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The Lockdown Skeptic They Couldn't Silence

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Does a pandemic demand the strong medicine of censorship? Social-media companies seem to think so. They're taking steps to control speech in the name of combating the spread of medical misinformation. Facebook employs "fact checkers" to review posts, makes those that don't pass their test harder to find, and directs users to purportedly reliable sources like the World Health Organization. YouTube has taken down videos it deems inconsistent with science. Twitter plans to add warning labels to tweets that don't pass muster with "subject-matter experts, such as public health authorities."

Aaron Ginn's story is a cautionary tale that even well-intended censorship can overreach, suppressing the search for truth. Mr. Ginn, 32, is the Silicon Valley technologist who posted an essay on March 20 titled "Evidence over hysteria—COVID-19" on the Medium website. Citing academic research and government data, Mr. Ginn argued that public-health experts were focusing too much on "flattening the curve . . . while ignoring the economic shock to our system" of shuttering businesses and schools and ordering Americans to stay home.

"When 13% of Americans believe they are currently infected with COVID-19 (mathematically impossible)," he wrote, "full-on panic is blocking our ability to think clearly and determine how to deploy our resources to stop this virus." The message was well-timed—the day he posted it, Gov. Andrew Cuomo ordered "nonessential" New York businesses to close.

Mr. Ginn's essay drew 2.6 million page views in 24 hours—and a barrage of liberal criticism. Carl T. Bergstrom, a University of Washington biologist, called it "Shakespeare run through google translate into Japanese, then translated back to English by someone who'd never heard of Shakespeare." Then Medium took it down, saying it violated rules under a "risk analysis framework we use for 'Controversial, Suspect and Extreme content.' "

Yet if Medium meant to stifle debate, its action backfired. Mr. Ginn has since become an informal organizer of a small battalion of well-credentialed dissenters. They include Michael Levitt (a Stanford biologist and the 2013 Nobel laureate in chemistry), John Ioannidis and Jay Bhattacharya (both Stanford professors of medicine), Joel Hay (a University of Southern California professor of pharmacy and health economics) and Neeraj Sood (a USC health economist). They and other researchers have been advising state and local governments on easing their lockdowns. On Thursday Dr. Bhattacharya and Messrs. Hay and Sood fielded questions from the Arizona Legislature about how to reopen the state's economy.

On one side, Mr. Ginn says, are ideologues heavily invested in the idea of lockdown, regardless of the cost. On the other are scientists with data that the lockdowns are overkill. Mr. Ginn himself is a generalist who's spent the past decade in Silicon Valley as a product engineer and "growth hacker"—argot for a marketing strategist. But he was aware of the coronavirus early—he says he started following it as soon as it was reported in China in January.

"My [paternal] grandparents fled Communist China 50 years ago," he says. His mother was the daughter of an Arizona copper miner, and he was born in Fort Worth, Texas. In college, he studied Chinese and went to China as a Christian missionary.

Soon after Beijing quarantined Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province on Jan. 23, cases started popping up in Europe and other Asian countries. "I was concerned, but I did not think that it was going to escalate this quickly," Mr. Ginn says. Then in late February towns in Northern Italy started locking down.

Mr. Ginn was disturbed that Western governments were relying on questionable Chinese data on infections and fatalities to develop their epidemiological models and reflexively copying its response to the virus. He saw no evidence that the lockdowns suppressed the virus's spread or reduced fatalities. China has reported new cases since lifting its Wuhan lockdown late last month, Mr. Ginn notes, though its data are still unreliable.

"There was actually lots of good evidence that we knew about the virus that we were ignoring, that I included in my original Medium piece as things that we should consider, in terms of moderation," he says. Nobody challenged his data, he says, only his interpretation of it.

"I believe in the free expression of ideas," he says. "I had a more positive view of the data than the broader norms were, but its removal was not justified." He acknowledges that some of his inferences may prove wrong—but notes that's equally true of his critics. "Science is the process of understanding the data and testing hypotheses and making sure that our underlying biases are being controlled for as much as possible."

