

# The Pandemic That Killed Debate

Carl Sagan famously said, “the cure for a fallacious argument is a better argument, not the suppression of ideas.” This wisdom has been sadly forsaken during the COVID19 pandemic, when one powerful narrative has taken not only the public, but the scientific community, by storm. The story is that societies cannot survive the pandemic without society-wide lockdowns until we have a vaccine, despite the fact that we have never had a vaccine for a coronavirus, vaccines usually take many years to develop, and many of them are not all that effective once made. Penetrating this narrative has been incredibly difficult even for impeccably credentialed scientists. One might even say that this pandemic killed scientific debate.

Even as evidence proving that lockdowns do not stop the virus rolls in by the truckload, the scientists who argue for a different approach are marginalized, censored, affixed with disparaging labels, and ostracized. Sweden’s chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell was accused of “[leading Sweden to catastrophe](#)” and of “[experimenting](#)” on the Swedish people. Nobel Laureate Michael Levitt’s careful studies and models were labeled “[lethal nonsense](#)” as he weathered attacks left, right and center. John Ioannidis, one of the world’s most productive scientists, [found his studies smeared and ignored](#). Sunetra Gupta, one of the world’s foremost epidemiologists at The University of Oxford, found that expressing her wide-ranging infectious disease knowledge suddenly made her “[unethical and dangerous](#).”

The latest smear target is neuroradiologist and health policy expert Dr. Scott Atlas, formerly of Stanford. A longtime lockdown dissenter, his principal and latest offense seems to be agreeing to serve on The White House’s coronavirus task

force, although Anthony Fauci – a researcher who funds grants, and who is not a public health expert – is permitted to do so without adverse media coverage. Where Dr. Atlas and Dr. Fauci differ is in their fundamental approach to the virus: Fauci believes [we can never return to normal](#), while Atlas believes all low-risk groups should do just that, with protective measures targeted towards vulnerable populations. Atlas believes epidemics end with herd immunity, while Fauci apparently believes they end if you lock down well enough for long enough, and then [fundamentally change your way of life](#) because you now have the insight that more pandemics will occur.

Many of Atlas's former Stanford colleagues publicly took issue with his age-focused pandemic management strategy on September 9, [when 98 of them signed a letter leveling the serious accusation of "\[fostering\] falsehoods and misrepresentations of science."](#) Omitted from the letter are the alleged misrepresentations and lies, "making scientific discourse difficult." This injustice was noted by infectious disease expert Martin Kulldorff of Harvard Medical School, who responded with his own letter published – not without some gentle prodding – in [The Stanford Daily](#) on September 16. Kulldorff explained his longstanding agreement with Atlas's position that an age-targeted strategy is needed to minimize casualties as well as collateral damage during the pandemic – ["the most compassionate approach . . . is to allow those who are at minimal risk of death to live their lives normally to build up immunity to the virus through natural infection"](#) – and invited the letter's signatories to publicly debate this strategy.

*Among experts on infectious disease outbreaks, many of us have long advocated for an age-targeted strategy, and I would be delighted to debate this with any of the 98 signatories. Supporters include professor Sunetra Gupta at Oxford University, the world's preeminent infectious disease*

*epidemiologist. Assuming no bias against women scientists of color, I urge Stanford faculty and students to [read her thoughts](#).*

Professor Kulldorff received no reply to this offer, so [The Soho Forum](#) – a highly respected debate platform – took up the case, personally inviting the scientists to participate in an online, one-on-one debate via Zoom, taking the negative on this resolution:

*To minimize mortality and optimize public health, the U.S. should implement a targeted coronavirus strategy that better protects the old and other high-risk groups, while letting children and young adults live close to normal lives.*

This offer was emailed to Dr. Philip Pizzo, the chief signatory of Stanford's letter in opposition to Atlas, who replied simply: "Thank you for the invitation. We have conveyed what we have to say in our letter and do not have additional comments to offer." From both a public policy and scientific standpoint, this blanket refusal to engage in discourse is concerning. When someone can level an accusation of dishonesty at a public figure, refuse to debate the substance with the accused, and suffer no consequences for this behavior, this stifles the free expression of opinions and ideas. This is not good for anyone except entities trying to control a self-serving narrative, which never turns out well for anyone else – especially those with the least power.

The best system for a humane and compassionate society is one that encourages the free expression of ideas. This practice must be encouraged and rewarded, not stifled and penalized. Ideas should be openly expressed, disagreement voiced, and the undecided parties credited with the intelligence they possess: they listen to both sides, and come to their own conclusions. The alternative – some narrative-maker decides the information that will be provided, withholds contradictory relevant

information, and forbids the defense from speaking at all— is fascism. It is tyranny. It is certainly not American. Americans have always known that it is dangerous to restrict debate while placing “authority” in one person or entity: that is why our government is built on checks and balances, on divided bodies of congress, on term limits and the electoral college and and separation of powers.

Experts differ and disagree, on every subject. Intelligent people, coming from various backgrounds and with all manner of life and professional experience, will choose their own side, and once this goes on for long enough, the correct result will arrive. Neither public policy or science is ever completely settled, so the restriction of debate hurts everyone. The voicing of innovative ideas and solutions is what helps us. We should celebrate people like Scott Atlas who are willing to take the unpopular, minority view – maybe we can learn from them. We should pay careful attention once we know their opponents will not only sling mud, but will not even appear for a debate.

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