
Volume 15 Issue 1 2021

American COVIDEOLGY: The politicising of a global pandemic

Lori L. Montalbano

Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus

Abstract

Misinformation and poor planning resulted in a failed U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During a national election year, the Trump administration prioritised the strength of the economy over a response that could have potentially saved thousands of lives. The rhetoric of the administration demonised the guidance of World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). This has circumvented the realities of the pandemic, resulting in divisive rhetoric, politicising the use of basic virus protections of masks and social distancing, positioning PPE as a sign of 'weakness' promoted by the media and 'radical left.' Such rhetoric has resulted in surging numbers of COVID cases and deaths in the U.S.

Introduction

On January 6, 2021, insurrectionists attacked the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. to stop the counting of electoral votes that would confirm the victory of the 2020 presidential campaign of Joseph R. Biden, Jr. The insurrectionists stormed the Capitol building during a joint session of Congress that Vice President Mike Pence was overseeing. The mob was calling for the hanging of the vice president (for his validation of the electoral process) and for the death of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. The menacing acts of the insurrectionists was documented and narrated by various media, displaying the vulnerability of the Capitol police, as well as that of all inside the building that day. News coverage allowed all Americans as well as individuals around the globe to live through their trepidation, shock and anger of events as they

unfolded. The messaging of the various media outlets that day varied, reinforcing the undertones of a divided country. The Capitol had not witnessed such an invasion since the invasion and fires of 1814.

Prior to the Capitol violence, the crowd had been incited by President Trump to 'fight' and join him at the Capitol during a rally where he continued his claim that the election had been 'stolen' from him and his constituents. As the mob became violent and stormed the Capitol, it took hours for the president to act and to denounce the actions of the insurrectionists. It took hours for the National Guard to be deployed, to mediate the violence, and to secure the area. In an act of strength, one-by-one, social media platforms began to suspend Trump's accounts – Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and others blocked the president as a 'seditionist'.

Unfortunately, this event was not isolated, but rather the result of years of polarisation and extreme division that typifies partisan politics in the United States. American voters demonstrate a clear division on issues of gun control, reproductive rights, LBGQTIA rights, civil rights, immigration, climate change, among many other contemporary issues. Recent violence depicted in the media is a reminder of this stark polarisation. This has not only affected civil rights and environmental issues but has had a devastating impact on America's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. is not alone in their failure to tackle the pandemic, yet misinformation by the Trump administration exacerbated this failure. While suppressing information and diminishing the severity of the disease, people were dying, and the disease began to surge. Further, the discourse of the administration demonised the guidance of World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). This circumvented the realities of the pandemic, resulting in divisive rhetoric, politicizing the use of basic virus protections of masks and social distancing, positioning PPE as a sign of 'weakness' promoted by the media and 'radical left'. Such rhetoric resulted in surging numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. It not only politicised science but accentuated the populist nationalism of the former Trump administration's political ideologies.

This messaging was not only amassed from Donald Trump and his administration and right-wing politicians but was perpetually reinforced by extremist pundits on *Fox News* and other ultra-conservative media outlets. For example, Sean Hannity of *Fox News*, suggested that Democrats and the media were 'doing everything they can possibly do to demoralise voters, especially the supporters of the president,' over their coverage of COVID-19 (Dicker, 2020). Ananyev, Poyker and Tian (2020) contended that 'the most watched cable channel in the US is the conservative *Fox News* Channel, whose hosts were accused of spreading disinformation and minimizing the threat of the virus during the initial days of the pandemic.' Further, they explain that during the early months of the pandemic, *Fox News* anchors reported using three types of messaging, including the theory that the virus was intentionally created at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, that the virus' significance was exaggerated, and that it was a ploy by Democrats to undermine Trump.

News covered those favourably while criticising the governors who implemented lockdowns (Ananyev et al., 2020).

The politics of misinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic is of 'the gravest public health crises the world has faced in the past century,' and marks a 'turning point in global culture' (Lasco, 2020). On January 21, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in the United States. On January 29, President Trump formed the White House Coronavirus Task Force, led by Vice President Pence. Despite the facts and his quick action to form the task force, Trump purported that the virus was a 'hoax' from the left, that it would be gone by Easter, or 'like a miracle' would one day 'disappear.' This type of response typified the Trump presidency. For example, during his first impeachment hearing, he alleged that the Russian investigation was a 'witch hunt,' that climate change was a 'liberal hoax,' and so on. Altheide (2020) writes that throughout the pandemic, Trump engaged in 'attention-based politics,' drawing attention to himself through hostile tweets, largely aimed at journalists, with no effective response to the growing pandemic. Trump had become a 'digital meme', thus enabling the president 'to dwell on his distorted accomplishments and TV ratings, to downplay health risks, and initially define the lethal virus as a benign hoax' (Altheide, 2020, p. 514).

Conservative media spread this message willingly. Adolph et al., (2020), state:

On numerous occasions in press conferences viewed by millions of Americans, President Trump undermined efforts by public health experts to convey the seriousness of the situation.

