

When to Start Freaking Out: Audience Engagement on Social Media During Disease Outbreaks

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ABSTRACT

As the media landscape in the United States has shifted and changed, the emphasis placed on digital technologies — particularly with respect to audience engagement — has become increasingly noteworthy. However, when situated against a backdrop of risk communications and sensationalized spectacle, such an emphasis also becomes concerning.

This thesis examines the audience engagement considerations and practices of the media industry at present through a discussion of current social media policies and practices, a discussion of the affordances and constraints of social media as they relate to public health communications concerns, and an analysis of the affective implications of the heavy emphasis placed on images used on social media. This breakdown is partnered with a data-oriented exploration of U.S. audience trends and U.S. media coverage of the 2014 Ebola and 2015-2017 Zika outbreaks to underscore the perception gap that U.S. audiences are contending with. In doing so, I use a theoretical framework of sensationalism, gatekeeping, and media figurations to argue that audience engagement is not merely a journalistic, revenue-oriented concern — it is a public health concern too.

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INTRODUCTION

At this point in time, American adults are increasingly using social media to get their news. According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 67 percent of adults get “at least some of their news on social media — with two-in-ten doing so often” (Gottfried and Shearer, p. 2). Given that this presents a significant increase from previous years¹, and given that social media usage trends are increasing across demographics², it’s logical to concur that the importance of news coverage on social media will continue to increase.

The increase has a number of implications that become particularly relevant when considering the state of the news industry at the moment. Industry revenues have been in decline for some time now, as organizations try to balance their budgets with digitally-oriented business models and coverage (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016, p. 4). News industry revenues are no longer what they were in the late 20th century (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016).

It follows that news organizations are now looking toward social media with a more keen eye than they did in the past. Social media jobs that were previously given to interns and entry-level college graduates are being viewed with heightened cachet, as news organizations pivot to meet audiences where they currently are — on social media (Elizabeth, 2017).

¹ In their 2016 report, *News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016*, Gottfried and Shearer mention that in 2012, the Pew Research Center noted that 49 percent of adults were *seeing* news on social media.

² Gottfried and Shearer note in the 2016 and 2017 versions of their report that the rate of this increases varies across demographics.

The emphasis on the social media producer/editor presents an opportunity to view one of the central concepts of journalism with a new lens. Gatekeeping, or the biased selection of news content — influenced by editorial, audience, and business interests — has been studied with great interest. At the end of the day, journalists and editors have a limited amount of space in which to convey news (and social media provides even more of a space limitation, in some cases), and this news is not merely serving the function of informing the public, in most cases; it is also the bread and butter that keeps journalists, editors, salespeople, and others, employed, and the news organization functioning. We can therefore posit that gatekeeping's role online is changing, as social media editors start to make decisions about coverage that are designed to draw in viewers. It's nothing new to say that an editor will make a headline catchy or select a compelling image to go with a story. However, it is still relatively new to think of the fast-paced, frenetic world of social media as a driver of audience engagement and, consequently, revenue.

An examination of gatekeeping and social media can go many ways. This thesis seeks to study the two in relation to the ability of social media to create a spectacle, particularly in regards to how and when stories become sensationalized. To dig a little deeper: this thesis will explore the issue of sensationalism-influenced gatekeeping on social media by examining social media policies and practices at news organization and how social media was used by news organizations and public health organizations during the most recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks. In doing so, it draws lines between risk communication practices and news communication practices, underscoring the need to conceptualize social

media-based news coverage as a public health concern in addition to a bevy of platforms on which to engage audiences.

Both the Ebola and Zika outbreaks drew significant amounts of media coverage in the United States. Yet, observation suggests that American audiences reacted to Ebola differently than they reacted to Zika. The cases of Ebola in the United States were rather limited in scope; audiences' concern about their risk of contracting the disease was disproportionate to their actual risk of doing so. In contrast, Zika certainly did reach the United States. Since Zika is transmitted by mosquitoes, it would seem logical to think that individuals can contract the disease more easily. After all, it's much easier to stay away from individuals in medical facilities than it is to avoid mosquitoes altogether in a state like Florida. Given this dichotomy, Ebola and Zika present an opportunity to study how individuals' perceptions of risk tie into the creation of sensationalized social media spectacles, and how gatekeeping on the part of news or health organizations plays into audience attitudes.

As such, the primary research questions for this thesis are as follows:

1. What is the relationship between sensationalism and spectacle when thinking about risk communications in the current media landscape?
2. How do social media policies and practices factor into the disease coverage that audiences see? How might news coverage affect our perceptions of risk?
3. How do visual representations of disease outbreaks on social media play into news coverage on social platforms? How do visual representations tie into social media

discourse and perceptions of risk? How might the visual affordances of social media lend themselves to sensationalized news coverage?

Addressing these questions necessitates using work on spectacles, risk perception, affect, and literature on public health and visual culture as theoretical lenses for this thesis to further examine how gatekeeping on social media — in relation to sensationalism and spectacle — manifest themselves to American audiences during disease outbreaks. This has implications for how social media is used during risky times, sheds light on how visual representations of disease might (or might not) influence perceptions of a given risk, and underscores the increasing scope of social media in news organizations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Guy Debord presented the concept of the spectacle as a concept that takes place when society begins to view reality and images as distinct, which takes place when consumers fall for the images rather than reality. “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images,” Debord writes in his seventh thesis, presenting the idea that spectacles take place when people’s interactions are mediated by images. In many ways, this idea manifests itself on social media every day; as platforms like Facebook and Twitter emphasize articles with large header images and posts that have images in them, images become driving factors in how audiences react to and with social media. It’s certainly possible there’s something of a chicken-and-egg scenario here. If social platforms made images more prominent because audiences were engaging with images, then did making images more prominent actually emphasize the use of the

image? Regardless, the fact that images are a driver of social media usage suggests that viewing the Ebola and Zika outbreaks through how they were visualized on social media by news and health organizations would be a productive exercise. The importance of images in social media strategy is largely known at this point. Communications professionals of all stripes have noted that social media posts receive greater audience engagement when those posts are paired with images or video. Marketing company Hubspot went so far as to collect 42 metrics on the importance of visual communications in early 2017, noting that they've "seen the importance of visual content emphasized by the changes that occurred across almost every major social network, including Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter" (Mawhinney).

In their 2015 article on media spectacles and risky globalization, Hannele Seeck and Terhi Rantanen "posit that the main phenomena challenging the current conceptualizations of media event and media spectacle are (1) the understanding of risk, (2) the context of disasters, and (3) globalization and the mediation of news in the context of transnational and transitional societies" (163). Seeck and Rantanen's work on the subject suggests that risk has not been much researched in relation to media events and spectacles, and that doing so would be fruitful when trying to understand how news organizations cover disasters. The focus of their argument is further refined by David Ropeik's work on best practices response (2006) related to risk perception, in which he establishes a link between risk perception and audience understanding:

Indeed, if risk communication can loosely be thought of as a process for closing the Perception Gap — when people are more worried than they need to be, or less

worried than they should be, given the general understanding of the facts of an issue — then understanding specifically *why* they are too worried or not worried enough is the foundation on which closing the gap, with more effective risk communication, should rely. The risk perception literature, therefore should be where ‘understanding the audience’ begins (p. 255).

Putting aside how news organizations and public health organizations view risk communications for a moment, Ropeik’s emphasis on the *why* (italics his) of audience reactions during risky situations underscores why affect should also be considered in this thesis.

In her 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed presents emotions as social and cultural practices, using her “model of sociality of emotions [to] suggest that emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others ” (p. 10).

Ahmed’s work, examines how fear helps and harms those around fearful situations, is well-situated to serve as a starting point for a discussion of how affect presents itself in risky situations — in this case, disease outbreaks — and how news coverage can convey certain affective concepts to audiences. Taking into account Ropeik’s own emphasis on emotion when considering risky situations, and Ahmed’s own work on how affect is conveyed in fearful situations (among others), I more closely investigate the affect(s) being

conveyed by news coverage and advisories during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks. Doing so will provide a useful conduit for further discussion and better understanding of how news and health organizations differ in their discussions of disease outbreaks while also helping us better understand why Ebola might have appeared more risky, even if the risk of contracting Ebola in the United States was minor.

METHODOLOGY

Given the theoretical frameworks presented above, I used a mixed-methods approach for this thesis, combining analysis of social media coverage from news and health organizations with interviews of social media editors/producers in both types of organizations, and an examination of the coverage presented by those organizations. The research questions mentioned earlier serve to structure the thesis. As such, the thesis goes through a series of methods, presenting an exploration of media coverage and audience interest on social media during disease outbreaks, an examination of the practices presently used in audience engagement, and a visually-oriented discussion of uses of social media during the most recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks.

The first portion of this thesis begins with a discussion of the 2003 SARS outbreak, as a starting place from which to understand societal spectacle and sensationalism at present. This discussion is complemented by a breakdown of risk communications and the perception gap as frameworks from which we can better understand how reality is mediated on social media. Following this larger theoretical discussion, I examine data related to the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, highlighting the disparities in audience searches

during both outbreaks using Google Trends data and the actualities of media coverage and shares using MediaCloud data.

Having done so, the second part of the thesis consists of an analysis of the various social media policies, guides, and practices that most directly address audience engagement at present. This analysis leads into the third part of the thesis, which breaks down the various images used on Facebook and Instagram by *The Washington Post* and the CDC during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks.

Taken together, these methodological approaches highlight distinctions between news and health organizations when it comes to risk communication, pinpointing the differences in approaches taken by organizations of both stripes, channel the affective weight of the image-oriented coverage presented during two specific disease outbreaks, and provide a framework from which I draw conclusions about the place of audience engagement in risk communications more broadly.

Chapter 2: From SARS to Present: Theoretical Perspectives and Data Analysis

THE 2003 SARS OUTBREAK

Between January and June 2003, the world was gripped by a disease outbreak like no other. SARS, originally thought to be a form of “atypical pneumonia” (Hunt, 2013), originated in the Guangdong province of China, quickly spreading from China to Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (*Remembering SARS, 2017*). The disease made it as far as North America, causing the U.S.-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to release a statement quoting then-CDC Director Dr. Julie L. Gerberding saying, “the emergence of two clusters of this illness on the North American continent indicates the potential for travelers who have been in the affected areas of Southeast Asia to have been exposed to this serious syndrome..... We do know that it may progress rapidly and can be fatal.”

Quarantine and isolation played a significant role in lessening the spread of SARS during this time period. According to the CDC, “the public and media were curious and concerned about these official and rarely used response tools.”

The concern over SARS manifested itself most poignantly in Hong Kong, where “alarm turned to panic” as quarantines were imposed suddenly (Hunt, 2013). A lack of understanding about how the disease spread — the press at one time was suggesting that SARS was being spread by rats and cockroaches — only contributed to the shock residents

were feeling (Hunt, 2013). As a result of this shock, SARS carried the stigma of a misunderstood, feared, disease.

At the height of the outbreak, 200 residents of Amoy Gardens, an apartment complex in Hong Kong, had contracted a still-unnamed disease. Unwittingly, the complex became caught in the crossfire of the SARS outbreak. On March 31, when police and medical professionals imposed a sudden quarantine on a block of the complex, “alarm turned to panic” (Hunt, 2013). In the aftermath of the outbreak, it was difficult to find tenants for apartments at Amoy Gardens, given the stigma associated with the complex. On the ten-year anniversary of the SARS outbreak, the BBC noted that “many residents [of Amoy Gardens], fed up with the stigma attached to their address, left after the outbreak, and those that remained have asked...to deflect the media attention the 10-year anniversary has attracted.”

This summary, though by no means comprehensive, highlights the myriad ways in which a disease outbreak can now play out in contemporary life. Public health communications efforts, important as always, face a great degree of scrutiny. Information disseminated by the press in regards to public health information is consumed, and taken seriously — regardless of whether or not that information is factually correct. This presents us with at least one inherent conflict in the communications process. Media attention can, in turn, affect lives long after a disease outbreak has taken place. Curiosity and concern can manifest themselves in ways that cause individuals, or groups of people, to interpret the details of an outbreak in ways that are startling, and emotionally driven.

THEORY: SPECTACLE, RISK, AND REALITY

All of this goes to underscore the importance of understanding risk in relation to media and public health communications. As a society, we interpret risks through a number of different lenses, some contradictory, others intertwined. This section serves to explore the literature relevant to concepts of sensationalism and risk in contemporary news media practices while keeping in mind the specific nature of disease outbreaks and the nuances associated with covering a disease outbreak. To that effect, I discuss Guy Debord's concept of societal spectacle, paying particular attention to how it is linked to power hierarchies, then discuss Ulrich Beck's concept of a risk society. Both discussions will be used to inform an understanding of how society constructs reality in regards to news media coverage today, with some attention to the issue of media framing. To follow, I examine the 2003 SARS outbreak in more detail, as a way to contextualize the theoretical concepts being discussed.

Guy Debord, a French scholar and intellectual, is perhaps best known for his work "The Society of the Spectacle." This book, originally written in 1967, is Debord's commentary on the altering modes with which society has come to understand reality. Written as a series of statements, or theses, Debord doesn't provide a specific form to his conceptualization of spectacle. Rather, he discusses spectacle through its manifestations — how society views, reacts to, comes to create, and comes to understand spectacle. Spectacle, Debord, writes, can occur in two different ways: in a concentrated form, that largely relates to process of force, or a diffuse form, that largely relates to an abundance of commodities and options. In describing spectacle in such a way, Debord uses his 63rd thesis to say:

What hides under the spectacular oppositions is a *unity of misery*. Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed. The spectacle exists in a *concentrated* or a *diffuse* form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery.

Debord presents the spectacle — regardless of whether it is concentrated or diffuse — as a façade of sorts. Though unity may be posited and pushed forward by society, possibly through means of heightened communicability or perceived understanding, the center of the spectacle is described as “desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery” in Debord’s 63rd thesis. Spectacle, then, might be home to an of abjection sorts, suggesting that understanding the affective implications of how we perceive society through contemporary forms of media can be a productive form of investigation.

