



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 38 – COVID 19 Conspiracy Theories

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Participants:

LaKesha Anderson
Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Daniel Romer

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*. Hello, I'm LaKesha Anderson, Director of Academic and Professional Affairs at The National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*. Thank you for joining us for today's episode.

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, conspiracy theories have spread alongside the virus. Social media has been a hotbed of misinformation, although some social media sites have attempted to stem the tide of misinformation by removing incorrect information. At the same time, mainstream media outlets have attempted to “debunk” many conspiracy theories, while fringe and extremist sites have promoted them. Because of misinformation, some people have been less likely to wear a mask or get a COVID-19 vaccine. On today's episode of *Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast*, communication professors Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Daniel Romer join me to discuss their recent study published in *The Journal of Medical Internet Research* about how social media, mainstream media, and conservative media have influenced beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and intentions to wear a mask or get a vaccine.

But first, a bit more about today's guests. Kathleen Hall Jamieson is the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Director of the University's Annenberg Public Policy Center, and Program Director of the Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands. Dr. Jamieson studies campaign communication, science communication, and the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Jamieson has authored or co-authored 16 books, most recently *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President*. Hi, Kathleen, and welcome to the podcast.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

It's good to be with you.



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LaKesha Anderson:

Daniel Romer is the Research Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Dr. Romer's research focuses on media and social influences on adolescent health and development with an emphasis on risky behavior. Hi, Dan, and welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Daniel Romer:

Thanks. Good to be here.

LaKesha Anderson:

Dan, could you talk a bit about the questions that you were investigating through this study and how you designed the study so that you could answer those questions?

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. So we had the opportunity early in 2020 to do a national survey through the Qualtrics Survey Organization. And we took that opportunity to survey a national sample of over a thousand folks, probability sample so it's representative. And we decided based on Kathleen's earlier work where she had found that there were at least three conspiracy theories as they're called that were very common and being circulated on social media and also on other media outlets. And so the three that we looked at were the idea that China was somehow responsible for the pandemic and had created the virus as a bioweapon so to speak. And another one was that there is a deep state within the CDC that is somehow undermining Trump and using the pandemic for that purpose. And the third one was that the pharmaceutical industry was somehow benefiting. And Kathleen found that those were quite prevalent. So we decided that it would be very helpful to get a baseline national sample in March just at the time when lockdowns were happening to see what proportion of people believe these things and are their beliefs and those things related to wearing a mask, other social distancing, and accepting an eventual vaccine. Of course, in March, it was very hypothetical. So then we had the opportunity to reinterview those folks in July which gave us the opportunity to see if there were changes in the conspiracy beliefs and in what kinds of media that they were using might be predictive of those changes. So that's basically how this thing evolved and led to a very interesting set of analyses and findings.

LaKesha Anderson:

This study, in part, addresses beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Kathleen, how widespread are beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and how have such beliefs changed over time?

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

So first, let's begin with a common definition of conspiracy theory because there's some confusion. Though there are times in which people attribute a statement to conspirators and they implied that there is a person engaging in conspiracy, but they don't actually specify who the