Further, Trump equated COVID-19 with the flu and falsely claimed that numbers in Italy were improving. Additionally, he claimed the U.S. was better handling their response to COVID-19 than other industrialized nations. 'As late as March 15, with reported cases rising rapidly, he continued to claim that the epidemic within the US was under control' (Qiu, Marsh, & Huang, 2020). On March 12, 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), announced that COVID-19 constituted a pandemic (Woods, et al., 2020). Altheide (2020) contends that Trump's insistence that the virus would just 'go away' undermined the government's response regarding more testing and protective measures including masks for healthcare workers and ventilators for patients. This resulted in a very limited public health response. By mid-March, the U.S. had tested fewer people than other industrialised countries, and there was growing concern from healthcare workers for their safety in treating patients, due to the lack of protective gear, including masks (Altheide, 2020).

In a September podcast, *NPR* (2020) reported that a new book as well as tapes released by *The Washington Post's* investigative journalist, Bob Woodward, (who along with colleague Carl Bernstein famously exposed the Nixon administration's 'Watergate' 1972-74 scandal), revealed that:

President Trump was aware of the severity of the coronavirus in early February, telling Bob Woodward that it was much more severe than the flu. In public, Trump used the flu comparison in a different way: highlighting the flu's high seasonal death toll compared to the few dozen early cases of coronavirus (p. 1).

Further, *NPR* stated that the president 'admitted to Woodward in March that he was intentionally downplaying the pandemic in order to avoid panic.', revelations that are contained in Woodward's book *Rage* (2020, p. 1). The efforts by Trump to minimise the virus, play far more than a tactic to reduce panic. The concern facing the then incumbent candidate was most likely an attempt to preserve the economy, which he and his campaign see as his stronghold for re-election. Massive industry and business shutdowns of the economy, resulting in job loss and economic insecurity for U.S. citizens, would be devastating to Trump's re-election bid and without direct, consistent leadership might prove, and has proven Trump's ineptitude in the handling of this public health crisis.

In addition to diminishing the seriousness of disease, Trump seized the opportunity to target blame on China, resulting in rising racism and the ostracising of Asian Americans. Across the campaign trail, Trump demonised China and made disparaging remarks toward their leader and citizens. Altheide (2020) notes that:

[D]espite efforts by the WHO to refer to diseases with medical and descriptive terms rather than stigmatising regions of the world where ailments occurred, President Trump pushed his radicalised language. During an interview on Tuesday, March 17, the president referred to the virus as the 'Kung Flu' (p. 530).

Trump has also referred to the virus as the 'Wuhan Virus' and 'China Virus' (Woods et al., 2020). Um (2020) explains, that as an Asian man, when New York City was implementing social distancing measures in schools and businesses, his:

... masked body felt increasing pathologised. It manifested in the form of side-eyed looks, street crossings, derogatory remarks, and in more extreme cases, physical assault, verbal threats, and exclusionary business practices (p. 3).

Further, Um (2020) explains that wearing a mask in New York City gave those in compliance a 'sense of civic duty,' but for Asian New Yorkers, 'it was to perform invisibility in a realm of targeted microaggressions' (p. 3). These microaggressions were exacerbated by the labeling of the virus, and Um (2020) describes this as a 'weaponising of language as a technology of power', when used by members of government. Such labeling was only the beginning of the divisive language that Donald Trump used to empower his base and remove himself from the responsibility of preparing a true federal plan to mitigate the

deadly consequences of the virus. With no real federal leadership, governors across the state were, 'on the front line in the battle against COVID-19' (Adolph et al., 2020, p. 16). The pandemic raised attention to the structural differences and decision-making policies of the federal, state and local governments in the U.S., and what happens when they don't match or even work against each other.

Rather than create a unifying call to the states' governors, the Trump administration pitted state-against-state for the procurement of PPE and refused to create a federal program to assist the states in mitigation strategies. At his campaign rallies, he would spotlight Democratic governors, mocking their responses to the virus, telling supporters to make their governor's open their states. This type of rhetoric has the potential to incite the threat of violence, for example, in the state of Michigan. Right-wing extremists, part of the 'Wolverine Watchdogs' of Michigan, brought automatic rifles and wore protective gear to the state house to intimidate and 'force' the state government to lift the stay-at-home order. Later, several men from Michigan, belonging to two anti-government parliamentary groups, including the 'Michigan III%ers' and the 'Wolverine Watchdogs' were charged in state court with providing material support for terrorist acts, as they plotted to kidnap Governor Whitmer of Michigan, and Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, because of the safeguards they put in place to combat the virus (AP, 2020).

The group, 'Three Percenters' is 'a diffuse, bottom-up militia,' according to a *Politico* profile, with the group itself claiming inspiration from the 'rough estimate' that only three (3) percent of American colonists took up arms against the British forces. The Southern Poverty Law Center which tracks hate groups, calls Three Percenters an 'anti-government' group with chapters claimed nationwide (Hafner, 2018, p. 1).

Trump's refusal to denounce such behavior, indirectly emboldened the Michigan III%ers and the Wolverine Watchdogs to plan the kidnapping and 'trial' of Governor Whitmer. Their plan was thwarted by the FBI, who infiltrated the group, resulting in multiple arrests. Still, Trump refused to denounce their plot and subsequently resumed his banter to 'tell your governor to open your state' at a subsequent rally in Michigan, in this surreal event, supporters chanted 'lock her up,' in reference to Governor Whitmer. Their chants were met with amusement by the president. This rhetoric typifies Trump's strategy to invigorate his base, and rapidly lead to strengthen political divisiveness in the U.S., with members of opposing parties clashing basic responses, resulting in increased threats of violence. While most Republicans are not extremists, messages that divide have ramped up the confidence and anger of right-wing domestic terrorists, many who belong to groups including the 'Proud Boys', 'III%ers', 'Watchdogs', among others.

