

# A field guide to experts

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Experts are common but not well understood. This guide introduces novice expert spotters to the essentials of artifexology—the study of experts



Deeply tanned experts top the pecking order



# Health communication in and out of public health emergencies: **To inform or to persuade?**

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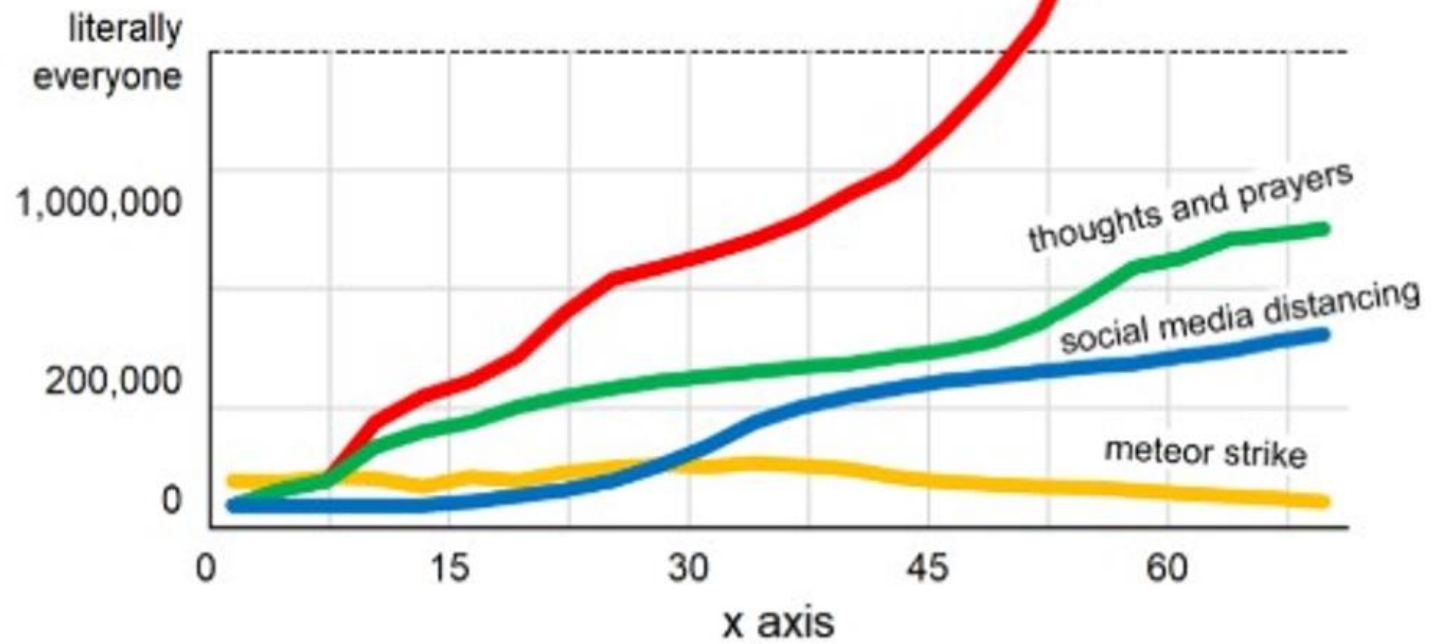
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# COVID-19 INFODEMIC

Cases of misinformation





**Covid-19: The pros and cons of wearing masks**



- Potential conflicts between seeking to persuade or to inform
- Changing people's behaviour through spin
- The ethics of persuasion
- Communication in the context of public health emergencies
- Principles to guide decisions by health authorities about whether to try to persuade people



Potential conflicts between seeking  
to inform or to persuade

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## A trade-off between health impacts and democratic rights

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- During the covid-19 pandemic, governments and health authorities have attempted to persuade people to follow restrictive measures
- On average, democratic governments were slower than autocratic ones to implement (and enforce) restrictive measures



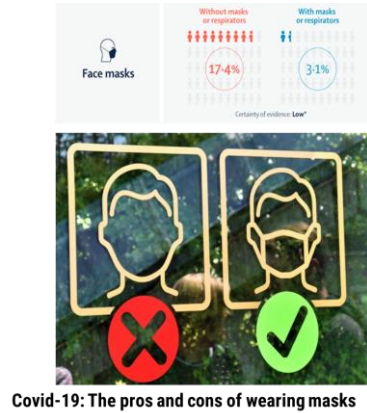


Public messaging about recommendations and policies intended to control the spread of covid-19 have often changed

