

False information has not helped national lockdowns

Even the WHO has moved to try and curb the spread of the infodemic

COMMENT



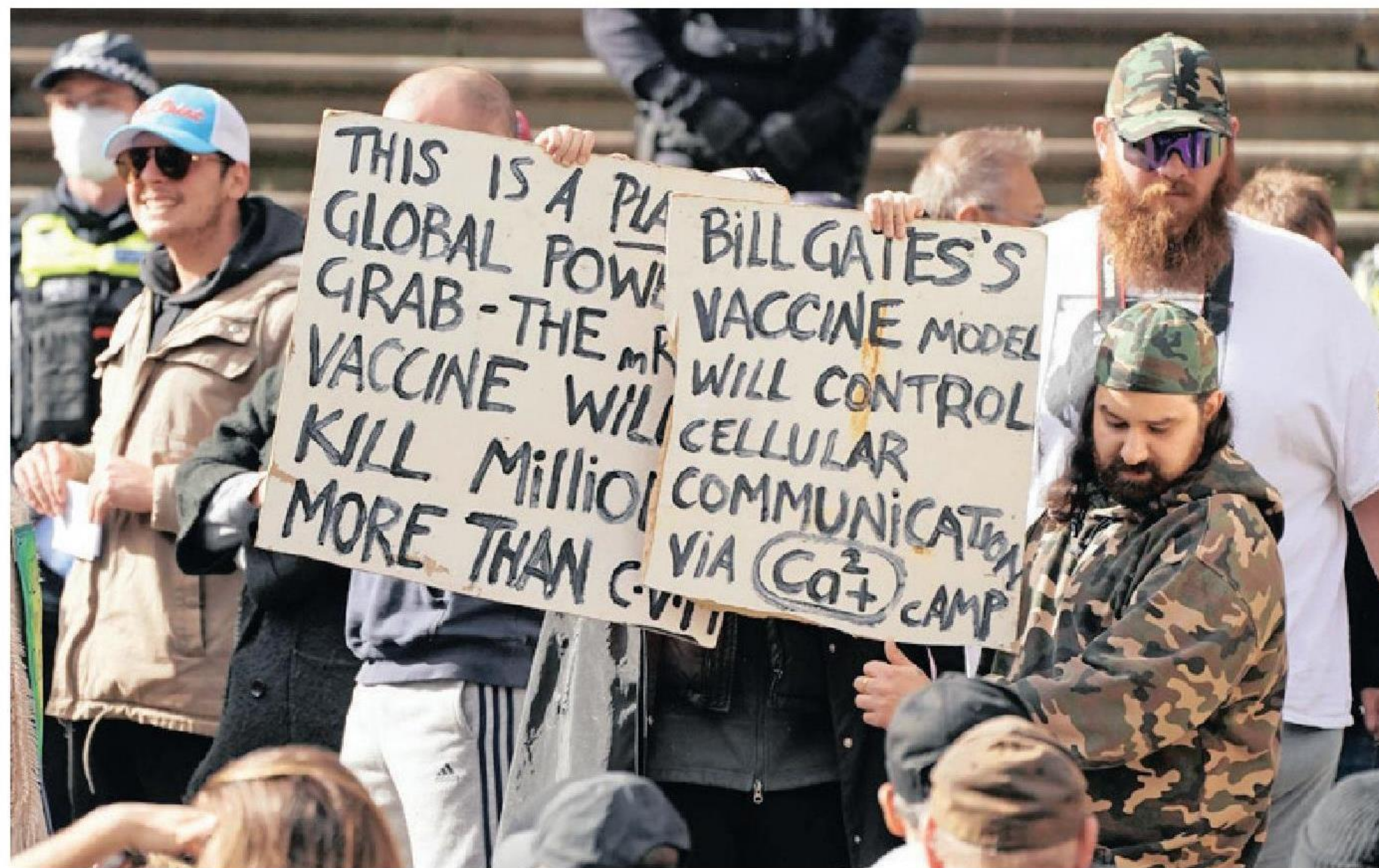
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IF WE speak meaningfully of viruses as possessing or being possessed by a drive or instinct, it is an instinct to replicate and multiply. As they multiply they take over more and more host organisms. It can hardly be their intention (so to speak) to kill their host. What they would like, rather, is an ever-expanding population of hosts. Ultimately, what a virus wants is to take over the world, that is to say, to take up residence in every warm-blooded body. The death of any individual host is therefore a form of collateral damage, a mistake or miscalculation. – JM Coetzee

IN LIGHT of the recent events, (still unfolding) there has been a surge of false information about Covid-19 and how we need to respond to it. As the virus spreads, it seems more misinformation about it is shared.

While the irresponsible use of social media and other digital platforms is not something new, its impacts can cause devastating outcomes as it spreads false counter-information and misleads people.

The lockdown did not do this issue any favours, as people are locked inside their homes and using mostly their smartphones to access the rest of the world. As the death toll and infections from the Covid-19 outbreak continue



PROTESTERS fed up with the Covid-19 lockdown in Melbourne, Australia. The spread of misleading information can lead to valuable information being ignored, says the writer. | EPA

to rise, the sharing and distribution of false health advice and untested prevention measures en masse has not in any way helped the situation. So much so that the problem has caught the attention of the World Health Organization (WHO).

The WHO has moved on this by engaging with the landlords of the digital space, including Facebook, Google, and Twitter on how they can curb the spread of the infodemic.

Their social media teams and dig-

ital people are said to be on the clock from sunrise to sunset to track and respond to misleading information.

The South African government declared: Anyone that creates or spreads fake news about Covid-19 is liable for prosecution. It encourages people to verify information before sharing it.

Here in South Africa, the spreading of fake news or misleading information about Covid-19 is now an offence punishable by a fine, six months' imprisonment, or both.

The information includes, but is not limited to, false prevention measures or cures, myths and rumours. Since the outbreak an abundance of misinformation has been doing the rounds and it should all be refuted with evidence-based information.

As expected, conspiracy theorists didn't sit this one out; they also jumped on the bandwagon. The conspiracies were also spreading with the same pace as the virus, if not faster. From Covid-19 being a biological weapon to 5G Networks links, surprisingly they left the aliens out of it.

As blogger The Medical Futurist put it: "One person in Wuhan eats an uncooked bat, and your local Walmart runs out of toilet paper. This is such a surreal scenario, no wonder people are looking for alternative answers to how their normal lives got blown into pieces in the matter of weeks."

The main problem with misinformation is that it sometimes occupies the vacuum of science, facts and truth. This leads to valuable information being misplaced and ignored, its place taken by false information.

As the cliché goes, this is a matter of life and death. People are looking for trustworthy information that could assist them in the fight against the pandemic. People should at all times scrutinize the sources of the information they consume.

The opening paragraph by the great novelist JM Coetzee is an abstract from *Diary of a Bad Year*.

While Coetzee made reference to the 1918 influenza pandemic (also known as Spanish Flu), his philosophical thinking makes for an interesting observation. Covid-19, in its quest to take over the world, has brought with it uncertainty, job losses, more economic instability, panic, anxiety, misinformation and many other unwelcome negatives.

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