

Pandemia

How Coronavirus Hysteria
Took Over Our Government,
Rights, and Lives

Big Betty
DON'T
BE
AFRAID
OF
ANYONE

Alex Berenson

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Took Over Our Government,
Rights, and Lives**

Alex Berenson



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Welcome to Pandemia

At the beginning, the *very* beginning, the hide-in-the-basement, stock-up-on-bottled-water, shut-down-the-world-the-plague-is-here panic made sense.

Maybe.

But within a few weeks, even as the United States and Europe had just begun lockdowns, anyone paying attention could see the cure was worse than the disease. In our desperation to control Covid-19, we had done more damage to ourselves and the world than the virus ever could.

By then, though, it was already too late.

This is the true story of how media hysteria, political partisanship, overreliance on unproven technology, and scientific illiteracy brought the United States and the world to the brink of breakdown.

The true story of how we trashed civil liberties we had treasured for generations. How we denied school to our children and destroyed small businesses.

The true story of how we locked down and hid our faces from one another on the thinnest possible evidence. Of how a public health emergency

became big business overnight, as governments spent trillions of dollars to fight the coronavirus—and unnecessary lockdowns destroyed small businesses, hugely enriched giant corporations, and forced people off paid employment onto government checks. How we spent a year hiding the risks and overestimating the benefits of vaccines based on a radical new biotechnology. And how we then tried to force the shots on tens of millions of unwilling Americans—while censoring those who raised questions about them.

All in response to a virus much less dangerous than the Spanish flu, much less Ebola. A virus that is less dangerous to healthy children and young adults than influenza. A virus that does most of its damage to people at or very near the end of their lives. A virus that killed slightly more people worldwide than diarrhea or Alzheimer's disease in 2020.

This is the true story many of you have never heard.

Not because I have a magic source at the Centers for Disease Control passing me thumb drives with hidden information. The facts that I and a handful of other journalists and “skeptics” have reported since March 2020 are readily available in government documents and hospital records and scientific papers.

No, the facts you're about to read aren't secrets.

The secret is in the perspective.

For the last two years, I have tried to approach Covid-19 and the vaccines for it as I do every story I write as a reporter—looking at evidence with an open mind and evaluating risks realistically. I have tried to compare lockdowns and other Covid policies to previous consensus views on the right way to manage epidemics.

Unfortunately, the media, especially the American media, committed early on to portraying the coronavirus as far riskier than it was and the vaccines as safer. Elite outlets like the *New York Times* went out of their way to foment panic and ignore positive news. Throughout 2020, many scientific studies offered reassuring data, especially the low risks Sars-Cov-2 posed to kids and young adults and their safety in schools. Practically everything pointed the same way.

Meanwhile, the models that had predicted apocalyptic outcomes proved wrong. Aside from a few bad days in New York City in March and April 2020, American hospitals were never close to being overrun. In fact, they were so empty in the spring of 2020 that many laid off workers. Even in New York, the field hospitals and medical ships went largely unused.

But no one seemed to notice, much less care.

Instead the *Times*, CNN, and the rest fixated on a single number, the count of Americans who had (reportedly) died from the coronavirus. Cable networks offered real-time tallies. The *Times* ran a special edition when the figure reached one hundred thousand.

They never put the figure in context. They never explained that our methods for recording Covid-linked deaths were likely producing overcounts. Or that even with our aggressive counting, the Covid death figure represented just over 10 percent of all American deaths in 2020.

Most important, they never explained honestly that Covid almost exclusively targeted the very old and sick.

Instead they went the other way, searching desperately for outlier cases—the handful of coronavirus deaths of people under fifty without preexisting conditions. Inevitably, they made mistakes, as when the *Times* called the murder of a twenty-seven-year-old Iowa man a Covid death.

Reporters are crucial watchdogs against government mistakes and overreach. *All* of government. But the media's hatred for Donald Trump blinded journalists to the power that state governors and unelected scientific and medical advisors wielded as the epidemic unfolded.

