

# Pushing Back on the Digital Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation

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# PGP's Related Projects

## Misinformation Monitoring

## Collective Impact

## Digital Influencers

## Campaigns & Programs

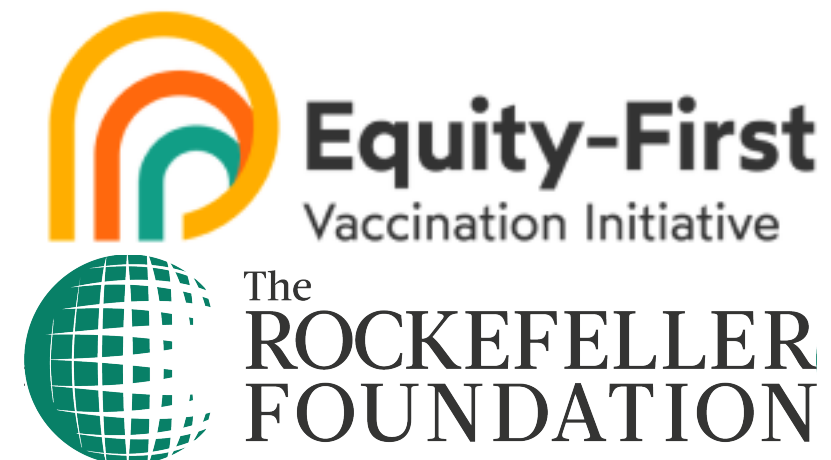


PROJECT VCTR



Vaccination Demand Observatory

Public Health Communications COLLABORATIVE



# Current Landscape

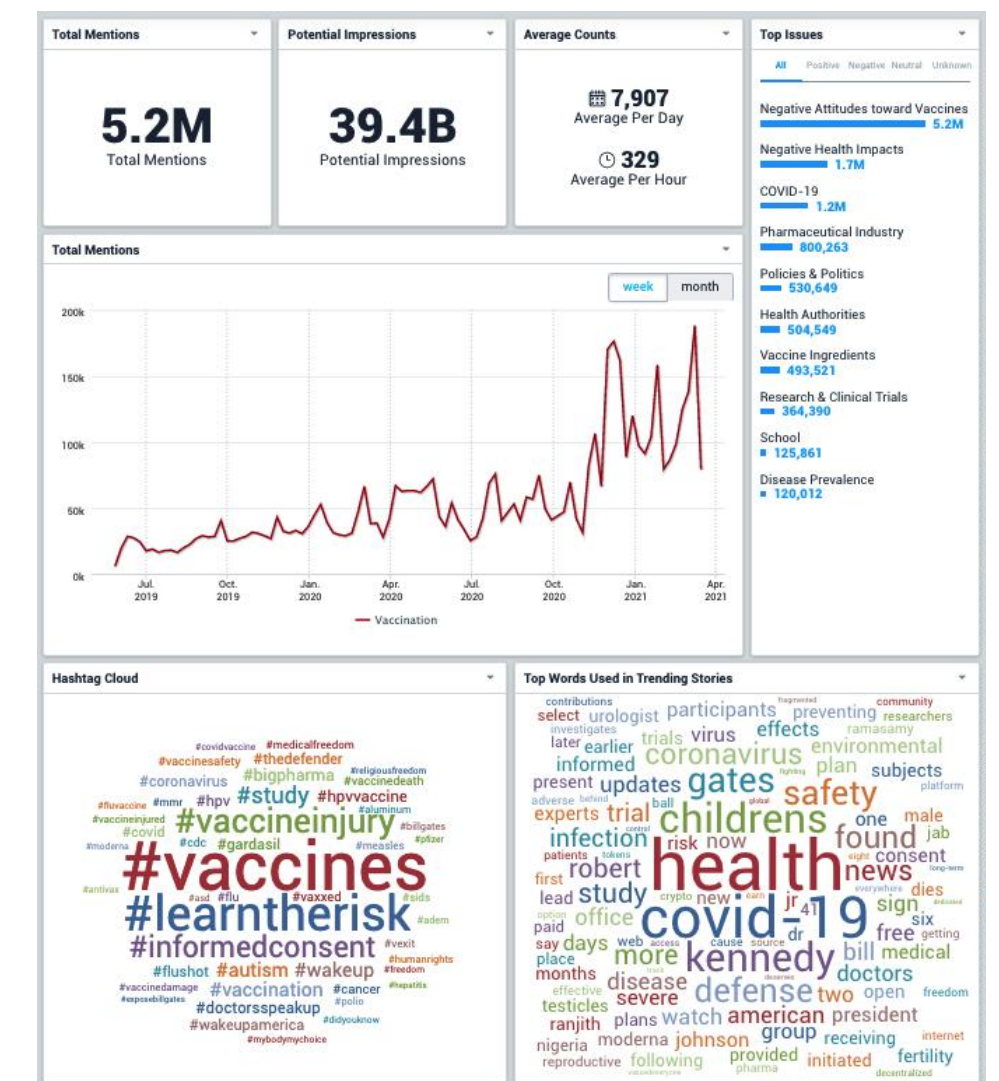
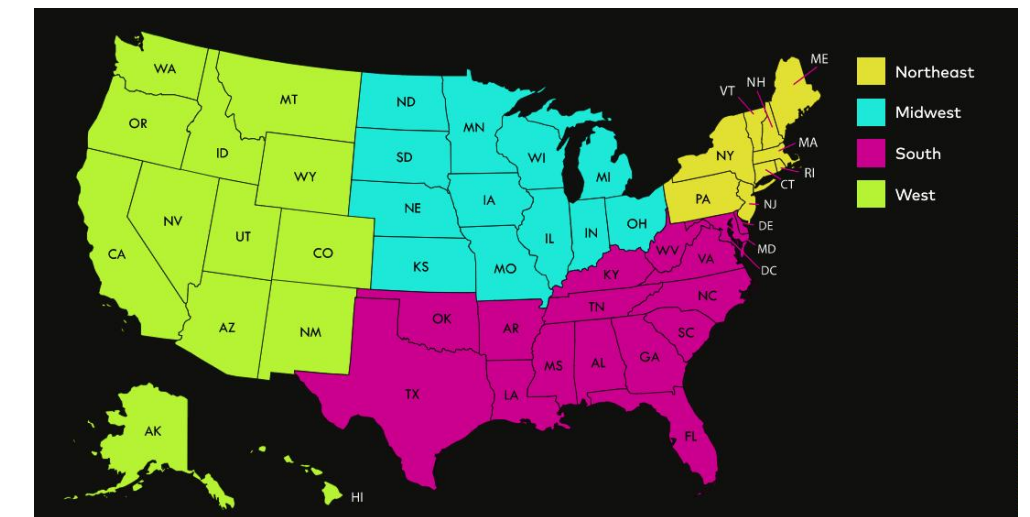
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# Project VCTR

Vaccine opposition is a threat to global health. Digital and social media are a primary source of misinformation and means of organizing vaccine opposition.

