

As anti-vax movement gets weirder—and dumber—Facebook announces crackdown

Enlarge / A single dose of MMR (for Measles, Mumps, and Rubella) at Kaiser Permanente East Medical offices in Denver.

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Facing scrutiny for allowing anti-vaccine lies and conspiracy theories to fester and spread on its pages, Facebook announced Thursday a set of steps it will take to rid its platform of misinformation—which has seemingly become even weirder and more idiotic recently.

The move follows a letter sent to Facebook from Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) last month, raising concerns that anti-vaccine information spread on the site could corrupt anxious parents' views of safe, life-saving immunizations. Schiff also questioned the popular social media site about accepting payments from anti-vaccine advertisements.

Facebook wasn't the only media giant questioned; Schiff sent a similar letter to Google, too, raising concerns about content on YouTube specifically. Still, Facebook has taken center stage on the issue.

In a Senate hearing last week exploring the rise of misinformation about vaccines (titled *Vaccines Save Lives*), a now-high-profile Ohio teenager made a point to single out the

site. Ethan Lindenberger, the 18-year-old who famously got himself vaccinated despite his mother being fiercely against vaccines, said his mother's false beliefs came from one place: Facebook. When a Senator asked Lindenberger where he got his information on vaccines, Lindenberger, chuckling, responded, "not Facebook."

"From CDC, World Health Organization, scientific journals... accredited sources," he added.

With the steps outlined Thursday, Facebook aims to inject some of those credible sources into its platform. Broadly, the social media giant will try to boost the profile of accurate, authoritative information on vaccines while thwarting the spread of pre-identified vaccine misinformation in news feeds and recommendations. It will also boot ads with that misinformation.

To identify just what is false and what is credible, Facebook said it will rely on the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to pick out what it referred to as "vaccine hoaxes."

"If these vaccine hoaxes appear on Facebook, we will take action against them," the company said. It offered an example of planned actions, saying that "if a group or Page admin posts this vaccine misinformation, we will exclude the entire group or Page from recommendations, reduce these groups and Pages' distribution in News Feed and Search, and reject ads with this misinformation."

Morphing myths

The success of the stated plan may hinge on whether the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can keep up with the ever-shifting conspiracy theories and bunkum related to vaccines. The noxious yet established falsehood that vaccines or vaccine components can

cause autism, for instance, has been widely debunked. But others are burgeoning and may be hard to head off. For instance, there's the myth that vaccines are cash cows for Big Pharma (they make relatively little revenue), which is secretly behind pro-vaccine messages (they're not; public health experts are).

More recently, a theme that has been volleyed by anti-vaccine advocates is that getting measles is somehow good for you and could prevent cancer. Both are completely wrong. Measles is a serious illness that can cause severe disabilities in children, including deafness and intellectual disabilities. It is also deadly. An ongoing measles outbreak in Madagascar, for instance, has killed nearly 1,000 children. Being dead isn't good for you.

The idea circulating that measles can prevent cancer may stem from a misunderstanding of studies that used bioengineered versions of the virus to deliver cancer therapies. But these are not the viruses that circulate during outbreaks. There is no credible evidence to suggest that previous measles infections will protect a person from cancers.

Last, in an even more idiotic turn, a Texas lawmaker argued that he was not worried about measles because, in the US, we have "antibiotics and that kind of stuff." Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections. Measles is caused by a virus. Moreover, there is no specific antiviral treatment for measles.

Due in large part to this kind of misinformation spreading, the US is now battling six separate measles outbreaks and has confirmed cases in 11 states so far this year. Amid an outbreak in Washington state, more than 800 potentially exposed children have been barred from schools.

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