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“The RCMP Trained Killer Horses”: Misinformation in Public Policing

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ABSTRACT

The spread of misinformation is rapidly undermining the value of information received in response to police interactions with the public. Objective facts are often reported by police agencies only after a false narratives have already gone viral in the public domain. To date, this alarming trend has received little scholarly attention. Thus, in the present study, we draw on interviews with sixty-five (n=65) police officers from across Canada to better understand the collateral consequences that misinformation can have on the police institution and personnel. Analysis of this data permits us to examine the previously unexplored institutional and personal costs of misinformation on police services and individual officers. To help flesh out this analysis, we also present some examples of recent misinformation related to public policing and consider the steps taken to correct false stories. Based on our findings, we emphasize the need for police and policymakers to explore how best to identify and combat public safety-related misinformation online.

Introduction

In response to growing frustration with the Provincial and Federal COVID-19 vaccine and mask mandates, patchwork and contradictory isolation regulations, and lockdowns that left many at the brink of financial bankruptcy, large groups of disaffected Canadians came together to protest in ways not previously seen before. The most significant of these events occurred in the nation's capital city, Ottawa, Ontario. For three weeks, local citizens experienced chaos in their downtown core, as the narrow streets in and around Parliament Hill were jammed with semi- and other trucks that had converged around the Hill with the intention of not only demanding acknowledgement of protestors' concerns, but to make sweeping changes in different areas of government unrelated to COVID-19, including a quasi-coup attempt by the protest organizers. The culmination of the event occurred with the invocation of the Emergency Measures Act on February 14, 2022, by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which initiated the deployment of a joint police task force on February 18, 2022, to dismantle the protest and facilitate the removal of the vehicles and their owners (Public Safety Canada, 2022).

Of the various news stories arising from the removal of protestors, one in particular caught significant mainstream and social media attention: the claim that an Indigenous elder had been killed by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) horse. Video and still shots of the horse purportedly trampling the woman to death were widely shared. The corresponding public outrage was palpable. It was also global.

Fairly quickly, the story morphed. In some versions, the woman was not an 'elder,' a term of respect in Indigenous communities, but rather 'elderly.' In other versions, she was not killed, but 'seriously injured.' A man who was with her, and also reportedly 'trampled,' was described as having also died as a result of his injuries (see Image 17.1 below).

Image 17.1. Killer horses. Source: Twitter.

· Feb 22

Replying to

What about the Man who got his skull smashed in by the RCMP trained killer horses, and died. P.S. I'd like to see you tell the Mohawk Headman their Clan Mother's brutal attack is bullshit...

Mainstream news media picked up the story and ran with the different versions. Among other outlets, the RCMP’s ‘killer horses’ became a featured story on the United States (U.S.) Fox News (2022) and in reports by the United Kingdom’s (U.K.) Daily Mail (2022). The latter described the event as “An elderly woman was trampled over by police horses during a peaceful protest in Ottawa, Canada” (ibid.).

While each of the versions carried a kernel of truth – two protesters did come into contact with police horses after being repeatedly told to leave the area over several hours, receiving minor injuries from the incident (CBC.com, 2022; Raymond, 2022) – the most compelling aspects of the stories shared and re-shared across mainstream, alternative, and social media platforms were fundamentally untrue. They were forms of ‘misinformation’[1] – that is, false information spread unintentionally, by error or mistake (Johnson & Marcellino, 2021; Scheufele & Krause, 2019). While some individuals may have intentionally created or shared a false or potentially inaccurate story to stoke the police state rhetoric circling the police deployment that day, most of those who shared, re-tweeted and/or commented on these stories with friends, family, and various audiences probably did so in good faith, likely believing what they were communicating was true. And that is why misinformation is so dangerous. For example, the widely circulated ‘fake’ videos of Israeli airstrikes on civilians in Gaza in 2023 created protests in the US that required police response to manage and

restore civic order (Lestrange & Bueerman, 2024). As well, when three young girls were stabbed in Southport, United Kingdom, a false name attributed to the attacker spread virally on social media, inciting violent riots, necessitating a large police response to quell the unrest (Spring, 2024). of the public are misinformed on the same topic, these shared misperceptions can bias collective opinion (Jerit & Zhao, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Misinformation also has i

The present study examines the impacts of misinformation on the institution of public policing, as well as on the emotional toll on individual officers. To explore this topic, we draw on in-depth qualitative interviews with sixty-five police personnel from across Canada, many of whom were either directly or indirectly involved with not only the Freedom Convoy protests of 2022, but also had direct knowledge and experience of some of the other erroneous stories discussed here.

