The Role of Social Media Influencing Public Trust in Government During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

In times of health crises and epidemics, government and media authorities play essential roles due to their overwhelming influence on the general public. Government authorities have the power to distribute lifesaving resources to the public, while the media carry great influence on public opinion. In fact, in past epidemics, the relationship between the government, the media, and the public determined the survival of victims of the pandemic. COVID-19 is the latest and most severe pandemic that has ravaged the entire world. Governments scrambled to assess the risk and damage that this illness caused when it was first discovered in Wuhan, China in 2019 as the media reported on its movement. Rather than trusting the government for their safety, the public responded by sharing their doubts about government announcements and guidelines. Conspiracy theories were prevalent, and the public turned less to traditional information sources and instead shared their opinions in the minimally controlled social media platforms. In this sensitive time of fear, the governments themselves are not gaining the public's trust due to ineffective management and conflicting statements on what the public should follow. The greatest difference between the current COVID-19 pandemic and the past epidemics is the existence of social media. Our paper will examine the relationship between the traditional authorities of the US government, namely the US media, and the public opinion during past epidemics. Then, we will examine the role that social media has played in the perception of the government and media sources.

Public Trust in the Government and Media Authority

The relationship between the public and the government is complex and multifaceted. The former's trust in the latter is necessary to enact effective government rules and regulations with compliance from the public. Though a moderate amount of distrust and skepticism towards the government may be evidence of a healthy democracy, the delegitimization of the government may render it ineffective and incapable of addressing citizens' needs. The role of the government in citizens' lives has grown especially over the 20th century as the US population has undergone dramatic growth and development. Especially true regarding epidemics, the implementation of public health measures is responsible for the safety of the public. Furthermore, developments in infrastructure and technology made it possible for the government to enact nationwide policies that affected almost all US citizens. However, ever since surveys of government trust began in the 1960s, trust in the government has been ever declining. There are many theories of the true reason for the decline, but the factors affecting public trust in government are largely economic, sociocultural, and political. When the current conditions are poor, citizens have often associated these problems with government inaction or incompetence. Political factors are particularly influential in determining trust in the government. It is a well-known trend that political division has become more extreme in the past few decades (*Political Polarization in the American Public,* 2014). Among the two main political parties, Republicans have been shown to have a greater dissatisfaction with the government (Chanley et al, 2000). Furthermore, studies showed evidence of a link between dissatisfaction with the

government and whether the political party one supports is in power. In the ever-shifting nature of American politics, it would make sense that government satisfaction generally decreases throughout the years.

Public trust in media authority is another important factor in understanding the dissemination of health information. Before the advent of social media, traditional media authority was the only source to be relied upon for the latest news about diseases that were affecting the populace (Jones, 2004). Unfortunately, traditional media has also shown a significant decline in public trust from nearly 70% in the 1970s to 50% in the 1990s (Hetherington & Ladd, 2020). The distrust in news media stems largely from the distrust of government authority. As news media citizens receive all information about government policies and actions from news outlets, it's recorded that nearly 36% of the American population have a "great deal" of trust in the media: more specifically, the breakdown by political association is 68% Democratic, 11% Republican, and 11% independent (Brenan, 2021). Even before the advent of social media, the government and media authorities had worsening relations with the public. It is clearly highlighted that this weak and unstable relationship with the public only facilitated the growth of mistrust when trust was needed the most. To understand the effects on public perception of pandemics, major historical epidemics must be observed.

Role of the Government and Media in Past Epidemics

Among all the diseases and illnesses that have affected entire populations, there have been a number of notable epidemics that have devastated the population. Before the establishment of clear healthcare infrastructure or knowledge of diseases, the American government took limited actions to protect the population. The severity of the epidemics caused by infectious diseases led to the conception of the nation's first public health policies. During these epidemics, the media authority, mostly in the forms of newspapers and radios, also played a key role in shaping or reflecting the public perception towards the disease. In addition, medical technology and advancements accelerated in the 20th century and the implementation of wide-spreading health policies improved the lives of many.

