

Why Don't They Believe Us?

You're struggling to understand where all this vaccine hesitancy comes from. Let me help you.

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Imagine you're a normal person. The year is 2016. Rightly or wrongly, you believe most of what you see in the media. You believe polls are broadly reflective of public opinion. You believe doctors and scientists are trustworthy and independent. You're a decent, reasonable person who follows the rules and trusts the authorities.

Imagine your shock, then, when Brexit, which you were assured couldn't happen because it was a fringe movement led by racists for racists, happens. The polls, which widely predicted it wouldn't happen, were wrong. The experts and pundits who told you day after day that it wouldn't happen were also wrong. "Oh well," you say, "these things happen."

Imagine that soon after Brexit, Donald Trump is running for president. You are told by the most trustworthy media outlets that he is going to lose. Some experts say his opponent has a 99% chance of winning. Imagine waking up the morning after the election to discover that the pollsters, experts, and politicians you still trusted were wrong again. Now the racist monster who you were told would never get near the White House is the leader of the free world.

"How did this happen?" you ask yourself. How could everyone I rely on for good information be so wrong? "It was the Russians," they tell you. "The Russians did Brexit, and they got Trump elected too." Imagine that for the next three years, day after day, the media and politicians you still trust keep you up to date on this story of Trump's collusion with Russia. They tell you the how, when, where, and why: the dossiers, the whistleblowers, the peeing prostitutes. Imagine your desperation for things to somehow make sense again.

Here comes the Mueller report. Hard evidence of foreign meddling in Brexit and the 2016 U.S. election is coming to set the world right again.

Imagine your shock, then, when you discover that Brexit had little to do with foreign meddling, and Robert Mueller has very little to report about Trump and the Russians. The collusion story, which dominated your news intake for the better part of three years, slowly dies down. Then it's gone. No one talks about it anymore. Imagine that bit by bit, you're starting to feel that the events you were told would not and *could not* happen, not only happened, but happened without some sort of malign interference. Instead, millions of your fellow citizens simply voted for them. In the American case, it turns out many of your fellow citizens who simply voted for Trump come from states that have been devastated by an opioid epidemic enabled by a corrupt system of incentives involving the Food and Drug Administration, doctors, and Big Pharma. (You might want to take note of this. It will come up again later.)

Again, you ask, "How could this happen?" And again, the media outlets and political representatives you've always trusted have the answer: racism.

"Your country is racist," they tell you. If you're white, this may seem strange to you. Other than a handful of idiots, you've never met a racist. If you're an ethnic minority immigrant like me, this seems even stranger. Why would people in one of the most welcoming, tolerant countries in the world want to convince themselves their country is racist when it's so obviously not?

But the evidence is right there on your TV screen. Imagine your horror as a famous and beloved gay African American actor is assaulted by MAGA hat-wearing thugs who racially abuse him and put a noose around his neck. In a prime-time interview, he cries while talking about it.

Imagine your outrage as you see news reports of a bunch of MAGA hat-wearing kids from a religious school contemptuously confront a Native American elder. Professional, adult commentators on TV tell you the kid has a “punchable face,” and while you abhor violence, it’s hard to disagree. Imagine that for days you watch coverage of these events, with expert after expert, pundit after pundit, sharing and fueling your outrage. Maybe your country really is racist. Maybe *you’re* racist. Were you always just blind?

Imagine that soon after, however, the Jussie Smollett story turns out to be an attention-seeking hoax: He made it all up. Imagine you also quickly discover that the Native American elder was the one who confronted the kids, and not the other way around. “If this is such a racist country,” you ask yourself, “why would they need to make up stories of racism?” As you ponder this, you remember that for years now, you’ve been expected to go along with other, more elaborate make-believe stories.

You’re expected to understand that gender is not as binary as school, your eyes, and your own experience have led you to believe. Whatever you learned about biology growing up is not only wrong, it’s pathological and harmful, according to the American Psychological Association. You no longer know how many genders you’re expected to be able to recognize. You do know that asking questions is dangerous.

Imagine that you still want to believe the experts and the commentators, but now that requires you to believe your country is racist, that men are bad, and that gender is a social construct, which is an idea you still don’t really understand.