In the pages that follow, we explore the concept of misinformation and demonstrate how the creation and dissemination of false stories about policing events can easily spread through social media networks, cascading into mainstream media outlets, and reflect on the consequences of these inaccurate reports. By highlighting the RCMP's story above and other recent examples of misinformation related to public policing, we consider its impact on the institution of policing, as well as some of the steps taken by agencies to combat the dissemination of false stories. These stories are about real people, accused of horrific things. Thus, we also consider how such untruths affect individuals and their families. Finally, we conclude by reviewing our major findings, highlighting some key points drawn from the data presented, and discuss both the practical and theoretical implications of our findings.

Misinformation

> "Information is only as reliable as the people who are receiving it."– Julia Koller (cited in Anderson & Rainie, 2017, p. 1)

It is not uncommon to see confusion surrounding terms such as fake news, propaganda, and misinformation, and to observe individuals using these terms interchangeably (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Our interest here is specifically on misinformation, and for the purposes of the present study, we draw on definitions provided by Scheufele and Krause (2019, p. 7662):

> Misinformation: False or misleading information that is spread unintentionally, by error or mistake.

Although Kuklinski and colleagues (2000) provide a definition that does not attribute intentionality (confidently held beliefs based on incorrect factual information), we believe that the above definition more succinctly captures the 'viral' spreading of internet-enabled communication. We also note that it is important to distinguish misinformation from disinformation, both of which rest on an understanding of the sharer's intent. Disinformation is a form of deliberate falsehood intended to manipulate an audience and may include "fake news," opinion pieces impersonating journalism, and 'false balance' stories (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Johnson &

Marcellino, 2021). Misinformation, by way of contrast, is a false story shared in good faith by the poster (Johnson & Marcellino, 2021; Kuklinski et al., 2000).

Regardless of intent, what makes both forms of communication equally problematic is their contribution to truth decay—the blurring of the line between opinion and objective facts (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Authors point to the creation of the 24-hour news cycle as one of the most significant antecedents of truth decay (Johnson & Marcellino, 2021; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). "Quality news and information are more available than ever before, but in greater amounts so are the trivial, the one-sided and the false" (Pew Research, 2004, p. 1). This drowning out of objectifiable facts can have consequences, especially those with policy-level implications. Indeed, social psychologists need only point to two well-researched phenomena to explain why this is the case: the confirmation bias and the disconfirmation bias. With confirmation bias, media consumers who hold pre-existing beliefs will unconsciously accept uncritical 'evidence,' reinforcing their worldview (Kahneman, 2011). Conversely, with disconfirmation bias, when consumers are presented with information that has the potential to alter their currently held beliefs (i.e. the release of objectifiable facts from trusted news sources or police services), consumers will search through their memories to locate information that will undermine the discrepant material presented (Edwards & Smith, 1996). So, in essence, if a story aligns with one's beliefs, values, and/or ideological lens, a consumer is more likely to accept it on face value (Druckman, 2012; Flynn et al., 2017; Jerit & Zhao, 2020). Conversely, exposure to information that does not conform to one's pre-existing beliefs is likely to be rejected out of hand (Nickerson, 1998).

