

ANALYZING THE CORONAVIRUS RUMOR MILL

Professor's research explores folk responses to pandemics



Jon Lee is a folklorist and instructor in Suffolk University's undergraduate writing program who has thought a great deal about how people react to outbreaks of sickness. His most recent book, *An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease*, examines persistent social phenomena, such as conspiracy theories and fake “cures,” that arise during times of widespread illness.

“We essentially have two different narratives running in an epidemic,” Lee says. “One is the official medical narrative, which tells you where [the disease] came from, when a vaccine might be possible. But you also have the cultural narrative, which runs alongside—but often counter to—the medical narrative.”

Scientific advancement, even when generously funded and championed by leaders, is obliged to move at a methodical pace; there are observations to make, theories to test, and trials to run. In the meantime, more people suffer, and a populace desperate for answers will often concoct their own all too readily, Lee says.

“That’s where you get a lot of conspiracy theories that circulate on the Internet. That’s where you get ‘cures’ and ‘preventatives,’ that’s where you get rumors. And the humanities can do a really good job of looking at those narratives.”

Dangerous scenarios

One of the benefits of studying these stories, Lee says, is that “it allows you to take a step back from the swamp of narratives that are circulating and gives you a chance to look at them critically. A lot of them are harmless, but there are some that are very dangerous.”

Lee cites the advice recently circulated online that recommends rinsing or gargling with bleach to kill the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. “That’s deadly. You don’t do that. But those exact same cures and preventatives were circulating during the SARS outbreak in 2003, during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. If you know the stories, you can step back and say, ‘Wait, I’ve heard this bleach thing before.’”

Jon Lee’s book *An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease* is **available for free** (<https://upcolorado.com/about-us/news-features/item/3825-free-resources-for-for-understanding-cultural-responses-to-the-covid19-outbreak>) from the publisher for a limited time as a downloadable PDF.

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