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**Propaganda Pandemics:
*The Use of Misinformation and Disinformation
to Obfuscate Pandemics' Impact***

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic is fraught with two categories of propaganda: *misinformation* (the dissemination of incorrect information, generally unknown as false by the messenger) and *disinformation* (the intentional sharing of inaccurate information often with a nefarious goal). A student survey characterized some of their pandemic information perceptions as misinformation and others as disinformation. Through this haze of uncertainty, the one thing that came into sharp focus is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation by some mainstream media through their reporting and amplification of the social media posts of politicians, influencers, institutions, trolls, bots, and regular users. This paper compares the use of media propaganda during the epoch of the COVID-19 pandemic and the era of the Spanish Flu of 1918–1919. During the period of the Spanish Flu, media was dominated by newspapers, pamphlets, cables, signs, newsreels, and movies. COVID-19 spread during a period controlled by the internet and its incumbent social media, and online news outlets alongside legacy media including newspapers, magazines, films, broadcast television and radio.

Keywords: misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, pandemic, media amplification

Lessons Learned?

Cataclysmic decisions may result from inexperience, faulty planning, or an intransigent leader's myopic focus. "It was a crusade for him, and anything that distracted from that crusade, he simply pushed aside." (Barry, in Cunningham podcast, 2020). This was not a reference to Donald Trump's single-minded obsession with winning reelection at the expense of a pandemic mitigation plan. Rather, historian John M. Barry said it was Woodrow Wilson's catastrophic choice to ignore the "Spanish Flu" pandemic to pursue victory in World War I. These two U.S. presidents, serving approximately a century apart, took similar evasive approaches to the pandemics that fell at their feet. Both exacerbated the impact of the pandemics through their inattention, inaction, and use of propaganda. Propaganda may be the intentional propagation of false narratives or framing of an issue by media. It may be used to disseminate truth or untruths or be an emotional appeal.

The 1918–1919 pandemic's roots were unclear, but some traced to about 138 miles from the geographic center of the United States. Eventually, it gripped the entire United States and spread abroad as Wilson continued to send young American soldiers and nurses on ships that Barry deemed "almost floating coffins." The 1918 pandemic was widely thought to have started at Fort Funston (now Fort Riley), Kansas, although others contend that it originated some 300 miles west in bucolic Haskell County, Kansas, where a local physician began reporting cases of influenza in late January 1918 (Barry, 2018).

Spanish Flu, as the 1918 influenza was misnamed, resulted in pneumonia that spread from one military base to another and led to the devastation of Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Influenza spread rapidly in the city of Boston and led public health officials to impose

restrictions on public gatherings, but it came too late to interrupt the burgeoning spread (Tomes, 2010). Throughout 1918, the United States flip-flopped between a single-minded focus on funding the war through citizen-purchased bonds and a lesser concern for the mitigation of the pandemic. The handling of these issues employed propaganda that took sharp aim at the patriotism of Americans. To finance WWI, the newly formed Federal Reserve and the U.S. Treasury initiated a plan comprising taxes and Liberty Loans from the public. Woodrow Wilson introduced the Fourth Liberty Loan drive in the Fall of 1918 and asked Americans to loan more liberally: “The money that is held back now will be of little use or value if the war is not won and the selfish masters of Germany are permitted to dictate what Americans may and may not do” (Wilson, 1924, p. 519). There were four Liberty Loan Drives and one Victory Loan Drive that enticed over 20 million people to purchase the bonds (Sutch, 2015).

On September 3, a “Win-the-War-for-Freedom” parade led to a horrific outbreak of influenza in Boston. By the day after the parade, influenza had spread to the Harvard Navy Radio School and to soldiers who were then shipped to Philadelphia where 600 troops were hospitalized, and deaths followed (Davis, 2018). Then on September 7, hundreds of sailors from Boston were sent to the Naval Yard in Philadelphia (Tomes, 2010).

On September 13, “Surgeon General Blue Admits European Pandemic Has Reached America,” according to a *New York Tribune* (1918) article. Blue propagandized about the inception of the influenza. He also issued a special bulletin through the Associated Press about the Spanish Flu for “all medical men” and provided additional guidance to the public on treating the pandemic symptoms. In a separate article, Rupert Blue told citizens to first call their physician and then to treat the influenza with bed rest, fresh air, abundant food, and Dover’s Powder [with opium] for the pain (*The Boston Globe*, p. 10).

On September 14, Division Surgeon Lieut. Col. McCormack assured Boston through the newspaper that there was no cause for alarm. "It is nothing more than the grippe, unpleasant, but in no way serious if due care is exercised" (*The Boston Globe*, September 14, p. 2). More than 8,000 troops were already being treated at Fort Devens outside of Boston. At that time McCormack propagandized to support the war effort by buoying the spirits of citizens and soldiers on the home front. The *grippe* or *la grippe* were terms used for influenza.