One potential method for avoiding the inculcation of false beliefs is to employ critical thinking skills to carefully scrutinize and fact-check incoming information. There are, however, two reasons why many people fail to do so. One reason is, again, our hard-wired biases. Not only do we fail to recognize the twin traps of confirmation and disconfirmation biases, but we also tend to incorrectly perceive ourselves as discerning consumers of information – that is, labouring under a delusion psychologists refer to as a bias blind spot (Pronin & Kruger, 2007). A bias blind spot occurs when we fail to recognize how our own biases shape how we view the world. This phenomenon was observed in a study of American students' media literacy by a department of Stanford University, where a large majority of the students were unable to distinguish a news story from a "sponsored" new advertisement as well as being unable to recognize biases in politically charged tweets (Wineburg et al., 2016).

When it comes to limiting the potential for misinformation to influence our thinking, communication technology offers little help. As a result of the various tools available on social media platforms, we are increasingly seeing individuals narrow their exposure to contradictory opinions and narratives (Coscia & Rossi, 2020). The result is "people on systems like Facebook are increasingly forming into 'echo chambers' of those who think alike. They will keep unfriending those who don't and passing on rumours and fake news that agrees with their point of view" (Hiltz cited in Anderson & Rainie, 2017, p. 1; see also Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Technology not only enables us to make these deliberate choices, but it also helps us narrow our exposure to alternative content further through the use of algorithms that push content to us based on our previous choices.

Our desire to screen our content based on our pre-existing biases leaves us vulnerable to manipulation. In a study of expert opinion on the rise of misinformation, Anderson and Rainie (2017, p. 1) found a subset of participants who believed that "humans mostly shape technology advances to their own, not-fully-noble purposes and that bad actors with bad motives will thwart the best efforts of technology innovators to remedy today's problems." Ill-intentioned actors are aided in their ability to manipulate media consumers through a phenomenon known as the 'firehose effect.' Simply put, the second reason why critical analysis of stories is not a *de facto* response to reading information in social or mainstream media is that even the most reasoned of consumers is likely to be over-saturated with information. The term "firehose effect" originates from medical researchers, who, in an attempt to combat medical misinformation, likened the volume of content in spaces like Twitter and Facebook to "drinking from the firehose" (Choo et al., 2015, p. 3). Not surprisingly, few individuals have the time or energy to evaluate each piece of shared content for accuracy. Those who do want to assess the accuracy of a piece of content are frequently forced to rely on online fact-checking services, such as Snopes and FactCheck.org. While these services provide an extremely useful function for navigating an otherwise treacherous information landscape, the reality is that misinformation spreads so quickly that by the time information is fact-checked, a falsehood could have been seen by thousands or hundreds of thousands of individuals. And therein lies another problem to which we will return very shortly.

The ability to manipulate portions of a populace into political and other behaviours through the dissemination of false information represents a significant global threat and, as we have seen in the U.S., a potential danger to democracy and democratic institutions (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015; Schiff et al., 2025). While we can easily point to Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election as representing a paradigmatic test case of this point, we prefer to draw from another foreboding example: the spread of erroneous and, in some instances, deliberately false information about the COVID-19 virus and governmental vaccine programs and quarantine policies. Writing in 2017, Flynn and colleagues (2017, p. 127) raised the spectre of misinformation distorting "people's views about some of the most consequential issues in politics, science and medicine." In 2020, we saw this firsthand with the promulgation of conspiracy theories about vaccines killing people, the promotion of useless and potentially deadly homegrown cures, which spread like wildfire through Facebook, Twitter and other sites. A significant portion of the Canadian population refused to quarantine, some deliberately courting the transmission of the disease through participation in viral challenges on TikTok (Tierney, 2020). One of the worst examples of this behaviour was a challenge aimed at teenagers that saw a TikTok 'influencer' film herself licking an airplane toilet seat (Merrett, 2020). Some viewers who followed this example tested positive for COVID-19 (Merrett, 2020). Even when false information is of a more innocuous nature, it can leave consumers uninformed or misinformed about what is happening in their neighbourhood, their city, or their world. Worryingly, one study conducted in 2018 found that 64% of Americans surveyed "say that fake news

has left them with a great deal of confusion about current events" (Shao et al., 2018, p. 1), and a further 23% admitted to sharing a false news story (Barthel et al., 2016).

