

What Does it Mean to be *Connected in Isolation*?

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COVID-19 upended many of our lives and institutions—but also perceptions of our lives and institutions. Many of these shifts are well-tread in public discourse. The embrace of remote work (at least by employees). The sense that what was normal and tolerated, such as long work days and commutes, was robbing people of their time. The idea that public health is above politics and that people share the same perception of risk.

In the past two years, a number of important scholarly works have emerged to help us make sense of this unique period of our lives. Among them, Shana Gadarian, Sara Goodman, and Thomas Pepinsky's (2022) *Pandemic Politics*, which showed how the politicization of the pandemic in the United States, especially by former president Trump, led to public health directives being distrusted, if not ignored, by large segments of the country. Meanwhile, scholars such as Emily Vraga and Leticia Bode (2021) have addressed things like responding to, and rebutting, COVID-19 mis- and disinformation.

Complementing these works, *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) takes up the question of how access to and understanding of information is embedded in social structures and social contexts. And it usefully offers a national comparative lens onto our understanding of the pandemic, showing how media, political, and social contexts shape knowledge and, ultimately, health outcomes.

Before detailing some of these findings, I especially want to note how impressive this research project is given how quickly Hargittai and her team were able to get surveys in three countries into the field during the early days of COVID. In a personal narrative, Hargittai writes about members of her team grappling with the things many of us struggled with—repurposed kitchen tables as office spaces; caring for parents, friends, and children; adopting and leveraging a range of new digital tools for collaboration; and navigating a world of health concerns and risks—even while studying how others were doing these things. The result is a book based on comparative surveys of American, Italian, and Swiss adults over the course of April and May 2020—offering a particularly illustrative picture of the pandemic at a crucial, early moment in time.

In addition to the uniqueness of this methodological challenge, theoretically the book centers social structures and social contexts as they shape informational behaviors, and subsequently, shifts in public perceptions (about COVID, public health authorities, behaviors to stay safe, etc.). Hargittai (2022) shows, repeatedly and clearly, that any understanding of communication has to be embedded in analysis of “societal positions” (p. 1), or social structures. In documenting how people used digital media during the early days of the pandemic in the context of learning and communicating about it, Hargittai shows how this was structured by social power and opportunity. And, as the book argues, that social power and opportunity, in turn, shaped *outcomes*—the likelihood that people embraced healthy behaviors and, ultimately, stayed safe.

Hargittai extends a well-established line of work on “digital inequality” in mapping these social contexts and practices of media use and linking them to outcomes. Set through the lens of “capital-enhancing” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 7) activities, Hargittai broadly argues that activities such as being able to find trustworthy-sources of news, searching for new income sources, navigating governmental websites and online shopping, as well as accessing digital health information and entertainment likely led to better COVID outcomes for people in the sense of protecting their minds and bodies. The book argues that the ways particular social groups are embedded in unequal social systems—whether structured by age, gender, race and ethnicity, geography, education, or income—shape these outcomes. The idea of digital and social media skills are central to this model, with privileged groups having greater opportunities to acquire them. “Skills” is a capacious concept that relates to things such as what people know about technologies, how to engage on and with them, how to avoid problematic uses, and how to navigate information contexts. Skills blend both social and technical know-how. People need to know both how to navigate technology but also how to use technologies appropriately in given social contexts (when to send a text versus an email, for instance).

Across the United States, Italy, and Switzerland, there were a number of convergent results. Hargittai shows, broadly, that more knowledge about the virus resulted in greater adherence to health directives. Hargittai also suggests that knowledge is textured by contexts. The book argues that economic precarity, such as in variable employment, and funding inequality, such as the differential capacities of schools to offer digital services, structure access to digital skills, information, and services. And, that the historical legacy of white supremacy in U.S. public health has left Black Americans with lower levels of trust in public health institutions. The data show that racial and ethnic minorities and disabled people had less accurate views about the pandemic—which Hargittai suggests reveals the importance of historical and social contexts in shaping skills and knowledge.

