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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Cohesion In Rural Canadian Communities: Letter-to-the-Editor Forums as a Window into Community Discord

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Abstract

This paper considers the potential harm inflicted by the COVID-19 Pandemic on levels of social cohesion in rural communities by analyzing “Letters to the Editors” published in five rural community newspapers over a 13-month period across Western Canada. Utilizing a quantitative “Content Analysis,” combined with a qualitative “Critical Discourse Analysis,” this study provides evidence that citizens in these communities were divided, almost equally, on the necessity of public health measures designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in their communities; that misinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 were present in these communities, although at relatively low levels; and most importantly, the nature and form of some of the arguments expressed in Letters to the Editor across these communities over the necessity of public health measures do speak to some potentially explosive areas of disagreement that may lead to increasing levels of social discord going forward. Overall, there is reason to fear that, aside from the more obvious implications of the Pandemic related to the physical, fiscal, and emotional health of rural citizens, the Pandemic may have increased levels of polarization and thus contributed to a further eroding of fragile levels of social capital in these communities.

Keywords: letters-to-the-editor, rural newspapers, polarization, social cohesion, pandemic

La pandémie de Covid-19 et les niveaux de cohésion sociale dans les communautés rurales: Les forums de la lettre à l'éditeur comme fenêtre sur la discorde communautaire

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Résumé

Cet article examine les dommages potentiels infligés par la pandémie de Covid-19 sur les niveaux de cohésion sociale dans les communautés rurales en analysant les « Lettres aux éditeurs » publiées dans cinq journaux communautaires ruraux sur une période de 13 mois dans l'Ouest canadien. Utilisant une « analyse de contenu » quantitative combinée à une « analyse de discours critique » qualitative, cette étude fournit des preuves que les citoyens de ces communautés étaient divisés, presque également, sur la nécessité de mesures de santé publique conçues pour ralentir la propagation de Covid-19 dans leurs communautés ; que la mésinformation et les théories du complot liées à la Covid-19 étaient présentes dans ces communautés, bien qu'à des niveaux relativement faibles ; et plus important encore, la nature et la forme de certains des arguments exprimés dans les lettres à l'éditeur à travers ces communautés sur la nécessité de mesures de santé publique parlent de certains domaines de désaccord potentiellement explosifs qui peuvent conduire à des niveaux croissants de discorde sociale à l'avenir. Dans l'ensemble, il y a lieu de craindre que, outre les implications plus évidentes de la pandémie liées à la santé physique, fiscale et émotionnelle des citoyens ruraux, la pandémie puisse avoir accru les niveaux de polarisation et ainsi contribué à une nouvelle érosion des niveaux fragiles de capital social dans ces communautés.

Mots clés: lettres aux éditeurs, journaux ruraux, polarisation, cohésion sociale, pandémie

1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has imposed all manner of suffering on citizens across the globe. At the time of writing, the virus has killed over five million people worldwide, including over 29,500 Canadians (Worldometer, 2021). It has further disrupted our lives in ways that were unimaginable just over 20 months ago. Public health restrictions across Canada designed to prevent widespread contagion of the virus severely decimated businesses large and small, throwing large swaths of the country out of work. In addition, the stress associated with fears of getting sick, of potentially losing one's job, or simply being unable to experience the social connections we rely upon, have resulted in untold mental and emotional suffering.

Rural communities, of course, have not been immune to any of this. Indeed, there already exists a large collection of studies that note the unique ways in which the pandemic has negatively impacted rural communities across North America given the challenges associated with low population density and often lengthy distances to health care facilities, a relatively older age demographic and higher incidents of chronic health issues, lower levels of income and education, and higher levels of mistrust of government (Erwin et al., 2020; Herron et al., 2021; Monteith et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2021; Weeden, 2020). Given the fragile state of the economies of many rural communities across Canada prior to the pandemic, it is obvious that the hardships experienced over the past 20 months represent a significant additional hurdle that, for some rural individuals and communities, may simply be impossible to overcome (Hall et al., 2020).

Clearly considerations related to the fiscal, physical, or mental health of rural citizens who have endured this pandemic are topics that deserve careful attention. However, this paper steps back a degree in the hopes of providing some insight, however tentative, on a broader concern I have with respect to the impact of the pandemic. That is, this paper seeks to explore the potential harm the pandemic has inflicted on the levels of social cohesion, or “the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society” (Manca, 2014, p. 6026), in rural Canadian communities. It is well known that successful place-based rural economic development, and economic and community resiliency more generally, is related in important ways to a high degree of community-level social cohesion and its contribution to a community's social capital (Douglas, 2010; Flora et al., 2016; Reimer, 2006; Townshend et al., 2015). As Flora et al. (2016, p. 172–173) have noted, disagreement and controversy surrounding contentious issues in a community are normal and, in many cases, healthy outputs of a robust decision-making process. However, should that disagreement turn personal, or deeper conflicts emerge between groups of citizens due to the sensitive nature of the conflict, a community's capacity to confidently and completely address issues of concern that are vital to their collective well-being can be seriously compromised.

In what has become a familiar refrain, a multitude of countries are growing more politically divided in ways that go beyond mere ‘disagreement’ over public policy (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). Importantly, what seems to be occurring in many places is not simply an increasingly thorough ‘sorting’ of people into clearly demarcated ideological camps, the traditional pattern of political polarization long studied by political scientists (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Hopkins & Sides, 2015). Rather, we are increasingly seeing “the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting

differences instead become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’”(McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18; see also Mason, 2018). This *new* form of polarization, or ‘deep disagreement’ (de Ridder, 2021), is strongly correlated with not only a shrinking ‘middle ground’ wherein opposing sides can work together toward a compromise, but an increasingly angry populace who strongly dislike ‘the other side,’ and are thus increasingly unwilling to engage in any way with ideological opponents (Talisso, 2021). Unsurprisingly, such trends are known to reduce social cohesion within communities (Martini & Torcal, 2016).