Aside from encouraging problematic behaviours, misinformation represents a significant threat because of its relative 'stickiness'. As other scholars have put it, such content tends to be 'resilient' – that is, once out in the public domain, it is often impervious to correction (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). The myth of the RCMP's killer horses provides just one such example. An American news reporter who shared false information from reports 'on the ground' about the Ottawa convoy protests had to subsequently retract her comments. However, by the time that happened, her posts had received millions of views, been retweeted approximately 14,000 times, and garnered around 15,000 likes (Raymond, 2022). Furthermore, misinformation persists in the public domain long after it has been posted. Writing in April 2023, we typed in "RCMP killer horse" on Twitter and went to the 'latest' tab to see the results. The most recent tweet on this topic was posted on February 23, 2022. Not only did the tweet contain erroneous content about someone supposedly being killed at the Ottawa convoy protests, but the name of one of the victims of this alleged trampling was incorrect.

Image 17.2 Erroneous Tweet. Source: Twitter

In combination with misinformation's 'stickiness' and resiliency in the face of new information or corrections, Pronin and Kugler (2007) also found that individuals are more likely to accept the first information they receive on a topic and then subsequently favour that information when faced with conflicting messages (i.e. corrections to a story). This is terribly problematic for public police services, who are handicapped with gag orders from civilian oversight bodies that investigate officer-involved shootings and serious injury incidents (as well as being limited in what information can be provided to the public so as not to harm any future court proceedings). As the police are often unable to be the first to communicate all the objective facts to the public in the initial stages of an incident, misinformation can create a false narrative that, as the authors referenced above have noted, is impervious to correction.

Despite the rise of misinformation online and its obvious detrimental impacts on various social institutions, there is a notable lack of academic research on the institutional and personal costs of these activities to police

services and personnel. In fact, we could locate only one such study, a paper by Scott Mourtgos, Ian Adams and Justin Nix (2022). Their article utilizes the Jacob Blake interaction with the Kenosha Police Department as a case study, using it as a backdrop to determine whether there was a premature increase in retirements and resignations resulting from the aftermath of the incident in the community. On August 23, 2020, Blake was shot by police during an armed confrontation. During the initial stages of the occurrence, inaccurate information regarding Blake being unarmed was proclaimed on both social and mainstream media sources. In the immediate aftermath of this event, a false story was spread that an unarmed Blake had been shot in the back by police because he was a Black male. The result was protests and rioting, resulting in some $50 million in damages (Mourtgos et al., 2022). Blake later admitted he had been armed with a knife, and an independent investigation subsequently cleared the officer involved, some four months post-event. That was not the only investigation to which this officer was subject. The Department of Justice also initiated an investigation, which was not concluded until October 2021 (Morales, 2021). The officer also faced a civil rights lawsuit launched by Blake, which the latter dropped 'with prejudice[2]' in May 2022 (Vielmetti, 2022). In the months following his encounter with Blake, the officer, Rusten Sheskey, had also received death threats, demands that he lose his job (Mintz, 2022), and been subject to an internal investigation (Madani, 2021). A news report filed in August 2022 stated that, while he retained his employment with the Kenosha Police Department, Sheskey had yet to return to active patrol (Madani, 2021).

Although there has been some recent interest in misinformation and its impacts on policing among academics, to date there has been little sustained effort at exploring how 'cheap fakes', 'deep fakes', lies and propaganda can undermine criminal justice institutions. Nor have we begun to unpack how misinformation and disinformation can potentially influence public policy, criminal justice practices and/or negatively affect individuals working within the criminal justice system. With that end in mind, we set out to better understand this phenomenon through an exploratory study of misinformation and its potential impacts on policing within the context of the convoy protests in Ottawa.

Method of Inquiry

The present study is based on an analysis of sixty-five (n=65) in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with police personnel from across Canada, who either had direct empirical experience on the frontlines at the convoy protests staged in Ottawa and other cities and/or who had been involved in similar types of political events. Interviewees included police leaders, critical incident commanders, public order unit personnel, emergency response team members, and frontline officers, among others (see Table 17.1 below).