During the late stages of the 2020 political campaign, the virus continued to surge, and the messaging from the White House remained obscure. In October, for example, White House chief of staff Mark Meadows stated that the U.S. is 'not going to control' the coronavirus pandemic, as cases surged across the country and nearly 225,000 Americans had died from the virus. 'We are not going to control the pandemic. We are going to control the fact that we get vaccines, therapeutics and other mitigation areas,' Meadows told *CNN's* Jake

Tapper on *State of the Union* (Cole, 2020). The administration had begun to embrace 'herd immunity' rhetoric that did damage to the message from the medical experts to try to control the spread of the virus. Trump and Meadow's comments undermine the messaging from government medical experts on how to protect oneself from the virus including social distancing and masking (Cole, 2020).

Six days after the publication of the Cole article, the U.S. reported nearly 100,000 new cases a day. This resulted in surges for all swing states in the upcoming election, which was a mere week away (Noori Forzan, et al., 2020).

Late in the campaign, there was a silence and failure to act by the White House to do anything to control the virus. Updates were muted, talk turned away from even trying to forge a concerted national response into growing conspiracy theories about the legitimacy of elections that hadn't even occurred.

Populist rhetoric and the COVID-19 response

At the time surveyed, approximately 70 percent of Americans were found to believe when going to public places, they should wear masks, most of the time or always. Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents are about twice as likely as Republicans and Republican leaners to say that masks should be worn always (63% vs. 29%) (Pew, 2020). Further, Pew (2020) finds 'Democrats much more likely than Republicans to say actions of ordinary Americans affect the spread of coronavirus a great deal'. As of June 2020, 'Republicans' concern about catching and spreading the virus have decreased while Democrats' have held steady' (p. 13). Pies (2020) writes:

[A]fter what seemed like a period of relative national unity in the face of COVID-19 pandemic, we now find wide cultural rifts emerging in the American landscape. Divisions have emerged along a timeworn North vs. South divide, on ideological and geographical grounds nationally and within states (CNN, 2020).

Skyler Cranmer, quoted in *Intagliata* (2020) warns, 'division among political elites has serious consequences: it fractures the response of everyday Americans to the threat' (p. 3). So why the divisiveness? What is it about the Trump administration's ideology that embraces steering Americans apart as a better response to the pandemic than an uniting them? Why did the administration denounce science and the strategies promoted by epidemiologists and other medical experts? The first appearances of COVID-19 in the U.S., began in large, democratic cities. As a result, polls indicated a lack of concern for COVID-19 from many Trump supporters.

A lot of people made the mistake of assuming that blue-tinge to the pandemic was indelible. Something in urban life – mass transit, for example, or high-rise living – made city dwellers uniquely susceptible to the illness, many commentators said (Feldmann, 2020).

Yet, as it began to sweep across the country, division grew. Feldmann (2020) notes:

the debates have grown heated. Even amid a pandemic, when a sense of common purpose and shared values are essential, the nation's red-blue divide seems as sharp as ever. In some circles, wearing a mask is now seen as a liberal political statement while going maskless is a sign of 'don't tread on me' defiance (p. 2).

While this polarisation existed long before COVID-19, but:

... at a time when a shared reliance on facts and science is absolutely critical, partisanship and a deficit of trust have made fighting the virus all the more challenging (Feldmann, 2020, p. 3).

Trump's response to the pandemic became increasingly divisive.

To understand Trump's behavior in response to the pandemic, it is important to consider his overall approach to leadership. Trump follows what the administration labeled, 'pragmatic realism,' while others see his approach populist nationalism, as it's messaging focuses on job-loss, immigration, cheating, a reliance on foreign food chains, all the while blaming the 'erosion of Western values', on the 'liberal elite' Braun (2020). Our political beliefs and ideological beliefs intersect. They are often formed across party lines in issues such as abortion, gun control, and so on, yet they are also powerfully embedded in our upbringing, our communities and families. Once we adopt these ideologies, we begin to follow the party's platform, like 'adopting the playbook of a sports team' (Pierre, 2020).

This playbook has pitted American against American. Feldmann (2020) explains:

For 40 years, there's been a growing anti-intellectualism or perhaps populist resentment toward the traditional sources of informational authority – the press, academia, the scientific community, nonpartisan government agencies,' says David Barker, director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University in Washington. 'We've gotten to the point, egged on by the president for four years, where maybe one-third of the country just does not trust a single word they hear from any of the traditional sources' (p. 3).

It is also important to recognise the significance of media coverage that promotes populist rhetoric and nationalism. In April, Arthur West of the Washington League of Increased Transparency and Ethics, sued *Fox News* over its coronavirus coverage, claiming 'it delayed and interfered with a prompt and adequate response to this coronavirus pandemic' (Sullivan, 2020). Further,

Sullivan (2020) states that Americans who relied on *Fox News*, or similar right-wing sources, were duped, and that studies of the media coverage, according to Christopher Ingraham, journalist for the *Washington Post*:

... paint a picture of a media ecosystem that amplifies misinformation, entertains conspiracy theories, and discourages audiences from taking concrete steps to protect themselves and others (Sullivan, 2020).

