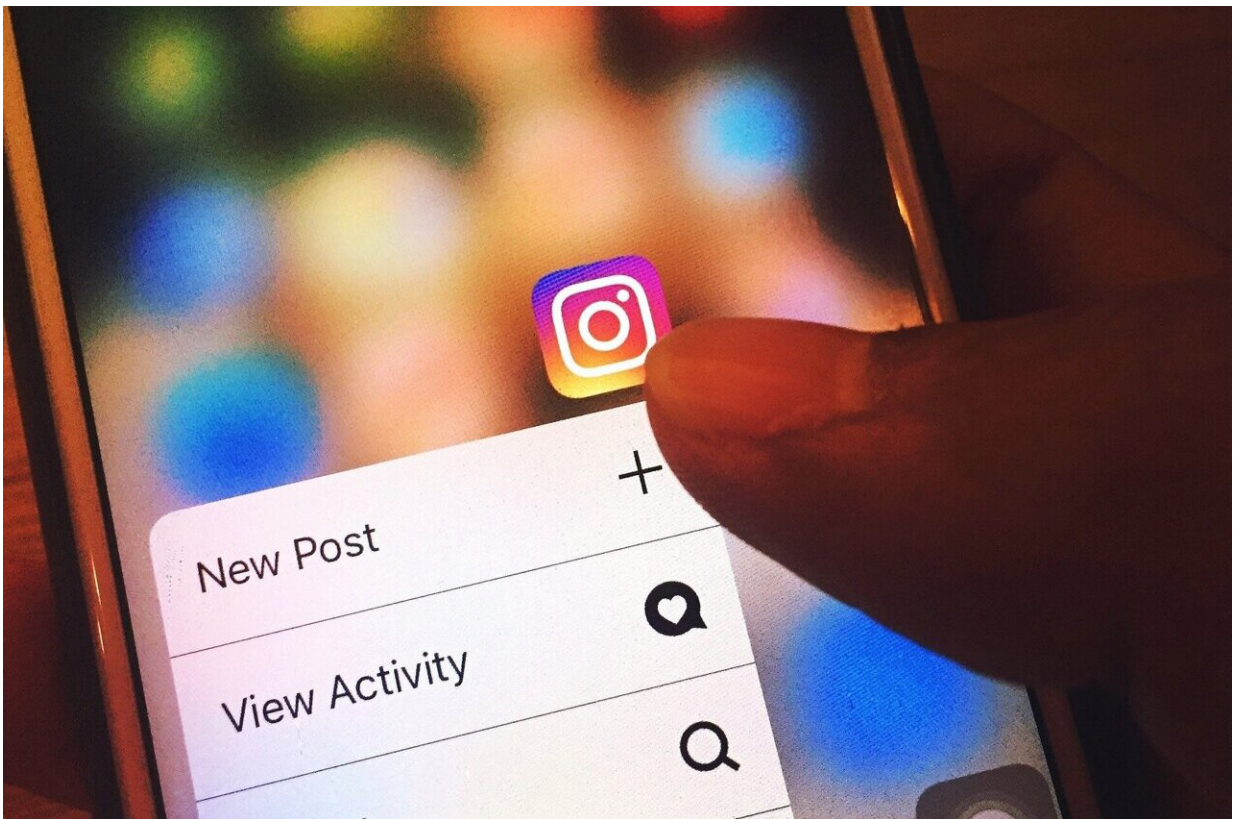


Q&A: How Instagram influencers profit from anti-vaccine misinformation

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

While Instagram might have a reputation for superficiality—a realm of exquisitely filtered images—it is [now eclipsing other social media](#) as a news source. The platform is increasingly filled with information, some of it pernicious and distributed via influencers.

Researchers at the University of Washington studied three prominent Instagram influencers spreading anti-vaccine misinformation as a route to profit. Each account occupies what lead author Rachel E. Moran, a UW senior research scientist at the Center for an Informed Public (CIP) and staff researcher in the Information School, calls a "slightly different corner of Instagram."

To protect the accounts' anonymity, the team gave each a pseudonym, substituting the account's actual name with a generic descriptor: the Wellness Homesteader (focused on things like homeschooling and farming), the Conspiratorial Fashionista (focused on fashion) and the Evangelical Mother (focused on Christianity). What unified the three U.S.-based accounts was that, amid their varied content, each dispersed overtly conspiratorial anti-vaccine messaging and used it to sell products and services they profited from either directly or indirectly.

The team recently published [its findings](#) in the *International Journal of Communication*.

UW News spoke with Moran about the paper, the particular methods of Instagram influencers, and the ways "misinformation is an immensely profitable endeavor."

What made you interested in researching this?

A lot of my research at the CIP has been in the vein of health-related

claims, particularly in the anti-vaccine movement. We've done a couple of research studies where we looked at how influencers on Instagram share information about vaccines, how they validate whether it's true or not. And we noticed this pattern of influencers directing people to buy things. It's something we see in our everyday lives all the time now. Everyone is selling something online. So we're interested in what happens when people use misinformation and leverage it to make profit.