Table 17.1. Interviewees by occupation type

Category n

Patrol Officer	20
Public Order	19
Incident Commander	13
Police Leader	4
Intelligence Officer	3
Investigator/Special Operations	2
Police Association Representative	4
Total	65

The data is comprised of interviews drawn from a non-probability sample. The data were collected as part of an ongoing study of public policing of political events. This project began as an oral history of the policing of the Convoy protests, and then subsequently expanded to include police involvement in other controversial political events. Participants were located through one of two methods: the first was through previous connections within the policing community, and the second involved self-selecting responses to social media posts seeking participants on LinkedIn and Twitter. Our semi-structured approach to interviews involved creating a loosely followed interview guide, which asked open-ended questions and allowed participants to guide the direction of the discussion. To ensure diversity in our sample beyond occupation, we deliberately sought participants from as many provinces (excluding territories, as protests occurred in urban metropolises) as possible, including reaching out to previous contacts from 10 provinces. Due to the geographic spread of participants, all interviews were conducted on the telephone and lasted approximately 45-90 minutes.

All interviews were conducted with the approval of a university Research Ethics Board and in compliance with TriCouncil guidelines on the ethical treatment of research participants. All research participants agreed to participate, agreed to review the transcripts of their interviews and to read (should they choose) a copy of this chapter to ensure we did not misquote them or unintentionally alter their content or the context in which it was said. Taking this step also afforded a greater degree of reliability in the work. It also allowed us to confirm that participants were comfortable with the level of anonymity provided.

The data presented here has also been supplemented by information gleaned from the relevant research literature and from public policy documents, such as the federal inquiry into the use of the Emergencies Act. We also draw on relevant posts from social media (Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube) that were collected during and immediately after specific events discussed here.

To begin coding our data, an exploratory analysis of the interview, document, and social media data was first conducted using inductive thematic coding. We employed an inductive approach to allow for greater flexibility

in identifying themes and sub-themes, which we wanted to emerge from the data rather than pre-existing theories and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first iteration of coding entailed having the first author conduct open coding by engaging in manual line-by-line readings of each transcript to develop a series of major themes (see, for example, Strauss and Corbin 1990). Once these themes were identified, the second author, who had also been involved in data collection, verified the results. To illustrate our approach, for the theme 'misinformation,' obviously relevant codes for the interview data included terms such as 'lie,' 'not true,' and 'false.' When examining potential examples of misinformation online – including the RCMP Killer Horse story – we had to become more creative in identifying it as an instance of misinformation and thus categorizing it as a relevant sub-theme. To do that, we used reputable sources to ascertain the veracity of a story, including investigative reports published by the Ontario Special Investigation Unit and other government agencies. Focused coding then permitted us to identify relevant clusters of sub-themes. For example, two sub-themes of 'misinformation' that emerged in the data were 'impacts of misinformation on the police institution' and 'impacts upon individual officers.'

Results

In the aftermath of the truck convoy protests in Ottawa, the Canadian federal government commissioned an inquiry into its use of the *Emergency Powers Act* to deal with the crisis. In testimony before the inquiry, RCMP Deputy Commissioner Michael Duheme (2022) offered the following comments:

> We know the IMVE [ideologically motivated violent extremism] threat environment is rapidly evolving and complex, and is increasingly fuelled by misinformation and hostile rhetoric surrounding a host of grievances, many of which focus on the government's response to COVID-19 and other matters. This has sown distrust in government institutions, including law enforcement, and has augmented the ability for extremist groups to both recruit new members and increasingly foster hostility.

One aspect of that rhetoric that Duheme spoke to in his subsequent remarks is the targeting of the police. It is concerning that this targeting "has manifested itself in all too real confrontation" between police and protestors in Ottawa and at cross-border blockades (Duheme, 2022). What Duheme was referring to in relation to the latter was a series of arrests of individuals in Coutts, Alberta, who had allegedly stockpiled weapons and body armour to be used against police, who were attempting to dismantle the blockade there (Grant, 2022).