In a *Digital News Report* that covers traditional (televised) media as well as social media, Fletcher (2019) states:

The political landscape of many Western countries is changing. As longstanding political parties fade, populists make significant gains at the ballot box – even taking power in some cases. In response, people have started to search for causes and, as is often the case, some have looked to the influence of the news media.

Further, the study found that ‘in US, the UK, and in Southern and Eastern Europe, audiences for news outlets are often heavily right- or left-leaning – with relatively few outlets able to attract people of different persuasions’ (Fletcher, 2019).

Hence, despite the political leaning of left or right, populists media sources can narrow scope, influence and censor information in terms of polarised differences, satisfying an appetite of reinforcement to one’s own political ideology. Such coverage is not only limiting, but can be detrimental to peace within a nation and across the globe.

Anti-science rhetoric

The political divide has been amplified by a growing anti-science rhetoric from the conservative right. Led by tweets, rally cries and inconsistent rhetoric from Donald Trump and the White House, American citizens have bifurcated into philosophies that seem irreconcilable. Hoffman (2020) defines *politicised science* as ‘The influence of political bias in the design or interpretation of scientific studies or the manipulative use of data from emerging science in the service of predetermined political narratives’ (p. 372). Further Hoffman (2020) explains the predictable process of the predetermined political narrative construction, including the use of ‘destructive bias and its seven deadly sins – character assassination, raw animus, cynical omniscience, historical amnesia, false choice, divisive labeling and selective truthing are routine ‘bipartisan weapons’ (p. 373). This anti-science movement has hovered over U.S. politics for decades, largely focused on a denouncement of the impact, or sometimes, even the existence of climate change. Climate change is not a popular issue in a capitalist society that privileges wealth over environment. This anti-scientific divisiveness has politicised basic prevention strategies against COVID-19 in acts as simple as wearing masks. Infection rates, as well as mortality rates from COVID-19 were the highest in counties led by populist nationalist leaders,

including the U.S., U.K., and Brazil. In May of 2020, the U.S. was responsible for over 25 percent of the COVID-19 infections and deaths globally, yet only comprises approximately 4.25 percent of the world's population. Populist nationalist leaders, like Trump, are more likely to reject the advice of scientists, 'attack global organisations like WHO, promote scientifically unproven and potentially harmful treatments for COVID-19 and reject scientifically proven practices like wearing masks in public' (Woods et al., 2020).

In the space of just a few-months, masks became debatable, arguable, tipping points of violence, personal identity and moral standing. Aratani (2020) explains that in the U.S., masks 'are a huge source of controversy. While Americans follow public health recommendations and wear masks in public to limit the spread of COVID-19, others passionately fight against them, saying they impair individual freedom' (p. 2). Aratani (2020) continues:

[A]lthough the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends wearing masks to prevent the spread of the virus, the US president has suggested wearing a mask could be seen as a political statement against him, and mocked Biden for wearing a mask in public. That message reached the public, who have turned masks into a 'culture war' (p. 2).

The divisiveness of mask-wearing, social distancing and state stay-at-home orders had become so volatile, that Dr. Anthony Fauci, America's premiere expert on epidemiology, experienced death threats (Papenfuss, 2020). Aratani (2020) notes that this divisiveness has contributed to acts of violence against business owners and their employees who are:

... increasingly finding themselves on the frontlines of the mask debate. Stores that have been strict about masks have reported an uptick in angry customers who lash out when employees try to turn them away for not wearing masks. The most extreme case has been in Flint, Michigan, where an employee of a Family Dollar store was shot on 4 May after telling a customer her daughter had to wear a face mask to enter the store (p. 2).

These are not isolated events. As the economic situation grows worse, and the divisiveness grows strength, more and more incidents have been reported. In North Carolina, a group called *Reopen NC*, equated masks with 'muzzles,' that eroded their freedom. In a social media campaign, the group started a 'Burn your Mask Challenge,' posting social media images of individuals burning masks under the hashtag '#IgniteFreedom' (Aratani, 2020). Similarly:

... at a meeting of local leaders in Palm Beach, Florida, several people spoke in public about why they were against masks. Reasons varied from anger that masks 'throw God's wonderful breathing system out the door' to invoking a 'plan-demic' conspiracy theory (Aratani, 2020, p. 3).

Months into the pandemic, there was still no planned federal response, no solidarity on prevention measures, and states floundering with reopening pressure. Hinz (2020) noted that:

the biggest threat to our democracy comes from those who act as if the rule of law is something that applies strictly to other people. Such as the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. His government issued detailed metrics that states were supposed to follow. It also recommended routinely wearing masks as a needed health precaution. But politics –and ego – got in the way (p. 2).

The pandemic has offered the U.S. a true ‘test of our tribal political attachment’ (Thompson-DeVeaux, 2020). As Trump downplayed the seriousness of the virus, and opposed medical expertise, partisanship led to individual responses, including risk-taking and personal responsibility ‘to the point that our divided politics actually affects our health. For Americans, that might mean that questions of whether to stay home, wear a mask or to see friends and family without social distancing are filtered through a partisan lens’ (p. 3). Feldman (2020) noted that

in Texas, the debate over a salon owner jailed for reopening her shop early became so intense that Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick paid her \$7,000 fine and offered to serve the rest of her sentence under house arrest’ (p. 2).