Mr. Ginn spends his days sifting through coronavirus studies, news stories and data, which he compiles in exhaustive daily news feeds that he sends to policy makers, including White House officials as well as state and city lawmakers. His goal is to balance the media's prevailing pro-lockdown bias by amplifying the voices of skeptical experts.

One of his priorities is reopening schools. "When it comes to children, the data coming out of Europe is very, very strong," he says. "You have, I would say, near-unanimous consensus among European scientists, public-health officials—including in Australia, South Korea and Japan—that children, for some reason, while they do get infected, they are not very infectious."

A recent study from Australia identified only 18 cases (nine children and nine staff) across 15 schools, and only two of the infected children's 863 close contacts at the schools became ill. Another review last month, published by the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health, couldn't find an instance of a child passing on the virus to adults and noted that the evidence "consistently demonstrates reduced infection and infectivity of children in the transmission chain."

Mr. Ginn has been closely following Sweden, which has kept children under 16 in school and let most businesses stay open while restricting gatherings of more than 50 people. His daily

briefings frequently cite Sweden's state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, who has argued that government lockdowns lack a "scientific basis" and "people should be able to keep a reasonably normal life." Dr. Tegnell recently estimated that 40% of Stockholm's population would be immune to the virus by the end of May.

That could bring Sweden closer to "herd immunity" than countries that have sought to suppress spread altogether. "We need to 'segment and shield,' " Mr. Ginn says, "and let the epidemic go through": "The question is: How are you going to best protect those that are vulnerable in the larger population?"

Some scientists say herd immunity would require 60% to 70% of the population to be infected, which would entail massive deaths. Mr. Ginn says those numbers are up for debate. A recent study from a large team of international researchers including some at Oxford and the National Institutes of Health (which hasn't undergone peer review) estimates that "variation in susceptibility or exposure to infection can reduce these estimates" so that some populations may achieve herd immunity with an infection rate of only 10% to 20%.

A paper last week by Stockholm University mathematicians estimates herd immunity could be around 43% if young, socially active people mix more and gain immunity, protecting older, less socially active people. In other words, Stockholm may have already achieved herd immunity. Dr. Tegnell said this week that the declining number of cases in Stockholm supports this possibility.

Many studies Mr. Ginn includes in his briefings defy conventional wisdom, and most support his opinion that the lockdowns are too sweeping. But he notes that scientists who support lockdowns are having no problem getting heard. He also cautions that he doesn't endorse everything he cites: "You can think of all of these as retweets. I think it's interesting, but I don't necessarily 100% agree with it."

Some belittle him as an "armchair epidemiologist." He retorts that "facts and data are independent of your credentials." Knowledge of the virus is evolving, and "we should always take in new evidence and judge it, and figure out what's the sort of best policy prescription. A lot of things that we originally thought we were right on were wrong." Take the "6-foot rule" for maintaining personal social distancing, which Mr. Ginn says isn't supported by scientific evidence. The World Health Organization recommends 1 meter (3 feet, 3 inches), while Germany and Australia suggest 1.5 meters (just under 5 feet). Sweden recommends that people use "good judgment."

There's evidence his briefings are having an impact. One of his email threads highlighted the low probability of viral spread outdoors. A follower shared it with the City Council of Newport Beach, Calif. Days later, the council voted to reopen its beach. A woman used his briefs to persuade her homeowner association in Houston to reopen a neighborhood playground.

Avik Roy of the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity notes that a European study Mr. Ginn highlighted several weeks ago found "roughly half of all deaths due to COVID-19 in reporting countries was taking place in nursing homes." That prompted Mr. Roy's group to conduct a similar survey of the U.S., which estimated that 40% of American deaths were in nursing homes.

John Allison, former CEO of BB&T bank who sits on President Trump's Great American Economic Revival Commission, credits Mr. Ginn with providing "a balance in his analysis, weighing both the economic and health burdens of lockdowns and shelter-in-place."

"I want this to be an open dialogue," Mr. Ginn says. "But we shouldn't have public-health people making economic policy. We need to have the policy makers who people vote for make those determinations." After all, "we're a democracy—we're not China."

As for social-media censorship, the internet never forgets. You can still find Mr. Ginn's Medium essay at Archive.org.