

Facebook overrun by COVID vaccine lies even as it denied fueling hesitancy, report says

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Anti-vaccine activists flooded Facebook to sow doubt about the COVID-19 vaccines, overwhelming efforts to stop them, even as the company told the world that it was not responsible for vaccine hesitancy, a new report from the Wall Street Journal found.

Of about 150,000 users posting in Facebook Groups disabled for spreading COVID misinformation, 5% produced half of the posts and 1,400 invited half of the new members, one document unearthed by the newspaper found.

The report paints a picture of a company outfoxed by a small but wily group of anti-[vaccine](#) activists that it called "big whales."

Facebook researchers in May compared the problem to QAnon and allegations of election fraud, "with a relatively few number of actors creating a large percentage of the content and growth."

The other problem: These same activists were targeting comments on Facebook posts, giving the appearance that vaccine skepticism and resistance were more widespread than they were. In one [random sampling](#), two thirds of comments were "anti-vax," a Facebook researcher found.

In a statement to USA TODAY, Facebook spokesperson Aaron Simpson said the documents unearthed in the report show the company's routine process in navigating tough challenges.

"Narrowly characterizing leaked documents doesn't accurately represent the problem, and it also ignores the work that's been underway to make comments on posts about COVID-19 and vaccines safer and more reliable," Simpson said.

Research released earlier this year by the Center for Countering Digital Hate and Anti-Vax Watch showed that a small number of anti-vaccine accounts were responsible for falsehoods about the safety of the vaccines that reached tens of millions on Facebook, Instagram, Google's YouTube and Twitter.

A dozen state attorneys general called on Facebook and Twitter to take more aggressive action against conspiracy theories, hoaxes and lies that undermine public confidence in the COVID-19 vaccines.

"This report today confirms the research of CCDH and Anti-Vax Watch, particularly that a small group of individuals are responsible for most of the anti-vaccine content on the platform, and demonstrates that Facebook officials were deliberately deceptive when they claimed this wasn't the case," CCDH CEO Imran Ahmed said in a statement.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg reportedly faced

a huge challenge in encouraging Facebook users to get vaccinated against COVID-19: his own social media platform.

According to The Wall Street Journal, which cites internal documents, researchers at Facebook warned comments on vaccine-related posts were filled with anti-vaccine messaging and misinformation aimed at undercutting efforts at pushing the vaccine.

Agencies such as Unicef and the World Health Organization expressed concerns about the flurry of anti-vaccine comments appearing on their posts encouraging users get vaccinated, said the report.

An internal memo showed Facebook researchers were worried all the negative comments could skew users' views on whether the vaccines were safe, the Journal reported.

In March, Zuckerberg wrote a post on a campaign to help 50 million people get vaccinated as rollout started to expand in the U.S. and other parts of the world.

They included tools for when and where to get vaccinated and a COVID Information Center where users can seek more information.

"The data shows the vaccines are safe and they work," wrote Zuckerberg. "They're our best hope for getting past this virus and getting back to normal life."

Friday's Journal report is the latest in a series showing how the social media giant is aware of how flaws in its platform can cause harm to users. A separate report earlier this week detailed how company-owned app Instagram can have a negative impact on the mental health and body image of teenage girls.

In February, Facebook warned of a broad crackdown against COVID misinformation, threatening to remove groups or pages from the platform for repeatedly spreading false information.

In July, U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., introduced a bill that would

create an exception under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act related to misinformation spread about a public health emergency. Section 230 provides protection for social media companies against content their users post.

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