# House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis Statement for the Record

#### by Imran Ahmed

#### Founder and CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate

Coronavirus has unleashed two parallel pandemics. One is the biological pandemic of Covid-19. The second is a social pandemic of digital misinformation. Misinformation not just militates against our success in containing Covid-19, it fundamentally threatens to weaken the liberal democratic values that underpin our societies.

Both pandemics were, in fact, predictable. They are acute eruptions of chronic problems: the first of coronaviruses, variants of which caused SARS and MERS; the second of globalised, digitally-transmitted misinformation, which has exacerbated social maladies in recent years, including those of political instability, illiberal democratic politics, vaccine hesitancy, climate denial and rising identity-based hate worldwide.

There is a growing and convincing body of evidence that misinformation, conspiracism and other content detrimental to individuals and society is not just tolerated by social media executives, it is actually promoted, and they know its role in driving profits. The reason for this is simple: content that elicits anger, is conspiratorial, and/or provokes false debates about science actually drives the most "engagement." In short, to *enrage* users is to *engage* users. Social media platforms feed us the material that outrages, upsets, and confuses us because that's what keeps us on their platforms longer -- and the more time we spend on their platform, the more money they make. Whistleblowers like Frances Haugen and others have confirmed that user engagement - the foremost driver of profit - is the primary metric that matters to company leadership at Facebook.<sup>1</sup>

The Center for Countering Digital Hate is an international not-for-profit NGO that researches the architecture of online hate and misinformation on Big Tech platforms. We have conducted extensive research on the anti-vaccine movement, particularly the worst superspreaders of vaccine disinformation, dubbed the *Disinformation Dozen*.<sup>2</sup> Anti-vaccine disformation is spread by this small group of individuals on major social media platforms, where their lies have gone unchallenged, been used by hostel foreign actors to sow the seeds of distrust, bled into the mainstream, and threatened the public health response to COVID-19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Financial Times: Facebook chose to maximise engagement at users' expense, whistleblower says

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> CCDH: The Disinformation Dozen

These disinformation superspreaders have built vast audiences on social media platforms that quickly disseminate their dangerous lies to millions of people. Our Disinformation Dozen report revealed that 12 anti-vaccine figures produce the content that is used in 65% of all anti-vaxx misinformation shares on social media.<sup>3</sup> This research was recently validated by internal company documents revealed by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen.<sup>4</sup> Haugen's disclosures showed that on the exact same day that CCDH's Disinformation Dozen report was released, Facebook had produced internal research showing that CCDH's findings were largely correct.

Our research also shows how the Disinformation Dozen harness misinformation and vast social media audiences. Our report, Pandemic Profiteers, documents how this cohort has developed sophisticated organizations to spread anti-vaccine disinformation.<sup>5</sup> The anti-vaccine industry makes its money through marketing books, documentaries, alternative health products, and directing their huge audiences toward elaborate subscription schemes. These schemes are orchestrated by leading anti-vaxxers who collaborate to promote each other's disinformation and boost sales. Our research shows that some of the top anti-vaxx organizations have an annual turnover of at least \$35.8 million dollars.<sup>6</sup>

It's important to note that among the top super spreaders of vaccine disinformation are practicing doctors with medical licenses who exploit the credibility that accompanies their credentials to disseminate these deadly lies. Despite a stern warning from the Federation of State Medical Boards three months ago, state medical boards themselves have failed to take disciplinary action related to the dissemination of COVID-19 or vaccine disinformation.<sup>7</sup>

Most of these individuals are still allowed to operate on social media platforms and sell their bogus products on Amazon. In fact, despite urgent requests from Congressional and state leaders and surging vaccine skepticism, social media companies continue to allow 42 of the 98 accounts controlled by the Disinformation Dozen to post disinformation, including Robert F Kennedy Jr. and Dr. Joseph Mercola, two of the most prolific spreaders of COVID-19 disinformation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> CCDH: The Disinformation Dozen

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Washington Post: Facebook told the White House to focus on the 'facts' about vaccine misinformation. Internal documents show it wasn't sharing key data.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> CCDH: Pandemic Profiteers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> CCDH: Pandemic Profiteers

