

Fool Proof?

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By Rev Paul Graham



Questions to ponder:

- Which news outlets/stations do you trust?
- Have you seen/read any stories about COVID-19 that make you suspicious that they may be untrue?
- Have you heard about the following stories? Which of these do you think are true? I've included in brackets some of the alleged sources or those who have spread these stories.
 - Hydroxychloroquine as a cure (Donald Trump)[\[i\]](#)
 - Coronavirus is big enough to be stopped by masks (UNICEF)[\[ii\]](#)
 - COVID-19 is reactive to heat and cold so avoid ice creams and drink tea (UNICEF)
 - Drinking colloidal silver kills coronavirus (US televangelist Jim Bakker) [\[iii\]](#)

Today is April Fool's Day and so continues a long tradition of gullibility and creative story-making. I wasn't alive at the time of the original 1957 broadcast of the famous "Spaghetti Trees" during BBC's Panorama programme, but it's familiar to many today. For any who haven't seen it, the clips are readily available on YouTube. Frightening though it might seem now that people could be so credulous, but we can excuse their lack of knowledge of what at the time seemed such exotic foreign fare and practices.

Further back, we find tales of the Wild West (much of which is myth anyway) and miracle medicines being hawked around frontier towns seeming to offer cures for anything and everything (except naivety). Our

own country's history is littered with similar stories of those who fell for tricks, scams and fantasies dressed up in a fancy outfit. Just ask any 19th Century purchaser of "Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup", used for curing teething problems in young children with morphine...

But what of today? We still seem to have a strong streak of gullibility within us. At the current time, there are stories circulating about COVID-19, many of which are no more real than the job title "Spaghetti Harvester". The risk, however, is far greater; lives are at stake and people can put themselves at far greater risk by believing what is nothing more than snake oil selling in modern clothing. All those stories I listed at the beginning, for example, are either debunked, unproven or, at worse entirely untrue. The two purportedly from Unicef were made up entirely and the last one actually risks more harm than anything else. As for the first one, the physical and psychological side-effects of chloroquine make for quite a lengthy list...

So, who do we trust? There's a side-bar of short possibly-true news stories in "The Week" magazine entitled "It must be true... I read it in the tabloids". We like to think that we're above all that sort of nonsense and we can distil truth from lies better than most.

Maybe we're just deceiving ourselves. The writer of the Proverbs certainly makes it plain that their audience was a long way off from the goal of attaining true Wisdom. We probably would be wise to count ourselves amongst those who are still travelling towards that destination rather than those who have reached it. It saves us having to apologise twice when we get it wrong again.

Back to the question - who do we trust? Can we trust the mainstream media, our good old Auntie Beeb and the others all seemingly vying for the prize of "most speculation dressed up as news award"? Or should we just trust Sandra from number 12 down the road, whose relatives seem to be the most qualified in the world in their chosen field of study?

Or should we just remember another piece of wisdom from God - you know, the one about gossip (Exodus 23:1, and again Proverbs 10:18, 20:19, 26:20, etc). If we don't fuel the fires of fake news by spreading what might be dangerous to our loved ones and neighbours, we do more to combat misinformation than anything else we can probably do. At the present time (and maybe for all time) silence is more useful than shouting. To risk misrepresenting Scripture, we're reminded at the end of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica to do three things: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). The first of these instructions is easier than the other two with regards to news stories, particularly if the rubbish we absorb looks very appealing. It doesn't stop it being rubbish, though.

So, here's the nub of it all: what do we do about this? How do we make sure what we hold onto is good and avoid is evil? In these stressful, saturated days, how can we be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16)? Discuss...

[i] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/coronavirus-cure-fact-check-hydroxychloroquine-trump>
- it may not be a cure, but there is further research pending:
<https://www.livescience.com/hydroxychloroquine-prevent-covid-19-study.html>

[ii] <https://factcheck.afp.com/unicef-officials-refute-false-claim-agency-released-coronavirus-prevention-guidelines> for both false "UNICEF" claims.

[iii] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-51735367> Also a number of other hoaxes are listed here.

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