

Scientific Communication During COVID-19

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Introduction

Regardless of one's partisan loyalties, it is difficult not to find fault in at least one aspect or another of how popular media has treated the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the most significant of such grievances, of course, is that media narratives seem to change so variably, without any *mea culpa*; examples of such narratives to which one might point include masking (which was initially deemed ineffective and later necessary) and vaccination (for which there was first concern about rushing the process, then praise of its general safety and efficacy, then caveats regarding its ability to prevent transmission, and so forth).

Media Malfeasance

Let us examine these major cases; first, with respect to masking: early on in the pandemic, established institutions in the US recommended against the use of masking to prevent spread of COVID-19. For example, in a tweet on February 27th, 2020, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) stated that they did not currently recommend using a facemask. Shortly afterwards, in a now-deleted tweet, Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams told Americans to stop buying masks due to their being ineffective for preventing COVID-19 infection for the general public (2020). Such tweets were generally supported and amplified by established media organizations such as the New York Times (NYT) or CNN. Consider, for example, the NYT article "Surgeon General Urges the Public to Stop Buying Masks," published on February 29th: although now edited to include quotes from a World Health Organization (WHO) official to the effect that masks "primarily prevent a person from giving the disease to someone else," the original article merely stated that "medical specialists have said masks are generally not effective because air can get in around the edges of the masks" (Cramer, 2020). A CNN article written on the same day, like the NYT article, only repeats information from public officials, albeit with some added commentary that the rush to buy masks is a "psychological thing" to "move the locus of control somewhat to ourselves" (Asmelash, 2020).

On April 3rd, the CDC began to advise Americans to wear masks in a bid to curb the spread of COVID-19 on the basis of asymptomatic transmission (Megerian et al., 2020); as time progressed, various states, cities, institutions, etc. began to instate mask mandates. In November of 2020, the first COVID-19 vaccinations became available; as time progressed, the CDC gradually relaxed various aspects of its mask recommendations for vaccinated individuals. In a NYT article first published in May of 2021, New York mayor Bill de

Blasio commented that "[v]accinations are the way to bring our city, our lives, back" (Tumin et al.), a sentiment echoed by other public officials. Soon, however, in July, the CDC once more began to recommend that "fully vaccinated persons wear masks in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high transmission" (Christie et al., 2021), in light of which places such as Los Angeles County began to reinstate mask mandates for fully vaccinated individuals. As noted in the NYT, the CDC was accused of "moving the goalposts" by many for this move.

Counterargument

In defense of the media, of course, there is the argument that science is not a static body of knowledge; rather, the information we have about the pandemic and appropriate responses to it changes over time as we observe what happens. It is, of course, rarely the case that any person behaves in a deliberately malicious manner rather than doing what that person, from a local and limited standpoint, sees to be best. Against this counterargument, however, I raise the fact that many outside established media were more accurate on various things (and perhaps even consistently so) than many within; at the least, it is not as though Asian countries with respect to masks had access to a different "science" than the rest of us. Even in the West, I have in mind figures such as Balaji Srinivasan (Srinivasan, 2020), Zvi Mowshowitz, Jacob Falkovich, Bill Gates (O'Toole, 2020), and others who had early predictions that the pandemic would be worse than initially supposed. It must be allowed, surely, that there did exist in the early stages of the pandemic people who maintained against certain media consensus the severity of pandemic. Even if this point will not be conceded, it is an incontrovertible fact that the People's Republic of China began its lockdown of Wuhan on January 23rd whereas sources as respectable as the Washington Post were still comparing COVID-19 to the flu by February (Bernstein, 2020); it is similarly true that the media generally reported that masks should not be worn in the early stages of the pandemic. I think it is difficult to maintain that these questions were necessarily ones in which the information environment was such that we simply could not know at the time, especially since positive claims (such as that masks were nonfunctional) were made rather than merely negative ones (such as that we simply did not know that masks were functional); furthermore, again, it is not as though there were not major reasons to believe otherwise, which were often taken as state policy in certain foreign nations.

