CONTAGIOUS RUMORS in the TIME of COVID

@noUPSIDE RENEE DIRESTA
1 Anti-vaccine narratives are very old, but the way they spread has changed
That change is co-occurring alongside social shifts, including a decline in trust.
3. These dynamics require a different type of response. We are not going back to the old way so it’s time to adapt.
ZERO-COST PUBLISHING

+ AUDIENCE CONSOLIDATION

+ ALGORITHMIC CURATION

+ PERSONALIZED TARGETING
NETWORK EFFECTS + ENGAGEMENT + VIRALITY & VELOCITY + GAMEABLE ALGORITHMS
THE POWER TO INFLUENCE OPINIONS INCREASINGLY LIES WITH THOSE WHO CAN MOST WIDELY AND EFFECTIVELY DISSEMINATE A MESSAGE.
INFLUENCE AND EXPERTISE HAVE BEEN DECOUPLED
COVID-19 VACCINE narratives
A CASE STUDY
The Virality Project

COVID vaccine dynamics
- Narratives
- Actors and Tactics
- Platform Policies

Potential future impacts
- Recommendations
COVID vaccine hesitancy narratives fell into 4 well-established categories:

- **SAFETY**
- **EFFICACY**
- **DISTRIBUTION**
- **CONSPIRACY**
SAFETY Narratives: The vaccine is dangerous

- First person videos of adverse reactions
- The vaccine causes death, paralysis, heart attack, stroke, or other significant side effects
- The vaccine alters your DNA
- The vaccine contains toxic substances like graphene oxide, or tromethamine
- The vaccine hasn’t been properly tested
- The VAERS database shows evidence of significant side effects

Source: Twitter, VP Analysis
EFFICACY Narratives: The vaccine doesn’t work

- Natural immunity is better than vaccine immunity
- If it worked, why do we need boosters?
- Places with high vaccination rates still have outbreaks
- Breakthrough cases prove the vaccine doesn’t work

Source: Telegram, VP Analysis
DISTRIBUTION Narratives: Why the vaccine exists

- Vaccines were developed purely for profit
- Vaccine mandates violate our medical freedom
- Vaccine passports compromise our privacy
- Mandates violate the Nuremberg Code

Source: Twitter, Instagram, ETSY, VP Analysis
Conspiracy Narratives: *Something else* is going on

- The vaccine represents the “mark of the beast”
- The vaccine is a bioweapon
- Bill Gates unleashed the virus to create the vaccine
- The vaccines contain microchips
- Vaccination sites are magnetic

Source: Twitter, Facebook, VP Analysis
From Lol to Legislature: The Magnet Challenge

May 9
Viral “Magnet Challenge” TikTok video

May 20
Amplification by the Highwire, Del Bigtree

Throughout May
Satirical copycats

June 8
Sherri Tenpenny before the Ohio Legislature

Source: TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Twitter, CNN, VP Analysis
Familiar Characters + New Additions

Longstanding Anti-vaccine Influencers

Wellness & Lifestyle Influencers

Pseudomedical Influencers

POST A COMMENT: CHD Calls on FDA to Immediately Take COVID Vaccines Off the Market

Children’s Health Defense and Millions Against Medical Mandates invite parents, healthcare practitioners, military members and others to comment on their petition calling on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to immediately remove COVID vaccines from the market.

MaXXXine NO!!!
A Cast of Recurring Characters

Conspiracy Theory Influencers

Right-leaning Political Influencers

Medical Freedom Influencers
### Platform Policy Evaluation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Remove” Policies</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>YouTube</th>
<th>TikTok</th>
<th>Pinterest</th>
<th>Nextdoor</th>
<th>Reddit</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Removes content that could lead to physical harm</td>
<td><img src="checkmark.png" alt="Green Check" /></td>
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<td>Removes content that runs counter to public health expert consensus</td>
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<td>Clear strike policy for removing recurring actors</td>
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Policy Nuances

- Maintaining a distinction between factually-inaccurate misinformation and personal stories (or “medical freedom” arguments) is challenging; need to avoid overbroad moderation, censorship

- Elevating authoritative sources is a challenge in times of incomplete consensus.
Rumors that fuel vaccine hesitancy remain a challenge

Source: Twitter, Instagram, VP Analysis
How can the medical community help?
Enabling responders to act: #ThisIsOurShot

1. Detection and monitoring
2. Counter-messaging: Preemptive + Reactive
3. Hero Recruitment + Training
4. Digitally Activated Heroes

Source: #ThisIsOurShot
I am urging all Americans to help slow the spread of health misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Health misinformation is a serious threat to public health. It can cause confusion, sow mistrust, harm people’s health, and undermine public health efforts. Limiting the spread of health misinformation is a moral and civic imperative that will require a whole-of-society effort.

Vivek Murthy, M.D., M.B.A.
Vice Admiral, U.S. Public Health Service
Surgeon General of the United States
ESTABLISHED ANTI-VACCINE NETWORKS AND BLENDED POLITICAL ADVOCACY EFFORTS ARE TURNING THEIR FOCUS TO ROUTINE CHILDHOOD VACCINES.