

Chapter 16

What a Modern Cyber Messaging War Looks Like: The Peculiar Case of Vaccine Reluctance in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Apparent U.S. Government Policy

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ABSTRACT

One of the strongest tools in a government's arsenal involves its relationship to information: how it collects it, who it collects it from, how it vets it, and then how it shapes and distributes it. This is especially so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a moment with precious effective vaccines available and a sub-population of U.S. citizens unwilling to be vaccinated in a liberal democracy where the "consent of the governed" is core. This work explores the affordances and constraints of the United States government (USG) in reaching out to the "late majority" and "laggards" to acquire vaccines that would protect their own lives and health and those of the peoples around them (from the many variants of SARS-CoV-2) in a time when children themselves are not vaccinated (while awaiting research and government approval for such interventions and proper dosages). This also explores, from the cross-cultural etic perspective, the strategies and tactics of the USG in this cyber messaging war based on a review of the journalistic literature.

INTRODUCTION

I'm glad it (pandemic) happened during my lifetime.

-- An unvaccinated carpenter working at the author's university on July 30, 2021

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What a Modern Cyber Messaging War Looks Like

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

-- Declaration of Independence (1776)

In a public health crisis, eventually, you'll need to ask the public to do hard things, and the public will have to trust the integrity of your appeals. You cannot advance policies or appeal for collective action if the public isn't on board. Once you pursue a policy, and get met with public rejection, or noncompliance, your capacity to implement future actions is eroded. If the public refuses to follow guidance in a public health crisis, if there's widespread opposition or protest, it becomes difficult or even impossible to advance additional measures, to take strong actions.

-- Dr. Scott Gottlieb, in *Uncontrolled Spread: Why COVID-19 Crushed Us and How We Can Defeat the Next Pandemic* (2021, p. 76)

When the global coronavirus pandemic hit, the U.S. teetered on the verge of a system failure.

-- Fiona Hill, *There is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the 21st Century* (2021, p. 11)

A mass-scale pandemic appears without warning, and humanity tends to be fairly slow to understand the onset of the foundation-shaking threat. In terms of the SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 pandemic, the start date of this mass-scale catastrophic event is not even clear. The U.S. has the start date as sometime in late January 2020, but other data may suggest that the novel coronavirus may have entered humanity earlier in 2019 than first thought (initially thought to be December and now thought to be earlier that fall). Different countries have different playbooks and plans for such eventualities, and then how they act on those playbooks will depend on various factors: the government officials, the populace, the emergency personnel, and so on. Scott Gottlieb, M.D., called the plans and preparations for a pandemic “a technocratic illusion” (2021, p. 3), given that the preparations were not sufficiently adaptable to the actual features of the emergent pathogen and the high R_0 .

How a country performs may be seen in objective measures such as the numbers of the infected, the recovered, the uninfected, and those who have passed on. The numbers of a country show something of its leadership, its healthcare system, trust in government, and other factors. In the contemporaneous moment, the U.S. does not look to have done very well. While the U.S. was ranked top for its supposed public health pandemic preparedness, its performance alone in the SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 pandemic was at the bottom. With 4% of the world population, it had “a bit more than 20 percent of its COVID-19 deaths” (Lewis, 2021, p. xv). Its excess deaths outpace those of other countries, by far: “*The Lancet* pointed out that if the COVID death rate in the United States had simply tracked the average of the other six G7 nations, 180,000 of those people would still be alive” (Lewis, 2021, p. xv), the so-called “missing Americans.” In the absence of governance, much of the responsibility taken on by corporations and private industry in coordination with a few who were aware of the magnitude of the risks (Slavitt, 2021). At this moment, the delta variant is widespread stateside, and it is thought to be causing severe disease and death among younger cohorts (Rabin, Aug. 3, 2021), and the record-keeping continues. This

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