It’s at this point that a pandemic breaks out in China.

You are initially unconcerned, but as terrifying scenes increasingly emerge from Italy and other countries closer to home, it is clear that something big is happening. You watch nervously as politicians give press conference after press conference, flanked by experts, to explain the situation.

President Trump shuts down travel to the United States from China. He has been widely condemned as a racist repeatedly in the past, and the same explanation is given this time. It’s not just Americans who tell you Trump is racist for calling a virus that emerged in China a “Chinese virus.” In response, the mayor of Florence advises Italian citizens to fight Trump’s anti-Chinese bigotry by “hugging a Chinese person.” Shortly after, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of the most respected and powerful Democrats in the country, visits Chinatown in San Francisco to explain that “there’s no reason tourists or locals should be staying away from the area because of coronavirus concerns.”

“Thank God there are some sensible, nonracist people who aren’t overreacting,” you say to yourself. Imagine watching as Trump doubles down on his racism by claiming the virus may have come from a lab in Wuhan. “Nonsense,” you think. You’re more concerned with how best to protect yourself and your family from this deadly disease than with its origins at this point anyway. You consider buying surgical masks, or using homemade ones—you’ve seen visitors and tourists from Asian countries wear them, and they’ve been through things like this before, so maybe it’s best to follow their lead.

But the country's chief medical experts tell you not to wear masks, and to focus on washing your hands instead. As lockdowns are introduced around the world, you diligently follow all the rules. You stay at home. You only go out once, and live off savings or government grants. You do your best to keep your hands clean, to not touch other surfaces that other people touch. Some political representatives make the solemn decision to shut down beaches, parks, and playgrounds, encouraging everyone to stay indoors.

You are proud to be doing your part. Thanks to you and millions of your fellow citizens, the first wave of the pandemic overwhelms certain hot spots, but it does not devastate the health care system at a national level. While thousands sadly die, you've helped to protect those around you.

Imagine your confusion as the same people who spent three months telling you not only that masks don't work, but that there are several reasons you shouldn't wear or purchase them, suddenly introduce mask mandates. We're "following the science," they tell you. This seems to make little sense, but a pandemic is no time for questions. And who knows, maybe our understanding of the science evolved?

As you cautiously go to the supermarket, you notice that masks have made people less likely to socially distance. You remember reading somewhere that bicycle helmets work similarly: They give the wearer more confidence, and the result is often more accidents and injuries, not fewer. "Silly people," you say to yourself. "If only they would follow the experts."

You turn on your TV and learn that shoppers at your local supermarket aren't the only ones who have been ignoring the rules. Nancy Pelosi arranged for a salon, shutdown by government decree, to open privately for her—then publicly blamed the business owner for violating the lockdown. California Gov. Gavin Newsom is seen eating dinner at one of the most expensive restaurants in America with a large group of unmasked people indoors. In the U.K., Neil Ferguson, the epidemiologist whose projections were used as the basis for lockdowns, appears to have broken his own rules to get some action with his married lover. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, drove halfway across the country to ensure he had a better place to isolate. The journalists who berate him for this are later found to have attended an unmasked, indoor birthday party in breach of the rules. The lockdowns continue.

Then a man is killed in Minneapolis by a police officer arresting him for a petty crime. The man is African American. The officer is white. The arrest and murder are captured on video, which quickly goes viral around the world. Imagine your horror as you watch an officer of the law kneel on another man's neck until he passes out and later dies. "This is disgusting," you say to yourself. "I hope they throw the book at him." Overnight, a huge campaign for racial justice springs up around the world.

No one explains what racism had to do with the incident, but they don't need to. As you know by now, the West is racist, America is racist, and police are racist. Therefore any time a crime has a white perpetrator and an African American victim, there is only one possible motive. The fact that an identical incident led to the death of a white man named Tony Timpa in Dallas in August 2016 is never mentioned for context.

