

Reporting on Contagion

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In Memory Professor Gita Ramjee



Professor Gita Ramjee



“I strongly believe that my calling in life is to find methods that empower women to take control of their HIV prevention and reproductive health rights through informed choices.”

Journalism is part of the public health ecosystem

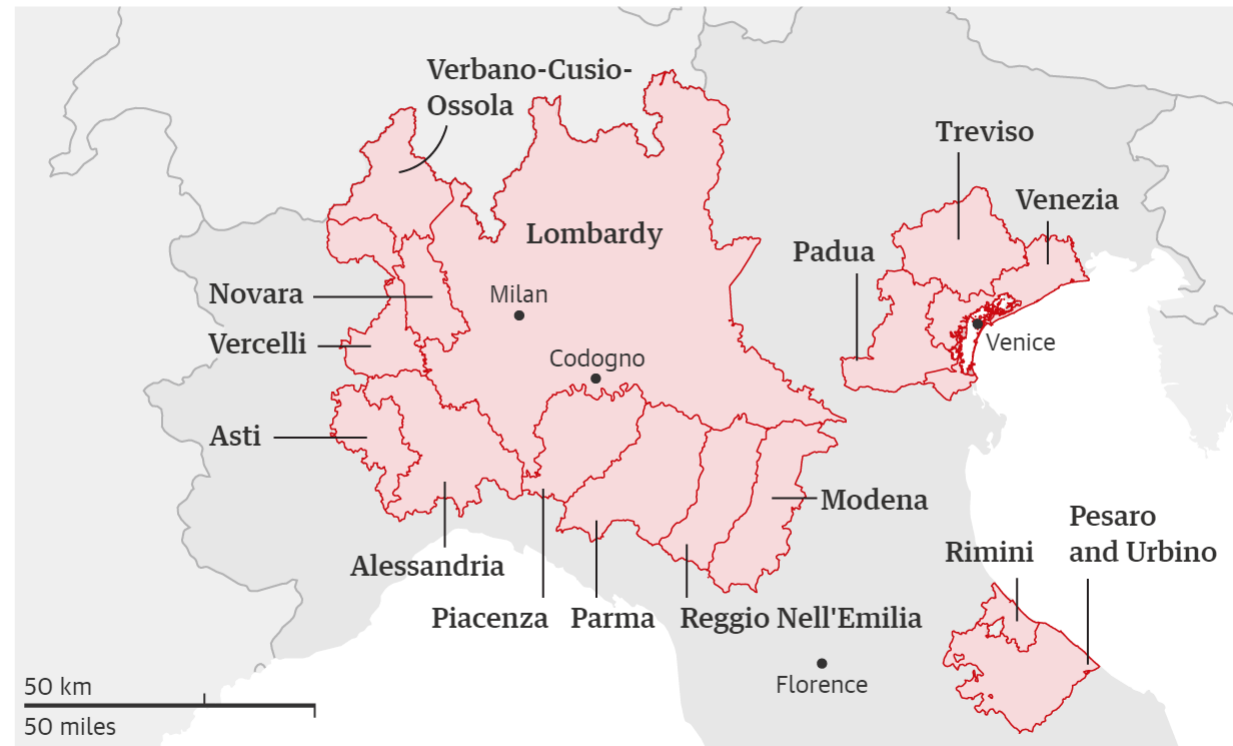
- Physician-journalist
- Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer
 - During my epidemic investigations, disease wasn't the only thing spreading
- Trained in journalism
 - Reported on epidemics
 - JSK Fellow at Stanford: studied how news organizations cover public health crises

Tough Decisions

- March 7, Corriere della Sera newspaper receives leaked memo
- Italian officials considering a quarantine of 16 million people
- Would you publish information about a potential quarantine?

Tough Decisions

16 million people are affected by the lockdown in northern Italy



Guardian graphic. Data correct at 6pm on 8 March

Journalism has Impact

- The story was published.

Coronavirus outbreak

Leaked coronavirus plan to quarantine 16m sparks chaos in Italy

Thousands tried to flee south after decree to confine people until 3 April was revealed

**Angela Giuffrida in Rome
and Lorenzo Tondo in
Palermo**

Sun 8 Mar 2020 11.54 EDT



3,012



Journalism has Impact

- The story was published. Thousands fled the region, flocking to train stations
- The next day, Italy reported its highest day-on-day rise in deaths from covid-19

Public Health Crises

- Disease spreads widely, and so does information
- Misinformation
- Disinformation
- False news can spread farther and faster than accurate information

Rumor no.	Content	
1	Ebola vaccine only works on white people	
2	Ebola patients have risen from the dead	
3	Ebola could be airborne in some cases	
4	Health officials might inject Ebola patients with lethal substances	
5	There will be no 2016 election and complete anarchy	
6	The US government owns a patent on the Ebola virus	
7	Terrorists will purposely contract Ebola and spread it around	
8	The new iPhone 6 is infecting people with Ebola	
9	There is a suspected Ebola case in Kansas City	
10	Ebola has been detected in hair extensions	

