

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Covid vaccine and mask conspiracies succeed when they appeal to identity and ideology

Once a person feels part of a community or a movement, the adherence to a science-free, health misinformation position may begin to feel brave.



— Protesters gather outside Central District Health's office in Boise, Idaho, on Dec. 15, 2020 as the CDH was meeting virtually to consider a mask mandate. *Otto Kitsinger / AP file*

Dec. 18, 2020, 4:53 PM MST

By Timothy Caulfield, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Alberta

We all do it to some degree. We adopt perspectives and behaviors because they seem consistent with our personal identity. We make one decision (making an effort to buy only organic food, for

instance) and that shapes future decisions and beliefs (such as views on the safety of genetically modified organisms). Our personal brand matters.

Playing to a person's personal identity – that is, how they view themselves and how they want others to see them – has always played a role in the uptake and spread of health misinformation.

Playing to a person's personal identity – that is, how they view themselves and how they want others to see them – has always **played a role** in the uptake and spread of health misinformation. It is, for instance, a **foundational marketing strategy** of the wellness industry. Wellness gurus and celebrity lifestyle companies push potions (unproven **supplements**), products (crystals, **vagina eggs**), and ideas (energy healing, cleansing) that **fit the vibe** of their brand and their consumer's expectations – science and evidence be damned.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an intensification of this use of personal identity as a way to push conspiracy theories, unproven treatments and ideological agendas.

Anti-maskers say, for example, that face coverings infringe their **constitutional rights**. And if you are the kind of person who is for constitutional rights (and who isn't?), then you should be against masks – or so the argument goes. Likewise, lockdowns and physical distancing are **framed as attacks on** basic democratic freedoms. As **Dr. Seema Yasmin**, a clinical assistant medical professor and a misinformation expert from Stanford University, **noted**, “more and more I'm seeing that misinformation and disinformation are packaged with political information – vaccines and masks are anti-freedom, anti-American.”

Related

OPINION

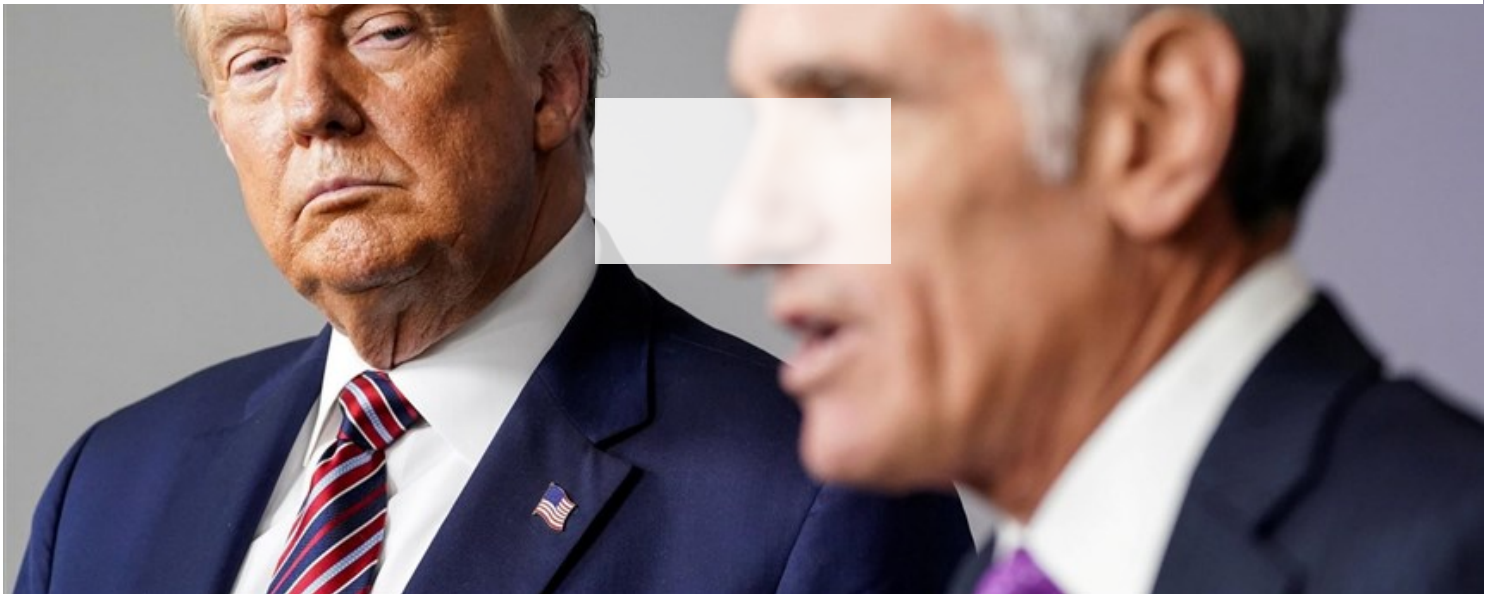
Right-wing America has no idea what 'liberty' means. COVID-19 protesters prove it.