Given what we perceive as the potential for serious political and social consequences arising from misinformation – both to the police institution itself and to individual officers – we asked research participants to identify the threats they associate with misinformation. Perhaps not surprisingly, the single biggest concern expressed was the ability of those spreading misinformation to undermine public confidence in policing. An officer we interviewed with an extensive history of working in media relations observed that misinformation "undermines public confidence [in the police] and [police] legitimacy." What he took exception to was not that police are routinely questioned about their activities, but rather that "you're questioning what the institution of

policing is doing, but not based on good information." The result, he felt, was "destabilizing" public policing. An intelligence officer in another province agreed. He stated it was difficult for police to "remain accountable when to whom we're being accountable and what we're being accountable about is in flux because of misinformation."

Interviewees also addressed the need for police and governments to react more quickly and decisively against misinformation. "We have to be aware of it," a veteran officer stated, "and be prepared for it." This participant, who has extensive experience with the media, added, "Facts are very, very important, and we think there are many, many cases over the last quite a few years when the facts aren't actually getting out there, especially in the initial stages when a story or an incident first appears." Such actions are slowly starting to happen, wherein police leaders or their media personnel are addressing erroneous stories more directly. One such example occurred in 2020, when, in response to complaints over police removal of protestors from a government building, the Chief of the Victoria Police Department, Del Manak, posted a YouTube video to respond to what he termed misinformation online (Harnet, 2020). Other examples include the swift responses of the Vancouver Police Department and its executive to various stories posted on social media. However, as one senior leader observed, even attempts to counter misinformation by police are limited in terms of the ability to correct a narrative once its been put out on a platform: "[misinformation] that lives out in the world, the wacky world of social media as being the truth, and it sits there forever, which is problematic because that's where people go." He noted that if such false information remains unchallenged, then audiences think, "Well, this must be the truth because nobody came out to correct it." Speaking specifically to the 'killer horse' example, another said, "We actually had people in our communications section that were doing nothing but monitoring those feeds. We immediately got on and corrected the record. But in a thread of tweets, or in a tweet, it's not easy just to actually capture what you want and send it out." He then added, "right now, there's no latitude nor ability for us to manage that, other than to, as much as we can, continue to push out actual factual information to the public." However, as we noted before, even attempts to correct false information do not necessarily change the discourse around an event. Individuals who are ideologically committed often readily dismiss factual corrections to the record as 'copaganda,' or the police deliberately framing the narrative in a positive light.

Given the possibility that misinformation might lead to specific targeting and harassment of individual officers, we also asked interviewees what they thought of this potential. Our decision to ask questions concerning individual impacts sprang from misinformation arising from the convoy protests that targeted Ottawa's Deputy Police Chief, Steve Bell. Bell's response to a media question at a press conference after the end of the demonstrations was misconstrued as that he would 'hunt down protestors' to 'charge them' and/or 'financially destroy' them. This story, repeated across social media, then formed the basis of a headline on an alternative media site: "Ottawa Police Chief: 'Every Single Canadian Who Supported Truckers Will be Hunted Down and Ruined" (Adl-Tabatabai, 2022). The claim was subsequently fact-checked by Reuters (2022) and shown to be false. However, a few months after Reuters debunked the story, the claim was still making the rounds on social media (see Image 17.2 below).

Image 17.3. Lawton. Source: Twitter.

REMINDER: **Ottawa**'s interim **police** chief **Steve Bell** was the one who told convoy protesters he would **hunt** them down after the fact and continue charging them and applying "financial sanctions."

Several of those interviewed for this project are or were former members of the Ottawa police. In discussing this case with one, he noted, "We just had no ability to corral or stop or rectify that [story] because there was a group of people that actually just didn't want to hear it. They wanted that mirror. And we don't know how you can combat that." Indeed, these interviewees are referring to the 'stickiness' problem described above (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). Confirmation and primacy bias are powerful heuristics that make attempts at correcting the record with factually correct information nearly impervious to change.