As Covid hit, governors in many states seized unprecedented control of their citizens. They refused to reopen schools. They imposed draconian rules on businesses. They forced people to wear masks, even outside.

Journalists didn't question these monumental intrusions. They cheered them, while ignoring scientists who challenged the conventional narrative.

Hugely powerful social media companies such as Facebook and tech giants such as Google and Amazon went even further. Those corporations blocked videos and books and groups that questioned the value of the lockdowns—from which these same corporations have profited enormously. The social media companies worked with organizations such as the World Health Organization to become quasi-governmental censors. In suppressing honest debate and dissent, they set a dangerous precedent—and fed the rise of wilder conspiracy theories.

Yet they couldn't silence everyone.

This is the true story of how—to my surprise—I became a leading voice calling for an end to lockdowns and a return to normality. How the strange intimacy of celebrity in the age of social media enveloped me. My Twitter follower count grew from 7,000 to 200,000 in months, and then to over 300,000 in 2021. Some people told me I had kept them sane. Others said I was a psychopath who didn't care how many people Covid killed.

People followed my feed to get information they couldn't find anywhere else. I tried to source my tweets, offering links to the material I quoted. I wanted my readers to judge for themselves whether I had fairly represented it. I knew I had.

I will do the same in this book. I want to be as transparent as possible.

But it wasn't the information I offered that made people love or hate my feed—and me. It was my tone: enraged at the lockdowns, prodding, often sarcastic. I didn't treat the epidemic with fear. Instead I insisted that “virus gonna virus.” I wrote about “Team Reality” and “Team Apocalypse.” I called masks “face diapers” and complained of “Neils and Karens” who wouldn't leave their houses. I created an Orwellian “Department of Pandemia” to announce rules about “the thing.”

Even readers who supported me occasionally told me I was going too far, that I needed to remember that the coronavirus really did kill people.

But I believed I needed to speak out in a way that couldn't be ignored. I believed mainstream reporters were offering worst-case scenarios for

reasons both economic and political. Panic was good for page views and terrible for Donald Trump. And most reporters at places like the *New York Times* hate Trump with a passion that can't be overstated. (As for me, I'm a registered independent whose politics are that it is impossible to be too cynical.)

On April 16, 2020, I tweeted:

Against hysteria, satire. Against storytelling, data. Against groupthink, reporting. Against authoritarianism, bravery. Most of all: Against millennialism, realism. And hope.¹

Against hysteria, satire. And if that satire sometimes cut too deep or went too far, I had to accept the consequences.

"I can't tell if you are super angry or if you are enjoying yourself," a journalist said to me in June 2020. My answer: "Why not both?"

Day by day and hour by hour, the cause of fighting for the truth—and against our overreaction to Sars-Cov-2—took over my life.

Vanity Fair published two hit pieces on me. I went to war with the *Times*, a newspaper where I had worked for a decade. Old friends stopped speaking to me. Sometimes they publicly attacked me. My marriage staggered under the weight of my Twitter obsession.

Most painful of all, my father, who was dying of cancer, grew angry with me for pressing against lockdowns. He accused me of not caring about him. My stance became a subject we couldn't discuss.

Until, in May 2020, he died. (Not of Covid. Of leukemia.)

I didn't mourn him properly.

My wife was right, my friends were right. I was obsessed. I couldn't stop fighting. Couldn't and wouldn't. Can't and won't. Because our response to the coronavirus is the worst public policy mistake worldwide in at least a century, since World War I, when Europe's leaders sent millions of young men to their graves for reasons they couldn't even explain. A generation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have run the other way, tearing up human liberty around the world.

The people who have caused the panic show no sign of letting up, no sign they plan to let us get back to normal anytime soon. If ever.

Yes, lockdowns in the United States have ended—but countries such as Australia and New Zealand show just how fragile our freedoms have become.

Meanwhile, we are still suffering from intrusive rules that vary state to state and country to country. Since the beginning of the pandemic, they have included “social distancing,” mask requirements, school closings, bans on indoor dining, endless testing of college students, aggressive contact tracing, travel restrictions, quarantines for people without symptoms, and now vaccine mandates.

