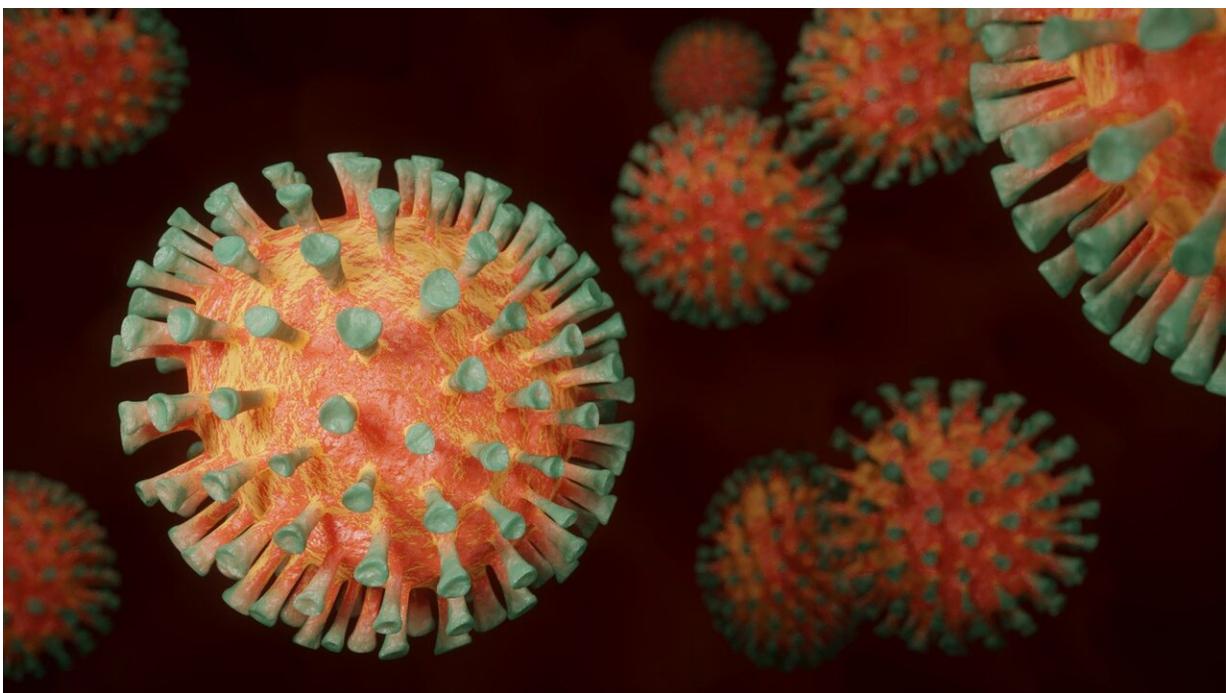


# Facebook winning war on COVID vaccine lies, hoaxes and conspiracies. Twitter and TikTok? Not so much, report says

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The nation's leading social media companies pledged to put warning labels on COVID-19 and COVID vaccines posts to stop the spread of falsehoods, conspiracy theories and hoaxes that are fueling vaccine hesitancy in the U.S..

With the exception of Facebook, nearly all of them are losing the war against COVID disinformation. That's the conclusion of a new report shared exclusively with U.S. TODAY.

As the pace of the nation's immunizations slows and public health agencies struggle to get shots in arms, Advance Democracy found that debunked claims sowing unfounded fears about the vaccines are circulating largely unfettered on Twitter and TikTok, including posts and videos that falsely allege the federal government is covering up deaths caused by the vaccines or that it is safer to get COVID-19 than to get the vaccine.

Twitter began labeling tweets that include misleading or false information about COVID-19 vaccines in March. It also started using a "strike system" to eventually remove accounts that repeatedly violate its rules.

Yet none of the top tweets on Twitter using popular anti-vaccine hashtags like #vaccineskill, #novaccine, #depopulation and #plandemic had labels as of May 3, according to Advance Democracy, a research organization that studies disinformation and extremism.

What's more, when U.S. TODAY searched these hashtags on Twitter, unlabeled posts were served up along with advertisements for major consumer brands including Cheetos, Volvo, CVS, even Star Wars.

"Making certain that reliable, authoritative health information is easily accessible on Twitter has been a priority long before we were in the midst of a global pandemic," Twitter told U.S. TODAY. "Since the beginning of COVID-19, we've expanded and increased our investment in those efforts."

Twitter says it does not take action on every piece of misinformation. In

order to be removed, a tweet must make a claim of fact, be demonstrably false or misleading based on authoritative sources and be likely to imperil public safety or cause serious harm.

"We prioritize the removal of content when it has a clear call to action that could potentially cause real-world harm, label Tweets that may contain misleading information, and take escalated enforcement action on repeat violators of this policy," the company said in a statement.

After coming under fire for its slow response to COVID-19 misinformation, Facebook has made significant progress in labeling COVID-19 posts, according to Daniel Jones, president of Advance Democracy.

In recent months, Facebook has moved more aggressively to combat misinformation. The social media company said in March that it would add labels to posts about vaccines.

As of May 3, all of the top 10 posts discussing COVID-19 vaccines that used the #vaccineskill hashtag were labeled, compared to only two of the top 10 on March 28, Advance Democracy found.

Six of the top 10 COVID vaccine posts using the hashtag #depopulation were labeled—the same rate as on March 28 when Facebook labeled six of the top 10 posts.

Facebook told U.S. TODAY it has removed more than 16 million pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram for violating its COVID and vaccine policies since the beginning of the pandemic.

"Promises to address public health misinformation online are only consequential if there is action and follow through. While Facebook has improved significantly, Twitter is still failing to provide a warning or

informational label on certain posts, including posts promoting the hashtag, #vaccineskill," Jones told U.S. TODAY.

False claims about vaccines have circulated on social media platforms for years, giving rise to a powerful anti-vaxxer movement with deep roots and a long reach.

A growing backlash against the vaccine has spread beyond fringe anti-vaccine communities into swaths of mainstream America whose faith in science and government has been badly shaken by the pandemic.

Researchers say COVID-19 vaccine theories peddled by anti-vaccination groups and hucksters looking to make a quick buck off people's fears with bogus health remedies has become a second pandemic.

"This pandemic is not over, and with the rate of vaccinations on the decline, directing users to reliable information on vaccines is more important than ever," Jones said.

On TikTok, anti-vaccine lies and conspiracies are still surging despite a company crackdown, Advance Democracy found.

Best known for its short-form viral videos, TikTok is popular with kids and teens and has at least 100 million users in the U.S.

TikTok says it prohibits content that's false or misleading, including misinformation related to COVID-19 and vaccines. It has also banned the hashtags #VaccinesKill and #plandemic.

Yet, as of May 3, TikTok had not consistently labeled anti-vaccination videos, the report said.

Nine of the top 10 videos related to COVID-19 vaccines using the

hashtag #NoVaccine did not have a label and collectively racked up 20.5 million views. Six of the top 10 videos using the #Depopulation hashtag had a total 11.7 million views on TikTok.

"We work diligently to identify and remove misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines," TikTok said in a statement. It says it also provides access to credible information from the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including on videos with relevant hashtags."

The Advance Democracy report did not look at vaccine-related content on Facebook-owned Instagram or Google's YouTube.

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