How the fight over vaccines is fueled by web forums

In June 2017, Mark Zuckerberg rewrote Facebook's mission statement to better reflect its current priorities. In the future, he said, Facebook would have a strong focus on groups. Once you've reached most of the adult population of earth, it turns out that they would rather all not gather in the same virtual room. And so Facebook has set about promoting the creation of all manner of groups, and last week during a groups-focused event rolled out a suite of new features for administrators.

In Bloomberg today, Selina Wang takes a look at the popular group Subtle Asian Traits, and considers what its growth means for the groups project overall.

> *Fast-growing meme and community groups have been a bright spot for Facebook over the past several months amid a series of privacy scandals and the company's own projections that people are spending less time on its namesake site. Subtle Asian Traits, while exceptionally popular, has origins typical of the genre: A group of Asian-Australian high school students, mostly first-generation immigrants, started it to distract themselves from exams. Screenshots of text exchanges with strict parents, photos of favorite childhood foods, and images that illustrate the difficulty of learning an Asian language usually attract thousands of likes and comments. "We've grown up in this environment where we're the minority, and we don't really have a community," says group co-creator Anny Xie. "In this group, with a million other Asians, you're all having the same experience as a community."*

But as Wang notes, groups have been just as vulnerable to hate speech, misinformation, and other woes that plague the News Feed. In the *Guardian*, Ed Pilkington and Jessica Glenza explore that downside, focusing on how anti-vaccination ghouls take advantage of Facebook's viral distribution to spread propaganda:

> *Facebook is increasingly engaged in combatting misinformation that causes "real-world harm". Yet despite the health risks, anti-vaccination propaganda is currently not treated as a breach of its content rules.*
>
> *The Guardian asked Facebook to respond to the proliferation of vaccine misinformation on its platform, but the company did not reply.*

In a Twitter thread, misinformation researcher Renee DiResta blames the groups' rise on Facebook's recommendation algorithm. "The FB recommendation engine actively pushes the larger ones like Stop Mandatory Vaccination at new parents," she writes. "If you're in a mom group, you'll get antivax group recs." She went on: "This is where the platform has real power to change. Take them out of the [recommendation] engine. YouTube recognizes that proactively pushing conspiracy theories is harmful; Facebook has the same problem but still does it."

Until that happens, some children of anti-vaccination parents are taking matter into their own hands. Emily Moon reports that some nervous but resourceful young people are seeking advice … from Reddit forums.

> *With this misinformation still thriving elsewhere on the Internet, forums like r/legaladvice are a rare safe haven. Even some of the harsher feedback has helped; Charly, who posted when she was 17 years old and living in Canada, said she began to question her parents' stance after seeing jokes and rants against anti-vaxxers on Reddit. "I began to feel*

> *bad about my unvaccinated existence," she says. "It isn't the best reason, but it's truly what got to me." Like Charly's, many of the plaintive requests for advice contain a lot of shame. One unvaccinated user says they've tried not to tell anyone. Another writes in the comments: "You have nothing to be ashamed of for your parents not vaccinating you. It wasn't something you researched and decided against, you were just doing the whole 'being a kid' thing."*
>
> *According to the CDC, "being a kid" should involve getting for vaccinated for 16 diseases. But for this group of teenagers, it means a regular flu and hours spent researching risks that don't exist. Two years after her post, Charly is no longer a kid: Now 19, she says she was able to follow through on the recommendations in the comments and get vaccinated.*

Groups on the internet: the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems.

Democracy

Maria Ressa, Philippine Journalist Critical of Rodrigo Duterte, Is Arrested

Maria Ressa, a crusading pro-democracy journalist in the Philippines, has been arrested on trumped-up charges by the Duterte regime. It's tremendously worrying:

> *Ms. Ressa's arrest is the most dramatic sign yet of Mr. Duterte's crackdown on the news media in the Philippines. Mr. Duterte has not tried to hide his disdain for journalists, calling reporters "sons of bitches" and "spies" and even warning that they are "not exempted from assassination."*
>
> *As she left the building flanked by police officers, Ms. Ressa addressed reporters, telling them, "I will do the right thing."*

California Governor Proposes Digital Dividend Aimed at Big Tech

Here's an idea that I hope gets a thorough public airing: incoming California Governor Gavin Newsom is proposing a "digital dividend" that would pay consumers for the data that they give to tech companies:

> *"California's consumers should also be able to share in the wealth that is created from their data," Newsom said. "And so I've asked my team to develop a proposal for a new data dividend for Californians, because we recognize that data has value and it belongs to you."*
>
> *Newsom didn't describe what form the dividend might take, although he said "we can do something bold in this space." He also praised a tough California data-privacy law that will kick in next year.*

