# **Misinformation in a Moment of Crisis is Incredibly Dangerous**

*Jonathan Beale*

*This article was* [*originally published in Public Seminar*](https://publicseminar.org/essays/misinformation-in-a-moment-of-crisis-is-incredibly-dangerous/) *on 26 May 2020. The author would like to thank the editors of Public Seminar for permission to republish the article.*

Albert Camus’ 1947 novel *The Plague* tells the story of a deadly virus that spreads through the Algerian coastal city of Oran. It halves the city’s population, killing 500 people a week at its peak. As the surviving population struggles to stay alive, there’s an increase in fires. They are set by people who return from quarantine and in a state of panic set their homes alight in a desperate attempt to kill the plague.

It’s madness. But it’s not difficult to imagine people resorting to similar actions now, influenced by misinformation about how to stave off the novel coronavirus. Most of us would also take desperate measures to evade death.

Similar events are, in fact, happening during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In March, Gary and Wanda Lenius, a couple in their 60s in Arizona, [drank chloroquine phosphate](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/24/coronavirus-chloroquine-poisoning-death/), a chemical used for cleaning fish tanks, thinking it could protect them from Covid-19. They consumed the substance as a prophylactic after seeing Donald Trump [tout](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-rips-reporter-who-asked-him-calm-scared-americans-terrible-n1165031) the malaria drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine as potential coronavirus treatments. The name partly matched a product they had used for treating their fish. But the toxic liquid they ingested was different to the medicinal form used to treat malaria.

Within twenty minutes they experienced side effects and became extremely ill. Gary died and Wanda was left in a critical condition for several days. “Trump kept saying it was basically pretty much a cure,” Wanda told [reporters](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/man-dies-after-ingesting-chloroquine-attempt-prevent-coronavirus-n1167166). “We were afraid of getting sick.” So were the Oranian citizens who set their homes alight to ward off the plague.

Trump’s medical advice has been misleading and irresponsible on many occasions, false on others, and has recently become preposterous. In a White House briefing on March 19, Trump [wrongly claimed](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/19/politics/fact-check-chloroquine-trump-fda/index.html) that the United States’ Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had approved hydroxychloroquine to treat Covid-19. In that same briefing, he [said](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-6/) hydroxychloroquine has “been around for a long time, so we know that if it – if things don’t go as planned, it’s not going to kill anybody.” Several times he’s also [said](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/coronavirus-us-ventilators-new-york-trump-touts-unproven-cure-malaria-drug), “What do you have to lose? Take it.”

The FDA’s post-briefing [statement](https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-continues-facilitate-development-treatments) made clear that they had not yet approved any drugs to treat coronavirus. Moreover, the following day, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and Trump’s top infectious diseases adviser, [said](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-rips-reporter-who-asked-him-calm-scared-americans-terrible-n1165031) that there was no evidence that hydroxychloroquine could be used as an effective preventative measure against coronavirus. Several [studies](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/20/donald-trump-callshydroxychloroquine-critics-enemy-state/) have since concluded that hydroxychloroquine is not effective for preventing or treating Covid-19, and that [anyone](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/politics/trump-hydroxychloroquine-covid-coronavirus.html) is at risk of life-threatening side effects. Another [study](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2820%2931180-6/fulltext) has reported that the death rate of coronavirus patients who have received hydroxychloroquine has been higher than those who have not. That study has increased concerns that the drug could do more harm than good and has led to the World Health Organization [halting](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/25/861913688/who-halts-hydroxychloroquine-trial-over-safety-concerns) a trial of hydroxychloroquine.

Last month, Trump’s medical advice reached the level of absurdity. In a White House briefing on April 23, he suggested scientists should investigate whether injecting disinfectant into and shining ultraviolet light inside the human body might be effective against Covid-19. These comments provoked immediate public warnings from [doctors](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/23/trump-coronavirus-treatment-disinfectant), [health reporters](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52407177) and [disinfectant manufacturers](https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-bleach-company-warns-disinfectant-wont-cure-coronavirus-dettol-2020-4?r=US&IR=T) that people should not attempt to self-medicate with disinfectant. In the days following Trump’s extraordinary suggestions, there was an increase in [cases of disinfectant exposure](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/coronavirus-trump-treatment-disinfectant-bleach-new-york-a9483786.html) in New York and [hundreds of calls](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/26/politics/maryland-disinfectants-coronavirus-larry-hogan-donald-trump/index.html) from Maryland residents to a state hotline about injecting or ingesting disinfectant. Two men in Georgia were [hospitalized](https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/495089-two-men-in-georgia-drank-disinfectants-in-efforts-to-prevent-covid-19) after trying to self-medicate by drinking household cleaning products.

Most recently, Trump [stated](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52717161) that he’s taking hydroxychloroquine himself. He’s presumably taking it as a prophylactic, since he claims to not have Covid-19 and [tested negative](https://www.npr.org/2020/03/14/815959169/president-trump-tests-negative-for-coronavirus) for the virus in March. Despite the risks and the incidents that have occurred from people self-medicating following his advice, upon proudly announcing to reporters that he’s taking the drug, Trump again asked, “What do you have to lose?.”

Trump’s irresponsible advice risks increasing public panic and decreasing trust in authorities. It immediately drew criticism from [medical experts](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/politics/trump-hydroxychloroquine-covid-coronavirus.html). Carlos del Rio, an infectious diseases expert at Emory University, [expressed concern](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/20/donald-trump-callshydroxychloroquine-critics-enemy-state/) that Trump’s statements could give rise to a conspiracy theory that there’s evidence that hydroxychloroquine works which isn’t being shared with the public.

During a crisis in which panic-buying has led to empty supermarket shelves and [a surge in gun sales](https://theconversation.com/why-canadians-and-americans-are-buying-guns-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-135409), we all need to be careful of the information we disseminate. After all, people are taking severe measures to mitigate the risks of catching or spreading Covid-19 on the basis of the latest news and social media posts. But those in positions of power need to be *particularly* careful, because many people act directly on their advice. A [*New York Times* report](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/us/coronavirus-trump-chloroquine-hydroxychloroquine.html) has shown a surge in prescriptions for chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine since Trump’s touting of them.

The amount of misinformation in Trump’s briefings even generated a debate over the responsible way to cover them. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* [temporarily boycotted](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/the-argument-trump-coronavirus-briefing.html?showTranscript=1) the briefings. While we all have the right to hear what Trump says in press briefings, they should come with a health warning – and perhaps also one about human nature: that when we panic, even a sliver of evidence for a belief can be enough to make us act on it.

Camus told the statesman André Malraux in 1942 that he was writing a novel on a plague to understand what it means for humanity. We are now learning in reality what it means. A seemingly insignificant trip to a grocery store can be deadly. Spreading misinformation in a time of crisis can cause panic which can have dreadful consequences.

What plague ultimately means for humanity emerges in one of the most memorable passages in *The Plague*, when the lead city doctor, Bernard Rieux, expresses his overarching principle for combatting the virus to Raymond Rambert, a Parisian journalist trapped in Oran by the quarantine. “I have to tell you this: this whole thing is not about heroism,” Rieux says to Rambert. “It’s about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency.” Rambert then asks Rieux what decency is. Rieux replies, “I can’t say, but in my case I know that it consists in doing my job.”

Rieux shows us that truth, decency, and a job well done in a time of crisis really matter. That is what the plague really means for humanity. It’s a lesson Donald Trump, the most powerful leader in the world, has yet to learn.