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Covid Cover-up: Secrecy, Censorship and Suppression during the Pandemic

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Abstract

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, most health authorities, governments, and mass media organizations presented a single official view concerning lockdowns, masking, distancing, and vaccines. The methods used against contrary views can be classified into four types: flooding, ignoring, censoring, and attacking. The method of information flooding involves presenting dominant views in a unified front, overwhelming contrary views by volume and consistency. The method of ignoring includes the absence of research on alternative approaches, failure to report on research contrary to orthodoxy, and not mentioning challenging views. Censoring involves active measures to prevent the circulation of contrary information and views. Attacking includes steps taken to silence and penalize scientists, doctors and others with heterodox views and campaigns to discredit alternatives to recommended approaches. These four types of methods are interrelated, forming an ecology of information control.

Keywords

COVID-19, censorship, information control, information suppression, secrecy, secrecy studies

Cover Page Footnote

For valuable comments, thanks to Jungmin Choi, Kelly Gates, Anneleis Humphries, Sue Jansen, Olga Kuchinskaya, Susan Maret, Lee Monaghan, Erin Twyford and two anonymous reviewers.

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During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, most health authorities, governments, and mass media organizations presented a single official view concerning lockdowns, masking, distancing, and vaccines. The methods used against contrary views can be classified into four types: flooding, ignoring, censoring, and attacking. The method of information flooding involves presenting dominant views in a unified front, overwhelming contrary views by volume and consistency. The method of ignoring includes the absence of research on alternative approaches, failure to report on research contrary to orthodoxy, and not mentioning challenging views. Censoring involves active measures to prevent the circulation of contrary information and views. Attacking includes steps taken to silence and penalize scientists, doctors and others with heterodox views and campaigns to discredit alternatives to recommended approaches. These four types of methods are interrelated, forming an ecology of information control.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, officially from 2020 to 2023, authorities in most countries imposed strong measures intended to protect their populations (Green and Fazi 2023). These measures included lockdowns, distancing, masking, therapeutics and vaccine mandates. Some measures were enforced by police, others by community pressure and yet others by self-imposition. Along with these measures came another set of measures intended to control information about COVID and how to contain it.

At the time, there were critics of the control measures, but often their voices were not heard due to measures aimed at imposing the view

of medical and government authorities. There is now a great deal of documentation about the information-control measures and their impact (Garcia Ruiz, 2023; Green and Fazi, 2023; Wallis, 2024). The aim here is to offer a framework for understanding methods of information management used by authorities during the pandemic.

These methods can be allocated to four categories: flooding, ignoring, censoring and attacking. Each contributes to the attempted silencing or discrediting of views contrary to the orthodox line on COVID.

Each of these methods can be linked to secrecy. Flooding of a dominant perspective refers to messaging with overwhelming volume and frequency. This makes alternative perspectives invisible, in effect secret. Ignoring alternatives is a different way of making them secret, so far as most of the population is concerned. Censoring heterodox views prevents people from becoming aware of them, again making them secret. Attacking can discourage the expression of heterodox views, and thus serves as another way to prevent people from learning about them. On the other hand, attacking, seen as an attempt to discredit an unwelcome viewpoint, can draw attention to it. Overall, most of the methods used against COVID dissidence contributed to forms of secrecy, so far as most of the population was concerned.

To divide methods of information management into four categories is a heuristic device, to help make sense of a complex information environment. In practice, these four types of methods interact.

To talk of an orthodox or official line about COVID is a simplification, given that recommendations by medical and government leaders changed over time and sometimes conflicted. Furthermore, sometimes

recommendations differed in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, there are sufficient commonalities to identify a dominant perspective and, in contrast, views that conflict with this dominant perspective.

To talk of these methods may suggest that there are individuals who know the truth but are scheming to prevent it from being revealed. This is not the intention here. It is a reasonable initial hypothesis that everyone involved in pandemic-related messaging was sincere, doing their best to reduce death and disease. Part of the process could include taking action to discourage acceptance of ideas they believed would contribute to death and disease.