Facebook's Most Intriguing New Hires Aren't in Silicon Valley — They're in Washington

Patrick Howell O'Neill catalogs the ex-government workers who are being rapidly absorbed into Facebook's Washington office:

> *Several of Facebook's recent hires come straight out of Capitol Hill. Joshua Althouse, who previously served as outreach director for former House Speaker Paul Ryan, is now a policy manager at Facebook. Senator Gary Peters, the Democrat from Michigan and ranking member of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, saw staffer Sydney Paul leave to become a newly minted policy manager at Facebook as of January 2019. Chris Randle, previously the legislative director for Hakeem Jeffries, a Democratic congressman from New York, now works on government affairs at Facebook.*
>
> *Facebook also recently hired Melinda Claybaugh, a veteran of the Federal Trade Commision, just as that agency is*

> *considering record-setting finesagainst Facebook for failing to protect user privacy. Claybaugh is now a Privacy Policy Director in Facebook's Washington operation.*

When Facebook Spread Hate, One Cop Tried Something Unusual

Max Fisher and Amanda Taub report on the German cop who went door to door to quash a fake rumor that could have endangered the town's Muslim community:

> *Mr. Guske's team members do not arrest people who post inflammatory rumors, or fine them. Instead, they act more like public health workers, inoculating communities from viral misinformation and its consequences.*
>
> *Their efforts reflect rising concern among governments that Facebook is spinning up violence and extremism. They also reflect a lack of faith in the company to address the problem.*

India Targets Facebook `Evil' in Backlash Against U.S. Giants

Saritha Rai examines the growing pressure on Facebook to let the Indian government monitor WhatsApp, possibly by breaking its encryption:

> *Frustrated that the service has been used to incite violence and spread pornography, the government is pressing WhatsApp to allow more official oversight of online discussions, even if that means giving officials access to protected, or encrypted, messages. Facebook has refused, risking punitive measures or even the possibility of a shutdown in its biggest market.*
>
> *"For six months, we've been telling them to bring more accountability to their platform but what have they done?" said Gopalakrishnan S., a senior official in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology known as MEITY. "So*

pedophiles can go about on WhatsApp fully secure that they won't get caught. It is absolutely evil."

Indian Lawmakers Call for TikTok Ban Due to 'Cultural Degeneration'

TikTok appears to be triggering a moral panic in India, Jennings Brown reports:

M. Manikandan—the information technology minister of the Indian state Tamil Nadu—said on Monday the state government will recommend the app be banned in Tamil Nadu, according to the Economic Times. The statement was a response to state legislator Thamimun Ansari. The Hindustan Times reports that Ansari said young users get hooked on the app, which is pushing them down "the path of cultural degeneration." He referenced posts that are sexually explicit, and content that alters people's faces—seemingly a reference to deepfakes.

China's Tencent Invests in Reddit, Sparking Free Speech Protests

Julie Verhage reports that not everyone is excited about Reddit's big new Chinese investor:

In the following days, users posted links to Reddit depicting imagery banned by Chinese censors. They include video of the Tiananmen Square protestand pictures comparing President Xi Jinping to the portly Winnie the Pooh. Reddit users swarmed several of the submissions, pushing them to the list of most popular posts.

Pro-Trump Activists Are Boosting A Twitter App Used By Banned Personalities And It Appears To Have Already Stalled

Parler News is a new platform for people who have banned from Twitter, and if there is a more hilarious business idea than

that one I have yet to hear it:

> *The Parler app appears to mimic Twitter in its functionality and design. Users can post updates onto a scrolling feed, although with a 1,000 character limit compared to Twitter's limit of 240, they are free to be more long-winded. Other users can "vote" on posts to indicate approval or "echo" it, which is similar to a retweet.*

Eight Ways We're Preparing for Elections Across Africa

Facebook describes what it's doing in advance of elections in Africa:

> *In Nigeria, WhatsApp has launched its "Share Facts, Not Rumours" campaign to help increase awareness about hoaxes. Additionally, at the end of last year Facebook began a new Online Safety Programme for students in Nigerian secondary schools. The 12-week workshop is designed to help teenagers understand the fundamentals of online safety and digital literacy, covering topics such as managing an online presence; social media and sharing; public Wi-Fi safety; building healthy relationships online; understanding password security and privacy settings; and identifying misinformation online.*

Elsewhere

U.K. Doctors Call for Caution in Children's Use of Screens and Social Media

Britain's chief medical officers are warning young people not to spend too much time looking at their phones, Palko Karasz reports:

> *The University College London paper found that lengthy social media use could have a negative effect on sleep patterns,*

> *self-esteem and body image, and expose young people to online harassment.*
>
> *"We showed that these were linked to depressive symptoms," Yvonne Kelly, a professor of epidemiology and public health at University College who is an author of the study, said in a phone interview on Thursday.*

Instagram is investigating glitch that's causing massive follower loss

Massive follower loss … the three most terrifying words in the English language.