While officers interviewed recognized the importance of external oversight on police issues, they were also concerned that stories containing misinformation would lead to increases in unfounded complaints against officers. This is not an entirely baseless concern: we were informed, for example, that the false claim concerning the Deputy Chief of Ottawa resulted in approximately 50 complaints lodged against him with external oversight agencies. Discussing this issue with a senior leader in British Columbia, he referenced the stresses false allegations can have on police members: "when we tell our people to do X, Y, and Z and then they get a complaint about that, even if the complaint is so frivolous that it's just completely out to lunch, it is still a very stressful process for these members. And it takes forever, forever and ever and ever [to resolve]." Depending on the nature of the complaint, even internal investigations by professional standards can take up to two years to complete. During this time, officers cannot apply for promotions, have promotions paused, or transfer between services/departments. These costs are well documented in policing literature (DeAngelis, 2009; DeAngelis & Kupchik, 2017; Huey et al., 2025; Schaible et al., 1988). When talking about the personal toll that such investigations can take, a police officer in another province spoke from personal experience: "Your own organization is putting you under scrutiny and investigating everything that you've been doing. And you fall apart. Some people go to a very, very dark place. I went to a dark place, but I got myself out of it."

Although spurious complaints based on misinformation promoted online are one potential issue that individual officers involved in public controversies as a result of their occupation may face, more often than not, participants were concerned about the impact of false stories on their families. As one explained in relation to his participation in the Convoy protests, "when officers are thrust into the spotlight, it ends up being very, very difficult for the officer, very difficult for the officer's spouse, and particularly their children. And I've had many, many instances where a family has been impacted, the spouse and the children, as a result of a media piece, which can go out quite far and wide." Several related stories of how misinformation online about police

actions during the occupation impacted their personal life, from awkward exchanges at junior league hockey to themselves or their significant others losing long-term friendships. It's especially difficult, one noted, "when a protestor will post on their site inaccurate information … and people read it and then are like "[name deleted] was that you? You actually said that to that person?" … You're like, 'Of course, we didn't say that." But they've already created a narrative that you can't counter." Some officers also found the online commentary spawned by misinformation personally difficult. Discussing the aftermath of the convoy protests, a police officer who had been involved remembered:

> Seeing videos and pictures of my teams and myself online after, and the comments people were making about us in those videos and pictures … It was an awkward, hard pill to follow, right down to the comments being made from people when we're on the ground and the stuff coming out of their mouths about being on the wrong side of history and your families and your wife and children must be disgusted by you.

Drawing on the work of Eisenburg (1975), who found that inaccurate media portrayals tarnished police service reputations and decreased officer morale, an inference can be made that in our modern media landscape, where there is an overwhelming amount of information and misinformation competing for paramountcy, that officer stress could be exacerbated by the visceral level of hateful messaging. More research in this area is warranted, however.

Conclusions

On February 18, 2022, as police attempted to clear the roads of downtown Ottawa of trucks and protestors, thousands of social media users remained transfixed by the story of 'Roberta Paulsen', the purported victim of a horse trampling. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the story, in various iterations, contained misinformation that was widely shared, shaping global perceptions of what was happening on the ground in Ottawa. Across multiple versions of the story, Paulsen was described as Indigenous, elderly with a walker, an Indigenous elder, dead, seriously injured, injured by a RCMP horse and/or deliberately trampled. The reality is that Roberta Paulsen was a fictitious name. The woman was 49-year-old Candice Sero, who had stumbled in front of one of the horses belonging to the Toronto Police Mounted Unit as they were walking their horses forward. She was neither killed nor seriously injured. Indeed, according to multiple sources interviewed for this project, she returned to the protest site the very next day. Further, an initial investigation by an independent civilian oversight body, the Special Investigations Unit (Hudson, 2022), found Sero had 'strained' her shoulder, and therefore declined to launch a full investigation (CBC News, 2022; Hudson, 2022).