On September 26, 1918, the U.S. Department of Navy issued "A Directive" concerning the influenza and advised readers to "Keep out of crowds" (National Archive at New York City, 1918). That evening, the *Boston Evening Globe* announced on its front page that the Emergency Public Health Committee requested that all unnecessary public gatherings would be suspended until midnight October 6. These closures included theaters, movies, dances, and public meetings.

On September 27, 1918, Provost Marshal General Crowder announced that he had cancelled the call-up of 142,000 men because of the Spanish Flu (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1918). The paper reported that on the previous day there were 80 new cases and five deaths at the naval yard, 31 new cases reported by the Philadelphia Bureau of Health among civilians, and at least one death and several hundred patients sent to the Municipal Hospital for Contagious Diseases. Approximately 1,400 sailors were already hospitalized with the disease (Barry 2018) and on the day before the parade, of the 200 people admitted to the hospital with the disease, 123 were civilians.

"But selling the war, selling liberty itself, had been more important than warning people of the risks. Ultimately, 675,000 Americans would die from influenza" (Cunningham, 2015).

The Philadelphia public health official Wilmer Krusen, despite concerns he voiced privately, offered

disinformation in the form of pre-parade assurances that the public was not in danger, and so the parade went on. “Several hundred thousand people jammed the parade route, crushing against one another to get a better look, the ranks behind shouting encouragement over shoulders and past faces to the brave young men. It was a grand sight indeed” (Barry, p. 209). It netted \$31.5 million in Liberty Bond subscriptions (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1918).

Photo 1



Liberty Loan Parade at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September 28, 1918

Note. This U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph (Catalog #: NH 41730) is described as: “Naval Aircraft Factory float, featuring the hull of a F5L patrol seaplane, going south on Broad Street, escorted by sailors with rifles. Note the crowd of onlookers. This parade, with its associated dense gatherings of people,

contributed significantly to the massive outbreak of influenza that struck Philadelphia a few days later.”

Two days later Krusen confirmed that the epidemic found at the Naval Yards was already present in the Philadelphia community. Within three days of the parade, every hospital bed in Philadelphia was filled. The third day after the parade 117 people died, and on October 5, the death toll was 254, and the number of deaths began to multiply (Barry). This was a tremendous failure of public institutions to safeguard the people they were tasked with protecting in order to sell more Liberty Bonds to finance the war effort. In the United States, the 12,000 deaths in September were mainly in the military. But in just the month of October, deaths soared to 195,000 in the general population and military (Cunningham, 2020). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was not neutral, and when things were shut down in Philadelphia, the *Inquirer* urged the officials to dispense positive information and avoid frightening the public. At this point in history, propaganda was not well understood by citizens who absorbed it and complied.

Committee on Public Information

In April 1917, Wilson’s government created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), an Orwellian label for its propaganda arm. It was designed to gin-up support for the war at home and demoralize the enemies abroad. The CPI was headed by journalist George Creel and comprised of the Secretary of State, Secretaries of Navy and War. “This was equivalent to appointing a separate cabinet member for propaganda” (Laswell, 2013, p. 18).

A couple of months later, the Espionage Act was passed, followed less than a year later by the Sedition Act. These two acts imposed by the Wilson administration combined to restrict First Amendment rights. Many newspapers took the same tack as the

Inquirer had and propagated government news releases. Wilson enacted the 1918 Sedition Act to quell government criticism of war efforts while suppressing pandemic information. This made it illegal to “utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, scurrilous, or abusive language about the government of the United States” (Library of Congress, n.d.) and kicked the door wide open for an onslaught of propaganda.

WWI Influencers

The “Four Minute Men” (4MM) were the “influencers” of the WWI generation and they engaged through government propaganda. Founded in Chicago in 1917, the 4MM were local speakers including attorneys, businessmen, professors, and clergy who addressed theater audiences using government talking points. The movement grew from the concept of Chicagoan Donald Reyerson who proposed volunteer speakers presenting talks at theaters (Creel, 1920). Professor Bertram Nelson, the director of the 4MM, explained the logic for the speakers’ movie house presentations:

Every night eight to ten million people of all classes, all degrees of intelligence, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, meet in the moving picture houses of this country, and among them are many of these silent ones who do not read or attend meetings but who must be reached. (Nelson in Masterangelo, 2009, p. 607)

The 4MM propagandized at movie theaters between the change of reels, which normally took four minutes. Approximately 75,000 of these Four Minute Men (the name is an allusion to the Minute Men of the U.S. revolution) made more than 7.5 million speeches (Creel, 1920) and also reached an estimated 400 million

listeners (Library of Congress, n.d.). The 4MM stood in front of theater curtains with a slide projected above them that stated they spoke under the authority of the CPI on subjects of national importance (Creel). The 4MM received “Bulletins” for speaking topics from Wilson’s CPI under the leadership of wartime propagandist George Creel.