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conspirator is. So when people say, for example, that 5G caused COVID, they haven't specified a malign individual engaged in a coverup of suspicious activities which usually are central parts of what someone would consider a conspiracy theory. So the first thing to ask when someone says, what are the dominant conspiracy theories and then what does it mean is what do you mean when you say conspiracy theory? So by conspiracy theories, what Dan and I are looking at are things which you're specifying who the malign person or organization is and what they have done that is problematic. And you are either explicitly assuming that there is a coverup because of the nature of the activities or you're posing a coverup. By virtue of delimiting in that way, we are able to ask whether or not these individuals have essentially a conspiracy mentality. So when you say that someone believes all three of the conspiracy theories that Dan outlined, for example, those are in different kinds of domains. So one of them is about China and a bioweapon. One of them is about the CDC and a deep state. One of them is about malign activities of the pharmaceutical industry. Those are very different agents engaged in a conspiracy where you are suggesting malign activities and that there is a coverup. One question is then if people believe those things, do they believe all of them and how intensely do they believe them? So when you ask the question what do you know about them, we would answer by saying, we know something that we didn't know before this study which is that media exposure can intensify those beliefs across time or some kinds of media expose can potentially minimize the likelihood that those have intensified across time. Now the reason that that's important is because if you simply believe people are living in a conspiratorial world, they're enwrapped in assumptions that are amenable to conspiracy theories. You might say, well, then we shouldn't try to persuade them because they're there already, they're probably not going to change, and they're just going to incorporate anything that's new into that conspiratorial mentality. When you find that no, they intensify across time and some kinds of exposure seem to minimize the likelihood that they will happen, now you're saying there might be the potential for interdiction. What Dan and I are suggesting is because this is a panel, we're looking at people across time, we were able to ask that fundamental question. Are they just locked in there? They were there before. They will be there after it. As a result, we can't do anything. Or is there potential change across time in which case they be susceptible to intervention?

LaKesha Anderson:

Social media platforms have been a hotbed of misinformation during the pandemic, but people have also shared vaccine selfies and flaunted their mask-wearing on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. How has the use of social media promoted or discouraged mask wearing and getting a vaccine, Dan?

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. So let me follow up a little on Kathleen's comment and your prior question. We did find that from March to July, there was an increase overall in belief in these three very disparate



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conspiracies, and the people who believe in one of them tend to believe in the other. Any one of them, they'll believe in the other two. So this is a very interesting phenomenon as Kathleen sort of laid out. And to start disentangling like social media's influence is I think very complicated because social media is very complicated. If you think about the three main platforms, I think Kathleen's going to talk later about things she's found out in terms of fact checking. But they've tried to remove misinformation as much as possible, the three main ones. But there are definitely sources of information even on those platforms in particular with regard to vaccination. And this has demonstrated not by us but by other researchers that there is a very aggressive advocacy group again vaccination, not particularly COVID but beginning with the MMR vaccine which was accused of creating autism in children. There's a group that actively disseminates information that argues against the pharmaceutical industry and the use of vaccination in general. That is definitely being promoted on social media, and it's a very big disincentive for a large proportion of people. And we find that people who believe in that are even more likely to believe the pharmaceutical conspiracy than the other two. But they will also tend to believe the other two as well. So I would say the social media has a wide range. There's one particular one that we've looked at recently, Parler or Parler, I don't know how people pronounce it. But it is actively extremely conservative in its viewpoint and is very willing to entertain all kinds of conspiracies, one of which was related to the January 6th event. So there's a very wide range of content, and we don't find that strong a relationship with overall social media use and these conspiracies as we do with what we would call overall conservative media outlets which includes news and commentary.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And some of which are social media.

Daniel Romer:

Some of which like Parler are social media. So there's large area there of overlap between social media and the conservative arena of news and commentary.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And Dan has pronounced it Parler as if it's French. I believe it's Parler, the outlet Parler, the thing. And the one that we're tracking now is Telegram. The amount of extremist content on Telegram and the amount of content that you would not talk about in a podcast because it is offensive content is extraordinarily high, in particular right now, the kinds of things that people on Telegram are saying ought to happen Anthony Fauci are worthy of a Spanish Inquisition.

LaKesha Anderson:

Conspiracy theories have spread daily on social media. For example, infamous videos have been shared hundreds of thousands of times before being removed. Major social media sites, including



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Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have worked to remove misinformation related to the pandemic for over a year. Have they been successful, Kathleen?

