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CLICK-SICK: In conversation with Ariel Bogle

Interviewed by Hart Cohen, Western Sydney University

In 2020, former ABC technology reporter Ariel Bogle took a significant look at the misinformation surrounding COVID-19. In a series for Radio National's 'Science Friction', Ariel, along with producers Jane Lee, Carl Smith and show host Natasha Mitchell, developed a three-part series, titled, 'Click-Sick'. The first episode explored issues of unintentional misleading information on the part of those sharing false ideas about the pandemic. It then looked at the political forces pushing pandemic conspiracy theories and ended with an examination of the wellness industry and the false prophets that sometimes inhabit that space. The following interview took place after Ariel presented her work at a media literacy symposium hosted by Western Sydney University in April 2021.

HC: We have titled our upcoming theme issue, 'Covideology: Mediating the significance of a pandemic'. We signalled an interest in the communicational aspects of the pandemic and the varieties of information and communication that permeate through institutions of communication, especially the media, both legacy and digital media. So, when I heard about your series, it seemed to land on this important concern around disinformation and health communication, specifically about COVID.

And then as it seemed when I progressed through the three podcast episodes, the focus shifted from the first to the third as it became more focussed on health-related disinformation and conspiracy theories and the strategic deployment of communications and internet media to monetise the exploitation of vulnerable people, with the example of the wellness industry.

I should add that I really enjoyed the podcast. I thought it was great.

AB: Thank you.

HC: So, my first question is, what was the original inspiration for the podcast and was there, a kind of 'defining moment' for you when you thought, 'I've just got to do this particular program'; what was the motivation?

AB: I had been covering at the ABC prior to 2020, misinformation, but more around politics during the 2019 election. For example, I was part of an ABC project where we tried to track election advertising online and try to get in the black box of online advertising.

I was looking back the other day and I realised that I wrote my first story about COVID-related misinformation and conspiracy theories in January 2020, so they were already circulating well by then.

There were conspiracies around Bill Gates somehow being involved with creating COVID. The other one was a little less conspiratorial, but nevertheless dangerous. That was a Facebook post, and I think there was speculation on various messaging apps too, suggesting that traces of COVID had been found at certain train stations in Sydney. And they were really naming suburbs that have a significant Chinese population so we could already start to see this sort of racist undertone to some of this misinformation. And that was circulating even by then. And then it became clear that this is a topic we would have to monitor all year.

And so, along with other colleagues at the ABC, we decided to set up a basically online form, so people could submit examples of misinformation that they were seeing online, whether it be email, pamphlets that were seen in the streets even, of course, YouTube videos, Facebook posts, etc.

And from that accumulation of material, we saw what was circulating and tried to offer the correct information, tried to identify trends, misinformation and things like that.

But in this online form, as well as submitting an image or link, people could also write more context. I found often they were sharing quite personal details about the effects that this misinformation had on them – whether it was, for example, their father sending emails that suggested he believed COVID wasn't real and relying on certain conspiratorial websites. And the sort of distress that was putting on the relationship between father and daughter and similar examples like that.

And so, later in the year, the opportunity arose to distil that into a radio series, we developed it, along with my fellow producers Carl Smith and Jane Lee, as well as the host of ABC Radio National's 'Science Friction', Natasha Mitchell. We sifted through the hundreds of submissions we got in that database and decided on three episodes that explored some key themes. We could have done tens of dozens of episodes probably; we settled on three because they seemed to be the main trends throughout the year.

So, this first thing – this idea of ‘just-in-case’ sharing. A lot of the health misinformation that was being shared was not out of malice, or anything like that; it was more people trying to sort through what was a very confusing time; it was an unprecedented situation with people trying to keep themselves and their family safe.

There was a lot of information for everybody to sift through. And so, what we tried to draw out of that first episode were just those little bits of complication or little bits of confusion that can have these broader impacts on relationships between people in a crisis.

In the second episode, we had people submitting examples of conspiracy theories around COVID, vaccinations and treatments that, if you have any knowledge of the history of health and misinformation, you can see these reverberate throughout history. As we discussed in that episode, even in the way that HIV was politicised and weaponised decades ago, you could see the same tropes emerge around illnesses. Always the idea of the sinister government that did it – or the evil billionaire that did it. Those are not new ... they were just adapted to COVID.