The heterodox views given attention here are ones backed by established scientists and doctors, ones with university or hospital affiliations, some of them authors of hundreds of articles, many of them supportive of the views of authorities before the arrival of COVID (Bridle and Risch, 2024; Kory, 2023; Pelech and Shaw, 2024; Shir-Raz et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to note that views submerged and discredited during the pandemic were not necessarily correct. Heterodox views can be wrong, and often are. There is no attempt here to judge the ultimate validity of competing claims.

Access to information and viewpoints can be unevenly distributed in various patterns. Consider a finding by a small team of scientists. It might, for example, be known only to those few scientists and no one else. Or it might be known to a small audience of colleagues and family members. Or it might be published in a journal but receive no publicity and be known to a slightly larger group. Or it might be circulated in alternative health circles and be a bit more widely known. Or it might be

condemned in the mainstream media, thus receiving more visibility while being denigrated at the same time. In these and other scenarios, information access is not a matter of yes or no, of knowing or not knowing, but a complex process involving diverse patterns of awareness, understanding and acceptance or rejection. It can be considered to be a process that creates de facto secrecy so far as particular groups of people are concerned.

Because there is so much material about the processes discussed here, I have not attempted to be comprehensive, instead just offering selected examples. The point here is not to document all the silencing that occurred but to show one way of understanding different components of or contributions to it.

The framework used here, with the categories flooding, ignoring, censoring, and attacking, was derived inductively. Being aware through extensive reading and discussions of dissident views about COVID and a wide variety of responses to them, the challenge was to make sense of them. The four categories draw on ideas in studies of dissent, especially in scientific areas (Dreger, 2015; Hess, 2024; Jansen, 1988; Jones, 2001; Kempner et al., 2011; Martin, 1999; Roberts, 2018).

Flooding

During the pandemic, some control measures received extensive attention: lockdowns, masking, distancing and vaccination. Information about these measures was present in the media, often daily. In addition, control measures served as a behavioral form of communication when lockdowns, masking rules, distancing recommendations, and vaccine

mandates directly affected people's lives. For example, having to wear a mask when visiting a hospital and seeing others wearing them provided a potent performance of mainstream expectations.

When messaging of a single viewpoint is sufficiently large in volume and frequency, it can overwhelm contrary views. This is the essence of flooding. Pervasive and repetitive communication of the official line thus served as a sort of information overload, making it more difficult to notice or accept contrary ideas.

Margaret Roberts (2018) offers a theory of censorship in which flooding plays a major role, applying it to China's Great Firewall. She classifies censorship techniques into fear, friction and flooding. Fear is closely aligned with attacking, which will be discussed later. Friction involves making access to certain information somewhat more difficult, such as slowing access speeds or putting search engine links lower in priority. Flooding is "the coordinated production of information by an authority with the intent of competing with or distracting from information the authority would rather consumers not access" (Roberts, 2018: 80). She says "Flooding directed at the public can be used for persuasion, confusion, or distraction" (Roberts, 2018: 83). Roberts is mainly concerned about these techniques when used by authoritarian governments, but they are also relevant to obtaining dissident information about COVID. Flooding of the authorities' perspective on COVID was used for persuasion rather than confusion or distraction.

A reasonable argument is that massive messaging of the official line on control measures was necessary to save people's lives. However, this argument assumes that every statement by authorities was correct, that

there was no value in the open airing of different perspectives, and that audiences were unable to make sensible judgements when exposed to diverse views.

The impact of flooding was to relegate contrary views to the margins. Even if they were occasionally expressed, they lacked sufficient volume and saliency to cut through the dominant line.

Flooding can be thought of as creating a sort of de facto secrecy: heterodox views become lost in the volume of expressions of the conventional view. In the metaphor of the needle in the haystack, it is like hiding the needle better by piling on more hay. Another metaphor is advertising: a notice on a wall can become almost invisible when it is among thousands of others. In these metaphors, secrecy results from a saturated information environment rather than from the intentional withholding of information.

