

Information has an evil twin sister.

Dane Rieber. November 2021.

Since the dawn of time -- in fact, quite characteristic of the meaning of the word *dawn* itself -- the sun has risen at dawn and set at dusk, sweeping across the cosmic expanse of the sky above to provide us with more hours of life to measure. While, to the naked eye, the sun selects its steady path each morning and embarks on its great revolution about our universal frame of reference, our collective understanding places a stationary sun at the epicenter of our existence; our magnificent world is merely an ant crawling upon the skin of an apple. That is, of course, if you subscribe to mainstream round-earth theory. I, however, possess a superior understanding than the feeble-minded collective, gathered through diligent independent research for which the methods lie outside the scope of this paper.

Misinformation and conspiracy are quite creative. Proponents of misinformation deserve some credit... definitely not any more recognition, but indeed they deserve respect for their efforts. To construct an entire fantasy in which the earth spins as a flat disk, lizard-human hybrids conspire to conquer humanity, and world leaders succumb to their tantalizing desire for newborn blood as they feast upon children in secret -- that takes serious imagination and dedication. Many experts of this craft search for a deviant understanding of the oppressive machinations of our society. Conspiracy theorists arguably have great respect for human ability and reasoning, believing that outside forces must be at play and must be responsible for our subjection. Otherwise, human individualism and freedom would prevail without restriction from greater powers.

Such respect for human reasoning is nevertheless abandoned once conspiracy theory reaches the tried and true American assembly line. The world's largest export of packaged pseudoscience and skepticism -- misinformation is a best seller in the marketplace of ideas.

The Market for Information

Information is power. Information is money. Information is a business. It has regulations; it is manufactured, processed, and consumed. It is a brilliantly effective but specialized tool, and the leverage one gains over the uninformed by withholding information can be exceptional. Stockbrokers dedicate themselves to the information trade, exchanging predictions, expectations, controversies, corporate gossip, and truckloads upon truckloads of money. Insider information is the market's forbidden fruit -- sweet but, as with any good thing the government touches, illegal. Fighting for the ultimate prize -- freedom from the shackles of scarcity -- stockbrokers nevertheless spelunk deeper into the intricate boundaries of regulation, sometimes finding light at the end of the tunnel. I offer my congratulations to those lucky individuals! They have just discovered what's known as a loophole, and loopholes are *very* profitable.

The Market for Misinformation

A subgenre of information, misinformation in America is a mostly deregulated trade thanks to our unwavering protection of our god-given right to freedom of speech. While medical misinformation has only recently been jolted into the spotlight of modern discourse, the overall industry of misinformation is a well-oiled, refined engine of socioeconomic influence. Consider past corporate-driven misinformation campaigning. In 2006, major cigarette manufacturers were found guilty in U.S. Federal Court for "conspiring to deny, distort, and minimize the hazards of cigarette smoking to the public" [1].

Although receiving a slap on the wrist in 2006, it was since the mid twentieth century that cigarette manufacturers collectively strategized to dodge a crucial obstacle: scrutiny over the health effects of their products. Attempting to keep business booming, such companies made the executive decision to change absolutely nothing. Despite lousy incremental changes to cigarettes, such as adding filters to market "safer" products, companies ultimately conspired to retain consumption through persuasion rather than innovation, although it could be argued that their persuasive strategies were quite innovative.

The mighty arm of big tobacco swung hard and fast into scientific research, squashing its findings and manufacturing its own product: fabricated, useless studies.

Corporations jointly funded research organizations who actively *attacked* studies demonstrating adverse health effects caused by smoking. Their ultimate strategy can be summarized by three fundamental pillars [2]:

- a. Create doubt about the health concern without actually denying it
- b. Advocate for the public's right to smoke without actually urging them to smoke
- c. Encourage objective scientific research as the only way to resolve the controversy

Simple, elegant solutions prove to be the most brilliant. The clever corporate strategists deliberately invented a method to obstruct scientific progress and alter public perception -- and it *actually worked*. Impressive. Even more impressive, this strategy prevails today, rebranded as *vaccine hesitancy*: an outcry for individual rights and objective research that drives a wonderfully crafted and superbly destructive narrative.

How to Sell Snake Oil

For a masterclass in snake oil salesmanship, look no further than osteopathic physician Joseph Mercola, widely renowned as the most influential spreader of coronavirus misinformation online. Dr. Mercola's net worth, reported as "in excess of \$100 million" [3], is clearly a testament to his great contributions to public health and safety as an overqualified massage therapist who knows a thing or two about virology. In a valiant crusade against sinister ulterior motives of government-sanctioned R&D, free thinkers join millions of other like-minded free thinkers in Dr. Mercola's Facebook haven -- an online basilica whose great chambers echo with the vibrato of scientific jargon.

Contrary to overwhelming scientific consensus proving coronavirus vaccines safe and effective [4], Dr. Mercola's illuminating perspective outpaces mere science itself. Among his many fantasies emerges one in which coronavirus vaccinations transform their victims into "a viral protein factory that has no off-switch" [3]. While easily disprovable, that sounds terrifying! The physician urges those fearful of adverse effects from vaccinations to explore alternative treatments on Mercola.com.

To understand Mercola.com's marketplace, consider the following three statements from Dr. Mercola, accompanied by some targeted rhetorical questions from myself:

- a. "Studies have warned COVID-19 vaccines may result in more serious disease when exposed to the virus by way of pathogenic priming and immune enhancement" [6].