The 1918 Influenza Epidemic (Spanish Flu)

In the early 20th century, the notion of public healthcare was nonexistent. Most of the population couldn't see a doctor, and the medical knowledge was very limited. The public health problems of that era were concentrated in the crowded and poor conditions of industrial cities. Public expenditure on public health was unheard of, and health conditions of the working class improved very little (Spinney, 2017). No one expected a disease to ravage the population regardless of social status and become responsible for unprecedented levels of death.

In addition, America was mired in World War I in 1917. President Woodrow Wilson received reports of the influenza starting to spread among the soldiers throughout his army. Instead of informing the public of the dangers of the influenza and enacting public health policies to save his soldiers and the public, he and the American government believed that the news of a deadly virus would decrease morale in the country. He used the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917, laws passed to control public opinion and punish dissidents, to silence news of the virus spreading. With a gross lack of communication from the government, Americans could only watch as the waves of the virus ravished their cities (First Amendment Museum).

When the flu had ravaged the population, the population was not prepared for the deadliness of the disease. In all, 25 million Americans were infected, and 500,000 perished from the disease, setting a record for death tolls caused by a disease. During this time, the country was only able to depend on organizations such as the American Red Cross or local authorities to help the sick population (D. A. Jones, 2004). Interestingly, the role of local authorities during this period was determinant of the severity of the influence of the disease. In St. Louis, Missouri, local authorities enacted critical nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPI) such as restrictions on movement and gatherings within the city and achieved the lowest death rates in all of America (Ahlers et al., 2021).

In contrast, cities such as Philadelphia suffered the worst casualties due to enacting health policies weeks later than St. Louis.

1916-1955: Polio Outbreak

Polio, or the poliovirus, is a severe disease that infects the nervous system and spreads through direct contact. Although those who safely recover from the virus are immune to it, severe cases of polio can cause permanent paralysis of the legs and a permanent placement in isolation wards with iron lung machines. Children are particularly susceptible to this virus and were often the victims of the most severe outcomes. The origins of polio can be traced back thousands of years with evidence of a polio-like virus debilitating those in ancient Egypt. The virus survived throughout the millennium but only started to affect large populations once industrialization led to crowded cities (*Polio*, 2022). Though there were a few outbreak cases throughout the 19th century, the infection rate and severity of the disease did not spread in earnest until the early 20th century. Outbreaks regularly broke out in the US through the 1950s, with two major polio outbreaks in 1916 and in 1952. Of the 57,628 reported cases in 1952, there were 3,145 deaths.

       In 1955, Dr. Jonas Salk was able to mass produce a vaccine that would protect the patient from the effects of polio. Most notably, Dr. Salk chose not to patent his vaccine and make it accessible to almost all of the population that needed it. It was quickly adopted throughout the world and saved countless lives. Prior to the development of the vaccine, the disease was recorded at the time to have been the primary cause of disability amongst children (*History of Polio: Outbreaks and Vaccine Timeline,* n.d.). By 1962, the average number of cases dropped to 910. The CDC reports that the United States has been polio-free since 1979. From then on, the importance of public health measures was finally recognized.

       The media also had an unprecedented role in the public discourse on the safety of the polio vaccine. The media reflected the uncertainty that the public felt towards the polio vaccine and the fear that polio's effects brought to local neighborhoods. Newspapers also reported on the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who wanted their children protected from the virus. After it was declared safe, the press expounded its virtues and contributed to the positive public perception of the vaccine (Neklason, 2021), It was also recorded through the media and national radio in March that it was announced that the vaccine for the polio virus had been developed.

