

# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS OF THE US GOVERNMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

ED SHELLEBY

OFFICE U.S. SENATOR TINA SMITH

MINNESOTA



# KEY PARTS OF THE US GOVERNMENT AS IT RELATES TO COVID

(WE'RE A LITTLE WEIRD)

- THE PRESIDENT AND HIS ADMINISTRATION
- CONGRESS
  - SENATE (2 SENATORS ELECTED FROM EACH OF THE 50 STATES)
  - HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (435 TOTAL, BASED ON A STATE'S POPULATION)
- GOVERNORS (ONE FROM EACH STATE)



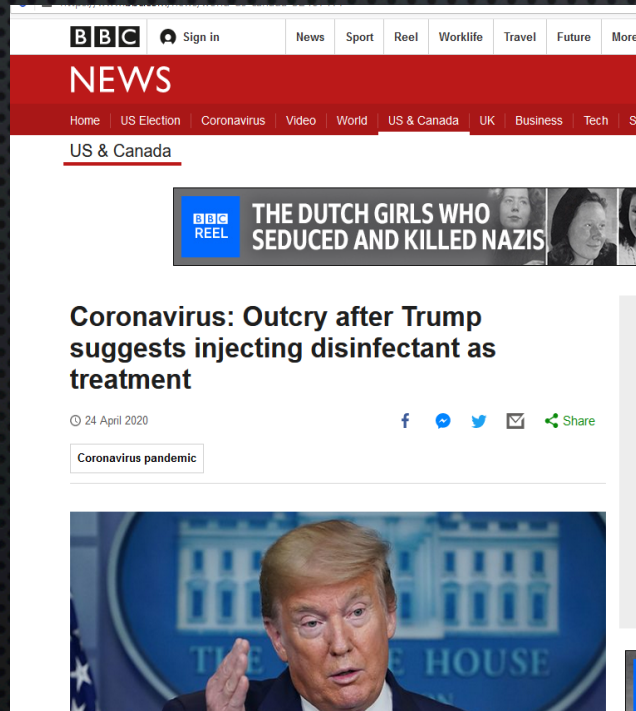
## CHALLENGE 1:

THE US GOVERNMENT HAS FAILED TO CREATE A  
COHESIVE NATIONAL STRATEGY (OR MESSAGE) ON  
HOW TO ADDRESS THE PANDEMIC



# CONSIDERABLE MISINFORMATION

(SOMETIMES FROM THE PRESIDENT  
OR OTHER GOV'T OFFICIALS)



The drug hydroxychloroquine is displayed at the Rock Canyon Pharmacy in Provo, Utah

## Drug cocktail touted by Trump to treat coronavirus increases chance of death by 27%, study shows

'No need for further studies' into unproven Covid-19 treatment supported by US president, researchers say

Vincent Wood | @wood\_vincent | Tuesday 01 September 2020 17:49





# WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE WAYS WE USED TO COMMUNICATE?

- MOST GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS MOVED TO TELEWORK; GOVERNMENT HAS NOT FULLY CONVENED IN SIX MONTHS
- ELECTED OFFICIALS NO LONGER INTERACT WITH REPORTERS ON A DAILY BASIS, ALL OF WHOM PREVIOUSLY WORKED IN THE SAME OFFICE BUILDINGS, INCLUDING THE CAPITOL
- FEWER HEARINGS, PRESS CONFERENCES, AND SPEECHES--ALL KEYS WAYS TO COMMUNICATE



GONE ARE THE DAYS OF THIS  
(MAYBE FOR A LONG TIME...)

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

(ALL ARE REAL PHOTOS THAT I DIDN'T TAKE  
BUT WITNESSED!)





