

Looking Back On The Sadism Of The COVID-19 Shaming Campaign

Description

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There's a scene in videographer Matt Orfalea's arresting new "Nobody is Safe!" compilation in which Jeff Van Gundy — one of the sharpest basketball announcers alive, and one of my favorites to watch — leans back and says, "I don't even understand what means, 'I'm doing my own research.'"

The whole quote, from a preseason Heat-Rockets game Van Gundy called in October of 2021:

*What does that look like, you doing your own research? Are you doing studies yourself? **Are you in a lab on a nightly basis?** What are you doing? I don't understand what that means, 'I'm doing my own research.'*
How about this: we've got really smart people... who've already done the research.

The subtext of Van Gundy's quote was one of the many stages of the Covid-19 messaging campaign, a collective roar against "asking questions" or "doing your own research." Just [a few weeks earlier, Brian Stelter on CNN](#) hosted a panel about "four little words that are hurting America's pandemic response." He showed evil always-villain Sean Hannity repeatedly uttering the "seemingly innocent" phrase, "Do your own research." He then rolled tape of comic Trevor Noah saying, "Nobody who's saying that is getting in a lab and doing tests."

In hindsight, who knows, that might have been where Van Gundy got the idea. Make no mistake, however, there was and is an active campaign against people who do their "own research." This was a mostly unexplored theme in the #TwitterFiles material, as we did repeatedly see anti-disinformation "experts" identifying people who didn't quickly accept official messaging without question as already, in a way, spreaders of mis- or disinformation.

We touched on this a little in a [report about the Stanford Virality Project](#), which advised that "just asking questions" was a tactic "commonly used by spreaders of misinformation." We also saw it in an Aspen Institute report on misinformation, which recommended "strikes" against people they called "savvy spreaders," i.e. those who used phrases like "just asking questions," evading censors by "couching" misinformation as mere "uncertainty":

- Extending strikes to the savvy spreaders: Savvy spreaders of misinformation know how to navigate existing policies by couching misinformation in uncertainty ("just asking questions") or using attribution shields ("people are saying"), thus avoiding responsibility for the content while helping it spread.¹³⁵ Policies should include guidelines for dealing with accounts that repeatedly use this technique to spread harmful misinformation — addressing the pattern of behavior rather than trying to judge each specific post on its own.

I got the shot and never advised people not to get vaccinated. I couldn't imagine an area where I was

less qualified to give advice. But this is the point: the same people Orf shows picking up torches and railing with bloodcurdling certainty against “the unvaccinated” are nearly all people who knew as little as me, and whose beliefs about the vaccine were at best secondhand.

You’re disgusted at those who “do their own research”? What do you think journalism is? None of us do lab experiments. The job is always an imperfect effort to figure out which sources are most trustworthy, and because even the most credentialed often screw up, we always need to leave room for consensus proving wrong.

In this case one didn’t need a microbiology degree to recognize something about Covid-19 messaging was off. From flip-flops about masks (an “evolving situation,” Dr. Anthony Fauci [said](#)) to unwillingness to be frank in discussing natural immunity or risks to children, even casual news-readers saw confusion in the ranks of senior officials. Later, a series of reversals on key questions — first about whether the vaccine prevented contraction, then about whether it prevented transmission — left even people who wanted to follow official advice unsure of what to do.

I hope Matt’s video survives as a warning. There is still a lot of investigation to be done, in particular about the origins of the pandemic — certain segments of the national audience may still be in for a shock or two there — but as Matt shows, we already see a cautionary tale about faulty information being used to gin up real hatred.

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