By way of what now? And are you merely suggesting or are you actually asserting that vaccines are unsafe?

- b. “My goal is to empower you to Take Control of Your Health[®] by providing trustworthy natural health information and advocating for your right to making informed health choices” [5].

By refusing to vaccinate myself, can I also Take Control of Others’ Health[®]?

- c. “I am the lead author of a peer reviewed publication regarding vitamin D and the risk of Covid-19 and I have every right to inform the public by sharing my medical research” [4].

Do you also have every right to a medical license?

Dr. Mercola profits as a shill for his alternative medicine; but perhaps in another lifetime, as a cunning executive at big tobacco. His academically attuned speech flawlessly embodies big tobacco's three pillars of market manipulation. Chains of medical vernacular anchor listeners in curiosity and confine them in doubt. Bellowing his advocacy for medical rights, he sustains a narrative in which our freedoms are in jeopardy, further reinforcing fear and doubt about national health policy. He defends his publications as properly conducted objective research and asserts their relevance to the situation -- classic moves from the cigarette maker’s playbook.

The Food and Drug Administration issued a strongly-worded email to Dr. Mercola for selling unapproved health products on multiple occasions. In 2017, The Federal Trade Commission brought false-advertising claims against him for promoting cancer-fighting tanning beds. After refunding \$2.95 million to scammed customers and losing a devastating 3% worth of his assets [3], he most certainly learned an important lesson: sometimes it's just too easy.

Whether a lifelong devotee of dishonest marketing or a visionary of our time, Dr. Mercola remains a master of his trade. He need not listen to the market, adapt to the market, or change the market. He needs only to create the market. Unfortunately, encouraging customers to resist vaccination also quite literally kills his market. For the esteemed businessman, the price is small for the payout.

Addressing the Opposition

It would be irresponsible to conclude my sarcastic tirade on anti vaccination without addressing the real concerns buried underneath the misinformative trash fire.

Deciding precisely what rhetoric deserves restriction is not clear-cut (it took decades to regulate tobacco misinformation). For many, allowing legislation that controls the flow of information enters dangerous authoritarian territory. Others simply argue that those duped by misinformation deserve the consequences of their stupidity. In general, though, Americans have a tendency to reject helpful, necessary regulation in protection of their right to keep doing whatever they please -- a sentiment that is reasonable but certainly not without bounds. Participation in any organized society requires either forfeiting the ability to perform certain actions or otherwise facing predefined punishments for doing so.

Ideal civilization exists for the protection of its civilians -- not only protection from the savages outside its walls but from malefactors inside as well. It intends to provide a formulaic distribution of power and violence, with power ideally in the hands of the governed and violence ideally directed towards reckless, malicious agents. We have *not* perfected this, and everyone is aware of that. However, everyone points fingers in different directions when identifying where exactly the imperfections reside.

Those resistant to vaccination point at our government, afraid that by mandating modifications to one's physical being, we begin our descent down a slope toward totalitarianism. This is hardly a ridiculous concern -- government power should always be in question for our safety -- but in the midst of global emergencies, the government needs necessary and possibly controlling measures to mitigate damage. Fast tracks to policy, like executive orders, exist for extenuating circumstances.

Delaying overdue quarantine orders and vaccination mandates made our great America the world's leading nation -- at over 750 thousand -- in coronavirus deaths. At its peak in December 2020, coronavirus committed the equivalent killing of one 9/11 per day [10]. If anything, Americans should be embarrassed by our response to this outbreak; we just shouted from the mountaintops to every enemy that biowarfare is their answer.

Those afraid of government control also tend to disregard players outside of government that possess arguably more concerning levels of power and influence, many of which pull the strings of congressional puppets to bend rules in their favor, and many of which sow the skeptics' very distrust in government and science for financial gain. To illustrate, observe just a few of many examples of pro-profit puppeteering:

- From 1998 to 2005, ExxonMobil provided around \$16 million to 43 advocacy organizations "in an effort to deceive the public about the reality of global warming" [7].

- From 1999 to 2018, the pharmaceutical industry spent an average of \$233 million per year on lobbying the U.S. government, including contributions to both national and state party candidates [8].
- 12 individuals (including Dr. Mercola) are responsible for up to 65% of anti-vaccination content on Facebook and Twitter. The top 20 anti-vaccination accounts hold a total cross-platform following of over 39 million. Along with revenue from social media, many additionally sell alternative medicines [9].

Considering the expensive tug-of-war between corporations and legislation, and especially considering the uncovered profit potential within vaccine hesitancy, we should regard the government's resilience in its implementation of vaccine mandates (although far too late) as a political success and a relief. Our next regulatory steps should hopefully throw a wrench in the medical misinformation market.

Our Power

With the power of the worker dwindling, being ever-exploited by the grip of corporate greed, the government may be the only force with which we can swing back. With the millions of dollars spent on lobbying and misinformation campaigning, corporations drop mere pennies in comparison to the cash they siphon from vulnerable consumers. What people defend as "free speech" is, in reality, just deceptive marketing that dodges regulation, further defended by people's apprehension towards federal authority.

The government is our middleman: serving the interests of its constituents due to democratic pressure; serving the interests of industries due to financial pressure. To continue to allow our industries to disrupt our end of the relationship only bolsters their own power. To continue to allow misinformation to pollute us and kill us only succeeds in improving a businesses' bottom line. Let's silence these remorseless, blood-sucking companies; let's make policy for the people.

Better Papers

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