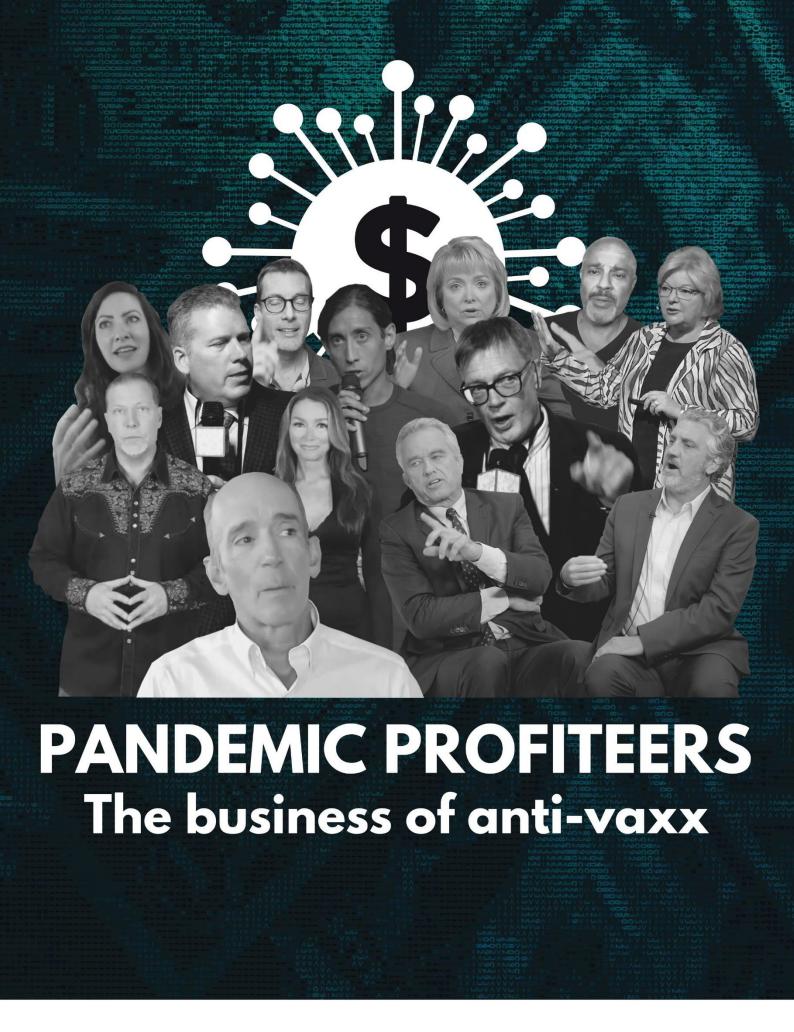
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> FSMB Statement

Since self-imposed rules are barely enforced, there are no levers to compel Facebook to abide by the commitments in its community standards, the deadly problem of COVID-19 disinformation persists despite the harm it causes. Worse still, any attempt to shine light on these harms is rebuffed by companies using a well-worn playbook.

As a deadly global pandemic rages on, this moment cries out for intervention and reforms from Congress and accountability for Big Tech. The time is now.

Sincerely, Imran Ahmed

[Addendum: Pandemic Profiteers Report] [Addendum: Disinformation Dozen Report]







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The Center for Countering Digital Hate is a not-for-profit NGO that seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and misinformation.

Digital technology has changed forever the way we communicate, build relationships, share knowledge, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values.

Digital spaces have been colonised and their unique dynamics exploited by fringe movements that instrumentalise hate and misinformation. These movements are opportunistic, agile and confident in exerting influence and persuading people.

Over time these actors, advocating diverse causes - from anti-feminism to ethnic nationalism to denial of scientific consensus - have formed a Digital Counter Enlightenment. Their trolling, disinformation and skilled advocacy of their causes has resocialised the offline world for the worse.

The Center's work combines both analysis and active disruption of these networks. CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure - the actors, systems and culture - that support, and often profit from hate and misinformation.



### Introduction

Throughout the Covid pandemic we have made sacrifices to protect ourselves, those we love, and our communities. And yet, as the world responded to this threat, a subversive, established industry of anti-vaxxers has seen an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of public health.