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

So largely actually they have. And one of the reasons that we know that is because when we're trying to track down the citations as we are publishing, for example, so we find something, we fact check it, we run FactCheckData.org and its subsites, DataCheck with the Annenberg Public Policy Center which I direct. But when we find it and we fact check it, it often is no longer there by the time we go back to check our citation before we publish about it. What that suggests is that the responsible social media outlets, the Facebooks, the Instagrams, the Twitters are actually doing a very good job on the big deceptions. But the problem is they take down in one place, it pops up in another. And so when asked the question, are they trying, yet. Are they succeeding, not necessarily because of the ingenuity of those who are pushing the content out. So it's a little like launching out a whack-a-troll process where you catch the troll in one place, the troll just simply reappears in another. So we're watching as the platforms move across all of the various venues they have, chasing stuff in order to try to make sure that it doesn't reappear someplace else. At a certain point, when they are successful about getting it interdicted, it hasn't necessarily gone off social media. They've just gotten it off their platforms. It's simply moved into more an extremist venue. And those venues then begin to aggregate the viewers who were initially attracted to the content. And so this is going to be an ongoing threat. But at least in the COVID era where you don't have the issue of whether or not political speech of leaders who were reelection ought to be treated differently. At least in the COVID era, what we've seen with the mainstream platforms are serious efforts to try to interdict as best they can.

LaKesha Anderson:

A lot of the social media platforms were chastised for being too late to the game in removing misinformation from their platforms. Do you think that that had any impact on people's perceptions of conspiracy theories or their ideas about what was true and whatnot?

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

Well, first, you need to separate misinformation and disinformation from conspiracy theory. So we're dealing in COVID with emergent science. There at the very early stage of the pandemic, there was a great deal that science did not know. And there was a lot of confusion and a lot of conflict about, for example, whether hydroxychloroquine worked or not. I mean the scientific community was saying, we don't know whether it works as a treatment for COVID. Nonetheless you had people arguing, yes, it's highly successful. It's a cure. So now put yourself in the position of the platforms. At what point do you decide that you should not label something as misinformation and as a result, put corrective content up against it or ultimately, if it's highly problematic, actually block it from your site? When you're dealing with emergent science, it's



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always going to be a judgment call about when you know enough to know that that is in fact misinformation. And in some cases, that knowledge may change over time. So, for example, Facebook interdicted the claim that the coronavirus originated in a lab in China and it was man-made. It also in the process interdicted the theory that it was a lab leak which means accidentally spread, not necessarily deliberately manufactured or deliberately spread. Facebook said that was a conspiracy theory, decided it was going to interdict it. Now as that dialogue has broadened and as we have found that people got sick in the Wuhan lab just about the time that COVID was starting to emerge, you're beginning—we haven't found what *The Economist* calls the smoking bat, the origin source for a natural origin theory that Facebook stepped back and said, we're not interdicting that anymore. So what you see is the challenge a platform has with emerging science in an environment in which it is not necessarily clear cut that we know with enough certainty about some things to determine whether or not you ought to interdict. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be putting up contextual information however. And FactCheck.org is part of the process with Facebook that fact checks content that's been crowdsourced as potentially problematic and our content with the other Facebook partners who fact check, is that posted up against the problematic content which is I think an appropriate way to deal with health misinformation at a point at which you still don't have a kind of certainty to know that this is definitely something that ought to be interdicted. They also need to establish across time and they're getting better at it. The threshold for determining what kind of information about health is so problematic that it's worthy of being blocked. And active deceptions about the negative effects that do not, as far as we know, exist of vaccination falls into that category for me and it falls into that category for them as well. Because if we deceive about vaccination by virtue of minimizing vaccination, we minimize the likelihood we're going to stop this pandemic.

LaKesha Anderson:

What could social media companies do differently in the future when faced with a similar health crisis?

