

Chapter 6

Dis Versus Mis-Information: Unexpected Insights from Covid19



Once again, the chapter calls attention to the distressing fact that one of the least anticipated, and thus least prepared for, aspects of the Pandemic was the spate of arguments that poured forth in favor of not getting vaccinated for the Virus. This is in spite of the fact that similar types of arguments were parts of previous Pandemics. It's thereby one of the most serious ways in which we failed to learn from earlier crises.

If ever we needed to learn the critical lessons that Covid 19 has to teach so that we can be better prepared for future Pandemics, surely that time is now.

One of the key points of Chaps. 1 and 2 is that one of the least anticipated consequences of Covid19, and therefore least planned for, was the spate of bizarre and outlandish arguments/claims that were constantly bandied about by those who are bitterly opposed to taking the vaccines. They are so far beyond the pale of ordinary thought such that they are literally unthinkable, at least to those possessing the most minimum amount of reasonableness.

Yes, once again, it's unfortunately the case that such arguments are not entirely without precedent for they've accompanied all important Public Health outbreaks such as HIV and SARS. Denial is regrettably a major accompaniment of all events that are too painful to comprehend, let alone bear. Still, why weren't they better anticipated by the Medical Community and Social Scientists working together? Once again, if they had, would it have helped lower the resistance to the taking of the vaccines, thereby upping the rates of vaccinations, and thus hopefully stemming the spread of a deadly disease?

But then it would have required the intense cooperation of diverse disciplines working together. Indeed, before then, it requires mutual respect and understanding.

What's supremely sad, if not tragic, is that the vaccines that were produced in record times were for the express purpose of protecting as many people as possible from a fatal disease, thus curtailing its spread.

Recall that the arguments/claims for not getting vaccinated fell into distinct clusters thus bolstering one another. First and foremost is the Hoax Cluster, namely that

Virus is not real, and thus not deserving of any attention. It was aided by its natural ally, the Conspiracy/Paranoia Cluster, which asserts without any proof whatsoever that by surreptitiously placing micro-chips in the vaccines, the Virus has been deliberately fomented by the Government to spy on us. Not only can the Government thereby track our every whereabouts, and most of all our thoughts, but it can then control us and take away our precious freedoms and liberties. Another important group is the Invulnerability Cluster, namely that “If in the highly unlikely case that the Virus is real, I’m immune to it.” The Product Defect Cluster is the absurd and unfounded claim that the Vaccine, not the Virus, is the true danger since it’s responsible for causing the Virus in the first place. It thus completely reverses the correct order of causality. Worst of all, the Virus was deliberately placed in the vaccines by the Government in order to infect as many people as possible. While these do not exhaust all of so-called arguments/claims, they more than capture the general spirit of the madness.

The clusters apply to virtually all of the important issues with which we are struggling. Climate Change comes immediately to mind. The Hoax Cluster takes the form of outright Climate Denial. To those who believe it’s a Hoax, it’s a perfect example of more unwanted Government Intrusion into our lives. Thus, Paranoia is a prominent feature as well. Invulnerability takes the form that its effects are exaggerated and thereby completely overblown.

Consider how they apply to Dis and Misinformation. Whereas Misinformation is supposedly unintentional, Disinformation is intentional in that it’s deliberately concocted. Be this as it may, the general clusters apply equally to both. Indeed, more often than not, it’s supremely difficult to distinguish between the two.

Consider the general outcomes of Dis and Misinformation. Both play major roles in the instigation and spread of Anger and Distrust, Disengagement from Public and Private Life, Greater Divisiveness and Polarization, and especially the Promotion of Widespread Fear and Panic.

The Hoax Cluster works both ways. The first is claiming that there is a Hoax when there is not. It’s thereby one of the major forms of Dis and Misinformation. The second is claiming that there is not a Hoax when there definitively is. It cannot be stressed enough that both forms apply equally to Dis and Misinformation. To reiterate, either is capable of Causing Havoc and thus of promoting Widespread Anger, Fear, and Distrust.

The most prominent example is the Big Lie, namely that Donald Trump won the last election when there is abundant proof that he did not. Just as bad are efforts by Republican lawmakers to whitewash the January 6, 2021 attacks on the U.S Capitol by among other things arguing that “it’s time to focus on the future, not dwell on the past,” thereby blocking an honest examination of one of the worst challenges to American Democracy.

More generally, the Hoax Cluster is not only capable of Raising False Hopes, but of Dashing Honest Ones; Creating Versus Ignoring Legitimate Crises and Threats; Creating Unrealistic Expectations Versus Suppressing Realistic Ones; Setting Parties Against One Another and in this regard Creating False Allies and Enemies, etc.

The Invulnerability Cluster applies equally as well. In this case, the claim is that one is Invulnerable when one is not. The exact opposite is the false claim that one is Vulnerable when one is in fact secure and well-protected from whatever threats are imagined. One of the most unfortunate examples is the unfounded claims of parents that by virtue of their young ages, their children are naturally immune to the Virus when they are not. As before, children must be generally protected from anything that poses a threat to their esteem, self-image, and self-worth. In short, they must be protected from anything disturbing.

To reiterate, the Defect Cluster wrongly attributes Cause and Effects. Thus, not only does it confuse them, but it attributes the wrong things to each. In effect, it leads one down the wrong paths. It's directly responsible for what are known as Type 3 Errors, Solving the Wrong Problems Precisely, thus diverting attention away from the most important problems.

Once again, the worst consequences are Rampant Fear, Unconstrained Panic, and Paranoia.

One of the most serious cases is the fallacious claim that Mandates for vaccinations are entirely new and that President Biden is thereby clearly to blame for instituting them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mandates for serious diseases go back as far as George Washington who ordered them for smallpox.

If only Dis and Misinformation were so easily dispelled by supplying Accurate and True Information. If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, such is not the case, especially in a world where they're constantly manufactured and distributed by the latest technologies such as so-called Social Media, more accurately labelled Anti-Social Media.

To emphasize an earlier point, as best we know, the most effective way of countering fallacious beliefs is by means of close personal friends who've not only been down the same false paths, but have the courage to admit that they were wrong. It's as close to a truly heroic act that most of us ever get.

Arguments big and small, true and false, literally make the world go round. They are the foundations upon which our lives are built. Challenging false arguments/claims has never been more important, and yet more arduous.

Postscript: A Needed Success Story

One of the most successful efforts in combatting Dis and Misinformation is that of New York City.¹ Its success is due to identifying new types of Disinformation and their sources and then putting out facts as soon as possible to counteract them. For instance, it was wrongly claimed that the vaccines increased infertility, were designed to "annihilate Christianity and the Polish Nation." In other words, once

¹Mara Gay, "Not Everyone in N.Y. Wanted the Coronavirus to Lose," The New York Times, Wednesday, November 3, 2021, p. A23.

again, they fed on deep insecurities. The campaign to dispel them was so successful that it increased vaccination rates among Black residents by 15%.

The chief lesson is that even if facts don't necessarily persuade everyone, they are essential nonetheless in reaching critical segments of the population.

As an important footnote, young people have taken the lead in getting the correct facts out to one another thus once again showing the power of personal touch.

Reflections

Think of as many examples as you can where you or your family have been exposed to information that later proved to be false. What were the sources of the Dis or Misinformation? Why did they seem credible? What was key in convincing you that they were false?

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