

# TikTok's algorithm is amplifying COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation

*18 videos fed to our "For You" page garnered over 57 million views*

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TikTok's algorithm appears to be promoting COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation to its users through personalized content recommendations, enabling conspiracy theories and medical misinformation to flourish on its platform.

The social media giant frequently boasts about its supposed efforts to combat misinformation, including a pledge to give \$25 million in ads to help trusted organizations deliver accurate public health information. However, the platform also consistently fails to address the harm facilitated by its own algorithm. For all its promises to promote high quality information during the pandemic, TikTok is still allowing dangerous lies about COVID-19 and vaccines to spread on its platform practically uninhibited.

TikTok claims to be "focused on supporting our users by providing accurate information and resources from public health officials," and the company partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide "trustworthy information" that "dispels myths around COVID-19." However, videos from the WHO account often receive far fewer views than many of the viral misinformation videos outlined below – perhaps because high-quality information from authoritative sources simply isn't as entertaining as lies and outlandish conspiracy theories.

While TikTok's community guidelines explicitly prohibit "misinformation related to COVID-19, vaccines, and anti-vaccine disinformation," videos containing medical misinformation, dangerous conspiracy theories, and lies about the vaccine regularly receive millions of views and are being circulated by the platform's "For You" page recommendations.

TikTok's algorithm appears to be creating dangerous misinformation bubbles around susceptible users, saturating their feeds with malicious lies about the virus and vaccine. Our findings indicate that TikTok's algorithm is heavily circulating anti-vaccination and COVID-19 misinformation videos and specifically

feeding them to users who show interest. A major part of TikTok's appeal is its ability to hyperpersonalize video feeds to individual users, and while this has helped the app rise in popularity, it has also seemingly created an unchecked medical misinformation catastrophe.

To test this, Media Matters reviewed and tracked which videos TikTok's algorithm recommended to our "For You" page (FYP) after engaging with anti-vaccination and COVID-19 misinformation by watching the relevant videos in full and liking them. After engaging with this content, our algorithm quickly began filling the FYP feed with almost exclusively anti-vaccination and COVID-19 misinformation videos. This process was replicated on multiple accounts, all with virtually identical results. The 18 videos examined in this report (a fraction of the videos fed to our FYP) have garnered over 57 million total views.

TikTok has struggled to control COVID-19 misinformation since the virus first started spreading around the world in 2020. And as misinformation surges with the emerging delta variant, TikTok has once again failed to address critical problems with its platform that have been apparent from the beginning of the pandemic.

## **Vaccine misinformation is being spread through TikTok's FYP**

Vaccine misinformation regularly goes viral on TikTok, meaning that the platform's algorithm is picking up the videos and widely circulating them to individual users' FYP feeds. For instance, a user with only 114,000 followers posted a video that has over 12.6 million views (fed to our FYP) of a speaker at an Indiana school board meeting falsely claiming that vaccines are causing the increase in COVID-19 cases.

Other anti-vaccination videos fed to our FYP claimed that vaccines are part of a plan to "tag every man, woman, and child on the planet" with microchips (1.5 million views); that vaccines "make you glow" under ultraviolet illumination and "street lights will be checkpoints in our near future" (1.5 million views); and that "your children and elderly that are not vaccinated will be removed permanently from your home" (3.9 million views).

A video of far-right conspiracy theorists Alex Jones and Jesse Ventura claiming to find coffins "for the vaccinated" made by the "elites" also went viral on TikTok, receiving 2.1 million views. An Infowars segment falsely claiming that the bodies of vaccinated people who have died are being used as fertilizer for crops so that "they are feeding the dead to the living" has accumulated at least 1.3 million views.



One of the highly circulated videos claimed that users must pay attention to subliminal messages in the media, explaining that *South Park* predicted that “anyone who gets vaccinated is going to be tracked and manipulated for the rest of their lives.” It received more than 900,000 views. Another video listed world leaders who’ve died recently and suggested they were assassinated for refusing to allow coronavirus vaccines in their countries. This video has 1.5 million views.

One viral clip on TikTok which earned 6.3 million views intentionally spread a hoax about “vaccine bandits” who will “walk up to you on the street and they ask if you’re vaccinated and if you hesitate at all, they inject you with a vaccine right on the spot.” In the creator’s Linktree (a website that allows users to house multiple social media links in one place), clicking on the “vaccine bandits article” directs users to a music video of Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up.” Even though this creator may have not intended to spread harmful misinformation with an internet prank, the effect of promoting false public health narratives is largely the same.



At a time when COVID-19 cases are beginning to rise again in the U.S. because of new variants and persistent vaccine hesitancy, TikTok's negligent moderating of dangerous vaccine misinformation cannot be excused.