Daniel Romer:

What can social media companies do differently? Well, I think one thing that Kathleen likes to point out is that in an environment in which the science is developing and people aren't sure about the right way to deal with various aspects of a crisis like this, that social media could try to promote greater understanding as the regular media, not just social media. But greater understanding of the tentativeness with which we are trying to cope with a crisis like the pandemic. So that will help people when Fauci tells people, oh, you shouldn't wear a mask and then the next month he says you should. If that had been couched a little more appropriately and with better explanation, people might have been able to not take advantage of that switch and say, look, you can't trust CDC. And the same is true with all the other recommendations. The media tend to give us the bottom line on what the organization, like CDC thinks we should do, but they don't go into why



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they think we should do that. And if they did that more, reviewing what the science is that leads people to that conclusion, that leads CDC to that conclusion, I think people would understand better how these recommendations are the best we know now. And we will know more in a month, for example, and maybe the recommendation will change. And that might help people understand a little better that when CDC makes a recommendation on day one, it can change depending on what we learn and how the crisis unfolds.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

One of the things that we're strongly recommending is that the public health community and the platforms and media in general engage in preemptive communication about what is known about the area of inquiry that is potentially being distorted and conspiracized. So we've developed a taxonomy of categories into which the deceptions fall about an infectious disease. And as a result, the kinds of preemptive knowledge that you would put in place to minimize the susceptibility to deception. And let's take vaccination as a category because it remains controversial and we're not reaching the thresholds of vaccinated immunity that we require to shut this pandemic down in the United States. We've been studying vaccination and vaccination communication now for more than a decade. So long before there was COVID, we were studying. The underlying patterns of deception about vaccination were there before COVID. So how do you counteract those upfront? You counteract them by increasing the likelihood that the public understands how vaccination works, how vaccinations are tested, how we know that they are safe and efficacious. And safe means safer than getting the disease. It doesn't mean categorically absolutely safe and it doesn't mean 100% effective for everyone under all circumstances. So if we were to build a block of public health understanding upfront, we would minimize the likelihood that a lack of understanding could be exploited. And this is not an adoption of a knowledge deficit about how we ought to be communicating about public health. It is rather saying there are forms of consequential knowledge that if built up in advance minimize susceptibilities. And Dan is pointing to one. Science is tentative and iterative. When Dr. Fauci says healthy people don't need to wear masks, he actually in that sentence that said, in that statement of 60 minutes says, now at this time. Well, what don't we know? We don't know at that point that there's asymptomatic transmission. At the point at which you know there's asymptomatic transmission, a person who thinks they're healthy is actually potentially not. They may be a carrier of COVID. Once you know that, even if you think you're healthy, you should wear a mask if you think that a mask will minimize the likelihood of transmission. Not eliminate but minimize the likelihood of transmission. And so one of the preemptive pieces of knowledge is science is provisional, science is iterative. Science is always saying this is what we know now. As a result, don't hear it is categorical. If you hear it as categorical, universal, and eternal, then when there is updated knowledge, you're going to assume they're being duplicitous or they're incompetent when, in fact, no, they were telling you what they knew then, and they're telling you what they know now. Now to your question, what can the platforms do? They can deploy those kinds of knowledge in forms that are palatable to



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audiences and reach those audiences with that proactive preemptive knowledge before one needs that knowledge as a buffer against deception.

LaKesha Anderson:

During the pandemic, President Trump spread some COVID-19 conspiracy theories which were also then perpetuated by conservative media outlets. How did consuming conservative media affect beliefs and conspiracy theories and intentions to wear a mask or get a vaccine?

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. So basically that's what our paper showed is that followers of conservative media which included Fox News but a lot of the other smaller outlets like Breitbart, One America.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And at that point also, Rush Limbaugh, now deceased, who I spent much of my life studying.