Adolph et al., (2020) stated that:

... in April, Trump and other Republican leaders – such as Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia – were leading the charge to ‘reopen’ states. The president’s supporters in the conservative media repeatedly cast doubt on the warnings of experts. *Fox News* personality Sean Hannity even pushed a conspiracy theory that coronavirus was an effort by the ‘deep state’ to ‘manipulate markets, suppress dissent and push mandated medicines.

Viewers of such programs were less likely to report practicing social distancing measures’ (Media Matters Staff, 2020; Bursztyn, et al., 2020, pp. 4-5).

In the last months of Fall 2020, the Trump administration promoted the narrative that the U.S was weeks away from a vaccine. In October, Trump claimed that he put an end to COVID-19, as one of his accomplishments of his first term, even as cases were surging in every nearly state of the U.S. This had scientists on alert to produce a vaccine. Because of the political pressure,

government's researchers are fearful of political intervention in the coming months and are struggling to ensure that the government maintains the right balance between speed and rigorous regulation' (LaFraniere, et al., 2020, p. 1).

LaFraniere et al. (2020) continue:

The administration's focus on a vaccine, was much more robust than their responses to the virus in general, 'contracts have been executed at a brisk pace. Mobile trailers have been speedily delivered for experimental doses to be administered. When a company was short on needles, the Pentagon dispatched planes to deliver supplies within 48 hours (p. 4).

Generally, vaccines take years to bring to market. The pressure and rhetoric of the Trump administration changed all of that during this pandemic. In May 2020, the Trump administration launched 'Operation Warp Speed' with the goal of delivering initial doses of a safe and effective vaccine by January 2021 – shortening the development time from years to months. Some were worried that to meet that ambitious schedule, the administration might cut important scientific corners (Palca, 2020, p. 2). A survey from STAT and Harris poll, indicated that 78 percent of Americans had concerns that the vaccine approval process was more political than scientific, and that President Trump might pressure the FDA to authorize approval prior to the election on November 3. These concerns were exacerbated by Trump, as he 'suggested in a tweet that the FDA is part of a 'deep state' conspiracy to sabotage his re-election bid' (Silverman, 2020).

In response to these concerns, Moncef Slaoui, the scientific head of Operation Warp Speed, insisted that 'he won't be swayed by political pressure to rush an unsafe or ineffective vaccine, and that science will carry the day – or he'll quit' He stated, 'I would immediately resign if there is undue interference in this process' (Cohen, 2020, p. 5). However, Cathey and Ebbs (2020) reported:

Dr. Paul Offit, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and member of the FDA's vaccine advisory committee, told *The New York Times* last month that people 'should be' worried about politics influencing the vaccine timeline.' Offit claims, 'There are a lot of people on the inside of this process who are very nervous about whether the administration is going to reach their hand into the Warp Speed bucket, pull out one or two or three vaccines, and say, 'We've tested it on a few thousand people, it looks safe, and now we are going to roll it out', he said' (p. 2).

Of course, there can be many other reasons for wariness toward vaccination. African Americans subjected to gross inhumane actions of the 'Tuskegee experiment,' by the US government, resulted in generational mistrust of

government-sponsored medical practices. The growing anti-vaxxer movement, and some religious denominations' objections to medical treatment, also contribute to a suspicion and lack of trust of a government vaccination program. Will it come to mandates? That remains to be seen.

Despite the wariness of some groups, as late as September 2020, Trump was promising that a vaccine would be available prior to the election in November. At a White House briefing, the president claimed, 'we think we can probably have it sometime during the month of October' (Cathey & Ebbs, 2020). The Trump campaign released an advertising campaign, 'The Great American Comeback', saying:

In the race for a vaccine, the finish line is approaching. I think what's happening is you're gonna see tremendous growth in the very near future. We're rounding the curve. We're coming up with vaccines (quoted in Cathey & Ebbs, 2020, pp. 1-2).

The 'rounding the curve' message was repeated during his campaign rallies throughout October. These rallies, that continued despite more and more White House staffers testing positive for COVID-19, were primarily organised with crowds in close quarters, albeit, generally outside, with most in attendance without masks. The false messaging was advanced not only by the president, but also by his son, Don Jnr. Touting the end of the pandemic, the rhetoric was unsettling, dangerous, and completely inaccurate. According to Dr Vin Gupta, 'with approximately 1,000 dying in the U.S. daily, the president's son falsely claims that Covid-19 deaths are down to "almost nothing"' (quoted in Williams, 2020, p. 1).

Trump tests 'positive' for COVID

In September, President Trump held an event in the Rose Garden with 200 attendees, mostly individuals without masks, to announce his nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the U.S. Supreme Court. The function was later called a 'likely coronavirus "superspreader" event after nearly a dozen people in attendance later tested positive for COVID-19' (Zarracina, et al., 2020, p. 1). Next, on October 2, President Trump announced that he and his wife, Melania, had both tested positive for COVID-19 and the next day, the president was flown to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center out of an 'abundance of caution'. In a memo shared by White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, White House physician Navy Cmdr. Dr. Sean Conley wrote Trump is doing 'very well' and that his doctors had elected to initiate Remdesivir therapy, referring to a drug that had been shown to shorten the hospital stays of coronavirus patients. The president had reportedly, completed his first dose and was resting comfortably (Liptak, 2020).