Ulrich Beck (1992) presents an overall societal concept, or hierarchy, of how risks manifest in contemporary society. The focus of risk communications is oriented on communicating risks related to health and the environment (Fewtrell and Bartram, 2001). I therefore proceed using both conceptualizations of risk, with the understanding that one can inform the other. Beck presents us with a way of thinking about risk that considers societal structures, infrastructures, and hierarchies. Risk communications exists within that composition, and is affected accordingly. In what we can see as an idea that further expands upon Debord’s work, Beck presents risk as a concept that “has become an intellectual and

political web across which thread many strands of discourse relating to the slow crisis of modernity and industrial society” (p. 3).

Beck makes three key observations about risks, namely that: 1) risks take shape in social systems, 2) risk depends upon the “quality of social relations and processes,” and 3) because social processes are increasingly stratified, there is a significant disparity between those who are most at risk and those who determine social interactions (Beck, 1992, p. 4). This framework can be helpful when considering the current media landscape during a disease outbreak. When society is dependent on the media for information, but that dependency is based on a source that can be seen as “alien, obscure and inaccessible” (Beck, 1992, p. 4), the positions of risk and security during the communications process become more complex, and therefore more suspect, or liable to become part of a societal spectacle. This underscores a further possible relationship between trust and risk; in order to be in less of a risk society, trust in the institutions disseminating information becomes all the more important.

Beck goes on to discuss the disparity between risk production and wealth production, a concept he describes under the auspices of the “reflexive modernization of industrial society” (p. 19). As certainty and uncertainty in societal patterns interact with one another, we find ourselves in a risk society where the “logic” of risk production has more power than the “logic” of wealth production (p. 19). Calling to mind contemporary discussions of production and consumption, and how the two have become enmeshed, Beck’s discussion presents us with a contrast between those who stand to gain from so-called risky situations and those who are actually at risk during those situations:

The social and economic importance of *knowledge* grows similarly, and with it the power over the media to structure knowledge (science and research) and disseminate it (mass media). The risk society is in this sense also the *science, media and information* society. Thus new antagonisms open up between those who *produce* risk definitions and those who *consume* them (39).

The changing relationship between production and consumption paves the way for another of Beck's ideas, namely that reflexive modernization brings with it a questioning of what is rational (Beck, 1992, p. 30). Beck goes on to say that "the social effect of risk definitions is therefore not dependent on their scientific validity" (p. 32), a perspective that builds upon Debord's thinking.

In thesis 218, Debord writes: "The spectator's consciousness, imprisoned in a flattened universe, bound by the screen of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the fictional speakers who unilaterally surround him with their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle, in its entirety, is his 'mirror image.'"

Such a "mirror image" suggests a new way of thinking about reality, one that makes it possible for myriad distortions and tricks to be played upon (or with, depending on where one is coming from) society. Reality, then, becomes nebulous. This manner of thinking also highlights how in risky situations, particularly disease outbreaks when it comes to this research, the place of communications processes becomes increasingly important. When a risk society is couched in a place of uncertainty, and spectacle itself is

characterized by conceptualizing reality in a distorted manner, it becomes prudent to examine how media manifests in such situations.

In order to accomplish such an examination, the work of Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp becomes instructive. In their 2017 book “The Mediated Construction of Reality,” Couldry and Hepp aim to establish social theory for a society that lives much of its experiences through and with digital media. This objective is accomplished by asking a question: “Since our ‘reality’ as human beings who must live together is constructed through social processes, what are the consequences for that reality if the social itself is already mediated; that is, shaped and formed through media?” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 1).

Couldry and Hepp (2017) point out that, since the advent of social media, media now “comprise platforms” (p. 2), which represent the spaces where social experiences take place. Rather than media being specified along lines of type of channel or type of content, platforms are presented as a contrast on which the social world changes. In accordance with these changes to the social world, reality changes – is constructed – differently as well (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 2). These changes suggest that, while SARS might be a benchmark for thinking about disease outbreaks in a globalized society, changes to media in the years following 2003 present an opportunity to rethink how disease outbreaks are mediated, and how reality is constructed during those outbreaks.

To present their theoretical framework for a mediated construction of reality, Couldry and Hepp make use of Norbert Elias’ concept of figurations. They present figurations as a conceptual tool, “a more or less stable interaction of individuals which

produce in this interrelation a certain kind of meaning” (Couldry & Hepp, 1992, p. 63). In that sense, figurations are independent interactions, comprised of many people or parts, that can interact through changing patterns. Given this definition of figurations, they present a helpful tool when considering how disease outbreaks are mediated in contemporary society. By viewing the myriad components of a disease outbreak — the factual basis of the disease itself, the healthcare communications related to the disease, the media coverage of the disease, and the public’s understanding of the disease — as parts of a figuration, rather than an established process, we find ourselves in a position to examine the role media plays in mediated disease outbreaks from a number of perspectives. These perspectives can include news coverage, public health alerts and notifications, and general audience discourse on the subject of the outbreak in question. This, in turn, presents us with an opportunity to better understand today’s changing media landscape. In the following quote, Couldry and Hepp introduce the concept of deep mediatization, which can be serve as a framework to examine the non-linear relationships that take shape during a disease outbreak:

...a meta-process involving, at every level of social formation, media-related dynamics coming together, conflicting with each other, and finding different expressions in the various domains of our social world. At the very least, deep mediatization derives from the interaction of two very different types of transformation: a changing media environment characterized by increasing differentiation, connectivity, omnipresence, pace of innovation and datafication (the emergence of the media manifold); and the increasing interdependence of social

relations (the complex role in social life for figurations and figurations of figurations, that are based, in part, on a media-based infrastructure, but whose dynamics evolve beyond it). (p. 215)

The definition of deep mediatization highlights the non-linearity of a media experience, notable for change and omnipresence. As we'll see in more detail during the discussion of the SARS outbreak to follow, it is not necessary that the events of a disease outbreak occur in a linear fashion. Rather, components of an outbreak, particularly in today's globally connected society, can occur simultaneously and have far-reaching effects. These components are largely determined by how media are used to discuss and convey information about a given outbreak, underscoring the theoretical significance of deep mediatization. Couldry and Hepp describe deep mediatization as a concept characterized by change through and with media, and as a concept that understands the role figurations play in mediating reality. If we view a given disease outbreak as a figuration of sorts in today's risk society, deep mediatization can help us understand the media-based spectacles that follow.

The 2003 SARS outbreak was notable for a number of reasons. Most significantly, for this research, it "was truly the first international health-related crisis of the 21st century, and therefore, the first international health communication crisis as well" (Powers & Xiao, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, the SARS outbreak provides a valuable starting place for a discussion of disease outbreaks in contemporary society. We can consider what happened in a globalized society with access to international communications, which offers a promising perspective for understanding the role media plays in the construction of reality during a

disease outbreak in contemporary society. The anthology “The Social Construction of SARS” uses Berger and Luckman’s 1966 book “Social Construction of Reality” to discuss how society-wide understandings of reality are created, and how such information can be applied to the SARS outbreak. In their introduction, Powers and Xiao (2008) write that “among the most important lessons is one that we all know at some level, but which seems to need to be relearned whenever novel circumstances like SARS confront us, namely, that the way people communicate about a topic largely determines how they are likely to understand the topic and behave toward it” (p. 2).

Powers and Xiao’s conclusion also heightens the emphasis placed on media framing; depending on how an issue is framed in the media, society’s understanding of reality changes. Societal responses to a disease outbreak or health concern, then, are largely dependent on the media framing of the issue at hand; reality is constructed accordingly. Though Couldry and Hepp’s work can be considered more relevant for disease outbreaks in the present moment, the emphasis on framing that one draws from Berger and Luckman’s work is also significant.

In Singapore, for instance, the SARS outbreak was framed in terms of both politics and medicine. As the SARS outbreak was presented as a threat to the nation in more ways than one, the ways in which audiences learned of the outbreak changed as well (Hudson, 2008, p. 164). “The spread of SARS in Singapore became a public spectacle, in which illness was inscribed as a threat to the integrity of the nation” (Hudson, 2008, p. 177). In this sense, spectacle and disease outbreak go hand-in-hand. The details of the disease outbreak, at least in regards to Singapore, were communicated and framed in politicized terms.

For instance, then-Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong was quoted as saying “Well, I think I’m being realistic because we do not quite know how this will develop. This is a global problem and we are [at] the early stage of the disease.... At the moment, I’d rather be proactive and be a little overreacting so that we get people who are to quarantine themselves to stay at home.” In a keynote presentation for the World Health Organization’s Outbreak Communications Conference, held in Singapore after the SARS outbreak, Dr. Jody Lanard used the Prime Minister’s quote to emphasize specific points about outbreak communications: that the public should know what to expect and that it is important to “[show] empathy for other people’s fears and worries.” The emphasis on framing the SARS outbreak as a cause for great concern, shared by the Prime Minister and Dr. Lanard, manifested itself across other forms of strategic media communication in Singapore during the outbreak. In addition to press releases and conferences, media kits, websites, and other standard public health communications measures, government agencies held “televised dialogues between political leaders and community [members]” (Menon, 2011, p. 4). The Prime Minister wrote an open letter to Singaporeans, and the Singaporean Parliament held a debate on SARS (Menon, 2011, p. 4). The Singaporean Media Development Authority also established a SARS TV channel that was free-to-air (Menon, 2011, p. 5). The channel did not maintain much public interest, but its existence was not predicated on strong audience engagement. Rather, it was created because “... information had to be made available to the widest numbers, regardless of ratings” (Menon, 2011, p. 5).

Houston, Chao, and Ragan (2008) take this political framing a step further when they consider the larger role of media in healthcare situations. Not only are the media

“understood to be a primary source of medical and health information — usually cited second only to an individual’s doctor” (p. 204), media are core influences to how society conceives of given healthcare situations. By playing such a significant role in providing standard medical information, media establish how society understands a given healthcare situation and shaping how individuals make decisions during the situation (p. 204). That media have such significance in healthcare situations underscores the need to examine how media play into disease outbreaks today. Given the changing media landscape and the changing nature of society, societal responses to disease outbreaks are undoubtedly changing as well.

The 2003 SARS outbreak serves to highlight a key moment in society, when we had become globalized enough to see a disease spread around the world, and to see the communications that go alongside that outbreak change accordingly. The rest of this research will focus on more contemporary examples of such disease outbreaks. By looking at the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the 2015/2016 Zika outbreak, I present an examination of how news media has changed in the period since SARS — and how those changes take shape to create the current figurations we see during disease outbreaks. In doing so, I hope to present a better understanding of contemporary societal spectacle, discussing how risk perception today ties into contemporary news media coverage practices.

CONTEMPORARY OUTBREAKS: CONTEXT AND ACTUAL RISK

The most recent Ebola outbreak took place in 2014, and was based in West Africa. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, four instances of Ebola were found in the United States — between September and October 2014. Of those four instances, three took place in Texas, following Thomas Duncan’s return from West Africa and subsequent diagnosis with the disease (Winter 2014). The other instance took place in New York, following the return of another medical aid worker, Dr. Craig Spencer, from West Africa (Santora 2014).

The Zika outbreak began in 2015, first gaining traction in South America, then entering the United States. Zika is a mosquito-borne disease that is now found most often (in the mainland United States) in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Between 2015 and December 2017, over 5,000 symptomatic disease cases of Zika have been reported in the United States according to the CDC. Based on that information alone, the risk of a U.S. resident contracting Ebola during the height of outbreak — or afterwards — is much lower than a U.S. resident’s actual risk of contracting Zika.

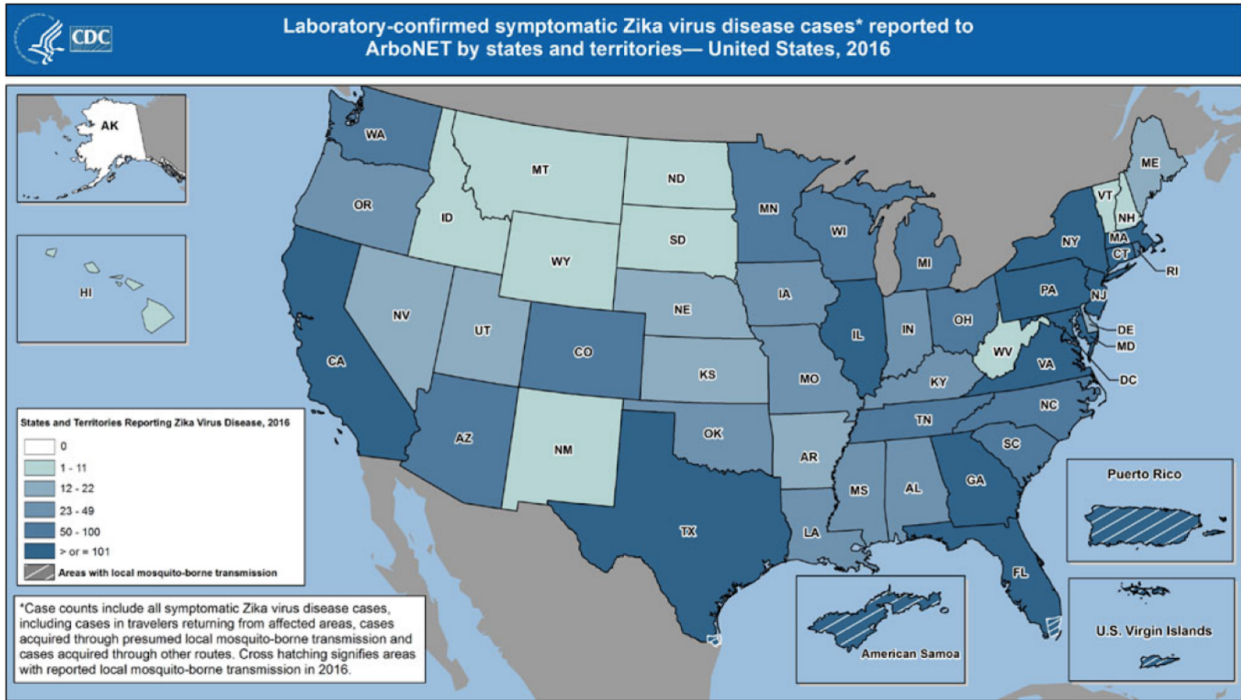


Fig. 1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2016 Zika Case Counts in the U.S. <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/reporting/2016-case-counts.html>