Flooding primarily affected those who did not actively seek alternative views, for example those who relied on mainstream media, health authority websites, and communications from employers. Some individuals sought out dissident views. But sometimes these were difficult to find, due to the other three processes: ignoring, censoring, and attacking.

Ignoring

In every research field, decisions are made about which topics to study and which not to study. These decisions can be influenced by a range of factors, including current puzzles in the field, the intellectual interests of the researchers, available research capacity, and funding. In

some cases, researchers do not investigate certain topics because doing so would challenge powerful groups that would not welcome the findings. When citizen groups call for research on such topics, and it is not done, this is called “undone science” (Hess, 2016) Undone science has a parallel with Roberts’ (2018: 56–80) idea of friction, a tool of porous censorship. Facets of friction include not collecting data and erecting barriers to others collecting it.

For decades, vaccine critics have been calling for studies to compare the health of fully vaccinated children with totally unvaccinated children. However, pharmaceutical companies have never funded such studies, and there is no evidence they have carried them out in-house (IOM, 2013:5). Vaccine critics have inferred that the reason for the lack of such studies is due to the companies - and medical authorities, who have long staked their reputations on the safety and efficacy of childhood vaccination - not supporting research that might produce results unwelcome to them. Shortly before the onset of the pandemic, an anonymous group of Israeli medical experts published a critique of vaccination, arguing that not a single childhood vaccine on the recommended schedule had ever been tested, in a Phase 3 randomized control trial, against an inactive placebo (Turtle Team, 2022: 65). The absence of such trials is an example of undone science (Turtle Team, 2022: 201–240).

With the advent of COVID, governments, companies and universities poured billions of dollars into research, and vaccines were a top-priority area. There was no equivalent level of funding for research into lockdowns, masking and distancing (Jamrozik, 2022). It would have been possible, for example, to study two populations, one subject to a

lockdown and one not, or one with a mask mandate and one without, but such studies were not a priority. Instead, the official recommendations were assumed to be correct, and not systematically tested.

Undone science can be thought of as ignoring at the level of research. Sometimes research is carried out, but then ignored in another way: not receiving widespread attention or official recognition. There were studies showing adverse effects of lockdowns, masking, and distancing (ÓhAiseadha et al., 2023 provide many citations), but authorities hardly ever mentioned them.

Lockdowns, masking, and distancing are intended to reduce exposure to the coronavirus and thus reduce the spread of COVID. In contrast, COVID vaccines are intended to stimulate people's immune systems, so they are less likely to contract the disease after exposure to the coronavirus and less likely to be hospitalized or die. Throughout the pandemic, officials gave top priority to vaccination. In contrast, other ways to boost people's immunity were almost entirely ignored. The point here is not to judge the merits of these other ways, but to make the point that evidence and arguments concerning their potential role never received much attention.

Exercise, in moderation, has long been known to improve individuals' immune response generally. Although exercise-stimulated immunity is not specific to COVID, it is plausible that it can reduce COVID morbidity and mortality, yet, throughout the pandemic, authorities offered no recommendations that physical activity might have a protective effect, as well as other health benefits. In addition, studies were carried out showing that exercise reduces COVID severity (Malisoux et al., 2022; , et

al., 2023) and mortality (Lee et al., 2022; Sallis et al., 2021). However, these studies received little attention: authorities did not publicize the findings or recommend exercise to improve immunity. Instead, lockdowns continued to be a preferred option in many locations despite them discouraging or hindering physical activity.

As well as exercise, there was also silence about other ways to improve immunity, including diet, sleep and mental relaxation (e.g., Davidson et al. 2003; Gamaldo et al., 2012; Katona and Katona-Apte, 2008). Not only were these factors hardly ever mentioned in communications about COVID, but the control measures taken often pushed in other directions. For example, the alarm about the pandemic increased many people's stress levels and thus potentially weakened their immune response.

