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FACEBOOK’S LATEST ATTEMPT TO ADDRESS VACCINE MISINFORMATION—AND WHY IT’S NOT ENOUGH

Health Affairs Blog (November 5, 2020)

Ana Santos Rutschman*

On October 13, Facebook announced the adoption of a series of measures to promote vaccine trust “while prohibiting ads with misinformation that could harm public health efforts.” In the post written by Kang-Xing Jin (head of health) and Rob Leathern (director of product management), the company explained that the new measures were designed with an emphasis on encouraging widespread use of this year’s flu vaccine, as well as in anticipation of potential COVID-19 vaccines becoming available in the near future.

The changes focus mainly on the establishment of a multiprong informational campaign about the seasonal flu vaccine, which includes directing users to vaccine-related content from public health organizations and providing sharable vaccination reminders. Moreover, Facebook announced that it was adopting a policy of rejecting ads explicitly “discouraging people from getting vaccinated.” Some vaccine-related ads, specifically those advocating “for or against legislation or government policies around vaccines—including a COVID-19 vaccine—are still allowed.” These types of ads have to be authorized by Facebook and display a label indicating who paid for the ad.

Facebook’s newest set of vaccine-specific measures constitutes an improvement over the status quo, especially by providing an educational campaign tailored to an ongoing seasonal event. However, it leaves the problem of the circulation of vaccine misinformation—the dissemination of inaccurate content—largely untouched and does virtually nothing to remove the well-established sources of vaccine misinformation within the Facebook network. While Facebook is not the only social media platform where levels of vaccine misinformation have escalated dramatically in recent years, it constitutes the most popular social media venue for the sharing and consumption of anti-vaccine and anti-vaccination content. This post explores the vaccine misinformation landscape against which Facebook announced its new policy and explains why this policy is insufficient as a meaningful deterrent to the spread of vaccine misinformation.

The Growing Magnitude Of Vaccine Misinformation On Facebook

Facebook has around three billion total users. A study published in *Nature* in May identified 100 million individuals who have expressed views on vaccines and vaccination—either positive or negative—while using Facebook. The universe of users active in this space encompassed individual accounts across the globe, sharing or consuming content in multiple languages and becoming deeply interconnected amongst themselves. While in absolute terms, there are fewer users sharing negative views toward vaccines than those sharing favorable views, clusters opposing or questioning the use of vaccines are more numerous. Clusters are defined as a Facebook page and its followers (also called fans). While pages expressing pro-vaccine views may draw

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significantly larger followings (for instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Gates Foundation currently have around 2.0 million and 1.5 million followers, respectively), pages on the opposite side of the debate (which may range from a few thousand to 40,000 followers) are much more effective in populating the online environment. There are more than twice as many anti-vaccine clusters than pro-vaccine clusters. In practice, this translates into substantially more opportunities for Facebook users to come across discrete pages conveying information likely to contain statements that do not reflect current standards in vaccinology and related scientific areas.

Critically, anti-vaccine clusters were shown to be much more successful at connecting with clusters of undecided individuals—which amount to 50 million users—than pro-vaccine clusters. Undecided users, in turn, were shown to be much more active than previously thought, searching for vaccine-related content and engaging with clusters expressing negative or questioning views at high rates. Against this backdrop, the *Nature* study also established that activity on Facebook propagating negative views of vaccines had become “robust and resilient” to current approaches to curb vaccine hesitancy. These dynamics make ongoing vaccine literacy campaigns less likely to succeed in permeating clusters of Facebook-based discourses that are opposing or questioning the use of vaccines.

Vaccine Misinformation on Facebook During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Health-related misinformation has grown exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online social media accounts propagating vaccine misinformation in particular have been especially active and have increased their already considerable following during the pandemic. A study conducted by the Center to Counter Digital Hate surveyed 409 accounts from mainstream social media—Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter—and found that the largest 147 accounts associated with anti-vaccination content have added close to eight million followers since 2019, bringing the overall total of followers of anti-vaccine content on major social media to close to 60 million.

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook alone had more than 850,000 users start following pages that share vaccine misinformation. This brings the total number of Facebook users who follow groups or pages conveying vaccine misinformation to around 30 million—roughly half of the followers of vaccine misinformation across the largest social media platforms.

