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UNTANGLING DISINFORMATION

An Anti-Vaccine Film Targeted To Black Americans Spreads False Information

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Heard on All Things Considered

By Will Stone

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A movie released online by Children's Health Defense, an anti-vaccine group headed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., resurfaces disproven claims about the dangers of vaccines and targets its messages at Black Americans who may have ongoing concerns about racism in medical care.

Iryna Veklich/Getty Images

When a filmmaker asked medical historian Naomi Rogers to appear in a new documentary, the Yale professor didn't blink. She had done these "talking head" interviews many times before.

She assumed her comments would end up in a straightforward documentary that addressed some of the most pressing concerns of the pandemic, such as the legacy of racism in medicine and how that plays into current mistrust in some communities of color. The subject of vaccines was also mentioned, but the focus wasn't clear to Rogers.

The director wanted something more polished than a Zoom call, so a well-outfitted camera crew arrived at Rogers' home in Connecticut in the fall. They showed up wearing masks and gloves. Before the interview, crew members cleaned the room thoroughly. Then they spent about an hour interviewing Rogers. She discussed her research and in particular controversial figures such as Dr. James Marion Sims, who was influential in the field of gynecology but who performed experimental surgery on enslaved Black women during the 1800s without anesthesia.

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"We were talking about issues of racism and experimentation, and they seemed to be handled appropriately," Rogers recalls. At the time, there were few indications that anything was out of the ordinary — except one. During a short break, she asked who else was being interviewed for the film. The producer's response struck Rogers as curiously vague.

"They said, 'Well, there's 'a guy' in New York, and we talked to 'somebody in New Jersey, and California,' " Rogers told NPR. "I thought it's so odd that they wouldn't tell me who these people were."

It wasn't until this March that Rogers would stumble upon the answer.

She received an email from a group called Children's Health Defense — prominent in the anti-vaccine movement — promoting its new film, *Medical Racism: The New Apartheid*.

When she clicked on the link and began watching the 57-minute film, she was shocked to discover *this* was the movie she had sat down for back in October.

"I was naive, certainly, in assuming that this was actually a documentary, which I would say it is not. I think that it is an advocacy piece for anti-vaxxers," Rogers says. "I'm still very angry. I feel that I was used."

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The free, online film is the latest effort by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the founder of Children's Health Defense. (He's the son of the former U.S. Attorney General Robert "Bobby" Kennedy and nephew of President John F. Kennedy.) With this film, Kennedy and his allies in the anti-vaccine movement resurface and promote disproven claims about the dangers of vaccines, but it's aimed squarely at a specific demographic: Black Americans.

The film draws a line from the real and disturbing history of racism and atrocities in the medical field — such as the Tuskegee syphilis study — to interviews with anti-vaccine activists who warn communities of color to be suspicious of modern-day vaccines.

At one point in *Medical Racism*, viewers are warned that "in black communities something is very sinister" and "the same thing that happened in the 1930s during the eugenics movement" is happening again.

There is lengthy discussion of the thoroughly disproven link between autism and vaccines. For example, the film references a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and autism rates as evidence that African American children are being particularly harmed, but in reality the study did not conclude that African Americans are at increased risk of autism because of vaccination.

The movie then displays a chart claiming to use that same CDC data — obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request — to make a connection between vaccinating Black children and autism risk. The findings in the chart closely resemble another study sometimes mentioned by anti-vaccine activists, but the medical journal later retracted the study, because of "undeclared competing interests on the part of the author" and "concerns about the validity of the methods and statistical analysis." (That study's author was also a paid independent contractor for Kennedy's group as of 2020 and sits on its board of directors.)





Kennedy speaks against legislation in New York state to narrow exemptions to state-mandated vaccines during a May 2019 rally in Albany.

Hans Pennink/AP Photo

The film also brings up a 2014 study from the Mayo Clinic that showed Somali Americans and African Americans have a more robust immune response to the rubella vaccine than Caucasians and Hispanic Americans. One of those interviewed in Kennedy's film then asks, "So if you have that process that could be caused by vaccines, why wouldn't there be a link between vaccines and developmental delays?"

But the study's own author and leading vaccine researcher, Dr. Gregory Poland, says this conjecture is not accurate.

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According to a statement provided to NPR by the Mayo Clinic, the study demonstrated "higher protective immune responses in African-American subjects with no evidence of increased vaccine side effects" and that any claim of " 'increased vulnerability' among African-Americans who receive the rubella vaccine is simply not supported by either this study or the science."

For her part, Rogers, the Yale professor, only appears for about 14 seconds in the film. Her quotes are accurate. But her remarks are embedded in a wider narrative that she had "enormous problems with" — namely that the anti-vaccine movement is heroically engaged in a new civil rights campaign, one meant to stop experimentation on the Black community.

Rogers says the film uses many of the ideas that she holds "passionately, like health disparities, fighting racism in health, working against discrimination, and it's been twisted for the purposes of this anti-vax movement."

Another credible expert from mainstream medicine also appears in the film: Dr. Oliver Brooks, the immediate past president of the National Medical Association. The group is the largest organization representing African American physicians in the United States.

Brooks says he agreed to be in the film because he wanted to provide balance, but, after seeing it, he now regrets doing the interview.

"The crux of the documentary is generally don't get vaccinated," Brooks told NPR in a recent interview. "There is an understandable concern in the African American community regarding vaccines — however, in the end, my position is you look past those, have an understanding of those and still get vaccinated. ... That nuance was not felt or presented in the documentary."



Just 12 People Are Behind Most Vaccine Hoaxes On Social Media, Research Shows

Kennedy's group released the film in early March, just as the COVID-19 vaccine was becoming widely available to the American public.