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- Communication between the scientific community and policymakers has not always been candidly shared with the public
- Researchers, eager to promote the value of their work, may have hyped it
- As a result, covid-19-related communications by policymakers, health authorities, researchers, and others can feel untruthful, inconsistent, and opportunistically shared





**On the one hand**, more candid communication might

- Make policy changes seem less arbitrary
- Help to preserve trust
- Increase support for and willingness to participate in future research

**On the other hand**, more candid communication might

- Reduce the perception of effectiveness
- Result in less compliance with recommendations and policies

# A dilemma?

## If the goal is to enable informed choices

Communicate information that clearly presents what is known about the pros and cons

- **But** this might reduce compliance with recommendations or support for policies
- To the extent that an intervention is effective, this would result in worse health outcomes
- It might also increase inequities, if some population groups are less likely to have access to candid information, to understand it, or to be able to use it to make informed choices

## If the goal is to maximise compliance

Communicate information that is designed to persuade people of the benefits

- **But** this limits people's ability to make informed choices and may erode public trust in authorities
- It also may make it more difficult to conduct needed research



# Not just during the pandemic

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This is also a problem in the context of

- Health promotion
  - For example, targeted at vaccination, smoking, drug abuse, unsafe sex, obesity, meat consumption, or screening
- Clinical practice
  - For example, in relation to communication targeted at adherence with medication and treatment plans, or for preventive medicine





Changing people's behaviour  
through spin

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# One way to persuade people is “spin”

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- Emphasize the advantages of the desired option and ignore or downplay the disadvantages and uncertainty
- This can be done intentionally or unintentionally
- Spin can be found in
  - Scientific literature
  - Press releases
  - News reports
  - Advertisements
  - Public health messages
  - Health service messages
  - Government messages
  - Industry messages, for example tobacco and sugar



# Ways of spinning information



<b>FACTORS</b> <i>that can affect a decision</i>	<b>SPIN</b> <i>to influence people to behave in a desired way</i>
<i>Seriousness of the problem addressed by the desired option</i>	Emphasise or exaggerate the seriousness of the problem and ignore or downplay uncertainty
<i>The effects of behaving in the desired way compared to other options</i>	Emphasise or exaggerate the benefits of behaving in the desired way Ignore or downplay the harms or undesirable effects of behaving in the desired way Ignore or downplay uncertainty about the benefits, and emphasise or exaggerate uncertainty about the harms Neglect to consider or point out that people may weigh desirable and undesirable outcomes differently Assume or imply that the desirable effects far outweigh the undesirable effects
<i>Costs of behaving in the desired way compared to other options</i>	Ignore or downplay the costs and emphasise or exaggerate the savings of behaving in the desired way Ignore or downplay uncertainty about the savings and emphasise or exaggerate uncertainty about the costs Ignore, assume, or imply the intervention is cost-effective, and ignore uncertainty
<i>Alternatives to the desired option</i>	Misinform or leave out information about relevant alternatives

# Other persuasive strategies

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- Using words and hyperbolic language without presenting numbers
- Presenting risk ratios for benefits and absolute effects for harms
- Arousing fear
- Using narratives
- Using expert sources to support claims







**When there is compelling evidence that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages**

- The difference may be smaller between information designed to persuade and information designed to inform
- For example, the advantages of vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella clearly outweigh the disadvantages
  - Parents want balanced information about the benefits and harms of childhood vaccination
  - Providing them with clear, concise, evidence-based information may both build trust and persuade them to consider the evidence when deciding

**The more closely balanced the advantages and disadvantages are and the greater the uncertainty**

- The more likely it is that information designed to persuade will differ substantially from information designed to inform
- For example, it is not clear that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of breast cancer screening
  - Communication to increase uptake differs substantially from information designed to enable informed decisions about breast cancer screening