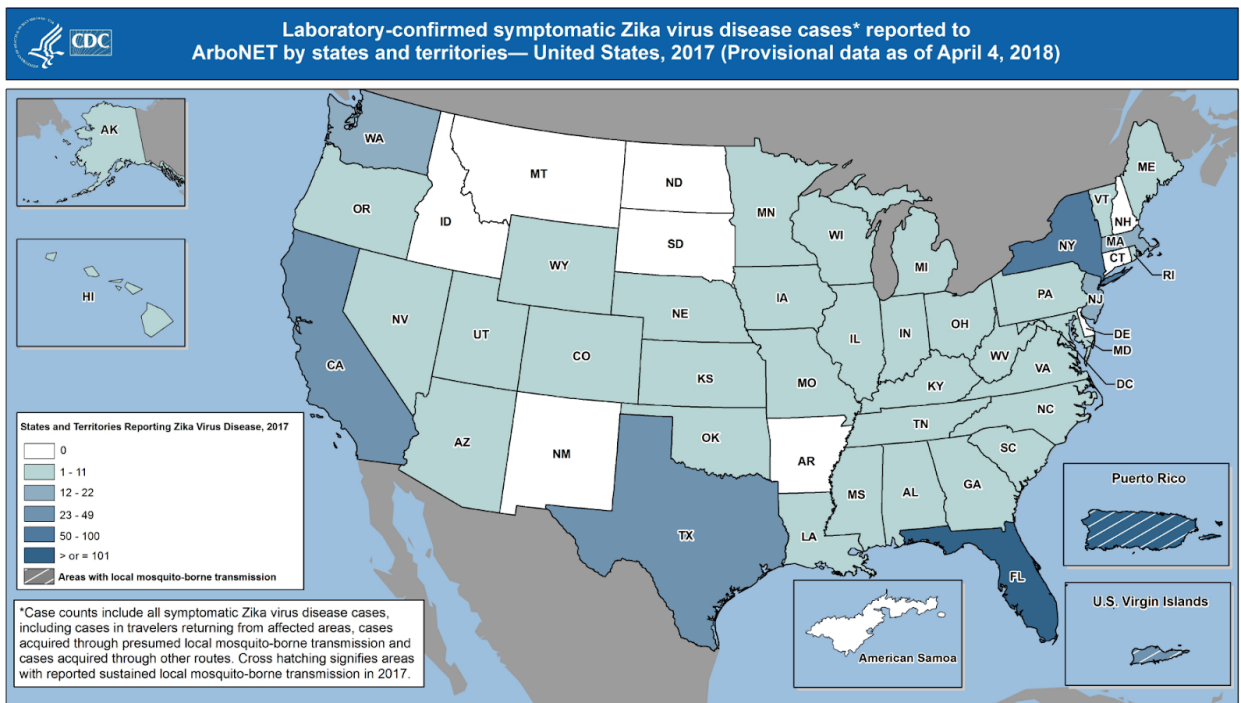


Fig. 1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2017 Zika Case Counts in the U.S. <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/reporting/2017-case-counts.html>

An analysis of the CDC’s own notices about the Ebola and Zika outbreaks further supports this conclusion. The graph below highlights how many notices the CDC released about Ebola and Zika between 2014 and the end of Nov. 2017, aggregated on a monthly basis. There are far fewer Ebola notices (red) than Zika notices (gold).

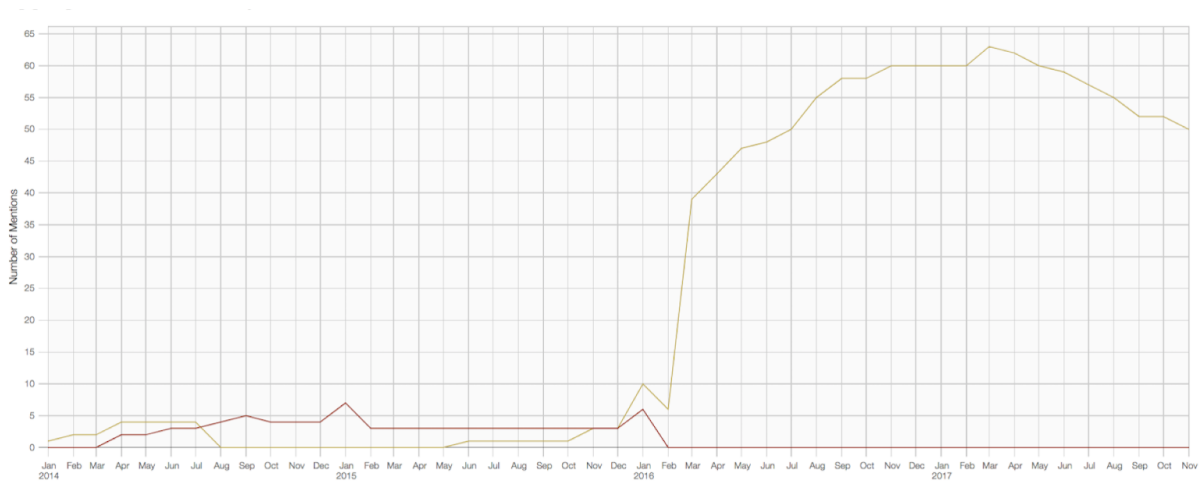


Fig. 3. CDC Notices Released During the Ebola and Zika Outbreaks, January 2014-November 2017.³

³ Figures 3 and 7 were created with Vivien Chen and Andrea Jackson for a project during the Fall 2017 course “Applied Data Visualization” at MIT.

AUDIENCE TRENDS AND INTERESTS

In contrast, the graph below uses Google Trends data to highlight what U.S. audiences were searching for during both outbreaks. Overwhelmingly, audiences in the United States were more interested in information about “Ebola” than “Zika” as search terms.

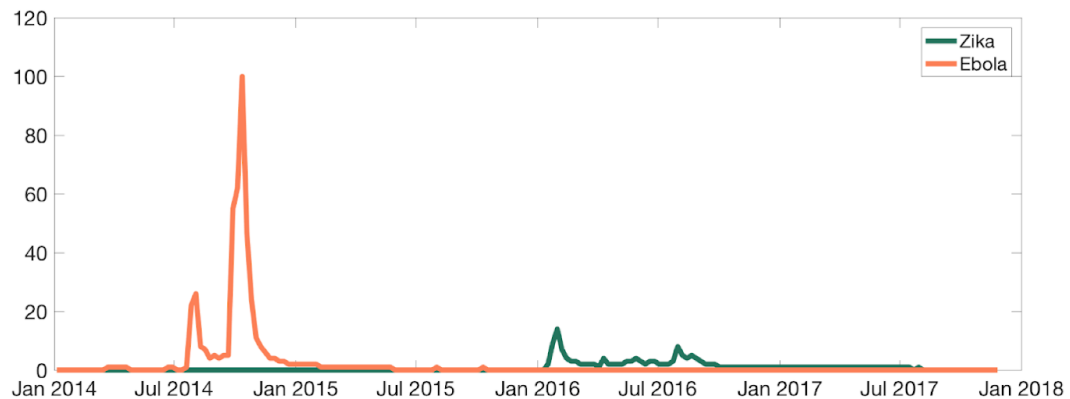


Fig. 4. U.S. Audience Google Searches for “Ebola” and “Zika,” January 2014-January 2018

The following two graphs compare Google Trends data by searches for “flu,” “Ebola,” and “Zika,” with the aim of understanding whether or not audiences were searching for the flu or for either disease during the relevant time period. By examining U.S. audience interest in either Ebola or Zika during the relevant flu season time period, we can develop a better understanding of whether or not audiences accurately perceived their risk perception.

The flu is a regular, seasonal issue that affects many Americans every year. The CDC prepares a communications campaign around flu season every year to raise awareness of flu season and flu prevention, so audiences are likely to hear more about the flu during

those seasons. This campaign runs regardless of other outbreaks — so flu information is a constant for U.S. audiences, at least from a public health communications perspective.

However, U.S. audiences were far more concerned about the Ebola outbreak (as interpreted by search data) than they were about the flu.

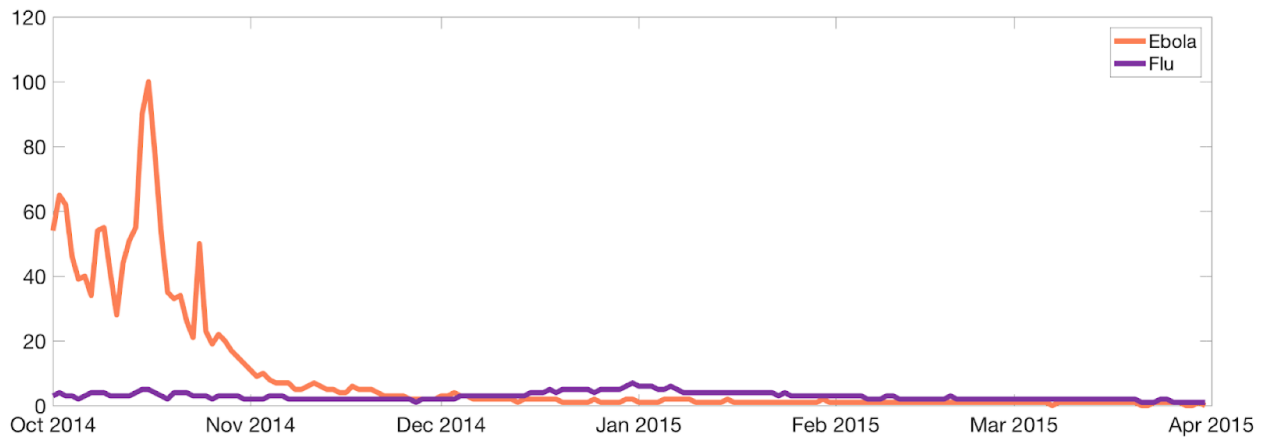


Fig. 5. U.S. Audience Google Searches for “Ebola” and “Flu,” October 2014-April 2015

In contrast, U.S. audiences were more concerned about the flu than about Zika during the relevant flu season — even though Zika was a disease that has no preventable treatment and is definitely a disease that U.S. audiences can contract.

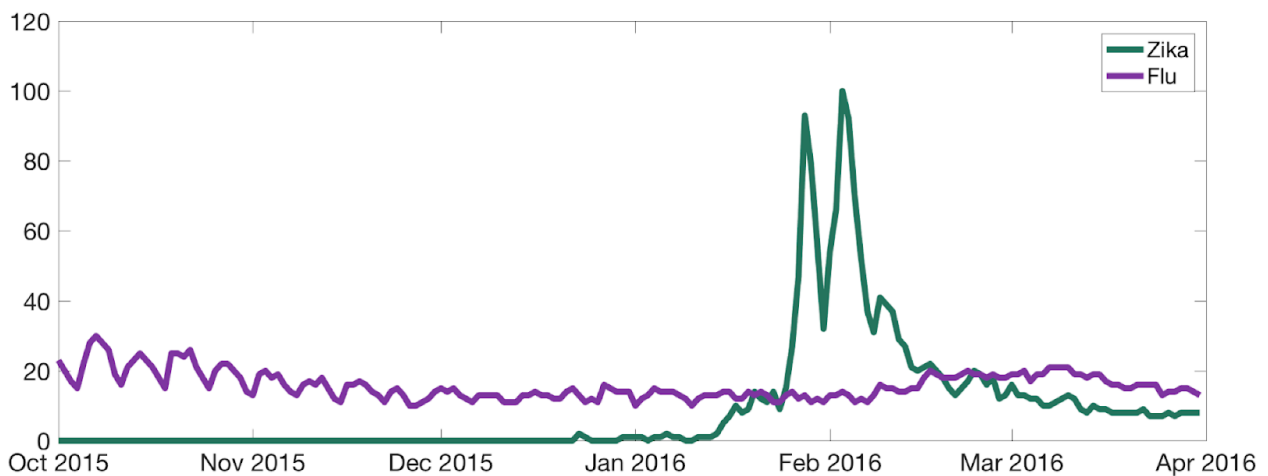


Fig. 6. U.S. Audience Google Searches for “Zika” and “Flu,” October 2014-April 2016

The spike in interest over Zika can largely be attributed to one state: Florida. If we look at Google Trends data for the same “flu” and “Zika” search and present the information differently (see the graph below), the majority of the United States — even states like New York, Texas, and California, not to mention other Southern states with a propensity for mosquitoes — was more concerned about the flu than Zika, even though Zika was a disease that U.S. audiences could feasibly contract in those portions of the country.

Zika vs. Flu (Oct 2015 - March 2016)

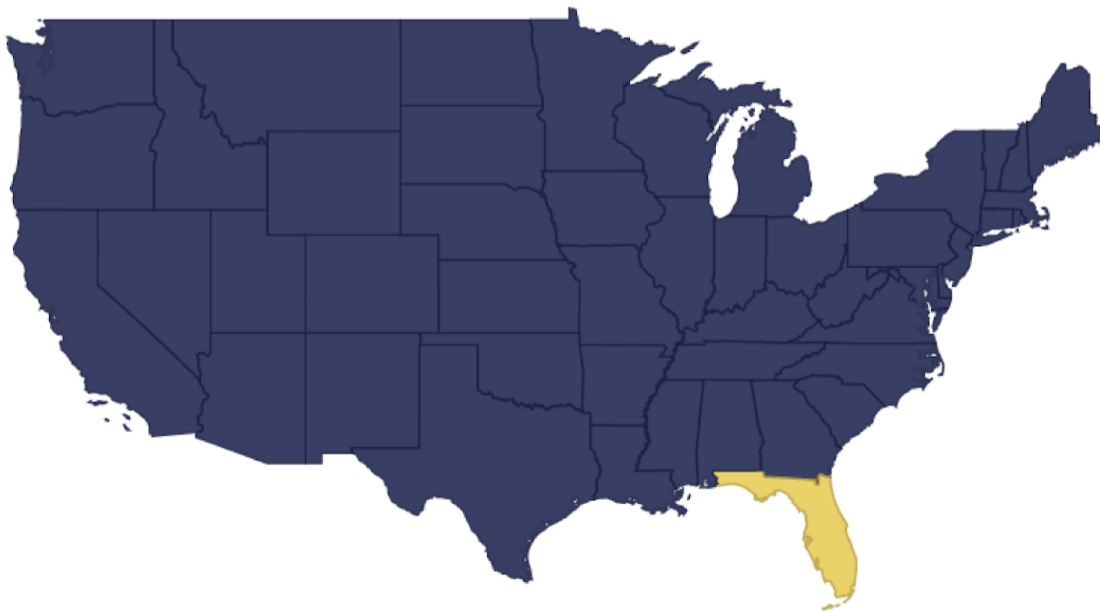


Fig. 7. U.S. Audience Searches for “Zika” and “Flu” Mapped, October 2015- March 2016

MEDIA COVERAGE DURING THE ZIKA AND EBOLA OUTBREAKS

To complement the above exploration of U.S. audience interests and search trends, I also looked at data from MediaCloud, a tool that highlights how news organizations are talking about various media issues and topics. I set up two media cloud searches, for “Ebola” and “Zika,” with timeframe start dates of 2014 and 2015 respectively (the start years of both outbreaks). Both searches included coverage through November 2017. Both searches examined news coverage from a variety of U.S.-based news sources on national and regional levels: *The Sacramento Bee*, *Dallas Morning News*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *Miami Herald*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and Media Cloud’s aggregate listing “U.S. Regional Mainstream Media.” These organizations and lists were selected based on their availability in the MediaCloud database and their prominence in the U.S. news media landscape; their coverage is well-regarded as reliable and comprehensive.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Having conducted searches for both Ebola and Zika, I proceeded to examine MediaCloud results for an understanding of the frequency of coverage and the type of coverage that news organizations were providing and referencing — as opposed to what audiences were actually sharing.