The misinformation that resulted from this story spread rapidly across social media and even found its way onto international media outlets. This spread of misinformation has significant potential for repercussions, as when large portions of the public have shared misperceptions of events in the same direction, collective bias can occur (Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This collective bias can shape the legitimacy of

the police actions during the event, and has the potential to shape protestors' response. As noted by several authors, once a person becomes misinformed on a topic, they can stubbornly cling to their inaccurate beliefs (Flynn et al., 2017; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Kuklinski et al., 2000), and offer resistance when attempts are made to correct them (Flynn et al., 2017; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Pronin and Kugler, 2007).

The present study makes a novel contribution to the policing research literature by addressing an emerging threat to police legitimacy: the spread of misinformation regarding policing actions (see Ellis, 2021). As we documented in the preceding pages, stories containing erroneous information about policing activities are easily circulated, and once a false narrative takes hold (i.e., 'goes viral'), it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to refute. Furthermore, those who create and/or share misinformation rarely incur a transactional cost for doing so, as, to date, no police services or their members have initiated legal action against stories containing false allegations. Compounding the situation, we would argue, is the fact that among individuals who share misinformation online, we must include provincial and federal politicians, who likely do so because the content of the misinformation advances their own political agendas by speaking to concerns of their base. We must also include another worrisome development: the mainstream media's increasing reliance on unverified social media stories. As we saw in relation to the 'killer horse' story, one version of the false narrative surrounding this event was picked up by a mainstream news outlet in the U.K. (Daily Mail 2022). By attracting extra attention to websites or social media posts that have outrageous tag lines, the mainstream media is contributing to the rise of click-bait material online (Chatterjee & Panmand, 2020; Munger et al., 2020), potentially to increase advertising revenues while at the same time contributing to the spread of misinformation and a lowering of the epistemic value of mainstream content (Fallis, 2021).

This research is not without limitations. This work may have also benefited from a greater number of interviewers and, particularly, from interviewers with diverse language and other skills. One of the recruitment problems we faced was in locating officers from the province of Quebec with English language facility, as neither of the two interviewers is sufficiently fluent in French to conduct and transcribe the interviews. We would also encourage future researchers to supplement our efforts here by considering diverse research methodologies, as well as theoretical frameworks for understanding this phenomenon. Again, our intent here was to present an exploratory analysis of an emergent public policy issue, and thus, there is much that we have not examined and that requires significantly more analysis to potentially inform policy and practice in this area.

Despite the limitations noted above, what our study does accomplish is to raise much-needed awareness of the rise of misinformation in public policing and its potential to impair police legitimacy (see Russell & Giwa, 2023). In the post-truth era, "facts are increasingly being trumped by existing beliefs and prejudices" (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, p.361). So, if facts do not have the normative effect they once did, social media companies must make facts more recognizable (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). As well, our study raises interesting questions concerning officer well-being among those who become the targets of misinformation. From a public policy and/or police practice standpoint, we are not in a position to make concrete

recommendations at this time; however, what our work does do is to highlight potential avenues of further study and consideration for both researchers and policymakers alike. Further, police and policymakers need to begin exploring how best to identify and combat misinformation online. As police often release objective information long after social media has created the discourse around an incident, Nylan and Reifler (2015) found that providing an alternate, causal account of the event has led to more effective corrections to the dialogue than by a straight refutation of the misinformation (Flynn et al., 2017). Police services and police associations must also start to think about the human toll of misinformation-based social media campaigns on individual officers and their families, as well as how best to mitigate negative impacts on serving personnel. Police agencies must develop a greater understanding of the media ecosphere. Arriving late to information exchange arena will almost certainly result in decreasing levels of police legitimacy that will require increasing police efforts to maintain. While the present study represents a starting point in that process, we are cognizant of the need for more empirical work in this area and will be using this study as a launching pad towards addressing some of the questions remaining.

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Footnotes

1. We choose this definition of misinformation as it relates more directly to the age of social media over that posited by Kuklinski et al. (2000). We clarify this distinction in greater detail in the literature review. ↩

2. Meaning that Blake could not refile the suit. ↩