Since 2019, Project VCTR has tracked vaccine-related communication within all 50 US states, across 12+ media sources. Each week, PGP's public health analysts and journalists provide weekly insights on trending stories across the U.S, including conversation about legislation and advocacy.

Project VCTR is a free resource designed for health organizations, health educators, or members of the press who routinely report on public health. For more information, visit [www.ProjectVCTR.com](http://www.ProjectVCTR.com)

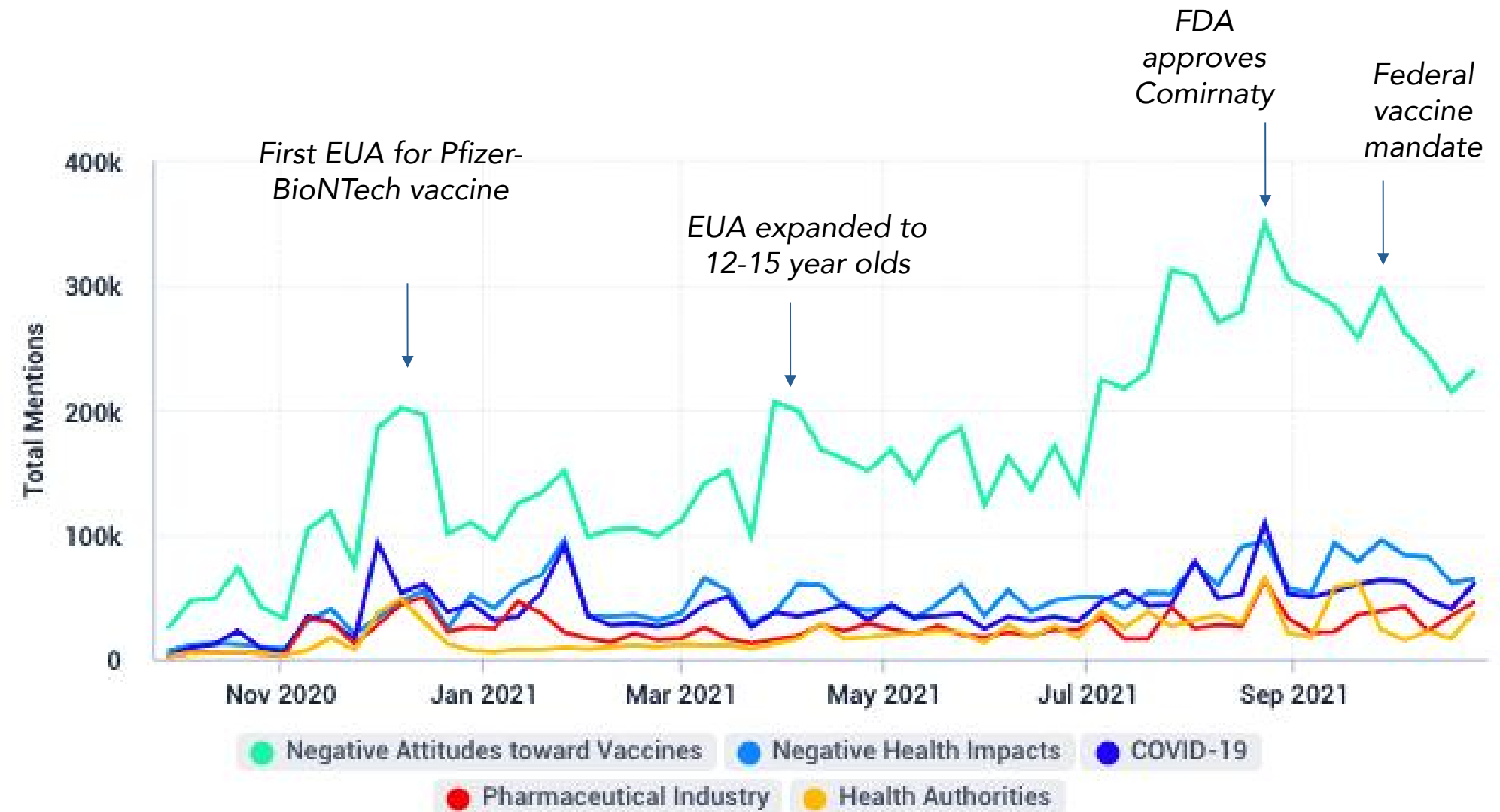


# Vaccine Conversations

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine opposition has increased.<sup>1</sup>

From Nov 2020 - Nov 2021, Project VCTR identified 8,894,320 conversations demonstrating vaccine opposition and mis/disinformation, an average of 24,368 per day.

From Nov 2019 - Nov 2020, Project VCTR identified an average of 5,368 per day.



1. Bonnevie, E., Gallegos-Jeffrey, A., Goldbarg, J., Byrd, B., & Smyser, J. (2021). Quantifying the rise of vaccine opposition on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of communication in healthcare*, 14(1), 12-19.

# Current Themes



PROJECT VCTR

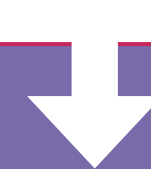
Trending vaccine related misinformation in November 2021 included:

## COVID-19 vaccines & children



Opposition to COVID-19 vaccines for younger children was a dominant theme of conversation, as vaccines for children began to be administered throughout the U.S. Trending articles encouraged parents to not vaccinate their young children.

## Changes in vaccine formulations



Circulating posts claimed that Pfizer changed its formulation for the children's COVID-19 vaccine, to include an ingredient to stabilize heart attack patients. The ingredient actually was added to all Pfizer vaccine formulations to allow for safer storage.

## Immunity & unapproved treatments



An unvaccinated NFL player's COVID-19 diagnosis set off a wave of misinformation about COVID-19 immunity and unapproved alternative treatments.

For more information on PGP's misinformation alerts and health communications guidance, visit [publichealthcollaborative.org/misinformation-alerts](https://publichealthcollaborative.org/misinformation-alerts)

# Misinfo's Impact



*"A reliable way to make people believe falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth."*

-Daniel Kahneman

*Source: Vaccine Misinformation Management Field Guide, 2020*

# Terms to Know

1

## INFORMATION

'Data with meaning': the basis of knowledge when it is resonant, actionable, trusted

2

## RUMOUR

Unverified information: stories/reports that spread rapidly through a group or population - can be true or false

3

## MISINFORMATION

Accidental falsehoods. Wrong or misleading information with the power to dilute, distract, distort

4

## DISINFORMATION

Deliberate, engineered falsehoods circulated with malicious intent or for the purpose of serving a personal, political or economic agenda



