

COVID, Communication, and Controversy:
How Modern Media Blurs the Line Between Fact and Fiction

By Ethan Han

Introduction

As cruel as it may sound, disease is a driving force in human development. During the numerous massive pandemics that have plagued humans throughout history, mankind has emerged on the other side more aware of the dangers a deadly disease can pose. In modern times, it is apparent that humanity is now better equipped to combat disease than ever before. However, despite recent medical advancements making diseases much more treatable and manageable, this has not completely eradicated pandemics. The increase in global air travel along with the heavy trends of urbanization worldwide have made the prospect of a pandemic in the 21st century drastically more worrisome, difficult to manage, and control.

In this age of globalization, modern communications through media and social media allow information to travel almost instantaneously across the globe, making the public much more cognizant of emerging diseases. At the same time, access to faster and broader modes of communication also poses a problem for control of diseases like COVID-19. Social media provides a platform for people to disagree with the medical realities and management of the pandemic and advocate against government regulations. For this reason, despite advances in medicine that help prevent and fight new diseases, increased social awareness through expanded communication can have a mitigating effect on the benefits that science offers humans in the current age. Public perception of disease has changed, presenting both an asset and detriment to current and future treatment efforts. Due to improved and increased communications in the modern era, anomalous amounts of misinformation are now widely available, both assisting and impeding COVID-19 relief efforts.

The Spread of COVID-19

On February 11th, 2019, COVID-19 was first detected in Huanan Market, a wet market which sold live exotic animals for consumption. Located in the Wuhan province of China, the disease quickly spread throughout China's densely populated megacities and its rural communities. Thought to have originated from bats, this novel coronavirus caused symptoms of a dry cough, and eventually developed pneumonia in its hosts. Due to frequent international travel between China and many countries in the world, the disease soon arrived in a plethora of countries such as Korea, Japan, Russia, Iran, Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the US, Brazil, and many more.¹ Despite the best efforts of health guidelines put into place by various governments, the number of infected continued to rise throughout 2020.

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was confirmed on January 21st, 2020, which stemmed from a Washington state resident who had recently visited Wuhan province.² The very next day U.S. President Donald Trump spoke out on social media, saying that "We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China. It's going to be just fine" (Trump, 2020).³ The country confirmed its second case from a woman in her sixties from Chicago on January 24th. By January 26th, 5 people were infected, with the most recent coming from Los Angeles, Orange County, and Arizona. The following day COVID-19 screenings were extended to 20 airports, and on January 28th, all air travel between the United States and China was suspended by President Trump. By January 29th the United States, along with Japan, were

¹ "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html.

² "A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020." *AJMC*, www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020.

³ @realdonaldtrump (Donald J. Trump). "It's one person coming in from China. We have it under control. It's going to be just fine," *Twitter*, 22 Jan. 2020 URL <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/22/trump-on-coronavirus-from-china-we-have-it-totally-under-control.html>.

the first nations to evacuate their citizens from Wuhan. On January 30th, a sixth case was confirmed, which became the first case of person-to-person transmission in the country.

On February 5th, the CDC began distributing test-kits to over one hundred labs across the country and even more evacuations from Wuhan were completed. By February 21st, there were 34 COVID-19 cases present in the US, including passengers evacuated from the Diamond Princess, a cruise ship off the coast of California that carried infected individuals from several countries.⁴ On the 25th of the same month, the CDC warned the country of the disease spreading amongst the general population despite the prevention measures put into place. Four days after this solemn prediction, the US suffered its first casualty due to COVID-19.⁵

In terms of the effects of the virus on the international scene, the world waits in anticipation for a reliable vaccine to be tested and distributed. Many countries still maintain their quarantine policy in fear of a premature opening causing another surge in cases. In the United States, there was a sense that the virus would end with the arrival of the summer in 2020. Some people predicted that like in the case of the flu the hot weather of the summer would bring an end to the disease. Unfortunately, that assumption has been proven to be utterly false. America is currently in the midst of a “third wave” far more severe than the previous two, resulting in local authorities redoubling their quarantine efforts to limit the impact of COVID-19. The vaccine is also somewhat worrisome. While significant progress has been made, questions of effectiveness and distribution issues still hinder its implementation.

Problems of a Modern Pandemic

⁴ “A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020.” *AJMC*, www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020.

⁵ Taylor, Derrick Bryson. “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Feb. 2020, www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html.