Government department heads turned to the Four Minute Men when they wished to arouse the nation swiftly and effectively. At a time when the Third Liberty Loan was lagging, President Wilson bought a fifty-dollar bond and challenged the men and women of the nation to ‘match it.’ (Creel, 1920, p. 87)

New bulletins were issued, and within a few days the 50,000 4MM were exhorting Wilson’s challenge across the country (Creel).

The gist of the 46 bulletins provided by the CPI to the 4MM was patriotism and Liberty Loans. The first bulletin topics were “Universal Service by Selective Draft” and “First Liberty Loan.” Bulletin No. 38 was titled “Four Minute Singing” and contained slides with lyrics and recommended songs (Keller, 1960, p. 20). The 4MM also reached audiences in disparate locations such as granges, lumber camps, fraternal lodges, Native American reservations, churches, and synagogues. The 4MM included women and youth in their ranks. Contests were held in schools where teachers used the CPI bulletins to guide students in writing speeches. The best speeches were selected and then rehearsed and delivered by the writers to their schoolmates (Creel, 1920). The bulletin for the Third Liberty Loan Contest in 1917 was sent to over 200,000 schools and twice that for the Fourth Liberty Loan contest. The 4MM training extended to the post-secondary level where students were coached in speech and presentation at 153 colleges.

In a November 1917 letter to the 4MM, Creel called them the “reserve officer corps” (Library of Congress, n.d.). Their success may be judged by concrete results such as the first Liberty Loan

drive being oversubscribed by 55% (Keller, 1960). Creel said that for the paltry sum of \$100,000, the 4MM had reached over 314 million Americans with propaganda (Auerbach, 2021). Creel and the 4MM scored a massive propaganda victory on the homefront.

Liberty Bonds

The Philadelphia Inquirer and its advertisers promoted the government's Liberty Loans publicity. Many display ads in the *Inquirer* and in other newspapers across the country included the Liberty Loans propaganda. Newspapers became jingoistic, and *The Boston Post* even ran a column and a half of the same line repeated twice per line: "Double Up on Your Liberty Bonds" only occasionally interrupted with a subhead "Double Up" (*Boston Post*, 1918). Many small-town newspapers such as *The Carolina Mountaineer* and *Waynesville Courier* (1918, Nov. 25) published Liberty Loans rosters at the top of their front pages to persuade readers to contribute.

Wilson continued promoting the Liberty Bond drives to fund the war and never spoke of the pandemic publicly (Solly, 2020).

The president traveled to Paris in January 1919 for peace talks and in April was struck with influenza. His White House never disclosed the grim diagnosis (Barry, 2018). The papers reported the administration's spin and a statement issued on April 4, 1919, by the president's physician, Rear Admiral Grayson, "the President had caught a cold yesterday and was unable to be about, although his condition was not regarded as serious" (*Atchison Daily Globe*, 1919). Wilson never fully recovered from this illness. His proposed conciliatory negotiations with the Germans were set aside, and the French pushed a hardline agenda that may well have propelled the devastated and humiliated Germans to Nazism. Several months later, Wilson had a stroke and his wife ran the government for the rest of his term from behind the scenes (Solly, 2020).

History Repeats Itself

Donald Trump found himself not in a world war, but rather a ferocious political campaign when the COVID-19 pandemic began to kill Americans. Rather than treat the pandemic as a battle and assume the role of commander-in-chief, Trump opted to focus on stock market growth and be America's cheerleader.

Two months before the COVID-19 outbreak in China was noted, Trump defunded a \$200 million program to train scientists to detect coronavirus outbreaks and provide early warning of pandemics (Chomsky & Polychroniou, 2021). COVID-19 was detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]). ProMed International Society for Infectious Disease reported that on December 30, 2019, an "urgent notice on the treatment of pneumonia of an unknown cause" was being distributed online by the Medical Administration of Wuhan Municipal Health Committee and was confirmed by a *China Business News* reporter. Then on December 31, 2019, a Hubei Province official report said that "Wuhan has continued to monitor influenza and related diseases, and 27 cases of viral pneumonia have been found, all of which were diagnosed with viral pneumonia/pulmonary infection. Of the 27 cases, 7 were critically ill, and the remaining cases were controllable" (ProMED, 2019).