1910s-1970s – Measles

Another major disease to affect the population in masses was the measles virus, also known as rubeola. Measles is a highly contagious airborne virus in which symptoms include a fever, runny nose, and a sore throat. Symptoms last 10-12 days, but patients may develop ear infections, bronchitis, pneumonia, or encephalitis (swelling of the brain). Though measles was around for centuries, cases were rare, and regular outbreaks did not start in earnest until the early 20th century. In 1912, measles became a nationally notifiable disease in the US, and there were around six thousand deaths a year related to measles (*A History of Measles in the United States*, 2019). Measles was particularly worrying because it was so communicable among the younger population.

       However, all changed in 1954 when Dr. John Enders and Thomas Peebles were able to isolate the measles virus to make vaccines. In 1963, the vaccine was made available to the public, and there was finally an effective weapon against the virus (*A History of Measles in the United States*, 2019). During this time, the federal government endorsed vaccination and made it its mission to vaccinate a significant portion of the populace. President John F. Kennedy passed the Vaccination Assistance Act in 1962, the very first law that would allocate federal funds to support immunization efforts across the country. The standard 450,000 cases the US observed yearly plummeted to tens of thousands of cases by the end of the 1960s. Still, the distribution of the vaccine was uneven, and measles was not seen as a severely dangerous disease like polio. It was not until the

Carter administration joined forces with the media in the 1970s that measles eradication became more of a reality. (Conis, 2019).

President Jimmy Carter realized that a great portion of the population did not see the need to vaccinate themselves or their children. His administration recognized that public relations was the key to improving vaccination efforts. The government actively encouraged and funded TV spots using characters from popular media such as Star Wars to encourage the public to vaccinate. More importantly, the newspapers were recommended to reframe measles from an accepted and normal part of life to a dangerous and deadly disease that must be eliminated. Though not the most ethical of ways to encourage vaccination, these efforts show the effectiveness that the media has on public perception of public health efforts.

HIV and AIDS Epidemic (1980s-present)

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is an aggressive virus that progressively destroys the immune system and is passed through infected blood, semen, or vaginal fluids. It is primarily spread through unprotected sex or sharing needles through drug use. If left untreated, the immune system will deteriorate and may lead to the development of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), a chronic and life-threatening disease in which the patient has a severely weakened immune system. AIDS/HIV first appeared throughout Africa and made its way throughout developing countries throughout the world. It wasn't until June of 1981, that the United States reported its first case of the virus (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

When the first clusters of AIDS cases appeared in the US, it was prevalent amongst the gay community who were still severely ostracized in American society. At the time, President Ronald Reagan, a staunch social conservative, was averse to discussing gay issues and largely ignored the plight of HIV/AIDS patients in the gay community (History.com, 2018). Public service announcements played on the fear of the disease and did not address the gay community's practical struggles (Florênzio, 2018). Newspaper and media outlets would refer to the disease as "gay pneumonia" and merely reported on the cases spreading throughout the country (*AIDS Crisis Timeline*, 2019). Because of the lack of government intervention and grossly prejudiced media coverage, HIV/AIDS cases would rise dramatically until hitting a peak in 1995. By then, a treatment had been discovered and numerous celebrities had revealed that they had the disease. Media coverage increased, but it wouldn't be until the late 1990s that the government and media outlets began educating the public about the matter in order to ensure the people get tested and the correct medical care as treatments for HIV/AIDS were made widely available (History.com, 2018).

The Great Change: Reliance from Traditional Media to Social Media

When technological limitations restricted the means in which the public could communicate with one another and receive information, most of the public received daily news sources in traditional print and broadcast media. For a long time, the public had implicit trust in news media sources, and a few media networks controlled the entirety of information flow to the public. Then, with the advent of technology and social media, this hierarchy has been disturbed. In 2005, barely 7% of adults used a social networking site; now, 65% of adults are on social media with the development of accessible computers and cellular phones (Peerin, 2005). Traditional print and broadcast media have lost significant revenue due to the attention on digital media. Many companies have been pushing their journalists to compete with digital media and the quality of journalism has significantly declined. More importantly, social media was able to transfer the power to distribute information to the news consumer.