Being the most severe pandemic since HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s, COVID-19 presents a truly modern issue to the table of disease prevention. When this current virus is compared to the pandemics of old, one of the important differences has to do with the relationship between communications and medicine, politics, and social conscience. Standing at nearly the one-year mark of the first cases of COVID-19, one can now look back and reflect upon the way that politics and the social mood of Americans has played a part in the pandemic. One of the main issues in the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States has been the question of trust of government and health officials. Some in the population have dismissed the advice of health professionals because of their fear of government control and the belief that the pandemic is a hoax intended to oust Trump from office. Much of this misinformation was generated and communicated by the president himself, who early on in the pandemic on February 28, 2020 told audiences that the coronavirus was the Democrats' new hoax. Near the beginning of the pandemic, Trump also repeated that there were many similarities between the pandemic and the seasonal flu, saying things like "35,000 on average each year die from the flu, that's a lot of people."⁶

This misinformation, combined with record levels of distrust of authority and government regulation, and an overall lack of concern over the potential risks of the virus has had a negative impact on pandemic management. In the United States alone, a large enough population has chosen to ignore the best judgement of health officials that it noticeably hinders the country's ability to respond to the current crisis. While in previous pandemics there were smaller groups who disregarded conventional wisdom in favor of home remedies, there has never been such a

⁶ @realdonaldtrump (Donald J. Trump). "It's one person coming in from China. We have it under control. It's going to be just fine," *Twitter*, 22 Jan. 2020 URL. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/trump-on-coronavirus-from-china-we-have-it-totally-under-control.html>.

widespread blatant refusal to comply. Adding insult to injury, the development of a vaccine, the best tool against such outbreaks, has left much to be desired. The Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have been vocal about their lack of funding inhibiting their progress on developing a cure. In addition, in the middle of the pandemic, Trump took to blaming the World Health Organization and ultimately decided to remove the United States representation from the organization.⁷ Compiling all the issues and setbacks the medical community has faced in the development of a vaccine, people have begun to lose faith in their ability to solve this current pandemic.

A significant influence in the rise of a populist mentality is the role that social media has had in the pandemic. As a side effect of the informational age that is the 21st century, a sizable population of citizens have chosen to forgo the safety guidelines of their governments. The main culprit to this mass of misinformation are the numerous social media platforms that are now widely available to all groups. In an article speaking on social media's effect on the distribution of false information, the Harvard Gazette's Christina Pazzanese notes that "the popularity and ubiquity of the various platforms means the public is no longer merely passively consuming inaccuracies and falsehoods. It's disseminating and even creating them."⁸ Arbitrary assumptions made by unqualified individuals can now be shared to hundreds of thousands at the click of a button, and when such cases are so abundant, it becomes difficult to identify what is correct. The massive amount of misinformation present creates doubts among those trying to seek actual medical advice, which can lead to people to eventually dismiss the entire subject as a hoax.

⁷ BBC News, "Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization," July 7, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

⁸ Christina Pazzanese. "Battling the 'pandemic of misinformation,'" May 8, 2020. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/05/social-media-used-to-spread-create-covid-19-falsehoods/> Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

A prime example of this “mythmaking” was President Trump’s advocacy for a drug to combat COVID-19 called hydroxychloroquine, or hydroxy for short. On March 19th, the president praised the drug as a “gamechanger” in a task force meeting about COVID-19.⁹ Despite the Director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Dr. Anthony Fauci dismissing the president’s claims as based on “anecdotal evidence,” public interest in the drug immediately skyrocketed among Trump’s supporters. The next day the president took to Twitter and cited a small French study, which the publisher denounced two weeks later citing that the study “did not meet society standards,” which coincided with his claim.¹⁰ On the 24th, just three days after Trump’s announcement about hydroxy, a man died in Arizona due to ingesting non-medical hydroxy.¹¹ On April 9th, the National Institute of Health (NIH) began clinical trials investigating the possibility of hydroxy being a valid treatment option for COVID-19.¹² After months of additional controversy and a study associating the drug with cardiac arrest being released on May 11th, the NIH ceased its trials on the drug with no benefits discovered.¹³

Social media communications have also played an enormous role in spreading conspiracy theories about the virus and the government’s role in finding a solution. This has greatly impacted the ability of states and communities to work together toward progress to slow the spread of the virus. An example of this is the now infamous Breitbart video showing a group of doctors in Texas advocating for the benefits of Hydroxy. The video showed a Texas physician named Stella Immanuel with several doctors advocating for the benefits of Hydroxy as a remedy