Based on MediaCloud’s search for “Zika,” the top media sources — those sources that “had control of the main narratives” — were the CDC, World Health Organization, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *New England Journal of Medicine*. These sources were determined by sorting the “Zika” search for media inlinks, or the number of unique

media sources that linked to content from the specific source being considered. If the “Zika” search was sorted by those media sources that received the most Facebook shares, the top media sources change slightly. In this case, the top media sources are *The New York Times*, ABC News, *The Washington Post*, BBC, and CNN.

A similar pattern emerges when examining MediaCloud for “Ebola.” The top media sources, as categorized by media inlinks, are the CDC, World Health Organization, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN. If the “Ebola” search is navigated by quantity of Facebook shares to determine top media sources, the sources change slightly again. They are *The New York Times*, CNN, Huffington Post, *The Washington Post*, and MSNBC.

It’s significant that media coverage for the Zika and Ebola outbreak centers around such a concentrated set of news sources. Though there are a few notable exceptions (a top story, not source, from the ‘Ebola’ search links to an article called ‘Obama is Infecting Christians to Destroy Jesus and Start a New Age of Liberal Darkness’ from christwire.org, which was shared a reported 526,437 times on Facebook), the vast majority of stories and sources related to searches for “Ebola” and “Zika” are from major news and health organizations, known for reputable — and factual — work. This presents us with a few pieces of information: (1) the news organizations getting the most Facebook traction from covering these two disease outbreaks are news organizations known for being accurate, (2), Facebook shares for these news organizations are not negligible — the MediaCloud search for stories showed that stories from *The New York Times* were shared on Facebook 5,371,982 times and 2,174,296 in relation to the Zika outbreak, and (3) if audiences are searching for disease outbreaks in stark contrast to what is being factually presented by

mainstream news organizations, then it becomes prudent to ask what it is about news organizations' policies and practices might be driving this incongruity.

Chapter 3: Social Media Policies and Practices in News Organizations

INTRODUCTION

As news organizations work to understand and benefit from social media in regards to their work, they have developed and codified guidelines, tools, and processes to shed light on a situation that is seemingly obscure at one level in particular — that of the audience.

If one compares the affordances of past manners of audience engagement with contemporary ones, it becomes clear that we are moving in stunningly contradictory directions: from clarity to confusion (in some cases), from inaccessible to too accessible (in other cases), and ultimately — in attempting to seek out audiences (with the ostensible aim of providing accurate information) — we have obfuscated the process of news communication.

This chapter examines the infrastructures of social-media based news coverage on a number of levels, including the affordances and constraints of social media job positions, a discussion of social media strategy and how it is (or is not) conducive to risky situations, and an examination of social media policies in newsrooms. Inherent to these examinations is an understanding of how risky situations can be defined, and an understanding of what the implications of covering risky situations on social media might be. (The next chapter more closely examines how media coverage played out specifically during the most recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks, serving as an examination of how news coverage manifests during situations of perceivable risk.)

In his breakdown of best practices response in risk communications, Dave Ropeik provides a broad definition of risk communications, contextualized in the importance of understanding how audiences might be perceiving their risk in any given situation. The “perception gap” Ropeik mentions refers to the gap between audience understanding of a risk in relation to the risk they actually face in a given situation. Ropeik then details best practices for address this gap in risk communications practices, highlighting a key component of designing those best practices: “understanding the audience.”

I argue that this understanding goes beyond understanding audience perceptions when it comes to how news organizations cover risky situations, or those where audiences might be at risk and their understanding of that risk through news coverage gains heightened importance. This importance cannot be understated in regards to disease outbreaks. At the present moment, for instance, how audiences understand their risk during disease outbreaks is only significant in regards to past outbreaks, but also necessary to understand in relation to future outbreaks.

INCREASING SCOPE OF RISK COMMUNICATIONS

As noted by the World Economic Forum, “infectious disease outbreaks are likely to become ever more complex and challenging. By 2050, the world’s population will have risen to 9.7 billion. A combination of high population density, poverty, changes in social structures and a lack of public health infrastructure will create progressively more favourable conditions for communicable diseases.”

At present, the World Bank estimates “the annual global cost of moderately severe to severe pandemics is roughly \$570 billion, or 0.7% of global income.” These costs — associated with those factors *related* to the disease, not typically associated with addressing diseases themselves — are related to losses based on “consumer reactions, labour and equipment shortages, and cascading failures in tourism, retail, financial and other sectors.”

These losses are undoubtedly based, at least in part, on factors related to preparation; if the labour and equipment sectors have no advance notice of a disease outbreak, they are unlikely to be able to address shortages once an outbreak has come out in full force. That being said, a large part of the World Bank’s estimates focus on *consumer reactions*. Given that news organizations and public health organizations are the two sources from which audiences get their news about disease outbreaks (Houston et al., 2008), the work those organizations put into communicating information about those outbreaks becomes work of tantamount importance. Cost benefits aside, having consumer reactions more closely aligned with actual risk in a given disease outbreak could lead to a closure of the perception gap (or, at the very least, a step in the direction of closing the perception gap). That being said, the matter is not as simple as recognizing the importance of news communications in closing the perception gap.

Just as diseases are changing in the 21st century — an increasingly global, mobile society means diseases can travel further, faster — news communications are changing too. The last few decades have seen a significant shift in how news is created, covered, shared, and communicated around the world. We’ve developed a new vocabulary for these changes, particularly in regards to social media; stories can “trend,” for a short amount of time, they

can go “viral” for short amounts of time — or longer, possibly — and most everyone can either find the news, frame the news, or set a news agenda depending on the level of savviness they have with certain social media platforms and technologies. Though this chapter isn’t intended as a discussion of misunderstanding and “fake news” on social media in all facets, it will touch on those aspects of social media usage to an extent. The focus of this chapter is the affordances and constraints of social media specifically in regards to healthcare situations (even more specifically, the potentially risky situations that are disease outbreaks). Such a discussion cannot, and should not, consider risk perception/understanding in one set of situations and overlook the commonalities that might stem from other situations that could similarly benefit from audiences understanding fact from fiction (politics, for instance). To that effect, this chapter will focus on social media-based news coverage in regards to disease outbreaks in particular, but the implications drawn from this analysis might have applications to other types of news communications on social media as well. In other words, this chapter is an analysis of social media policies and recommendations at major news organizations and research institutions; it serves to highlight what practices and processes have been institutionalized in the mainstream media.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND NEWS CONSUMPTION

Two-thirds of Americans currently get “at least some of their news on social media — with two-in-ten doing so often” (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). This statistic is representative of other data found from the Pew Research Center; collectively these metrics highlight a notable increase in American usage of social media across demographics, and an increase in the amount of news consumption done across social media platforms. Though different groups of people use different social media platforms with varying amounts of frequency, the fact remains that social media is becoming an increasingly significant way for audiences to consume the news.

News organizations have been using social media platforms of all stripes to provide news to audiences. As social media has gained importance in relation to news coverage — as a means of generating website traffic and as a way to engage audiences more immediately and interactively — news organizations have increased the amount of consideration and resources put towards social media. In many ways, the news industry suffered a case of whiplash as the scope and size of social media became clear; social media made itself known at a time when the news industry was facing a challenge precipitated by an overall societal shift to digital news coverage. Print subscription rates were falling, digital advertising revenue didn’t replace the shortfall, and news organizations consequently became short-staffed just as social media stepped onto the scene.

The result was a situation in which news organizations were left catching up. Outside of the most well-resourced organizations, social media was (and sometimes still is) seen as something best left to people who knew how to use social media, who simply cleared the low bar of knowing how a given application or platform worked. The Intercept’s

audience engagement director, Rubina Fillon, quoted in a 2017 report from the American Press Institute, said “it’s bizarre that people think this is an entry level position. That indicates managers think it has to do with age, and that is not accurate.” The API report goes on to mention that Fillon “recognizes that just because someone is a ‘digital native’ doesn’t mean he or she has a solid understanding of social media platforms and strategy.”

Though this practice is no longer endemic to all newsrooms, and social media is now largely recognized as as a significant source of website referrals, audience engagement, and newsgathering, there are still oversights in the way news organizations view social media that suggest audiences are being significantly overlooked. This omission is startling in some senses, because although news organizations appear to be giving more weight to social media than ever before, the central component of social media can easily be said to be the audience. Without a following, or an audience to comprise the “social” aspect of a given platform, a news organization’s social media strategy seems poised to omit significant considerations if that organization is to effectively cover situations of risk in a way that closes the perception gap.

News organizations have a vested interest in large social media followings. If the two ways for websites of all stripes to get traffic – and therefore ad revenue – are search and social (Richter, 2016), then news organizations have to excel at both. At a certain point, search is left up to what Google surfaces. Since news organizations can have social presences of their own, and manage those presences as they see fit, they have more control over this aspect of traffic generation. But what work/presentation gets the biggest audience

on social media may not actually be the most effective piece of information to communicate to audiences if one wants audiences to accurately understand risk.

It becomes relevant, then, to consider how social media might be influencing audience perception and understanding on a number of levels, including the policies/guidelines that convey information about how audiences might be engaged, the behaviors that social media platforms themselves are encouraging/facilitating, and a discussion of what could be improved about social media strategies with the aim of closing the perception gap and better conveying an accurate understanding of risk to audiences.

The visual formats that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are encouraging have a higher emotional pull than what might come out of a “text” story. The infrastructures of both platforms emphasized the importance of images and video, to the extent that most news organizations built out “social video,” teams, designed to make videos that would be most engaging for audiences scrolling through their Facebook feeds. News organizations also began to strategize about their image use with new consideration given to how likely a social media posting was to be surfaced if that posting incorporated images. This point will be further expanded upon in the next chapter.

This work examines the role and responsibility of news organizations — and the potential danger they pose — when it comes to risk communications and health education. At present, news organizations are largely considering “The Audience,” as a group en masse, as news organizations discuss and design social media and audience engagement policies writ large, rather than more tailored policies. This can — and should be — distilled down into more detail on social media. Just as different verticals or sections in a newspaper might

have drawn different audiences, different platforms do so as well. An individual using Instagram to get their news might be markedly different from an individual using Facebook for the same purpose. Beyond different platforms, different users on the *same* platform will use those platforms differently as well; there are individuals who prefer to be “lurkers” on Twitter, for instance, observing news and commentary as it comes by. There are other individuals who prefer to actively engage in news and commentary on Twitter. As such, a blanket strategy — even for one platform — is likely to overlook audiences and their myriad habits, in ways that can be unproductive when trying to effectively convey information.

In order to effectively engage audiences, then, it becomes incumbent upon news organizations to tailor their social strategies down to very specific levels. Regardless of platform, a mother of two will have different concerns about what a disease outbreak means than a businessman who travels, and these differences in audience approaches need to be accounted for. To contextualize these considerations, this chapter draws from recent social media guidelines from *The New York Times*, research reports and recommendations from The American Press Institute and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, a discussion of corporate social media management vis-à-vis the @DennysDiner Twitter account, and an analysis of the newsletter theSkimm. Certainly, this chapter could have surveyed additional social media policies and practices, and examined other organizations focused on news research and best practices. For instance, the Knight Foundation is a valuable journalistic resource, and news organizations other than *The New York Times* certainly have social media policies. However, social media policies are updated with varying degrees of

frequency, so I selected *The Times'* policy as a benchmark since it is a recent example that highlights its considerations in detail. Similarly, the reports from The American Press Institute and the Tow Center are fairly recent, and speak to the current conversation around audience engagement best practices. As such, the analysis presented in the pages to follow serves as a helpful discussion when thinking of how to design effective audience engagement experiences with (and without) regards to risk communications.

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES IN THE NEWSROOM

In the fall of 2017, as the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election came to a close, *The New York Times* revealed new social media guidelines for their newsroom and staffers. These guidelines, created in conjunction with journalists from across the *Times* and spearheaded by editorial staff, serve as as a productive starting point for a discussion of contemporary social media policies, because they act as an indicator of what a significant news organization in the United States is currently thinking about, and serve as a reference point for the strategies and policies that have come out since. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, redid their own social media guidelines roughly a week after the *Times* released their own revision.

The *Times'* guidelines are significant for more than the timing of their release. They highlight the reactive nature of the media industry at present; as one organization does something, another will do the same. There is a certain amount of caution in what news organizations can and will do at any given time. (Had the *Times* not updated their own policy, would the *Wall Street Journal* have seen fit to update theirs?) More importantly, the

guidelines serve as a yardstick for the considerations news organizations see as most important when it comes to social media guidelines for staffers in general.