Daniel Romer:

That's right. The echo chamber number one. Yeah. So people who follow that tended to display an increase in belief in the three conspiracies that we studied. And people who followed what we would call more mainstream outlets like television news, the major broadcast networks tended not necessarily to change their views about the conspiracies but to be more open to wearing a mask and more willing to vaccinate. And then you have people following the more established news outlets that are typically associated with print but are now online like *New York Times*, *Washington Post*. They actually reported less belief in these conspiracies. So you get the sense that some of the national media actually subvert the belief in these conspiracies. Some do nothing but do help to get people more inclined to wear a mask and to vaccinate. And then others promote them. So you've got these three different sources all working at the same time. And of course, they have separate audiences so they're going to reach different kinds of people and you get changes that vary by the audience.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And I actually have a theory unsupported by our research, that is we didn't ask the questions that would answer whether or not that's what's happening. But why would broadcast news, traditional broadcast news exposure, that is network evening broadcast news, mainstream, ABC, CBS, etc., why would that increase the likelihood of masking? And it is because I believe you saw them on location in masks. Constantly they modeled masking. So the norm inside that part of the media sphere was one in which socially normative masking was, in fact, is so routine that I am assuming that what we had was a modeling effect. And our field has been studying the ways in which modeling and media has affected audiences going back into the 1950s. Some of that research actually started at The Annenberg School done by George Gerbner and Larry Gross and their



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colleagues and called Cultivation Analysis. I mean one of the three or four major theories produced actually by the communication field about the impact of mass communication.

LaKesha Anderson:

Dan, why do you think conservative media outlets were so strongly associated with beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories?

Daniel Romer:

Well, first of all, you've got a president who was entertaining some of these, not so much the pharmaceutical one but the other two. So they then will naturally try to support him as well, and they are very partisan in the way they comment and report the news. So they would become a natural outlet for these kinds of conspiracies, if not directly then indirectly by presenting evidence that would support them or is consistent with them. The other irony about that though is that given that you've got the President of United States who's the head of the country floating conspiracies, he's also at the same time promoting the idea that he's going to have a vaccine for everybody. So at the same time that these conspiracies are floating around partially supported by him, he's touting the fact that the pandemic's going to end because of the miraculous appearance of vaccines that he is helping to bring about. So this created a bit of a disparity among the followers of conservative media because at the beginning, when we first started tracking them, they were very much in favor, much more in favor of vaccination than you might have expected based on their belief in conspiracies. But over the course of the year as they were exposed more and more to conspiracies about the pandemic, the deep state and China, they became much more resistant to vaccination despite the fact that Trump was promoting vaccination all the way through the year. So they produced a sort of a funny dichotomy in the way followers of those outlets responded. At first, we were a little surprised because we expected them to be very much opposed based on their belief in conspiracies. But at the same time, they wanted to support Trump as well. And so that sort of dual process kind of worked in parallel for those folks.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

One possible explanation that is philosophically driven is that conservatives are traditionally distrustful of centralized authority, and that lends itself to a disposition to doubt that what you're hearing from centralized authority can be trusted. So when someone alleges that there's a deep state working within a centralized authority such as the CDC that is trying to undermine Donald Trump, you begin to get the beginnings of a premise that you would logically then follow through to say, and if the vaccine isn't delivered by Election Day as Trump is promising it's going to be, that must be that the deep state was responsible for the delay. And from the perspective of a Trump supporting part of the electorate, the fact that the first vaccine announcement of a successful trial happens very shortly after the election, that's very suspicious timing if you think that there's a deep state that would have delayed it by say 10 days in order to ensure that Trump



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didn't benefit from it. So one of the things that conspiracy theories do is take incidental pieces of data and weave them into a coherent narrative. All that then ultimately clouds one's perception of what's going on with the vaccine. So if you can't trust the deep state as a result because the deep state delayed the vaccine in order to undermine the Trump presidency, can you trust then when the FDA certifies that the vaccine is safe and effective? Haven't you now undermined your respect for the FDA's authorization process? Maybe those same deep state people are playing games with that vaccine. So you start to embed premises that are consistent with distrust in statements about safety and efficacy because those same authorities that supposedly were undermining Trump are the ones who are going to certify the vaccine.