This fifth column has operated in plain sight, publicly undermining our collective confidence in doctors, governments and medical science. Their confidence in openly promoting lies and false cures comes from years of impunity in which they were hosted on popular social media platforms, driving traffic and advertising dollars to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, while benefiting from the enormous reach those platforms gladly afforded them. It's a mutually profitable arrangement -- our calculations value the audience of anti-vaxxers, now numbering above 62 million followers, to be worth up to \$1.1 billion in annual revenue for Big Tech. The Anti-Vaxx Industry itself, as detailed in this report, boasts annual revenues of at least \$35 million.

In an industry conference in October 2020 anti-vaxxers met to cynically plan their strategic push. They decided to minimize the dangers of Covid (a disease that, despite lockdown and massive preventative measures has killed more than 2 million people worldwide), to subvert health experts (the ones in the best place to mitigate the crisis) and to impede the vaccine in whatever ways they could, mostly by amplifying any possible doubts and side effects.

This industry stretches back to the time of Andrew Wakefield and his pseudo-medical campaigns against the MMR vaccine. Struck off the medical register for "serious and wide-ranging" errors, his views found safe-haven in Silicon Valley with its belief in profit and unfettered free speech and a hyper-capitalist mix of libertarianism and the prosperity gospel. His direct proteges and those he inspired now number in the dozens, with the most dangerous twelve - whom we dubbed the Disinformation Dozen in a previous report - creating two thirds of all misinformation shares on social media in this pandemic.

In this report, CCDH exposes the network of businesses, nonprofits, political action committees, affiliate schemes and social media marketing empires that form the Anti-Vaxx Industry. While small businesses struggled through the pandemic, these enterprises reaped at least \$1.5 million in PPP loans from the US government. From books on the latest 'Great Reset' conspiracy to propaganda films targeting the vaccine hesitant, we break down how anti-vaxxers fund their fight against science and how they specifically shifted their strategies to profit during the pandemic.

Governments need to set up new bodies to look at how bad faith actors use the Internet to cause harm and convene non-governmental bodies that can respond effectively. CCDH's work on anti-vaxxers, for example, has forced change at once-reluctant social media platforms and led to anti-vaxxers removing their propaganda to avoid being banned. Social media's failure to act in the pandemic has cost us lives, government's failure to act in the pandemic's wake could cost us our society.

Imran Ahmed CEO, CCDH



# **Executive Summary**

- 1. Analysis of the online anti-vaccine movement has identified a dozen leading antivaxxers who operate businesses or organisations with significant revenues.
- 2. These twelve are responsible for up to 70 percent of anti-vaccine content shared to Facebook. Three of these twelve Joseph Mercola, Del Bigtree and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. are so influential that they account for nearly half of this content.
- 3. Anti-vaxxers represent an industry with annual revenues of at least \$36 million, based on a limited view of their finances based on self-reported filings and publicly available revenue estimates for 22 organisations belonging to twelve of the industry's biggest earners. This anti-vaxx industry employs at least 266 people.
- 4. Anti-vaxxers have received more than \$1.5 million in federal loans through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) designed to help businesses through the Covid pandemic. The largest such beneficiary was the anti-vaxx entrepreneur Joseph Mercola, whose business received \$617,000 in total.
- 5. Some leading anti-vaxxers are earning six-figure salaries for leading roles at anti-vaccine non-profits, including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. who earns \$255,000 a year as Chairman of Children's Health Defense.
- 6. The anti-vaxx industry's total social media following of 62 million could be worth up to \$1.1 billion to social media platforms based on publicly available figures for the amount of revenue social media platforms make per impression or per user where that information is not available.
- 7. Leading anti-vaxxers are collaborating to market each other's disinformation and boost sales. Leading anti-vaxxers including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. took part in a popular affiliate marketing scheme established by anti-vaxx entrepreneurs Ty and Charlene Bollinger which claims to have paid out \$14 million to partners who promoted their health disinformation.
- 8. Anti-vaxx organisations led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Del Bigtree and Larry Cook privately admit in legal filings that they are reliant on mainstream social media platforms for reach and revenue, saying that deplatforming has curtailed their ability to spread anti-vaccine messages.
- 9. The same legal filings reveal that platforms do not believe that deplatforming contravenes free speech protections, with Facebook and YouTube stating that they are "private parties, not state actors. And under settled law, their content-moderation decisions are not subject to First Amendment constraints."
- 10. We recommend that social media platforms take action to stop anti-vaxxers profiting from undeclared paid promotions for products, something which is against both platform standards and advertising regulations in the US and UK.
- 11. For-profit anti-vaxxers who repeatedly breach platform standards on dangerous misinformation should be deplatformed. The evidence shows that deplatforming cuts the audience anti-vaxxers can access, as well as their revenues.
- 12. Platforms must keep their promises to stop profiting from vaccine disinformation. As long as they allow vaccine disinformation on their platforms, they continue to make ad revenues from anti-vaxxers and their followers.



# Organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers have estimated annual revenues of at least \$36 million

CCDH's June 2020 report, *The Anti-Vaxx Industry*, categorised online anti-vaxxers into a number of different archetypes, including campaigners primarily financed through donations and entrepreneurs who earn money through the sale of products, such as supplements.<sup>1</sup>

This report shows that as well as collaborating with alternative health entrepreneurs, a number of anti-vaccine campaigners and the organisations they are associated with share revenues through affiliate marketing schemes and speaker fees.

In order to examine the real scale of the anti-vaxx industry, we selected a dozen anti-vaxxers who operate businesses or organisations with significant revenues. For these anti-vaxxers, we have identified businesses or organisations that they control or in which they hold a significant interest.

The table above collates estimated revenues for each business. Data sources include self-reported revenue figures taken from non-profit filings and estimates from the business data firm Dun & Bradstreet, which estimates revenues on the basis of sales and payment figures along with other metrics. This is a limited window into their revenues as we have excluded many smaller businesses where estimates or filings were not available or where we could not clearly establish control or ownership.

Our analysis shows the anti-vaxx industry represented by these twelve figures alone has an annual turnover of at least \$35.8 million dollars.

#### Some anti-vaxxers are earning six figure salaries

Some leading anti-vaxxers are earning six figure salaries in their roles leading organisations that question the safety of vaccines.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is earning \$255,000 a year in his role as Chairman of Children's Health Defense. Filings for the organisation show that Kennedy was working for the organisation full-time at the same time as earning an annual salary of \$200,000 for a full-time role at his other non-profit, the Waterkeeper Alliance, until his resignation from the Alliance in November 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Del Bigtree earns \$232,000 a year as Executive Director of the Informed Consent Action Network, while Barbara Loe Fisher earns \$55,950 as President of the National Vaccine Information Center.

A full breakdown of revenues and salaries by organisation is available in the appendix at the end of this report.



# Organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers have received more than \$1.5 million in federal loans

Public records show that organisations associated with nine leading anti-vaxxers have received more than \$1.5 million in loans from the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

They include the businesses of leading anti-vaxx entrepreneurs such as Joseph Mercola and Sayer Ji, as well as organisations dedicated to campaigning against vaccines that they claim are unsafe.

Joseph Mercola was the largest beneficiary of such PPP loans, with his businesses receiving \$617,500 in total. Children's Health Defense, a non-profit that questions the safety of vaccines that was established by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., received a loan of \$145,000.

To apply for a PPP loan, organisations must approach an approved lender and "self-certify" their eligibility. The US Small Business Administration does not vet applicants for their suitability.



In response to CCDH's previous research showing that anti-vaccine groups had received at least \$850,000 in federal coronavirus relief funding, prominent anti-vaxxer Del Bigtree told viewers of his weekly anti-vaccine show that the loan money "really did save our butts and it managed to help us keep producing this brilliant show".<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Mercola responded to a Forbes article citing CCDH's research by claiming "nowhere on the paycheck protection program (PPP) loan application must you profess your undying loyalty and adherence to vaccine propaganda."<sup>4</sup>



# There are an estimated 266 people working for organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers

Using information from Payment Protection Program loan applications and data held by business analytics firm Dun & Bradstreet, it is possible to estimate that organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers employ 266 people.

Data released by the US Small Business Administration states the number of "jobs retained" as a result of each loan offered under the program.<sup>5</sup> This data reveals that the nine of these organisations that have been identified as recipients of PPP loans claimed to have used the money to retain 174 jobs.