# Experts Have Emerged

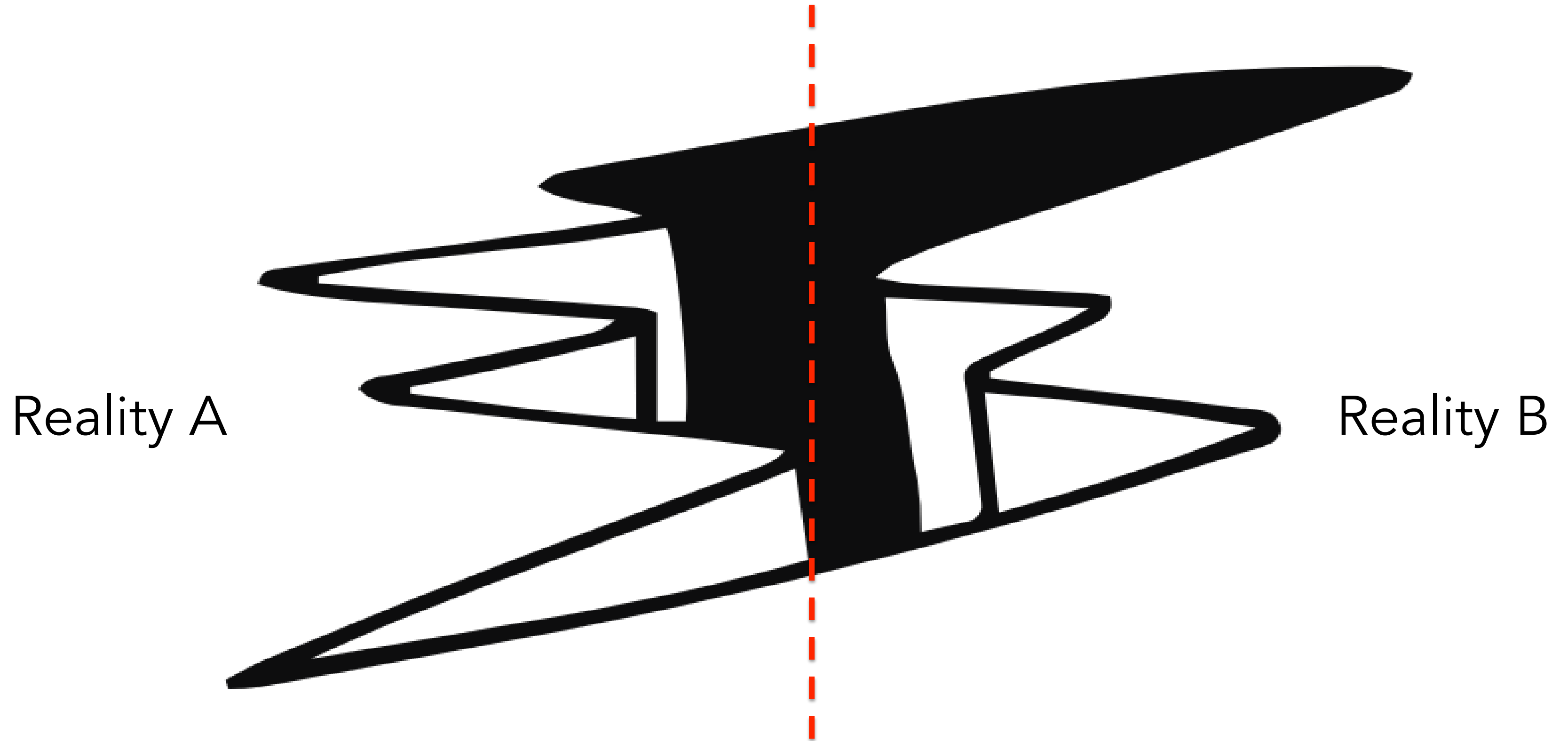
## Infodemiology:

“The science of managing infodemics” compares pathogens in epidemics to misinformation in health emergency response

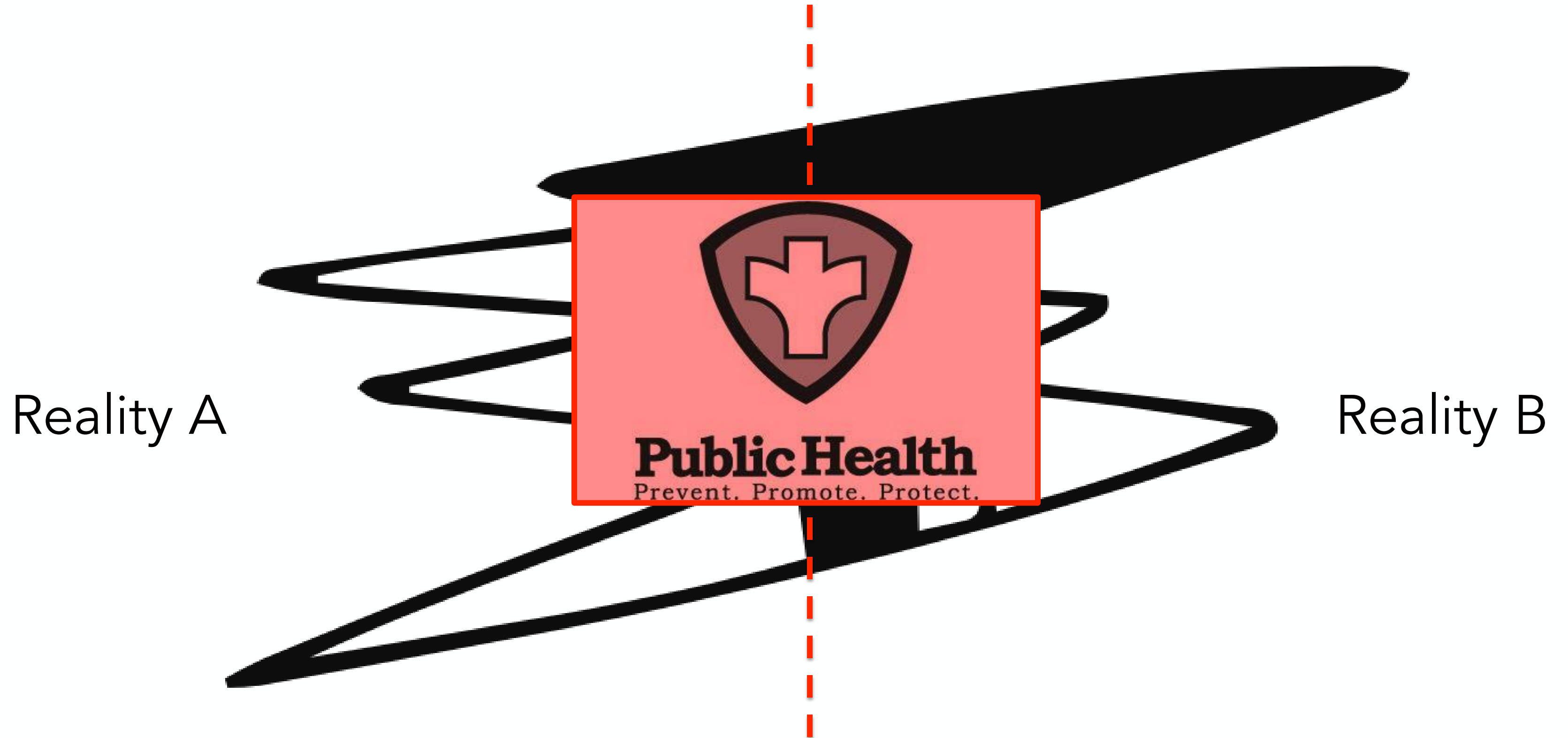
Source: WHO, 2020

Journalism	 <b>FIRST DRAFT</b>	
Academia	 <b>Misinformation Review</b>	
Public Health		
Data Tracking/ NGOs		