## **TikTok is feeding COVID-19 misinformation to its users**

Many of the TikToks promoted false narratives that have been around since the first lockdowns in early 2020. For example, videos fed to our FYP pushed the baseless "plandemic" narrative (1.8 million views), argued that COVID and vaccines are "preparation" to install a "new world order" (2.3 million views), and platformed supposed experts falsely claiming that the pandemic death toll is "fake" (6.1 million views).

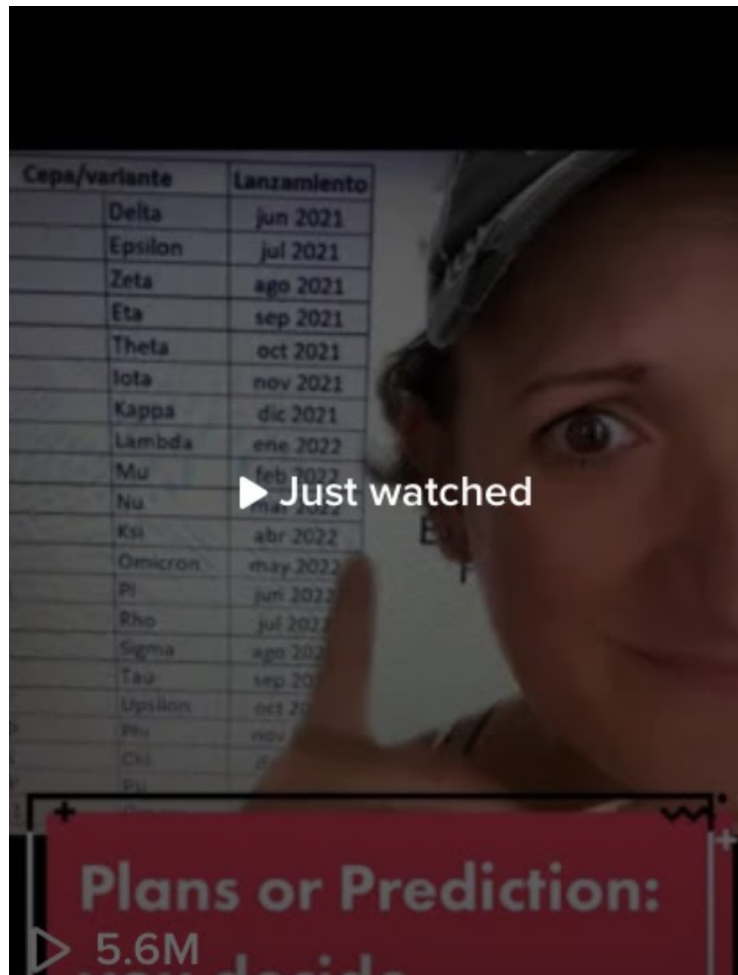


Beyond older narratives continuing to circulate, the reimposition of lockdowns in places such as Australia is prompting the spread of new misinformation and conspiracy theories. For example, a video falsely claiming that Australians who didn't believe in COVID-19 were having their children taken away by the government garnered over 800,000 views.

Another video displayed an Australian man who appeared to be at a drive-through COVID-19 test site, asking the healthcare workers to see the test and then rapidly outlining false claims about the dangers of the COVID tests themselves. He holds up the test for the camera, pointing to the label, and claims that it contains "the No. 1 ingredient used in antifreeze" that is also "a massive carcinogen and mutagen, so it'll give you Hodgkin's lymphoma, in females it greatly increases the chances of breast cancer, alright? And it'll fuck with your DNA. Literally changes the structure of the building blocks of your own body. So that's here. We're giving this to people." The video has approximately 6 million views.



Some of the videos worked current events into their false narratives. For instance, with the rise of the delta variant of the coronavirus, a video showing a fake list of future variants and a supposed schedule of their supposedly scheduled release dates accumulated roughly 5.6 million views on TikTok.



Although some of these videos spread newer misinformation, the recycling of old conspiracy theories was a consistent theme among the videos fed to our accounts. Narratives fearmongering about the Federal Emergency Management Agency building concentration camps have circulated for well over a decade, for example, and they've been adapted to the COVID-era and flourished on TikTok. The hashtag "femacamps" has 7.5 million views, and we were repeatedly shown TikTok videos claiming that FEMA's August 11 emergency broadcast test would activate a "kill switch" in vaccinated individuals (42,000 views), that FEMA camps would be used to implement martial law (95,000 views), and that FEMA will create a "detention camp for the unvaxxed" (2.9 million views). These predictable but baseless narratives can cause panic, fear, and mistrust in an institution designed to assist during times of crisis, and TikTok has taken no apparent actions to contain them.

## **TikTok needs accountability for its algorithm**

TikTok has seemingly prioritized content engagement above the well-being of its users, enabling the spread of inaccurate information and dangerous lies about COVID-19 and vaccinations at a time when misinformation is creating real consequences in the form of an even larger public health crisis – and in some cases, the platform is directly feeding those narratives to its users. TikTok has an algorithm problem, and it's time for the company to fix it.