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ALI NOURI *06: I think the United States is really a leader in science expertise, in technical expertise. And yet, in spite of that, there was a disconnect getting the relevant, factual, evidence-based information to the policymakers to address a pandemic.

MARGARET KOVAL *83: Welcome to We Roar. This spring, with coronavirus disrupting all our lives, we're reaching out to Princetonians everywhere to hear how we're continuing our collective and personal missions, how we're staying together at a distance, and how so many of us are working to serve the wider world. In this episode, the president of the Federation of American Scientists and graduate alumnus from 2006 talks about speaking science to power.

ALI NOURI: My name is Ali Nouri. And I'm the president of the Federation of American Scientists. What happened during the early stages of this pandemic was that really a fog of war set in. There was a lot of confusion. People didn't really know what to make of this virus. There was a lot of misinformation and even disinformation circulating online, particularly on social media.

And so in this respect, this pandemic has been quite disturbing, both in the public health sense of the pandemic but also in what the World Health Organization calls an infodemic, which is just a massive amount of misinformation that's being produced.

For example, one of the biggest pieces of disinformation that's out there is this claim that Bill and Melinda Gates actually created this virus. And they essentially were behind, deliberately behind this pandemic.

Well, nothing could be further from truth. We know that these viruses have a natural origin. We know that 75% of emerging infectious diseases actually spill over from animal populations into human populations. And there's plenty of evidence to point to that as the origins of this current pandemic.

Another concern was claims over treatments for coronavirus. For example, there are, there's quite a bit of stories circulating around the internet on how eating garlic in massive quantities provides protection against the coronavirus. Well, garlic does have some health benefits. But protecting you against coronavirus is not one of them.

Another one of these issues to a lesser extent has been this claim that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine in particular is this be-all cure against coronavirus. [MUSIC] We're speculating here, and then what we really need is we need randomized trials. And we really should not be touting the benefits of these kinds of remedies, whether we're medical professionals or whether we're the president of the United States.

But again, early on during this crisis, it became pretty clear that the public was just not getting the accurate information that it deserved on this COVID-19 crisis. And so at that point, the Federation of American Scientists really decided to start fighting some of that disinformation. And what we did was we started looking at trends that we were

observing both online and on social media around COVID-19.

And as we were detecting either Twitter threads or Facebook campaigns around this information, we would essentially go back to the scientific literature. We would synthesize the science, look at the evidence. And we would debunk the myths that we were seeing online. And very quickly, we started getting a lot of inquiries from just individuals. And pretty soon, the number of requests became overwhelming.

And so I had a conversation with the director of the NYU GovLab, Professor Beth Novek, who is really an expert in crowd-sourcing solutions to problems like this one. And together, what we did, we established essentially a website, a platform. And it's called Ask a Scientist. And the URL for it is covid19.fas.org.

And this Ask a Science platform essentially is a website that's populated by facts around coronavirus. And so when the public enters a question, after that question comes to us, we engage a network of 600 volunteer scientists. And these are mostly graduate students across the country and including graduate students at Princeton University who essentially look at the question that the individual is asking.

They provide an answer. Then that answer goes through an editorial process and then gets emailed back to the individual. So it's really been a service to serve the public and to answer the public's questions with some objective, evidence-based answers.

When I was a graduate student, the norm typically for scientists was to — and for us graduate students — was really to work in the lab, work on our research project. And this idea of communicating to policymakers or communicating to the public wasn't really something that we were taught to do. And it wasn't something that we were necessarily encouraged to do. We weren't discouraged to do it. But there were no incentives really for us to do that sort of thing.

When I looked at graduate students today, especially graduate students through this volunteer network that's been helping us on this Ask a Scientist project, they're really a different kind of graduate student. They're much more engaged on these public matters.

They're very interested in figuring out ways how to educate their community, how to educate their member of Congress or their state senator. And really, I think the faculty members today can actually learn quite a bit from the examples that their own graduate students are setting. I think that's number one.

And number two, I think there is a real role for various departments and various universities to further incentivize this kind of outreach by the science community into the public sphere. I think it's, this outbreak has really shown the importance of doing that and how lack of doing that type of outreach can really have life and death consequences.

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I think the United States is really a leader in science expertise, in technical expertise. We have some of the best universities, some of the best research universities in the world. Princeton, of course, is one of them. We have some of the best researchers.

And yet, in spite of that, there was a disconnect getting the relevant, factual, evidence-based information to the policymakers, and not just getting it to the policymakers, but also forcibly getting it to the policymakers in a way that policymakers would be compelled to act on that information. Clearly, that was in part really why we did not move expeditiously and forcefully in the early days and even today as the situation demands.

So I think if there is any lesson that comes out of this episode for me, it's that evidence-based policy, science policy, science advice is extremely important. We have the expertise in this country. We just have to make sure that their voice is louder and that their voice is stronger.

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