# Current State



# Current State



# Vaccine Opposition

## Common Motivators



1. Profit
2. Politics
3. Power

## Repeat Tactics



1. Cherry-pick data
2. Reference to fake experts
3. Race-baiting
4. Values-baiting

## Recurring Themes



1. Negative health impacts
2. Pharma industry
3. Politics/policies
4. Vaccine ingredients
5. Federal Health Authorities
6. Research/clinical trials
7. Religion
8. Vaccine safety
9. Disease prevalence
10. School
11. Family

## Types of Key Players



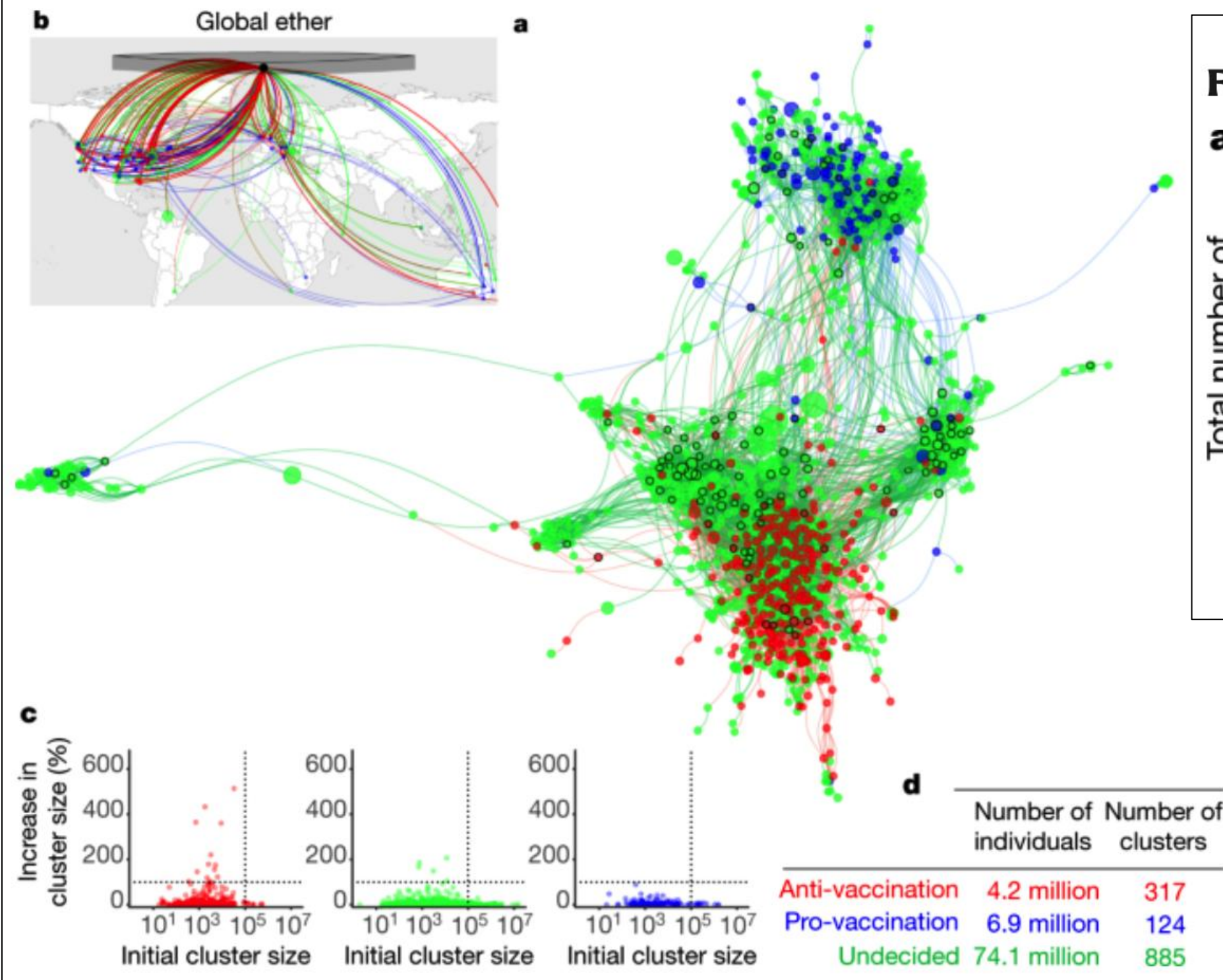
1. Traditional Anti-Vaxxers
2. Conspiracy theorists
3. Opportunists - White supremacists etc
4. Foreign actors
5. Our own politicians

