



Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation—A Rhetorical Challenge

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One of the biggest challenges faced by health experts during the coronavirus pandemic is how to communicate accurate, truthful and fact-based information necessary for the public to make informed decisions about how to behave. At present there is an enormous amount of information and political messages spinning that information—all of which create confusion and uncertainty.

More specifically, the question is: How do we fight misinformation on the COVID-19 threat spread by President Donald Trump and those media outlets who act as his cheerleaders not only by supporting but sometimes prompting his claims?

One of my former students who works for the World Health Organization offered an answer, suggesting this is the role of public health officials and their organizations. Their nonpartisan mission is to

fight misinformation by communicating scientifically-based information to all people, regardless of ideology or political view.

While I understand this argument and applaud the efforts of public health officials, as a scholar and teacher of communication for more than 40 years, I believe doing this is not so easy and may be an impossible rhetorical feat. Why? Because it is hard for public health officials to gain the attention of Americans and thus fend off misinformation as long as the public stage and lines of communication are controlled by the President of the United States.

For example, when people hear their President (who in times past was invariably trusted and counted on to tell the truth) lie and undermine experts, getting out an accurate message is an enormous communicative challenge. Hence, in order for the nation to minimize the COVID-19 pandemic, the President must stop dominating the conversation and promulgating spur of the moment ideas that some inevitably will believe and recklessly act upon. That will require Republican leaders to do what thus far they haven't—stand up to and denounce Trump; otherwise he will have no incentive to behave in a more responsible manner.

As someone who studies political messages, I contend that fighting misinformation is primarily a rhetorical challenge: How can public health officials reach and persuade a wider audience? There is only one answer: Silence Trump and allow his public health experts to do the talking, rather than putting them in an awkward position where in order to keep their jobs they must undertake a difficult balancing act,

avoiding a full-throated critique of the President. After all, these officials realize that their dismissal might very well unleash Trump to say and Tweet more untruthful information, as well as enact dangerous measures that, fortunately, his public health officials thus far have dissuaded him from implementing.

Of note is that during Friday's unusually short COVID-19 health briefing the President failed to bring Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx, his two leading public health officials, to the press room. In addition, we are now learning that Fauci and Birx may be sidelined in the coming weeks. The White House confirmed to Axios that both will stay on "but take a back seat to the forward-looking, 'what's next' message."

These recent moves underscore and in fact document the exact problem at the heart of my argument. In short, all Americans wishing to prevent and counter misinformation should be concerned.

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