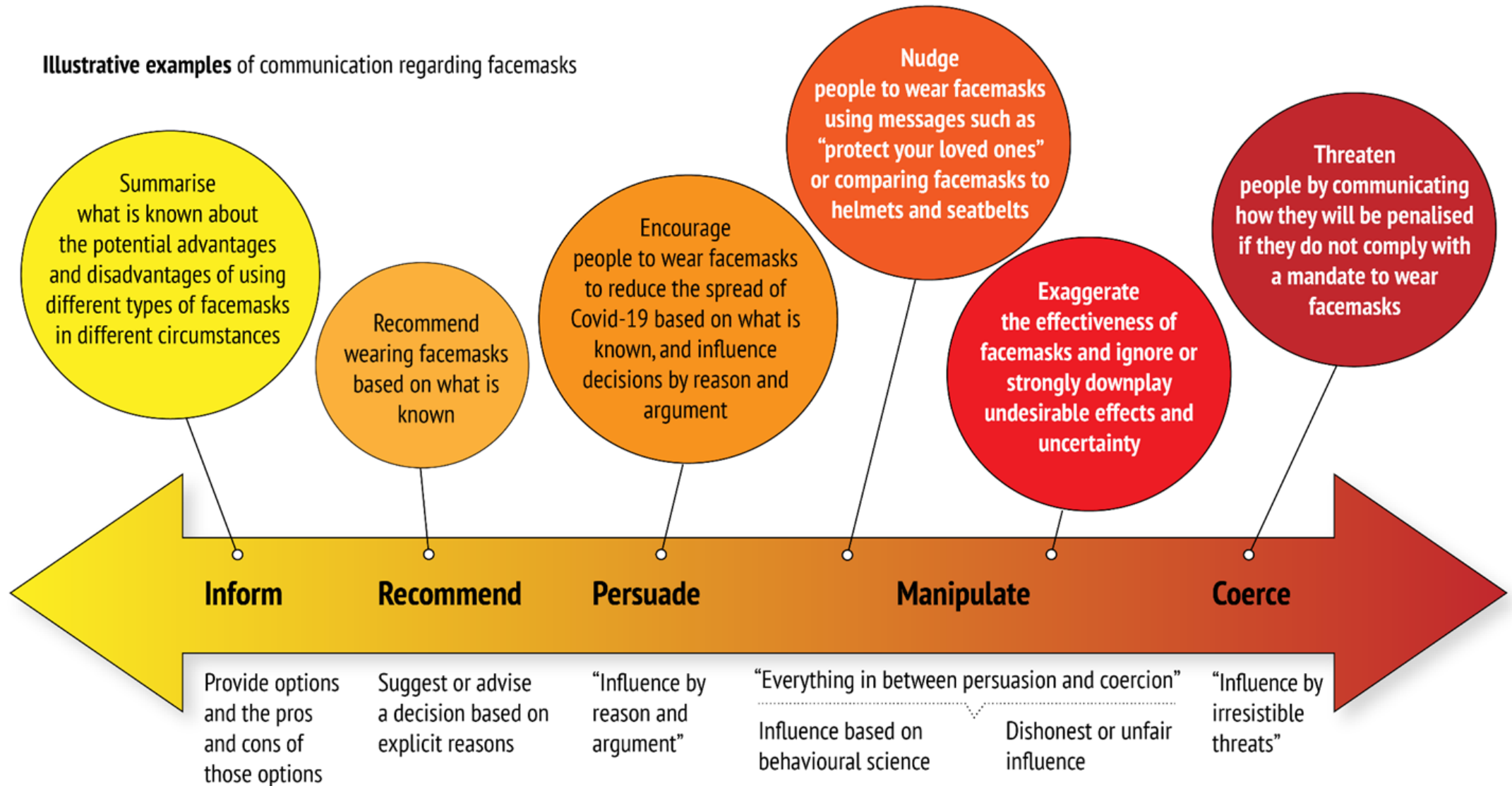


# The ethics of persuasion

Autonomy, beneficence (doing good),  
nonmaleficence (not doing harm), and fairness

# A continuum from information to coercion

Illustrative examples of communication regarding facemasks



# Autonomy

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- Information designed to inform people builds on a basic respect of people's right to autonomy
- Some autonomous choices that people make entail risks, such as riding a motorcycle
- In societies that value autonomy, such choices are respected if they do not harm other people or create undue collective burden



Information designed to persuade does not necessarily infringe on people's autonomy, but it can if the information is “manipulative”