While the lockdown rules remain in place, the protests against injustice spill out into public spaces. Tens of thousands of people crowd into the streets of major cities. Few of them wear masks, and social distancing is nonexistent. Clashes with police ensue, and in the United States, protesters loot stores, destroy businesses, attack residents, and start fires. A retired African

American police officer from St. Louis named David Dorn is among dozens of people who are murdered in the chaos.

Attempts to discuss the negative impacts of lockdowns on health and mental well-being, especially that of children barred from going to school, are suppressed.

The media describes these events as “mostly peaceful protests,” as broadcast reporters stand in front of burning buildings. After months of harsh restrictions, the media and political class offer no criticism of protests that violate every element of lockdown policy. After months of telling you to stay at home to avoid spreading COVID, doctors explain that rather than being a potential form of super spreading, “protest is a profound public health intervention.”

Big tech companies go into overdrive to stop the spread of what they call disinformation. Alternative points of view regarding the efficacy of masks and lockdowns, as well as the origins of the virus itself, are increasingly blocked, flagged, and censored. Attempts to discuss the negative impacts of lockdowns on health and mental well-being, especially that of children barred from going to school, are suppressed. As the year runs on, with a pivotal U.S. election looming, Trump promises a huge push to develop a vaccine. Then-Sen. Kamala Harris, running for vice president, says that if Trump advised people to take a vaccine, she wouldn’t take it.

On the eve of the election, a major media outlet releases a damaging report about Hunter Biden, son of presidential candidate Joe Biden. The story alleges corruption that may implicate his father, as well as drug use, paying for prostitutes, and more. Twitter and other social media platforms immediately prevent the story from being shared. The media lines up commentators to claim the story was, yet again, “Russian disinformation.” Once Hunter’s father wins the election, it becomes clear that several key elements of the story are likely accurate, and the laptop from which the information was recovered is not in fact a Russian decoy, but Hunter Biden’s laptop.

Meanwhile, in the U.K., the publicly available number of COVID patients and deaths nationwide turns out to have been inaccurate. For some time, any British citizen who died at any point for any reason after having tested positive for COVID was counted as dying *from* COVID, even if it was from a car crash. The official figure is later revised again. The number of people who are in hospital because of COVID also turns out to be incorrect.

Now that a bigot is no longer president of the United States, closing national borders to visitors from other countries is no longer considered xenophobic. In fact, it is widely advocated in the media. Likewise, it is no longer considered racist to detain people at the border, to put them in holding cells, to deport them, or to simply turn them away.

The supposedly racist conspiracy theory that the virus came from a lab in Wuhan is now also open for discussion. It even looks like the most credible explanation of the origins of the virus. Imagine your horror as you learn that the reason thousands of people died in the first wave of the pandemic was that elderly patients with COVID were allowed, and sometimes compelled, to be released back into nursing homes. In fact, it was a personal decision by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, brother of CNN anchor Chris Cuomo. Gov. Cuomo’s publisher later suspends promotion of a book he wrote in the meantime. It’s about his leadership during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Texas and Florida, which largely remained open and avoided draconian lockdowns, seem to have made out OK. Kids have been going to school, businesses have stayed open. You look at COVID death rates by state, and neither Florida nor Texas cracks the top half.

It is at this point that **vaccines** become the main focus of government policy and media commentary.

The same people who told you Brexit would never happen, that Trump would never win, that when he did win it was because of Russian collusion but also because of racism, that you must follow lockdowns while they don't, that masks don't work, that masks do work, that social justice protests during pandemic lockdowns are a form of "health intervention," that ransacking African American communities in the name of fighting racism is a "mostly peaceful" form of protest, that poor and underserved children locked out of shuttered schools are "still learning," that Jussie Smollett was a victim of a hate crime, that men are toxic, that there is an infinite number of genders, that COVID couldn't have come from a lab until maybe it did, that closing borders is racist until maybe it isn't, that you shouldn't take Trump's vaccine, that you must take the vaccine developed during the Trump administration, that Andrew Cuomo is a great leader, that Andrew Cuomo is a granny killer, that the number of COVID deaths is one thing and then another ... are the same people telling you now that the vaccine is safe, that you must take it, and that if you don't, you will be a second-class citizen.

Understand vaccine hesitancy now?

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