Although most notable in the political context of the United States, there is emerging evidence suggesting that the rise of such polarization is now occurring in Canada as well (Proudfoot, 2019; Santos, 2019). The pandemic has seemingly accelerated these trends, with cable news programs—especially American ones streamed into Canadian homes—and social media platforms being inundated with gross exaggerations, personal attacks, and blatant misinformation leading to more people ‘taking sides’ on all manner of issues related to the best path forward in the United States (Gadarian et al., 2021; Gruzd & Mai, 2020) and to a slightly lesser extent, Canada (Griffith et al., 2021; Nsoesie et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2021).

To the extent that polarization in general has been studied in Canada, the research tends to point to a potentially widening divide *between* urban and rural citizens (Armstrong et al., 2021; Banack, 2021; Speer & Loewen, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Wherry, 2021). This paper instead asks whether this polarization, this increasing social discord related to the pandemic, has found its way *into* rural communities in Canada and is thus dividing rural citizens from each other. Although survey work, in-depth interviews, and even focus groups could shed much light on this question, this paper instead uses an exploratory multi-method analysis of ‘letters to the editors’ published in five rural community newspapers across Western Canada as a case study aimed at assessing the degree to which citizen disagreement, and even misinformation, related to COVID-19 is circulating in rural Canadian communities, potentially increasing levels of polarization and eroding fragile levels of social capital.

What follows is an initial quantitative ‘content analysis,’ combined with a basic qualitative ‘critical discourse analysis’ of all letters to the editor published in five rural community newspapers across Western Canada covering a 13-month period over the Pandemic designed to address the following three questions:

- Are rural citizens divided with respect to the necessity of the various public health measures imposed by respective provincial governments?
- Is misinformation and conspiracy theory related to these public health measures circulating in rural communities?
- What is the nature of the disagreement that does exist and how likely is it to lead to long-lasting social discord?

Acknowledging that the initial data set constructed for this paper is relatively small, this paper will demonstrate that, at least in these five rural western Canadian communities, the levels of misinformation or blatant conspiracy theories circulating appear to be relatively low. However, there is clear evidence of disagreement and even ‘deep disagreement’ or polarization when it comes to attitudes toward public health restrictions. Perhaps more alarming, at least some of the disagreement is rooted in conflicting attitudes on issues that have the potential to be incendiary, including debate over conceptions of individual freedom and social responsibility,

the nature of religion and the ways it ought to be practiced, and even references to family histories of victimization related to government oppression. In other words, this study provides some initial evidence that, beyond the more immediate impacts on rural citizens fiscal, physical, and mental health, the pandemic may also lead to enhanced social discord within rural communities, thereby placing additional pressure on their capacity to demonstrate resilience in the face of the many unique challenges imposed by the pandemic

1.1 Rural Community Newspapers and Letters to the Editor

Scholars have long realized the importance of a quality newspaper within a given community. Not only do local papers respond to the ‘critical information needs of communities,’ thereby fulfilling a critical role in local democracy (Friedland et al., 2012; Lindgren et al., 2019), they further assist in the construction of a shared sense of community, helping to generate a form of ‘mediated social capital’ that can play a crucial role in the community’s health (Hess, 2015; Woodrow & Reimer, 2014). Indeed, for rural communities in particular, already facing significant fiscal and demographic pressures that threaten their vitality, the presence of a local newspaper that successfully delivers “information needed to make informed decisions” and sets the tone for community dialogue, is often a key predictor of community success (Flora et al., 2016, p. 173; see also: Woodrow & Reimer 2014).

Although it is clear that the number of Canadians who rely on printed newspapers has declined rapidly in Canada in the era of digital media (Newman, 2018), and over 195 community newspapers across the country have been shuttered over the past decade (Lindgren & Corbett, 2018), local newspaper readership rates have not been negatively impacted by the rise of social media (New Media Canada, ND; Woodrow & Reimer, 2014). In 2018, a survey of citizens across rural Saskatchewan and Manitoba demonstrated that, not only did over 79% of respondents in non-metropolitan markets report having read the local newspaper the previous week, 62% spent at least 15 minutes doing so, and over 60% of respondents reported that at least two members of their household read the paper (AdWest, 2018) Furthermore, strong levels of readership were not negatively impacted by access to home internet and the print edition of the local paper was, by far, the most trusted source of news when compared to television news, internet websites, or social media (AdWest, 2018).

A similar study in rural Alberta generated nearly identical results: roughly 80% of respondents read their local newspaper weekly, a proportion that has remained essentially steady since 2005 (Totum Research, 2019). Interestingly, readership levels have remained constant across age groups as well, suggesting that younger residents are engaging with local papers at the same rate they were 15 years ago (Busch & Jamieson, 2020). Finally, it is clear that despite the handwringing over the amount of misinformation being spread via social media, the majority of Canadians continue to rely on national and local news outlets for trusted information about the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to less than 10% who turned instead to social media (Lindgren, 2020).