# GOVERNMENT HAS MOVED TO ALMOST ALL DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

- FIRST, UPDATES TO EXISTING TOOLS
  - GOVERNMENT WEBSITES SAW ENORMOUS SPIKES IN TRAFFIC IN THE SPRING—PEOPLE WERE CONFUSED AND LOOKING FOR RELIABLE INFORMATION—LOW HANGING FRUIT!
    - FIRST, FOR FACTS ABOUT COVID, TESTING, ETC
    - SECOND, TO UNDERSTAND WHAT ECONOMIC SUPPORT THEY QUALIFIED FOR (THE GOVERNMENT PASSED A \$2.2 TRILLION BILL IN MARCH TO HELP THE COUNTRY RECOVER)
  - SUCCESSFUL: OVERHAULING WEBSITES TO BE FULLY COVID-CENTRIC—MAKE YOURSELF A RESOURCE PEOPLE FIND RELIABLE AND FREQUENTLY UPDATED
  - THAT INCLUDES NOT ONLY INFORMATION ABOUT THE VIRUS AND ITS SPREAD, BUT ABOUT HEALTH INSURANCE INFORMATION, UNEMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE, AND OTHER GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS



# OUR OFFICE, AS AN EXAMPLE

## US SENATOR TINA SMITH'S WEBSITE





# SOCIAL MEDIA: A GREAT TOOL. SOMETIMES.

- FACEBOOK, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM, ETC.
  - HELPFUL TOOLS TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION BUT...
  - LOTS AND LOTS AND LOTS OF MISINFORMATION, WITH LITTLE POLICING OF ACCURACY
- SO HOW DO YOU COMBAT?
  - FOCUS ON PROMOTING INFORMATION FROM NON-POLITICAL AND TRUSTED SOURCES (ESPECIALLY WHEN THE PUBLIC DOESN'T CONSIDER YOUR OFFICE AS ONE OF THEM...)
  - AND PARTNER WITH A (SOMEWHAT) TRUSTED SOURCE TO GET THE MESSAGE OUT!



# WHAT'S WORKED WELL

- WHAT THE GOVERNMENT ACCOMPLISHED
  - INFORMATION UPDATED DAILY ON THE WEBSITE: RELIABLE SOURCES ONLY!
    - THOROUGH VETTING PROCESS FROM POLICY STAFF
    - BUT STILL VERY QUICK UPDATES—PEOPLE CRAVING UP-TO-DATE CONTENT
    - QUALIFIED INFORMATION WHEN NECESSARY (LIKE IF DETAILS WERE STILL DEVELOPING—SAY THAT)
  - CLEAR AND SIMPLE WAYS TO CONTACT ELECTED OFFICIALS WITH QUESTIONS, INCLUDING FOR PEOPLE HAVING TROUBLE WITH DEALING WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE GOVERNMENT
  - LINKS TO RELIABLE GOVERNMENT RESOURCES, BOTH NATIONAL AND STATE, FOR ADDITIONAL INFO.



# WHAT DIDN'T WORK!

- REAL-TIME, **REACTIONARY** SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSES
  - FRIENDLY REMINDER: SOCIAL MEDIA (TWITTER ESPECIALLY) IS NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC OR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

**From the New York Times, in partnership with an organization called the Hidden Tribes Project:** “views of Democrats on social media often bear little resemblance to those of the wider Democratic electorate.”

## **Identify themselves as moderates or conservatives**

29% of Democrats on social media  
53% of other Democrats

## **Say political correctness is a problem in the U.S.**

48% of Democrats on social media  
70% of other Democrats

## **Say they don't follow the news much**

27% of Democrats on social media  
59% of other Democrat

Social media is important, but not the sole or primary metric you should use to gauge public opinion



## CHALLENGE 2:

# THE AMERICAN PUBLIC DOES NOT TRUST ELECTED OFFICIALS

- THEY REALLY THINK POLITICIANS ARE ALL LIARS.
- YIKES.