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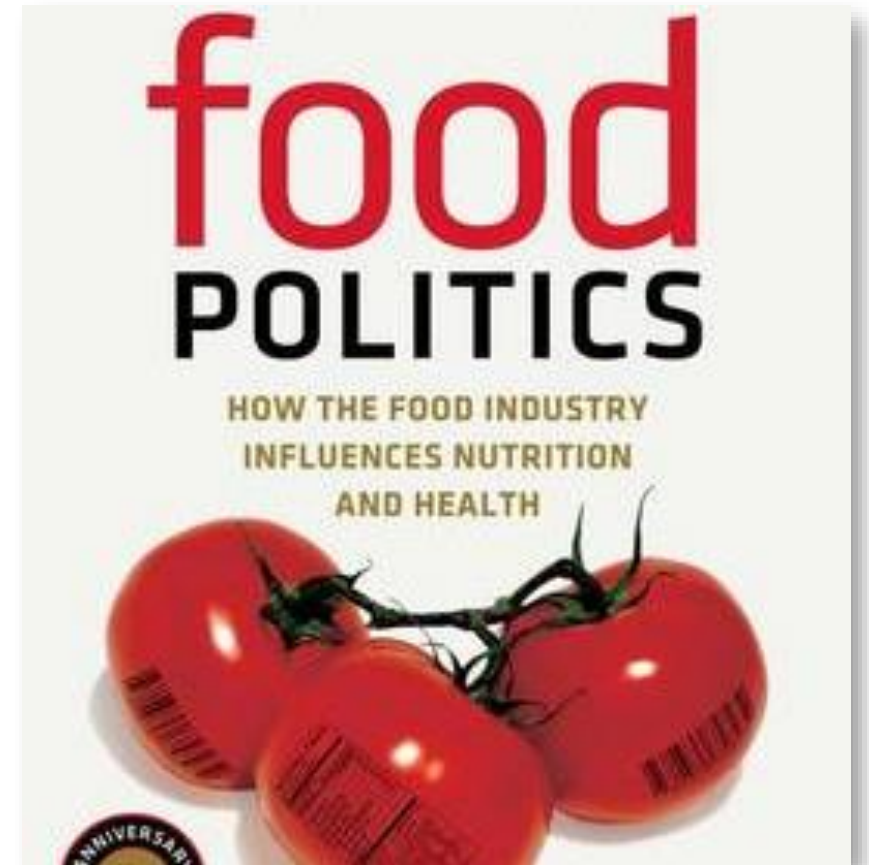
- **Spin** is manipulative if it is used deliberately to influence people's choices
  - For example, withholding information on rare but important vaccine side effects
- Providing **information designed to arouse fear or other emotions**, such as guilt, can also be manipulative
  - For example, during the covid-19 pandemic, informing people about the gravity of the situation
  - People should be told the seriousness of the situation so that they can make informed choices
  - However, emphasizing worst case scenarios can exacerbate fear, anger, and anxiety unnecessarily



# “Autonomy” may sometimes be deceptive

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- People’s choices are sometimes unknowingly shaped by their environment or by misinformation provided by actors with special interests, for example the food industry
- In addition, people do not always rationally weigh their options, and decisions are often affected by cognitive biases
- However, it is questionable whether this justifies health authorities or governments acting in a similar way to manipulate information or people’s emotions



# Beneficence

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Arguments for designing information to be persuasive are largely based on beneficence

- This assumes that the people responsible for the information know what problems should be addressed, what goals people have, and what is best for people
- If these assumptions are well founded, it may be justifiable to persuade, manipulate, or even coerce people to behave in a desired way, despite some disagreement
  - For example, seat belt laws, traffic regulations, and information to promote adherence to those are widely accepted as well-founded in many countries, although not everyone agrees