Source: Misinformation Propagation in the Age of Twitter (2014), Fang Jin et al



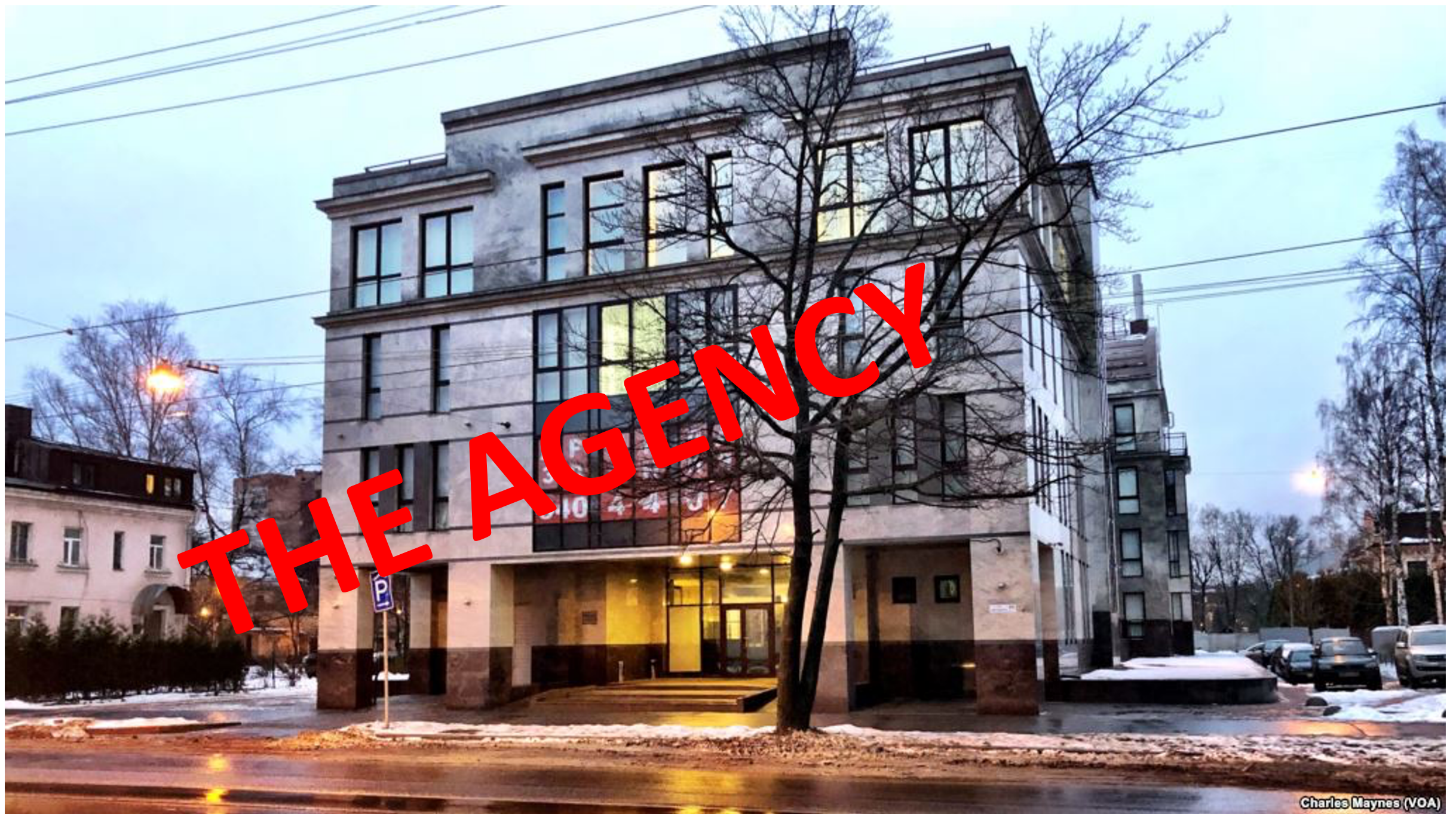
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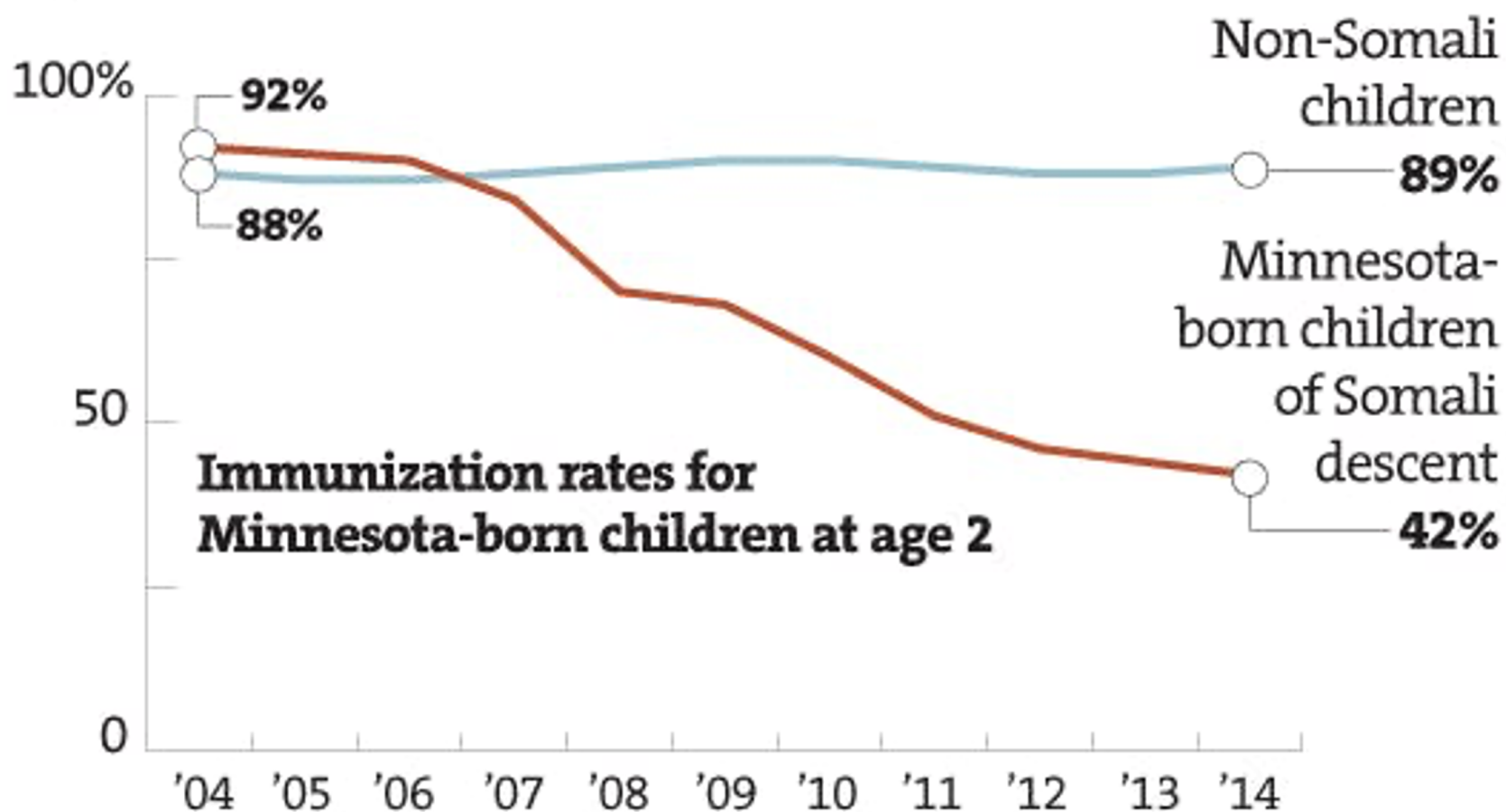
BREAKING: EBOLA OUTBREAK IN
ATLANTA! Estimated 145 people infected
so far since Doctors carrying the disease
were flown in from Africa.