Can you describe the patterns you found in the three accounts?

They were all female and kind of catering to female audiences, and they leverage gender in a really interesting way. They're kind of homing in on mothers' responsibilities so they can, for want of a better word, "guilt trip" people into buying specific products. They're eschewing traditional vaccines or medicine in favor of more "natural wellness" products, for example.

We also saw the use of multilevel marketing companies. During the pandemic, the Food and Drug Administration tried to put a handle on some of these wellness-related multilevel marketing companies that were leveraging the pandemic as a way of advertising their products.

The FDA came out and said, "You're not allowed to say that your product will cure COVID," for example. There's a bit of a loophole, where you can sell a multilevel marketing product if you're not employed by that company. Then, the policies aren't really enforceable. This allows individuals with these Instagram accounts to advertise the product and make money off of it by leveraging misinformation without any consequence.

In the paper, you discuss how the 'parasocial

relationships' that develop through these kinds of accounts can help the anti-vaccine messaging gain users' trust. Could you talk about that?

It's a through line to a lot of our work within misinformation spaces—the importance of these parasocial relationships, which are sort of one-sided relationships we build with the people that we follow online, celebrities and so on. But with Instagram, you get this look into someone's [everyday life](#) that sometimes can be very mundane, and you kind of build a rapport through that.

They're showing content that feels relatable. Maybe you've bought the leggings that they've advertised, and they work well for you. You build up that incremental trust, so that if they then share something that isn't within their wheelhouse—maybe they're not medical experts, but they're sharing medical advice—you may be less likely to question it.

And it's not quite as one-sided anymore. On Instagram, we can reply to an influencer's story, and they sometimes respond and provide a little semblance of a two-way relationship. This also means that they know that parasocial relationships are really important. It really shapes the content that we see and all kinds of influencers online. They know that their job is to build trust, and they can then use that trust to get people to buy things.

Could you give examples of ways you saw these influencers leveraging those sorts of relationships for profit?

Often they would share throughout the day using Instagram Stories, which is this ephemeral content that disappears after 24 hours. Maybe

it's just them getting up and getting their kids ready for school, or maybe their child is sick, and they say, "Okay, I'm not going to treat it with medicine, I'm going to treat it with this essential oil." And then they would direct their followers to the link in their bio, or to swipe up on the story. And it would take the followers to a multilevel marketing campaign, or maybe an Amazon affiliate link, where they can purchase the product.

Maybe it's very genuine, maybe they actually are using this product, and it's a safe product. But often, it would come with some sort of anti-vaccine rhetoric—this is what they're choosing instead of a vaccine, which contains these free radicals or metals or whatever they're claiming.

Instagram videos and images can convey a lot more information than more text-based social media. Just as much as that visual richness is a great tool for spreading good information, it's also a great tool for people who want to spread bad information. Because people often go to Instagram for entertainment, they're not necessarily thinking as critically about the information that they're seeing as they might be on a platform like X, where they anticipate encountering news. They aren't thinking: "I have to question everything." So they're probably more vulnerable to misinformation.

A lot of attention has been paid to misinformation as a social and political tool. Why is it important for people to also pay attention to it as an economic phenomenon?

I think it's important because it's an avenue that we've kind of forgotten about. In a way, I think we're all attuned to the fact that scams exist online and offline. But we think about the big stories: someone losing

their life savings. Yet we're all kind of being scammed on a daily basis by being told that some products work when they don't or, on a more dangerous level, being told to choose certain products over those backed by proven scientific medical knowledge. Looking at those economic mechanisms helps us consider why we're so attracted to misinformation.

In terms of intervention, we need to think about media literacy—how do we give people the skills to recognize when they're being scammed? And we need to think about what intervention looks like for these companies like Facebook and Instagram and Twitter. Or what it looks like for government.

A lot of these tools are quite benign, like the fact that you can direct people off-platform to do certain things—that's all well and good, and it affords a richer conversation online. But these are the mechanisms that get taken advantage of. So what are ways that we can potentially curtail this problem?

Anything else you want to add?

One thing that I think a lot about is that you now see things on Instagram that are fairly politically extreme, but feel quite normalized, because you're not always consuming the content in a really engaged way. So with these three influencers, the amount of content that is anti-vaccine is fairly small compared to the whole gamut of what they're sharing every day. But the nature of the content is extreme.

It's not hidden. It's not suggesting that you maybe should question getting a vaccine or talk to your doctor about getting a vaccine. It's often straight conspiracy theories about vaccines. It's quite jarring to see that a lot of this really hardcore anti-vaccine rhetoric comes from everyday people who get sucked in and make it their cause and share it alongside all of the other stuff that they do daily.

We need to be attentive and discerning when we're scrolling through TikTok or Instagram. We're consuming so much on so many different topics so quickly, that if we step back and reflect on some of the things we've seen, they can often be quite extreme and extremely misinformed.

More information: Rachel E. Moran et al, Vaccine Misinformation for Profit: Conspiratorial Wellness Influencers and the Monetization of Alternative Health. *International Journal of Communication* (2024) ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21128/4494

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