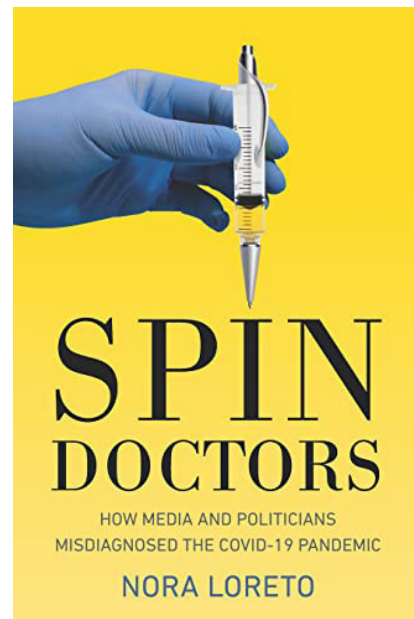## Spin Doctors: How Media and Politicians Misdiagnosed the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Nora Loreto (Fernwood Publishing, 2021)

REVIEW BY ADRIAN MA

AUDIO VERSION

Toward the end of 2020, the editors of the popular website Dictionary.com hosted a "People's Choice" survey to identify the defining word of the year, something that its users felt best encapsulated the metaphysical timbre of the preceding 12 months. The top pick, it turned out, was "unprecedented," a choice undoubtedly inspired by the myriad ways the COVID-19 pandemic had upended our professional and personal lives (Dictionary.com, 2020). As the virus spread from Wuhan, China in late 2019 to every corner of the planet, we were introduced to public health measures like "physical distancing" and mandatory mask wearing. Lockdowns were employed in an effort to "flatten the curve," while healthcare systems across the world strained to cope with the influx of patients. Classrooms were emptied and students logged onto Zoom for hours on end. Restaurants and retail stores transitioned to pick-up and delivery services, leaving massive numbers of employees without work. Lining up outside hospitals for nasal swabs became a routine activity for some. Indeed, all of this felt "unprecedented." And while governments struggled to formulate effective responses to a disease that threatened our health and economy like few crises before, news organizations—already stretched thin by years of budget cutbacks and job losses—also scrambled to share the full picture.

Few individuals in Canada have tracked the expansive, breathless, and sometimes hazy media coverage of COVID-19 in this country like Nora Loreto. The Quebec City-based activist, author, and podcaster began her deep dive into reporting on the virus in April 2020. At the time, Quebec was seeing shocking increases of COVID deaths among long-term care residents. Loreto believed it essential for journalists and members of the public to have an easily accessible record of the fatality numbers to refer to. When she discovered that no online record like this existed, she created her own public spreadsheet to track the deaths, combing through news stories, public health unit data, provincial ministry sources, and obituaries each day. Over the next year-and-a-half, Loreto would examine more than 30,000 articles and web pages from news organizations and public health sites. More than 26,000 Canadians died from COVID during this time frame and nearly 1.5 million had been infected; these numbers would grow to nearly

45,000 deaths and over 4 million infections by September 2022 (Health Canada, 2022). Loreto saw missteps and missed opportunities in how both the government and news industry responded to the emergency. In her most recent book, *Spin Doctors: How Media and Politicians Misdiagnosed the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Loreto makes a detailed and compelling case that while governments and politicians consistently fumbled their management of the virus, mainstream journalism largely failed to hold them accountable.

The book is organized chronologically, with each chapter capturing a month of the pandemic, beginning in March 2020 and concluding 12 months later. This is by no means a definitive account of Canada's experience with COVID, as Loreto's manuscript was sent to the printer before the sudden emergence of other highly contagious variants, particularly Omicron, towards the end of 2021. But it serves as a sobering reminder of the pandemic's early days and the competing narratives that framed the unfurling story.

The book begins with the virus's emergence in Wuhan, the mass lockdowns in China, the passengers stranded on cruise ships, and Canada's lack of preparation despite growing evidence of the incoming calamity. The April 2020 chapter tackles the distressing scenes that played out in Canada's residential care facilities as the virus ripped across the country. The months that follow finds the national spotlight shifting to outbreaks in food processing plants, the start of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program, the confusion and consternation around back-to-school measures in September, the plight of migrant workers, and the dramatic race to develop and distribute an effective vaccine.