Yet despite the enormous cost of these measures, despite their intrusion on our civil liberties, *none* of them been shown to slow the spread of Covid. We engaged in a game of viral theater at incalculable cost, both real and psychic—particularly to children and teenagers, who were denied normal schooling and social interaction.

In August 2020, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 25 percent of adults ages eighteen to twenty-four said they had seriously considered suicide during the month of June. That figure was more than double the percentage who had reported doing so in a similar survey in 2018. These young adults are at essentially no risk from the coronavirus. But we made them terrified for their futures and locked them up to grapple adolescent angst, drug problems, or depression alone.

This is the true story of the pandemic: one part pandemic, five parts hysteria. Neither shaken nor stirred, but heated in a thermal cycler—also known as a PCR machine (another obscure and complex technology that played a crucial role in bringing us this crisis).

The coronavirus epidemic could not have happened a generation ago. Or a decade ago. *But not because of the virus.*

At the beginning, the *very* beginning, when the panic made sense, the novel coronavirus seemed special. Exceptional. It could lurk for weeks before suddenly cutting down its victims, we were told. It spread like the common cold but killed far more aggressively than influenza, we were

told. It colonized the nose and mouth for maximum infectivity before suddenly moving into the lungs for maximum lethality, we were told.

But a lot of what we were told wasn't true. We've learned now that Sars-Cov-2 isn't particularly lethal and that its contagiousness varies widely in different settings. Most people without symptoms don't spread it much. Really, the novel coronavirus is just...a virus. It has one truly unusual symptom—many infected people temporarily lose their senses of smell and taste.

Not exactly Ebola, which has a 50 percent fatality rate.

So why was our response to this rather ordinary virus so different from our reaction to any other disease in human history? *Because it could be.* Because in our foolish brilliance we have created information technology indistinguishable from magic.

We closed offices and schools *because we could.* We now have the internet bandwidth for white collar workers to stay home—and for students to “learn” remotely, on their computers.

We counted and publicized deaths obsessively—and still do—*because we can.* We have database software that enables hospitals and health departments to aggregate information in real time.

We distribute that information to everyone instantaneously, through social and conventional media, *because we can.* We are not just choking on data, we are stuffing it down our throats. Yet we are desperate for more each moment. Many of us seem almost addicted to tracking the toll of the coronavirus. We know we should stop, but we can't.

We test endlessly for the virus *because we can.* Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) machines make the virus's RNA into DNA and that DNA into more DNA. They let us find a single fragment of the virus and multiply it a trillion times. A trillion is a million million, a thousand thousand thousand thousand. It is a number no one can really grasp.

And the mRNA Covid vaccines—created, developed, and put into use worldwide in under a year, faster than almost any other drug or vaccine in history—are only the latest example of our scientific brilliance.

But we are playing magic tricks *on ourselves*. We have forgotten a crucial fact: These medical wonders come at the highest possible price. When we multiply a viral fragment a trillion times, we get a positive test result in many people who never will be sick.

Then we tell those healthy people that they're ill, and we make them—and the people around them—stay home.

Our magic has made us insane.

Long before the coronavirus, physicians had a phrase for the havoc that over-testing healthy people can wreak: the medical cascade. A single unusual result on a medical test causes doctors to recommend more tests. Those tests can lead to drugs or surgeries, even for patients with no symptoms. Men have their prostates removed. Women are given chemotherapy for breast cancer. The temptation to *do something* is overwhelming. The financial incentives don't hurt either.

When it comes to Covid, all of us everywhere have been riding that cascade—even if we haven't had a single test.

Nowhere are the incentives stronger and the cascade more powerful than in the United States, with its incredibly expensive health care system. In 1960, Americans spent \$27 billion on health care, or about \$235 billion adjusted for inflation. That figure represented 5 percent of our overall economy.

In 2019, Americans spent \$3.6 trillion—\$3,600 billion—on health care. That represents a more than fifteen-fold increase in fewer than sixty years, *after* accounting for inflation. Medical spending is now almost 20 percent of the overall economy, more than energy and real estate combined.

