

Why anti-vaxxers often win out on Facebook

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Groups that spread vaccine misinformation on social media have more impact than government health agencies and other expert organizations on undecided people, a new study finds.

The spread of false information could have significant public health consequences if an effective COVID-19 vaccine is developed, the researchers noted.

For the study, investigators developed an innovative tool to map vaccine conversations among 100 million Facebook users during the height of the 2019 measles outbreak.

"There is a new world war online surrounding trust in health expertise and science, particularly with misinformation about COVID-19, but also distrust in big pharmaceuticals and governments," said lead author Neil Johnson, a professor who heads a new initiative in Complexity and Data Science at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. "Nobody knew what the field of battle looked like, though, so we set to find out."

While vaccine supporters outnumber users with anti-vaccine views on Facebook, the platform has nearly three times as many anti-vaccination communities, according to the study. That makes it far more likely that their views will reach people who are undecided.

And researchers found that pro-vaccine communities may be putting their focus in the wrong place. Those concentrating on larger anti-vaccination communities be missing chances to influence medium-sized communities that are growing under the radar, researchers suggested.

Another takeaway: Anti-vaccination groups offer lots of content about vaccines and other proven health treatments—such as safety concerns, conspiracy theories or individual choice, for example. These increase their chance of influencing Facebook users who are undecided. About 3 billion people use the [social media](#) platform.

Pro-vaccination communities typically focused their messages on the public health benefits of vaccination, according to the study published May 13 in the journal *Nature*.

"We thought we would see major public health entities and state-run health departments at the center of this online battle, but we found the opposite. They were fighting off to one side, in the wrong place," Johnson said in a university news release.

"Instead of playing whack-a-mole with a global network of communities that consume and produce [mis]information, public health agencies, social media platforms and governments can use a map like ours and an entirely new set of strategies to identify where the largest theaters of online activity are and engage and neutralize those communities peddling in misinformation so harmful to the public," he added.

More information: The online competition

between pro- and anti-vaccination views, *Nature* (2020). DOI: [10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1) , www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-2281-1

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