During the pandemic, messaging by health and government authorities presented pharmaceutical companies as saviors, undertaking research into vaccines at tremendous speed and expense, as well as developing and testing drugs to treat COVID. Accompanying this positive angle was silence about negative sides of Big Pharma (Goldacre, 2012; Gøtzsche, 2013; Sismondo, 2018). It was hardly ever mentioned that major companies developing vaccines had been recently subject to massive fines for corruption, sometimes of billions of dollars. Also hardly ever mentioned was Big Pharma's long-standing neglect of low-cost drugs and nutrients, ones that could not be patented and thus could not be the basis for massive profits.

Some attention was given to high prices for COVID vaccines (Buchholz, 2021). Of the manufacturers, only AstraZeneca offered its

vaccine on a non-profit basis, yet even this seemingly magnanimous gesture received little publicity, and was criticized in the US financial media (Fortner, 2022). While citizens were expected to make sacrifices, it did not look good when companies were making huge profits from people's misery, but this angle received little attention from health authorities.

Finally, not only were heterodox views not discussed by authorities, but their very existence was ignored. Censorship of dissenting views was never mentioned, and neither were attacks on dissenting doctors and scientists. The mainstream message was, implicitly, that no silencing was occurring.

The silencing of expert dissent meant that when the mainstream media reported on public protests against control measures - rallies against lockdowns, vaccine refusals - this was implicitly assumed to be "uninformed," by people who did not understand "the science." The fact that, within the scientific community, scientific claims are routinely debated was seldom raised.

As a process, ignoring has an indirect relationship with secrecy. Imagining several haystacks, if one is ignored and all attention is given to the others, the result can be that the ignored one is secret in a de facto sense. This operates in conjunction with flooding.

Censoring

A dominant narrative is more convincing when contrary views are not aired. The role of censorship was to prevent messaging that might confuse audiences, potentially making them reluctant to follow the

recommendations of authorities. However, censorship is only justified on this basis if the censors possess an undisputed truth. When there is a rational basis for disagreement, censorship curtails the intellectual engagement and discussion of values that could lead to better policies and practices. That at least is the usual way that arguments for free speech proceed (Baker, 1989; Barendt, 2005).

During the pandemic, there was extensive censorship of views contrary to the dominant lines about lockdowns, distancing, masking, and vaccines (García Luiz, 2023; Liester et al 2025; Wallis, 2024). However, the evidence about censorship is much stronger in some areas than others. For mainstream media, it is difficult to obtain information about the rejection of news and opinion items unless journalists and editors speak out about it, which is rare, and in any case usually applies only in some outlets. It is plausible that the absence of reports contrary to the dominant line suggests censorship, but this is hardly conclusive.

Concerning social media, there is stronger evidence. The Twitter Files, an exposé of Twitter policies during the pandemic, show that heterodox views were systematically excluded (Lowenthal, 2023; Maas, 2022). Facebook censored posts critical of COVID orthodoxy (Parker, 2022). Google manipulated its searches to downgrade links to sites offering views contrary to the official line, and YouTube took down videos questioning orthodoxy (Martin, 2021; Mercola, 2021).

Censorship was often justified by the claim that suppressed views were “misinformation.” In nearly all studies, views were classified as misinformation simply because they differed from the dominant, establishment perspective (Chaufan et al., 2024).

Censorship sometimes backfired (Jansen and Martin, 2015). When people became aware that some views were being excluded, they sought to find them elsewhere and, perhaps more importantly, became skeptical of dominant perspectives, if dissident views had been allowed more of a voice, there might have been greater trust in the dominant perspectives being promoted.

Censorship and secrecy operate in parallel, each serving to prevent views from reaching audiences. Secrecy might be considered a form of information control nearer to the source, so that information does not escape a closed circle, from which no one seeks to release it. Censorship operates in situations in which the circle is not closed, typically when outsiders not committed to information control need to be silenced.