Indeed, many who have been peddling conspiracy theories about **2020 election fraud are now making the transition** to spreading lies about **Covid-19 vaccines**. The peddlers know their

audience. The themes are often the same – freedom, distrust of government institutions, and, of course, the demonization of Bill Gates.

Alas, wrapping Covid-19 misinformation in a blanket of ideological branding has likely contributed to the spread of bunk that has done significant harm, including resulting in deaths, hospitalizations, financial loss, increased stigma and discrimination, and warped health and science policy. It has shaped beliefs and behaviors, and it **has had an adverse impact** on the adoption of preventative health strategies. To cite just a few examples, **one-fifth of the U.S. population believed in September**, despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, that masks are bad for our health. In May, a YouGov poll found that 28 percent of U.S. respondents believed the (seriously hard-core) conspiracy theory that **Bill Gates wants to use vaccines to implant microchips**.

Trump, Fox News misinformation affliction complicates Covid-19 response



The spread of health misinformation has always had an ideological dimension. This is likely because the use of ideological concepts has been shown to be an effective strategy to draw people into a community and to facilitate the uncritical acceptance of contentious scientific perspectives. For example, there are public debates surrounding the sale of raw milk, with some wanting less regulation and more access, despite evidence of potential harm due to the lack of pasteurization. In this context, messaging that frames the issue as about “choice” and “food freedom” – as the raw milk advocates often do – has **been found** to resonate more with the

general public than the scientifically grounded safety and health concerns often used by public health authorities. **Anti-GMO and anti-fluoride** activists use similar tactics.

People come for the ideological spin (especially if it fits their pre-existing **personal identity**) and stay despite the science-free lunacy. Unfortunately, we are seeing more and more of this kind of messaging – that is, the use of intuitively appealing language, such as “freedom” and “choice” – in the context of vaccines. As recently **noted** by **associate professor David Broniatowski** from George Washington University, the “framing vaccine refusal as a civil right allows vaccine opponents to sidestep the science.” And with the **distribution of Covid-19 vaccines** just around the corner, this couldn’t be happening at a worst time.

Laurie Garrett says we ‘don’t have the right kinds of messaging going out’ to build vaccine trust



People may also come to embrace a worldview and the associated misinformation only after they’ve entered a community for some other non-ideological reason. But once they feel part of the community, they adopt the philosophies and perspectives that serve as identifiers of that community – thus, again, allowing personal identity and ideology to take precedence over the recognition and rejection of associated science-free precepts.

One of the best examples of this comes from the world of alternative medicine. An **interesting study found that** people have a range of initial motivations for trying alternative medicine, including frustration with the conventional system and a desire to find an effective treatment.

But once a person has tried alternative medicine, the motivations may shift to being more about a concomitant to the community's value and ideology – which, too often, can mean an **increased tolerance** for magical thinking and anti-vaccine perspectives.

Recommended

OPINION

Trump's specter still haunts almost every major American sport. Just ask Tom Brady.

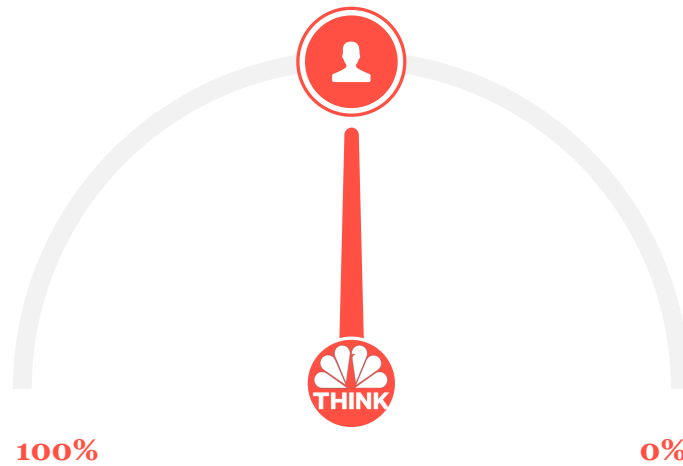
OPINION

The SAT is desperately trying to save itself, but hopefully colleges will see through it

This is one reason that many in the wellness community have **embraced alt-right conspiracy theories** like those **pushed by QAnon**. While it may seem an incongruous pairing, **the communities have ideological similarities** – including a distrust of traditional sources of scientific knowledge and an emphasis on freedom and choice.

QUICK VOTE ● 11 734 VOTES

How much do you trust the coronavirus vaccine?



OPINARY.

Of course, personal identities will also influence the kind of information we seek out. **Often**, people will **find someone who appears to be “like them”** (that is, aligns with their personal identity) to be more credible than an expert. This is one reason why a blogger or YouTube pontificator can hold more sway than an academic researcher who has spent an entire career studying the relevant issue. If the YouTuber speaks to and confirms a pre-existing worldview that is core to who you are, that message has a good chance of winning out over science-informed information from an expert.