The linear structure is something of a feint, however, as Loreto uses each chapter to examine broader, more complex issues that existed well before the pandemic and were exacerbated by the crisis, such as systemic racism. Indigenous, Black and racialized individuals were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 as they were more likely to be employed in frontline and essential services. But news coverage of the pandemic focused far more on the total number of daily infections and deaths than on which communities were being most affected and what was being done about it, according to Loreto.

Journalists should have written about how racism was central to telling the story of COVID-19, rather than relegating it to an add-on to a central story. They needed to press politicians for answers that considered how entwined COVID-19 and racism really were. For example, of the 670 media releases and advisories the Ontario government issued from February 23 (the day that Ontario had its first presumptive case of COVID-19), until the end of 2020, just one release referenced how the provincial government would combat COVID-19 through measures especially designed for racialized and/or low-income communities. In fact, of these 670 releases, race was only mentioned four times total, three of which were unrelated to the pandemic. (p. 94)

This is a central, recurring theme that echoes throughout the book as Loreto highlights other systemic issues that worsened during the pandemic, including the lack of support for Canadians with disabilities and chronic health conditions, the intensification of the gender gap, and growing income inequality. She argues that Canadian journalism had an opportunity to challenge the status quo but didn't, and may have ended up reinforcing it.

Loreto recognizes the obstacles reporters faced, many of whom had to adjust to working virtually while caring for families. And at a time when many Canadians were glued around the clock to their TVs and phones for news and analysis, newsrooms struggled to support reporters in their efforts to feed the relentless demand for fresh information. In her chapter, "One Year in Media Cuts," Loreto points out that from March 11 to April 29, 2020, nearly 80 news outlets laid off staff and 50 outlets closed, either temporarily or permanently. The cuts would continue throughout the year, with major organizations like TorStar, Global and the CBC shedding hundreds of media jobs. Short-staffed and under-resourced, reporting on COVID-19 defaulted to an overreliance on government sources and medical experts. As Loreto writes earlier in the book:

Journalists were forced to create a new kind of journalism on the fly: pandemic journalism, which had to sort through a mix of anecdotes, ever-changing data, competing priorities and policies and experts who often agreed, but sometimes did not. This new kind of journalism became increasingly self-referential, like news that modeling predicted next month's case growth, which generated another story later on based on whether or not the models were correct. Politicians announced measure after measure and journalists became their amplifiers. (p. 16)

While Loreto found most COVID news coverage to be worryingly uncritical, the author acknowledges that some truly excellent reporting was done during these difficult days. She particularly cites the work of independent news outlets such as the Greater Toronto Area's *The Local*, the *Halifax Examiner* and Calgary's *The Sprawl* as offering more community perspectives and filling in gaps left by the government and national media. There were also moving features about COVID victims and leaps forward in data-driven storytelling, despite Canada's notorious lack of publicly available statistics. But, ultimately, *Spin Doctors* makes a persuasive appeal that journalism in Canada, on a macro-level, failed to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,"

as the well-worn axiom goes.

The book is densely packed with research and analysis, and Loreto attempts to connect so many important threads that it can be difficult to follow at times. But as a raw, uncompromising snapshot of this country's initial pandemic coverage, it offers valuable perspectives for those both practicing journalism and educating the next generation of reporters. Covering a crisis can sometimes lead one to focus on the trees and not the forest. The arrival of COVID may have been an "unprecedented" disruption for many, but it was entirely predictable who would be hurt most. Racialized and marginalized communities, women, senior citizens, and those with disabilities bore the brunt of pandemic's consequences, while dozens of major Canadian corporations reaped record profits topped off with public subsidies. Much of the journalism published in the first year of the pandemic supported the government's position that managing COVID was up to each of us as individuals (stay at home! wear a mask! get the jab!), as opposed to taking collective responsibility to address serious, longstanding gaps in our society. Despite the often-parroted sentiment, *Spin Doctors* illustrates how we were not, in fact, all in this together. And perhaps the lessons learned from it can better prepare us to ask the right questions when we, inevitably, face our next collective crisis (or ever get around to solving the ones that have been allowed to compound.)

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