Given these strong readership numbers, the local newspaper remains a legitimate object of study for those interested in understanding the social dynamics of a community. As Perrin and Vaisey (2008) have argued, newspapers play dual yet complimentary roles in a community, helping to both reflect the community back to itself while simultaneously assisting with its formation. The letters to the editor page

in particular, which includes a selection of ‘letters’ written by ‘non-expert’ newspaper readers in response to a newsworthy issue in the community, has long been recognized as a type of ‘mini public sphere’ wherein citizens can deliberate on a whole host of issues, thereby offering researchers a unique window into citizen discourse and debate in a community (Gregory & Hutchins, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). What makes the ‘letters’ page especially valuable in this regard is that, unlike social media threads and internet-based discussion groups, the community newspaper does not fall into the ‘echo-chamber’ trap in being limited to a particular group who share an interest or perspective on a certain topic (Hoffman & Slater, 2007). Not only is the paper distributed to, and widely read by, the entire community, various studies have confirmed that the ‘letters’ section is among the, if not *the*, most popular section of the entire paper for community readers (Raeymaeckers, 2005; Hayek et al, 2020). In fact, when compared to ‘comments’ sections that are now common at the end of online news stories on many media websites, letters to the editor published in the physical paper possess “significant cachet” in the minds of most paper readers (Young, 2011, p. 225, see also Nip, 2006). In other words, the letters are frequently read and taken seriously by community members. Thus, not only do such letters provide insight into how the letter authors are thinking about certain issues, they also provide a wider lens through which to study the views and arguments that the community is being exposed to. That the ‘letters’ page allows for an ongoing conversation, potentially over the course of several volumes of the newspaper, between citizens on particular topics of interest, ensures that a close reading of the page over time can generate considerable insight into the ways in which community members are making sense of any given issue (Snyder & Sorenson, 2018).

Of course, the views expressed in ‘letters’ pages are not perfectly representative of the population at large. Letter-writers tend to be older, wealthier, and better educated than the general population (Cooper et al, 2009; Richardson & Franklin, 2004). More importantly, the ‘letters’ page is, in the words of Nielson a “co-production” (2010, p. 24) between letter writers and newspaper editors who ultimately choose which letters to publish. This ‘gatekeeper’ function provides significant power to the editor in terms of ensuring certain narratives receive a public airing, while others are restricted from view. Although editors tend to emphasize a variety of considerations when selecting letters to publish (see Nielson, 2010; Wahl-Jorgenson 2002; Wahl-Jorgenson 2004; Young, 2011), it is important to note that they will not often shy away from publishing letters that express disagreement with news editorials, previous letters to the editor, or government policy—even disagreement expressed in a somewhat ‘uncivil’ manner. That is, editors have been shown to highly value the principle of open deliberation that ‘letters’ pages make possible (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2004). In other words, even though editors possess the power to prevent certain narratives from finding an outlet in the community newspaper, it is unlikely that they will frequently utilize this gatekeeper capacity beyond blocking the most egregious examples of ridiculous or hurtful expression. To do so would not only violate the principle of open deliberation but, furthermore, may impede the legitimacy of their paper in the eyes of community members. Indeed, one of the editor’s key roles is to constantly monitor public opinion in their community and to ensure the newspaper in general and the ‘letters’ page in particular reflects the various views of community members, if for no other reason than to maximize circulation (Raeymaeckers, 2005). Thus, as Uscinski et al. (2011) argue, although the typical letter writer is not necessarily representative of the community at large,

the work of the editor often ensures that the ‘letters’ page of a given newspaper does, in fact, offer significant leverage on community public opinion.

The flip side of this, however, is that an editor’s willingness to publish letters that express strongly contrarian viewpoints that may have initially been held by only a small minority of the population creates an avenue for such narratives to emerge and quickly grow within a community given the aforementioned ‘cachet’ published letters have in the eyes of the public. For instance, Young’s study exploring ‘letters’ published in Canadian newspapers on the topic of climate change found strong evidence that letters advanced “very different themes, narratives, and logics about climate change than are found in other reporting, [and, perhaps more dangerously], letters appear to be a means of inserting otherwise taboo, unacceptable, unproven (and unprovable) arguments into the mass media landscape (2011, p. 444). It is thus perhaps unsurprising that conspiracy theories have a long history of appearing in, and thus being legitimized by, Letters to the Editor pages (Uscinski et al 2011). To what degree has this been occurring in rural Western Canada over the course of the pandemic?

2.0 The Study

This study utilized a multi-method approach to explore the content of letters to the editor pages in five weekly rural community newspapers across Western Canada from March 15, 2020 until April 15, 2021—a 13-month period that began just days after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 virus to be a worldwide pandemic (March 11, 2020), and covered the three ‘waves’ of the pandemic in Canada, and the accompanying series of provincially-instituted lockdown measures, and a period of significant vaccination distribution across the country in the spring of 2021. It was decided to sample two community papers in Alberta—the home province of the author as well as the province that has witnessed the most significant public backlash over issues related to the pandemic in the country—and one paper each from British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, with an emphasis on including community papers of different sizes and different ownership structures. The potential sample was restricted to newspapers that were available electronically, were not behind a paywall, and, at first glance, seemed to possess a vibrant letters to the editor section—some community papers identified in the initial research phase either did not contain a ‘letters’ section, or tended to publish one letter or less on a weekly basis. The five papers chosen for the study are listed in Table 1. Across all of these papers, a total of 535 letters to the editor were analysed.