Businesses were permitted to claim a maximum PPP loan that is 2.5 times the value of their average 2019 monthly payroll costs. If anti-vaxxer organisations in receipt of PPP loans applied for the maximum amount, it is possible to estimate their annual wage bill was \$6.4 million in 2019.

The data suggests that the anti-vaxx entrepreneur Joseph Mercola employs 94 staff across two of his business which applied for PPP loans, while data from Dun & Bradstreet suggests he employs another 65 staff through Mercola.com LLC, for a total of 159 staff.

Data from LinkedIn's "Recruiter Lite" tool shows that "Mercola Consulting Services" employs dozens of staff in the Philippines, working on social media content, email marketing and alternative health articles.<sup>6</sup>



An example job description for one of Mercola.com's employees in the Philippines

Self-reported figures taken from non-profit filings for Children's Health Defense, the organisation led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., show that it has eight staff and an annual wage bill of nearly \$890,000 in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Data collected by Dun & Bradstreet for a further seven organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers show that they have another 84 members of staff.



A full breakdown of employee numbers and estimated wage bill expenditure by organisation is available in the appendix at the end of this report.



# Anti-vaxxers examined by this report are responsible for up to 70 percent of anti-vaccine content on Facebook

In our previous report, *The Disinformation Dozen*, CCDH examined the influence of twelve leading anti-vaxxers by analyzing content posted to Facebook over 689,000 times between February and March 2021.<sup>8</sup>

Further analysis of this sample shows that some of the anti-vaxx industry's biggest earners examined in this report are responsible for 70 percent of this content.

This analysis was based on a representative sample of 483 pieces of anti-vaccine content that are known to be circulating in anti-vaccine Facebook Groups. We collected this sample by analyzing anti-vaccine posts containing URL links from 10 private and 20 public anti-vaccine Facebook Groups between 1 February and 16 March 2021. Groups in this sample have between 2,500 and 235,000 members and generate up to 10,000 posts per month.

Researchers then analyzed the content of these URL links, tagging each of them to indicate whether they contained one of the twelves anti-vaxxers examined in this report or originated from a website controlled by or related to one of those members. For example, URL links to articles hosted on Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s Children's Health Defense website were attributed to Kennedy himself.

Finally, in order to establish the full distribution of this content on Facebook, we used Facebook's own CrowdTangle analytics tool to establish how many times these URLs have been shared on the platform.

This revealed that the anti-vaccine content in our sample had been posted or shared across Facebook a total of 689,404 times. Content attributed to just the twelve anti-vaxxers examined in this report had been posted or shared 484,876 times, representing 70.3 percent of the total anti-vaccine posts represented by our sample.

Just three of these twelve - Joseph Mercola, Del Bigtree and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. - are responsible for nearly half.

### **COVID-19 mRNA Shots Are Legally Not Vaccines**

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola



Headline of an example article from our sample shared to Facebook 5,600 times



# Anti-vaxxers admit they rely on mainstream social media for reach and revenue in court filings

Anti-vaxxers have encouraged the view that they will thrive even if they are removed from mainstream social media platforms.

Indeed our previous report, The Anti-Vaxx Playbook, revealed that many leading anti-vaxxers are actively seeking to push their followers to "lifeboat" accounts on emerging platforms such as Telegram, as well as traditional email lists, with limited success.

Now, a new analysis of legal papers filed by organisations associated with leading antivaxxers in the last year reveals that efforts to deplatform them from mainstream social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube have impacted their ability to reach a wider audience and raise funding.

#### 8. Continuing Injuries to CHD.

216. CHD's primary source of revenue derives from membership dues and donations that CHD solicits on its website, through PayPal and Stripe, and formerly on its Facebook page. In addition to that monetary interest, attracting visitors to the CHD Facebook page, and through it to CHD's website, enables CHD and RFK, Jr., their authors, and readers to associate and to engage in speech on matters of mutual concern. Prior to March 2019, CHD's Facebook page content generated significant third-party user traffic to CHD's website, and significant membership fees and donations to CHD.

One such paper filed by **Children's Health Defense** (CHD), the campaign headed by leading anti-vaxxer Robert F. Kennedy Jr., show that Facebook's moves to reduce traffic to the organisation's page and ban it from advertising impacted on its donation revenue.