During his stay, Trump left the hospital to greet his supporters, 'waving to them from inside an SUV that slowly drove past the crowds gathered outside Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The outing alarmed Secret Service agents and medical professionals, including a doctor affiliated with Walter Reed, who said others in the vehicle were risking their lives for 'political theater'

(Hawkins, et al., 2020, p. 1). The president's doctors, led by Sean Conley, stated that while President Trump's condition had 'improved', he had experienced significant oxygen drops on Friday and Saturday and was given dexamethasone – a steroid that is typically reserved only for severely ill coronavirus patients. Conley declined to answer questions about the president's lungs, including whether there is scarring or whether Trump had pneumonia. This report contrasted with Conley's earlier report where he said that Trump had not needed oxygen. Trump's hospital event reinforced the false narrative rhetoric, that even his doctors later admitted to having been a part of.

After his 'recovery,' Trump began touting how he beat COVID-19, and claimed that no one should fear it. He also promoted the ideology on 'herd immunity' and once again denounced the severity of COVID-19, claiming personal victory for the remainder of his campaign. This arrogance has not boded well amidst the growing number of cases, deaths, and long-term health issues of many COVID-19 survivors. According to news sources:

In several phone calls ... from the presidential suite at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Mr. Trump shared an idea he was considering: When he left the hospital, he wanted to appear frail at first when people saw him, according to people with knowledge of the conversations. But underneath his button-down dress shirt, he would wear a Superman t-shirt, which he would reveal as a symbol of strength when he ripped open the top layer. He ultimately did not go ahead with the stunt' (Karni & Haberman, 2020, p. 1).

Where do we go from here?

In August 2020, the pandemic was far from over. Under federal pressure, most governors re-opened businesses and allowed gatherings before it was safe to do so. Not surprisingly, the states that eased social distancing mandates most aggressively saw rapidly climbing COVID-19 case counts, with potentially severe consequences for public health and the economy (López & Rodó, 2020; Tsai, et al., 2020). In the midst of one of the most important elections in history, as a nation the U.S. faced issues of violated trust, a search for the truth and a dire need for a unified approach to managing this unwielded pandemic. Feffer (2020) asked:

How low does a country's trust index have to go before it ceases being a country? Commentators have already spent a decade discussing the polarisation of the American electorate. Much ink has been spilled over the impact of social media in creating political echo chambers (p. 7).

Trump's handing of the pandemic, politicisation of health measures, engaging in political fights with governors over lockdown measures, and divisive tweeting resulted in costly lack of trust in U.S. leadership. Klein (2020) explains, 'the

tragedy of American politics in 2020 is that many Americans sincerely trusted an untrustworthy man, And the cost of that mistake will be devastating' (p. 5).

At the time of writing, over 590,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 (CDC, 2021). During the last weeks of his presidency, Donald Trump failed to deliver a plan for vaccine distribution. Thankfully, since then, three successful vaccines have been launched. President Biden was sworn in with a national plan that will support states' efforts to combat this virus, rather than bathe a nation in divisive rhetoric. Still, political divides remain. In January 2021, Donald Trump was impeached and acquitted for the second time, this time for sedition. Lawmakers voted along party lines, with little likelihood of unity. When government responses fail, largely due to communicative weakness and bi-partisanship, it is important to consider the responsibility of the media is in promoting, encouraging, and saturating viewers and listeners with divisive messaging. When does reporting become promoting? What are the consequences of repeated sound bites and video trailers that merely serve to exacerbate our sense of division, not only in the US, but around the world? This pandemic has been a test for all Americans, testing the commitment toward a common goal, standing with each other with fact-based information to end the deadly spread of this virus. We have failed. We can, however, identify the sources of failure – namely division, competition, and mis-played aggressions. The media play an important role in supplying viewers with fact-based information, yet biases prevail. Lines have blurred between reporting and editorializing. Media can aide in holding governments and high-profile leaders accountable. As consumers of media, we should demand they do so – like our lives depend on it.

References

- Adolph, C., Amano, K., Bang-Jensen, B., Fullan, N., & Wilkerson, J. (2020). Pandemic politics: timing state-level social distancing responses to COVID-19, *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 2020, 1-24. <https://faculty.washington.edu/cadolph/papers/ABFW2020.pdf>.
- Altheide, D. L. (2020). Pandemic in the time of Trump: Digital media logic and deadly politics. *Symbolic Interaction*, 43(3), 514-540. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.501>.
- Ananyev, M., Poyker, M, & Tian, Y. (2020, October 20). Exposure to *Fox News* hindered social distancing in the US. *VoxEU*. <https://voxeu.org/article/exposure-fox-news-hindered-social-distancing-us>.
- Aratani, L. (2020, June 29). Coronavirus Outbreak: How did face masks become a politics issue in America? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/29/face-masks-us-politics-coronavirus>.
- Braun, W. G. (2020). *Domestic politics and the military's COVID-19 response*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College.
- Bursztyn, L., Rao, A., Roth, C., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2020). *Misinformation during a pandemic*. University of Chicago, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper.