The initial analysis involved a basic quantitative content analysis that included a two-level hand-coding exercise. First, all letters (n=535) were read and coded as either ‘speaking to the pandemic’ or ‘not speaking to the pandemic.’ All letters that made mention of the COVID-19 Pandemic—with the exception of letters that were obviously about something unrelated but happened to mention the pandemic in passing—were coded as the former. Those letters identified as being ‘related to the Pandemic’ were then further coded by topic. Table 2 provides an overview of how letters were coded.

Table 1. *Weekly Community Papers Sampled*

Name	Area Served	Distance to Large Urban Centre (kms)	Circulation ^a	Ownership
The Winkler Morden Voice	Winkler and Morden, Man	116	15,646	Corporate
The Battlefords Regional News Optimist	North Battleford, Sask	136	13,000	Corporate
The Camrose Booster	Camrose, AB	97	12,746	Independent
The Merritt Herald	Merritt, B.C.	127	5,510	Corporate
The Three Hills Capital	Three Hills, AB	103	4,350	Independent

^a Current circulation numbers were provided directly to the author by the newspapers themselves. The sole exception is the circulation numbers for the Merritt Herald, which are instead drawn from (News Media Canada, 2016).

Table 2. *Study Codebook*

Code	Description
Acknowledging hardship	Letters that lamented any type of hardship associated with the pandemic, ranging from concerns over health to the difficulties imposed by public health restrictions—including social, physiological, and financial impacts—without directly criticizing the restrictions.
Expressing gratitude	Letters that expressed gratitude to the service of others in the midst of the pandemic, from healthcare and other frontline workers, to acts of kindness performed by local citizens, to the scientists developing vaccines.

Table 2 continued

Defending restrictions	Letters that acknowledged the severity of COVID-19 and defended the need for public health restrictions, including letters that encouraged others to comply with these restrictions and criticizing those who did not comply
Critiquing restrictions	Letters that downplayed the severity of COVID-19—without alluding to a broader conspiracy theory—argued that restrictions were more harmful to individuals and society than the virus itself, pleaded for restrictions to be lifted, or argued various restrictions were not effective in the effort to stop the spread of COVID-19
Expressing conspiracy theory ^a	Letters that made direct reference to a secret plot, orchestrated by certain nefarious actors, related to the origins or severity of the COVID-19 virus, the “true intentions” of political or economic leaders imposing public health restrictions, or the contents and/or side effects of various COVID-19 vaccinations
Refuting conspiracy theory	Letters that responded directly to conspiracy-laced letters previously published in the newspaper in an attempt to refute them
Criticizing Federal Government	Letters that criticized the Federal Government’s response to the pandemic, including letters that argued against increased government spending, as well as letters who criticized border-crossing policy, government messaging, vaccine procurement and roll-out, etc.
Defending Federal Government	Letters that defended Federal Government’s policies and messaging
Other	Letters that fell outside of any of the above categories

^a Following Douglas et al (2019, p. 4), I define conspiracy theories as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (see also Aaronovitch, 2010; Uscinski et al 2011).

The second component of this multi-method study involved a basic critical discourse analysis (CDA), a longstanding and widely practiced qualitative method of exploring many types of media discourse. With roots in the critical theory of Marxism and the Frankfurt School, CDA attempts a close reading of a selection of media texts within their broader societal context including, in its most in-depth variants, the power relations and ideological hegemony of the society in question

and the manner by which they either infiltrate the discourse or are challenged by the texts (Carvalho 2008). Less comprehensive forms of CDA are content to consider the way in which the style, language, and arguments of the media texts relate to the local social and political context of both the author and the reader. As Young (2011) notes, CDA “pays attention to the ‘situated meanings’ of words and arguments and assumes that audiences play a significant role in filling in the contextual blanks around language and claims—meaning that texts can evoke events, and power relations, and meanings without explicitly raising them” (p. 451)—see also Gee (2011).

This approach is designed to provide a more contextualized, and thus I would argue, a deeper and more accurate representation of the meanings of the language employed in the text, as well as the overall intention of the author in writing the text, than is possible in a straightforward quantitative content analysis. This is especially important when seeking to make sense of the language and arguments employed by authors of letters to the editor. For this study in particular, combining a content analysis designed to provide insight into the thematic patterns that emerge across a large number of letters over time, with a CDA that probes the meanings of language and arguments utilized in a small selection of ‘typical’ letters from the overall sample, provides multiple levels of insight into community attitudes toward issues related to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Content Analysis: Themes Present in Pandemic-Related Letters

As Table 3 makes clear, the letters related to the pandemic made up a significant portion (38.7%) of all letters published across the five newspapers sampled, certainly far more than any other single topic. By and large, the proportion of letters related to the pandemic was similar across newspapers, the sole exception being the *Winkler Morden Voice*, which surpassed 50%. That said, they also published the lowest number of letters by a fair margin, despite having the highest circulation among papers sampled. Interestingly, the two papers with the largest number of both total letters and letters related to the pandemic published, were both based in Alberta. The *Three Hills Capital* especially stands out given its relatively low level of circulation—this small-town newspaper clearly continues to serve as a vibrant forum for public deliberation within the community.

Things become more interesting when examining the breakdown of letters related to the pandemic by topic. Across all papers, a healthy proportion of letters published were either ‘acknowledging hardship’ or ‘expressing gratitude,’ although the most common type of letter across all five papers were those defending public health restrictions (26.1%). That said, evidence of disagreement on this issue is clearly present: the third most common type of letter across all five papers were those critiquing public health restrictions (18.8%) and, in two papers, the *Winkler Morden Voice* and the *Battlefords Regional News Optimist*, letters critiquing public health restrictions were actually more common than those defending such restrictions. Interestingly, these two papers have the highest circulation numbers across papers sampled, although the paper with the third highest circulation, the *Camrose Booster*, actually featured the highest proportion of letters defending restrictions relative to the number of letters critiquing the restrictions.