# The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views.

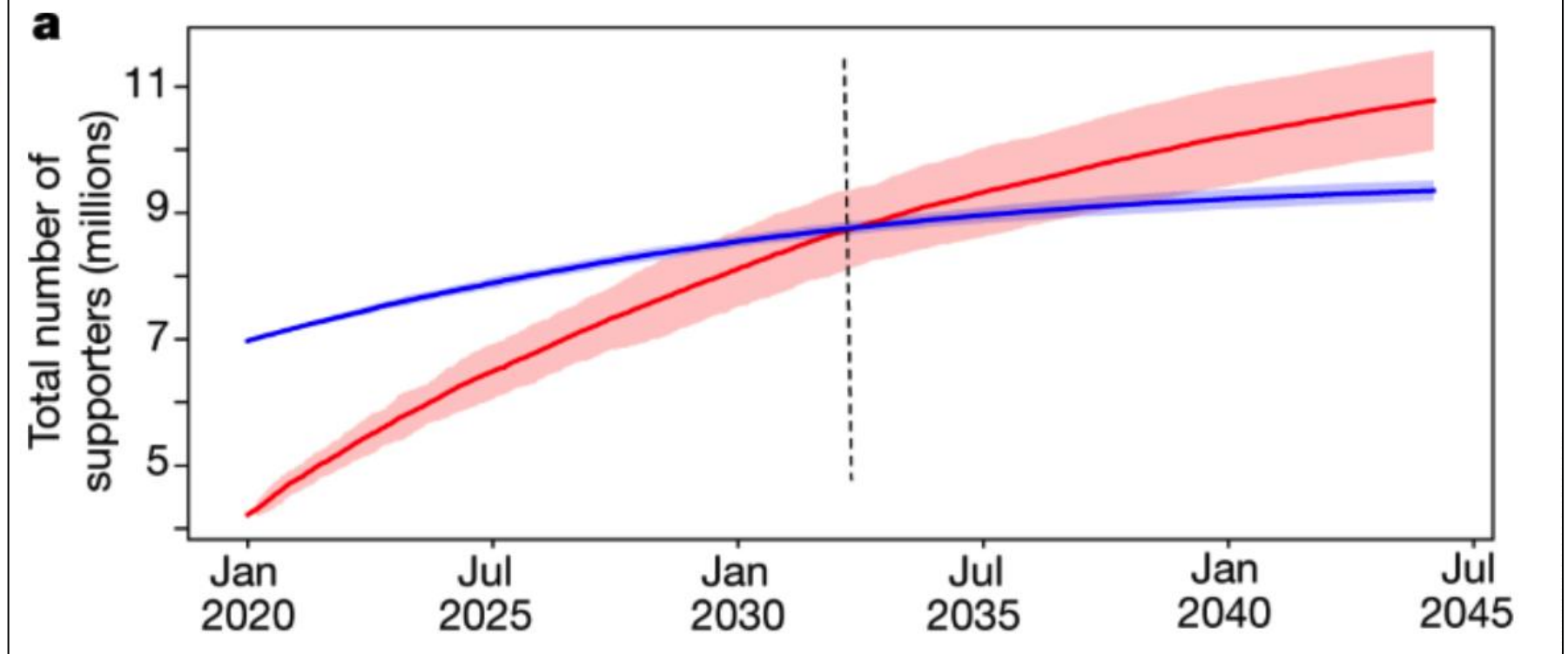
**nature**

May 13, 2020

**Fig. 1: Online ecology of vaccine views.**



**Fig. 3: Predictions and interventions.**

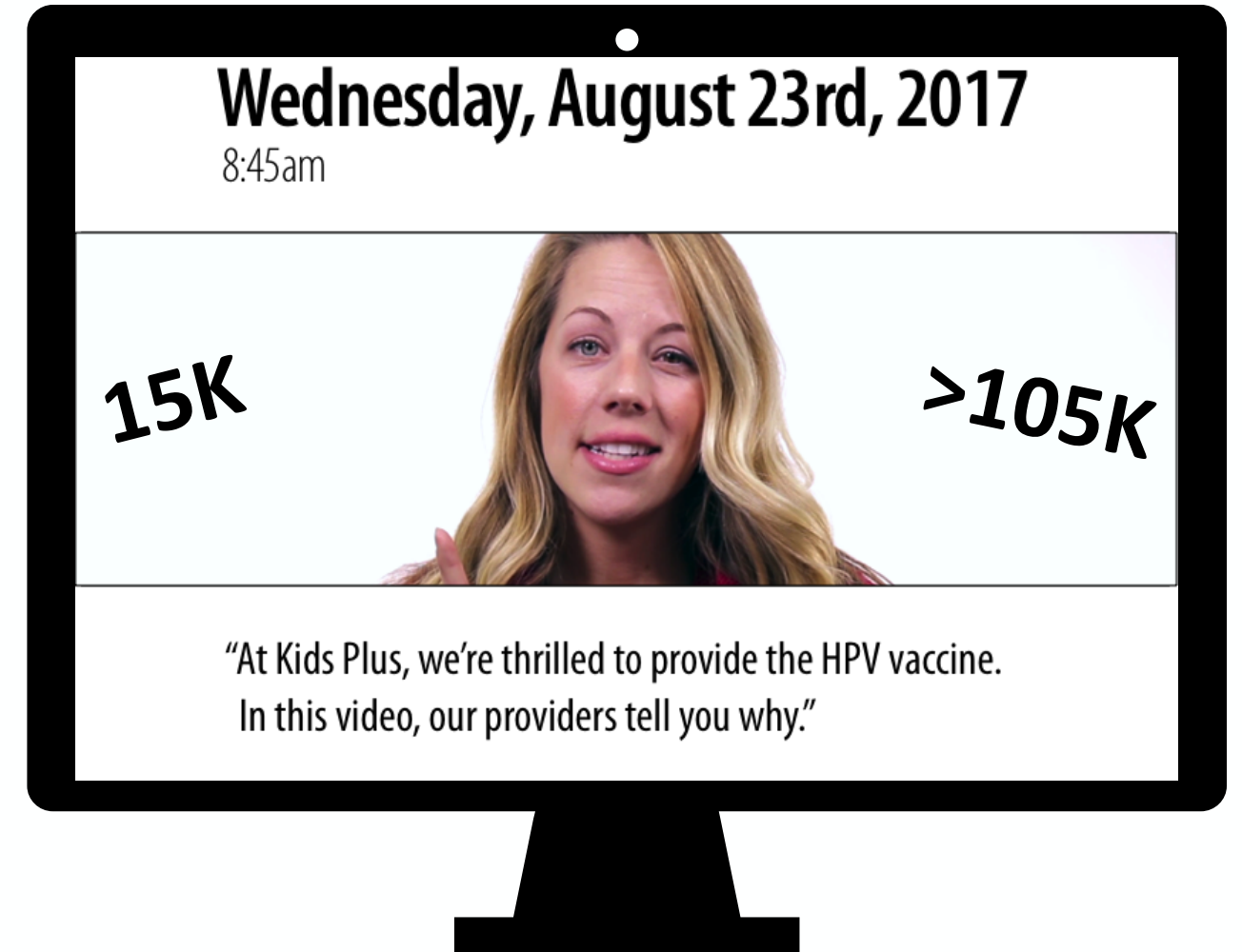


The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views.

Johnson, N.F., Velásquez, N., Restrepo, N.J. *et al.*  
*Nature* **582**, 230–233 (2020).

