

3.37: Skepticism, COVID-19, and Debating Science in the Era of Trade-Offs with Jacob Hale Russell

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We Discuss:

- Conversation with Jacob Hale Russell [1:15]
 - Let's put the straw man of pandemic denial out of his misery [2:17]
 - Background [3:33]
 - Demonization and sanctification [17:00]
 - Media [20:20]
 - Denial [31:52]
 - Misinformation [52:20]
 - Preparedness [1:03:14]
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Plenary Session 3.37 Show Notes

Overview

Conversation with Jacob Hale Russell [1:15]

- **Introduction**
 - Russell is an Associate Professor of Law at Rutgers
 - He previously taught at Stanford Law School and joined Rutgers Law School in 2016

- **Let's put the straw man of pandemic denial out of his misery** [2:17]
 - Op-Ed in STAT by Russell

Background [3:33]

- **Complex Policy**
 - Russell and his colleague, Dennis Patterson, taught a course based on populism
 - One of the goals of this course was to understand what connects a left leaning populist voter and a right leaning populist voter to people who have very different policies, but maybe have similar stances towards elites and expertise
 - TLDR; Studying what brings separate partisan voters together to critique elites and expertise

- **Structure of conversations**

"We think the structure of the conversation is badly warped and it's warped in a way that reflects i think things we see. It's not just a problem of sciences or a problem of the pandemic, it's a broader problem of the way we treat and mistreat expertise in contemporary policymaking" - Russell

- This lack of structure is an existential threat because when a future problem occurs that requires a scientific coordinated global response, we're out of luck
- **Expertise**
 - Expertise is entirely important, but to claim expertise can solve all problems is irrational
 - Many of these issues are multi-dimensional that involve value judgements and public policy issues that are beyond expertise
 - When values are implicated, a broader discussion is required
 - Exercising "credentialism" shuts off the ability to have a conversation
- **Demonization and sanctification [17:00]**
 - Ioannidis was quickly demonized for his STAT article (see below)

- On the other hand, Fauci was sanctified
- **Media [20:20]**

"The reality of coverage is that the media is going to reward voices that can simplify, and simplification often requires a degree of exaggeration" - Russell

- This cross purposes with true expertise
 - True expertise forms a true opinion and judgement, but at the same time acknowledges the limits of your beliefs and calibrates your level of confidence appropriately
 - e.g. The more novel the issue, the lower your confidence should be in your conclusions
 - Media coverage often does not include low confidence beliefs though, which will lead to inherent bias and coverage of oversimplified exaggerations
- **Denial [31:52]**



"But the claim is a straw man: there is no epidemic of pandemic denial. Polls since March have shown that Americans overwhelmingly aren't in denial: They believe the threat of Covid-19 is real, they are reasonably good at identifying medical misinformation, and they are largely complying with public health recommendations. Compared to their peers in Europe, Americans are more willing to get vaccinated against Covid-19, similarly likely to wear masks, and no more prone to believe common conspiracy theories about the pandemic's origins" - Russell & Patterson

- The narrative has switched to individual blame, rather than systemic failures
 - The narrative is being stoked by politicians to deflect blame from their failures (i.e. policies)

- e.g. Politicians and leaders failure to contemplate predictable lockdown fatigue is something that they should be blamed for

"A progressive philosophy is to look beyond individuals and ask how systems can be restructured, and how systems have been perversely structured to give you this outcome" - Dr. Prasad

- **Misinformation [52:20]**

- Russell brings attention to the distortion that can be caused by a mainstream media narrative that covers only the negative studies about kids in schools or doesn't cover countervailing studies
 - This distortion can have a massive impact on public policy
 - This is because the studies that the news covers become cited the most often at school board meetings, city council meetings, and in state legislatures

- **Preparedness [1:03:14]**

- We Need More Than Pandemic Preparedness
 - Op-Ed by Dr. Prasad
 - Dr. Prasad proposes that we think *beyond* pandemic preparedness and more to scientific preparedness
 - Principles:
 1. Smart people will disagree
 2. Incentivizing thinkers
 3. Centralization and decentralization
 4. Anticipation and preparation
 5. Arbiters
 6. The role of scientists and politicians
 7. Media

8. Technology companies need to be broken up

9. Let's bury our demons and our saints

- **Schools [1:23:32]**

- Schools are one of the only ladders for upward mobility, and the service that teachers provide is invaluable
 - Dr. Prasad believes school closures may lead to a "lost generation" where children will grow up to deal with more struggles than they would have if schools remained open
 - He also believes there may be political implications in the future

- **Literature cited:**

- [A fiasco in the making? As the coronavirus pandemic takes hold, we are making decisions without reliable data](#)
 - STAT article by Ioannidis
- [Quarantine Fatigue Is Real](#)
 - Op-Ed by Julia Marcus
- [More Science, Less Speculation on Covid LongHaulers](#)
 - Op-Ed by Dr. Prasad
- [Landmark Danish study finds no significant effect for facemask wearers](#)
 - Op-Ed by Heneghan and Jefferson

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