Attacking

The authorities who promulgated the official view on COVID were challenged by a range of critics, of whom the most threatening were those with claims to expertise and those with a large reach, or both (Martin, 1999). They were the ones most likely to be attacked, with the methods of attack often targeting their vulnerabilities.

Doctors who treated COVID patients had the authority of front-line knowledge and experience, but also vulnerabilities associated with their jobs. Some doctors questioned the usual protocols; this could usually be dealt with in-house. Some spoke out about their doubts and disagreements, for example putting videos online; they were sometimes met with stronger measures (Klotz, 2023; Shir-Raz et al., 2023).

Some of the strongest attacks were against doctors and researchers who suggested the value of treating COVID patients with low-cost repurposed drugs, notably hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. Pierre Kory in his book *The War on Ivermectin* provides examples of what might be considered reprisals for advocating treatments not supported by authorities. Referring to the Front Line COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance (FLCCC), Kory (2023: 202) wrote, "Later, the FLCCC would catalog the censorship actions against us. That list includes (but is not limited to) getting locked out of Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook (twice): being completely deplatformed on Medium, LinkedIn, and Vimeo; and being banned from PR Web/PR Newswire and PayPal." Attempts were made to prevent Kory from being able to treat patients. Deregistration was a threat hanging over many dissident doctors.

As stated earlier, just because a view was silenced during the pandemic does not make it correct. Likewise, those who are judged to be wrong can still be censored. Whether or not Kory is judged to be wrong about ivermectin, he still provides considerable evidence about attacks on dissent.

For critics with a significant reach through social media, one response from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms was to terminate their accounts, often without warning. In some cases, accounts with tens of thousands of followers were cancelled. This might reasonably be classified as censorship. When targeted at particular individuals, it also fits in the category of attack.

A prominent example of attack was a report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH, 2021), claiming that 73% of social media

posts critical of COVID vaccination came from twelve individuals, labelled the Disinformation Dozen. The CCDH called on tech companies to act on this information by closing their accounts. Despite the CCDH having no track record in this area and not disclosing information about its own donors, and despite a lack of verification of its claims, its allegations were widely trumpeted in the mainstream media and even repeated by US President Joe Biden. Some tech companies acted on CCDH's calls to close the accounts of those named. Subsequently, Facebook (Bickert, 2021) made a statement discrediting CCDH's claims, but this received little media attention at the time, with corrections only being issued years later by some media organizations (GreenMedInfo Research Group, 2024).

Attacking has a complicated relationship with secrecy. Attacks sometimes can deter people from speaking out, so flooding becomes more effective. Attacks can discredit dissident views and their proponents, with the result that ignoring is more widespread and censoring is justified. On the other hand, attacks sometimes draw more attention to dissident views, puncturing de facto secrecy.

Discussion

The four methods of flooding, ignoring, censoring and attacking served as a potent combination for silencing and discrediting views contrary to COVID orthodoxy. Flooding and ignoring might be considered the initial methods, saturating the media with a dominant line while not mentioning contrary views. For many issues associated with COVID, this was sufficient to make contrary views invisible to most audiences. For example, the idea that exercise should be encouraged as a means of

improving immunity as well as for general health benefits remained off the agenda throughout the pandemic.

However, some issues were not so easily submerged, usually because there was a combination of a receptive audience for heterodoxy and credible figures who spoke out. In this context, a “credible figure” could be either someone with credentials and expertise or someone with high visibility and reach. These issues and figures were prime candidates for censorship and attack. An example is ivermectin as a treatment for COVID. Flooding and ignoring were insufficient to keep it from obtaining attention, so the methods of censoring and attacking were used.

According to Kory (2023), the attack element included denunciations by authorities, fraudulent studies being trumpeted in the media (which overlaps with flooding), and suppression of scientists and advocates.