The movie begins with a string of ominous news clips about the pandemic and the COVID-19 vaccines and includes short interviews with people of color who talk about COVID-19 being "propaganda" and why they don't trust the vaccine. Kennedy also appears to offer a warning to viewers about vaccines: "Don't listen to me. Don't listen to Tony Fauci. Hey, and don't listen to your doctor."

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In addition to Kennedy, other producers helped make and market the film, including a prominent figure in the Nation of Islam, and a wealthy entrepreneur who recently made headlines when a private school he co-founded in Miami prohibited teachers who got the COVID-19 vaccine from returning to the classroom.

Children's Health Defense made one of the film's co-producers, Curtis Cost, available to talk with NPR. He is a longtime anti-vaccine activist, who has previously claimed that "viruses do not cause anything, it's a hoax, it's a myth ... whether you are talking about HIV virus, the flu virus or any other virus."

Cost says the film does not explicitly tell people to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine, but it "goes all the way to the present experimentations and bad things have been done by the medical establishment in America and in Africa and other parts of the world."

"The film basically wants people to recognize this history that leads right into the present, and especially when they're facing decisions about whether they should take any vaccine, including COVID," he says.

In an email statement, a spokesperson for Children's Health Defense denies that the film is misinformation and says it contains "peer reviewed science and historical data."

The movie is "a classic example of the anti-vaccine industry with a highly targeted message using sophisticated marketing techniques and building alliances with affiliate organizations," says Imran Ahmed, chief executive officer of the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate, which has extensively researched figures such as Kennedy.

"They've seen the opportunity to target a specifically African American audience," he says, during a particular moment of heightened national attention on racial injustices and health disparities.



THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

'The Perfect Storm': How Vaccine Misinformation Spread To The Mainstream

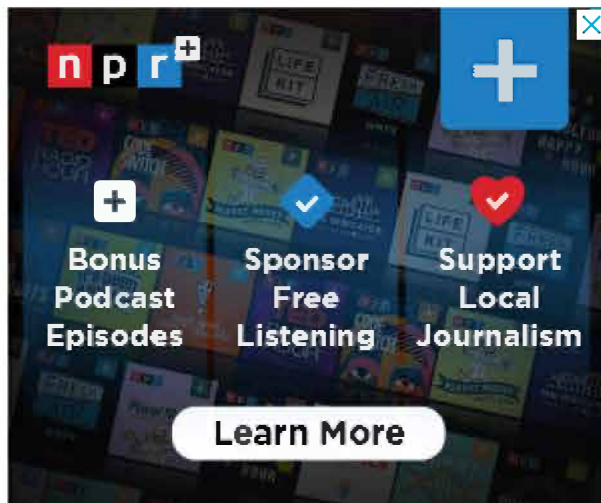
Black Americans have twice the risk of dying from COVID-19 compared with white Americans. Racial disparities in vaccination uptake persist across the United States.

While there are efforts to improve access to the vaccine, media coverage has also focused heavily on historical reasons for vaccine skepticism — too much, some scholars argue, when the focus should be on how Black Americans experience the impact of systemic racism in health care today — and how to fix those problems and improve trust.

"We're in this moment where we're having some necessary discussions about health equity," says Victor Agbafé, a medical student at the University of Michigan. "It's not a

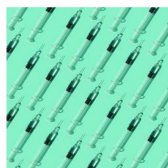
good thing to sort of exploit that as a means to undermine trust in the vaccine today, instead of focusing on how we can make the vaccine more accessible for all communities."

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Agbafe, who helps lead his school's Black medical student association, was surprised to get an email from Children's Health Defense asking him to promote the movie among his peers.

When it was released, the film did not seem to gain much traction on major social media platforms such as Twitter, although tracking how often this kind of video is being shared privately can be difficult, says Kolina Koltai, a University of Washington researcher who studies the anti-vaccine movement online.



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For Some Anti-Vaccine Advocates, Misinformation Is Part Of A Business

But Kennedy's anti-vaccine activities during the pandemic involve more than this movie.

In February, he was banned from Instagram for posting misinformation on vaccines, but he still has a home on Facebook and Twitter. Ahmed's organization has labeled

Kennedy one of the "disinformation dozen" — a group of people responsible for 65% of the shares of anti-vaccine misinformation on social media platforms.

In a recent webinar about the film, Kennedy said those who agree with the film need to use "the tools of advocacy that Martin Luther King Jr. talked about" and promote it "guerilla-style" against the "darkening cloud of totalitarianism."

Although more than half of American adults have gotten the COVID-19 vaccine, demand is falling fast, and polls show almost one-third of adults still either want to "wait and see" or do not want to get the shot. When asked why, many say the vaccine is unsafe, based on false conspiracy theories.

"I see the downstream ripple effects of disinformation every day in practice, every day in the patient's lives I treat," says Dr. Atul Nakhasi with the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services and co-founder of the online campaign #ThisIsOurShot, which aims to encourage trust in the COVID-19 vaccine.

"We know people have uncertainties, and we need to acknowledge that and have humble, respectful conversations, but for someone to actively subvert that trust is unconscionable," Nakhasi says.

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According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate, the ideal strategy for stopping the spread of online misinformation is to cut it off at the source: meaning "deplatform" the most notorious spreaders of that information so they can't gain a following on social media in the first place. But Ahmed says that all too often, tech companies don't take those steps themselves. In that case, the next best tactic is to try to "inoculate" people against false and misleading claims.

"You tell people in advance, 'Hey, something terrible is happening, be careful, they're targeting you,' " Ahmed says.

robert f. kennedy jr. children's health defense black americans anti-vaccine movement african americans



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