World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) officials confirmed that the first case of COVID-19 outside of China had popped up in Thailand on January 13, 2020. The next day, in a press briefing, the WHO said there may have been limited human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus in the 41 confirmed cases and that there was a risk of a wider outbreak.

On January 22, 2020, during interviews at the Davos G-7 meeting in Switzerland, Trump said that he trusted China's Xi and that "We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It is going to be just

fine” (Belvedere, 2020). Approximately 71% of the student group of a mid-sized southeastern U.S. university who were surveyed for this research said that this Trump assurance did not make them feel secure in their health. Of those students, 51% believed Trump’s statement was disinformation.

On January 24, 2020, after reports of hundreds of cases and dozens of deaths in China, President Donald Trump tweeted, “China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!” (Higgins, 2020).

While Trump was in the middle of his impeachment trial, his top-secret security briefing on January 28, 2020, covered a discussion of the outbreak of a flu-pneumonia in China. Trump was told by his national security adviser that this would be the biggest security threat of his presidency. Deputy National Security Officer Matt Pottinger told Trump that he had reached out to contacts in China who told him there was evidence this would be the equivalent of the 1918 pandemic, and it was urgent. Pottinger had medical contacts in China and Hong Kong, and he was monitoring social media there. He was fluent in Mandarin and had lived and reported in China for 7 years including writing 30 news articles about China’s mishandling and secrecy over SARS that had caused it to spread. Pottinger told Trump the reasons he thought it would be a fast and deadly killer: It spread person-to-person and was spread by those who did not show symptoms (Woodward, 2020).

The New York Times reported that the Chinese government controlled the release of information. A physician who tried to warn other doctors about this disease was detained, questioned, and then died from COVID-19 weeks later. By the end of January, there were outbreaks of this virus in 17 countries including the United States.

China shut down travel, and no one could come or go from Wuhan. However, travel was still permitted to other countries from

China. On January 31, 2020, Trump imposed restrictions on travelers coming from China to the United States. In his February 4 State of the Union address, Trump briefly mentioned the virus and said, “My administration will take all the necessary steps to safeguard our citizens from this threat” (Woodward, 2020, p. xviii). Woodward wrote that “the necessary steps” did not include sharing his national security advisers’ warnings with the American people.

Congresswoman Katie Porter (CA-45) reported on April 6, 2020, from monthly U.S. Census trade data that “the value of U.S. ventilator exports jumped 22.7% percent from January to February. We also found that in February 2020, the value of U.S. mask exports to China was 1094% higher than the 2019 monthly average” (Porter, 2020). Porter said she repeatedly requested that Trump use his powers under the Defense Production Act to ensure adequate personal protective equipment and ventilators. He did not.

On February 7, Trump told Bob Woodward in a private call that it was amazing and more deadly than the flu. “This is deadly stuff,” Trump told Woodward, and in the same conversation continued to praise China’s Xi (Woodward, 2020, p. xx). Yet publicly, Trump continued to compare it with the flu and said it would dissipate in April because of the warm weather.

On February 22, 2020, in a pre-Super Bowl interview with Sean Hannity, Trump said, “We pretty much shut it down coming in from China. But we can’t have thousands of people coming in who may have this problem, the coronavirus. We’re going to see what happens, but we did shut it down, yes” (Puhak, 2020).

“The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA,” Trump tweeted on February 24. “We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!” (Beer, 2020).

Trump’s initial reaction to the coronavirus was to deploy disinformation suggesting the Democrats were politicizing the

coronavirus for political gains. “They tried the impeachment hoax. . . . And this is their new hoax,” Trump said at a campaign rally on February 28, 2020. After the first recorded death of an American from the virus, Trump attempted to clarify his statement of the previous day by saying that “hoax” did not refer to coronavirus, but rather to the Democrats’ criticism of his administration’s response to it (FactCheck.org, 2020). Over 60% of the students surveyed for this study characterized this Trump hoax statement as misinformation.

In a Pew Research Center survey conducted March 10–16, 2020, among 8,914 adults most (83%) had confidence in the job the CDC officials were doing, but fewer than half were confident in the Trump’s (45%) and Pence’s (48%) response to the COVID-19 crisis. Almost half (48%) of survey respondents had seen some news they believe was made up (Pew, 2020). The summer of 2021 student survey for this study revealed much higher numbers than Pew with 89% saying they encountered misinformation from mainstream media. Only 37% of the students perceived that news from online websites of traditional publications (*The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*) was trustworthy most of the time. Cable and broadcast news fared much worse.