Scammers Are Filing Fake Trademarks to Steal High-Value Instagram Accounts

Joseph Cox reports on the latest method by which fraudsters are separating people from their Instagram accounts:

> *Scammers do this by creating fake companies and trademarks to convince Instagram they should be the legitimate owner of a username in question, with fraudsters using "trademarking," as the technique is known, to get ahold of sought-after, valuable handles, according to posts and evidence of the process in action obtained by Motherboard. The scammers can then keep these handles as digital mementos, brag about their acquisition, or resell them at a profit in a thriving underground community.*

America's most generous billionaires gave half as much to charity in 2018 as in the previous year

Mark Zuckerberg's personal giving fell from $2 billion in 2017 to $200 million last year, Teddy Schleifer reports.

Launches

Twitter is testing a pop-up mini profile inside of threads

Sure, why not.

Instagram is testing direct messages for the web

Finally! This is great news for people like me, who spend all day at a desktop computer.

A new dating app mashes up HQ Trivia with Tinder

Do you ever feel like dating is not complicated enough, and might benefit from being more of a live game show? Quiz Date Live is here for you, Ashley Carman reports:

> *A new app's creators think they know the key to dating success: a trivia-oriented game show where the questions revolve around a bachelorette. It's a unique idea, for sure, albeit one that I can't imagine having wide appeal. The game, called , comes from a company called East Meets East, which has raised $4 million in funding to get its iOS show off the ground. The team plans to monetize in a way similar to the mobile HQ game show by giving users the option to purchase extra lives. The game has two parts, and the second part has three rounds. Try to stick with me while I explain.*

Takes

How hard is it to have a conversation on Twitter? So hard even the CEO can't do it.

Kara Swisher invited Jack Dorsey to make a stop on his podcast tour with her, and he countered with an offer to tweet back and forth with her for an hour and a half. What followed was basically unreadable, thanks to various quirks of Twitter's platform. I have rarely been contacted by so many ex-Twitter

employees asking me whether I can even believe Jack proposed this. (I can.) Here's Kurt Wagner:

> *Despite the public interview and a dedicated hashtag (#karajack) for the event, it didn't take long before the dozens of tweets between the two started to get confusing. They were listed out of order, other users started chiming in, and there was no way to properly follow the conversation thread.*
>
> *Swisher's questions about Twitter's complex abuse policies and Dorsey's subsequent responses were floating around my timeline along with the regular tech news and opinions I always look at. If you wanted to find a permanent thread of the chat, you had to visit one of either Kara or Jack's pages and continually refresh. It made for a difficult and confusing experience.*

Google Workers Lost a Leader, But the Fight Will Continue

Liz Fong-Jones, who helped to pioneer the art of angrily tweeting about your own employer and not getting fired for it, reflects on leaving Google after 11 years:

> *The approaches that I used during my time at Google to advocate for vulnerable people, including women, people of color, and LGBT+ people, have become less effective as leadership repeatedly stonewalls employees who privately raise concerns. Google will need to fundamentally change how it is run in order to win back the trust of workers and prevent a catastrophic loss of long-tenured employees, especially those from vulnerable groups.*

Why Amazon buying Eero feels so disappointing

Dieter Bohn says Amazon's acquisition of a home networking company feels like yet another case where the absence of competition-minded regulators is pushing us into a world where

it is impossible to live without patronizing four big companies:

> *We all feel trapped – or maybe captured – by the various ecosystems we live in. We all use excellent products every day made by behemoth companies, but increasingly only made by those companies. iPhone or Android, Chrome or Safari, Surface or Mac, Windows or Chrome OS, and even Facebook or Twitter: all, in one way or another, come from one of the big guys.*
>
> *Eero was different. It was a tiny little company that made a great little product. Something simple, elegant, and reliable. Would it have been too much to ask that it stay independent? Perhaps, but we don't know Eero's financial situation. But it's getting harder to find independent hardware startups that can scale up to something big without getting bought.*

And finally …

I can't tweet for one week and it's killing me

Brandy Jensen got suspended from Twitter for telling a joke and finds it's hard to be without:

> *This is obviously an absurd situation. Much, much worse has been said and is currently being said on the hellsite. But I am not the first person this has happened to, nor will I be the last. But this is my story, and I realize the irony of my situation: that all I want to do is tweet about how I cannot tweet. I have been rendered impotent and mute, allowed only to lurk among you, chuckling to myself at your jokes but unable to reply "lmao."*

I hope this never happens to me!

Talk to me

Send me tips, comments, questions, and your favorite Facebook groups: casey@theverge.com.

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