

COVID-19 and the ‘third-hand dealers of truth’

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Anti-vaccination protests have raged across the United States in recent months as protesters destroyed a COVID-19 testing site in Manhattan and others threatened to burn down schools in Staten Island over children’s vaccine mandates.

Distrust in experts is surfacing across the country as new data suggest that even amid threats of new variants, people are looking elsewhere for answers on COVID-19 vaccinations and treatment options, often relying more on social media than more direct, reliable sources.

But in an era in which journalists, public officials, and researchers are increasingly having their objectivity compromised by political bias, it has become increasingly difficult to find objective information, and people are understandably skeptical.

The unfortunate result of this otherwise healthy skepticism is that people often rely on social media posts and online stories, often sensationalized "clickbait" to increase website ad revenue.

A good example of this phenomenon is how many people have become conflicted about what to believe about the coronavirus pandemic and vaccine.

“Among the 53% of Americans who say they regularly get news from at least one of the 10 social media sites asked about, close to three-quarters say they have gotten a lot (30%) or some (43%) news and information about COVID-19 vaccines on social media. And about 6 in 10 of this group (61%) say that social media is an important way of keeping up with news about COVID-19 vaccines, though just 11% say it is the *most* important way,” according to an Aug. 24 Pew Research report .

“Those who depend on social media are also more likely than other news consumers to be exposed to made-up news... and to give credence to falsehoods,” Pew warned in an earlier Nov. 16, 2020, article .

Still, only 52% have “a great deal” of trust for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and only 37% have “quite a lot” of trust for the National Institutes of Health and the Food and

Drug Administration, according to a May 2021 poll conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

These revelations are troublesome when according to recent CDC reports, only 59.1% of the U.S. population has been fully vaccinated.

This general feeling of distrust could explain why the U.S. has reportedly among the lowest vaccination rates among G-7 nations.

And yet, while this story is certainly worrisome, it is not new and most definitely a problem that continues to grow with the use of social media platforms.

In economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek's seminal 1949 article, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," he offered the public a grim warning, claiming the intellectual movement which drove Europe toward socialism in the 1800s was on the horizon of the United States, in part because of the intellectual class's growing power to define public opinion.

Hayek says this intellectual class serves as "the organs which modern society has developed for spreading knowledge and ideas, and it is their convictions and opinions which operate as the sieve through which all new conceptions must pass before they can reach the masses."

But when Hayek speaks of intellectuals, he is not speaking of university professors and other experts in their respective fields. He is speaking of "second-hand dealers in ideas" (e.g., journalists, commentators, and politicians) that merely repackage ideas for mass consumption.

Today, the internet has provided yet another layer of opportunity for another group of people to repackage information. Social media users with large followings are today's 'third-hand dealers in ideas,' hurriedly posting quotes and stories from second-hand dealers, enabling popular but uninformed and even manipulative internet users to receive esteem as holders of truth.

And yet, while the role of these social media users is unavoidable when navigating through the Information Age, their biases present a significant danger.

As Hayek warned, the intellectual often "judges new ideas not by their specific merit, but by the readiness with which they fit into his general conceptions, into the picture of the world which he regards as modern and advanced."

What happens when ideas are peddled to and from individuals who do not hold a philosophical or even scientific system of beliefs? What happens when truth is oversimplified to fit a 140-character call to action on Twitter?

The result is dangerous because third-hand dealers do not base their arguments on evidence but rather try to reshape the evidence to fit their arguments.

Although this warning was not directed toward the current pandemic, there are lessons to be learned from the disinformation and panic we have seen from both sides of the political aisle.

Although we should not blindly trust experts whose studies are used to legitimize government narratives and quell public concerns, we should also not dismiss that some of them have access to knowledge, skills, and training the public does not.

As the Cato Institute's Peter Van Doren notes , "In some ways, the 'scientific community' is akin to a modern version of the priesthood. Scientists wear lab coats instead of vestments, but like clerics, they have the authority that comes with access to knowledge unavailable to laypersons."

As we continue to battle COVID-19 and the ever-changing pandemic, we must take heed of Hayek's warning and be wary of this pandemic's second and third-hand dealers in ideas and modern-day "Twitter intellectuals."

Although we sometimes find comfort in our friends, neighbors, or admired online personalities and politicians, we must utilize reason because, as the numbers demonstrate, these decisions continue to remain a matter of life or death.