⁹ Cathey, Libby. “Timeline: Tracking Trump alongside Scientific Developments on Hydroxychloroquine.” *ABC News*, ABC News Network, abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-tracking-trump-alongside-scientific-developments-hydroxychloroquine/story?id=72170553.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

to the virus. Soon after its release, the video went viral on social media and within days Trump defended the doctors, saying that they have something important to say.¹⁴ Within days of Breitbart news posting the video, both Facebook and Twitter deleted it from their platforms, citing that the video led to major disinformation about the virus and complicated the ability of the country to halt its spread. This decision on the part of the big-tech social media companies only fed further into conspiracy theories, some of which held that social media was the friend of Democrats and liberals in the American government. Many people saw the banning of the video on social media platforms as yet another liberal attack on Donald Trump and his attempts to get a vaccine out for Americans as soon as possible. The problem with this idea was that the medical community had already run several tests on the drug and found that it did not have any significant effects upon COVID-19 patients.

COVID-19 in 2021

As more and more information regarding the vaccine situation becomes public, it has become clear that COVID will persist until the new year. Concerns with the vaccine's effectiveness and possible side effects in addition to the constant mythmaking and hoax theories already present have made significant portions of the population suspect the validity of the vaccine itself. The social climate created by quarantine makes publicizing up-to-date information about COVID-19 or the vaccine extremely difficult, and that fact does not seem to be changing with the transition into 2021. COVID-19 will inevitably still be a major issue in the new year, and the promise of a vaccine has done little to ease the worries of a people whose lives and livelihoods have been irrevocably altered by the pandemic.

¹⁴ Spiering, Charlie, "Donald Trump Defends Censored Doctors for Recommending Hydroxychloroquine," July 28, 2020. <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/07/28/donald-trump-defends-censored-doctors-for-recommending-hydroxychloroquine/>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Along with the changing of the year, the political landscape of the United States will shift with Democratic candidate Joe Biden's victory over the incumbent Donald Trump and the new Democratic majority in the Senate. Biden's rhetoric concerning the pandemic is starkly different from Trump's time in office: promising widespread stimulus relief and direct action to end the pandemic. President Biden also advocates for mask-wearing, social distancing, and other precautionary measures that Trump had previously dismissed. While the effectiveness of Biden's message remains to be seen, it is highly likely that his efforts in 2021 against COVID-19 will become the defining period of his presidency.

Conclusion

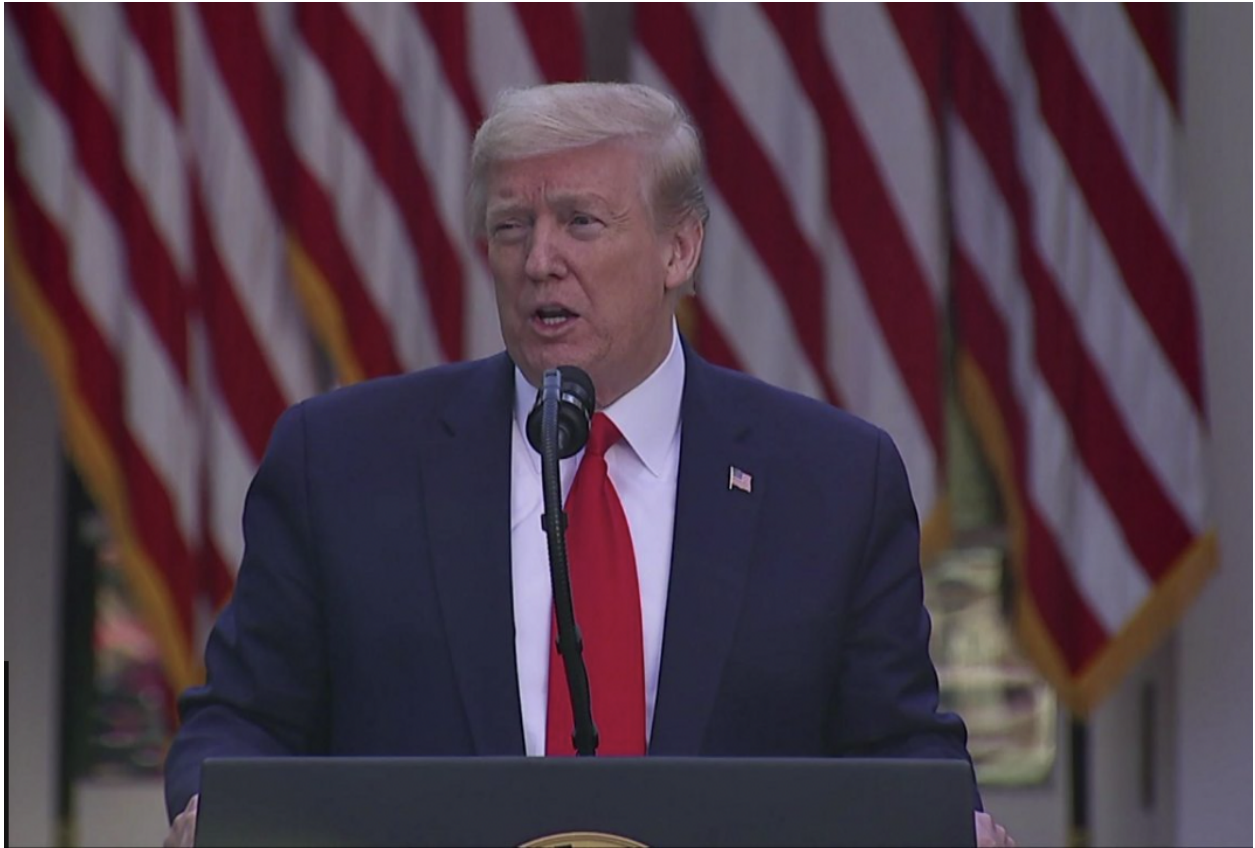
For better or for worse, COVID-19 has forever changed public perception of pandemics. Disease has always had a social aspect, but COVID-19 shows that global pandemics in the modern era present problems that medicine cannot solve. Distrust of medical authorities and doubts of pandemic conditions are now genuine concerns that need to be dealt with alongside vaccine research and quarantine efforts. At the heart of these new obstacles is communication, for without the interconnected nature of the modern era, resistance against COVID-19 relief would never have reached the heights that it has. By expanding the overall available information, it has become increasingly difficult for the average citizen to find accurate and trustworthy information on the current progress of the pandemic. Communication has proven to be the origin of so many problems that scientists, doctors, and politicians are faced with in this new age of disease.