The interconnections between the four methods are illustrated by the attack on the “Disinformation Dozen” (Martin, 2021). Most obviously, this was an attack on the credibility of the named individuals. It was simultaneously a call for tech companies to censor them, by closing down their accounts and removing their tweets, posts and videos. The attack was also an affirmation of vaccination, a contribution to flooding. When the targeted individuals responded, and when Facebook rejected claims in the CCDH study, this was unreported, namely ignored, by most of the media.

Although there are interactions between the four methods, it still can be useful to distinguish between them. For those who seek to explore or promote challenges to COVID orthodoxy, it is useful to understand the likely responses. The context is continual reinforcement of the views of

authorities, namely flooding. Challengers might think that by providing evidence, authorities would reconsider their recommendations. This almost never happens, as illustrated by the failure to mention vaccine adverse effects, before and during the pandemic. In addition, mainstream media usually followed the lead of authorities and gave little attention to dissident views, except to dismiss them. When confronted by flooding, challengers need to think of contacting audiences directly, not via authorities or the mainstream media.

The obvious alternative is going directly to audiences via social media, personal networks and what in this case are appropriately called alternative media. This is just what many challengers did during the pandemic. The next obstacle is censorship by social media platforms, at their own initiative or encouraged by governments. Challengers need to plan ahead, aware that their messages may not be getting through or that their social media accounts may be cancelled without notice.

Finally, challengers need to be prepared being attacked. Some individuals are more vulnerable than others, financially or organizationally, so if dissidents can coordinate their responses, it is safer for those with fewer vulnerabilities to take a higher profile. In preparing, it is important to collect evidence of censorship and attacks and to use it to generate awareness and concern. With the right sort of preparation, it is possible to make censorship and attacks backfire, generating more attention to dissident views than would have happened otherwise (Jansen and Martin, 2015).

Conclusion

Given the alarm about the pandemic posing a serious threat to human life and well-being, it may seem that silencing dissident views was necessary. This, however, assumes the views of authorities and their mouthpieces were correct and vital, that there was no value in testing them, and that there was no risk that they might be wrong or harmful. It also assumes that audiences are incapable of making their own informed judgements when exposed to contrary views and hence must be protected from such views by never mentioning them or by discrediting them.

It may be that independent in-depth investigations will find that both these assumptions were warranted, but even if this is the case, it might not be in a future pandemic or some other emergency with similar features. In other words, there is always a risk when promulgating a single orthodox view that it will turn out to be limited, inadequate, wrong, or harmful.

There is an additional risk. By attempting to enforce orthodoxy, some people may become distrustful of authorities and the mainstream media, and become contrarian in future episodes even when the dominant view best serves human welfare (Harambam, 2023). This might be thought of as a facet of censorship backfire.

There are various ways by which a dominant view can be conveyed to audiences while challenging views are subordinated. These have been classified into four categories: flooding, ignoring, censoring, and attacking. These are not distinct or independent but rather mutually reinforcing methods. Analyzing the process in this way helps get beyond the limitations associated with each of the components, or with related

concepts like secrecy. For example, “secrecy” implies the existence of information that is kept from outsiders. Ignoring might be thought of as a version of secrecy, except it includes information that doesn’t exist because research hasn’t been funded or carried out (undone science) as well as information that is not secret but isn’t publicized in a way corresponding to its potential public importance. The component “censorship” is often a focus of attention, but it needs to be considered in tandem with flooding of dominant views. If flooding and ignoring are effective, censorship may be unnecessary or irrelevant. The method of attacking is especially important when audiences are responsive to dissident views.

The point here is that it is important to consider the bigger picture: the ecology of information, namely the interactions between different players in the information game. Each of the components discussed here is worthy of attention, and so are their interactions, plus the wider aspects of politics and economics, ranging from intellectual property to national security organizations.

Finally, it is worth repeating that just because a view is silenced or attacked does not mean it is correct. It does suggest, though, that it is a view unwelcome to some influential players in the information system, and for that reason giving extra attention to the processes involved is warranted when trying to assess whether people should have wider access to the view. Skepticism concerning orthodox views is likely to increase when people start asking, “What are they trying to hide?”

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