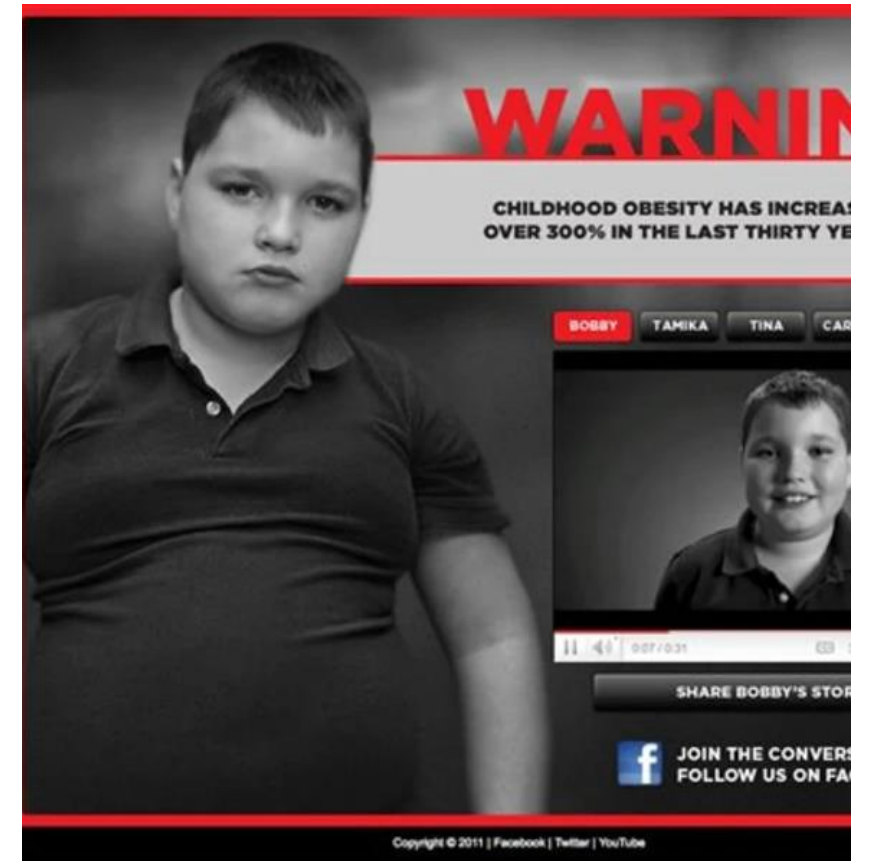


# Nonmaleficence

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Health information that is designed to be persuasive can be harmful.

- It can result in **victim blaming**
  - By suggesting that individuals are responsible for their behaviour and, if they do not behave in the desired way, they are responsible for the resulting problems
- It can also result in **stigmatization**
  - For example, well-intended information campaigns to reduce obesity and the health consequences of obesity may have contributed to blaming, shaming, and stigmatising obese people
- It is important that those responsible for health communication reflect carefully on avoiding potential unintended effects (nonmaleficence) as well as the intended effects (beneficence)







Questions or comments about spin  
or the ethics of persuasion



Communication in the context of  
public health emergencies

# The extent of uncertainty & the need to respond urgently may limit the ability to use systematic and transparent processes

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However, health authorities and governments can **be prepared** by having established processes for

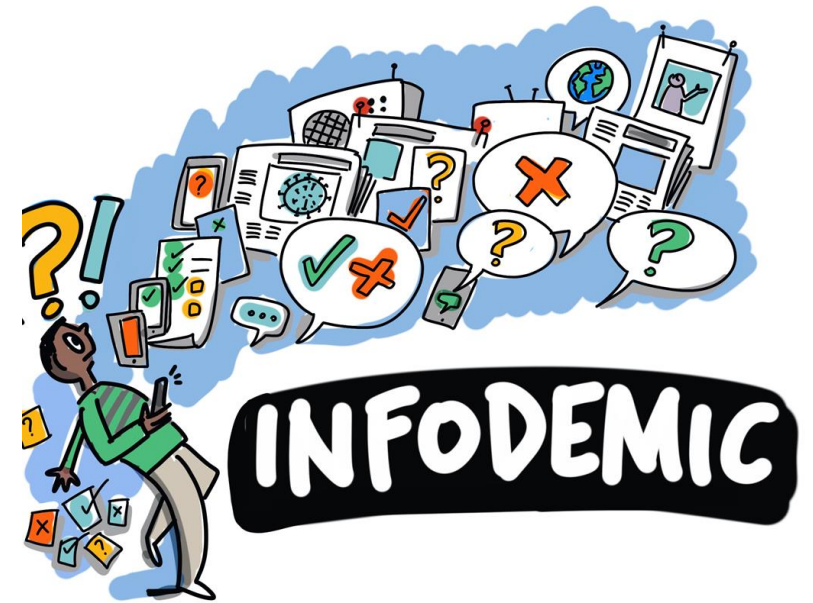
- Making recommendations and policy decisions
- Using existing evidence to inform decisions and recommendations
- Producing evidence to address important uncertainties
- Using evidence-informed guidance for risk communication



# Another way in which they can be prepared is by fostering critical thinking

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- By fostering critical thinking skills, health authorities and governments can help to reduce people's susceptibility to misinformation and help them to recognise and make good use of reliable information
- Currently many people lack those skills, and they are not being taught in schools