That is not to say that we should forsake communication to reduce these problems. Even at its worst, being connected has created solutions to as many problems as it has created. If

anything, COVID-19 has further emphasized the necessity of communication. It is now easier than ever to meet with your loved ones, albeit virtually, and share your lives with others. Companies are changing work policies to allow for more employees to work from home. Medical institutions use social media to spread awareness about proper COVID safety guidelines and vaccine updates. While it may be true that communications have created issues, modern media is the linchpin to keeping our daily lives as close to normal as possible; without it, we would be utterly isolated, trying to cope with the current status quo alone. We, as a species, are social creatures. We yearn for personal connection and to be a part of something greater than ourselves, seeking validation for our own existence from our peers. In that sense, humans are not in Zoom meetings, liking pictures on Instagram, or scrolling through their Twitter feeds more than ever because of COVID-19, but instead to search for that connection which isolation has taken away from us.

Appendix A

Former President Donald Trump addressing the public on Covid-19 in May 2020



Source: BBC News, “Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization,” July 7, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Appendix B

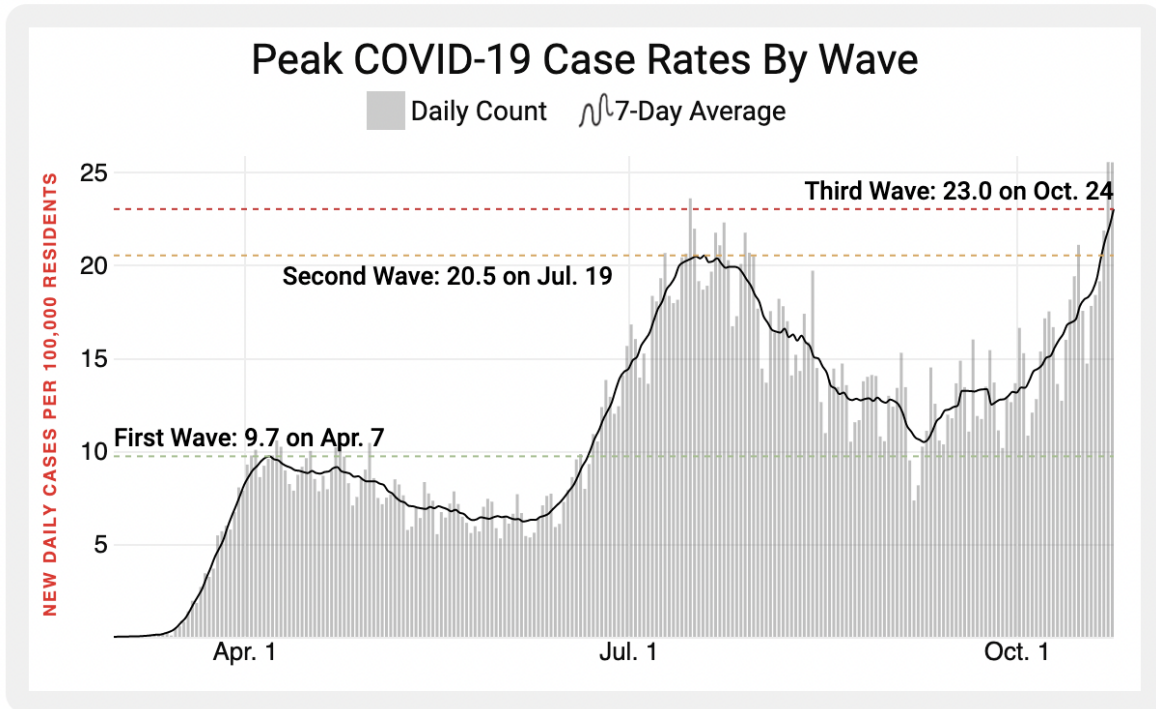
US doctors speaking about the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine in July 2020