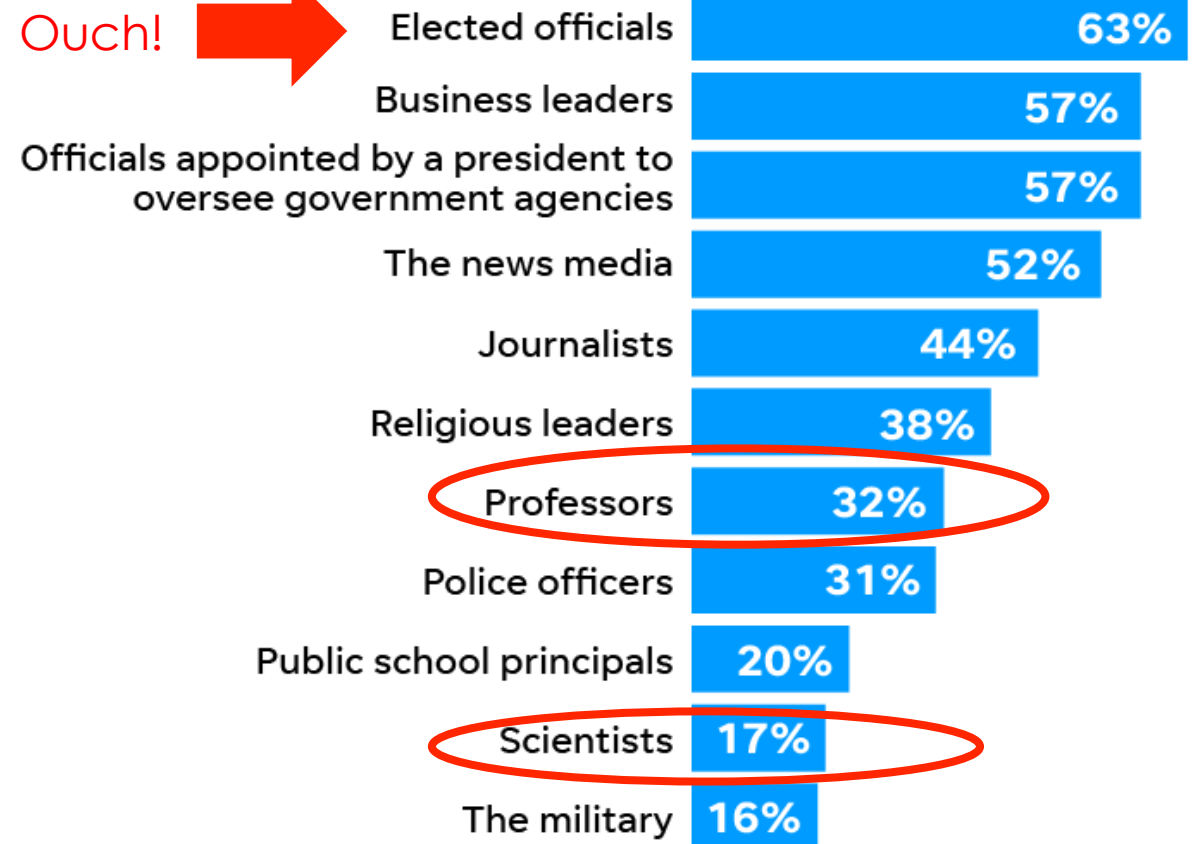
# THE PUBLIC DOES NOT TRUST ELECTED OFFICIALS

(AND THIS IS PRE-COVID!)

## Where trust is worst

Americans who reported “not too much” or no confidence at all in the following groups of people to act in the best interests of the public:

Ouch!