We wanted to explore in the second episode the way that illness can be weaponised. And then, the third podcast, because there’s also a long history of snake oil salesman and people promising cures; that’s not new. We wanted to look at wellness and recognise that history of wellness – and I don’t want to dismiss the ideas of wellness out of hand because they have been really important and they still are important for a lot of people’s personal health experiences – but you could see how that kind of thing can be exploited in a pandemic too, and so I wanted to give that history and context. In a nutshell, I suppose, it really did emerge from those submissions that ABC audiences made throughout the year.

HC: So, just as a quick follow up, the sense I get is that you opened a site for people to contribute in a kind of crowdsourcing approach and then out of the crowd you selected your individuals. So, we had, I think someone named Jade in the third podcast and we had, was it Kathrin in the second podcast, who was from East Germany and then the chap from Kerala in the first podcast ...?

AB: Yeah, yeah.

HC: Those were examples of individuals that that got in touch with you, and then you selected these three people.

AB: Lucy and Srihari. From memory, they both made submissions. Srihari and Lucy got in touch with us. Kathrin also had got in touch earlier in the year and we got back in touch with her for the second episode.

The third one, actually Jade, we found on Reddit, not through a submission. We were looking at people that were engaging with – I’m not sure how familiar you are with Reddit – there is the message board website and there are sub-Reddits on different themes ... and there’s a sub-Reddit around this wellness influencer

that we discussed in the program, *Sarah's Day*, where they discuss her content, both in support and critique of it. And so, we were looking at people that had raised concerns about her content.

So that's how we found Jade.

HC: Actually, yes, I recall the connection to Reddit. I thought that was quite interesting. Can I go to the next question, some of the themes around health, and information and COVID-related disinformation feed into and cross with post-truth issues in media and distrust of mainstream media outlets? So, do you see health disinformation around COVID as a kind of species of post-truth media problems?

AB: I'm not sure. I'm still sorting through in my mind this idea of 'post-truth'. I'm not sure if we are distinctively in a post-truth age though I understand the sentiment behind that term. The media's desire to be first is a problem, especially around health.

This doesn't quite gel with the scientific process. I'm sure we can all think of dozens of examples during COVID – claims of potential treatment, potential cures, potential prevention that could work, but had not yet been through the rigorous scientific process. But that clash with the media's desire for speed and being first, and also trying to match the audience's/reader's desire for information and reassurance.

I think what's very difficult, what was so difficult, and continues to be difficult for the media to convey, to emphasise, to communicate, is trying to help people understand how the scientific process works, how there's no such thing as 100 percent faith, 100 percent certainty around health and around science, and also to help people understand risk. The conversation around masks earlier in 2020, was a great example of this. People either rejected masks or took them to be a talisman of absolute safety, and really, they are neither – but it's quite hard to convey that. And so, we have to acknowledge too there are plenty of media outlets that have to make money, but they've chosen to make money by a sensational kind of reporting, and so we saw a lot of that. I'm not sure whether it is naiveté about the impact of the reporting, or a faux naiveté and deliberate exploitation around health issues, but that existed pre-COVID and really became a big problem around COVID too.

HC: Yeah, I guess, the term 'post-truth' is a bit of an arguable term. It really reached its peak during Trump's administration with his attack on media and his ability to render pretty much anything as potentially suspect or as a means to generate certain kinds of scepticism through his inane tweeting. I guess the peak of that was in the attempts to try to figure out what in fact what's going on with COVID. At a certain point when Trump's and other others' interventions which were so outrageous in the thinking about how to deal with COVID, seemed to bring the distortions to a fever pitch. The question of how we were ever going to get accurate information, when the public discourse was so polluted by this disinformation, and coming from what one would think of as normally a highly respected source, in the end, made the search for truthful or factual information completely untenable.

AB: It would make sense that the most influential voices that confuse the matter, that confused people around COVID, were not face-to-face, but rather elite political leaders, the media. And the politicisation of the disease in general, by politics and the media.

There would always have been disinformation, but surely it would be easier for people to sift through that and work through their sense-making process if not for that politicisation of COVID by people in trusted leadership positions.

HC: When false claims about COVID cures appear as covered in your first podcast, these appear to spread as a function of the lack of certain kind of communication competency. In the example, I think that you suggest that non-English communities are more vulnerable to this disinformation, because of the lack of moderation of this information. So, how much of COVID disinformation do you think is a communications problem, and how much can be attributed to those that are made vulnerable, who are already precarious, either by the fact of their marginalised status or otherwise exceptional circumstances?

