

VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 4: An Eye on ‘Why’?; Episode #5
Professor Beth Coleman
Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology
U of T Mississauga

[intro music fades in and out]

[theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD)

Information and civic engagement.

Hello and welcome to VIEW to the U, an eye on UTM research.

I'm Carla DeMarco at UofT Mississauga.

VIEW to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs, and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

We're baaack for the home edition.

Things might sound a little bit different as I navigate recording interviews with UTM faculty members from afar, and over various technologies, either on cell phones, through zoom or teams. Bear with me as the sound quality might not be as clear as it has been in the past.

The next few episodes – or maybe next several episodes depending on the duration of the physical distancing – is meant to be a brief check in with faculty members from various departments at UFT Mississauga. To find out how their research might be shifting or how their focus might relate to the new reality of COVID-19, and how they are managing in this era of physical distancing.

In this episode I chat with professor Beth Coleman in UofT Mississauga's Institute of Communication Culture, Information and Technology [ICCIT], and in UofT's Faculty of Information Studies about her research and also about weeding through all of the COVID-19 information that we are bombarded with every day. We also talk about some of the things she's doing during this time of self-isolation, and we might even have a recipe or two to share.

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CD: Beth Coleman is an associate professor in ICCIT where she has been on faculty since September 2019, she researches aspects of human narrative and digital data in the engagement of global cities, including aspects of locative media, mobile technology, and smart cities. She has curated numerous art exhibits and media installations within North America and in Europe. Beth is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Hello Avatar*, which examines the many modes of online

identity and how users live on the continuum between virtual and the real. She is currently working on two books. She obtained her BA at Yale and her PhD at New York University.

CD: And so can you in maybe a couple sentences just outline what your basic program of research is?

Beth Coleman (BC):

I'm the director of a research group called City as Platform, so it's myself and a bunch of MAs and PhD RAs and also Coleen, Leslie Shade, she's at the Faculty of Information, is my co-PI on the Insight Grant we have. And I also have industry relationships. I'm working with Peter Semmelhack with SignalPattern, which is an online platform for authentication and distribution of urban data, and Ana Serrano as a collaborator, who's the incoming President of OCAD. So it's a really nice combination of people and essentially what I'm looking at in my lab is smart technology, which is advanced automation. It's Internet of Things [IoT], it's things around data in public spaces or up urban data in relationship to civic engagement, and civic engagement is a very broad title for ... this can be how do people see the infrastructure that's around them?

So for example, the King Street Pilot in downtown Toronto, there's a bunch of IoT instruments used to gather data about how fast the street cars are going, how many people are moving around. So, that's an infrastructure public works. But then I also look at things such as my collaboration with Michelle Murphy and the type of science research unit where we're looking at chemical pollution and Indigenous peoples in Ontario.

So different types of specificities can come up when we're talking about civic engagement. And I designed it that way on purpose because I don't want a sense of normative and general public to exclude people and groups who are traditionally marginalized, and racialized, and these different types of things. I think that we're actually, as corny as it sounds, we're in this together, even though we have different histories and experiences. And the COVID-19 health crisis really has brought that to a pitch, in terms of what does it mean to have a civic engagement, civic trust of one another, and trust of a federal and municipal authorities, in terms of helping to lead us through this. And as dreadful as the toll is already and will continue to be in terms of illness, stress on the health care system, and also it's really devastating economic reverberations because of all the protocols we need to have in place for safety, for health.

It really has woken us up as a city and as the different communities, and also international people who are part of a global conversation, thinking about how are we imagining now and our future.

CD: Yeah, I think there's a lot to unpack there, but I think that part of what you've just outlined leads into my next question about ... based on your research, how can we best sort through the flurry of communication and information, both the Corona virus and the crisis that's coming through on a daily basis, and just being able to decipher credible from non-credible sources, and finding the best way to stay informed?

BC: Well, I think that we need to always start with authenticated sources. So statements issued by the city of Toronto, statements issued by the federal government, they're reliable and we might

do more investigation around particular things. So for example, two weeks ago we were told by authorities we do not need masks if we're not COVID-19 positive, and in fact, we need to make sure N95 masks are saved for frontline workers. And those of us who received that message with the clarity that was delivered, understood it and acquiesced. With that said, my parents are in New York and in New York you're required to cover your face when you go out, with the understanding that N95 masks, they're not available and where they are available, they need to be saved for frontline workers. So we now have seen a re-messaging around that, where governments are saying protecting yourself and protecting others.

BC: Everyone should be heading towards covering their faces when they're outside in addition to social distancing. And then we have this beautiful outpouring of all these different people innovating around, how do you make a mask when all you have at home are rubber bands, or what are the best materials engineers can help lead us in terms of expert analysis of, if you're using a shop towel, this shop towel you want to apply this shop towel, you want to apply. So we really want that trusted experience around testing through things. But, when you see residents, everyday people innovating chiming and sharing. That combination is really powerful, and it's that combination that will help us pull down the curve and get the kinds of outcomes that we want from this, and not just panic, and insanity, and fighting each other over resource scarcity.

CD: I think I want to stay informed. A lot of the information is really heavy and hard to take. So I'm just wondering is there anything that you see as a positive that will emerge from all of this? I just feel like all the conversations have been very bleak, and the fallout from it is substantial. So I'm trying to think, is there some good to come out of all of this?

