
HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS HELPED CANADA MOBILIZE EXPERTISE

Darren Gilmour | February 17, 2021

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The arrival of COVID-19 in Canada last winter urgently called for enhanced engagement from researchers across all disciplines. We looked to historians to share lessons from previous pandemics, to infectious disease specialists to explain what a coronavirus is and what it does, to public health policy experts to define the challenges and opportunities for government action to protect the lives of citizens, and to artists for solace and inspiration, and to deepen our sense of empathy.

But how could leading scientists, scholars and artists best contribute to public discussion? How could society's urgent calls be answered in rapid and effective ways? How could this information be accessible each and every day, as new questions arose with the spreading pandemic, particularly in a digital world full of fragmented platforms?

In keeping with a long history of diverse, discipline-spanning thought leadership, the Royal Society of Canada (RSC) struck a task force in April to tackle these questions. With commitments to inclusive excellence and independence, the [RSC Task Force on COVID-19](#) immediately began mobilizing experts across Canada to strengthen public dialogue and to provide peer-reviewed evidence and recommendations for decision makers.

On April 19, the task force posted its [first COVID-19 publication](#), and through an unprecedented, innovative partnership with The Globe and Mail, the RSC helped launch the [Zero Canada Project](#) a week later.

Since then, the RSC community has generated an average of two articles each week, freely available in both English and French, answering questions as diverse and urgent as: [What has been the impact of COVID-19 on children and schools?](#) [What do we know about masks?](#) [What can we do now to support the elderly?](#) [How can we track the presence of the virus in communities?](#)

To accompany the shorter rapid response pieces, the task force established a series of expert committees mandated to produce more detailed, peer-reviewed reports on the latest COVID-19 science and insights. The first report, "[Restoring Trust: COVID-19 and the Future of Long-Term Care](#)," was published in July, and it made its way to the desks of federal and provincial ministries; in August, FACETS – Canada's first and only multidisciplinary open-access science journal – published the long-term care report as the first in a [series](#) devoted to RSC Policy Briefings.

By the fall of 2020, with the task force growing in size and scope, colleagues produced an additional six peer-reviewed Policy Briefings, as well as essay collections on COVID-19's effects on [racialized communities](#) and on [Indigenous health and wellness](#). By the end of the year more than 330 Canadians had participated in the work of the task force, and in co-ordination with The Globe and Mail, RSC publications have been viewed more than 400,000 times – an average of 5,000 views for each of the 82 articles. Meanwhile, the Restoring Trust report has been downloaded 13,000 times from the RSC Website and 3,000 times from FACETS, while the essay collections and Policy Briefings have been downloaded 25,000 times to date.

Two things seem clear. First, the Canadian research, scholarly and artistic community is passionate about contributing to a better future. Second, there is a voracious appetite among Canadians, including leaders of corporations, hospitals and government agencies, for independent expertise from across disciplines and across generations.

This collective impact compels us to accelerate our efforts. Along with the continued provision of independent COVID-19 expertise in the Zero Canada hub, we will soon be publishing a further 11 COVID-19 policy briefings on themes as varied as [artistic responses](#), [migrant workers](#), [vaccine acceptance](#) and [the future of higher education](#).

At the same time, we are broadening the enterprise to address other urgent crises such as climate change. We invite Canadians to contact us with suggestions about issues where independent expertise could assist us all in making informed decisions, with a view to building a better country and a better future.

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