Source: Charlie Spiering, “Donald Trump Defends Censored Doctors for Recommending Hydroxychloroquine,” July 28, 2020. <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/07/28/donald-trump-defends-censored-doctors-for-recommending-hydroxychloroquine/>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Appendix C

United States Peak Covid-19 Case Rates By Wave



Source: Wilson, Chris. "The Third Wave of COVID-19 in the U.S. Is Officially Worse Than the First Two." October 25, 2020. <https://time.com/5903673/record-daily-coronavirus-cases/>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

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[URL.https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/trump-on-coronavirus-from-china-we-have-it-totally-under-control.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/trump-on-coronavirus-from-china-we-have-it-totally-under-control.html).

Annotation: In this Tweet, former President Trump comments on COVID-19 in its early stages, prior to large-scale infection in multiple countries.

“A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020.” *AJMC*, www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020.

Annotation: This source provides a comprehensive timeline of the critical events throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html.

Annotation: This source shows general information about COVID-19, including a map of COVID-19 cases worldwide.

Secondary Sources

BBC News, “Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization,” July 7, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: In this article, former President Trump cuts funding for the WHO and blames the organization for his inability to contain the virus.

Bomey, Nathan, “Social media teems with conspiracy theories from QAnon and Trump critics after president's positive COVID-19 test, October 2, 2020.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/10/02/trump-covid-conspiracy-theories-emerge-social-media-after-positive-test/5892808002/>

Annotation: Former President Trump buys into conspiracy theories generated by internet conspiracy group QAnon after testing positive for COVID-19.

Cathey, Libby. "Timeline: Tracking Trump alongside Scientific Developments on Hydroxychloroquine." *ABC News*, ABC News Network, abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-tracking-trump-alongside-scientific-developments-hydroxychloroquine/story?id=72170553.

Annotation: This timeline tracks Former President Trump's statements on Hydroxychloroquine, a possible but untested cure for COVID-19.

Kulke, Stephanie. "Social media contributes to misinformation about COVID-19 National survey explores misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccine acceptance." September 23, 2020 <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2020/09/social-media-contributes-to-misinformation-about-covid-19/> Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: This article outlines the vast amounts of misinformation on the internet and social media about COVID-19.

Pazzanese, Christina. "Battling the 'pandemic of misinformation,'" May 8, 2020. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/05/social-media-used-to-spread-create-covid-19-falsehoods/> Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: This article discusses the effects that an enormous amount of misinformation about COVID-19 creates.

Spiering, Charlie, "Donald Trump Defends Censored Doctors for Recommending Hydroxychloroquine," July 28, 2020. <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/07/28/donald-trump-defends-censored-doctors-for-recommending-hydroxychloroquine/>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: In this source, former President Trump defends previous statements about Hydroxychloroquine, an unproven cure for COVID-19.

Taylor, Derrick Bryson. "A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Feb. 2020, www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html.

Annotation: This source provides another timeline that notes major milestones in COVID-19 transmission globally.

WARC Staff, "The two sides of social media during COVID-19," October 13, 2020.

<https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/the-two-sides-of-social-media-during-covid-19/44219>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: This article outlines the positives and negatives of social media during quarantine.

Wilson, Chris. "The Third Wave of COVID-19 in the U.S. Is Officially Worse Than the First Two." October 25, 2020. <https://time.com/5903673/record-daily-coronavirus-cases/>. Last accessed, March 10, 2021.

Annotation: This article displays the "waves" of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing that the "third wave" is the most severe so far.