I guess in that podcast in which the family from Kerala that were first stranded in Australia, and then who subsequently left, were vulnerable to this misinformation around vitamin D. I was curious as to whether you felt that this was more about them being vulnerable than the processes of disinformation themselves?

AB: It is complex. It can be highly personal – somebody, I think, Srihari – said about older members of his community who have Malayalam language.

I'm not sure if we kept it in the podcast, actually, but he said that they had gone straight from getting a phone and skipped all of the intermediary steps. In other words, that a lot of people went straight to YouTube and WhatsApp for information about COVID. And, and he was worried that his parents were not familiar enough with how these platforms work – that people on YouTube could present themselves as experts and they weren't in fact experts, and perhaps his parents would find it more difficult to spot that potential phoniness.

Because that's an issue with all these platforms like YouTube and Instagram, they flatten everything, and everything looks the same; it's quite easy now to get a nice camera and get a nice backdrop and present yourself with the trappings of legitimacy. And it gives a lot of people, a lot of influencers on all platforms the ability to create the perception of authority for themselves in various ways.

But, of course, it's understandably very difficult. If you have English as a second language or if you don't live in Australia and you unexpectedly find yourself here, you wouldn't necessarily have that close relationship with Australian media and know which media to trust. So, you would be looking for information in your own language. There were a lot of questions that maybe haven't been fully answered about whether the government in Australia, state and federal, were doing enough to convey accurate and timely information to people in diaspora communities in all the relevant languages. There has been a lot of debate about whether that was adequate and correctly carried out. I think that's something we still need to examine around Australia's COVID response.

HC: Yes, I do recall that there was a point where there was a definite sense that our non-English speaking communities were really not getting the services they required around information at a critical point in the rollout when COVID started to increase.

AB: Yeah, I mean generally, not specific to this case, but in general, certainly it's widely known that the major social platforms neglect languages that are not significant markets for them. So obviously, they have plenty of resources and we can debate whether they're adequate, even in English or Spanish or whatever, but certainly for languages that are not in priority markets, I don't think it's controversial to say they may neglect audiences in those languages, and we certainly had some back and forth with YouTube about the videos in that episode, and I believe some were removed.

HC: I'd like to move to the second podcast and the analogy of the older communist East Germans' and Soviet Union KGB's use of conspiracy theories to smear the US around HIV-AIDS and focus on the disinformation conspiracy in the sphere of global politics. I'm just curious as to how you arrived at this particular example of HIV-AIDS and the East German, Russian activities? And as a scenario that you thought would be something that you could relate to COVID?

AB: Yeah. Well, I think that I had earlier in the year read an article by *Douglas Selvage* about his work looking through Soviet-era archives around these issues. He has done a lot of work looking at this issue and so I think when we were putting together this episode, that came back to my mind, especially after we talked to *Kathrin*, who had, as I said, sent some examples of things into our database.

And then we when we spoke to her on the phone. We realised she had this East German childhood, and suddenly it seemed like an interesting way to draw some historical parallels.

And the HIV example was important for two reasons: the first was just an obvious parallel in that there were, first, so many conspiracies and rumours flying around COVID escaping from a lab in Wuhan, a conjecture being put forward on the internet, and then, second, also in reverse, that same Fort Detrick theory in the old HIV conspiracy was also showing up, as we talked about in the episode. So, there was like a pretty obvious parallel there. But then I thought the HIV story also was important because we wanted to present that it's quite easy to dismiss conspiracy theorists – people who believe in conspiracies, who are just dismissed out of hand or made fun of. But we wanted to show, sometimes, why conspiracies can emerge, especially from communities that have been mistreated, especially around their bodies and medical care, and why it's not entirely irrational often to be suspicious of government power, institutional power, and so that that was why that was important to draw that parallel too.

HC: And just as a follow up, I think the sense of that episode is that the pandemic seemed to be a crisis in which these conspiracies tend to flourish. And I wondered whether, in the context of other conspiracy theories that have

flourished, particularly say around 9/11, or the moon landing, or the assassination of JFK, which are the main ones I recall.

Do you think that there's a special case that you can make for pandemic-type conspiracies that are different from these other very public events that also spawned, a number of conspiracy theories?