The organisation's complaint against Facebook and fact-checking organisations in August last year claims that its "Facebook page content generated significant third-party traffic to CHD's website, and significant membership fees and donations to CHD." The complaint adds that direct donations from CHD's page fell from over \$41,000 in early 2019 to nothing when Facebook removed the organisation's access to this feature in May 2019.

A similar case raised against Facebook and YouTube by **Informed Consent Action Network** (ICAN), the campaign group fronted by anti-vaxxer Del Bigtree, reveals the impact deplatforming has had on its reach and revenue. Outlining its case for damages, the group stated that "Facebook's actions have caused ICAN to lose its 360,000 followers and all its analytical data pertaining to all videos uploaded since 2017" and "have severely curtailed ICAN's ability to reach its followers and raise funds". Likewise, it complained that "ICAN has had to raise and expend thousands of dollars to get its own website up and running". 12



65. Facebook's actions have caused ICAN to lose its 360,000 followers on Facebook and all its analytical data pertaining to all videos uploaded since 2017. Facebook's actions have severely curtailed ICAN's ability to reach its followers and raise funds to carry out its charitable mission.

**Larry Cook**, the operator of a now-removed Facebook page and group named Stop Mandatory Vaccination, has also complained about the impact of deplatforming in an affidavit attached to a lawsuit alleging that Facebook and others have "violated our voting rights through systematic election fraud." Cook states that Facebook's actions dramatically reduced visits to his website from 2 million a month to just 100,000. Cook also complains that "my ability to secure ongoing revenue for my full time activist work has been demolished." 14

REVENUE DEMOLISHED. Through Facebook I also shared online summits, donation requests, supplement recommendations and other revenue generating opportunities. Without my Facebook account because of censorship, my ability to secure ongoing revenue for my full time activist work has been demolished.

#### Platforms are clear that deplatforming does not contravene free speech

Legal filings show that Facebook and YouTube have categorically denied claims that they violated First Amendment rights to free speech by deplatforming leading antivaxxers.

In March 2021, Facebook and YouTube filed a joint motion to dismiss a complaint from the anti-vaccine group ICAN, defending their decision to remove content with titles such as "mask test proves toxic for children". The motion states that ICAN's appeal to First Amendment protections for free speech do not apply, as "Facebook and YouTube are private parties, not state actors. And under settled law, their content-moderation decisions are not subject to First Amendment constraints." <sup>15</sup>

Both companies likewise dismiss claims that they acted in bad faith on the service agreements with ICAN, pointing out that "both YouTube's and Facebook's terms of service permit [them] to remove user content at their discretion."<sup>16</sup>

1. Facebook and YouTube are Private Parties, Not State Actors

"The Free Speech Clause does not prohibit *private* abridgment of speech." *Manhattan Cmty. Access Corp. v. Halleck*, 139 S. Ct. 1921, 1928 (2019). Plaintiffs, of course, do not dispute that Facebook and YouTube are private parties, not state actors. ¶¶ 1, 75. And under settled law, their content-moderation decisions are not subject to First Amendment constraints. The Ninth



# Followers of anti-vaxxers are worth up to \$1.1 billion to Big Tech

The 62 million followers of anti-vaccine accounts could be worth up to \$1.1 billion in annual revenue for social media giants, primarily generated by advertisers knowingly or unknowingly paying to reach users interested in vaccine misinformation.

This estimate is derived from publicly available figures for the amount of revenue social media platforms make per impression, or per user where that information is not available. It represents our best possible estimate of the anti-vaxx industry's value to social networks in terms of engaging users and generating ad impressions.

#### **Facebook and Instagram**

The anti-vaxxer audience of 37.8 million followers on Facebook and Instagram could be earning Facebook up to \$1.1 billion in revenue. This figure is based on tracking of 419 active anti-vaccine Facebook and Instagram accounts, as well as Facebook's own key metric of Average Revenue Per Person (ARPP) which stood at a value of \$29.23 in the year to Q1 2021 according to the company's last annual report.<sup>17</sup>

Anti-vaxxers' primary value to Facebook is in engaging users who are subsequently served adverts. In the absence of publicly available data on the precise number of ad impressions that anti-vaxxers generate, this ARPP figure gives the best possible estimate of the value of their audience to Facebook across its family of products.