The Average Epistemic Condition

The length of time required to attain an appreciable understanding of any field is significant even for experts in related fields; for complete novices, it might require years that might be better dedicated to other things. It is for this reason that we must, by necessity, rely on the reports of others to augment our knowledge; those we consider reliable we call “experts.” Now, that somebody or another is an expert is not something that is easily gleaned, since of course from the perspective of the layman there is no prospect of direct verification of expert knowledge; therefore, we rely on various *heuristics* to determine whether someone is an expert. Among these heuristics are factors such as credentials, a past track record of honest and good predictions, and so forth. Another point to emphasize is that expert claims that do not resemble one’s “lived experience,” if the phrase may be permitted, are typically distrusted.

The average person has neither sufficient time nor ability to personally assess studies and statements. Insofar as experts couch their recommendations with caveats, hedging, and phrases such as “no evidence,” such recommendations will surely not be taken in the intended light. The phrase “no evidence,” for example, is nothing more than equivocation between a positive statement against something or other, such as masks, and a negative statement about our knowledge; conventionally, this phrase would certainly be taken to indicate the former; it is the manner in which this phrase is often used to give such specific recommendations against wearing masks (early in the pandemic) and so forth. These euphemisms and particular uses of language have meaning for scientific communicators but surely not for the majority of their audience.

Now, on this basis, we must surely find it understandable that a great decrease of trust in “experts” and “media” in general has occurred; these rapid shifts in the positions of various media sources on topics of such salience (regardless of the exact chain of causality) clearly would lead to a decrease of one’s trust in anyone whose statements one cannot directly verify. It is utterly beyond the ability and interest of even the average educated professional to have a personally-informed opinion on the pandemic by directly reading epidemiology papers, assessing their methodology, and so forth; again, therefore, nearly any person must decide *who* (rather than *what*) to trust, for which direct assessments of ethics, honesty, and credibility might matter generally more than any nominal expertise (in the mind of one doing this kind of assessment).

The Problem of the Media

One may question now why it is that the media had a tendency not to question the recommendations of public officials. That is to say, it is not an uncommon thought that the purpose of free and independent media is to provide some kind of check on governments; although we can allow that it is not as though there was ever universal conformity, nonetheless the question that must come to our mind is why it came to be that so many established institutions all had the same line.

As Matt Yglesias, co-founder of Vox, tells us, while in the not-too-distant past publications had their own respective identity and voice, today things have become far more homogeneous (2022). The headlines, stories, and so forth have no distinct perspective between different publications but rather all contain the same story. Yglesias notes various reasons for this phenomenon: the lack of context for articles in the internet era, the algorithmic pressures of Facebook and Google, and the nastiness of office politics and social media.

The unfortunate condition of the media is that the journalist class *is a class*. That is to say, it is a social group; the members of this group generally interact with others within it, receive their feedback from others within it, and receive the same incentives and pressures as everyone else. One might furthermore note that in contrast to the educationally diverse backgrounds of past journalists, today it is quite typical that established media sources are dominated by staff with college degrees from elite institutions (Jilani, 2018). It is simply human nature to be social in this way, and the extremely similar backgrounds of journalists today as well as the highly competitive nature of the industry leads to the following effect: that journalists often move in lockstep with one another, unwilling to test the waters once a common narrative has been taken.

Conclusion

Now, I am not saying that there is anything malicious within this system (although to rule the possibility out might be too far); it is perfectly reasonable to think that one’s peers, who are all intelligent, competent, and so forth, maintaining some given position on a subject might thereby indicate that one’s own controversial opinion should require some extra scrutiny before publication. I recall that Kelsey Piper, a writer at Vox, observed the following in hindsight: some blogger might easily publish whatever comes into their mind, but a writer at some established publication must be careful and cautious, must take into account their responsibility, leading to the kind of lockstep narrative followed by rapid change that we

observe. From even good intentions, this phenomenon can result, and the nature of humanity is such that intentions (although rarely evil) often do not take good into account.

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