On March 19, Trump told Woodward that he wanted to play down the virus because he did not want to create a panic. At his daily briefing, Trump actively blamed the Chinese for the pandemic. “Corona” was scratched out of his briefing notes and replaced by “Chinese” virus. He used the term “Chinese Flu” in that speech but not at the point in which Jabin Botsford’s photo captured the change in his notes (Chiu 2020). On other occasions, he dubbed COVID-19 “China flu” or even the “Kung Flu” when addressing a youth rally in June 2020 in Phoenix, Arizona (BBC News, 2020). Of the students surveyed, 54% said they perceived these references as disinformation, 51% said they were offended by them, and 63% characterized the references as racist.

In April, after Trump had been warned about the disease in

over a dozen briefings, he finally acknowledged its severity. “This is the first recorded account of the president fully admitting that he had purposely lied about the severity of a virus that has now killed more than 190,000 in the U.S., a death toll made significantly worse by his shambolic ‘leadership’” (Levin, 2020). After months of ignoring the COVID-19 pandemic and flaunting the recommendations of the CDC and the WHO, the maskless U.S. president was forced to acknowledge it. He continually boasted about his prowess with controlling the stock market and his concern about “spooking” it. The president stopped WHO funding in April 2020 citing China’s lack of transparency and saying that if the WHO had challenged China, the pandemic could have been abated with few deaths (Ward, 2020).

Noam Chomsky wrote that a senior European official said, “the US administration is very fixated on the reelection campaign and on who can get blamed for this catastrophic COVID-19 situation in the US. They are blaming WHO and China for it” (Chomsky & Polychroniou, 2021, p. 275).

Trump said that he had to be a “cheerleader for the country,” as a defence his failure to prepare the public for what was coming. On September 9, 2020, press secretary Kayleigh McEnany explained, “the president was expressing calm” when he said COVID-19 would go away by April even after he was told of the seriousness of this virus by his advisers, who compared it with the Spanish Flu of 1918 (Levin, 2020).

Trump again attempted to persuade the public with disinformation which rationalized that the increase in cases was caused by increased testing. *The New York Times* reported that a close associate of the president “described him as ‘subdued’ and ‘baffled’ by how the crisis had played out. An economy that he had wagered his re-election on was suddenly in shambles” (Lipton, Sanger, Haberman, Shear, Mazzetti & Barnes, 2020).

A team of Stanford researchers studied COVID-19 trends in

counties that hosted Trump political rallies and matching counties that did not. They determined that the events increased confirmed COVID cases by more than 250 per 100,000 residents (Bernheim et al., 2020). “Extrapolating this figure to the entire sample, we conclude that these 18 rallies ultimately resulted in more than 30,000 incremental confirmed cases of COVID-19. Applying county-specific post-death rates, we conclude that rallies likely led to more than 700 deaths (not necessarily among attendees)” (Bernheim et al., 2020, p. 1).

As with Wilson’s Liberty Bond rallies like the huge Philadelphia event, Stanford researchers Bernheim et al. confirmed that the communities that hosted Trump rallies “paid a high price in terms of disease and death” (p. 13). “The gross incompetence that has resulted from his whiplash presidency helmed by an uber narcissist in the wheelhouse of a mendacious propaganda machine has been responsible for thousands of deaths in the US and has most certainly exacerbated a pandemic-induced recession” (McLaren, 2020, p. 2).

Chomsky told *The Guardian* that “Donald Trump is culpable in the deaths of thousands of Americans by using the coronavirus pandemic to boost his electoral prospects and line the pockets of big business” (Partington, 2020).

At an April 24, 2020, press conference Trump posited misinformation or possibly disinformation that may have proven dangerous to the public when he asked whether medical staff would look into ingesting bleach or employing ultraviolet lights internally to kill the virus. The following is a transcript of the relevant part of the press conference.

So, supposedly we hit the body with a tremendous, whether it’s ultraviolet or just very powerful light, and I think you said that hasn’t been checked, but you’re going to test it. And then I said supposing you brought the light inside the

body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way. And I think you said you're going to test that too. Sounds interesting, right? And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in one minute. And is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside or almost a cleaning because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it'd be interesting to check that so that you're going to have to use medical doctors with, but it sounds interesting to me. So, we'll see, but the whole concept of the light, the way it kills it in one minute. That's pretty powerful (Rev, 2020).

Almost 99% of the students said they had not ingested disinfectants and others derided the suggestion. Yet, this was a major social media discussion and disinfectant manufacturers quickly suggested that their products should not be used internally.

The Trump administration hosted a White House indoor and outdoor event to announce the president's nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. Just 10 days after the event, 28 attendees tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, including Trump, who was admitted to hospital and then recovered at the White House (Gonsalves & Yamey, 2020).