Table 3. *Letters to the Editor Related to Pandemic*

Name	Circulation	Total Letters	Number of Letters Related to Pandemic	Percentage of Letters Related to Pandemic
The Winkler Morden Voice	15,656	50	26	52%
The Battlefords Regional News Optimist	13,000	90	31	34.4%
The Camrose Booster	12,746	179	68	38%
The Merritt Herald	5,510	76	27	35.5%
The Three Hills Capital	4,350	140	55	39.3%
TOTAL		535	207	38.7%

Letters identified as ‘expressing a conspiracy theory’ related to the pandemic represented less than 8% of all ‘Covid-themed’ letters, and even that proportion is skewed upward thanks to a hefty proportion of letters (18.2%) in a single paper, the *Three Hills Capital*, falling into this category. Although every single paper contained at least one of these types of letters, the proportion in each of the other four papers was quite low. After the *Three Hills Capital*, the paper with the next highest proportion of such letters was the *Camrose Booster* (4.4%). Although not shown in Table 4, repeat authors were responsible for some of the ‘conspiracy’ letters. Finally, letters responding directly to some of the conspiracy-laced letters in an effort to refute them were found in both Alberta papers.

Obviously, both the small sample size at the heart of this study, and the fact that the typical ‘letter writer’ is not perfectly representative of the population at large (Cooper et al, 2009; Richardson & Franklin, 2004), prevent us from interpreting the outcomes mentioned above as being statistically significant indicators of public opinion. However, given the leverage such letters can provide into the general viewpoints circulating in a community (Raeymaeckers, 2005; Uscinski et al., 2011), it is clear that:

- Rural citizens in these communities experienced a wide range of hardships related to the pandemic.
- There is definite evidence of disagreement in these communities when it comes to attitudes toward the public health restrictions that were put in place across these four provinces.
- Conspiracy-based narratives were present in these communities but at relatively low frequencies.

Additionally, given the small sample size, it is difficult to make many meaningful statements with respect to regional or community variations, but it is worth noting, if only to direct future research in this area, that the letter writers from Camrose, AB and Merritt, BC were the most sympathetic to public health restrictions whereas writers from Winkler, MB and North Battleford, SK were less sympathetic—although almost even split. Three Hills, the smallest of the five communities appears, at first glance, to be more sympathetic to public health restrictions but once the high number of ‘conspiracy’ letters are accounted for, a clear plurality of letters were strongly against public health restrictions.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: Analyzing the Arguments Opposed to Public Health Restrictions

Following Young (2011), I have chosen six letters that are meant to be illustrative—that is, they are not outliers—of the types of arguments made by authors who spoke to the issue of public health restrictions in particular.¹ As highlighted in the content analysis above, there is clear evidence of disagreement on this issue in the rural communities sampled. As noted earlier, disagreement in and of itself within communities is not necessarily problematic. Indeed, spirited public debate over whether or not a community ought to invest in a new swimming pool, for instance, may very well be a sign of healthily engaged citizenry. However, as Flora et al. (2016: pp. 172–173) have argued, disagreements that turn personal over especially sensitive issues do pose a real threat to a community’s capacity to confidently and completely address issues of concern that are vital to their collective well-being. De Ridder (2021, pp. 227–228) similarly warns of these types of ‘deep disagreements,’ especially within the context of the rising political and belief polarization we are now witnessing across multiple countries, and the manner by which they can become “very difficult, if not impossible to resolve,” (De Ridder 2021, pp. 227–228) given that they are often rooted in the emergence of competing, rather than common, normative frameworks among citizens. It is via a qualitative critical discourse analysis designed to provide an accurate representation of the meanings of the language employed in the text, as well as the overall intention of the author in writing the text, rather than a quantitative content analysis, that the potential existence of such deep disagreements can be best probed.

In general, letters across all papers that *defended* public health restrictions like masking by-laws and temporary forced closures—or reduced operating capacity—of business, schools, and religious institutions, overwhelmingly relied upon the same arguments offered by political leaders and public health officials. That is, they cited the severity of the virus and the need to follow orders to ensure as few citizens as possible contracted the virus and prevent the healthcare system from being overwhelmed. However, letters that *criticized* public health restrictions were far more varied in their argumentation. What follows is a brief analysis of four distinct arguments against public health restrictions, as well as direct citizen replies to two of these arguments. Not only does this demonstrate the various lines of argumentation employed, it also provides some insight into the ways in which certain arguments may be more dangerous in terms of enflaming social discord in significant ways within a community, in that they resemble arguments that may plausibly lead to the type of ‘deep disagreements’ de Ridder warns of.

¹ Letters have been slightly abridged by the author of this study.

