

# Scientists' lanes and headwinds

**C** OVID-19 will be remembered for many things, including the pandemic that changed science communication. Much of the effect was positive. Outstanding epidemiologists, virologists, and public health experts became household names as they talked about the pandemic through mainstream media and social platforms. In the rapidly evolving situation, hearing directly from the scientific community was more important than ever. But former president Donald Trump and former vice president Mike Pence did enormous damage in the United States by appointing themselves scientists, logisticians, and chief economists and taking control of the information flow. The vaccine arrived, despite all the bungling, but in the meantime, many lives could have been saved had messages about dangers, challenges, and solutions come through more clearly. We still seem to be learning. Although the Biden administration appears to have a firmer grip on the crisis, it now faces a new surge of infections brought on by the variants and an increase in the number of states loosening restrictions. How can science be better communicated in the future, given what we have seen during the pandemic?

Viewers of cable news will easily recognize Juliette Kayyem, a fixture on CNN who also appears occasionally on other networks as a national security analyst. She was assistant secretary of Homeland Security in the Obama administration and is now the Belfer Senior Lecturer in International Security at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government (I was a consultant for a company run by her brother many years ago, but that business relationship has long since ended). Early in the pandemic, Kayyem was one of the first voices assuring the public that the supply chain would hold up and that there was no reason to raid the grocery stores for toilet paper and hand sanitizer. I asked her what scientists could do better in the future. The main message: Stay in their lane.

Kayyem consumes health intelligence the same way she consumes foreign intelligence or climate intelligence and then uses it to create a message for politicians and the public. She thinks scientists did not do enough to acknowledge the economic devastation

that was ushered in by shutting down the economy, which left an opening for the anti-lockdown voices to fight back. She believes scientists could have offered more hope along with the warnings. And she believes that the extreme voices on cable news and social media distracted scientists from seeing that most of the American public could understand the nuances of the situation better than they gave them credit for.

As for the early garbling of the mask message, she feels that some science experts ventured too far into logistics, rather than sticking to what they know. "They all say they didn't want to promote masks initially because there wasn't sufficient supply," she said. "That's not their call."

She was also critical of what she saw as a panic over vaccine supply. "Make us the vaccine," she said, "but once you start getting into logistics and supply chain and the use of the Defense Production Act and all that, that's not your lane." As we approach 200 million shots in 100 days, Kayyem's admonition rings true. In other words, just as we were lamenting the rise of armchair epidemiologists, some scientists inadvertently became armchair logisticians.

Though the public discussions on Twitter were sometimes exploited by malicious forces, Kayyem believes that overall, it is good for scientists to join the debate on social media, a point I made in an editorial earlier this year. She was also very complimentary of

the scientists who became household names on social media and cable news, but she cautioned that "rockstar status can make you think that everyone wants your opinion on everything."

One of those scientists who became well known in the pandemic, Georgetown University virologist Angela Rasmussen, agrees that some ventured too far afield. "While I can understand the temptation to be thought of as a leading pandemic Public Thinker," she says, "I remind myself that this isn't the Renaissance and none of us are Leonardo da Vinci."

These are important admonitions, but it is also salient to remember that the headwinds caused by President Trump were intense. We can only hope that in the next pandemic, the messages will have smoother sailing.

—H. Holden Thorp



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# Science

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