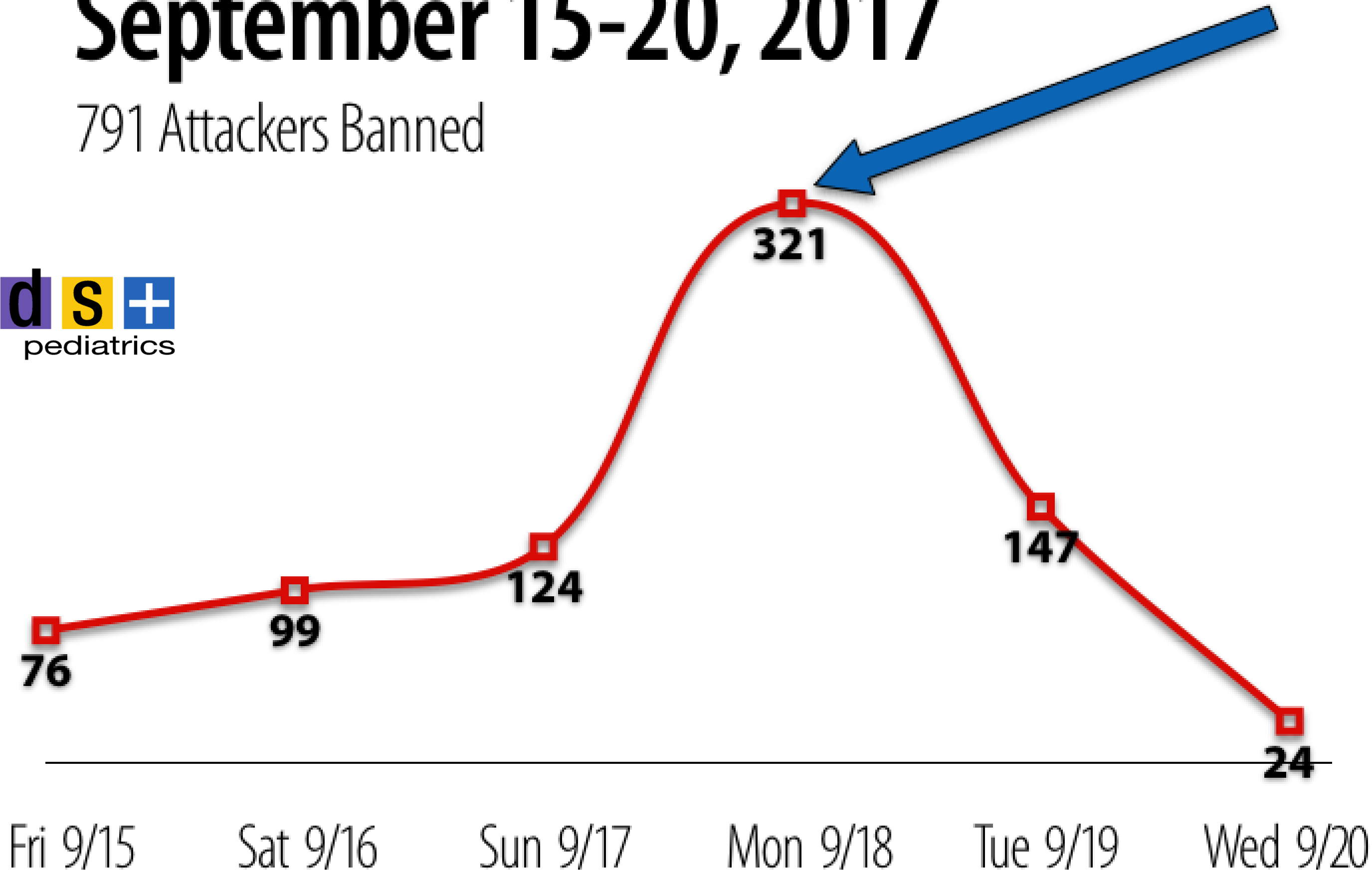
# Case Study: Shots Heard

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# September 15-20, 2017

791 Attackers Banned



344  
Days



# Anti-science Tactics

## Disinformation Campaigns

- ▲ Sensational
- ▲ Voluminous
- ▲ Amplified

## Attacking Resonating Vaccination Advocates

- ▲ Harass
- ▲ Threaten
- ▲ Harm



vs

Anti-Vaxx'ers

**Being victimized was terrible**

**We weren't going to be the last victim**

**Better resources were necessary – Immediately!**

**HCP's/Practices/Health Systems Being Silenced**

*So we launched a 4-pronged counter-response*

**Research, Toolkit, Cavalry & Awareness**

# Anti-Vaxx Attacks



## Tactic

## Goal

Rapid Waves	→	Overwhelm
Organized Swarms	→	Isolate
Threats	→	Weaken
Abusive Words	→	Frighten
Anonymity	→	Terrorize
<b>Reputation Harm</b>	→	<b>Damage</b>

Connect & Unite  
Reinforce & Strengthen  
Reassure & Empower  
Protect & Defend  
Repair & Recover  
Embolden & Galvanize

# People

BUSTING  
MYTHS  
ABOUT THE  
COVID-19  
VACCINE

Fact-Check  
“It’s important  
for health care  
providers to fight  
the anti-vaccine  
movement,” says  
Hermann (right,  
with Wolynn).

June 2021



# What You Can Do: When Attacked

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# PREPARE AND AVOID

- Have reinforcements ready
- Assess your online presence
- Prepare your workplace, office, or institution
- Monitor online account security
- Know your platform's settings
- "Google" yourself



# DEFEND

10 important actions to take immediately:



1. Remember: You will overcome this and you are not alone.



6. Screenshot and save all attacks, including negative comments, fraudulent reviews, and other such content.



2. [Notify us](#) to ask for support.



7. Report and block attackers and delete negative comments.



3. Don't engage with attackers.



8. Claim your businesses on [Yelp](#) and [Google](#).



4. Turn off social media notifications.



9. Inform your employer/employees of the situation.



5. Increase your privacy settings on the platform and pages of the attack.



10. Take breaks to take care of yourself and your mental health.

# MOVE FORWARD AFTER AN ATTACK





# TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF



# Recap

With the right preparation, defense, and cleanup, you can get through any online attack!



# What You Can Do: With Messaging

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# Inoculation Theory: the science of prebunking



Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S. Fake news game confers psychological resistance against online misinformation. *Palgrave Commun* 5, 65 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0279-9>

# 3 Main Response Scenarios

## Debunk

- Respond to false information where you find it
- Provide science, data, or true information

## Inoculate

(Prebunk)

- Equip people with counter-arguments to build resistance to future misinformation
- If people see truth before fiction, they're more likely to believe the truth

## Report

- Help hold social platforms accountable
- Help social platforms hold super spreader users accountable

# Debunk

## Example From Stronger

**MISINFO**

**MINUTE**

2/5/21 - 2/11/21

**SENIOR CITIZENS**

A man claiming to be a CNA is spreading misinformation about the vaccine's safety for senior citizens.

This is part of a larger misinfo trend that we're seeing all over the world.

**Senior citizens account for 80% of all COVID-19 deaths. No one has been killed by the vaccine.**

**ADVERSE REACTIONS**

Beware of a fake "CDC" document that compiles social media posts from people alleging to have experienced vaccine side effects. **The document is NOT from the CDC, and its claims are unverified.**

Adverse reactions to vaccines do happen. Severe reactions are rare, and are always investigated.

**To date, no one has died from taking the COVID-19 vaccine. Experts agree that the benefits of taking the vaccine far outweigh the risks for senior citizens.**

**IT'S NOT A FLU**

A debunked video has resurfaced, along with claims that COVID-19 is just a typical flu, and that the vaccine is "gene therapy."

Let us repeat: COVID-19 is not the flu. It is currently the #1 killer in America, with a death toll of over 460,000 people.

**The vaccine does not (and cannot) alter your DNA.**

# Debunk

## Online Example

When someone on your timeline has posted misinformation.

Response depends on your comfort in that situation. You can comment truth, message the person privately, report it to the platform, or even do nothing.