Social media users were able to leave the narrative framework that traditional media had constructed and find their own narrative with other like-minded people (Pentina & Terafdar, 2014).

Unfortunately, as much as social media has provided a unique avenue for news consumers to digest information, it has led to "information overload, suboptimal knowledge formation, and biased worldview" (Pentina & Terafdar, 2014). Currently, around half of adults receive their news through often or sometimes get their news through social media (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Distrust in traditional media seemed to be at an all-time high with President Donald Trump declaring all media outlets to be "fake news." Ironically, social media sources were often the source of misinformation and unverified facts. Nonetheless, millions of people have shared countless stories without any editorial authority checking whether the news stories were true. Traditional media sources are stuck in a dilemma of choosing between high quality journalism and potentially unverified stories that are only intended to appeal to more readers.

Social Media's Role in Eroding Public Trust in Government

As social media has begun to displace traditional media's place in society, it also has a great effect in influencing attitudes towards authority. Although research studies on the effect of social media on public trust are relatively new, political attitudes and dissatisfaction towards the government is prevalent even upon a cursory glance on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. These platforms provide a megaphone for anyone without expert knowledge to voice their opinion on any political or governmental issue. However, these sentiments are strong and enduring. In a study conducted in Brazil and Mexico, it was shown that those who were more engaged in political discussion on social media were more likely to show distrust towards government authority (Araguete et al, 2021). When observing those who receive more of their news from social online communities, studies showed an increase in critical attitudes towards those in power, leading to a negative perception of those in the current political system (Chen et al, 2022). Social media was devised to lead to greater transparency in communication and more trust between members of society. Instead, it has heightened suspicions and deepened the distrust that individuals have towards the government. These conditions were especially harmful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19: The US Government and Media's Response

The latest disease that has already surpassed many deadly epidemics of the past is the coronavirus, known as COVID-19. In December 2019, clusters of patients of a novel illness were spreading among unsanitary conditions within a seafood market in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 spreads through air-borne and surface transmission and is able to linger for days after the time of transmission. Cases in the US appeared as early as January 2020 and the World Health Organization declared the world in a state of a pandemic by March 2020 (CDC, 2021). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the US government, more specifically the Center for Disease Control and Protection, has had to manage unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 virus. The population was plunged in fear with high mortality rates and rapid infection rates while the economy floundered with restrictive social measures. Local and state governments needed to address both the logistics of keeping a population safe while minimizing the economic fallout that resulted due to public health measures to limit person-to-person contact (Sauer et al, 2021). One commendable response was that the federal government's economic response has been massive. Laws such as The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act offered the American public $2 trillion in fast and direct economic relief (Dzigbede et al, 2020). However, the US government's ability to provide the public with consistent information and a sense of security was severely lacking.

One main factor of the frustration towards the government is due to the information overload the public receives from different information sources such as the executive branch of government and media. Studies have shown that the American public across most demographics had a greater distrust towards the government due to the mixed messaging throughout the pandemic (Scoy et al, 2021). The media certainly had a great impact on this perception, as the US public tuned in daily to receive the latest updates about the pandemic. Although important information of health measures was relayed, highly politically divisive material were favored and did little to assuage the worries of the American public (Scoy et al, 2021). Both the government and media authority did not give Americans much reason to trust them. Another flaw in the COVID-19 response has been in the inconsistency in messaging. Though public messaging was simple when enacting quarantine, social distancing, and mask wearing measures at the beginning of the pandemic, the measures frequently changed back and forth, further frustrating the public (Edelman, 2021).

COVID-19 and Social Media: A Perfect Storm of Disinformation

Amidst the confusing responses of the government and media, social media quickly filled the gap and provided anyone with access with a smartphone or computer to consume and share information. Social media does have many benefits for government and health authorities to relay accurate and important information to the public in an efficient manner. The public has instant access to scientific literature and can communicate with experts across the world. (Gonzalez-Padilla, 2020). The disadvantages of social media, however, are far more influential and worrying. The design of social media has made it so that the user can create a "personalized ecosystem" of their favored content. More objective and reputable sources of information may be completely ignored if the views were not in line with the user's beliefs. Instead, unverified stories spread across Twitter and Facebook with a significant portion of the population believing that it is the truth (Gonzalez-Padilla, 2020).