Connected in Isolation (Hargittai, 2022) also extends recent work in showing how there is no one “social media” (there are many different platforms with different affordances) and sweeping country-level differences in use, such as the dominance of WhatsApp in Italy and Switzerland compared to the United States. Country-level differences also shaped the contexts within which people navigated information environments. Italy and Switzerland, for instance, have strong public broadcast networks that helped provide good information related to the pandemic, while the United States relied on commercial networks. There are also a number of confusing findings across and within these national contexts: Following PBS daily is associated with less pandemic knowledge in the United States, as is daily newspaper consumption in Italy and health information sites in Switzerland. One important factor Hargittai and her team speculate about is that consuming more sources of information might lead to confusion (and, there are also clear associations between certain media outlets and misbeliefs.)

Particularly striking is the research team’s finding that “more engagement on social media about the novel coronavirus is linked to lower levels of knowledge about it” (p. 90)—a finding that held across all three countries. The data suggests that the use of social media in distinctly social ways facilitated misinformation (or disinformation). People who knew less about the pandemic “corrected” others about it and those who discussed the pandemic with others on social media held clearly wrong views about the virus—with the problem being especially pronounced in the United States. According to Hargittai, people with disabilities, meanwhile, were more likely to engage in sharing information about the pandemic, but this

engagement was also by people with less knowledge about the virus and greater susceptibility to believing misinformation.

Hargittai's (2022) *Connected in Isolation* findings are persuasive. There is much we still do not know, however, and as such we should see *Connected in Isolation* as a complement to other works. The relatively weak association between political identity and wrong beliefs about COVID documented here, for instance, can potentially be explained by it being comparatively early in the pandemic, before the full-blown politicization of public health in countries such as the United States. The book generally takes the view that compliance with public health directives is a matter of knowledge and trust as opposed to the possibility that people had different views of risk or made different tradeoffs (such as valuing religious services or economic health over lockdown directives—it could be, for instance, that people stated their knowledge about COVID to justify their preferences for what they wanted to be able to do).

Meanwhile, Hargittai's information-based approach to health is important, for sure, especially in being linked to health outcomes. But there are many other ways for understanding Internet and digital media use. André Brock (2020), for instance, has forcefully critiqued "deficit" models of the "digital divide," especially in the context of the construction of non-dominant racial and ethnic groups as *lacking*. As Brock (2020) shows in *Distributed Blackness*, joy, companionship, relationships, passion, entertainment, fun, humor, and embodiment are all central to Black practices of being digital. At the very least, all of these things would be as important to any understanding of how people survived months in isolation and still found life meaningful, maintained bonds of social life and their mental health, and otherwise entertained themselves. Limiting analysis to a set of cognitive and informational benchmarks, however important, leaves a number of unanswered questions. To be fair, it is significantly harder to get close to the actual lived practices of people online, and to do so in the context of comparative national surveys. Hargittai notes that other digital inequality research has carved out a space for recognizing that things like what Brock highlights are significant but largely does not pursue it here beyond showing how prevalent seeing and sharing "humor" and "health worker gratitude" is on social media (important social uses of social media). At the very least, there might be other paths to those capital-inducing behaviors that improve life outcomes.

In the end, *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) privileges an informational model of "connectedness," defined in terms of the access, understanding, and evaluation of information that can shape perceptions and health outcomes. And in centering digital inequality, it complements other scholarship that has pointed to the inequalities of public discourse and policy making when it came to addressing the pandemic. The digital inequalities that Hargittai finds sit alongside Bonilla-Silva's (2022) argument, for instance, about how the color-blind discourse of the pandemic public health and political and media response systematically elided the structural inequalities in wealth, health care, and food security, among many other things, that *required* race-conscious pandemic interventions to secure health and safety. As such, when read alongside works like these, we see how unequal structures sustain themselves, to devastating effect.

References

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