

Disinformation impacts ag conversations, decisions



John Taylor from the Ontario Mutual Insurance Association thanking Dr. Cami Ryan from Bayer for her remarks around disinformation and misinformation at the Farm & Food Care annual conference

Social media is behind a major shift in how people access and process information

BY LILIAN SCHAER
Ontario Farmer

Misinformation and disinformation are difficult to detect yet impossible to ignore - and they're having an impact on agriculture and perceptions consumers have on food and the food system.

That was the message Dr. Cami Ryan, Senior Business Partner for Industry Affairs & Sustainability at Bayer, brought to the Farm & Food Care Ontario annual conference recently.

"Disinformation and misinformation are not new; we've been dealing with the constant drumbeat for decades, but how information is created, driven, incentivized and shared has changed," she said.

Although most people use the terms interchangeably, they're not the same. Ryan defined misinformation as inaccurate or incomplete information, whereas disinformation is a carefully planned and technically sophisticated deceit process.

"The main difference is the intent. Disinformation is a product with a market, but the purposeful distribution of disinformation can lead to the spread of misinformation," she said.

One of the biggest changes has been the transition from people reading a newspaper in the morning and watching the evening news to a continuous 24-hour news cycle that is

driven in large part by social media where stories, both good and bad, circulate freely.

Half of all Baby Boomers, three quarters of GenX, and virtually all Millennials are social media users, she noted, with people on average spending three to four per cent of their day on social media.

The first tipping point for agriculture in Canada came in 1921, when the national population had more urban than rural residents for the first time and marked the beginning of the distancing of the public from food production.

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— Dr. Cami Ryan

The second turning point was a century later, when the number of social media users worldwide tipped over 50 per cent of the global population.

"Social media has effectively embedded itself in our global communications culture and changed the way we interact and connect as humans," she said. "Social media is the virtual living room of our lives and disinformation can come in uninvited and sit on our couch."

Overall, people are risk averse story seekers, and as herd animals, are resistant to breaking ranks with their social networks. That means people naturally seek out information that con-

firms their biases and are more likely to move away from content that runs counter to those opinions. And with 2.5 quintillion bytes of data created every day and almost five billion YouTube videos watched daily, the sheer volume of material makes it impossible to keep up.

"We face decision fatigue and so we make bad choices because we have no time for critical thinking - and the bad stuff is always easier to believe," she said. "We absorb 105,000 words daily through digital means. The ratio between what is out there and what we can absorb is big and time is a limited resource, so we pick and choose the information we take in."

Disinformation's success lies in its ability to attract attention in a world where human attention is a scarce resource, and in today's environment, anyone can express opinions whether they have expertise or not.

And with most Canadians both generationally and geographically removed from the farm, fewer and fewer people have the true expertise to speak up which places the products and technologies farmers need to farm at risk.

So what can agriculture do? Ryan suggests the three Cs: conversation, critical thinking and cross-fertilization. That means engaging in meaningful conversations with diverse audiences and partners, considering misinformation and disinformation as part of agriculture's competitive landscape and start thinking about it as a product with a market.

"Misinformation and disinformation are an economic problem for all of us and it won't go away," she concluded.

Budget proves disappointing for fruit, vegetable growers

Government has not created a financial protection tool to compensate growers who do not receive payment for sales

BY ALEX BINKLEY
Ontario Farmer

Ottawa - The federal budget was a disappointment for the fruit and vegetable sector because it did nothing to advance the creation of a financial protection mechanism for produce sellers, says Ron Lemaire, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA).

While the budget did draw attention to the need to stabilize the cost of groceries and strengthen local food security, it did not address gaps in market stability, financial protection, trade and food security, which could be done with no cost to the government, Lemaire said.

"The fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain contributes nearly \$15 billion to Canada's GDP and supports more than 185,000 jobs in rural and urban communities across the country. We also provide Canadian families with safe and nutritious food that is crucial to supporting their health and well-being."

CPMA has consistently reiterated the importance of a finance protection mechanism for growers which could be achieved if the Senate would pass a bill by York-Simcoe Conservative MP Scot Davidson that was approved by the Commons last October.

It would create a deemed trust financial protection tool to compensate growers who do not receive payments due them for fruit and vegetables sales. "Supply chain disruptions and geopolitical and economic volatility have put the produce sector in a more vulnerable position without a financial protection mechanism in place," Lemaire said.

The bill has support from agrifood groups across the country and CPMA hopes "all Senators will support this important legislation and secure its swift passage in the coming weeks."

He also called for the government "to make food a priority across federal departments, strengthen Canada's food security and support a growing, resilient and sustainable fresh produce sector."

The most recent Senate speaker on the bill was Senator Brent Cotter who said in early April that he hopes the bill will be passed and followed up with "a more comprehensive, organized study of the public policy shortcomings inherent in the present bankruptcy and insolvency structure when it comes to how unsecured creditors are placed and not much compensated."

The bill's passage could be "a constructive olive branch between our country and the United States, benefiting both Canadian and American fruit and vegetable producers and generating economic benefits for both."

If a wholesaler or retailer that buys produce becomes bankrupt and unable to pay its bills, "the fruit and vegetable seller has a low place in the totem pole of compensation. They are, in the language of the bankruptcy and insolvency laws, unsecured creditors."

The U.S. has a comparable form of protection for these sellers, which had previously been available to Canadian sellers, under the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act. The absence of reciprocity in this kind of protection for U.S. fruit and vegetable sales into Canada resulted in the denial of similar protections for Canadians selling into U.S. markets.

Aside from the cooperative and constructive trade policy that the bill represents, it also could facilitate expanded trade for Canadian fruit and vegetable sellers into the U.S., which would be a win-win trade measure.