Other rich countries don't spend as much, but the trend is the same. We have medicalized our societies. Worse, hospitals themselves have proven remarkably effective vectors for spreading the coronavirus.

This dynamic was obvious almost immediately. As Italian physicians wrote in March 2020, "Coronavirus is the Ebola of the rich.... It is not particularly lethal, but is very contagious. The more medicalized and centralized the society, the more widespread the virus."²

Yet weirdly, even as our societies have become more medicalized, our experience of death has turned more remote. Death itself is more horrifying and unthinkable than ever. Serious technologists now truly believe they will be able to cheat the reaper for all eternity by uploading their consciousnesses into the ether.

More than three million Americans died in 2020, but we hide many of those deaths in nursing homes and hospices. My father could not imagine his passing even as it was on him, but the denial that is understandable and perhaps even merciful for the individual pilgrim on his final journey will not work for society as a whole. Not if our denial about the mortality of the aged and sick comes at the cost of denying children a chance at full lives of their own.

Please understand: *I am not saying Sars-Cov-2 is not real. I am not saying it does not kill people.*

What I am saying is that our response to the coronavirus has been vastly disproportionate. The coronavirus has not disrupted the food chain (though the lockdowns threatened to do so). It has not overrun hospitals (though vaccine requirements for reluctant nurses are putting the system under enormous stress). It kills fewer American children than drowning, cancer, abuse, or a dozen other conditions.

We panicked anyway.

Sars-Cov-2 did a fraction of the damage we feared it would when it first escaped China. But the dangers it has revealed are here to stay. The medicalization of society is not going away. Neither is our reliance on advanced technology and the power of the companies that provide it.

Fed by anger at Trump, conventional media outlets stoked the coronavirus panic. The panic was the pull. But the push came from two incredibly powerful industries, technology and health care.

Now Trump is gone. But we've set a precedent. A terrible precedent. The temptation to panic—over another coronavirus, a bad flu strain, a drug-resistant tuberculosis—will only keep growing harder to resist, unless we stop it.

We need to fight the pandemic—the hysteria about the pandemic—and stand up for the old normal.

Or before we know it, the old normal will be gone.

Notes

1: Welcome to Pandemia

Alex Berenson (@AlexBerenson), “Against hysteria, satire. Against...,” Twitter, April 16, 2020, 4:14 a.m., available at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210324020334/https://twitter.com/AlexBerenson/status/1250744283012960258>. Twitter has now censored me by suspending my account, which does not just prevent me from tweeting but also makes my older tweets unavailable. Fortunately, I downloaded an essentially complete archive of my tweets and do intend to make them publicly available, unedited. But for the moment they cannot be found on Twitter. When I quote one of my tweets, I note whether I have a screenshot of it in my archive. And where it was captured and is still available elsewhere on the internet, usually at the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, I give that link.

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2: Happy New Year

1. “Li Wenliang: Coronavirus Kills Chinese Whistleblower Doctor,” BBC News, February 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51403795>.
2. Sui-Lee Wee and Vivian Wang, “China Grapples with Mystery Pneumonia-Like Illness,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/asia/china-SARS-pneumonialike.html>.
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7. Zhuang Pinghui, “Chinese Laboratory That First Shared Coronavirus Genome with World Ordered to Close for ‘Rectification,’ Hindering Its Covid-19 Research,” *South China Morning Post*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052966/chinese-laboratory-first-shared-coronavirus-genome-world-ordered>.

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“A few of us looking closely at the data—not at what public health authorities or governors or reporters were saying about the data but at *the data itself*—could see two crucial facts emerging as early as the first week of April 2020.

“First, Covid was far less threatening than it had originally seemed. Yes, it could be deadly, especially to the elderly and people with severe comorbidities such as kidney disease. But it would *not* overwhelm the medical system, much less all of society.

“Second, the lockdowns, at least as the United States and Europe conducted them, were useless, if not counterproductive.”

—Alex Berenson