"While hospitalized, Trump was also enraged by a flub from his chief of staff Mark Meadows, who told White House reporters off the record (or so he thought) that Trump's condition was 'very concerning' while Associated Press cameras were still rolling and capturing everything he said" (Panetta, 2021).

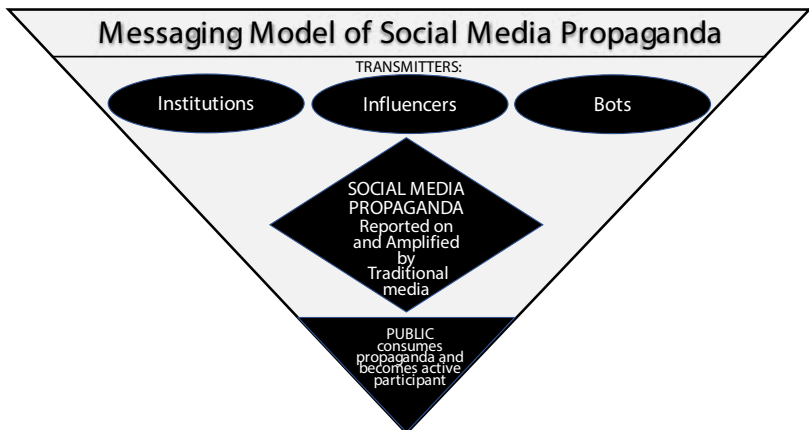
The antimask fervor on the right continued by politicians and citizens alike. Dr. Vin Gupta, a lung and intensive care unit doctor, said on MSNBC that even if you have had two doses of the vaccine, you should not stop wearing a mask or resume travel until most people have received the vaccine (Mulder, 2020). On December

17, 2020, Ted Cruz tweeted in response to Gupta’s mask-wearing advice, “This is a bizarre, lunatic, totalitarian cult. It’s not about vaccines or protecting people’s lives—it is instead profoundly anti-science and is only focused on absolute govt control of every aspect of our lives.” According to Mulder, the fact-checking organization PolitiFact awarded the Cruz statement the “Pants on Fire” rating for his tweet.

The danger to the public from untruthful social media posts may come from mainstream media reporting and amplifying the propagandic social media posts, therefore increasing the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

This study proposes a new model of communication that reflects current media environment that has legacy media reporting and intensifying social media posts. The “Messaging Model of Social Media Propaganda,” illustrates three categories of transmitters: institutions, influencers, and bots. These transmitters send their propaganda messages through social media where it is picked up, reported on and amplified by traditional media. The public consumes this social media propaganda and then become active participants through a confirmation bias process.

Illustration 1



The Author’s 2021 Messaging Model of Social Media Propaganda.

“Confirmation bias emerges because the primary function of reason is not to form accurate beliefs, but to convince others that we’re right,” according to Michel and Peters (2020, p. 1). As early as 1620, long before television, the internet, and social media, Francis Bacon wrote about people’s tendency to look for information that supports their beliefs.

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate. (Bacon, 1620, Section XLVI)

A Spanish Flu or COVID-19–era Bacon may speculate that people utilize media propaganda to reinforce their beliefs and garner support of their philosophy by others.

Trump received the COVID vaccine injection in January 2021 before leaving the White House but did not announce it publicly as Vice President Mike Pence and President-Elect Joe Biden had (Seddiq, 2021). In March at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Florida, Trump told the audience that everybody should get the vaccine shot. He reminded the audience that he was responsible for the quick rollout (Acosta & Kelly, 2021). In the summer of 2021, Trump hosted a rally in Ohio and boasted about “Project Warp Speed” COVID-19 vaccine development by the public sector and the departments of Health and Human Services and Defense. *The Washington Post* said the advisory is a “major reversal from the Trump Administration, when the former president’s own baseless claims about the virus often tested the social networks’

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COVID-19 misinformation policies” (Sonmez & Zakrzewski, 2021). Surgeon General Vivek Murthy cited a Kaiser Family Foundation poll that found 67% of unvaccinated adults heard vaccine myths and either found it truthful or were uncertain about the veracity of the statement (Sullivan, 2021).

“Simply put, health misinformation has cost us lives,” Murthy warned on July 16, 2021. He chastised social media outlets for allowing people to spread misinformation. Propaganda may block consideration of rational options (Stanley, 2015) as evidenced by the rejection of masks and vaccines by many while hundreds of thousands of Americans have died from COVID-19 and the Delta and the Omicron variants.

“People tend to divide into opposing camps in response to propaganda, and public ‘communities’ are formed that create ‘armies’ to fight for and support a cause” (Jowett & O’Donnell, p. 397). They posited that even when the public understands a message is propaganda, they are not dissuaded from responding favorably. Indeed, right-wing media consumers seemed to accept the pandemic propaganda with an unwavering fervor—heading to Sturgis, political rallies, and the grocery stores without masks. While left-leaning media consumers sported masks while attending socially distanced outdoor yoga and other events.