BC: Okay, so here's my feeling about it. I think that this health crisis, which is also an economic crisis, has profound impacts nationally and internationally, and it has also underscored some of the things that we've been struggling with as a rich city with really diverse income bracket. Toronto is a rich city, but it doesn't mean everyone in it is rich. Toronto has been going through a really profound growth in terms of technology and the housing market, but that same growth has also made it nearly impossible for young people to afford to live here, as for people who are not earning a tech salary to be able to afford to live here as well.

So some of those points of pain and growth that are part of the city, continuing to grow and evolve, because things have been accelerated, and amplified in terms of, have and have not, access to information. Even something like access to wifi so you can get information. We really have accelerated in terms of seeing where there are profound gaps and the call to all of us in terms of our civic responsibility is, how do I answer that call? So for example, the numbers I'm most familiar with are the ones in France, where it's a 35% increase in reported domestic violence cases.

BC: The government had to figure out how do you, when you tell people to stay home, how do you address an escalation in domestic violence? Those are two different needs. Both are important. Both are people at risk, but they have different modes of how you can solve them. One is isolation, the other is getting the people out of their home and into safe spaces. So you see there's just a whole domino effect of, if people are homeless and they're going to be at higher risk, but we don't have enough shelter beds in Toronto to begin with.

BC: I know it's all grim stuff, but because there is larger societal impact, if we don't try to fix those problems in a productive way, that type of opportunity that's in hand now, really innovative thinking around problems that we've been living with, but now they've just taken a sharper edge because there's a cascading effect around people not being able to observe health protocols, and sometimes it's because they can't.

CD: Yeah, I think that. Again, it is grim, but I feel like at least maybe that is a move in the right direction of trying to figure out some of these problems in a more holistic way maybe.

BC: Yeah. One of the articles that I read about Germany has a relatively high infection rate. And as you know, it's a larger size EU country, but their death rate is remarkably low. And trying to look at what framework can they put in place. That's essentially the argument that was being made in the article is, their medical teams are identifying positive COVID cases at the right sequence, where they're not shifting to extreme cases. So pre ventilator, pre emergency room, medical interventions that help. I don't know, flatten the curve is the right word, but decrease the load on the emergency health services are also help preserve lives. So that's really interesting in terms of the types of things that Toronto can do, or the types of things that Canada can do, because of our medical infrastructure, our ability to be able to communicate information.

The other side of it is the emerging work around pre vaccine, thinking about plasma exchange of people who are demonstrating be positive, has come through COVID-19 and are okay, and this becomes a neighborly good relation in terms of taking care of people who are very sick.

So this is still experimental, literally people at Johns Hopkins are just starting trials right now with it. But those things, they really help inspire some sense of resilience.

CD: And so I guess one of the last things I just wanted to ask you is, what are some of the things that you've been doing in this time of physical distancing and isolation to stay balanced and relatively happy, and healthy?

BC: So I'm lucky enough to have a park right outside my house, and we're still allowed to move around. So one of the things I've been doing is, my 11 year old has been teaching me how to jump with two feet upstairs, because I'm chicken about jumping up the stairs. And in the past couple of weeks that we've been isolating, I'm not awesome, but I've gotten better. And those small personal challenges. I'm sharing recipes with my sister who's in Arizona. I'm just like, "Oh, this is, this is a [quester blassim 00:14:21] with baking soup. We have local farmers who we used to shop with every Saturday at the Farmer's Market. Now they're doing deliveries. They're really just trying to engage with our circle of ... some of this is delicious food, but it's also supporting the farmers who, they don't really have a place in the chain right now in terms of essential services, but they can safely deliver boxes of micro greens.

These kind of things, make a big difference in terms of, not feeling too isolated. I am also lucky enough to have a really amazing group of friends who were super active, and nurturing, and taking care, and staying in touch before we were all shuttered away. And really have moved forward with hilarious ways of hanging out together and sharing music and those kinds of things.

- CD: That's great. And if possible, can you share your recipe? We'll link to it on our site for the black bean soup.
- BC: Oh yeah. I wrote it out for my sister in a text, so I can probably find that text and send it to you.
- CD: Okay. Yeah. I think this has been a great recipe sharing, because I will do the same with my sister. We've been sending each other things back and forth. But she was trying the soup that I sent her the recipe for, and I'm going to try the carrot cake that she sent me the recipe for.
- BC: What soup did you make?
- CD: It's called the detox lentil soup, and it's in a Crock-Pot, but I've made it many times now. It's one of my go-tos. I just love it, because you can just have it going, simmering all day and dinner's done.
- BC: Okay. So, I'll send you my isolation black bean with bacon soup if you send me your lentil soup recipe.
- CD: Okay. That's a deal. Okay. That's all the questions I have, and I just wanted to thank you so much in this crazy time to carve out a few minutes to chat with me. Tell me about your work.
- BC: It was really nice. It was good to just be able to talk about the things that have been on both of our minds, and we've had a little bit of opportunity with, but not enough people.
- CD: Yeah, absolutely.

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- CD: I would like to thank everyone for lending me your ears while you're all sequestered and for listening to today's show.

I would like to thank my guest, Professor Beth Coleman from UTM's Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology, for taking the time to chat with me about her work, and for sharing her black bean soup recipe.

I would like to thank the Office of the Vice Principal of Research for their support, and I would like to thank the Office of Communications at UTM for their support and for helping to promote the podcast.

Lastly and as always, thank you to the tuneful Tim Lane for his tracks and support.

Thank you!

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