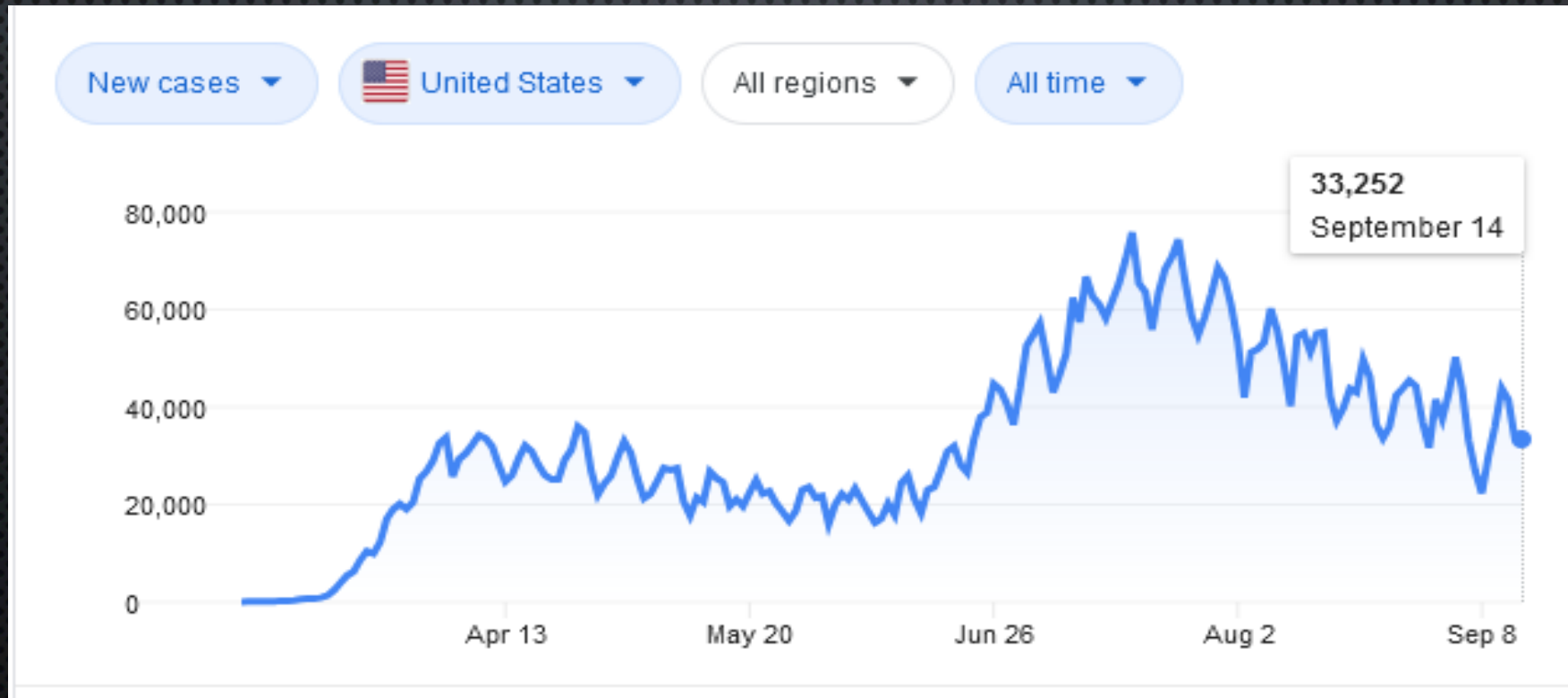


SOURCE Pew Research Center survey of 10,618 US adults, Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018