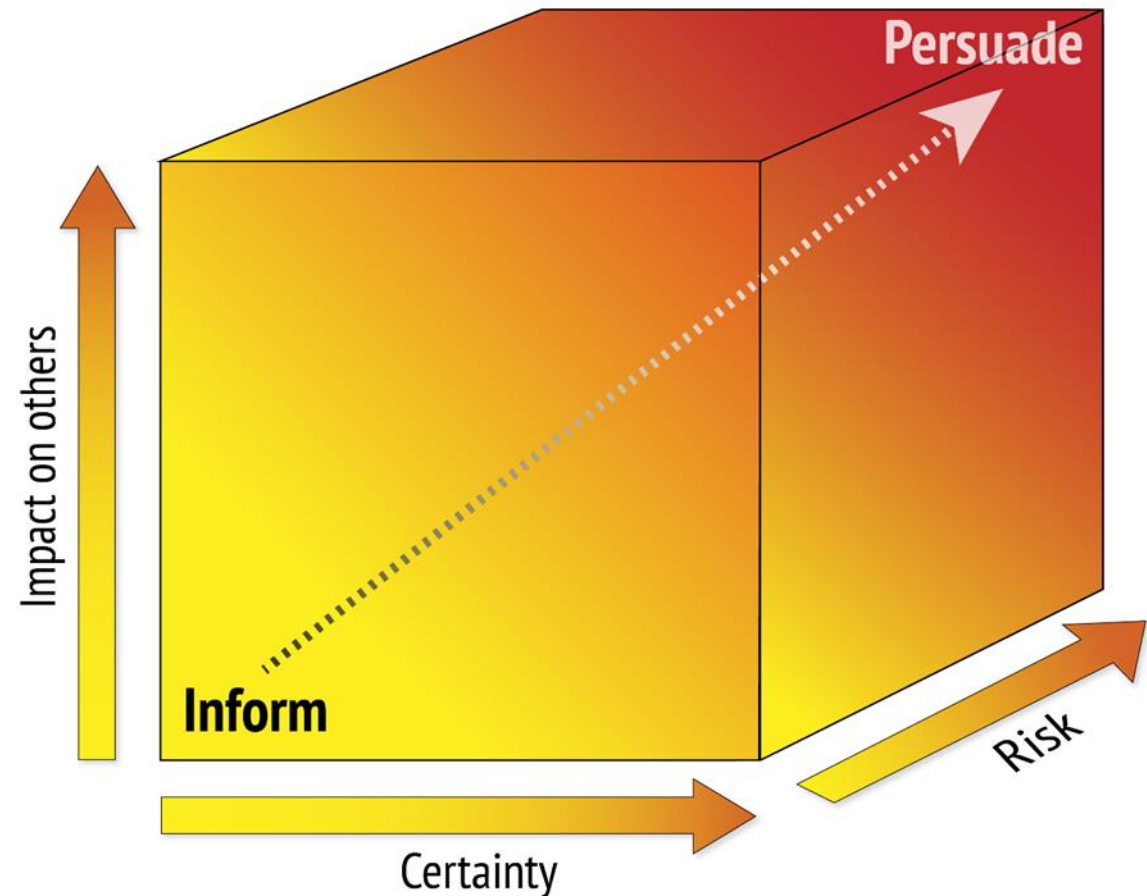


# Both persuading people and informing them are reasonable goals

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Factors that can influence the balance between aiming to persuade and aiming to enable people to make informed choices include the

- Extent to which people's behaviours affect others
- Size of the risk
- The certainty of the evidence





9 principles



Principles	Questions
1. Evidence	What is known about the potential impacts of the behaviour? What is known about the potential impacts of the communication strategy?
2. Participation	Does the message reflect the values of those affected?
3. Fairness	Are the potential impacts of the message on different populations fair?
4. Transparency	What is the justification for the message?
5. Precaution	Is there a credible threat of serious harm that warrants an urgent message?
6. Proportionality	Is the message appropriate for the level of risk?
7. Flexibility	Is the message tailored to key target audiences and their contexts and can it be modified as new information becomes available?
8. Testing	Has the message and how it is communicated been tested?
9. Uncertainty	Are there important uncertainties about the impacts of the message?

# Mandates

- The principles can also be applied to decisions about whether to restrict people's behaviour or mandate that people behave in a certain way.
- When a behaviour is mandated, messages may still be designed to persuade people to adhere to the mandate, or they may be designed to inform people.
- For example, in the context of a mask mandate, messages may be designed primarily to persuade people to adhere to the mandate or to inform people (e.g., about when, where, why, and how to use masks).