The most notable spread of disinformation was within the conspiracy theories about the virus. Studies showed that social media users who digested COVID-19 information through social media were far more likely to believe in conspiracies. This finding suggests that the ever-increasing reliance on social media use, may correlate to an increase in the distrust of authority figures (Allington et al, 2020). Unverified claims that varied from the coronavirus designed as a biological weapon by evil elites to home remedies that would cure the virus spread like wildfire throughout the Internet (Brindha et al, 2021). Though the government has responded swiftly to these comments, the public simply do not believe them.

Particularly worrying was the increasing politicization of public health issues such as mask wearing and vaccination. Mainly Republicans and Independents were seen to espouse negative sentiments towards these health measures, framing them as infringements of personal safety and freedoms (Shin et al, 2022). In facg, mask wearing and vaccination are still relatively low in the US compared to other industrialized countries. Throughout the pandemic, divisive government officials and politicians shared inflammatory or biased news stories which further polarizes the social media audience. Many social media users who see members of their government cannot help but distrust the widely differing views of politicians on public health issues (Edelman, 2021).

Exemplary Government and Media Communication in Other Countries

South Korea

During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea was regarded to have been one of the few countries with an impressive response when it came to the containment of the spread. This may be largely attributed to their experience with the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) crisis. Government authority understood the

importance of providing transparent and direct communication with the public. Some of the successful protocols during pandemic include the development of clear guidelines for the public, the implementation of their efficient contract tracing and testing, and a reliable support for medical workforce that could treat the quarantined and infected population (Kim et al, 2021). Outbreaks were recorded to have been managed as early as March through August and gradually lessened towards December of 2020 (Lwin et al, 2022). With cooperation with businesses and media, South Korea was able to successfully detect, contain, and treat the spread in an organized manner. This synergy would in turn help speed up and easily quarantine COVID-19 patients to prevent further spread and ease the issue of hospital bed shortage which was prevalent in many other countries.

To do so, the government expanded its communication efforts with the public to first provide them with information. Interestingly, the Korean government utilized both traditional and social media to provide citizens with daily updates with clear and concise messaging. Later, measures were implemented to establish hotlines for quarantine and to notify the public through the media when there was a super spreader or negatively affected region. Specially selected officers were also provided with information including facility visit records from medical facilities, cellular GPS data from mobiles, credit card transaction logs, and closed-circuit television. A study examining Korea's public sentiment towards the government response to COVID-19 reports a general positive attitude that is associated with effective government crisis communication (Lwin et al, 2022).

Taiwan

Taiwan, one of the other countries to have successfully navigated themselves out of the worst phase of the pandemic, was ultimately able to accomplish the feat due to their early action, national plan, strong information source, and communications technology infrastructure (Cheng, n.d.). It was reported that by October of 2021, the country had been ranked lowest in the world for the number of COVID-19 cases and second lowest in the number of deaths per 100,000 population. The three primary measures Taiwan has taken that were critical in preventing further spreading was contract-tracing, testing, and quarantine or isolation treatment (Lee et al, 2020).

