Misrepresentation, Distortion and Deletion – Our Inability To Hear And See Women

The last 18 to 24 months have seen countries expend exceptional effort examining the countless aspects of disinformation, information warfare and media manipulation that threaten their cherished democratic institutions.

In Canada, media reports of Russia’s information warfare directed at the presence of Canadian soldiers in the Ukraine and Latvia gave Canadians a firsthand glimpse of the use and power of disinformation by States. The cunning use of traditional and social media to make false claims of Canadian soldiers’ death aiming to demoralize the troops and the fake news trying to get locals to associate the lack of housing to the presence of the Canadian contingent shattered our Canadian naïveté about state-sponsored disinformation. However, it was the interference in the elections of our closest neighbour that brought home the realization of vulnerability and the need for government to take action to protect our citizens and our democratic institutions.

The context for government action could hardly be more challenging. Talk of “fake news”, “post-truth” and distrust in our sources of information, including government, are now the norm. The reality of a citizenry influenced by social media and expressing anger and distrust at traditional institutions has added to the complexity of government action.

Fittingly, the multi-sector mobilization to meet the challenge has been remarkable. For instance, in the Canadian government, departments responsible for elections, culture, security intelligence, industry, documentary heritage and democratic institutions have all been engaging with academics, journalists and think tanks. Analyses, recommendations, reports - and blame - are everywhere.

With this said, no such effort has ever been deployed to address the greatest disinformation campaign of all. For decades, information distortion to silence women and exclude them from public spaces has been prevalent but received scarce attention. Every attempt to narrow the gender gap has and continues to come at a high cost to women: ridicule, shame, denial of a platform, bullying, threats of violence have been the habitual price paid by women to exist in public spheres and simply be journalists, gamers, academics, politicians, actors, scientists or archivists.

Whether the deliberate or inadvertent result of policies, propagated by traditional institutions or by fringe misogynist groups, the manipulation of information and of the spaces where information lives alters women’s daily reality. Witness the mocking and harassment of women activists, journalists and politicians, or the censorship of women and “women related” issues such as pregnancy termination, facilitated by media platforms. Note the complicit practices of institutions and professions that erase women from current events and history. Be shocked by the blunt threats of sexual violence received by women who dare engage in public spaces. The extent and range of distortion tactics used to silence women are formidable!

Yet, this campaign receives a minuscule fraction of the thought and concern expressed toward the current fake news crisis. Research and analyses are essentially done by those on the fringe, primarily those working in institutions dedicated to women’s equality. Occasionally, organizations such as Amnesty or a mainstream (left) newspaper like The Guardian UK will explore online violence or heinous discourse and stumble upon the inevitable conclusion that women are disproportionately the target of
such attacks. However, the shock and surprise quickly fades from the public discourse and policy responses remain absent.

In the words of Yuval Harari, author of Sapiens, who noted that the history of gender is bewildering: “Though the gender gap is still significant, events have been moving at a breathtaking speed.” This may be the case from the perspective of historians, but certainly not from the perspective of women living what will be history for future generations.

What hope remains to eliminate this distortion may rest in the valiant efforts of a few trusted institutions and professionals. Beyond universities and academics upon whom we rely to do much of the heavy lifting, others, such as Libraries are taking a leadership role in convening discussions and encouraging critical thinking about fake news and disinformation. Considering that study after study report that libraries and librarians are among the most trusted institutions and professionals, the potential to fight back with information literacy is significant. In the same way, archivists are speaking to the harmful legacy of archival descriptions that have erased marginalized groups and women from history, and journalists are questioning the habitual coverage of women in politics.

Could multiplying the number of platforms where they can all denounce systemic biases in language, policy, cultural ideas and norms, institutions and professional practices give rise to a collaborative effort comparable to the one we see happening globally right now? Is a movement to eliminate this distortion at “breathtaking speed” possible? Or will the most glaring threat to half of our citizens and to democracy be defeated by the forces that maintain power where it currently rests?

Linda Savoie

Library and Archives Canada