PANDEMIC MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Spanish Flu propaganda efforts took a step into the fabrications and persuasion efforts that surrounded the virus and the war effort. In the United States the nascent public relations industry was having good success in the war effort. The 1918 pandemic was incorrectly dubbed the Spanish Flu because Spain had remained neutral in WWI and did not have the war as the main story in publications. Instead, the Spanish media covered the influenza pandemic and deaths in Spain more thoroughly than the media in other countries (Barry).

Examples of propaganda abounded on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, from senators to influencers to everyday platform users. For instance, physician and U.S. Senator Rand Paul issued this disinformation on July 16, 2020:

Look, there's millions of us like me now who are immune. Are they going to hold me down and stick a needle in my arm? They probably will, because these people believe in the idea they are so right and that their cause is so righteous that they can inflict it on others. (Paul, as cited in Cillizza, 2020)

Paul was tested but continued to work, go to the gym and swim while awaiting results (Dovere, 2020).

Disinformation about Dr. Anthony Fauci continued throughout the pandemic. On June 1, 2021, Charlie Kirk tweeted, "Tony Fauci will make millions off of a new book about "Truth" while Americans continue to suffer because of his endless stream of lies over the past year. The highest paid employee of the federal government is set to profit even more off this pandemic. What a disgrace." This was retweeted 1,753 times. This was proven false and two weeks later corrected by Kirk, but that was only retweeted 177 times. Kirk self-describes on Twitter as Founder & President @TPUSA, host of The Charlie Kirk Show, and author of *The MAGA Doctrine*. Fauci received no remuneration for the book that Kirk said would earn him millions. The book published in November of 2021, states that Fauci was not paid for his participation and will not receive royalties for this National Geographic book.

All Democratic house members were vaccinated against the coronavirus, when Nancy Pelosi requested that the Republicans prove they were vaccinated before coming into the chamber maskless. Concerning Pelosi's request on wearing masks, Georgia Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene told David Brody on the Water Cooler podcast:

You know, we can look back at a time in history where people were told to wear a gold star, and they were definitely treated like second class citizens, so much so that they were put in trains and taken to gas chambers in Nazi Germany. And this is exactly the type of abuse that Nancy Pelosi is talking about. (Nobles, 2021)

Greene tweeted about women who “miscarried healthy pregnancies” (@mtgreene, Aug. 4, 2021). On January 2, 2022, Twitter permanently suspended the personal account of U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, “for violating policies on Covid misinformation.” Her official Twitter account still exists. Martin Pengelly (2022) reported that one of her final tweets, the one that may have earned her the strike, discussed “extremely high amounts of Covid vaccine deaths.” *The Guardian* said they pulled this information pulled from her Telegram account, which they report “appears to mirror her now-banned Twitter feed” (Pengelly, 2022).

Student Study

This nonexperimental study employed a survey of a convenience sample of the population of a midsized southeastern university. This sample enabled inferences about the university population. This study investigated the perceptions and usage of propagandic pandemic messaging and attempted to understand students’ perceptions of the impact of messaging from institutions, influencers, and bots during the pandemic. The sample comprised 223 students who voluntarily participated and did not receive any incentives. The full group did not answer all questions.

The study used Qualtrics survey software to query students about their perceptions of vulnerability to COVID-19. The study presented students with questions and some examples of social media posts with still screen and video captures and then requested

their responses on a Likert-type scale. Students were asked their choices of trusted media and whether they were able to get the information they needed from their trusted media source during the pandemic. They were asked if they noticed propaganda on the social media platforms and how they handled it and whether they had posted something they later found out was untrue.

For instance, students were presented with an Instagram post from June 13, 2021: “Christian Eriksen, the Danish player who suddenly collapsed on the pitch, plays for Inter Milan. The chief medic and cardiologist of that Italian team confirmed on an Italian radio station that Eriksen had received the Pfizer vaccine on May 31” (Putterman, 2021).

Students were asked whether that social media post would make them hesitant to be vaccinated. Of the participants, 16% said it would make them hesitant, 20% said it may make them hesitant, and 62% said it would not make them hesitant to be vaccinated. The soccer player did not receive the Pfizer vaccine, and the doctor had to take down his tweet after Inter Milan’s director Giuseppe Marotta told Italian sports TV channel Rai Sport that Eriksen had not received any COVID-19 vaccine.