Taiwan's government was also quick to use the tools around them to establish close communication on the ground. Its advanced information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure was key to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 (Lee et al, 2020). Taiwan's interoperable ICT platform enables various government agencies to use collected data to monitor the situation, plan next steps and adjust or change any anti-COVID-19 measures. The system also enables close real-time interactions between government agencies and Taiwan's private sector such as pharmacies, convenience stores and the predominantly private healthcare delivery system, facilitating real-time communications with the public (Hale, 2022)

In addition to efficient government measures, the media had an influential role on the public perception of COVID-19. Similar to that of the US, the trust in Taiwanese traditional media sources is low. In Taiwan, the tumultuous history under Communist rule and oppressive control of media have discouraged citizens from putting trust into media sources. Social media has been the ubiquitous alternative for news and there has been a spreading of "fake news." The government was quick to act and engaged with the public through social media. Along with daily updates of the latest information on the pandemic, Taiwan's government took advantage of the virality of social media posts to spread positive messaging and recommend the 2-2-2 strategy (a response in 20 minutes, in 200 words or less, with 2 images) for social media users who want to dissuade disinformation (Lai, 2020). Though still restrictive, COVID-19 coverage on the news media was mostly transparent and engaging with the public. TV news stations focused on spreading a unified message of protecting public health. Furthermore, the non-profit Taiwan FactCheck Center was established by journalists and educators to earnestly debunk disinformation and keep the public safe from fake news (Lin, 2021).

Singapore

Like the few other countries that had been successful in the beginning stages of the pandemic, Singapore also enforced a system of extensive testing and contract tracing, as well as a form of knowledge and awareness. Singapore had been regarded as a country of unparalleled testing and reported nearly 57,000 tests per million population. That was possible not only because of their sufficient resources but also due their successful implementations around early COVID-19 identification (Kuguyo et al, 2020). Their contract tracing method revolved around an app known as TraceTogether which made it possible for the country to control the spread. However, prior to the pandemic, Singapore was also known for already having implemented a centrally controlled surveillance system for the purpose of social order and protection of national security and interests. Therefore, having the system of surveillance technologies already in place and the public sentiment of it approved, the government was more easily able to enact a system, in which others in a more democratic government would argue as an invasion of their privacy and rights. When it came to the matters of finding a solution for the issue on a limited number of medical facilities and caring for the large-scale of those infected, the government did not hesitate with the Ministry of National Development to transition large buildings to fully operating isolation centers (Thong et al, 2021). The Singapore government also took extensive measures to strictly promote the wearing of face masks and hand washing.

They also did not hesitate to use popular media outlets to keep the public informed: newspapers, television, radio, social media, and several other platforms were used to spread awareness. This measure, therefore, helped minimize the amount of stigma around the virus in the beginning stages. Uniquely, Singapore implemented what they called the "The COVID-19 Chronicles" which provided informative yet simplified information on the pandemic and virus. Therefore, a wide range of people ranging from various demographics would stay educated on the matter, and recommendations for preventing and medical attention would be promoted (Kuguyo et al, 2020).

Recommendations and Future Research

With the rise of the age of technology and media, there have been many concerns regarding their influence within many countries. As seen by the pandemic, the influence of social media is so great that it is able to persuade and sway the opinions of others on matters that may bring about chaos and instability. It is clear that the government is continually losing ground on public trust and needs to change its priorities from partisanship to providing security to the US public. To restore this security and improve public communication, the US government needs to do more to connect with its populace using social media to get ahead of the disinformation. There needs to be transparent and consistent information throughout all communication platforms. Currently, social media accounts and platforms are run by the individual departments acting as mere bulletin boards for relevant information. Funds should be allocated to establish a more interactive and informative social media presence in which the public is reassured of the government's concerns about their safety. Future research should focus on the efficacy of various social media measures enacted by the government in restoring trust in the US.

Conclusion

The waning of trust in traditional media and the increase in reliance on social media as a medium for the public to receive the latest news and discuss their opinions are posing a great threat to the public trust in government. This recent change may have serious ramifications in the future when a greater public health threat than COVID-19 affects the population. If the US government wants to regain the trust of the public and ensure that deaths from public health epidemics do not have such a drastic effect on the population, government authorities must

realize that the American public feels genuinely frustrated by their government. The mixed messaging and political division further erode the trust in government. COVID-19 has shown that public trust is diminished further and that much work needs to be done to gain back public trust.

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