The importance of social media is certainly acknowledged, showing a marked shift from even a decade earlier, when news organizations would often put interns at the helm of their social media strategies. The *Times* report highlights the myriad ways in which social media can be used as a reporting tool: “Social media plays a vital role in our journalism. On social platforms, our reporters and editors can promote their work, provide real-time updates, harvest and curate information, cultivate sources, engage with readers and experiment with new forms of storytelling and voice.” Journalism on social media is consequently presented as more than the dissemination of information. Regardless of where a story is being published, one can infer, social media is a valuable tool and resource. Social media serves as a way to disseminate information, yes, but beyond that it is a tool for promotion and publicity, a way to convey information, a way to *find* information, a way to gather sources, and a way to engage audiences and venue for experimentation. The order of these affordances is noteworthy. For instance, “promote their work” is listed first in a list of what journalists and editors can do with social media.

This emphasis on a profit-oriented perspective is notable, especially when the *Times*' guidelines speak of what can be understood as breaking news situations. “We believe in the value of using social media to provide live coverage and to offer live updates. But there may be times when we prefer that our journalists focus their first efforts on our own digital platforms,” the *Times* writes in another section of their guidelines. At this point, the *Times* is presenting a profit-oriented perspective. One can infer that by guiding audiences to their

own digital platforms, the *Times* is interested in getting more traffic to their digital platforms at those times when audiences are most keenly in search of the news. This isn't to say that a profit-oriented perspective is a negative. The *Times* is a business like any other, and their many journalistic contributions would decrease significantly if they had less money to fund those efforts. That being said, there's an inherent contradiction between what the *Times* is advising their staff to do in situations where audiences are most in need of information and what might actually be best for audiences. For instance, if Twitter is the fastest way for a certain audience to get news about something that might significantly impact them, then is publishing that information on a *Times*-branded platform first the best thing to do for the audience in question? Is the audience in question even aware of the competing interests that might be at play first? And are they aware of how to approach such situations? At present, the *Times* appears to be aware of the contradiction, but they also seem to be addressing it in a way that leaves the issue to be addressed on a case-by-case basis by saying, "We generally want to publish exclusives on our own platforms first, not on social media, but there may be instances when it makes sense to post first on social media. Consult your supervisors for guidance."

A more broad-level critique of the *Times*' social media guidelines can be found in a 2017 article published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In that article, author Mathew Ingram argues that the guidelines will backfire because they do not inculcate a necessary amount of trust between news organizations/reporters and audiences. Ingram notes that the *Times*' guidelines do not prevent staffers from using social media, but they do limit the ways in which staffers might use the platforms, most notably by refraining from presenting

statements of opinion on the platforms. Ostensibly, the *Times* includes such a statement in their guidelines to ensure some amount of objectivity in the work that they publish. While it's possible to maintain an impression of objectivity on one website, or in one newspaper, it's certainly not possible when the reporters and editors or a news organization are all using social media. Audiences could interpret what one reporter says as a statement said *on behalf* of a news organization, and that the news organization itself shared the opinion mentioned by the reporter in question.

Ingram takes this question a bit further by turning it on its head: "The first downside of these kinds of policies is that they won't actually achieve what publishers want them to achieve: Convincing readers their journalists aren't biased. The second — and possibly even more important — drawback is they'll prevent media outlets from using social media to its full potential.... Those who believe the *Times* is out to get Trump, or the *Journal* is out to prop him up, are unlikely to change their minds simply because reporters and editors revert to robotic tweets that contain nothing but the facts and a link their editors are hoping someone will click so they can make their monthly numbers."

This statement points out that having staffers revert to objectivity might not necessarily be productive for news organizations, especially if audiences are skeptical of news organizations to begin with. It's conceivable that audiences, inured as they are to objectivity might fight efforts to be objective worthy of not being trusted; after all, as people, reporters and editors likely *do* have opinions. To be certain, the *Times*, or any other news organization, could still run the risk of having the words of their staff be misconstrued by audiences, but the question of trust still remains. If audiences already have an inherent

mistrust of the news media, do attempts at objectivity on social media go against the grain? In other words, are attempts at objectivity unproductive when audiences see social media as a separate form of communication, with its own affordances and benefits, one of which might very well be a frank, forthright manner of communication? If the answer to that question is yes, it could very well suggest that attempts at complete objectivity are both counterproductive to getting audiences to trust news organizations and to building relationships with audiences on social media. If the trick to engaging audiences on social media is communicating with the tone and stylistic choices audiences use on a social media platform – either because the platform encourages those choices or because audiences have formed a community that values those choices – then attempts at objectivity might reduce news organizations’ use of social media to a shadow of the rich, productive resource it could have been otherwise.

The final salient observation from the *Times*’ guidelines relates to this note about the affordances of different social media platforms entirely. Journalist Margot Sanger-Katz, quoted in the reworked guidelines from *The Times*, remarks that “part of what’s fun and interesting about these other platforms is that they are a little different from The Times’s article pages in tone and framing.” This underscores the differences between social media platforms, and presents a way to draw inferences about the different ways in which they should be used. If each platform has its own way of presenting tone and framing to audiences, then might it be possible to consider platforms independently of one another when crafting social media guidelines? More to the point, how might those differences in

tone and framing be influencing what gets posted on a given platform, and how that information might be understood by audiences on a given platform?

These are questions that are addressed (to varying degrees of success) in a report from the American Press Institute, titled “After a decade, it’s time to reinvent social media in newsrooms.” The report begins boldly, claiming that newsrooms across the United States haven’t changed much since they first began to use social media. In making this claim, the API cites a statistic from the survey data they used to drive their report. Having surveyed 59 newsrooms in the U.S., the AP has found that “that posting links to their own content, mostly on Twitter and Facebook, is still by far the top activity of the average social media team.” Given the scope of social media – the sheer number of people on any given platform, and the journalistic possibilities of social media – this is a startling insight, one that suggests that news organizations might have recognized the importance of social media, but are still either wary or unaware of using it to its full capacity.

In highlighting the priorities and key fears of social media usage, the report initially appears to have put an overwhelming amount of thought into questions of how audiences can be engaged and how social media can be used to strengthen news organizations and their coverage. The benefits of implementing the API’s recommendations are “[improving] trust and engagement, increasing subscribers, and enhancing staffers’ skills and efficiency.” These benefits align with the *Times*’ stated goals of social media usage, suggesting that they’re benefits largely agreed upon, and desired, by those working on issues of social media-based news coverage.

The API's report resorts to some problematic recommendations that suggest audiences are *still* being overlooked, even in a report that is ostensibly guiding newsrooms in efforts to improve audience engagement. One of the first recommendations in the report suggests adopting marketing and corporate efforts into newsrooms, by “[checking] the corporate world outside of journalism to help learn more about engagement.” While there’s certainly much that can be learned from corporate marketing practices – how to keep track of audience data, how to create engaged users who return to a product they like, and how to track metrics, for instance — the merits of this suggestion are lessened given the lack of some significant caveats. Though the corporate world can offer much for newsrooms to learn, not all corporations are the same.

The restaurant Denny’s, for instance, is incredibly popular on Twitter (@DennysDiner). It has nearly 500,000 followers, and many of its tweets have received significant amounts of audience engagement. That being said, Denny’s is largely such a social media phenomenon because it *does* insert personality into its accounts. Audiences largely interact with Denny’s because they identify with Denny’s. The general theme of the Denny’s account can be said to be “ridiculous with a side of food,” a theme that its audience also identifies with. Audience responses are in character, and similarly driven by a sense of the ridiculous. For instance, a February 3, 2018 tweet from @DennysDiner made a list of “unlucky things,” including black cats, breaking a mirror, getting syrup on one’s pants, and spilling salt. By and large, followers responded with pictures of their own black cats — the conversation had left the realm of the food-related entirely.

Notably, there is a lack of anything related to consistent, direct promotion of Denny's food or dining experience anywhere on the account. To be certain, there are many companies who don't have the levity-based approach to audience engagement that Denny's does. That being said, the points that are notable about Denny's are points that are notable about other companies as well. These companies have personalities that drive audiences to their social media platforms. Audiences identify with the work being done by those companies, or with the messages being put out by those companies. In telling news organizations to inculcate more corporate practices into newsrooms, then, the API is largely recommending that newsrooms develop more character; that audiences might resonate more with a news organization when they identify with the brand of that news organization beyond the idea that the organization exists to "give them news."

It's an interesting recommendation, especially considering that the starting place the API suggests for news organizations looking to learn more about their audiences is decidedly staid. The report writes: "A solid first step in getting to know your audience: Check the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder for deep data about your town or region." Though such data is undoubtedly helpful, it seems like an odd start for learning about audiences using social media. A more effective starting place would be reports from the Pew Research Center's work on internet and technology, which include data about the individuals using social media, and how those individuals use social media. The recommendation given by the API comes across as cursory and unconsidered, particularly when coupled with the recommendation to adopt more corporate practices.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND OBJECTIVITY

As previously discussed in this chapter, there's a marked wariness in news organizations related to straying from the appearance of objectivity online. Though objectivity is certainly an admirable goal, it appears as if news organizations are approaching the issue of objectivity from contradictory positions. By suggesting that news organizations adopt more corporate practices, the recommendation implicitly encourages more efforts related to having an online personality. By recommending that news organizations learn more about their audiences, but from the places that don't have up-to-date information about those audiences (the U.S. Census is conducted every 10 years, and the last 10 years have seen a notable shift in how U.S. residents use technology, making the information currently offered by the census rather out-of-date), the recommendations are addressing audiences cursorily, without giving much consideration to the habits and approaches of those audiences.

Furthermore, if one is to put any regard into what the *Times'* guidelines suggest, tailoring social media accounts to have more personality, i.e. to be less objective, would be counterproductive to news organizations' ability to gain trust from their audiences. It would appear that news organizations are caught in a chicken-and-egg situation of sorts. By becoming more objective, they think they will gain more trust from their audiences. By adopting more corporate practices and making the most of the infrastructures and communities inherent to various social media platforms, they would be straying from their goal of remaining objective. Perhaps there is a balance that can be found between the two perspectives. At present, though, it appears that the balance is nebulous – and possibly

nonexistent. After all, recommendations to pursue both approaches are being presented without the nuance necessary to help newsrooms with smaller staffs and less experience make informed decisions about audience engagement writ large.

DEVELOPING AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

Julia Haslanger, one of the audience engagement experts reviewed by the API for their report, is quoted having noted several of the obstacles present when interacting with audiences: “lack of time, resources, support, training and best practices, etc. ... [M]any people with audience-centric titles are still spending the majority of their time and energy helping their news organization meet its business goals.” There is an irony in Haslanger’s quote, as it mentions the potentially problematic role of audience-centric positions in helping news organizations meet their business goals, as the article itself recommends that news organizations turn to business-oriented functions for help in learning how to engage audiences. This suggests that energies are being diverted from newsrooms to help bring about financial success, while making the point that newsrooms aren’t necessarily equipped to contribute to the bottom line in such a way; after all, that’s why the recommendation to turn to corporate practices exists.

Though the broad swathe of the idea — marketers and businesses oriented to marketing may have adaptable principles that can help newsrooms engage audiences — sounds useful, it is a statement that should include a number of caveats given the thinking that such advice is bound to bring forth. That thinking includes presuppositions that news organizations and businesses can use social media in exactly the same ways (or parallel

ones), and that news organizations and businesses should be thinking about social media on singular streams of thought. By definition, businesses are using social media to further transactional purposes. By definition, news organizations are not. Though they are organizations that certainly have — and need — business models, they are not using social media in exactly one stream; rather, they are using social media with myriad goals, of which only one is to generate revenue. The larger goal, one could argue, is to disseminate information and engage with audiences to find stories.

The Tow Center’s February 2018 “Guide to Audience Revenue and Engagement,” does succeed at addressing the complex nature of the relationship between audience engagement and business by providing a comprehensive breakdown of the corporate practices news organizations might find most valuable and the ways in which those practices can be implemented in news organizations of all sizes. Unlike the New York Times guidelines (which, though they’re meant for *Times*’ staffers are undoubtedly also being used as models at other news organizations) and the recommendations from the American Press Institute, the Tow Center’s approach has an inherent pragmatism and practicality that makes it more well-suited to serving as a resource from which news organizations. The Tow Center’s report provides a specific suggestion to think about increasing audience engagement through a funnel (that is very similar to the corporate marketing funnel), describes the email flow of a drip campaign for new newsletter subscribers (another instance of borrowing corporate practices), offers suggestions on how publishers can hold smaller focus groups with audiences, and participate in large-scale events to gain more

brand recognition. The report also encourages the use of survey techniques to learn more about audience interests.

However, for a report that aims to help news organizations increase audience engagement (and consequently, revenue), it lacks follow through on the *how* of these recommendations. Authors Elizabeth Hansen and Emily Goligoski write: “This report is intended to aid staff from news organizations and media entrepreneurs who wish to grow their revenue by deepening interactions with their audiences. It’s based on hundreds of conversations and interviews with journalists, managers, and members themselves, including newsroom fieldwork and observation, as well as focus groups with supporters of news sites.” An introduction of this sort suggests that the report, unlike those preceding it in this analysis, will provide detailed input into how news organizations can implement the suggestions above, with thought given to the monetary constraints of most news organizations. Yet, the report does not describe replicable practices with which audiences or audience groups can be engaged.

Unlike other sets of recommendations, the Tow Center’s report does consider the concept of user experience research as a way to research audience news consumption practices. However, those recommendations are framed largely in the context of marketing-esque practices, with the implicit suggestion being to understand how audiences consume news largely for the purposes of revenue generation. I would suggest broadening this approach. Methods such as user experience research can be used for more than the enrichment of marketing processes; rather, they can be used as a way for news

organizations to learn more about their audiences and apply those insights to practices of *news coverage* as well.

To balance out examples of problematic audience engagement guidelines across the industry, I would recommend news organizations – particularly those that are still struggling to adopt to social media practices to begin with – gather insights from the successful audience engagement practices of other news organizations with an eye toward practical replicability (for example: how to manage large-scale events, best practices for designing audience surveys, and emphasis on the distinction between corporate marketing and audience engagement.) Though there is much to be gained from the guidelines and recommendations discussed above, they are problematic in ways that can be addressed by looking at case studies of digital news organizations that have managed to straddle the line between audience engagement and revenue while not muddling up issues of objectivity, personality, and actual audience inclusion.