**Remember:** don't demonize the poster

Our whole house got the flu shot every year. Our whole house got the flu every year. Except hubby, we stopped getting the flu shot 13 years ago. Haven't had the flu since...hubby...still gets the flu ever other year or so. Like · Reply · 21w 1

Me nor my kids have ever had flu shot. Not starting this year. Like · Reply · 21w ↳ 3 Replies

I am a pediatric ICU physician. Many who land in my PICU did not get the flu shot. A few died. Those who survived regretted not getting the flu shot; parents too. True, u may still get the flu despite the shot, but at the very least the flu shot may reduce the severity, complications, time off (from school/work/etc), even give u that push to survive.

In addition, there are too many overlapping symptoms between flu & COVID-19 as well as the significant risk of contracting both at the same time or back-to-back (setting u up for a similar "2-hit" phenomenon).

There are those of u who do not trust vaccines for a variety of reasons. Linked to this post is a set of references from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (<https://www.chop.edu/.../vaccine-education.../vaccine-safety>), one of the premier national/international authorities in healthcare.

For the minority but significant number of people not wanting to get the flu shot for themselves and/or their children, all I ask is that u take these comments and the link to CHOP into strong consideration.

For those young adults and children who are anxious about the needle and pain, my recommendation on minimizing if not outright PREVENTING any pain:

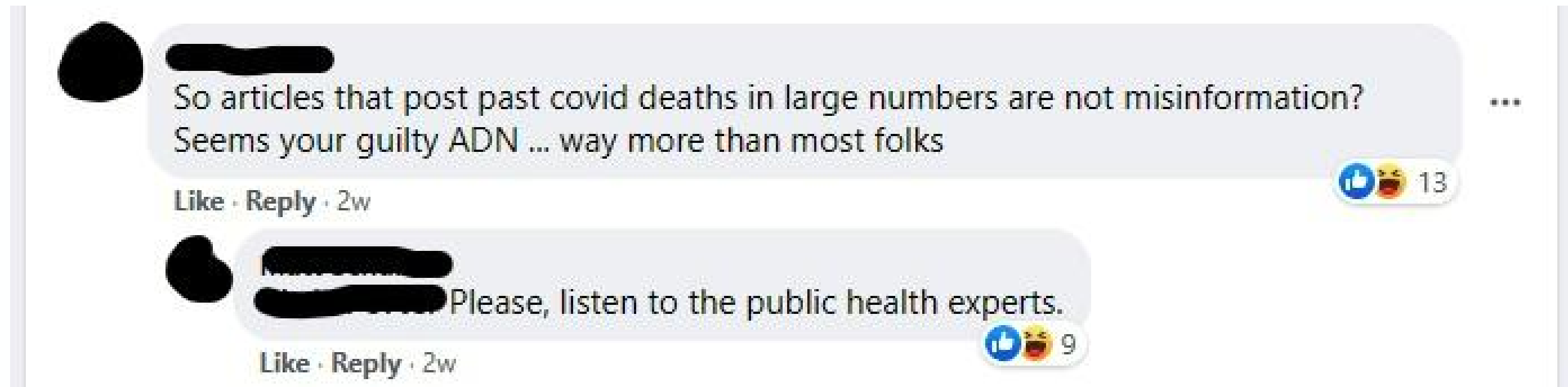
- let ur arm go completely 110% LIMP and HANGING down.
- completely RELAX not only ur arm but also any emotional tension. Do NOT tense up with the needle. u will feel pressure from the needle but not necessarily any pain.

I am being 100% honest with u, when I got my flu shot this year while using this technique, I literally almost didn't even feel the needle and was even surprised it was done. The more limp u let ur arm hang, the better. [Show ur parents how it's done.]

CHOPEDU  
Vaccine Safety | Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Like · Reply · 21w 1

# Debunk

## Observational Correction



Two targets for any corrective message:

1. The Sharer: May have a higher resistance to correction. Values and reputation are at stake.
2. Observers: Anyone who sees this post.

Research has consistently documented the ability of observational correction to reduce health misperceptions across platforms and topics, and including correction from a variety of sources



# Debunk

## Meme



  here's an actual list:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/research/publications/index.html>

**Vaccine Safety Publications |  
Research | Vaccine Safety | CDC**  
cdc.gov

Just now Like Reply

# Inoculate

## Inoculate (Prebunk) Misinformation Before False Beliefs Take Hold

**Goal:** Expose people to a weakened version of the misinfo and equip them with counter-arguments



### FACT

Lead with the fact

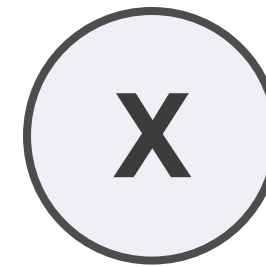
Make it clear, relevant, sticky



### WARNING

Misinformation alert!

Misleading tactics alert!



### FALLACY

Flag tactics used to deceive

Undermine trust in  
disinformation authors



### FACT

Provide alternative correct info

Must replace misinformation,  
cannot leave a vacuum

Make correct information stickier  
than misinformation

# Inoculate

## Stronger Example



# Inoculate

## Meme Example



# Report



- Social media platforms have committed to taking down misinformation about vaccines and COVID-19
- Reporting misinformation helps hold the platforms accountable, and helps the platforms hold publishers, outlets, and superspreaders accountable
- Each platform has a menu button next to each post with a 'report' option.  
[Here is a walkthrough of how to report on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.](#)
- Focus on posts sharing links to content from major vaccine opposition players

**Goal:** Get misinformation taken down before it spreads

# Report

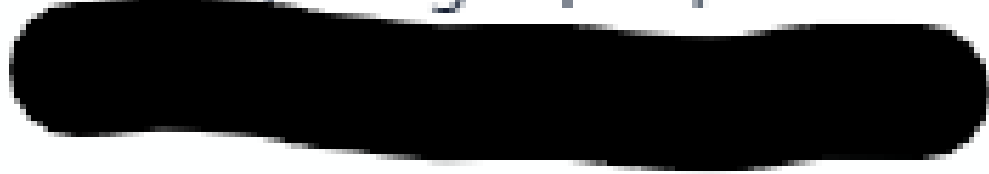
## Example - Twitter

- The image below contains misinformation. The link and username are covered.
- If you see something like this on social, report it



New analysis concluded Pfizer's COVID vaccine killed "about 40 times more (elderly) people than the disease itself would have killed" during a recent 5 week vaccination period, & 260 times more younger people than would have died from the virus.