AB: Interesting question. Certainly, around health, as I said before, there are these tropes that keep coming up: the evil government that releases the plague, the evil mastermind billionaire that releases the plague.

The idea that important information that could save you is being hidden by governments, or doctors won't tell you, or some people are getting this special treatment because of their place in society and you're not, which you know sometimes could be the case.

Most of them can seem to occur in various health crisis, as we saw with HIV as well but also with Ebola. Now there may be other specific examples I'm forgetting, but I guess what was happening in parallel with the rise of the QAnon conspiracy theory during 2020, ... elements of which have been trickling down, prior to the pandemic, probably prior to the election of Donald Trump. And from when I've spoken to people who have made their academic life studying conspiracy theories and how information travels, people found it quite remarkable the ability of that conspiracy theory to gather all others into a mega-theory. It had an endless appetite. So, you can see JFK in there, in fact, you see the idea that JFK may still be alive or coming back for something in there, as well as conspiracies about health and government and Donald Trump's fight against the paedophile cabal of the left, you know, it was quite remarkable for that reason.

To me, that feels unprecedented. Social media, and media helped it metastasise and snowball.

And those disparate conspiratorial communities were more able to find each other thanks to social media. Obviously QAnon started [out as] such an American conspiracy theory about Trump. And you could start to see it flow into Australia. But what I found quite remarkable last year was to start to see it flow through anti-vaccination activist communities in Australia and anti-lockdown groups on various platforms. So, it showed a remarkable ability to adapt to local communities and local people.

HC: Just to move to the third podcast focus on wellness and influencing culture around wellness and the wellness industry, this seems to also insert itself into COVID because of those who are more anxious or vulnerable, I suppose, about health. So, do you think that wellness influencers have more power to persuade because we're in the COVID context? And if so, why do you think that might be the case?

AB: Wellness influencers really thrive off anecdote, their personal experience, the way they beat x disease by eating x supplements and doing x activities.

And that's why they are so beguiling and powerful, because anecdote and stories are so much easier to relate to than the government's daily health briefing. Yesterday they said, 'You shouldn't wear a mask', but today they said, 'you should wear masks' – but there's no story. And it's far less compelling. And so, I think maybe that is why wellness influencers – where a lot of people did turn to because they offered, often, not always – I mean there's a lot more responsible types of wellness influencers out there – but some of them seem to be offering clearer solutions through their own personal journey and stories and nice pictures ... and they often look great.

So that was one thing.

The other thing is that contemporary iteration of 'wellness'. I think it sets itself up in opposition to mainstream medical care, often, but not always; what is this random person who is living in some part of Australia with no actual health qualification ... what can they offer to the viewer except a personal story that casts mainstream medical care's traditional medicine as a kind of an oppositional force? There has to be a good force with a bad force dichotomy there, a lot of the time – not always.

And that also in an environment where there was quite a lot of misinformation swilling, conspiracies taking hold in some communities – that kind of good versus bad story was also quite compelling; and we did see a conspiratorial rhetoric, QAnon's rhetoric, anti-vaccination rhetoric, flowing through a lot of Australian wellness influencers; obviously, Pete Evans is probably the prime example of that.

HC: I agree. I guess I was thinking too that, and you mentioned this, that this vulnerability felt by people in this context with COVID just makes people have a heightened anxiety, and heightened vulnerability; and influencers can mess with people, perhaps more successfully already having an audience that might be susceptible because of that COVID state. And I think you made that point on at least one or two occasions in the podcast.

So finally, and this is my last question: you channelled an interesting paradox to me that binds the conspiracy theorists and the wellness influencers and the idea that these people work with values of anti-authority. They emulate that quality of giving agency to those who may feel this lack of control, in the context of the pandemic. And this paradox of regaining agency is somehow connected to a progressive value linked to enlightenment thinking and finding a better health outcome for oneself. You illustrated that with the feminist movement of the past and especially with the feminist issues re-emerging in recent weeks and months, particularly in Australia.

So, I'm just wondering if this paradox is resolvable in the terms that you presented it: How do we maintain vigilance around the so-called experts and authorities that is rational, without crossing over to darker side of conspiracy and clearly, overreach by the wellness people who, are on the extreme end of snake oil sales?

So, it's it seems to me that it's an interesting paradox that we're in the space of enlightenment, in the space of progressive thinking and an interest in bettering ourselves in some fashion, gaining agency and, and I think actually, the whole podcast ends on this question of control, or lack of control, and how this is the space that these influencers enter into and successfully get their audiences following them in some fashion.