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. The conspiratorial mind can weave together lots of interesting pieces of evidence to support their beliefs. That's for sure.

LaKesha Anderson:

How did other news outlets influence beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories? For instance, was there a difference between print and television?

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. I think we sort of covered that earlier, that print from what we could tell in our research was associated with a reduction in belief in the three conspiracies. And when we say print, of course, a lot of that is disseminated online. And broadcast TV did a good thing in helping people to become comfortable with wearing a mask and being ready to accept the vaccine but didn't do very much, at least through the period we've studied, to disabuse people of these conspiracy beliefs. So they probably don't want to go there because they don't have any evidence either one way or the other that I think they're sort of at a disadvantage in that regard because they want to go with reliable sources. They don't have a lot of time for people to watch them. And so they go with sort of the standard line without challenging necessarily these kinds of conspiracies because they're very hard to challenge. Let's face it. They're not something you can fact check. I mean Kathleen's FactCheck.org tries to fact check them, but I think at the end of the day, you have to say like, did China create the virus as a bioweapon? Well, it doesn't look like it. But do we know for sure? No.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

I worked on a meta-analysis with Dolores Albarracín and Sally Chan and a number of other authors that asked, under what circumstances are you able to correct? Because once people accept misinformation, it's sticky. It's difficult to correct. And one of the things that we found in the meta-analysis was detailed explanation, particularly when you're putting in place an alternative cause, the cause that's alleged in the misinformation can be corrected. Well, who's most likely to



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be able to do that? A print reporter who's got the long form print and the linear structure of a print article or a broadcast reporter who's got maybe 2 minutes and 10 seconds of time. So first, the broadcast reporters aren't going to take on conspiracy theories. They might take on misinformation. They're not going to take on conspiracy theories. But the likelihood that you're going to get a detailed explication of something that people will be able to process as an alternative reality is far more likely when you're dealing with long-form print. So I suspect that print has a natural advantage that is corrective in light of the finding that we had from that meta-analysis.

LaKesha Anderson:

I just want to follow up on something you mentioned, Dan. You mentioned that broadcast news was good at influencing viewers to wear masks and get vaccinated. Why do you think that was the case?

Daniel Romer:

Well, I think Kathleen talked about this earlier, that often on TV, you get a visual. Visual is part of the story, and the visual is often file footage of people getting vaccinated, reporters wearing masks themselves when they interview people even if the people they're interviewing aren't wearing them. So this normalizes the use of masks and showing file footage of people getting vaccinated over and over. I mean I don't know how many times I've seen a syringe go into someone's arm since the beginning of this pandemic. I think it must be close to a million times. So this tends to normalize that kind of thing which you wouldn't get as often in other venues. Even social media probably wouldn't get it as powerfully.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And there was a narrative structure inside broadcast network news which saw vaccination as the solution to the pandemic. So vaccination was always treated as this thing in the offing. Were we going to get there? Here's a new form that's come online. Will it be able to get there? Here's its preliminary insight. Doctors are being interviewed. Will AstraZeneca be able to get there first? Well, what about Moderna? Now we've got an MRNA platform. So the underlying assumption of broadcast news and its story structure, its visualized story structure was one in which problem, pandemic, solution, vaccination. There were not stories that suggested a vaccine would fail us. The question was would science give us a vaccine. And so there's a very strong narrative assumption underlying broadcast news that invites us to see that as a solution. And the question was not whether it was a solution but when would it be delivered and then would it be effective enough to do what it needed to do. The assumption always was that it would be effective if it were authorized. But would it be effective enough? So when you then get the first vaccination results and you see 94% efficacy in clinical trials, the level of astonishment is such because that narrative said, would it ever get there. So the whole underlying structure of the narrative was science has



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delivered. Isn't this just absolutely amazing? There's almost a breathlessness in broadcasting. Well, it's hard to be breathless in print, and you've got much more diffused narratives across everything that's happening in print where this is a dominant narrative across the pandemic. The vaccine in the offing, if we get there, pandemic might be able to be harnessed. But maybe we'll never get there. Vaccines are really tough.

