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Studying the Fire from Inside the Burning Building: Reflections on *Connected in Isolation* by Eszter Hargittai

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Connected in Isolation (Hargittai, 2022) is a remarkable work of social science—a report on a study conducted in the midst of a novel and horrifying pandemic, at a moment of almost total uncertainty, during a lockdown in which much of the everyday sociality that sustains our lives was absent and much of the rest was mediated through electronic screens. There are many good sociological studies of disasters, but none of which I am aware in which the researchers experienced the disaster along with the people they were writing about. In other words, the author, Eszter Hargittai, and her team were studying and writing about a fire from within a burning building.

The result is a document that captures the state of mind, as far as surveys can do so, of residents of three countries—Italy, Switzerland, and the United States—that were experiencing a similar crisis in different ways. The Italian north was the center of the pandemic in Europe; the situation was less grave in Switzerland; and the United States was, as always, divided and heterogeneous—New York was devastated, while in other parts of the country, the pandemic was barely a rumor. The book is skillfully constructed, taking the reader through what people knew about the pandemic and how they responded to it, variation in the access that people had to the Internet and how they sought information online, their other sources of information, and the association of all of these with the knowledge they acquired.

The project was only possible because the author built it upon a career of fundamental contributions to the study of online behavior and digital inequality. Hargittai was the first person to measure skill in Internet use and has refined that measurement throughout her career; she has pioneered research on the many ways in which social class influences every dimension of Internet use, through access and autonomy to the ways in which people use online affordances; and she has done trailblazing research on students, the elderly, and the disabled.

The book packs a huge amount of data into just a few pages yet creates a narrative that carries the reader along and keeps the main themes visible. Of those themes, I found several to be especially compelling.

First, inequality—in access to the Internet, in skill at navigating it, and in autonomy of use—shaped individual experience. Inequality was substantial and consequential for people's knowledge about the pandemic and their ability to protect themselves and their families from its worst effects.

Second, although the author does not address this explicitly, her data document a diagnostically worrisome American exceptionalism: Americans more often complained of loneliness, family tensions, and

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"feeling trapped" than Italians or Swiss; they believe more untrue things about the pandemic; their access to digital media was more heavily affected by social class and ethnoracial identity than was that of people in other countries; and political polarization, even in those first months of the pandemic, created partisan differences in both knowledge and behavior.

Third, a central and important theme is the positive association of information and misinformation. Hargittai's respondents were not divided between the enlightened and the duped (Hargittai, 2022). Accurate information did not drive out inaccurate beliefs; rather, people who sought out information about the pandemic knew more about it, but also believed more things that were wrong. The author documents this pattern in all three countries, though the problem of misinformation is especially visible in the United States.

Given its brevity and the conditions under which it was produced, it is not surprising that *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) leaves some puzzles unresolved. One such puzzle is the effect of skill. The author measures two kinds of skill, one having to do with the use of the Internet in general and the other having to do with use of social media. (The former is based on laboratory studies that correlate responses to survey items with the ability of users to find information online; the latter on insight into what social media users must do to protect their privacy and evaluate information properly.) General Internet skill but, surprisingly, not social media skill, had a big effect on social media use in the United States. By contrast, social media skill had an independent effect on how much accurate information the minority of people who used Twitter had about the pandemic. One wonders if Internet skill accounts for greater use of social media, or if orientation to and interest in the online world—in so far as it is uncorrelated with socioeconomic status, race, and gender and thus unmeasured—explains both social media use *and* the measures of skill? One also wonders how any researcher can keep up with the evolving Internet in a way that keeps laboratory-developed skill measures current. Such laboratory-validated measures are a public good—invaluable and available to the whole research community—and too expensive for a single scholar to maintain indefinitely. There is a strong case, I think, to institutionalize their maintenance and revision in an established research institution with stable funding.

One reason that skill is only weakly related to accurate information is the complicating effect of political polarization. In the United States and Italy, conservatives knew as much about the pandemic as anyone, but more of what they knew was wrong—partisanship did not affect knowledge, but it increased misinformation (a result that in the United States was mediated by watching Fox News, which perhaps served as a proxy for broader embeddedness in the right-wing echo chamber). It is striking that this effect was visible so early in the pandemic, when the fog of war made it hard for anyone to keep track of current knowledge.

These relationships are especially striking because in other ways knowledge seeking was relatively rational. People who needed information because they were more vulnerable or were taking care of others made efforts to get it, and people who did not were less attentive. Thus, the elderly and women had more information than young people and men. But partisanship, at least in the United States, and to some extent Italy, introduced an irrational element that only became more extreme after the research concluded. Hargittai (2022) is on to something when she suggests that knowledge that is wrong may not constitute "misinformation" as we usually understand it, so much as willful ignorance reflecting one's political commitments: a marker of identity similar

to a gang tattoo, but, one hopes, less indelible. Some respondents who seemed poorly informed may have known what they were *supposed* to believe about COVID-19, but have chosen not to believe it.

Another related puzzle: One would expect that people who sought information more widely would be better informed than people who limited themselves to fewer media. But that was not the case; instead, the author found a nonlinear relationship between the number of sources to which respondents attended and the amount of accurate information they acquired. Nowhere did people who consulted more than three sources have an advantage, and in the United States and Italy, more sources were correlated with *less* valid knowledge. Were people who went beyond the major media accessing less dependable sources? Was obsessive information seeking a result of judgment-clouding anxiety?

Of course, people do not live by media alone. Even during lockdown—perhaps especially given lockdown, if one had access to Zoom—they talk to one another. Face-to-face communication (in person or on screens or through messaging apps) provided frames that may have shaped the interpretation of mediated data, amplifying some messages and casting doubt upon others. The author reports that lonelier people reached out more to others online, that people who spent more time online had more incorrect information, and that people who possessed *less* accurate information were *more* likely to correct others who expressed different views. Surveys may be too blunt a tool to capture the dynamics of dyadic communication, but it seems likely that much information (and misinformation) spread through retail channels.

Connected in Isolation (Hargittai, 2022) demonstrates that one can do good social science from inside a burning building and sets the stage for even more ambitious efforts. The pace at which the media are changing ensures that next time there will be additional challenges, and variation in the structure and governance of social media makes it likely that a broader comparison (including, for example, countries from the Global South and societies with authoritarian as well as democratic regimes) would yield even more varied results. Such an effort will require multinational teams and international collaboration. Communication scholars should begin planning for the next global disaster, whenever it occurs.

Reference

Hargittai, E. (2022). *Connected in isolation: Digital privilege in unsettled times.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.