

The Professors Who Call 'Bullshit' on Covid-19 Misinformation | WIRED

By Tom Simonite

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A FEW YEARS ago, Jevin West told fellow University of Washington professor Carl Bergstrom that he was starting a new course on big data. “Oh yeah,” Bergstrom joked, “I’m starting a course called ‘Calling bullshit on big data.’”

The pair worked together to develop a course, [Calling Bullshit](#), broadening the scope to offer tips on how to detect and disarm spurious appeals to data and science in anything from TED talks to medical papers. The syllabus [went viral](#), and dozens of universities around the world now draw on the UW material. Bergstrom and West reoriented their careers around bullshit detection, wrote a [forthcoming book](#), and in December established a new Center for an Informed Public.

A month later, the novel [coronavirus](#) arrived. The professors quickly realized it would be their toughest assignment yet in forensic scatology. The pandemic has added Miracle-Gro to what Bergstrom and West’s course calls the “[natural ecology of bullshit](#).” Human nature and society—particularly online—offer psychological and monetary rewards for attracting attention, regardless of whether information is accurate. That the president of the United States has [repeatedly spread untruths](#) about the coronavirus and the government’s response aggravates the situation.

[...]

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