Cathey, L., & Ebbs, S. (2020, September 6). Trump administration insists politics won't play into timeline for coronavirus vaccine, *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-administration-insists-politics-wont-play-timeline-coronavirus/story?id=72823404>.

Centers for Disease Control, *Covid Data Tracker*. <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

Cohen, J. (2020, September 3). Leader of U.S. vaccine push says he'll quit if politics trumps science. *ScienceMag.Org*. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/09/leader-us-vaccine-push-says-he-ll-quit-if-politics-trumps-science-approval-process>.

Cole, D. (2020, October 26). White House chief of staff: 'We are not going to control the pandemic' *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/25/politics/mark-meadows-controlling-coronavirus-pandemic-cnntv/index.html>.

Crane, E. (2020). New coronavirus cases surge nearly 50% across US in one week with 31 states now seeing an uptick in infections – as Arizona becomes latest hotspot state to reverse reopening by closing bars, gyms and water parks. *Dailymail.com*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8475123/New-COVID-cases-surge-46-week-31-states-seeing-uptick.html>.

Dicker, R. (2020). Sean Hannity: 'Coronavirus hysteria' is attempt to 'demoralize' Trump voters. *HuffPost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sean-hannity-coronavirus-hysteria-donald-trump_n_5f994651c5b6aab57a0e1289.

Detrow, S., Rascoe, A., & Elving, R. (2020, September 9). On tape: President Trump admits to downplaying the pandemic. *NPR.org*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/09/911179868/on-tape-president-trump-admits-to-downplaying-the-pandemic>.

Eggert, D., Foody, K. (2020, October 17). Judge finds case against 5 in Whitmer plot can move forward, *APnews.com*. <https://apnews.com/article/grand-rapids-michigan-gretchen-whitmer-courts-4c52a7fbcd4e3eba18a8d0c94f285c76>.

Ellis, E.R. (2020). *COVID-19: Shaping a sicker, poorer, more violent, and unstable western hemisphere*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College.

Feffer, J. (2020, July 29). COVID-19 can change international politics forever, *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/coronavirus-foreign-policy-2/>.

Feldmann, L. (2020, May 8). COVID-19 isn't partisan. But it's intensifying America's red-blue divide, *Christian Science Monitor* <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2020/0508/COVID-19-isn-t-partisan.-But-it-s-intensifying-America-s-red-blue-divide>.

Fletcher, R. (2019). The Rise of Populism and the Consequences for News and Media Use *Digital News Report*. Reuters Institute. University of Oxford. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/the-rise-of-populism-and-the->

consequences-for-news-and-media-use/.

Hafner, J. (2018, March 1). Three Percenters: What is the gun-toting group? And what do its supporters want? *USA Today*.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/03/01/three-percenters-what-gun-toting-group-and-what-do-its-supporters-want/385463002/>.

Hinz, G. (2020). Keeping the body politic healthy in the COVID age. *Crain's Chicago Business*, 42(22), 2.

Hoffman, W. W. (2020). The patient as COVID: The destructive bias of politicized science – flashpoints, obligations and the burden of coming together. *South Dakota Medicine: The Journal of the South Dakota State Medical Association*, 73(8), 372-374.

Hawkins, D., Sonmez, F., Min Kim, S. Knowles, H. (2020, October 4) President's blood oxygen levels dropped twice in recent days, doctors say. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/2020/10/04/trump-covid-live-updates/>

Intagliata, C. (2020, July 1). Tweets reveal politics of COVID-19, *Policy and Ethics 60 Second Science*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/te=weets-reveal-politics-of-covid-19/>.

Dodds, K., Castan, V., Klaus Detterbeck, B., Jones, M., Mamadouh, V., Ramutsindela, M., Varsanyi, M., Wachsmuth, D., & Yuan Woon, C. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Territorial, political and governance dimensions of the crisis, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8(3) 289-298, DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2020.1771022.

Karni, A., & Haberman, M. (2020, October 10). Trump makes first public appearance since leaving Walter Reed. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/10/us/politics/trump-white-house-coronavirus.html>.

Klein, E. (2020, July 1). Trumpism, not polarization, drive America's disastrous coronavirus politics, *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2020/7/1/21308809/covid-19-coronavirus-2020-trump-election-polls-polarization>.

LaFraniere, S., Thomas, K., Weiland, N., Baker, P. & Karni, A. (2020, August 2). Scientists worry about political influence over coronavirus vaccine project, *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/us/politics/coronavirus-vaccine.html>.

Lasco, G. (2020). Medical populism and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Public Health*, 15(10), 1417-1429.

Lauter, D. (2020, May 8). COVID-19 hits the red states, *Los Angeles Times*.
<https://www.latimes.com/politics/newsletter/2020-05-08/covid-hits-red-states-essential-politics>.

Liptak, K. (2020, October 3). Trump taken to Walter Reed medical center and will be hospitalized 'for the next few days' *CNN Politics*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/02/politics/president-donald-trump-walter-reed-coronavirus/index.html>.

Long, S. (2020). PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE. COVID-19: Science Versus Politics. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 83(3), 6.

