

Coronavirus: 'Follow the Science' Means 'Do What I Say'



By Alex Berezow, PhD — April 28, 2020

Many politicians insist that they will "follow the science" in regard to reopening the economy. But the COVID-19 pandemic has placed us in uncharted territory with few relevant precedents to guide policymaking. Therefore, "Follow the science," is indistinguishable from, "Do what I say." This doesn't prevent activist websites like Undark from smearing reputable scientists who speak out in disagreement.



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Like democracy, everybody wants to be on the side of science.

Have you ever wondered why dictators like Vladimir Putin hold elections? It's because they know they have to give a nod to democracy in order to claim legitimacy. Similarly, anti-vaxxers and anti-GMOers pretend to have science on their side. To be taken seriously in the public square, politicians especially must pay lip service to science, even if whatever they say next doesn't make any sense.

This phenomenon is also happening in our ongoing debate over the COVID-19 lockdown. Those who favor an extended or even an indefinite lockdown claim to have science on their side. For instance, here's a tweet from California Governor Gavin Newsom:



Gavin Newsom

@GavinNewsom

Today, Colorado and Nevada joined CA, OR, and WA in our Western States Pact.

The West Coast is -- and will continue to be -- **guided by SCIENCE**. We issued our stay at home orders early to keep the public healthy. We'll open our economies with that same guiding principle.

This is pure political posturing. Unlike say, vaccines, where the science is overwhelming and conclusive, we're largely flying blind when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are solidly in uncharted territory with few guideposts or relevant precedents to aid in policymaking.

Complicating matters is the fact that public health policy requires a delicate balancing act between scientific, legal, ethical, and financial factors. The science on marijuana, for example, is clear. It's bad for you. But a ban doesn't make legal or financial sense, which is why "the science" was overruled in favor of legalization in many states. The bottom line is that there are very few, if any, issues in which science is the only relevant factor.

Therefore, when a politician says, "Follow the science," that's often indistinguishable from, "Do what I say."

The Demonization of Dissent

No example illustrates this as clearly as the demonization of dissent. Anyone who questions the utility or morality of a massive lockdown is immediately labeled by some as a "COVID denier." The disreputable website [DeSmogBlog](#) [2] (which, ironically, is [operated by an anti-vaxxer](#) [3]) did that very thing to us. But we're used to the abuse.

What we will never get used to seeing is a highly respected scientist being smeared by fellow scientists with the help of a complicit media. Dr. John Ioannidis, a brilliant epidemiologist and biostatistician, made a name for himself by demonstrating that [most published research is wrong](#) [4]. He subsequently has examined research in various fields, such as [nutrition](#) [5], and concluded that low-quality, untrustworthy research is pervasive.

Now, Dr. Ioannidis finds himself in trouble. Why? Because he dared to criticize the public health response to COVID-19. Writing for Stat News, Dr. Ioannidis [argued](#) [6] that we are making sweeping, society-altering decisions based on very flimsy data.

Undark: An Activist Website Masquerading as Science Journalism

Woe be unto him! [Undark](#) [7], an activist website that masquerades as science journalism, [features innuendo and mudslinging](#) [8] (as well as [anti-GMO propaganda](#) [9]) and decided to take several cheap shots at Dr. Ioannidis. The site's publisher is Deborah Blum, a once reputable journalist who now engages in casual character assassination. In 2015, [she played a major role](#) [10] in the complete fabrication of a story meant to damage the reputation of Nobel Prize-winning scientist Tim Hunt. So, it's no surprise that Undark would attempt to tar and feather Dr. Ioannidis. It's how Blum makes her money these days.

Instead of simply criticizing Dr. Ioannidis' methodology and/or conclusions -- which would be a completely legitimate exercise in science journalism -- Undark decided to go after him personally. Because obviously, only a partisan hack with some sort of devious political agenda could question the COVID-19 lockdown. Here's an [excerpt](#) [11] (emphasis added):

*IN THE WEEK after the study's release, **Ioannidis has made the rounds on Fox News**, appearing on Tucker Carlson's show and on "The Ingraham Angle," hosted by Laura Ingraham. (Bhattacharya, a former research fellow at the **politically conservative Hoover Institution**, has also appeared on Carlson's show talking about Covid-19 death rates).*

What does this have to do with anything? Nothing. It's guilt by association. Fox News bad. Hoover bad. Therefore, Ioannidis bad. How ludicrous.

In a subsequent [piece](#) [12], Stat News criticized Undark for "wrongly ascribing legitimate disagreements about Covid-19 to ignorance or to questionable political or other motivations." The piece went on to argue in favor of robust debate and against demonization and the "chilling attitude" that stifles discussion.

It's too bad that lesson will fall on deaf ears. The smear merchants at Undark have bills to pay.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politician#/media/File:Discurso_funebre_pericles.PNG

[2] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2020/03/17/desmogblog-intercept-spread-lies-about-acsh-covid-19-14641>

[3] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2020/03/23/desmogblog-climate-website-headed-anti-vaxxer-brendan-demelle-14653>

[4] <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124>

[5] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/08/24/john-ioannidis-aims-his-bazooka-nutrition-science-13357>

[6] <https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/17/a-fiasco-in-the-making-as-the-coronavirus-pandemic-takes-hold-we-are-making-decisions-without-reliable-data/>

[7] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/30/death-science-journalism-12221>

[8] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/02/14/breathtaking-hypocrisy-undark-12578>

[9] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/29/undark-joins-dark-side-gmos-12217>

[10] <https://reason.com/2015/07/23/sexist-scientist-tim-hunt-the-real-story/>

[11] <https://undark.org/2020/04/24/john-ioannidis-covid-19-death-rate-critics/>

[12] <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/27/hear-scientists-different-views-covid-19-dont-attack-them/>