Facebook is also the preferred medium for individuals or groups seeking to monetize anti-vaccine content through “marketing funnel” strategies. In the case of vaccines and vaccination, these strategies consist in the use of a Facebook page to both disseminate anti-vaccine content and provide the option of a newsletter sign-up. The newsletter further directs the reader to free anti-vaccine content in other media, such as in a video format, and from there to paid content or possibly paid goods, such as “alternative medicine” products (including dietary supplements for which institutions such as the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes for Health have repeatedly issued warnings).

Anti-vaccine content currently available on social media is also monetizable from the viewpoint of the social media companies themselves. In the case of Facebook, the study by the Center to

Counter Digital Hate applied Facebook’s Average Revenue Per Person rates to calculate that the company could earn as much as \$23.2 million in revenue derived from anti-vaccine content, a number that also includes revenue from Instagram, which is owned by Facebook.

Additional Steps Are Needed

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, several social media platforms had already started to take steps to address the increasing spread of vaccine misinformation. The trigger for many of these interventions was the multiple measles outbreaks that occurred in the United States in 2019 and were linked to dropping levels of vaccination. At the time, Facebook was among the social media platforms announcing efforts to curb vaccine misinformation by downgrading search results leading to anti-vaccine content and removing some targeting options for advertisers, such as “vaccine controversies.”

The increase of anti-vaccine users on Facebook during the pandemic has illustrated how little these measures have accomplished. One of the reasons that anti-vaccine pages on Facebook grow so quickly during a public health crisis lies in the idiosyncratic nature and the intersectionality of debates surrounding vaccines: Vaccine misinformation engages several conceptually different areas, including alternative medicine, public safety, and conspiracy theories. These are all areas that have seen considerable activity in the discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the considerable and quick expansion of anti-vaccine content within Facebook, the policy announced in mid-October is likely to make a very small dent in the root problem: the sources of vaccine-specific misinformation. A lot of this type of misinformation is sheltered in private Facebook pages that are left untouched by the newly adopted policies. Additionally, the measures in question—educational campaigns, reinforcement of pro-vaccine messages, and rejection of certain types of ads—have been shown to be of limited persuasion on established social media users holding anti-vaccine views. While potentially valuable for users seeking or open to accurate information on vaccines, they are unlikely to move the needle for those espousing anti-vaccine views.

In the specific case of Facebook, as previously noted, anti-vaccine pages are much better at reaching and engaging with undecided users than pro-vaccine ones. Because they do not meaningfully eliminate the sources of misinformation, the measures announced by Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have the same fate as the ones rolled out in 2019: Anti-vaccine pages on Facebook grew significantly more—in some cases by more than 300 percent—than pro-vaccine pages during the measles outbreaks in the United States. The company has similarly failed to curtail the spread of vaccine misinformation on Instagram, which has been described as a “hotbed of vaccine misinformation.”

Other social media have taken steps that exceed Facebook’s current efforts. For instance, a few days after Facebook shared its most recent policy, YouTube announced that it would start removing videos conveying vaccine misinformation, building on an existing policy to delete misinformation related to COVID-19. Twitter has had a similar COVID-19 misinformation policy since March 2020. Pinterest eliminated misleading results for vaccine searches even before the pandemic and later redirected searches to content from credible public health organizations.

While it is important to recognize that these combined efforts have not been enough to counter the overall expansion of vaccine misinformation on mainstream social media, a simple exercise in comparativism points toward several more stringent avenues of self-regulation that Facebook has so far apparently declined to explore. The disproportionate role of Facebook in the circulation of online vaccine misinformation is worth further interrogation, if nothing else because the company is the most salient player in the architecture of online vaccine misinformation. Considering the quasi-global footprint of Facebook, maintaining the status quo is likely to further erode levels of vaccine trust in the United States and abroad. This erosion is especially troubling not just for emerging COVID-19 vaccines but for the future of vaccine strategies and public health. Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable infectious diseases were already resurgent before the pandemic, and the uptake of routine vaccines has fallen during COVID-19. Rethinking current approaches taken by social media companies that enable large-scale circulation of vaccine-specific misinformation is imperative.

Now that robust data on the magnitude and sources of vaccine misinformation in the online environment have begun to emerge, the health policy community can and should engage more intensively with technologists, lawmakers, advisory bodies, and activist groups outside the public health arena, where most debates on the regulation of social media have historically occurred. Emphasizing the public health dimension of certain types of misinformation—of which vaccine misinformation is paramount—can help to change the current regulatory tradition of defaulting to self-regulation and placing no burden on social media to remove known and well-established sources of vaccine misinformation.