Conclusions

The justification for persuasive messages should be transparent

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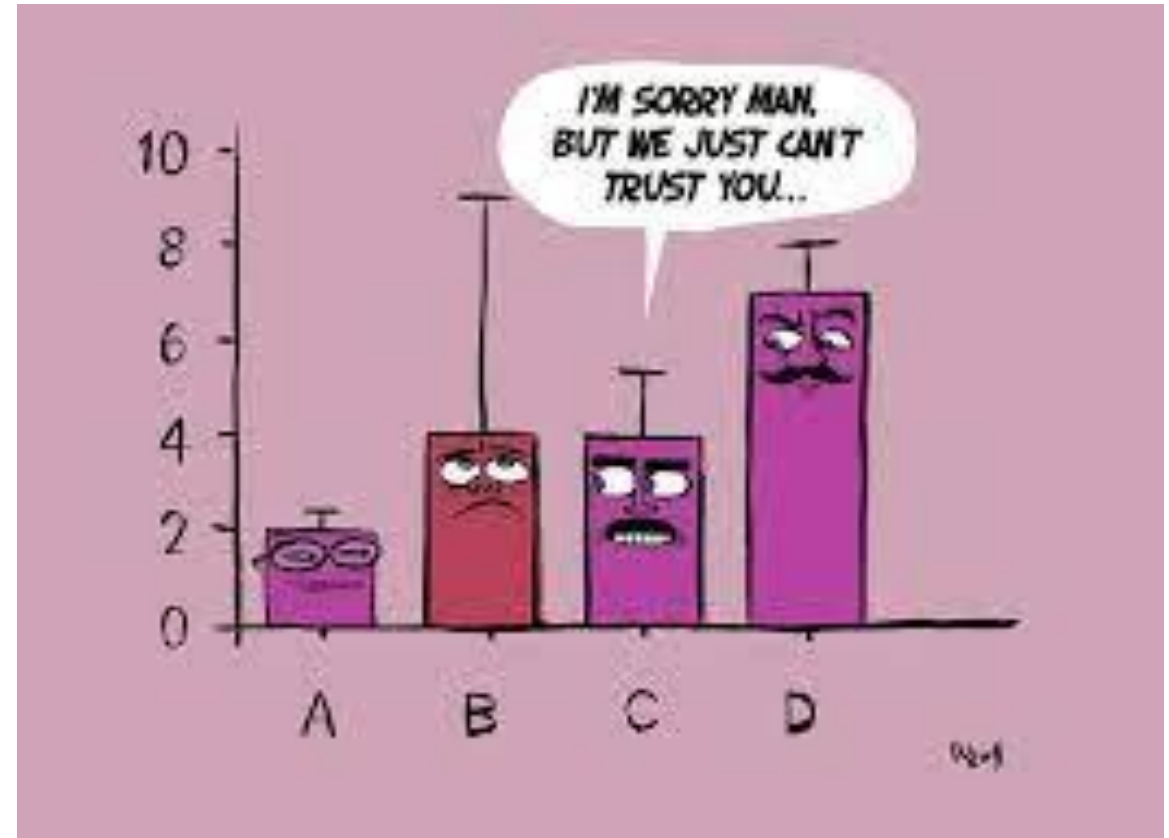
- Clear, actionable messages can stand alone
  - And they can be made despite low certainty evidence
- **But** persuasive messages should not distort the evidence
  - And it should be easy for those who are interested to find the justification



# When there are important uncertainties

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- They should be acknowledged
- Not disclosing uncertainties
  - Distorts what is known
  - Inhibits research to reduce important uncertainties
  - Can undermine public trust in health communication and in the institutions producing it



*People facing life threatening illness have a right to expect that research into their illness will address the uncertainties that matter most to them.*

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- Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as Alessandro Liberati (1954-2012) described in an editorial published in the Lancet shortly before he died.