When a belief becomes linked to personal identity, it can become very resistant to change. Indeed, once a person feels part of a community or a movement, the adherence to a science-free position may begin to feel not fringe-y, but “brave and righteous” – as a **recent study of the Australian anti-vaccine** movement found.

What can be done? One thing to consider is speed. **Studies have shown** that the best debunks of misinformation are targeted and happen quickly. A study published in Nature Human Behaviour concluded that a **prompt communication response to Covid-19 misinformation** can “make a major difference in determining the social outcome” of the misinformation.

Related

OPINION

We want to hear what you THINK. Please submit a letter to the editor.

So, we need to tackle misinformation quickly, before it becomes symbolic of a particular ideology or a health brand. And we should also remind the world that science-informed public health policy isn't antithetical to concepts such as freedom and choice. On the contrary, fighting misleading health misinformation enhances autonomy and empowers informed decision-making – which seems like a goal that everyone should be able to get behind, regardless of your ideological inclinations.

Subscribe to the THINK newsletter

ReTHINK the news cycle with timely op-eds, in-depth analyses and personal essays delivered weekly to your inbox.

Enter your email

SIGN UP

THIS SITE IS PROTECTED BY RECAPTCHA

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [TERMS OF SERVICE](#)



Timothy Caulfield



Timothy Caulfield is a Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Alberta and author of the [new book](#) “Your Day, Your Way: The Fact and Fiction Behind Your Daily Decisions” (Running Press, 2020).

Sponsored Stories

by Taboola

ERO WARS

etting this Treasure is impossible! Prove us wrong

HE MOTLEY FOOL

esla CEO Is Contributing to a \$1 Billion Investment In This New Technology

CAPITAL ONE SHOPPING

The Dead Giveaway That Tells You What Is Amazon's Lowest Price

SPACE MASK

Breathe And Speak Easily For Hours With This Nanotech Face Mask

SPONSORED / HERO WARS

Getting this Treasure is impossible! Prove us wrong

SPONSORED / THE MOTLEY FOOL

Tesla CEO Is Contributing to a \$1 Billion Investment In This New Technology

SPONSORED / CAPITAL ONE SHOPPING

The Dead Giveaway That Tells You What Is Amazon's Lowest Price

SPONSORED / SPACE MASK

Breathe And Speak Easily For Hours With This Nanotech Face Mask

SPONSORED / THE MOTLEY FOOL

Where should you invest \$1,000 right now?

SPONSORED / TOTAL BATTLE: TACTICAL WAR GAME

If You Own A Computer This Strategy Game Is A Must-Have!

SPONSORED / CAPITAL ONE SHOPPING

Before You Renew Amazon Prime, Read This

SPONSORED / THE MOTLEY FOOL

This Stock Could Be Like Buying Amazon in 1997

SPONSORED / TOTAL BATTLE: TACTICAL WAR GAME

If You're Over 30 And Own A Computer This Game Is A Must-Have!

SPONSORED / THE MOTLEY FOOL

The Tech Possibly Worth \$19 Trillion

SPONSORED / NERDWALLET

A Fast Way To Pay Off Up To \$10,000 In Credit Card Debt

SPONSORED / ULTIMATE PET NUTRITION

If Your Dog Eats Dry Food, Do This Every Day

SPONSORED / COMPARISONS.ORG

Tempe,Arizona Launches New Policy For Cars Used Less Than 49 Miles/Day

SPONSORED / DENTAL IMPLANTS | SEARCH ADS

This Could Explain Why 2021 Implants Are Almost Being Given Away

More From NBC News

THINK / OPINION

Opinion | Catholics like Biden who support abortion

THINK / OPINION

Opinion | The GOP backlash to Biden's inauguration speech is frustratingly self-defeating

NBC NEWS / SHOP

Buying an exercise bike? Here's what fitness experts recommend.

SPONSORED / GENETICS DIGEST

New Method Traces Ancestry Back Thousands of Years

SPONSORED / CANOPUS GROUP

N95 Respirator Mask Reusable (FDA Registered), 10% Off

SPONSORED / 2021 NISSAN SUVS | SEARCH ADS

Shut The Front Door! The 2021 Nissan SUVs Astonish!

SPONSORED / STOCK NAVIGATORS

How this Vietnamese Immigrant Cracked The Code of

THINK / OPINION

Opinion | How Trump's business brand went from titanic

THINK / OPINION

Opinion | Here's the fastest, easiest way to keep Trump from ever holding office again

THINK / OPINION

Opinion | Trump lost the presidency. The Capitol riot proves he gained a far-right army.



[ABOUT](#)

[CONTACT](#)

[CAREERS](#)

[COUPONS](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION](#)

[CA NOTICE](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)

[NBCNEWS.COM SITE MAP](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

[AD CHOICES](#)

© 2021 NBC UNIVERSAL

