



REPORT 21/2021

Content Department

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**Covid-19 anti-vaccination content
on social platforms and networks.**

Conclusions.

Conclusions of the report

The report analyses Covid-19 anti-vaccination audiovisual content on social platforms and networks and is part of a systematic procedure to analyse online content that may constitute disinformation regarding Covid-19.

We analysed 40 videos from the social platforms and networks YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

All of the content analysed rejects vaccination as a means of combating Covid-19 on the grounds of messages that implicitly or explicitly question the safety and efficacy of vaccines or the need for vaccination.

A full 70% of the content analysed explicitly urges people not to be vaccinated against Covid-19.

These messages refer to vaccination both in general (“Please do not have the vaccine”, “Don't let them inoculate you!”, and “#NoTeVacunes” (#DontGetVaccinated), and with specific reference to some of the available vaccines (“Don't get the Moderna vaccine. [...] And don't get the Oxford University vaccine either”).

The most widespread message, found in 85% of Covid-19 anti-vaccination videos, refutes the safety of the vaccine.

This discourse is based on two facts: the rapid development of the vaccine since the pandemic started, and the use of innovative techniques (mRNA, or messenger RNA), concluding without any further argumentation that Covid-19 vaccines are unsafe:

“The public should know that a vaccine has never been approved in under a year in the history of vaccines. [...] anyone who sells that vaccine as safe or effective is selling snake oil.”

This narrative places special emphasis on the alleged lack of experience with mRNA technology, which is described as dangerous and at risk of producing genetic alterations:

“This new medicine [...] is a completely new technology and this technology is based on [...] genetic modification of the RNA chain. To give you an idea [...] DNA chains are what makes us who we are, what make us different to other species. Any modification, no matter how small, can cause major changes, so to speak. Genetic malformations, some in the short term, some in the long term.”

Of the videos analysed, 40% state that vaccines would cause sterility and nerve damage in those vaccinated.

With no scientific backing, some messages claim that Covid-19 vaccines would have serious side effects, mainly related to fertility:

“The price of having this vaccine is that 97% of men vaccinated will be made sterile, but also, when given to small children they will never develop secondary sex characteristics. They will turn into a kind of androgen, with no sexual desire [...]. It will make 45% of girls sterile. The nerve damage will affect part of your frontal cortex.”

Over a quarter (27.5%) of disinformation about the Covid-19 vaccine trivialise the severity of the virus and conclude that a vaccine is unnecessary.

These messages present Covid-19 as a condition that can be treated with vitamins or minimise the fatality rate, for instance by claiming that it cause death only in people with pre-existing conditions:

“Covid is the biggest farce in history that can be cured with vitamins. We need to look at our diets to detox.”

“Covid-19 does not kill, that is a lie. That is a big lie. Only people with pre-existing conditions have died.”

The alleged lack of severity of the virus leads to the conclusion that the risks of vaccination would outweigh the benefits:

“Why do we have to put this in our body for a virus that has such a low death rate as coronavirus? Look out, because we could be using a sledgehammer to crack a nut!”

The videos we found also allege that the vaccines are ineffective against coronavirus, for example arguing that immunity by catching the virus is better:

“How can we think that a vaccine is going to save us from this? Right now, we would have to look at each vaccine one by one to see which are valid and which are not...”

As a result, this message suggests we should do away with the safety measures that have been put in place:

“We should all be free on the streets now, catching this disease and immunising ourselves.”

A full 70% of the videos feature people who purport to be experts in science or medicine, in an attempt to lend credibility and authority to claims that are contrary to scientific consensus.

The anti-vax narratives seek credibility from audiences through people who present themselves as experts in various fields of health (60.7% in these videos claim to be professionals in medicine and 10.7% in nursing), which respectively account for 42.5% and 7.5% of the entire sample. In addition, the presenters seek to show their expertise by using scientific terminology.

Around one in five (17.9%) of those who claim to be medical professionals openly declare that they are not going to have the vaccine on the grounds of some of the most common anti-vax arguments on the internet:

“Normal vaccines are attenuated viruses and bacteria. This is not; this is a gene that they put inside you and it attaches to your DNA. I do this for a living, I'm a doctor of science, of viruses. [...] I'm not having it and I don't recommend anyone else to.”

The anti-vaccine narrative regarding Covid-19 reformulates and adapts claims from older anti-vaccine narratives.

The narrative in the videos analysed has features that are in common with previous anti-vaccine claims, such as alleging the vaccines contain toxic substances that cause illness, a lack of safety, downplaying the targeted disease, and featuring people who present themselves as medical professionals.

However, parts of the narrative are also adapted to the new coronavirus vaccines. For example, the lack of safety is purportedly due to how quickly they have been developed, and the use of a new technology is claimed to genetically modify the population.

Of the videos analysed, 72.5% include calls to spread Covid-19 anti-vaccine content, often using a multi-network strategy.

The call to spread the word is both through explicit messages (“Please share this video”) and hashtags, which makes content more visible (“#DontGetVaccinated”).

One of the characteristics of the sample analysed is that the same content is shared either simultaneously or successively on different networks.

This multi-network strategy applies both to the ease of creating and disseminating content online, and to the policies that platforms have put in place to tackle Covid-19 disinformation, with mixed results.