#### YouTube

Anti-vaxxers' YouTube videos could be generating up to \$707,222 in annual ad revenue, according to the number of views received by monetised anti-vaccine YouTube channels in the last 30 days and available information on the typical rates paid by YouTube advertisers per thousand views.<sup>18</sup> This includes only the 15 anti-vaccine YouTube channels we have identified as carrying YouTube advertising, although the other 80 will also make a contribution to YouTube's revenue by generating traffic.

YouTube splits this ad revenue, giving content creators a 55 percent share while keeping the remaining 45 percent. This model means that anti-vaxxers could earn up to \$388,972 a year from adverts on YouTube videos, while YouTube earns \$318,250.

#### **Twitter**

Anti-vaxxers' Twitter audience of 2.7 million followers could be earning Twitter up to \$7.6 million in annual revenue. This figure is based on Twitter's own key metric of "monetizable Daily Active Users" (mDAUs) who are served adverts on the platform.

Twitter had 192 million mDAUs in 2020, compared to a reported 1.3 billion accounts in total.<sup>20</sup> Using these figures, it is possible to estimate that 392,575 followers of accounts that have promoted vaccine misinformation are mDAUs who generate revenue for the platform, contributing \$7.6 million to Twitter's \$3.7 billion revenues in 2020.<sup>21</sup>

As with Facebook, anti-vaxxers' primary value to Twitter is in engaging users who are subsequently served adverts, making this the best possible estimate of the Twitter anti-vaxxer audience in the absence of data on ad impressions generated by anti-vaxxers.



## How leading anti-vaxxers collaborate

The rest of this report details how individual anti-vaxxers raise money through donations and sales to carry on promoting their views and products on social media.

But anti-vaxxers collaborate to make money too, primarily through affiliate marketing schemes. In these schemes, anti-vaxx entrepreneurs with a product to sell will recruit other anti-vaxxers as "affiliates" who then share marketing materials with their own audiences. By assigning a unique ID to each affiliate, entrepreneurs can track the number of sales generated by each affiliate and pay them a commission on each sale.

CCDH has identified three such affiliate marketing schemes for anti-vaccine videos and conferences from the last year. All twelve anti-vaxxers studied in this report either featured in these videos and conferences directly, or promoted them on their social media accounts, in some cases embedding a URL that could be used to track affiliate activity.

The table below shows how the twelve anti-vaxxers studied by this report engaged with affiliate marketing schemes for anti-vaccine videos and conferences from the last year.

With the exception of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s organisation, Children's Health Defense, which has already admitted benefiting financially from one such arrangement, it is not clear whether other anti-vaxxers have profited from these schemes.<sup>22</sup>

Name	TTAV/TTAC	Vaccines Revealed	Health Freedom Summit
Andrew Wakefield	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Barbara Loe Fisher	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Del Bigtree	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Speaker</u>
Joseph Mercola	<u>Speaker</u>	No	<u>Speaker</u>
Kelly Brogan	<u>Promoter</u>	No	No
Larry Cook	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Mike Adams	<u>Promoter</u>	No	No
Rashid A Buttar	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	No
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Sayer Ji	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Speaker</u>
Sherri Tenpenny	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	Owner	No	<u>Speaker</u>

#### Anti-vaxxers may have broken platform rules on paid product promotions

None of the anti-vaxxers we have identified as promoting videos and conferences with affiliate marketing schemes in social media posts declared a financial interest in the promotion. Where a financial interest does exist, these posts may have broken social media platform rules that require users to declare such paid promotions.

Facebook's rules state that "branded content may only be posted with the use of the branded content tool" which flags it as a paid promotion.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Instagram's policies "require anyone... to tag business partners in their branded content posts when there's an exchange of value between a creator or publisher and a business partner."<sup>24</sup>



Twitter states that "[a]dvertisements posted as organic Tweets will require disclosures to viewers indicating the commercial nature of such content." YouTube requires users to check a box signalling paid promotions in their videos. <sup>26</sup>

In many countries, failure to disclose paid promotions may also fall foul of advertising regulations around influencer marketing.<sup>27</sup>