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SOMALI VACCINATION RATES FALL

The Somali backlash against the measles vaccine is new; their kids' vaccination rates matched the general population until 2008, when fears of a link between the vaccine and autism sparked a reaction among Somali parents.



Source: Minn. Dept. of Health

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Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate

David A. Broniatowski PhD, Amelia M. Jamison MAA, MPH, SiHua Qi SM, Lulwah AlKulaib SM, Tao Chen PhD, Adrian Benton MS, Sandra C. Quinn ... ([show all authors](#))

[\[+\]](#) [Author affiliations, information, and correspondence details](#)

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A Free Press: The Immune System of a Democracy

- Journalists can counter false narratives
- Disseminate accurate information
- Hold the powerful to account

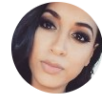
Journalists are not well-supported to cover public health crises



Stan
MED

Covering an epidemic is like covering conflict: Why science reporters should be trained like war correspondents

the Vice Provost
of Learning



Seema Yasmin [Follow](#)

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News Organizations Not Prepared to Cover Epidemics

- “Winging it”
- No pandemic plans
- Cuts to local news organizations
- Lack dedicated health and science reporters

Solutions

- Epidemic toolkit for reporters
- Inoculation theory
- Address disease epidemics *and* misinfodemics

Summary

- Information spreads in tandem with disease
- Misinformation spreads farther and faster than accurate info
- A free press is the immune system of a democracy
- Journalists not well-supported to cover epidemics
- Leaving the public vulnerable to disease and disinformation



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