Misinformation and Skepticism as Risk Factors when Examining Existential Risks

In the novel *The Precipice,* Toby Ord presents an insightful discussion of the risk to humanity's long-term survival, also known as existential risk. Ord determined that the approximate existential risk when considering all discussed anthropogenic risks is 16.7% chance of catastrophe within the next century (Ord, 2020). This number is not insignificant; therefore, these risks bear real concern by humanity and action taken to lower these odds. As Ord discusses, there are risk factors that exacerbate each existential risk; one unanalyzed risk factor is humanity actively working against decreasing the chance of irreversible collapse of human civilization and extinction of humanity (Ord, 2020). This essay will dive into this area where further analysis would strengthen the arguments presented in the novel and present an analysis of the propagation of misinformation and skepticism as risk factors for certain existential risks, such as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear war.

The technology in use since the industrial revolution has contributed to an increase in carbon dioxide, a prominent contributor to climate change, present in the atmosphere, as evidenced by the sharp increase of the concentration to levels greater than have been seen throughout millennia (NASA Earth Science Communications Team, n.d.). Ord estimates the risk of climate change reaching a point that humanity will not be able to come back from this century at a 1 in 1000 probability, likely through amplifying feedback loops (Ord, 2020). Even though there is risk to humanity's future, in addition to many other negative effects to the Earth and humanity, there is a subset of people who minimize these issues, either by believing climate change is not occurring, that it is not anthropogenic, or that it will not impact humans (Treen et al., 2020). The main perpetrator of the disinformation is the fossil fuel industry, who stand to lose profit if renewable energy is favoured (Treen et al., 2020). They are unwilling to take potentially costly environmentally friendly measures, such as pivoting to renewable energy, effectively choosing profit over the future. To this end, they spread misinformation will the help of a

minority of scientists, far-right wing media platforms, “anti-environmental politicians”, and social media (Treen et al., 2020). The doubt planted by misinformation has led to division of opinion and has created a political landscape where politicians have been supported in inaction (Treen et al., 2020). The spread of misinformation bears discussion in the realm of existential risk as it poses a risk factor. On a policy level, necessary mitigating measures may not be implemented or may be delayed as politicians debate the merits of, and the general public protest, such projects; research shows that these outcomes have already come to pass (Treen et al., 2020). Moving forward, it is therefore necessary to combat misinformation to give the best chance of adequate climate change mitigation occurring globally.

Similar to climate change, misinformation can impact the course of a pandemic. Ord argues that engineered pandemics have a much greater chance of existential risk than ones that occur without human meddling – putting the risk at a 1 in 30 chance of catastrophe within the next century (Ord, 2020). He highlights that a modern pandemic may not result in an existential risk due to the presence of global public health organizations that allow for a coordinated response (Ord, 2020). The Precipice was written before the COVID-19 pandemic; with the new perspective of an ongoing pandemic, it is possible to identify further risk factors for a pandemic resulting in the decimation of humanity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the global connectivity did allow for a robust response, however there are instances that can be improved. Information, especially in the early days of a pandemic, is vital. Accurate information was not widely available during the first months of the pandemic, which have allowed the opportunity to suppress the pandemic before it began; for example. The transmissibility was downplayed by China early on, and countries with a government in charge that did not value scientific knowledge did not give adequate information to their citizens to stay safe (Robertson, 2021). Misinformation and skepticism also played a part in adherence to public health measures, such as masking, vaccination, and physical distancing. Vaccination is an essential public health tool in controlling disease, however misinformation has long existed that makes people wary of being vaccinated. In terms

of the COVID-19 pandemic, many myths about the vaccine circulated that decreased vaccine uptake, including but not limited to that it is linked to infertility, that it is not safe because of its quick creation and that the mRNA vaccines alter DNA (Kelen & Maragakis, 2022). Some members of the public were also dissatisfied with public health measures such as masking and building occupancy limits and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic protests against these measures occurred, fueled by mistrust in the government and the media; mistrust that resulted in further spread of ideas harmful to fighting the pandemic (Hapuhennedige, 2020). While COVID-19 did not have the power to pose an existential risk to humanity, it did drastically impact the lives of everyone globally and can serve as a learning opportunity. To reduce the risk of a future, potentially even more deadly pandemic, ensuring easy access to accurate information and addressing mistrust in the public health policies is vital.

The final evidence for the harmful impact of misinformation to existential risks is the risk of information to nuclear war, of which the main existential risk is nuclear winter (Ord, 2020). Of the three main risks discussed in this essay, nuclear war is perhaps the least able to be influenced by the average person, however misinformation can be a tactic used in war. In referencing another current event as an example, when Russia, who threatened nuclear retaliation against any countries that intervened, invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it did so under false claims; Russia spread misinformation that Ukraine was planning to use radiological weapons to justify the invasion (Goldenberg & Potter, 2022; Mohanned & Emmott, 2022). In addition, Russia did its best to keep knowledge of the invasion from the Russian people, instead their media reported the performance of a “special military operation” against Nazis in Ukraine (Anonymous, 2022). In addition, many Russian citizens distrust Western media outlets, so did not believe reports of war from such sources (Anonymous, 2022). This misinformation, combined with Russia’s anti-protest laws, means that the Russian people have little ability to protest the war if they would have wanted to had they known it was occurring. Russia is used as an example here but is

not alone in holding critical information back from its citizens to prevent pushback; if such an instance occurs that ends in nuclear war, there would be one less barrier to that result.

Climate change, pandemics, and nuclear war are highlighted as critical existential risks of the modern day, yet through a combination of misinformation and mistrust, people choose to ignore or actively work against finding solutions for these risks, for example protesting public health measures during a pandemic. Misinformation and mistrust of the information being received are easily spread and is a risk factor for all these examples of risk. The question of why there is such distrust and how to combat the culture of believing information with no critical thinking arises. Further examination into how misinformation impacts existential risk and how to effectively fight it is necessary.

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