Table 4. *Number and Percentage of Pandemic Letters by Topic*

Paper	Acknowledging Hardship	Expressing Gratitude	Defending Restrictions	Critiquing Restrictions	Expressing Conspiracy Theory	Refuting Conspiracy Theory	Critiquing Federal Gov't	Defending Federal Gov't	Other	Total
Winkler Morden Voice	1 (3.6%)	5 (19.2%)	9 (34.6%)	10 (38.5%)	1 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	26
Battlefords Regional News Optimist	6 (19.4%)	6 (19.4%)	7 (22.6%)	9 (29%)	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.2%)	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	31
Camrose Booster	23 (33.8%)	2 (2.9%)	20 (29.4%)	8 (11.8%)	3 (4.4%)	2 (2.9%)	7(10.3%)	0 (0%)	3 (4.4%)	68
Merritt Herald	6 (22.2%)	4 (14.8%)	9 (33.3%)	5 (18.5%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (7.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	27
Three Hills Capital	12 (21.8%)	7 (12.7%)	9 (16.4%)	7 (12.7%)	10 (18.2%)	4 (7.3%)	3 (5.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (5.5%)	55
TOTAL	48 (23.2%)	24 (11.6%)	54 (26.1%)	39 (18.8%)	16 (7.7%)	6 (2.9%)	13 (5.3%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (2.9%)	207

Letter 1: “State of pandemic does not justify our current governmental and social overreach,” Three Hills Capital, January 20, 2021.

Your correspondence the last two weeks has discussed the current virus...Its virulence can be measured only by statistics in context. Let’s look at them.

In the ten-and-a-half months since the first case was confirmed, we’ve had about 120,000 cases. That sounds like a lot, but is only 3% of our total population (4.3 million). A little more than 26, 000 people died in this province from all causes during 2019. In ten-and-a-half months, the virus has killed 1,500 people (about 1/30 of 1% of our population). These deaths are devastating to those bereaved, as all others are: one doesn’t mourn less when the loss is owing to an auto accident, a cardiac arrest, or a suicide. However, the total mortality is equivalent to only three average weeks of deaths from all causes.

There is no doubt that the virus is real and can be fatal, but, considered on a provincial scale, it is not devastating and does not justify our current governmental and societal overreach—which rises, I believe, from fear mounting to panic. We know who’s vulnerable (85% of the deaths are from the 70 and older age group and 10% are from the 60–69 age group; 97% had at least one “comorbidity” and three-quarters had at least three). Let’s concentrate on protecting them. So far as I can tell, the rest of us are not at the highly-elevated level of risk which alone could make shutting down our lives and livelihoods reasonable.

Letter 1 represents a common argument employed on a number of occasions in the sample examined. The author acknowledges the seriousness of the virus, especially on older citizens, but argues that the blanket approach with respect to public health restrictions imposes too high a cost, both socially and financially, on the vast majority of citizens who are outside of the ‘highly elevated level of risk’ category. The tone of the letter is clear, respectful, and based upon verifiable statistics. Although clearly taking a strong stand on the issue of public health restrictions, the style and tone of argumentation employed does not strike me as posing a significant danger to the social cohesion of a community. Indeed, it did not generate a response from other citizens in the following editions of the paper.

Letter 2: “It’s time for freedom,” Winkler Morden Voice, April 15, 2021.

I am so encouraged to hear that the Christian Church of Morden is taking a stand for freedom for the right to meet together. It is refreshing to finally hear common sense; that people that are healthy can have the freedom to be social, to live their lives.

For the past year, we have been told what to do and what not to do in every aspect of our lives. It is time that we have the freedom to choose how we live, not dictated by fear. We need to go back to common sense...

What is harmful is the extreme restrictions we've all experienced in the past year. The real crisis is extreme isolation, depression, loneliness, broken relationships, a rise in addictions, and sadly, suicides. There has been so much loss, and especially high school students are struggling.

Canadians have been so overly concerned about physical health, and just as the Christian Church shared, people in difficult times need help for spiritual, mental and emotional suffering. The strict restrictions are causing much more harm than good, it's not worth it...the restrictions have gone on far too long and have been too much to ask of people...we need to get past the fear, and learn to live with it. There will never be zero risk.

The Christian Church of Morden is addressing serious needs that have been overlooked by most. I commend the people at the Christian Church for taking a stand, for showing us that our freedoms matter. They are people that are truly caring and responsible for themselves and others. We need personal connections for our well-being. We need each other more than ever, and it is time for freedom!

The premise of Letter 2 is rooted in a debate that seized Manitoba in April 2021 when a church in Morden ignored existing public health restrictions imposed on religious institutions by holding a 'regular' Easter service (DePatie, 2021). The author does not appear to be a member of the church, but is clearly sympathetic to the "spiritual, mental and emotional suffering" citizens have endured over the course of the pandemic and believes the church is offering something of significant value. Broadly, the issue of restrictions on churches was a hot button issue across many of the letters in the sample. Several letter writers raised similar concerns as the author of Letter 2, many of whom used much more explicit religious language, often quoting scripture, in defense of religious freedom and in opposition to the "tyranny" of government officials who dared attempt to impose restrictions on houses of worship. Alternatively, many letter writers across the sample aimed to directly refute the notion that religious institutions ought not be subject to public health restrictions (see Letters 3 and 4 below). That this issue in particular was raised often should not come as a surprise. Although religious attendance has declined overall across Canada, levels do generally remain higher outside of major urban centres (Clark 2003, p. 4) and, for many rural communities across the country, the church (or churches) remain key institutional pillars. Given the sensitive nature of religion, for individuals and communities, these debates certainly do hold the potential to be significantly divisive in rural communities.

