this received a lot of media coverage relative to other issues, like the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people, the coverage rarely sought to put forward

fundamental solutions or hold politicians to account. Politicians mostly offered platitudes, even as the statistics were showing a marked rise in gendered violence and front-line agencies were crying out for help. Disabled women were especially made to be vulnerable during the pandemic, given very little income support and few services. I explore this further in Chapter 11, which looks at disability more broadly and how journalists and politicians nearly entirely erased disability from the public discussion of who is most threatened by COVID-19. Instead of disability or chronic illness, the term “comorbidity” became more popular, signalling to Canadians that avoiding the worst outcomes of a COVID-19 infection was as easy as not having a comorbidity.

In Chapter 12, I look at the biggest source of COVID-19 spread: workplaces. Politicians often directly or indirectly hid the impact that workplaces had on spreading COVID-19, and it wasn't until after Canada was well into the second wave that journalists finally started examining the role that large, congregant workplaces played in propagating COVID-19. But it wasn't as if workplaces were entirely erased: small businesses took the place for all business in thousands of media reports, distorting where COVID-19 was most serious and confusing Canadians over what was more versus less safe.

The final chapter, Chapter 13, examines the elephant that is lurking in most of the pages of this book: how the media industry fared during the pandemic, trying to fulfill its mandate while bosses hacked thousands of jobs. Journalists were under pressure to report on the health crisis of the century while they also faced increasing attacks from their own media companies. Cuts to the media industry had profound impacts on the quality and depth of local news, the breadth of national news, and the ability that media had to hold anyone to account for the

existing issues laid bare by COVID-19.

There was an over-reliance by some to describe the pandemic as being a moment of intense fog. This foggyess allowed politicians to spin a narrative they preferred to tell, one that shaped how Canadians understood what was happening, who to blame and critically, how to stop it. But that narrative was incomplete, and sometimes downright misleading. And journalists, far more often than not, repeated politicians' talking lines thereby contributing to this fog and making it very hard for Canadians to keep up with the news: what was happening, what did it mean and critically, who was responsible? There were very few individuals who were able to cut through it and explain plainly what was happening, and many of those voices are featured in this book.

The spin started early—even before COVID-19 had arrived in Canada—and it set in motion a dominant media frame that didn't question fundamental problems with Canadian society, even though those problems are what allowed COVID-19 to run wild, ending lives and permanently altering others.

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## References

### Introduction

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