

Testimony to U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

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Good afternoon committee members. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Jay Bhattacharya, and I am a Professor of Health Policy at Stanford University. I hold an M.D. and a Ph.D. in Economics, and I have over 20 years of experience working on the epidemiology and economics of infectious diseases. I have published more than 150 peer-reviewed scientific papers, including studies on HIV, H5N1 flu, and six peer-reviewed articles on COVID.

The problem of misinformation during the pandemic is serious. Media and big tech corporations have constructed an edifice of algorithms and fact-checkers to correct misinformation. I like to call this effort the Ministry of Truth. Ironically, the infrastructure that media and big tech corporations have set up to address the problem has, in fact, contributed to and exacerbated the misinformation problem.

The Ministry has made mistakes on some of the most important aspects of COVID science and policy.

Consider the worldwide COVID infection fatality rate. My colleague at Stanford, Prof. John Ioannidis, wrote a scientific [paper](#) in which he and his colleague Catherine Axfors painstakingly reviewed the literature on COVID mortality rates worldwide. Facebook commissioned a fact check by someone with no background in meta-analysis, who labeled the paper false based on a misunderstanding of the evidence presented in the paper.

This is not the first time the Ministry of Truth has decided it knows better about the COVID infection fatality rate than the published literature. In June, the Ministry's fact-checkers [cited](#) the WHO to suggest a fatality rate between 0.5% and 1.0% for the unvaccinated but neglected to mention that the [WHO](#) itself published an estimate last year by Prof. Ioannidis of 0.2%.

Another recent and [notorious example](#) is Instagram's censorship of posts that link to evidence summaries conducted by the renowned Cochrane Collaborative. For decades, Collaborative has conducted high-quality, evidence-based medicine summaries on every imaginable question in medicine. Directly and indirectly, doctors rely on these summaries to inform their practice and care for their patients. With no explanation provided, Instagram decided this month to censor posts by users who link to studies by the Collaborative with no explanation given, depriving users to access to the most accurate medical information available.

A third example involves the Ministry of Truth censoring me. In March of this year, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida hosted a roundtable discussion with other scientists and me, where we discussed various matters of COVID science. At one point in the discussion, the governor asked me about the evidence on masking children. I made an entirely accurate statement – that there is no randomized evidence that masking children protects them versus the disease or reduces the spread of COVID. The roundtable was televised, with press present, and posted on YouTube by a local Florida channel. Agree or disagree, this was good government – the governor of a state showing the public what advice he is receiving from scientific advisors that inform his decision on COVID policy. The Ministry's decision prevented the public from hearing facts about the scientific literature on child masking and prevented open access to information about their government.

The Ministry has consistently [downplayed or censored the truth](#) about lasting and robust immunity after COVID recovery, despite overwhelming evidence in the scientific literature documenting this fact. The consequence has been discrimination against COVID-recovered patients, who have been forced out of their jobs and prevented from participating in society, despite posing as little risk of spreading the disease as the vaccinated.

Often, the Ministry permits false statements it likes to go unchecked.

In Oct. 2020, I wrote the Great Barrington Declaration, along with Prof. Martin Kulldorff of Harvard University and Prof. Sunetra Gupta of the University of Oxford. The Declaration, signed now by over 10,000 scientists and 40,000 physicians, called for focused protection of the vulnerable elderly and an end to lockdown policies, including school closures and other measures which have caused enormous collateral damage to the health and well-being of the population.

Several prominent figures, including Anthony Fauci, reacted to the proposal by falsely mischaracterizing it as a herd immunity strategy to let the virus "rip" through society. This was pure propaganda. As I have said, our proposal called for focused protection of the vulnerable, who face a 1000 fold higher risk of mortality if infected than children do. The term "herd immunity strategy" is nonsensical. Herd immunity – sometimes called endemic equilibrium -- is the endpoint of this epidemic, no matter what strategy we follow. The goal of policy should be to minimize harm from the virus and collateral damage from interventions until that state is achieved.

The Ministry failed to check these falsehoods. Instead, it parroted the narrative that there was no middle option between "let it rip" and lockdown. Many states adopted lockdowns, closing businesses, churches, and schools for extended periods, with little to show in terms of infection control. The lockdown policies successfully advocated by Dr. Fauci have amounted to a 'let it drip' strategy, with over 750,000 dead from the virus and catastrophic collateral harm to the physical and mental health of the population, including extended closures of schools that harmed children.

Even when the fact-checkers happen to be right, they call attention to crackpot ideas that aren't worth seriously rebutting. Consider the [debunking attention](#) that the preposterous statement

that "COVID vaccines make you magnetic at the point of injection" has [received](#). It is possible that the statement has [considerably more](#) debunkers than believers. By combatting laughably false statements, The Ministry gives them undeserved extra publicity while ignoring more important issues.

The causes for the failures of the Ministry are overdetermined. The Ministry of Truth is not all-knowing. Fact check organizations commonly employ people with [no relevant background](#) to conduct checks of scientific claims made by reputable scientists and scientific papers. They typically have limited expertise, relying instead on appeals to authority but without a capacity to sift between competing authorities.

The ultimate ironic effect of the fact-checking enterprise – the Ministry of Truth -- has been the promotion of misinformation. By boosting the demand for lockdown and COVID-restrictions, these errors have proven disastrous.