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Hot Tip for the NYT on Vaccines: There are These Two Countries Called Russia and China



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I realize that it's hard for reporters at the country's leading newspaper to stay on top of the news, but this major piece (four reporters) on vaccinating the world should get a Pulitzer for ignorance. The topic of the piece is vaccinating the world, which should be number one on any serious person's list of priorities right now.

This is not just a humanitarian point, which should be an incredibly big deal by itself. The idea of millions of preventable deaths in the developing world, and hundreds of millions of avoidable infections, should be enough to get any reasonable person's attention.

But beyond the humanitarian issue, there is the simple common sense point that the more the virus spreads, the greater the likelihood that a vaccine resistant strain will develop. This possibility should have everyone terrified. Can anyone in their right mind want to see a whole new round of infections, deaths, and lockdowns, as we wait for a new vaccine to be developed, tested, produced, and then distributed in mass quantities?

I don't know what the risk of a vaccine resistant strain developing is, but it is clearly not zero. And, it is obviously greater the more the pandemic is allowed to spread unchecked. So the claim that we have a strong interest in vaccinating the world is not really debatable. But the place where this NYT piece goes seriously off the rails is that it completely ignores the vaccines developed by Russia and China. Both countries have developed vaccines that have been proven effective against the coronavirus. The test results from the Russian vaccine show it to be between the mRNA vaccines and the Astra Zeneca vaccines in effectiveness. There have been a range of test results reported from the Chinese vaccines (the manufacturers have not been very transparent), but there is substantial evidence that they are effective in slowing the spread and radically reducing hospitalizations and deaths.

There have already been hundreds of millions of doses of the Russian vaccine produced and China claims that it will be able to produce billions of doses of its vaccines this year. Anyone who is serious in talking about getting the world vaccinated must include the production of these vaccines in their calculations.

This brings up the second point this piece misses. If we want to get the world vaccinated, we need to open-source the technologies. This doesn't mean just having Pfizer and Moderna's engineers whispering into the ears of a select group of engineers to allow them to replicate their technology.

It means making the production technology fully open, so that engineers everywhere in the world can examine it, and most importantly, look for ways to improve it. We also want to do this with the production technology for inputs that are in short supply, and we want the manufacturers of Russia's and China's vaccines to do the same.

The logic here follows the idea that more minds working on a problem are better than fewer minds. Earlier this year, Pfizer reported that its engineers developed a way to cut its production time nearly in half. They also discovered that its vaccine did not have to be super-frozen at temperatures below minus 90 degrees Fahrenheit, it can instead be stored in a normal freezer for up to two weeks.

Unless we think that Pfizer's engineers are the only people in the world capable of improving its production process, it is likely that we will see further useful innovations if the technology were open to engineers all around the world. The same applies to the production technology of the other vaccines as well as inputs in short supply.

We should also want the technology for producing the Russian and Chinese vaccines open-sourced. I don't know if they would agree to this, but it is certainly worth trying.

Getting the world vaccinated is a huge task and it addresses the greatest immediate crisis facing the world. It would be good if the NYT could take off its Cold War blinders to address the issue in a serious way.

This first appeared on Dean Baker's [Beat the Press](#) blog.

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