Religion is not the sole premise of the letter, however. Without blatantly downplaying the severity of the virus, the author raises the familiar argument that the public health restrictions have imposed a great range of hardships that are not justified. In contrast to Letter 1, the author does not attempt to employ any verifiable data in defense of this reasoning and instead relies upon the assumption that individual freedom is a principle that ought not have been violated in this instance. This was a very common line of argumentation in letters opposing public health restrictions across the sample and, again, given the value-judgments inherent in how

citizens understand a concept such as ‘freedom,’ especially in more conservative-leaning rural jurisdictions where it can easily mesh with concerns over ‘religious freedom,’ such debates also pose significant risks to social cohesion in a community. In fact, the letter writer suggests that it is the leaders of the Church community, rather than those demanding compliance to public health orders, “that are truly caring and responsible for themselves and others.” It is certainly not a stretch to suggest that employing such a line of argumentation has the potential to be quite divisive within a small community.

Letter 3: “Voicing frustration at public health orders,” Winkler Morden Voice, November 12, 2020.

I used to wonder what it would be like to live in a country like China or the Russia of my forefathers. What would it be like to be told what you are allowed to do in your own home or business? What would it be like to have someone tell you where you can travel and what time you have to be home? What would it be like to choose between God saying that we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves, and man saying we should? What would it be like to be told that if you do not follow the rules for the greater good you will be punished? What if you weren’t allowed to question if there is not more harm than good in this “greater good”? And if you dare to live by your own convictions your neighbour is encouraged to call the snitch line to report you to the authorities. I used to wonder what it would be like to live in such a place, but there is no need to wonder any more.

Letter 4: “Responses to last week’s complaints about Covid restrictions,” Winkler Morden Voice, November 19, 2020.

In response to (name withheld) many frustrations with public health orders, I have a few of my own frustrations for him to consider. What must it be like to have your child and other family members go to work each day in a hospital or a nursing home and worry about their health and safety as they take care of people who didn’t like the rules either?

...What must it be like for people to politicize something that is a matter of common sense? And for people to care so little about anyone other than themselves and how they are being inconvenienced rather than caring about the good of all of us?

What must it be like to think that you can only find God in a church when, really, He is everywhere? The same God who calls us to love our neighbour and work together. The same God who tells us he is with us when two or more are gathered in His name.

...What must it be like to feel free to ignore the rules and complain about being inconvenienced when 240,000 people have died and thousands and thousands more are getting sick every day? I guess the U.S. knows.

What must it be like to be a small business owner and have to close down because people can't follow the rules? To wonder how you will pay your bills and provide Christmas for your kids?

I no longer have to wonder about all of these things anymore because I am living them every day. My heart breaks that we are so divided on this issue, but I am going to sleep at night knowing I am doing my best to make things better. I never wanted to live in such a place either, (name withheld), but here we both are.

Letters 3 and 4 are best analysed together given that Letter 4 is written as a direct refutation of Letter 3. In terms of style, Letter 3 employs a rather dramatic approach, posing a series of rhetorical questions that imply existing public health restrictions are akin to the actions of totalitarian governments like “China or the Russia of my forefathers.” Given the sizable population of Mennonites in Winkler and surrounding area, the reference to “the Russia of my forefathers” is most likely meant to evoke images of the significant oppression Mennonites faced in Russia in the early 20th century before emigrating to North America in search of a home free from religious persecution. This reference would not have gone unnoticed by most readers of Mennonite descent who tend to be very cognizant of, and understandably sensitive to, the suffering their ‘forefathers’ endured over this period. Similar to Letter 3, the issue of restrictions on religious worship are raised, alongside a variety of other references to freedoms lost in favour of “the greater good,” a seeming reference to the folly of totalitarian communism throughout history. Although such a letter would, I suspect, draw significant scorn from urban progressives who would scoff at the notion that public health restrictions could, in any reasonable way, be equated to the terrors inflicted on citizens under a totalitarian regime, this letter is likely representative of the attitudes towards public health restrictions of a hearty swath of citizens of Winkler.

Letter 4 employs the precise rhetorical style of Letter 3, but in direct opposition to the line of argumentation used in Letter 3. The letter does not attempt to refute the claim that public health restrictions are akin to the actions of a totalitarian regime. Rather, it simply repeats many of the justifications given by public health officials in defense of restrictions related to the health and safety of frontline workers and the hope that, through compliance, small businesses will be able to open sooner. Interestingly, it does challenge the notion that the restrictions limit citizens capacity to “find God” by noting that scripture does suggest God is present “when two or more are gathered in His name.” Again, this reference would not go unnoticed by many in Winkler and speaks to the broader, and most likely quite sensitive debate, that took place between Christians across rural Canada when faced with the public health restrictions that were variously imposed on places of worship. Even more potentially incendiary, the author asks readers to consider what it must be like to live in a place where people “care so little about anyone other than themselves and how they are being inconvenienced rather than caring about the good of all of us,” a rather personal shot across the bow of those who oppose public health measures. Similar to Letter 2, the author is making a rather divisive accusation that could potentially ripple across a community. Indeed, the author admits that “My heart breaks that we are so divided on this issue,” a clear acknowledgment of the division that has emerged within the community due to the pandemic.

Letter 5: “Canadian Facts,” Camrose Booster, September 22, 2020.

A big thank you to our Camrose city councillors who voted in favour of our lawful freedoms—to choose ourselves whether we wear a face covering or not. We live in Canada, yet our CBC reports the same coronavirus news as China or the UN using unscientific and “fake” doctor sources...

When the “real” doctors from Toronto Sick Children’s Hospital wrote a letter to the health ministers concerning the irreversible “social” damage of mask wearing for children who learn social skills through facial expression, it was ignored....

The real doctors say that neither “social distancing” (germs can be airborne for 20 feet) or “mask wearing” or a “vaccine” are a medical remedy...