Digital media outlet theSkimm exemplifies this behavior on a number of levels. Founded in 2012 by two NBC producers, Carly Zakin and Danielle Weisberg, theSkimm began as a daily newsletter, then developed a subscription product, theSkimm App. Since 2012, theSkimm, which describes itself as a “membership company,” has grown to have over 6 million subscribers and has generated a significant amount of revenue (though exact numbers have not been released). theSkimm is a media company — and acknowledges itself to be so — but their self-description as a membership company is significant. It suggests an orientation to audience engagement that goes beyond news dissemination and information distribution. Rather, the company positions itself as an essential part of the

daily routines of female millennials, integrating themselves into targeted aspects of everyday life.

theSkimm is notable for its emphasis on understanding audiences, having targeted news products, and for its approach to community management. As the policies and practices discussed above illustrate, we often think of audience engagement as a social media-based phenomenon. theSkimm serves to highlight how this might not be the case, and how audience engagement can be more proactive, targeted, and user-oriented to produce better results — both in terms of audience engagement and subsequent revenue.

theSkimm describes itself as an organization that “[builds] products that fill a void in our market: news that fits into the daily routines of our members.” This ethos is pervasive throughout the organization; various media interviews with Zakin and Weisberg strongly emphasize the company’s reliance on understanding female millennials, theSkimm’s core audience, and their news consumption practices at very granular levels.

The concept of theSkimm’s daily newsletter developed as Zakin and Weisberg observed patterns of news consumption among their own friends (who also happened to be their target audience). The two present female millennials are busy professionals who *want* to be informed about the news of the day, but often find it difficult to gather expertise in the field. Zakin and Weisberg noticed that the news is populated with stories that often require previous knowledge of a situation — knowledge that individuals working outside of politics and media may not have the time or expertise to build on their own.

To that effect, the two set out to “create a news source that really spoke to smart, busy people and gave them their news in a way that fit into their routine.” In doing so, Zakin

and Weisberg also had to analyze the habits and media consumption practices of their target audience. Their turn to newsletters wasn't about newsletters at their core, it was about meeting female millennials where they were: on their phones. As Weisberg put it in an interview with Business Insider:

“It wasn't newsletters that we thought about; it was email. There was a beauty in how naïve we were. We didn't have a tech background. We didn't have a business background. It helped us not overthink things. We just thought — what's the best way to get in front of our friends? We went back and forth. Should we text them?

We were like, "No, the very first thing you do in the morning is you turn off your alarm, it's on your phone, you grab your phone, and you literally open your email to be like, Did someone die? Am I getting fired? or Is my boss yelling at me? and What did my friends send me? And we knew we had to be in that moment. One of our friends worked in finance, and she left for the office at 5:50 in the morning every morning. So we were like, we gotta get it out to her on that commute. So we chose 6 a.m.”

MARCH 06, 2018

ARCHIVE

theSkimm™



WATCH

“ QUOTE OF THE DAY ”

"I walked into a glass door" – [A caller](#) to a 911 dispatcher after walking into one of the many glass doors at Apple's new HQ. Geniuses, they're just like us.



NEW TARIFFS IN TOWN

The Story

Republicans are not on board with President Trump's new tariffs.

Remind me.

Trump campaigned on economic policies that he says would protect US workers from foreign competition. One of those policies was [tariffs on imports](#). Last week, he moved [to make it happen](#), announcing massive tariffs on steel and aluminum.

Fig. 8. A screenshot of the header of theSkimm's March 6, 2018 newsletter.

theSkimm's core product — the daily newsletter — is written and designed in a way that is designed to be easily digestible, informative, and aspirational. Each newsletter begins with a silhouetted woman, theSkimm girl, going about her life. At times, her silhouette incorporates a branded item or logo; at other times she is presented as is —

consuming the news, wearing a double-string of pearls. Simultaneously informed and elegant, she is presented as an aspirational version of the theSkimm’s target audience. The writing in the newsletter is also designed to best suit theSkimm’s audience. News headers are attention-getting and snappy (ex: “new tariffs in town” leads the story about President Trump’s desire to implement new tariffs on products from Canada and Mexico.) The rest of the story is similarly structured; theSkimm links to articles and stories from varied news sources that provide more context, and presents a shorter version of the story, “theSkimm” at the end.

At the end of each newsletter, theSkimm gives acknowledgement to Skimm’s (subscribers) who have birthdays on a given day, putting an asterisk (*) by the name of any Skimm’r who is a Skimbassador, something like a product evangelist. Skimbassadors, who receive exclusive access to information from theSkimm, and often products as well, can only join the Skimmbasador community after having convinced 10 others to subscribe to the skimm. At present, theSkimm has 27,000 Skimbassadors serving as product evangelists, which suggests that theSkimm has a great deal of access to subscribers, and a way to always learn about their target demographic from their most dedicated subscribers.

Compared to the strategies and policies outlined above, theSkimm’s approach is markedly more approachable, accessible, and considerate of audience habits, preferences, and activities. The success of this targeted approach — that is neither wholly marketing nor information distribution — is borne out through theSkimm’s engaged, activated audience and the revenue success the company claims to have accomplished.

Admittedly, theSkimm is not the only news organization to make use of a newsletter — or even multiple newsletters — to engage its audience. Oftentimes, news organizations use newsletters in a way that still puts a bulk of the effort on readers; those newsletters are organized by specific subject areas or types of content, rather than tailored to a specific type of reader, so readers typically have to subscribe to multiple types of letters (for science, for technology news, or for breaking news headlines, to name a few) or follow the (typically) personal newsletters of writers who create newsletters that curate content across disciplinary divisions. (The Ann Friedman Weekly comes to mind as an another example of this behavior.) A turn toward newsletters that further focused on demographics or interest groups — rather than content categories — would be a productive way to better engage audiences while also attending to revenue concerns.

CONCLUSIONS

Though news organizations have developed more nuanced social media strategies, guidelines, and policies since the early days of social media, it's also apparent that their practices are still largely out of touch with the larger social media ecosystem and resulting revenue models. There is an inherent irony to be found in the value that news organizations place on social media-based revenue and objectivity, while they also make attempts to inculcate corporate marketing practices into newsrooms. Meanwhile, as theSkimm highlights, news organizations can generate significant amounts of revenue by putting the information-oriented needs and practices of target audiences front and center. By expanding from an audience engagement model that focuses on clicks alone, to one that

understands audience habits, practices, and interests, news organization can increase audience interest in their coverage — and consequently, revenue — while also giving larger amounts of consideration to the information-dissemination practices that best characterize news organizations.

At present, given the imbalanced relationship between news organizations and their use of social media, the place of the perception gap on social media becomes all the more relevant. Since social media is used as a tool for risk communications, we need to understand its specific affordances — and the considerations attendant upon those affordances – during disease outbreaks in particular.

The next chapter specifically examines how news and health organizations covered the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, and how social media platforms have been designed to emphasize certain affective responses in audiences.

Chapter 4: Using Social Media to Cover Disease Outbreaks

INTRODUCTION

In February 2018, The Poynter Institute ran an article titled “These tools will help you find the right images for your stories.” On the surface, the title of this article is innocuous enough. The Poynter Institute is a resource for journalists, describing itself as “the world’s leading instructor, innovator, convener and resource for anyone who aspires to engage and inform citizens in 21st century democracies.” Poynter’s website regularly provides trainings to journalists, provides resources and ethical guidance, and highlights innovations in journalism and media. That said, this particular article, by journalists Kristen Hare and Ren Laforme, drew the ire of visually-oriented journalists for a number of reasons.

The article aimed to highlight resources through which journalists can find free, legally usable images online that add to a story. Hare and Laforme wrote the article based on their own experiences trying to find engaging images that go alongside a story, saying that “It’s a hard sell to get anyone to read an article online if that article doesn’t have an image. Most audiences find posts through social or search, both of which have a visual element. Articles without images show up as boring text blocks that few will see and even fewer will click through. But what do you do if you don’t have an image? Luckily, there are a variety of image hosting sites with generous licenses that journalists can sort through. No image, no problem.”

As photojournalists went on to say in response to Hare and LaForme’s article, this approach is problematic for a number of reasons. It treats the visual components of a story

cursorily, as a necessity largely because of their engagement value. It also presents visual considerations as secondary to the actual text of a story, rather than a complement — or even the driving factor of a story. It was also written conversationally, in a way that did not serve to emphasize the importance of visual journalism (on or off social media). The article also presented ethically questionable reasoning, as argued by Mark Johnson in a response to the Poynter article, since “you don't know the provenance of the image, you don't know the conditions under which it was created and you don't know where else it has been used. It degrades the journalistic integrity of the site.”

The National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) also brought their opinion to bear upon the issue, highlighting the value of photography by saying that “ A great image captures attention. It can inform, enlighten and evoke an emotional response. In print, broadcast, online, and on social media, images have the power to draw people into a story and multiply its impact. That power is awesome and has quantifiable value.”

Both Johnson’s response, and the NPPA article are worth reading in their entirety. That many news organizations — at least enough to warrant the original Poynter article — are using free and stock images to buffer their written content is problematic, especially as it suggests the images are just a ploy for audience engagement. But for the purposes of this chapter, the outcry from visual journalists is relevant for another reason; it highlights the power that images have — to incite emotion, to elicit response, to make a story hit home.

Such power is only strengthened in our contemporary media landscape, one that is dominated by social media and the value judgments, decisions, and affordances present on social media platforms. Combined, the power of images and their prevalence suggests that

the importance of images as a vehicle for news communication has been increasing, that it is likely to increase in the future, and that we should pay careful consideration to the place of images in news communications.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the audience engagement practices of news organizations can be questionable; organizations aren't engaging with audiences in ways that wholly incorporate audience understanding and input, though doing so would likely increase their revenue. Organizations are, however, making the most of images — free or paid — because of the value of those images. Particularly on social media, images are a driver of engagement, and consequently, revenue. As Hare and Laforme wrote in their contentious Poynter article, "Articles without images show up as boring text blocks that few will see and even fewer will click through."

If the takeaway from this anecdote is that images have a considerable amount of weight and power among audiences, follow-up questions arise: can the power of those images outweigh audience understanding of a given situation? In regards to health communications, what might this power mean for accurate audience understanding of a given situation? What role do social media platforms, and their image-heavy emphasis, play in audience understanding of risky situations?

This chapter breaks down these questions by discussing the affective implications of images in risky situations, the significance of the emphasis that social media platforms place on the visual, and the contrast this emphasis presents with the aims of health communication practices and those largely being used by news organizations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURES

In a 1999 article titled the “Ethnography of Infrastructure,” Star aims to ask “methodological questions about studying infrastructure with some of the tools and perspectives of technology” (p. 377). This article is relevant for two reasons. First, the infrastructure of social media platforms themselves comes into play when considering the power of images on social media platforms. Second, by applying ethnographic perspectives to the infrastructure of social media platforms, we can better understand how audiences are responding to the images they see on social media.

As Star presents it, infrastructure has several properties: embeddedness, transparency, reach or scope, is learned as part of membership, it links with conventions of practice, it embodies certain standards, it is built on an installed base, it becomes visible upon breakdown, and it is fixed in modular increments, not all at once or globally.

Of particular note to a discussion of images on social media are the properties of transparency, reach/scope, and embodiment of standards. In the Poynter example, Johnson mentions that the provenance of stock images can be difficult to identify. This point can be taken a step further: the provenance of social images can be difficult to identify. Images on social media are often remixed and reused — this is in part an engaging facet of social media culture and partially a feature to its detriment. As the provenance of images gets lost, audience understanding of the *context* of those images can also be lost. This content is important because, like the caption and layout that accompany images on news websites and newspapers, it provides audiences with further information about the situation in which an image was created, information about who created/took the image, and

information about whether or not that image has been modified. From the perspective of those particularly interested in knowing how audiences understand their risk for certain health situations, this provenance-related transparency is particularly important.

In highlighting the reach and scope of infrastructure, Star also presents us with a way in which to consider where images on social media platforms are actually going. An image presenting a risky situation on social media has the *potential* to travel far and wide given the practices that social media platforms inculcate as part of everyday practices: retweets, shares, likes, and suggested/recommended content based on what the people you friend/follow have retweeted, shared or liked. Algorithms that social media platforms keep intentionally vague surface content in newsfeeds that is designed to get the highest volume of engagement or most likely to keep audiences *on* a platform. Is it a form of sensationalism, then, to have platforms that — by valuing reach and scope for the sake of eyes on a given piece of content — can possibly also value those images that elicit the strongest affective responses in audiences, even if those images are not necessarily the most factually accurate? Or if those images do not present the more mundane, pragmatic facets of a risky situation?

Lastly, Star mentions the embodiment of standards as significant to an understanding of infrastructure. To take the point about popularity a step further, consider the Poynter example once again. Journalists responsible for teaching and guiding *other* journalists (Poynter is a very well-regarded resource in the journalism community) are suggesting questionable practices — through no ill-intent, but possibly through a misplaced one — to other journalists, largely because of a feature of the current news media

landscape. Traction on digital media, largely based on social traffic and clicks, has become essential to profitability. And that profitability manifests itself most keenly in the practices journalists are now espousing (or struggling with practicing, as the case may be) — having images to accompany articles for the clicks, so that articles get more traffic. The standardization of using images on digital media and social media has become related to profit and engagement — not necessarily to the more direct, information dissemination motives that could be associated with choosing the best images to convey information rather than sensationalize it. A bar chart, after all, is likely to get less clicks than an emotionally compelling picture. But the bar chart may be a more accurate and effective representation of actual risk, while the emotionally compelling picture may get more clicks — even if it increases the perception gaps audiences have in relation to a given disease outbreak.

AFFECT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In her 2013 book “The Cultural Politics of Emotion,” Sara Ahmed examines how emotions “work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (p. 1). In conducting this examination, Ahmed discusses what it means to be emotional, and also how the processes of being emotional affect the workings of individuals and larger groups. Ahmed’s discussion of the affective responses individuals and society can have to particular situations/objects/bodies is relevant to a consideration of the place of images as part of a social media infrastructure, given that images that elicit affective responses are most likely to be used on those platforms. In other words, her work underscores the affective

significance of those images, highlighting how the power of those images in audience perception should not remain unaccounted for.