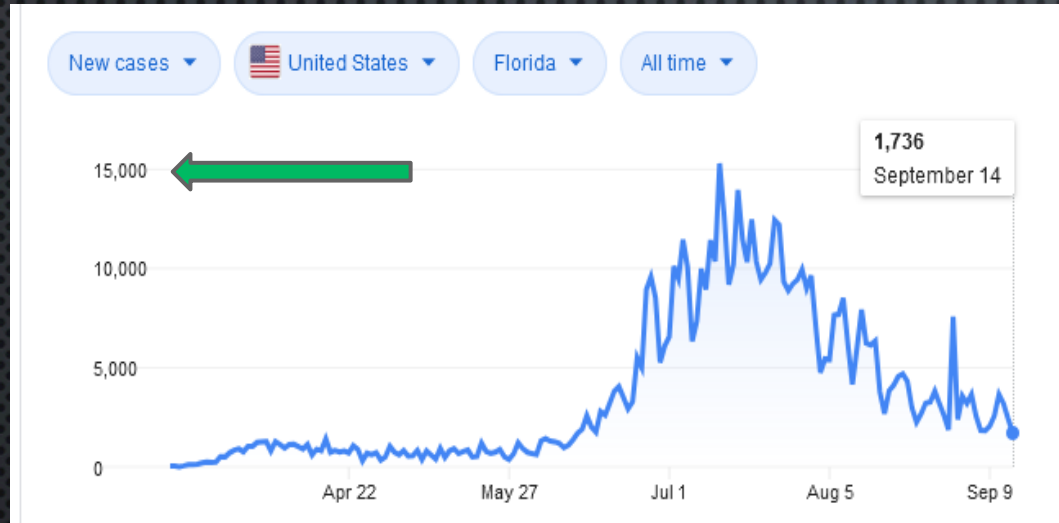
# THAT MISTRUST HAS CONTRIBUTED TO WHERE THE US IS NOW: A STORY IN THREE GRAPHS

- GRAPH 1: THE US WITH 6.6M CASES, 195K DEATHS
  - ABOUT 20 PERCENT OF BOTH, DESPITE BEING ABOUT 4 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION

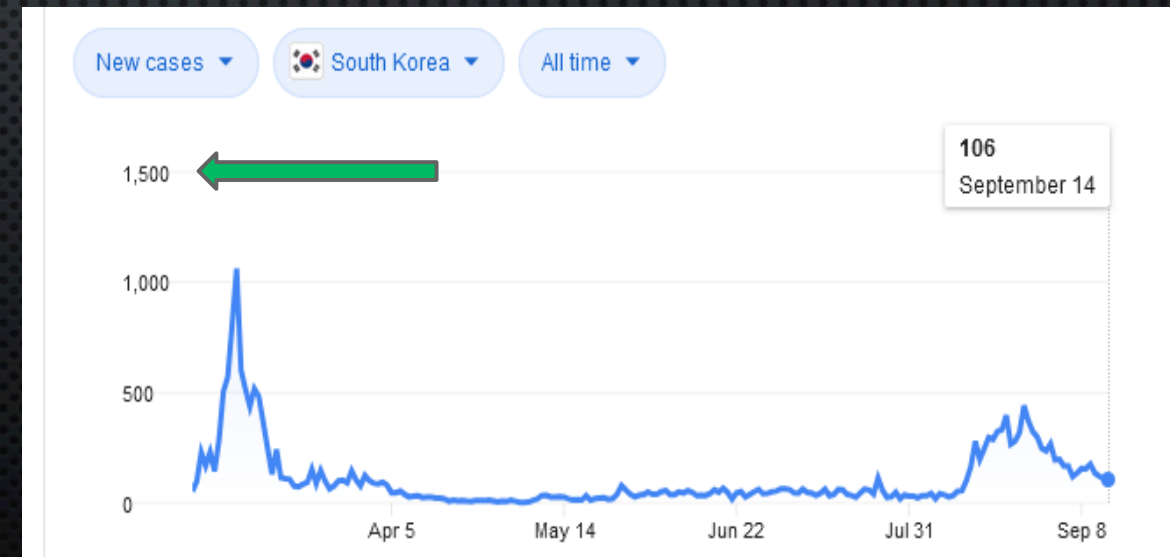




# SOUTH KOREA VS. THE U.S. STATE OF FLORIDA



- The American State of Florida vs. South Korea (which publicly reported its first case as the same day as the US)
  - About double the population; fewer cases in South Korea during the pandemic than in Florida's worst day





# SO WHO(M)\* DOES THE PUBLIC TRUST?

- SADLY, NOT A WHOLE OF PEOPLE...
- FIND RELIABLE SOURCES (WHICH IS DIFFICULT)
  - FIND OUT WHO THE PUBLIC LISTENS TO AND PARTNER WITH THEM
    - PROFESSORS
    - PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS
    - ANYONE WHO WASN'T ELECTED TO OFFICE
- HAVE OTHERS JOIN YOU FOR VIRTUAL PRESS CONFERENCES WITH THE MEDIA, FOR TELEPHONE TOWNHALLS WITH CONSTITUENTS
  - SERVE AS A RESOURCE AND A CONDUIT
- REPETITION
  - SAY THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AND OVER



QUESTIONS??