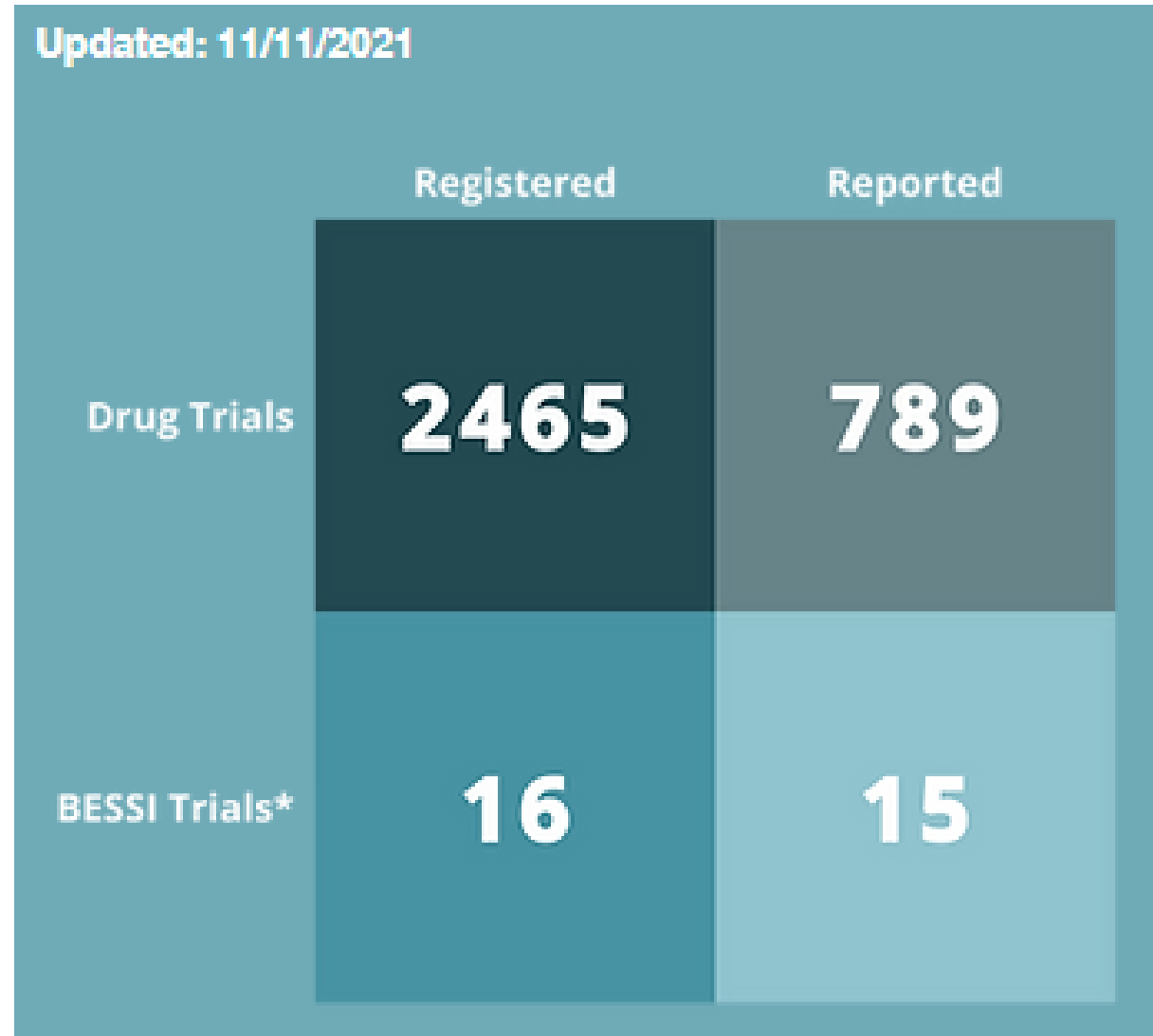


Elisa Liberati

The same is true  
for pandemic  
control measures

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- There are important uncertainties that are not being adequately addressed



\*behavioural, environmental, social and systems interventions

# A new governance strategy is needed

- Inclusive and deliberative decision-making processes

The screenshot shows the Participedia website search results for the query "covid". The page displays a grid of 12 case studies, each with a thumbnail image, a title, and a brief description. The cases include:

- COVID-19, Citizen's pulse** (A National Survey on COVID-19-Nepal) - Updated October 7, 2020
- COVID-19: Rethinking Emergency Preparedness and Response in Cameroon** - Updated July 30, 2020
- Finding Youth-Led Solutions to COVID-19: Lockdown Live Webinars** - Updated November 11, 2020
- Scottish Parliament Citizens' Panel on COVID-19** - Updated April 16, 2021
- July 2020 Covid-19 winter preparedness** (An online dialogue project for the) - Updated November 26, 2020
- Connecting to Congress Online Town Halls on the COVID-19 emergency** - Updated February 16, 2021
- London Covid-19 Deliberation** (Commissioned by NHS England and Improvement (London Region) Delivered by Imperial College Health Partners and Great MOP) - Updated November 24, 2020
- Dialoging and Deliberative Workshops on COVID-19 and the NHS (National Health Service)** - Updated November 24, 2020
- Advocating for Women's Inclusion in Ghana's COVID-19 Response** - Updated May 19, 2020
- Community Engagement for COVID 19 – Ethiopia** - Updated October 26, 2021
- Climate Assembly UK and the COVID-19 crisis** - Updated November 17, 2020
- Addressing the impact of COVID-19 on landless farmers and smallholders in Nepal** - Updated August 26, 2020
- Oregon Citizens' Assembly on COVID-19 Recovery** - Updated October 17, 2020

The website interface includes a search bar, navigation tabs (All, Cases, Methods, Organizations, Collections), and a footer with a feedback button.

Grazie

