

Can We Separate Science from Politics and Fear-Mongering?

By Jeffrey M. McCall | May 29, 2020 | 12:05pm EDT



Dr. Anthony Fauci (L), director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases speaks next to Response coordinator for White House Coronavirus Task Force Deborah Birx. (Photo credit: MANDEL NGAN/AFP via Getty Images)

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the important role science plays in our culture. Science helps the nation understand the biological aspects of the virus and science will, hopefully, provide adequate treatments and vaccines for it.

But the COVID-19 situation has also shown the limitations of science in addressing the complexities of a nation. The media, for its part, has chosen to only cheerlead for science. Thus, news outlets have created a false worship of science that fails to recognize the many sociopolitical, cultural, and ethical components to the nation's pandemic response.

Science has been weaponized by politicians to push directives and legislation. The media, in turn, echo the self-serving politicians, collectively elevating science as the perfect shield to rationalize any policy decision.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker boldly [proclaimed](#) that people who opposed his lockdown orders were enemies of "science and reason."

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo professed repeatedly that his COVID-19 decisions were based on science.

"I operate on the data and on the numbers and on the science," Cuomo [explained](#) as he called in late March for 140,000 hospital beds and 40,000 ventilators to battle the virus.

Turns out those numbers weren't close. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi salutes science in every interview, talking about the need to "listen to scientists" and making decisions that are "science-based." President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, too, like to borrow the prestige of science, parading scientists into the White House briefing room and crowing that guidelines for reopening the nation do, indeed, stem from science.

The nation understands the importance of science, but it doesn't get why science is being used as a rhetorical lever on non-science policy matters. It is hard to find "science" in decisions that allow liquor stores and pot shops to remain open as essential, but not churches or exercise centers. Science hardly explains legislative spending packages littered with ideological prizes unrelated to the direct effects of COVID-19. It is difficult to see how science can allow ten people to gather under New Jersey's lockdown restrictions, but a gathering of eleven would be against the rule of science. Or, what science allows people to go to a New York beach, but not into the water.

Twentieth century rhetorician and sociopolitical observer, Richard Weaver, warned about the misguided devotion to science in his 1964 book, "Visions of Order."

He wrote, "Science in the area of public affairs speaks with a false rhetoric." He pointed out that science, by its basic mode of operation, is "irrelevant to the world of value and feeling." Weaver further pointed out that the compilation of scientific facts is quite different from "accumulation of wisdom," and that science alone is incapable of deciding policy and sociocultural issues.

Ultimately, Weaver observed, any rhetorical obsession with science belies underlying political motivations. Science, when used as a hard, dogmatic tool, reduces human dignity and freedom. That rhetorical stratagem is now being plied across the country as public officials, with nodding journalists, issue edicts that are, at best, tangential to protecting anybody against the virus.

Lockdown protesters have been portrayed by CNN and MSNBC as crazies intent on infecting the nation. These protesters, however, are simply raising a common sense debate point about what scientific facts justify the elimination of an entire culture of personal liberty.

The reporting of COVID-19 has not just been about science, but instead, about science infused with emotion. After weeks of news coverage, there is still much about the science of COVID-19 the nation still doesn't know. The CDC has now backed off its earlier warnings about catching the disease from contact with infected surfaces. It is now known the early "science" overestimated the mortality rate and underestimated the asymptomatic occurrence. Some scientists now question whether the lockdown measures really did alter the course of the virus. But whatever is known or not known about the virus, the media have made it clear that everybody should be frightened of it.

No one should doubt the seriousness of COVID-19 and its deadly nature, but having the news media scare the nation with constant death tallies and ominous television graphics is hardly a measured response. Sparse has been the reporting about how many Americans will not get sick or be threatened by the virus, or the multiple risks people must sift through every day as they go about their daily lives.

While it is true the news media trend constantly towards sensationalism, heightened emotion hardly helps a nation manage a crisis. Science alone can't solve any crisis without proper consideration of moral, cultural, and economic implications. A sole devotion to the science of COVID-19 has hampered America's crisis response.

Jeffrey M. McCall is a Professor of Communication at DePauw University. He is a recognized authority on media and journalistic ethics and standards, having been interviewed and quoted by over 125 newspapers. He has made over a hundred appearances on radio and television shows. He is a contributing op-ed columnist on contemporary media issues, and is the author

of the book "[Viewer Discretion Advised: Taking Control of Mass Media Influences.](#)"