There are many people who have worked with the importance of affect on social media. In their article on affective news and networked publics, Papacharissi and Oliveira draw connections between the streams of news found on social media and the use of #egypt during the Arab Spring. Their work highlights the affective power of social media, and also provides a framework from which to consider the specific affective place of images being used on social media.

Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012) mention that the tweets associated with #egypt “[revolved] around... this *drama of instantaneity*” (p. 13), a concept that blends the infrastructure of social media (in this case, the specific, moment-to-moment nature of Twitter during a movement) and the affective power of that infrastructure. They write: “Prominent and popular tweets were reproduced and endorsed, contributing to a stream that did not engage the reader cognitively, but primarily emotionally. Frequently, the same news was repeated over and over again, with little or no new cognitive input, but increasing affective input” (p. 13). This increase in affective input is particularly relevant when thinking about the place of images on social media. As Papacharissi and Oliveira mention, the results of their own work identifying the place of affect in social media infrastructures “underscore the need to consider affect in explanations of the role of media use during mobilization” (p. 15). I argue that this expansion should also include risk communications specifically; social media are a primary means of learning about disease outbreaks — both for individuals and news organizations. Helen Branswell’s March 2018 StatNews article

highlights this need; as local news outlets and papers die out, the individuals tasked with tracking diseases find their work harder to do (there's no news coverage to search for in order to know if certain kinds of health phenomena are spreading). Conversely, individuals in the areas with less local media resources are less likely to get information about the spread of diseases from reliable non-internet sources. Social media fills this gap in a large way; given the affective power of social media, and given that diseases and health issues are inherently emotional to begin with — lives are at stake, after all — the affective place of social media communication is worth considering in regards to risk communications. It is particularly important to consider images in this regard given their emotive power, and the vaunted place they have in social media communications of all sorts.

Papacharissi and Oliveira address a part of this significance by introducing the term “affective news streams, to describe how news is collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion within an ambient news environment” (2012, p. 15). In their presentation of affective news streams, the ambient news environment is one that is comprised of the infrastructures of social media in such a way that influences the background that individuals experience on any given social media platform: “The constant pace, frequency, and tone of tweets contributed to and constructed an “ambient” information sharing environment. We term this a news value, because not only does the architecture of the medium invite the constancy and continuity that constitute ambience, but also because the continuous updates, even if redundant, contributed to the creation of a live and lively environment that sustained online and offline expressions of the movement.” (p. 11)

If we take the daily news presented unceasingly and incessantly on social media as the ambient news environment of risk communications — the risk being communicated has to make its way through this backdrop, after all — then the affective force of images associated with risk communications becomes a point of consideration as part of the affective news stream. These images become a construction of how a disease is presented to individuals the world over, carrying weight that in turn affects their understanding of an outbreak, its risks, and their own perception of the risks of that outbreak in relation to themselves.

IMAGES USED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

This section examines the affective role of images in risk communications on social media by looking at the images presented by *The Washington Post* during the most recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks in contrast with the images posted on Instagram by the CDC during the corresponding time periods for the corresponding diseases. This comparison is relevant for a couple reasons. Though *The Washington Post* and the CDC have slightly different objectives during a disease outbreak — the *Post*'s mission is largely to inform the public of the outbreak, while the CDC would have the more specific goal of sharing general and preventative information about the disease outbreak — examining their work hearkens back to the significant role that news organizations and health organizations play in providing work to audiences during disease outbreaks. Given that local media is fading out of the landscape of risk communications, largely due to media business problems, the visual output of a large, national news organization and the CDC is important when considering

the affective weight of the images most likely to make their way to US audiences during periods of heightened risk and fear during disease outbreaks.

The methodological choices made here were made for a few reasons. First, I chose to examine the images posted during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks because both outbreaks were heavily covered and discussed in the United States after social media had become a mainstay of mainstream news coverage. News organizations and health organizations included coverage of both outbreaks in their social media strategy. I chose to examine the CDC's Instagram feed during both outbreaks because Instagram is an image-oriented social media platform, it is (comparatively) more feasible to search the CDC's Instagram in an unimpeded manner than it is to search the CDC's Twitter and Facebook feeds for image-oriented content, and, in an interview with a CDC communications specialist, it was mentioned that the CDC was particularly intentional about their image use on Instagram.

Lastly, I chose to examine the images posted on *The Washington Post's* Facebook page during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks. Instagram does not have any search tool beyond the most basic, so finding Instagram images from the time periods of the Zika and Ebola outbreaks on the Washington Post feed is extremely difficult; after early 2016, Instagram has a tendency to freeze and prevent scrolling further. On repeated occasions, Twitter surfaced error messages when attempting the same process using their advanced search tool. This examination is by no means saying that coverage from The Washington Post is inferior, or badly conducted. Rather, it is meant as a starting place for a larger discussion of how mainstream news organizations are using industry best practices on a regular basis.

EBOLA IMAGE ANALYSIS

The images shared by *The Washington Post* during the 2014 Ebola outbreak are largely foreboding and ominous. They overwhelmingly present Ebola as something separate from the United States, something that should be contained and controlled and prevented and carries with it themes of death and disaster.



Fig. 9. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Oct. 7, 2014

In the above image, for instance, an indistinguishable aid worker is carrying a child through a maze-like construction of net, wood, and wire fencing. The child is turned away — no faces are distinguishable. The fencing suggests the two are in a dangerous, inhospitable place.

Inhospitality resurfaces in other images as well. The following image presents audiences with another obfuscated figure, entering a dark structure. The windows are unopened, the paint is peeling, and the person in the picture is carrying a canvas stretcher into the building. The picture presents nothing hopeful; there is nothing to suggest that *people* are involved in the outbreak compared to the bodies of the diseased or those tasked with removing those bodies:



Fig. 10. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Sept. 30, 2014

Even when The Post presents images of the Ebola outbreak in relation to the United States, the images emphasize the unwelcoming nature of the unknown. The images below both suggest that travel — the primary means of association with West Africa — has become hazardous and disease-ridden. Figure 12 makes use of comparatively brighter lighting than the second, but both invoke ideas of avoidance. Figure 12 makes it seem as

though Ebola awaits any given traveler at the Delta counter, a sight recognizable to any traveler, anywhere. The social media post itself makes no mention of where the picture was taken, of where the medical worker might be, or of why they are dressed the way they are. Rather, audiences are left to extrapolate that the worker is in a place that audiences could also be in — a stark contrast given that audiences in the United States were highly unlikely to contract Ebola in the US. Figure 11 again invokes themes of fear. Even the “authorized” professionals behind the door are preventatively masked. The “regular citizens” off to the side are shaded and positioned in such a way that they are uncomfortably close to the authorities. Figure 11 does not invoke sensations of safety or security. Rather, the authorities themselves seem to be at risk, and the citizens even more so. After all, they are not masked.

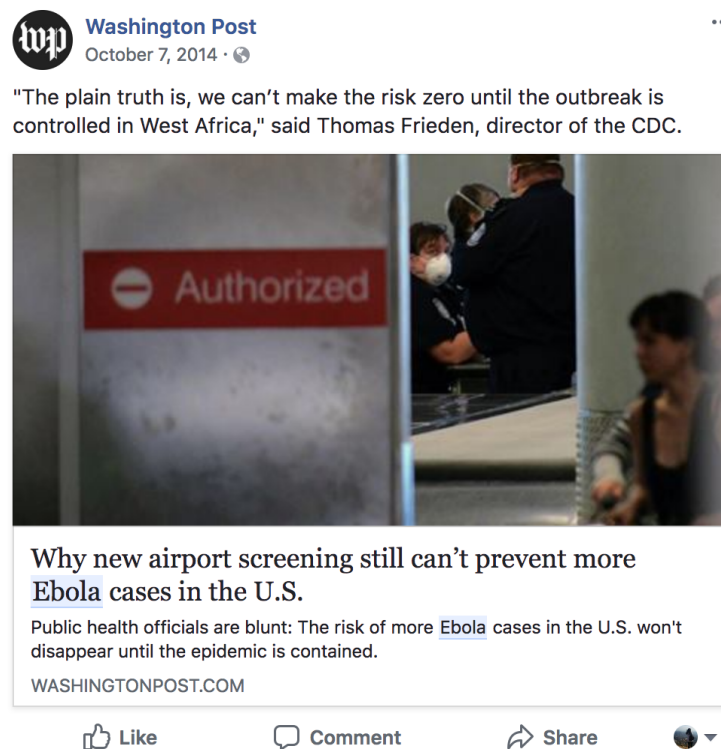


Fig. 11. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Oct. 7, 2014 (2)



Fig. 12. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Oct. 15, 2014



Fig. 13. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Dec. 12, 2014



Fig. 14. Ebola-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Aug. 7, 2014

Figures 13 and 14 also emphasize the dehumanization of death presented visually. The deceased are shown in plastic coverings, being carried by protected workers. In Figure 14, the workers are — rather unceremoniously — dumping a body into a freshly-dug hole. There is an air of dismissal in the picture. Though it would be medically inadvisable to have close contact with the body, there is nothing in the picture to suggest that the deceased individual was an individual with a past, a family, or anything beyond what has made them most noteworthy — their death by Ebola.

Figure 13 shows a body being taken from a shanty-like structure to an unknown location. The individuals who are uncovered and unprotected in this picture are standing

back. Though they appear to be healthy, there is nothing to suggest their engagement with Ebola beyond the facts of their perceived living conditions and the loss of this one person.

In contrast, the images shared on the CDC's Instagram page present Ebola as a disease affecting humans that is also treated by humans. Though the images acknowledge the weight and worry associated with the disease, they also bring a lighter perspective – and a surprising amount of levity — to the information being communicated about the disease. “We are working on it,” the images seem to collectively say. They present more reassurance, a certain amount of certainty about safety and treatment processes, and underscore the humanity beneath the cloaked and suited workers.

Furthermore, information isn't presented as only available after an individual has clicked on a “link in bio” (as the case would be for Instagram). Rather, the captions are extensive and detailed, providing information on what exactly is happening in a picture, rather than leaving audiences to surmise and draw conclusions. This is noteworthy, particularly given that Facebook has no character constraint similar to Twitter's. Had The Washington Post — or its social team — wanted to provide information about the images directly *in* the Facebook posts themselves, they could have certainly done so. The observation suggests that, even when social media platforms aren't constraining performance in some way, news organizations choose to make audiences perform a second task to get more information: click an article. Though Facebook is emphasizing the images in these posts of their own volition, the Post is certainly not providing all the information it could have provided to alleviate audience tensions related to the sombre images it is surfacing to audiences.



Fig. 15. Ebola-related Instagram Screenshot from the CDC, May 27, 2015

The above image, for instance, shows a doctor who is trying to establish a personality despite her protective suit. Dr. Wong has written her name across her front, taped a picture of herself to her suit, and is describing her work as a job that requires “channeling her inner scuba diver.”

In the image below, the CDC also presents audiences with a behind-the-scenes perspective. The Washington Post images suggest that the protective gloves and gear are always on, that fighting Ebola is a constant state of being. In this picture, audiences see an aid worker taking a break, looking off into the distance. Rather comically, the aid worker is sitting near an odd wooden contraption, a drying rack specifically designed to hold the gloves of myriad aid workers — and some boots to boot. The bright gloves, with fingers all

over the place, are a bit comical despite the gravity of their surroundings. Having coupled the image with a quote about an emergency responder who found that “fear was pushed to the back of my mind and the goal of getting the patients better overwhelmingly became my main concern,” the CDC is presenting the outbreak with a significant amount of nuance and humanity.



Fig. 16. Ebola-related Instagram Screenshot from the CDC, July 15, 2015

OTHERIZATION IN DISEASE COVERAGE

In a 2017 article for *Africa Today*, Sarah Monson examines the concept of otherization during the Ebola outbreak; in the process, Monson emphasizes the significance of affect in news coverage, especially in regards to audience understanding of a given risky situation. Monson writes that “the media triggered Americans’ fear and conceptualization

of Ebola as “other” and “African,” sparking a discourse of panic and propelling the otherization of Africa and Africans.” Her analysis delves into how American media sources presented the Ebola outbreak as “‘other,’ ‘scary,’ and ‘African,’” to the detriment of US understanding of the outbreak and highlights how fear is essential to health concerns. Monson’s use of virtual ethnography gives rise to conclusions that “the media still strongly influence public perception and behavior, perpetuating fear, othering, and discrimination, primarily due to the consumption of ‘pandemia,’” (p. 7), a term used by Davis et al. (2014) to describe the specific atmosphere created by media communications during pandemic situations (p. 514). In doing so, Monson emphasizes the stark contrast between the images presented by mainstream news media and the on-the-ground reality of the Ebola outbreak. For instance, Monson’s analysis includes the two images below, which play on US audiences’ understanding of risk and the actual prevalence of Ebola on the African continent:



Fig. 17. Jack Ohman, Ebola Fear Mongering, The Sacramento Bee, (October 9, 2014)



Fig. 18. Anthony England, #Ebola Map of Africa for the Geographically Challenged, Twitter, (November 2, 2014). <https://twitter.com/EbolaPhone/status/529091237652234240>

In contrast, the CDC acknowledges the potential otherization of people in Ebola-affected areas, even after the Ebola outbreak has fallen out public conversation. The following post from 2016, for instance, directly acknowledges the distinction between a disease and the people closest to it.



Fig. 19. Ebola-related Instagram Screenshot from the CDC, April 27, 2015

The picture, taken by a CDC epidemiologist, also makes use of the captioning ability offered by Instagram to present a more nuanced version of the Ebola outbreak to audiences: “I recognized the ‘I am a Liberian, not a virus’ slogan from the social media campaign started by a group of Liberian-American women in Fall 2014. At first my CDC colleague and I snapped a few shots just of the message on the wall. Then the man in the picture approached us and started up a conversation. He then asked us if he could pose in our photos. I was touched by the friendliness and openness of many of the Liberian people after everything that they had experienced during the Ebola epidemic.”

Overall the CDC’s presentation of the Ebola outbreak on Instagram is more behind-the-scenes than the social media images used by *The Washington Post*, presenting the human aspects of a disease outbreak, highlighting moments that might have more levity than the typical presentation of the disease, and emphasizing the people behind the

disease. In doing so, the CDC also acknowledges the distinction between the disease outbreak and the people in West Africa.