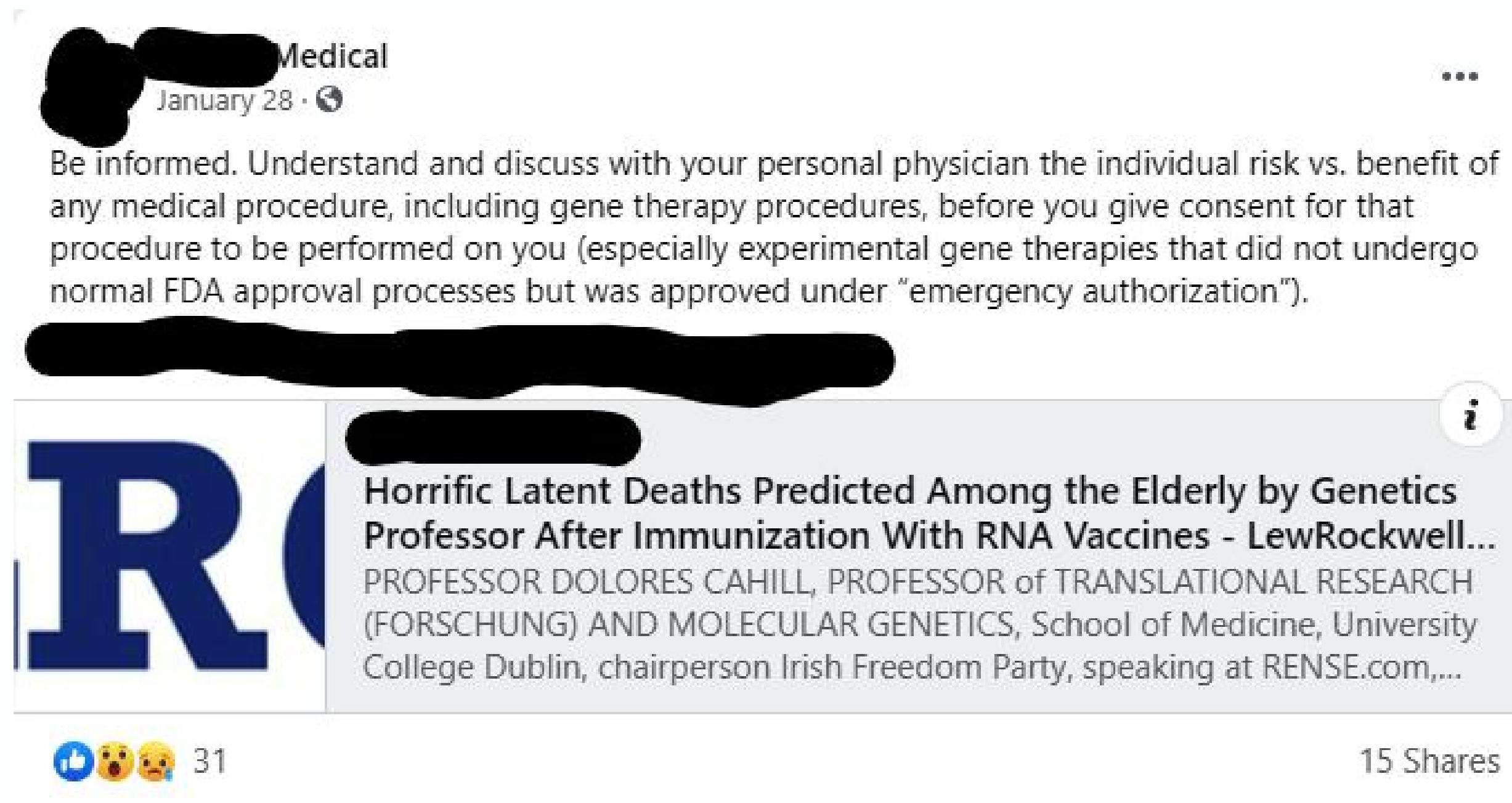
**773**  
Retweets



# Report

## Example - Facebook

- This profile tries to derive extra credibility by having “Medical” in their name



The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a profile named [redacted] Medical. The post is dated January 28 and is public. The text of the post reads: "Be informed. Understand and discuss with your personal physician the individual risk vs. benefit of any medical procedure, including gene therapy procedures, before you give consent for that procedure to be performed on you (especially experimental gene therapies that did not undergo normal FDA approval processes but was approved under “emergency authorization”)." Below the text is a large black redaction bar. The post includes a link to an article titled "Horroric Latent Deaths Predicted Among the Elderly by Genetics Professor After Immunization With RNA Vaccines - LewRockwell..." with a preview of the article text: "PROFESSOR DOLORES CAHILL, PROFESSOR of TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH (FORSCHUNG) AND MOLECULAR GENETICS, School of Medicine, University College Dublin, chairperson Irish Freedom Party, speaking at RENSE.com,..." The post has 31 reactions (likes, surprised face, sad face) and 15 shares.

[redacted] Medical  
January 28 · 🌐

Be informed. Understand and discuss with your personal physician the individual risk vs. benefit of any medical procedure, including gene therapy procedures, before you give consent for that procedure to be performed on you (especially experimental gene therapies that did not undergo normal FDA approval processes but was approved under “emergency authorization”).

[redacted]

**R** **Horroric Latent Deaths Predicted Among the Elderly by Genetics Professor After Immunization With RNA Vaccines - LewRockwell...**  
PROFESSOR DOLORES CAHILL, PROFESSOR of TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH (FORSCHUNG) AND MOLECULAR GENETICS, School of Medicine, University College Dublin, chairperson Irish Freedom Party, speaking at RENSE.com,...

👍 😮 😞 31 15 Shares

# **Do's and Don'ts**



# You May Need to Adjust...

## DO

- Be personal and empathetic
- Listen and validate the person's concerns
- Rely on science and data - and personal experience
- Account for the varying experiences of people in different demographic groups
  - Many communities of color have valid historical reasons to be skeptical of the health system

## DON'T

- Get political
- Repeat misinformation
- Take it personally
- Vilify the sharer
- Rely on fear

# One more time...



## FACT

Lead with the fact

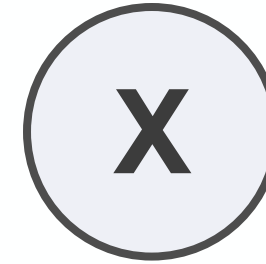
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# Resources

FACT CHECKING	FURTHER READING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ <a href="https://healthfeedback.org">Healthfeedback.org</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://fullfact.org">Fullfact.org</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://politifact.com/poynter/">Politifact (poynter)</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://snopes.com">Snopes</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://www.afp.com/fact-check">AFP Fact Check</a></li><li>◦ Mayo Clinic "<a href="#">Expert Answers</a>"</li><li>◦ Fact checks from <a href="#">USA Today</a>, <a href="#">Reuters</a>, <a href="#">AP</a>, etc.</li></ul></li><li>• Personal use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ <a href="#">Skeptical raptor</a></li><li>◦ <a href="#">First Draft Vaccine Insights Hub</a></li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">WHO: How infodemics affect the world &amp; how they can be managed</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Debunking Handbook</a> 2020 (climate change)</li><li>• <a href="#">Vaccine Misinformation Management Field Guide</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Changing the COVID Conversation Communications Cheat Sheet</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Facebook's misinformation policies</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Google Fact Check Explorer</a></li></ul>



# Thank you!

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