There have been four pandemics over the last century, and many more over the course of the last millennium. Although not yet nearly as deadly or as infectious as past pandemics such as the Spanish Flu or the Bubonic Plague, the narrative behind the novel coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 was definitively unique in a number of ways. The relatively-recently introduced technological advancements permitting immediate inter-country global communication, as well as the capability to rapidly disseminate of information to the general public, forced the narrative behind the disease caused by the coronavirus, COVID-19, to resemble no other.

Distinguishing it immediately from other worldwide health crises, COVID-19’s inception was shrouded in mystery and corruption. Chinese ophthalmologist Ling Wenliang “posted in his medical school alumni group on the Chinese messaging app WeChat that seven patients from a local seafood market had been diagnosed with a SARS-like illness” (Xiong) and was shortly after “accused of rumor-mongering by the Wuhan police,” (Xiong) a tactic the Chinese government often elects to employ when dissenting views or revolutionary ideas are presented by the public. The significant effects of the political opposition against Dr. Wenliang are still tangible today, as many wonder if the current outbreak could have been mitigated or even prevented with full cooperation of the silencing body in China with organizations like the WHO and CDC. Ironically enough, the refusal to agree with healthcare professionals on epidemiological matters holds historical precedence in the Cholera outbreaks mid-19th century England. The late anesthesiologist-researcher John Snow was the first to expose the causative agent of the Cholera outbreak after years of ardent research and observation, but upon proposal of his ideas to the Medical Times and Gazette he saw rejection for no clear reason. The MTG issued the statement: “We must, however, again express the opinion to which we have, on former occasions, given utterance, that, while allowing all credit to this Physician for the patience, perseverance, and skill with which he has carried out his investigations, we are by no means prepared to adopt the hypothetical views which he has broached in relation to the cause of epidemic cholera” (“The John Snow Archive and Research Companion”). The failure to properly categorize Snow’s research as factual rather than hypothetical likely significantly augmented the spread and intensity of the subsequent Cholera outbreaks, as no plans for preventative measures or dissemination of information to the public were constructed at the time. Failure to act quickly and definitely at the precise inception of a novel pathogen has shown in the past and now again the present that the outcomes to the public can be extremely detrimental as diseases progress past the pivotal point of control at which they could have once been contained.

The next stage of any globally-reaching disease is the spread of relevant (and often non-relevant) information. In the age of globalization of communication and technology able to deliver information essentially immediately to all parts of the globe, the nearly endless amount of information posted on the internet and presented on television news channels must be carefully sifted through for validity – a skill that proves very difficult for the masses. Although difficult to discern who with influence should be trusted and who should be avoided, Democritus Junior attempts to rationalize his place of trust in “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” explaining that the religious elite of his time often preached fraudulent information regarding disease “to withdraw the hearts of religious men under the pretence of casting out of devils, practised by Father Edmunds, alias Weston, a Jesuit, and divers Romish priests, his wicked associates, with the several parties' names, confessions, examinations, which were pretended to be possessed. But these are ordinary tricks only to get opinion and money, mere impostures. Aesculapius of old, that counterfeit God, did as many famous cures” (Democritus 14). Here he implies that those educated in religion have no place in the field of medicine because they are simply not educated in the science of healing; they should not be trusted to heal the body of disease. He then directs his attention to who he believes should be trusted to study and cure diseases of the body and mind; Democritus writes “Next therefore to God in all our extremities we must seek to, and rely upon the Physician […] to whom he hath given knowledge” (Democritus 15). The comparison drawn here is that he who deserves the trust
of the people in any given field is equipped with knowledge of that field. Physicians and scientists should be trusted to disseminate information about health and disease, not simply just anyone in power who hold influence over the spread of information.

As news coverage of COVID-19 is continuously circulating on a global scale, huge amounts of misinformation is similarly tainting the pool of knowledge regarding the disease. President Trump of the United States has been at the forefront of spreading false information that he has claimed to be factual, similarly to the religious elite of Democritus’ time. In the same manner as the religious influencers of the past, President Trump spoke to the country: On February 27th, 2020 he preached “It’s going to disappear. One day it’s like a miracle – it will disappear” and on March 6th, 2020 said “Anybody that needs a test, gets a test. We—they’re there. They have the tests. And the tests are beautiful” (Paz). One of the most influential figures in the United States and even around the world has been spreading false information and instilling an illusion of hope and security in the minds and lives of millions since the very discovery of the novel coronavirus. The blatant problem that exists here is that those uneducated in the field of science, which constitutes billions of people around the world, have too little knowledge of the topic to critically analyze the fictitious claims being made. In “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” these false purveyors of epidemiological information are said to have always been around, “for there be many mountebanks, quacksalvers, empirics, in every street almost, and in every village, that take upon them this name, make this noble and profitable art to be evil spoken of and contemned, by reason of these base and illiterate artificers: but such a physician I speak of, as is approved, learned, skilful, honest” (Democritus 15). There has however been a wave of physicians and scientists around the world who have begun to spread factual evidence about the coronavirus in order to teach the masses of the real progression of the pandemic in hopes of prevent future detriment, in the way Democritus Junior championed: using true knowledge as the means of healing. With the adept perception that so many around the world are not equipped to analyze scientific literature about COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci from the CDC began a brilliant campaign to spread the truth to people from diverse backgrounds. Basketball star Stephen “Curry went on Instagram Live on Thursday to talk about the coronavirus with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Reaching nearly 50,000 concurrent viewers — including former President Barack Obama, pop star Justin Bieber, rapper Common and former teammates Andre Iguodala and Leandro Barbosa. More will likely watch the archived version” (Medina). This represents the first major attempt from healthcare professionals to spread factual information about the disease to those who might not otherwise listen, such as sports fans and younger children, all with the goal of encouraging viral-spread mitigation techniques. This appeal to the masses is certainly essential for slowing disease progression and is unique to the COVID-19 narrative due to the technology that was never before available.

As the narrative of 2020’s novel coronavirus evolves every day in a variety of locations around the world, new misinformation permeates the database of information on the virus and new figures emerge vying for the trust of the public, while others, sometimes quite literally, fade away.
Works Cited


