

4.41: The Mask Debacle with Jacob Hale Russell

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 - The Mask Debacle [1:00]
 - Extreme positions [8:54]
 - Trump [13:03]
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Plenary Session 4.41 Show Notes

Overview

Conversation with Jacob Hale Russell [0:15]

- **Introduction**
 - Russell is an Associate Professor of Law at Rutgers

- He is a former Wall Street Journal columnist
 - He previously taught at Stanford Law School and joined Rutgers Law School in 2016

The Mask Debacle [1:00]

- How partisan warfare over mandates became a central feature of the pandemic
 - Published in Tablet Mag by Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson
- **#masks4all**
 - This hashtag was from a citizen activist group, spearheaded by an artificial intelligence entrepreneur named Jeremy Howard
 - The group published a narrative review in which no new evidence was presented, but reached a different conclusion from existing reviews
 - Rather than encouraging debate, the group asserted that the science was settled and that open discussion about this intervention would be unethical.
 - This is a classic case of poisoning equipoise through mass opinion



“Howard pushed back against anyone who questioned his results, going so far as to email demands to the boss of one virologist who raised issues with his analysis. Even Michael Osterholm, later a Biden adviser and very much a COVID hawk, reported backlash and mischaracterization of his views by Howard.” - by Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson

- Problems:
 1. Overselling certainty
 2. Culture of science where instantly people are demonized
 3. This messaging functioned as a form of propaganda, which spread like wildfire

Extreme positions [8:54]

- The rationale for which elites and politicians marketed certainty, was not merely hubris; it was an attempt to reassure people who were in a state of panic
 - However, you can project confidence without falsely claiming certainty
 - Even if they stick to the former strategy → If you are an expert who makes a certain claim, shouldn't you also conduct research to determine the correct answer?

“Either they [public health leaders] understood the uncertainty and didn't do the trial, which makes them terrible leaders, or they didn't understand the uncertainty, in which case, they're terrible scientists” - VP

Trump [13:03]



“When Donald Trump casually denigrated cloth masks as president, the stage was set for a Democratic backlash—turning masks into not just a public health measure, but also a *talismanic symbol* of virtue signaling on one side and a rallying cry about freedom for the other” - by Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson

- **Partisan divide**
 - We knew that prior to the pandemic, there was no inherent distinction between liberals and Republicans in regard to mask policy
 - However, Trump's polarizing intervention stoked the fires of division
- **“Follow the science”**
 - This phrase obliterated all significant philosophical issues from the debate

“It [”Follow the science”] could have raised a much more rich, philosophical debate about what it means to protect the vulnerable in a realistic way under COVID” - Russell

Masks [23:00]



“The ability of masks to impact the outcome of a pandemic, like the effect of most interventions, is in fact a complex question. Yet the discourse has been framed unhelpfully as a meaningless oversimplification: “masks work” versus “masks don’t work.” The theoretical value of an intervention in a vacuum is not the same as its real-world effect. While studies of aerosols on masked mannequins may tell us something about fabric quality, they do not tell us much about the effect of a mask mandate—the actual policy—in reality.” - by Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson

- **Unrealistic policies**

- The physicists, the aerosol entrepreneurs, and the entrepreneurs in artificial intelligence do not get it
 - They do not understand the policy or the fabric; there is an intermediary called **people**
 - Mask mandates fail to address the policy in the larger context of what it does to society over a two-year period of being unable to see faces
 - NY Gov. Cuomo on COVID: “It’s all self-imposed. If you didn’t eat the cheesecake, you wouldn’t have a weight problem.”

Vaccination [29:27]

- January through May of 2021 was a different moment when it comes to masking due to the advent of vaccines
 - Vaccination modifies your risk of bad outcomes by a large margin
- Prior to this time period, society did right to promote policies that prolong the time until individuals face the virus for the first time, in the hope that we can do something in the meantime to significantly reduce your negative consequence (e.g., medication, vaccination, etc.)
 - One of the reasons the train derailed was when the government came out in the summer of 2021, after being alarmed by Delta, and said, “Well, now, all vaccinated people had to wear masks again.”

- Because then it created a situation where the end goal was unclear

“The switching in messaging after mass vaccination, I think, is a good example of undermining public trust, because I think we effectively had a social contract on the terms you said” - Russell

Mandates [35:54]



“Mask mandates are just one of many pandemic policies; a similar disregard for curiosity and open debate have pervaded other areas, like lockdowns and booster policy. But they offer an object lesson in how overconfident, unnuanced messaging conditioned us to assume that all dissenting opinions are misinformation rather than reflections of good faith disagreement or differing priorities. In doing so, elites drove out scientific research that might have separated valuable interventions from the less valuable, and corroded much needed public trust.” - by Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson

- **Boosters**

“I understood that the fundamental structural bias in biomedicine is that the company will want to give them as many as they can give them, because that's their market share. And I understood that a lot of people may think that that's good, but it's the job of independent scientists to say, ‘Well prove to me that each additional dose improves a clinically meaningful outcome’” - VP

- **Curiosity in the time of uncertainty**

- There is no way to say, "Look, we're taking the middle ground."
 - Currently, we have these lumping in extremes with no intermediate possessions

- One solution to the intense philosophical debate due to these extremes is to settle it with well conducted randomized trials

Culture [48:02]

- **The need for debate**

- If you're an academic, it is your responsibility to confront the other person's ideas, not just to destroy their reputation
 - 4 buckets of bad faith academics
 1. Resentment
 2. Career envy
 3. True believers
 - a. The mistake is they're using their academic gravitas to kind of to enforce their personal anxiety
 4. Followers
 - a. Everyone wants to be heard, but not everyone has something to say

Final thoughts [59:39]

- Where is the best pressure point?
 - In times of crisis, what Harvard, Hopkins, and Stanford should have done is said, "We are going to hold real town halls."
 - By holding many oxford-style debates, it is possible that ideas would be peeled apart in order to develop a sense of direction and purpose
 - Another pressure point is the mainstream press
 - The media is equipped with training, strength, and capability to do two tasks.
 1. It has failed to instill a sense of skepticism.
 2. It has failed to convey tales about how individuals are truly dealing with their circumstances
- **Other literature mentioned:**
 - Scientists who express different views on Covid-19 should be heard, not demonized

- *By Vinay Prasad and Jeffrey S. Flier; STAT*
 - Great Barrington Declaration
 - Bari Weiss resigns from New York Times
 - **Other people mentioned:**
 - Michael Osterholm
 - Julia Marcus
 - John Ioannidis
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