



The cult of the vaccine

Description

USA: Yesterday, I ran a story that had nothing to do with vaccines, about the seeming delay of the development of a drug called molnupiravir (see the above segment with the gracious hosts of *The Hill: Rising* for more). In the time it took to report and write that piece, conventional wisdom turned against the drug, which is now suspected of ivermectinism and other deviationist, anti-vax tendencies, in the latest iteration of our most recent collective national mania — the Cult of the Vaccine. The speed of the change was incredible. Just a week ago, on October 1st, the pharmaceutical giant Merck issued a terse [announcement](#) that quickly became big news. Molnupiravir, an experimental antiviral drug, “reduced the risk of hospitalization or death” of Covid-19 patients by as much as 50%, according to a study.

The stories that rushed out in the ensuing minutes and hours were almost uniformly positive. *AP* [called](#) the news a “potentially major advance in efforts to fight the pandemic,” while *National Geographic* [quoted](#) a Yale specialist saying, “Having a pill that would be easy for people to take at home would be terrific.” Another interesting early reaction came from *Time*:

Vaccines will be the way out of the pandemic, but not everyone around the world is [immunized](#) yet, and the shots aren’t 100% effective in protecting people from getting infected with the COVID-19 virus. So antiviral drug treatments will be key to making sure that people who do get infected don’t get severely ill.

This is what news looks like before propagandists get their hands on it. *Time* writer Alice Park’s lede was sensible and clear. If molnupiravir works — a big if, incidentally — it’s good news for everyone, since not everyone is immunized, and the vaccines aren’t 100% effective anyway. As even *Vox* put it [initially](#), molnupiravir could “help compensate for persistent gaps in Covid-19 vaccination coverage.”

Within a day, though, the tone of coverage turned. Writers began stressing a *Yeah, but* approach, as in, “Any new treatment is of course good, *but* get your fucking shot.” A CNN lede [read](#), “A pill that could potentially treat Covid-19 is a ‘game-changer,’ but experts are emphasizing that it’s not an alternative to vaccinations.” The *New York Times* [went with](#), “Health officials said the drug could provide an effective way to treat Covid-19, but stressed that vaccines remained the best tool.”

If you're thinking it was only a matter of time before the mere fact of molnupiravir's existence would be pitched in headlines as actual bad news, you're not wrong: *Marketwatch* [came out with](#) "It's not a magic pill: What Merck's antiviral pill could mean for vaccine hesitancy" the same day Merck issued its release. The piece came out before we knew much of anything concrete about the drug's effectiveness, let alone whether it was "magic."

Bloomberg's morose "[No, the Merck pill won't end the pandemic](#)" was released on October 2nd, i.e. one whole day after the first encouraging news of a possible auxiliary treatment whose most ardent supporters never claimed would end the pandemic. This article said the pill might be cause to celebrate, but warned its emergence "shouldn't be cause for complacency when it comes to the most effective tool to end this pandemic: vaccines." *Bloomberg* randomly went on to remind readers that the unrelated drug ivermectin is a "horse de-worming agent," before adding that if molnupiravir ends up "being viewed as a solution for those who refuse to vaccinate," the "Covid virus will continue to persist."

In other words, it took less than 24 hours for the drug — barely tested, let alone released yet — to be accused of prolonging the pandemic. By the third day, mentions of molnupiravir in news reports nearly all came affixed to stern reminders of its place beneath vaccines in the medical hierarchy, as in the *New York Times* [explaining](#) that Dr. Anthony Fauci, who initially told reporters the new drug was "impressive," now "warned that Americans should not wait to be vaccinated because they believe they can take the pill."

Since the start of the Trump years, we've been introduced to a new kind of news story, which assumes adults can't handle multiple ideas at once, and has reporters frantically wrapping facts deemed dangerous, unorthodox, or even just insufficiently obvious in layers of disclaimers. The fear of uncontrolled audience brain-drift is now so great that even offhand references must come swaddled in these journalistic Surgeon General's warnings, which is why whenever we read anything now, we almost always end up fighting through nests of phrases like "[the debunked conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was created in a lab](#)" in order to get to whatever the author's main point might be.

This lunacy started with the [Great Lie Debate of 2016](#), when reporters and editors spent months publicly anguishing over whether to use "lie" in headlines of Donald Trump stories, then [loudly congratulated](#) themselves once they decided to do it. The most histrionic offender was the *New York Times*, previously famous for teaching readers to digest news in code ("he claimed" for years was *Times*-ese for "full of shit") but now reasoned a "more muscular terminology," connoting "a certain moral opprobrium," was needed to distinguish the "dissembling" of a politician like Bill Clinton from Trump's whoppers. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" could be mere falsehood, but "I will build a great great wall" required language that "stands apart."

The key term was *moral opprobrium*. Moralizing was exactly what journalists were once trained not to do, at least outside the op-ed page, but it soon became a central part of the job. When they used they word "lie," the *Times* explained, they wanted us to know that was because "from the childhood schoolyard to the grave, this is a word neither used **nor taken lightly**." Put another way, the *Times* didn't want people reading about something Donald Trump said, grasping that it was a lie, and, say, chuckling about how ridiculous it was. If the *New York Times* sent the word "lie" up the flagpole, they now expected an appropriately solemn salute.

This was the beginning of an era in which editors became convinced that all earth's problems derived

from populations failing to accept reports as Talmudic law. It couldn't be people were just tuning out papers for a hundred different reasons, including sheer boredom. It had to be that their traditional work product was just too damned subtle. The only way to avoid the certain evil of audiences engaging in unsupervised pondering over information was to eliminate all possibility of subtext, through a new communication style that was 100% literal and didactic. Everyone would get the same news and also be instructed, often mid-sentence, on how to respond.

by Matt Taibbi

Date Created
10/26/2021