López, L., & Rodó, X. (2020). The end of social confinement and COVID-19 re-emergence risk. *Nature Human Behaviour* 4(7), 746-755.

Media Matters Staff. (2020, March 11). Sean Hannity: It 'may be true' that the 'deep state' is using coronavirus to manipulate markets, suppress dissent and push mandated medicines. *Media Matters for America*
<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/sean-hannity-it-maybe-true-deep-state-using-coronavirus-manipulate-markets>.

Miller, J. J. (2020). COVID Confusion in Michigan. *National Review*, 72(9), 20-22.

Noori Forzan A., Noack, R., Bellware, K., Villegas, P., Berger, M., Telford, T., Knowles, H., Sands, D. (2020, October 31). U.S. reports nearly 100,000 new cases in one day as infections surge in battleground states. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/10/30/coronavirus-covid-live-updates-us/>.

Palca, J. (2020, August 27). The coronavirus crises: COVID-19 may pit science against politics. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/08/27/906240454/covid-19-vaccine-may-pit-science-against-politics>.

Papenfuss, M. (2020, August 14). COVID-19 has 'taken a political tone like nothing I've ever seen,' warns Anthony Fauci, *HuffPost*.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fauci-politics-covid-19-divisiveness_n_5f372003c5b69fa9e2fba8c5?guccounter=1.

Pew Research Center (2020). Republicans, Democrats move even further apart in coronavirus concerns, *U.S. Politics and Policy*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/25/republicans-democrats-move-even-further-apart-in-coronavirus-concerns/>.

Pierre, J. (2020, March 28). Disregarding science: The politics of COVID-19 beliefs, *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202003/disregarding-science-the-politics-covid-19-beliefs>.

Pies, R. W. (2020). Culture wars, COVID-19, and countertransference: What America's cultural rifts might mean for psychiatry. *Psychiatric Times*, 37(6), 5-16.

Pfaff, A. C. (2020). 'Disaster diplomacy' and the US response to COVID-19
Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College.

Qiu, L., Marsh, B., & Huang, J. (2020, March 18). The President vs. the Experts: How Trump played down the coronavirus. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/18/us/trump-coronavirus-statements-timeline.html>.

Silverman, E. (2020, August 31). Poll: Most Americans believe the COVID-19 vaccine approval process is driven by politics, not science, *STAT News*.
<https://www.statnews.com/phamalot/2020/08/31/most-americans-believe-the-covid-19-vaccine-approval-process-is-driven-by-politics-not-science>.

Sullivan, M. (2020, June 28). The data is in: *Fox News* may have kept millions from taking the coronavirus threat seriously. *The Washington Post*.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/the-data-is-in-fox-news-may-have-kept-millions-from-taking-the-coronavirus-threat-seriously/2020/06/26/60d88aa2-b7c3-11ea-a8da-693df3d7674a_story.html.

Thompson-DeVeaux, A. (2020, July 23). Republicans and Democrats see COVID-19 very differently. Is that making people sick? *FiveThirtyEight*.
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/republicans-and-democrats-see-covid-19-very-differently-is-that-making-people-sick/>.

Tsai, A. C., Harling, G., Reynolds, Z., Gilbert, R. F., & Siedner, M. J. (2020). COVID-19 transmission in the U.S. before vs. after relaxation of statewide social distancing measures. *Clinical infectious diseases: An official publication of the Infectious Diseases Society of America*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa1502>.

Um, N. (2020) Biopower, mediascapes, and the politics of fear in the age of COVID-19. *City and Society*, 32(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12311>.

Williams, B. (2020, October 30) Trump Jr. claims COVID deaths down to 'almost nothing' *MSNBC 11th Hour* <https://www.msnbc.com/11th-hour/watch/trump-jr-claims-covid-19-deaths-down-to-almost-nothing-94979141813>.

Woods, E. T., Schertzer, R., Greenfeld, L., Hughes, C., Miller-Idriss, C. (2020). COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis: A scholarly exchange. *Nations and Nationalism*. 26(4) 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644>.

Woodward, B. (2020). *Rage*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Zarracina, J., Voyles Pulver, D., Wu, N., Wedell, K., Santucci, J., Fraser, J., Baratz, D. (2020). Here's everyone at the White House Rose Garden SCOTUS event now called a likely 'superspreader.' Help us ID them all. *USA Today*.
<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2020/10/07/likely-rose-garden-covid-superspreader-white-house-drew-hundreds/3636925001/>.

About the author

Lori L. Montalbano, Ph.D., is the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus. Formerly, she served as Division Chair of Arts and Letters and Professor of Communication at Governors State University. She taught at Indiana University Northwest for many years, where she worked as Chair of the Department of

Communication, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Chair of the Department of Performing Arts and Artistic Director of *Theatre Northwest*. She has a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from Southern Illinois University. Montalbano has published articles, book chapters; a book entitled *Taking Narrative Risk: The Empowerment of Abuse Survivors*. She co-authored a textbook, *Public Speaking and Responsibility in a Changing World*, with Dr. Dorothy W. Ige. Her most recent work includes an edited book, Montalbano, Lori L. (Ed.) *Gender, Race and Social Identity in American Politics* Lexington Books, Lanham, MD. (2019).

Email: lmontal@iupuc.edu