This whole plandemic has made the rich richer—it is most likely a scamdemic (Bill Gates’ billion dollar vaccine, using aborted baby tissue); in all likelihood, it will give people the coronavirus.

It’s time for people to check the resources for themselves and wake up to the truth of the spread of communism in all of its forms: through Antifa and climate change (see Friends of Science).

Canada does not want “Socialist Marxist Communism”, yet it seems Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is doing everything to destroy Canada into a communist dictatorship, like China (China Communist Party CCP), whom he admittedly admires.

I suppose our choice in this era is: Communism or Christianity? For 2,000 years, it has been Christianity or “Whatever Evil Work” the devil is able to infiltrate.

Letter 6: “Wearing Masks,” Camrose Booster, September 29, 2020.

In the last Booster, letter writers went off against the need to wear masks. Usually misinformation and conspiracy theories are an attempt to simplify a complex issue with, at best, cherry picking of the facts to suit a belief or narrative or, at worse, the ramblings of a someone with profound paranoia or delusions.

Wearing a mask to protect your fellow citizens, your vulnerable family members and yourself is literally the least you can do. It’s a selfless act of concern for your neighbours. Recent WHO studies have again shown that mask wearing slows the spread of COVID-19. If you have any doubt, go ask your family doctor. This pseudo-libertarian ranting we hear now and again is just an individual’s selfish and self-centered world view, one of entitlement and somewhat narcissistic.

Public health officials are educated and expert in ensuring that the spread of communicable diseases is kept in check. There is no conspiracy beyond keeping the public as healthy as possible, especially against a novel virus to which many are vulnerable. To try to make the link to communism, or the climate change bogeyman, or Antifa onto measures meant to protect the most vulnerable in our society, is obtuse in the extreme. Stop getting your news from Facebook, perhaps put your face in a real book. Whether it's Covid or climate change or black lives matter or...pick your issue, I am so done with people deflecting their own inability to deal with the world and projecting their ignorance onto the trusted public institutions that have given us peace and security and health for many, many years....The only real response is to shed light on the lies and half-truths. Peer reviewed science, not opinion, should rule the day. Even just use some common sense or critical thinking and the absurdity of these arguments just fall apart.

Letters 5 and 6 are also best analysed together given that Letter 6 is written as a direct refutation of Letter 5. Letter 5 represents a standard 'conspiracy-based' letter. The letter's premise seems to be praising the decision by Camrose City Council to, in the fall of 2020, vote against a mandatory face-masking bylaw. The letter then unleashes a variety of accusations that imply current public health restrictions, and concern over the severity of virus more generally, are based on evidence supplied by "fake doctors" whereas the "real doctors" are being ignored. Similar to other conspiracy-based letters in the sample, Letter 5 rambles from point to point awkwardly, dropping buzzwords (Plandemic, Scamdemic) and naming supposed collaborators (Bill Gates, Antifa, China) that have become common in Covid conspiracy circles, without offering a clear line of evidence-based argument, before concluding that we are seemingly at a turning point where we must choose between "Communism or Christianity."

Letter 6, in a style akin to other letters from the sample that seek to refute Conspiracy-based Letters, encourages readers to listen to advice offered by those traditionally considered reliable sources of information related to the pandemic—the WHO, Public Health experts, family doctors—while also chastising the author of Letter 5, and those who hold similar beliefs, from "getting their news from Facebook," from attempting to link communism, climate change, Antifa, and pandemic public health restrictions, and perhaps even suffering from "profound paranoia or delusions." In addition, like Letter 4, the author implies that the author of Letter 5 suffers from a "selfish and self-centred worldview." On the whole, it is probably true that letters such as this appearing in the Letters to the Editor sections of rural newspapers represent a helpful check on the proliferation of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic in rural communities. However, having read Letters 5 and 6 together, it is difficult to imagine the authors, or those citizens who would side strongly with either author, would not experience a meaningful rift in their community based on these views, further endangering social cohesion.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has documented an initial and admittedly tentative attempt to consider the potential ramifications for levels of social cohesion and/or discord in relation to debates over the appropriateness of the public health measures imposed by various provincial governments in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in five rural Western Canadian communities. In response to the three questions posed in the introduction, this study does provide some evidence that:

- Citizens in these rural communities are seemingly divided, almost equally, on the necessity of public health measures designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in their communities.
- Misinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 or the public health designed to slow its spread is present in these communities, although at relatively low levels, and often was met with clear efforts to refute these positions.
- The nature and form of some of the arguments expressed in letters to the editor across these five communities over the necessity of public health measures do speak to some potentially explosive areas of deep disagreement that may lead to increasing levels of social discord going forward.

That said, this was but an initial study considering letters in just five community papers.

A more detailed study, covering several more newspapers across a wider region of the country, would be required to make more definitive statement with respect to levels of social cohesion and/or discord across rural Canada in relation to the pandemic. Of course, complementary studies relying on both survey data and in-depth citizen interviews, and even focus groups, would provide a much clearer and deeper picture of the social dynamics in rural communities related to disagreement over the necessity of public health measures. However, I believe this paper has demonstrated that studying letters to the editor in rural community newspapers remains a creative way to generate insight into the social dynamics of a community, even in an age of seemingly omnipresent social media, and that beyond the more immediate fiscal, social, and health implications of the pandemic in rural Canada, it is worth dedicating further study to what could be a significant, although somewhat underappreciated, long-term consequence of the pandemic in rural communities across Canada. That is, they may be entering the post-pandemic era as much less socially cohesive than before, a consequence that could have serious implications for their resiliency going forward.

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