Daniel Romer:

Yeah. Now at the time when we did our July survey, I'm not quite sure what the narrative was, but it was certainly, we're hopeful for a vaccine. What Kathleen's talking about is more later I think when FDA finally said yeah, this is going to work. But yeah.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

And by the way, you had no political contest between Trump and Biden over it. I mean they both are looking to a vaccine. The question in September is would the vaccine be delivered in time for the election? The Democrats were worrying that if it were delivered in time for the election, it might have been delivered too fast. There might have been corners cut. The Republicans were arguing that if it wasn't delivered, that meant the deep state had sabotaged it. So what that meant was the underlying assumption, the political dialogue was vaccine, good. Question is when will we get it and who will get the credit? And that again lends itself to we want to vaccinate. It's not undercutting vaccination. It's not engendering suspicion about vaccination.

LaKesha Anderson:

What lessons can media organizations learn from this study? How can they more effectively respond to conspiracy theories or promote preventative behaviors if faced with a similar public health crisis in the future?

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

One of the problems with conspiracy theories is they undercut trust in institutions. And when you're dealing with public health information, we have to rely on our public health institutions as the source of the available scientific knowledge. We just simply don't have another source. And so if you say, what is a pernicious effect, how would you preempt, minimize the susceptibility preemptively to that kind of a move, you would do what you can to increase the likelihood the public understands how the science is done within those agencies, how the independence of the scientific judgment is protected within those agencies. And that whole discussion is existing in an environment in which the Trump administration is politicizing the agencies. So the MMWR, the official publication of the CDC, for example, is being pressured to engage in publication practices that are going to be politically beneficial for Donald Trump. An MMWR publication about hydroxychloroquine, for example, is delayed. You've got evidence that the hydroxychloroquine may have been authorized early because of unjustified enthusiasm on the part of Trump



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administration officials in its efficacy. So those are all threats to the independence of those agencies that we trust to give us health information. So what would you like to see the media structures do? First, be critical of them when they've been politicized. Be critical of them when they've gotten things wrong. And they did get things wrong. The CDC's initial testing for COVID, for example, was wrong. They just didn't get that right. That's journalism's job. It's to hold people accountable. But secondly, help the public understand all the protections that are in place to minimize the likelihood that they can be politicized. So how do you know, for example, that Dr. Fauci is not personally gaining large amounts of money because of his statements about hydroxychloroquine. That's a deception about him. It's built into a conspiracy theory about his relationship to the pharmaceutical industry. You know that because there are self-disclosure requirements built into the federal bureaucracy. There are monitoring structures within the federal bureaucracy. Well, if you understand that, you're less likely to believe that he's on the take getting some buy-out, some financial incentive as a result of taking the position which says science doesn't know yet about hydroxychloroquine and then once the clinical trials come in, saying, and hydroxychloroquine is not advised for COVID-19 because first, its efficacy has not been shown on the trials but secondly, you run some risk than taking it. So how do you protect from the inference, the conspiratorial influence about Dr. Fauci? Let the public know what the protections are in place to ensure that people like Dr. Fauci are not on the take. How to increase the likelihood that you understand that the process by which the vaccine is approved should be protected from political influence. You look at all the stages that are built into the process, all the independent reviews that are there. And then the journalists should ask, well, did they take place? And if they did, we've protected the science from personal human bias of the people doing the studies but also, from forms of political interference. So understanding those things preemptively provides a buffer potentially against some conspiracy inferences, not for those already in conspiracy world. They're already there. But for the people who might be lured into that world, perhaps we can throw a breaker in place before they get there to minimize the likelihood that they go over the line.

LaKesha Anderson:

And finally, this is one of many studies that has examined public communication related to COVID-19, particularly conspiracy theories. How has the pandemic highlighted the need for even more communication research in the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories?