More than 81% of the respondents said they had encountered misinformation from family and friends on social media. Over 89% of participants said they have posted something on social media that they later realized was untrue. In addition, 83% have seen propaganda from influencers, and 60% report encountering misinformation from institutions (e.g., government, health organizations, agencies, organizations, NGOs, schools). The population of the study was 223 college students, the majority of whom were women. The majority of respondents lived off campus. Only 31% of this group said they never met with others without social distancing and masks during the 2020–2021 school year.

The students were quick to identify propaganda in a social media video post of an Ohio doctor testifying about the negative

effects of vaccines. Almost equal numbers dubbed it misinformation (42.51%) and disinformation (41.92%). The students also chose to ignore (79%) and report (13%) a February 1, 2021 Tweet that stated “People are getting lumps from the covid vaccine..no thanks!” (Feldz 2021). Just over 4% said they would like it and over 2% would repost the Tweet. It is interesting that over 81% of the respondents said they wore a mask prior to vaccination, and many do not now that they are vaccinated. See Table below.

Table 1

Survey Response to Question, “Do You Wear a Mask Now that You Are Fully Vaccinated?”

Response	Percentage, %
Yes, when in public	28.82
Sometimes when in public	24.71
Not when with vaccinated friends and family	7.06
Not at all	10.59
I am not vaccinated	28.82

Note. The survey was completed in August 2021.

The student participants who reported their lack of vaccination are close but slightly below the national findings of the KFF Vaccine Monitor (Kirzinger et al., 2021) that found in July of 2021, 67% of American adults said they were vaccinated, and 3% planned to get the vaccine soon. Interestingly, the KFF study found mask wearing habits split along party lines, but that vaccinated adults reported they mask in most public locations. The students in this study who are vaccinated are less likely to mask than the adults in the KFF study.

Discussion

Obviously, the lessons of the Spanish Flu were not learned by the Trump administration. The smokescreen and denials did little to lessen the impact of the pandemic and eventually hurt the economy and reelection prospects the president hoped to safeguard. Throughout 2020, Donald Trump did not mask and hosted public campaign events across the United States. This study reveals similarities in the outcomes of pandemics almost a century apart. The result of the administrations' propagandizing, mishandling, and stalling resulted in countless deaths that may have been averted as Bernheim (2020) calculated. Citizens trusted Wilson's propaganda presented by the media and government propagandists. A significant distinction identified through this student research is that many young citizens today recognize and comprehend propaganda. The students in this study were not amenable to misinformation and disinformation yet given that the United States death count has topped one million, propaganda is finding recipients who continue to reject masks and vaccinations. The polarized media and virulent reporting of social media activity provide citizens with the affirmation of opinions they once would not have articulated. For future administrations to ameliorate the impact of pandemics and severe disease outbreaks, there is a need for truthful information to be provided the public at the outset. Additionally, the administration and health agencies must use positive persuasion to relay the potential impacts of outbreaks and methods to limit their effects.

Social media platforms bear a responsibility to establish a systematic method to identify and remove posts by bots and unscrupulous purveyors of misinformation and disinformation. Social media content moderation may have a significant impact on attitudes. Students in this study recognized social media propaganda but admitted that they had mistakenly posted what they later found was misinformation. Perhaps, social media platforms should

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promote the concept that correcting mistaken posts is heroic—maybe even with a badge. Considering the responses from this study, there is reason to be hopeful as many students recognized misinformation. There may be a need to educate less fluent social media users of the nefarious intent of some social media content providers and of legacy media’s use of this content to obtain viewers and higher ratings.

The obligation of mainstream media to avoid reporting on social media posts until the veracity has been confirmed is imperative yet expected of entities that act in the public trust. These legacy media are driven to report on viral content because of competition. During Covid-19, the recognition of the issues posted on social media and reported on by legacy media led many to doubt health institutions such as the NIH and WHO. There is a strong need for media to establish guidelines on the verification and reporting of social media posts and stories (often unsubstantiated). Media may need to do the hard work of checking the authenticity of viral social media posts using investigative techniques, rather than simply reporting on, and sharing posts. Many journalists use techniques including geolocation and image verification, but there is also a need to understand and identify creations of artificial intelligence, deep fakes and cheap fakes which may exceed the abilities of typical newsrooms. The New York Times practices video verification and in 2019 the Washington Post created “Seeing Isn’t Believing: A Fact Checker’s Guide to Manipulated Video (Ajaka et al., 2019). Creating and employing tools like these require time and personnel to operate them—a luxury many smaller outlets do not have.

Tools to verify videos and images are becoming widely available. Their implementation by social media platforms and mainstream media outlets will help prevent propaganda from negatively affecting the health and safety of people worldwide. The cost in lives due to propaganda during two pandemics, a century

no Darlene W. Natale

apart, should be enough to motivate the government and media to act.

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