ZIKA IMAGE ANALYSIS

The images used on *The Washington Post's* Facebook page during the Zika outbreak fit within three specific themes: 1) coverage of the Zika outbreak is presented with mosquitoes as the primary image, 2) coverage of South American countries where the Zika virus is present is characterized by dark, shaded images that have babies with microcephaly in the picture, and 3) there is a strong focus (at least on social media) on Brazil, largely in relation to the 2016 Summer Olympics. This third observation suggests that the Zika virus was only seen as more relevant in relation to a global sporting competition or news event than it might have been otherwise. When the Zika virus is mentioned in relationship to Brazil, it is typically the athletes who are pictured, rather than representations of the virus, as can be seen in Figure 20.



Fig. 20. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, June 22, 2016

For instance, when professional golfer Rory McIlroy made his decision to forego competing in the Olympics over concerns about the Zika Virus, the Post's Facebook page covered the story with a picture of McIlroy golfing, rather than any of the images that they typically used to characterize the virus in Brazil or other parts of South America. The contrast in the types of images can be seen below, which highlight the differences in the images of the Zika virus in relation to the United States and the Zika virus in relation to South America:



Fig. 21. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Feb. 24, 2016



Fig. 22. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, July 30, 2016



Fig. 23. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Feb. 24, 2016



Fig. 24. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, July 9, 2016

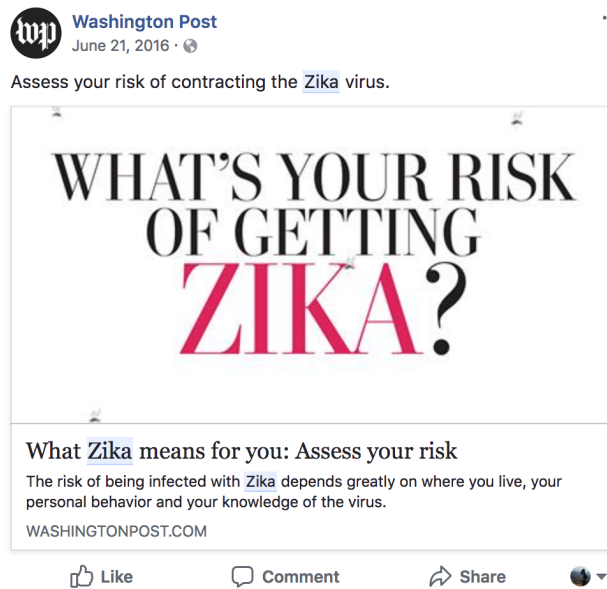


Fig. 25. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, June 21, 2016



Fig. 26. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Feb. 1, 2016

In addition to showing the shadowed emphasis these images place on women and babies in what is presumably South America (like coverage of the Ebola outbreak, context for the images is not provided in the social posts themselves), they also suggest that Zika is closely associated with poverty. There are less images of women or babies presented in relation to Zika in areas with ambiguous backgrounds that could connote the virus's presence in the lives of more affluent individuals. Furthermore, in those images that do present information about Zika in ambiguous backgrounds, the dark shading — which largely presents the outbreak as ominous and mysterious — continues to be prevalent:



Fig. 27. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, Feb. 11, 2016



Fig. 28. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from The Washington Post, March 4, 2016

In comparison, the images used by the CDC during the Zika outbreak are more targeted and prevention-oriented. They directly appeal to the consciousness of pregnant audiences, and are more concerned with the fact that Zika would eventually come to the United States as well. The following picture, for instance, makes it very clear to Instagram followers that the CDC is directly speaking to pregnant women.



Fig. 29. Zika-related Screenshot from the CDC, May 20, 2016

Unlike *The Post's* posts, Figure 29 is clearly focused on passing a message to a very specific audience. *The Post's* use of images during the Zika outbreak suggests the presentation of a larger outbreak, most often in the context of other events or issues, such as the Rio Olympics or income inequality in Brazil. Though those are certainly perspectives

that are important to be covered, there is less focus on immediately addressing the healthcare concerns and questions of US audiences.

In Figure 30, for instance, we see *The Post* presenting information about the then-suspected link between microcephaly and pregnant women:

Washington Post
January 20, 2016 · 🌐

It may have spread to infants in the U.S. <http://wapo.st/1ZL5eRv>

IT'S SUSPECTED THE VIRUS CAN CAUSE MICROCEPHALY IN FETUSES OF INFECTED PREGNANT WOMEN.

86K Views

Like Comment Share

495 Top Comments

547 Shares

Write a comment...

Adam Geldhof Relax everyone. Remember ebola? That was pretty scary, too.

Fig. 30. Zika-related Facebook Screenshot from *The Washington Post*, Jan. 20, 2016

The comment underneath the post in Figure 30 suggests that *The Post* could have done a more accurate job of representing risk to their audience. The person commenting on the post writes that Ebola was a similarly “scary” as the Zika virus, though the Zika virus is actually more likely to affect audiences in the United States. Given that *The Post* is a national newspaper, most often read by US audiences, the omission of risk information specifically for this audience — are they likely to get the Zika virus? — is not ideal.

The CDC also took advantage of the social video-aspect of Instagram to create video messages specifically targeted to pregnant women. The video-oriented nature of the CDC’s Instagram posts is particularly noteworthy because the videos directly target the specific concerns of pregnant women and those most likely to be affected by Zika. All of the CDC’s social videos have a clean, abstract background. The individuals pictured are in ambiguous, home-like surroundings that call to mind middle class homes or hotels. In one video from August 2016, for instance, the video zooms out on a pregnant woman taking her temperature while a voiceover cautions about how a fever might be a symptom of the Zika virus. Another video zooms out on a pregnant woman putting on a cardigan while standing outdoors. In this video, the voice over highlights another way to prevent Zika: covering more skin to avoid more mosquito bites.

The CDC’s use of social video is notable because they are making use of a mode of engagement that was — in 2016, at least — not at the peak of its popularity and is a method of engagement that *The Post*’s Facebook strategy did not take advantage of during the Zika outbreak. The observation suggests that news organizations could also prioritize the use of more recent social strategies and tactics, particularly when it comes to disease

communications; though audiences need reliable, consistent information, this information should reach them where they are at, and in those methods that social media platforms are surfacing most prominently to audiences in order to make sure that audiences are more likely to see those pieces of content.

CONCLUSIONS

In their 2016 letter to the editor in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Southwell, Dolina, Jimenez-Magdaleno, Squires, and Kelly noted that news coverage of emerging infectious disease outbreaks “tends to be episodic and ephemeral rather than thematic, comprehensive, and consistent over time, in part because of newsroom constraints.” In comparison, “public health authority announcements may help drive peaks in coverage and warrant attention, in particular give the importance of trust and credibility for information acceptance. Moreover, online search behavior and social media interaction tend to respond to news coverage, especially for novel health issues.” These findings suggest the potential for news organizations and health organizations like the CDC to work in tandem; if news organizations were to take advantage of the increased public interest surrounding information dissemination by health organizations, this would both increase public interest in news coverage and provide valuable information to that same public body. Southwell et al. examined news coverage and online behavior in relation to the Zika virus in the United States, Guatemala, and Brazil, ultimately concluding that their results “suggest that news coverage of public health authority announcements open brief windows of information sharing, engagement, and searching that offer opportunities to address

perceptions and provide preparation and vector control recommendations through education.” This, coupled with the above analysis of how Ebola and Zika were covered and visually presented on Facebook by The Washington Post, suggests that immediate steps can be taken to increase public interest/information about an infectious disease outbreak in the future while also bolstering audience engagement with a given news organization. For instance, Facebook posts could take advantage of the other affordances of Facebook posts — more text-based information about the outbreak, multiple links, image galleries rather than links back to a website, and surveys to gauge audience interest and questions about the outbreak in question.

In a 2017 article for the journal *Public Health*, Seltzer, Horst-Martz, and Merchant quantitatively observed that many images related to the Zika outbreak on Instagram “expressed fear and negative sentiment (79/156, 51%)” (p. 170). The researchers ultimately concluded that Instagram is a valuable tool for understanding public sentiment around a disease outbreak, largely in the context of public health professionals “correcting misleading or incomplete information or expanding messages to reach diverse audiences.” This suggestion on the part of the researchers could be expanded with an understanding of how news organizations (in this case *The Post*) are covering outbreaks in comparison to how the CDC is leveraging visual communications. Based on how the CDC’s presentation of both the Zika and Ebola outbreaks broke down stereotypes, directly addressed issues of otherization, and brought advice and information directly to audiences via images and text captions, the suggestion could also be expanded to incorporate the scope of work that news organizations are doing as well. If audiences are using social media in ways that accurately

demonstrate their concerns and sentiments about a disease outbreak, as the results of this particular study suggest, then news organizations can and should also make use of this source of insight. Audience engagement practices could be adopted to have news organizations also examine audience posts and data for general sentiment and affective-oriented posts; this, in turn, could lead to more nuanced coverage than what was found during the Zika and Ebola outbreaks. Seltzer, Horst-Martz, and Merchant describe “infodemiology” as “the science of the distribution of digital information to inform public health practice and policy (2017, p. 8).” I would suggest taking this a step further: if news organizations are a primary source of information, especially *after* a public health organization has provided information to audiences, then they are also a large part of infodemiology, and should be prepared to directly address the public health challenges associated with disease outbreaks, which are largely beyond the scope of current audience engagement policies and practices, and which do not necessarily consider the particular visual weight of image selection and social media structure at the present moment.

CONCLUSION

TOWARD A NEW APPROACH TO AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

This thesis began with observations about the media industry that have crossed paths to create a situation that crosses the typical of journalism. As changing media business models, an increase in social media usage, and an increase in the importance of risk communications converge, audience engagement becomes an increasingly important consideration for those invested in making sure audiences accurately understand their risk for a given health concern.

By starting with the 2003 SARS outbreak and examining the social media coverage and U.S.-based audience interest during the 2014 Ebola outbreak and 2015/2016 Zika outbreak, I sought to contextualize a situation in which journalistic and public health aims are at a unique juncture. Rather than view the two as distinct, or even closely aligned, they form what can be described as a figuration; together, the ways in which news and public health organizations make use of social media becomes an audience engagement issue in ways that other stories may not.

Consequently, audience engagement becomes more than just a “news” consideration. When the dissemination of accurate health information is also incumbent upon news organizations using social media, audience engagement practices — ranging from the policies and strategies guiding those practices, to the affordances of specific social media platforms, to the ways in which organizations do (or do not) make use of those affordances — become public health concerns too. Audiences need reliable information to

make informed decisions when it comes to their healthcare and safety. Therefore, disease outbreaks in particular present an opportunity to rethink audience engagement practices and use of social media to set agendas around news stories and how they might become sensationalized.

It is possible for news organizations to have their cake and eat it too; they *can* better understand and engage their audiences with accurate information while maintaining revenue targets. However, reaching such a state requires reconsidering how audience engagement is practiced in the present moment.

User experience research is certainly one way in which we can better understand audiences, but the question of understanding audiences has to go beyond how audiences use certain platforms to get news to a place which examines how audiences integrate news into their lives and routines. This information can, in turn, be juxtaposed with the information that audiences actually need to see in order to make informed decisions about the factors that affect their lives — ideally in ways that reduce perception gaps.

Furthermore, while marketing practices are useful learning tools, we have to keep in mind that news organizations and corporations have differing motivations. News organizations, even if they are corporations, have larger public obligations. As such, the practice of implementing marketing practices in newsrooms — while certainly effective for revenue generation — requires reconsidering notions of journalistic objectivity, given that marketing practices are based on specific affordances of social media platforms that do not necessarily speak best to the mission of accurate news dissemination, especially in situations when accurate risk perception is important.

Additionally, it is important to understand the role affective experiences can play in audience understanding of news presented on social media. Though image-oriented facets of social media can seem cursory, they play an outsized role in how stories are presented to audiences, and can further problematic conceits, such as otherization, if the role of affect — particularly for image-driven communication — is not given more consideration. Fear can be a productive emotion during disease outbreaks, driving audiences to look after their safety and wellbeing (Lanard, 2004). However, when fear is not used productively — when a situation is sensationalized and the perception gap is large — it creates situations of distrust for audiences and can further problematic health concerns (Lanard, 2004). As such, the role that social media-oriented news coverage can play in affecting disease outbreaks is noteworthy, and certainly deserves more consideration. At present, the best practices for audience engagement are largely being designed with revenue — by way of clicks, shares, and length of visit. These best practices are not necessarily the practices that make the best use of the affordances and constraints of social media, especially when it comes to providing audiences with reliable information that furthers public trust while avoiding sensationalism or outright misinformation.

Of course, these observations come with their own set of further questions, including: to what extent is audience risk perception a journalistic obligation? In this thesis, I assume that accurate risk perception is a journalistic obligation, but the *extent* to which this obligation rests on news organizations' can certainly be discussed further. Furthermore, is it a compromise of journalistic ethics to present true, though debatably relevant information, as though stories have equivalencies? In the case of the SARS, Ebola,

and Zika outbreaks, the amount of coverage — and the type of coverage — certainly created a misconception among audiences of the disease itself, audience risk for the disease, and facilitated problematic stigmatizations that were not representative of reality. This question can be expanded to consider issues and considerations relevant to public health from other perspectives, most notably climate change. Lastly, is there a larger obligation for social media organizations to take responsibility for their affordances and constraints, given that certain facets of their platforms influence audience understanding and how news organizations can use those platforms?

Lest I end with questions alone, I want to mention notes for optimism surrounding improved audience risk perception. Since the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, news organizations have recognized that there was a disparity in coverage between the two outbreaks. Even though this recognition largely comes in the form of reported stories, rather than a deeper reflection of the role news organizations might have played in this disparity, it is certainly a starting place. Moreover, the extent to which public health organizations and programs are using and learning to use social media for health communications is increasing. The CDC's work in this vein is particularly instructive; they have released guides to the general public, and health communication is becoming an increasingly recognized component of public health education. Moreover, there is much opportunity for news organizations and health organizations to both coordinate and learn from one another. As such, though new organizations' audience engagement practices are not regarded as a significant public health concern at present, it is certainly possible that this can change. Additionally, the

practices that would be used to enact such change are likely to improve the quality of news coverage and audience engagement altogether.

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