Daniel Romer:

Well, there's a very active research area to try to figure out how to debunk these theories and to help people understand why they shouldn't believe in them. That's a very active area of research, and I think that's one that will continue for quite a while. And at present, I'm not sure that there's been a very big breakthrough in that area. I know Kathleen's very optimistic about preemptively helping people to understand why conspiracies are not plausible in many cases or why we shouldn't believe certain ones. But I haven't seen a really good demonstration of a way to



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disabuse people, especially people who are prone to conspiracy beliefs. They are quite resistant because they think that an authority figure is already biased against them. And so you have to find a figure who they will trust to change their minds, and that, of course, is difficult to do in and of itself. But if I think right now that might be the best avenue. If Donald Trump tomorrow said, get vaccinated, do everything you can to get vaccinated, and have your children wear masks when they go to school, that might have some benefit because the people who are currently believing these COVID conspiracies are people who follow Donald Trump. I think that's quite the case. So I think beyond that, I don't think I've seen anything particularly persuasive at this point although Kathleen is optimistic about preemptive education.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson:

Kathleen is chronically optimistic. It's just a character flaw. I come out of the speech tradition that NCA comes out of. The part of my world that I think is really important as we study these things is the rhetoric part of the world. The communication field that grounding itself in rhetoric and in speech is the place in the intellectual community that really cares about messages and that understands how messages work in relationship to audiences. And I think those kinds of understandings have informed the kinds of research that we do at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. We believe that messages matter. We also understand how a medium can affect the way in which a message gets to audiences. And because it's a central premise of the communication field, we I think are highly sensitive to audience difference and to the ways in which audience uptake of messages can be dramatically different person to person. And so that perspective I think explains why it is that it's the work that we have been doing from that part of the field that is looking at messages that are specific across time, their likely prevalence, how they are configured structurally. That's actually a rhetoric mode. And then when you put them into a properly constructed survey instrument, what it is you learn about how audience uptake occurs through media and channels. Those are all communication perspectives. Most of the people working on conspiracy theories are not communication scholars. They are coming from other fields. And if you look at the weakness of their work, the weakness of their work is they don't know what to do with messages to the extent that someone grounded in communication theory I think does. I think it's the strength of what we do.

LaKesha Anderson:

Thank you both. Thank you for joining me today on *Communication Matters*. Listeners, I hope you found this as enlightening as I have. You can find a link to the study on the *Communication Matters* webpage at natcom.org/podcast.

Conclusion:

And, listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters*, which will focus on communication research related to ableism and disabilities as well as some best



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practices for classroom and campus accessibility and inclusion. Communication scholars Jim Cherney, Janell Johnson, Nathan Stewart, and Sophia Maier join University of Maryland Professor Trevor Parry-Giles for this important conversation. Tune in for insight into research related to intersectionality and disability studies as well as practical tips to use technology in the classroom for the benefit of all students.

In NCA News, more insights about the COVID-19 pandemic issues highlighted in this episode can be gained by attending the NCA 107th Annual Convention, themed “Renewal and Transformation.” This year’s convention will be held November 18 – 21, 2021, in Seattle, WA, in a face-to-face format. The convention will feature hundreds of presentations about topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. If you register before September 17, you can take advantage of early bird registration rates. Early bird rates offer significant savings. Register today at natcom.org/register.

Also, in NCA News, the August features collection on NCA’s online magazine, *Spectra*, will be posted to the NCA website on August 10. The collection will focus on communication teaching and learning in the post-pandemic “new normal.” Features will address innovations in performance studies, resources that teachers can use in their classrooms, the community college perspective on post-pandemic learning, and how NCA’s Learning Outcomes in Communication can be applied in the post-pandemic world. Visit natcom.org/spectra next week to read the collection.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world.

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars’ work and perspectives.

Communication Matters, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.



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