AB: Yeah, it's a difficult one. On a practical level, I do think there needs to be more accountability by people that set themselves up as experts. It's hard to think about how that space can be regulated effectively that doesn't overreach – people should have a right to relate to what works for them – their health. There's a line crossed by those trying to sell something or actively offering quite dangerous health advice.

There's also a responsibility from the platform on which they've grown that fame and have that reach. It was only this year that Instagram removed Robert F Kennedy Jr. who's one of the world's leading anti-vaccination activists – he has made a career out of it. So, I think the platform should be doing more to crack down on industries that are built around health misinformation. It's an industry – they tour, they make money off their disinformation. I think it's crazy that he was on the platform for so long and there is still plenty of his content around.

On a more theoretical level, as we talked about in that episode, these ideas of wellness that grew out of women's movements, but also movements in the United States like the Black Panthers, to think of health and wellness as a collective effort, I mean that really appeals to me. Something, I think, that makes me really uncomfortable with a lot of wellness influencers is they make it so individualised. It's all up to you – if you eat well, you will cure your disease, or if you get up at 5am today and meditate for half an hour and go for a jog, and then eat chia porridge, then you won't get COVID. I feel like it's very unfair pressure to put on people. And if there was a way to return to those earlier ideas of health as a collective effort around environment, around community, that would be a better use of your platform on Instagram or YouTube.

HC: Yes, there were those countervailing community health services in effect that do still exist both here and overseas, so it seems like it's a battle for helping people generally. The irony is they must gain some form of agency from the influence of platforms and platform communication, platform capitalism that seems to be at the root of a lot of the problems that get caused by people enlisting themselves to be the heroes of the influencing movement.

So, I guess it's a paradox that it seems to me that it is something that is going to be hard to make any sense of, or to have a prescription for. But at the same time, it's interesting to point it out and I think the podcast does well to make us aware of this kind of paradox, and to try to think through what alternatives are ultimately there.

The people I teach, who are largely 18- or 19-year-olds, fully embrace the platforms and know them really well, and particularly those students who are majoring in advertising and public relations. They are apprised of the influencing movement and in some ways, they see themselves, I suppose as potentially

wanting to emulate them in some fashion. It's a little bit troubling. I mean we try to do the thing that instils critical thinking around these particular movements and the emergence of these things in the powerful way that they have. But I'm a little bit troubled by how many students I see who just simply want to duplicate the achievements of influencers. It's a big attraction.

AB: Yeah. And I should say too those ideas of scepticism and as you're discussing the podcast, Dr Natalia Petrzela really laid it out well in the podcast. As we talk about in that third episode with Sarah's day <wellness influencer> and her episode about the specific diagnosis, and we read some of the comments that we saw on that YouTube video where people – at least in the YouTube comments – seem to be really eager, really desperate for her help. This is a troubling diagnosis for any woman to get, and then you have to figure out what to do about it ... and so moments of vulnerability can certainly be fairly compelling as Jade (character in Podcast 3) told us about as well.

But I do see moderating behaviour – a lot of these influencers, when they overstep boundaries, whether it be around these kinds of health advice or around social behaviour during the pandemic if their followers, suspected them of partying or going out without a mask, especially on platforms like Tik Tok – there's a really active kind of comment culture where the audience feels ownership, and they do comment and chastise.

There is some regulating behaviour that happens on these platforms too. So, I don't think it's the case that everybody that's looking at them, even if they follow them because they think they look good or to dress right or they want to emulate a lifestyle in some way. I don't think it's completely an unquestioning path they are following.

As you can see with our character Jade in that episode, it just went too far one day, and then she became an active part of community that seeks to critique.

HC: Yeah, so, I think this a great illustration of someone who actually goes through a transformation, personal transformation, and comes out the other side fairly strong actually. And ended up enjoying walking her dog. I think that was the takeaway in the end.

AB: Yeah, she seemed to feel like she had developed her healthiest self, I hope.

Click-Sick: a series on health misinformation for ABC's Science Friction

The Click-Sick podcast can be found at:

Click-Sick: Part 1 Why sharing isn't always caring

Click-Sick: Part 2 The hidden political forces pushing pandemic conspiracies

Click-Sick: Part 3 Can 'wellness' make you...sick?

Science Friction, Radio National

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