#### The Truth About Vaccines (TTAV)

The Truth About Vaccines is a video series produced by Ty and Charlene Bollinger, who have claimed that the Covid vaccine "is a killer". Leading anti-vaxxers including Andrew Wakefield and Joseph Mercola feature in the series, and every other anti-vaxxer studied in this report has promoted the series in some way. In some cases, the Bollingers created custom landing pages carrying quotes from leading anti-vaxxers such as Del Bigtree and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.<sup>29</sup>

Archived copies of a web page advertising their affiliate marketing scheme listed a number of leading anti-vaxxers including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Sherri Tenpenny and Mike Adams amongst the top ten of their "overall sales leaderboard".<sup>30</sup> The same page states that affiliates will "earn 40% commissions on all digital products and 30% on all physical product sales", with video packages currently for sale at prices of up to \$499.<sup>31</sup>

Organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers have also promoted the Bollingers' alternative health series, *The Truth About Cancer* (TTAC).<sup>32</sup> An archived affiliate hub for TTAC is advertised with the claim "\$14 million PAID in affiliate commissions since 2014."<sup>33</sup>



- 3. Jonathan Landsman
  4. Robert Kennedy
  5. Michael Adams
  6. Dr. Sherri Tenpenny
  7. Jonathan Otto
  8. Dr. Eric Z & Mama Z
  - as of yesterday midnight

9. Erin Elizabeth 10. Trevor King





#### **Vaccines Revealed**

Vaccines Revealed is a video series produced by Jeff Hays, a former associate of the Bollingers, featuring leading antivaxxers including Andrew Wakefield and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.<sup>34</sup> A page advertising an affiliate marketing scheme for the series states "you earn 50%" on sales of videos ranging up to \$279 for a "gold package" including physical copies of the series.<sup>35</sup> Two tweets promoting the series posted by Children's Health Defense, the organisation led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., contain links to "ro20trk.com", a "performance tracking" site that has been used by a number of accounts promoting Jeff Hays films.<sup>36</sup>



#### **Health Freedom Summit**

The Health Freedom Summit was organised by Alana Newman and Stephanie Lind in February 2021 and featured talks from leading anti-vaxxers including Del Bigtree and the Bollingers.<sup>37</sup> Amongst a number of packages for sale on the summit's website is a "premium pass" worth \$69.<sup>38</sup>

An "affiliate invitation" video hosted on Newman's Vimeo account explains that affiliates "get a 50 percent commission on every purchase made with your unique link".<sup>39</sup> In the same video, Newman explains that "last year our affiliates had a lot of success, we were writing some very nice cheques to people", prompting Lind to interject "9,000!" before Newman responds "yeah, thousands, to our people".<sup>40</sup>

The event was hosted on the Kajabi platform which offers a range of affiliate marketing tools, including the generation of unique links for affiliates to use. <sup>41</sup> A Facebook page for Andrew Wakefield's most recent film promoted the summit with a unique Kajabi link, and a sales page for premium passes to the summit states that "part of every premium pass sale goes directly to Andy Wakefield's documentary production company". <sup>42</sup> In addition, summit attendees are able to purchase a "platinum license" to hold screenings of Wakefield's film, 1986: The Act. <sup>43</sup>



#### **Basic License**

For \$497, your basic screening license grants you permission to show the film one-time at a public event. You'll get 10 DVDs to resell, and a beautifully designed teaching guide to help you build a spectacular event from the ground up.

Purchase Basic License



#### **Platinum License**

For \$997, your Platinum License grants you permission to show the film an unlimited number of times to your community. You'll get extra merch and a teaching guide.

**Purchase Platinum License** 



# How twelve leading anti-vaxxers use social media to generate funding

The rest of this report profiles twelve leading anti-vaxxers, examining how they use social media to spread their messages and raise funds.

These twelve have been selected because of their influential roles in spreading vaccine misinformation, and because of the publicly available information about the finances of the organisations they are associated with.

- 1. Joseph Mercola
- 2. Andrew Wakefield
- 3. Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
- 4. Del Bigtree
- 5. Larry Cook
- 6. Ty and Charlene Bollinger
- 7. Sherri Tenpenny
- 8. Mike Adams
- 9. Rashid Buttar
- 10. Barbara Loe Fisher
- 11. Sauer Ji
- 12. Kelly Brogan

Each of the below profiles sets out how many followers an anti-vaxxer and the organisations they are associated with have in total, and broken down by platform.

Marked in red next to each of these figures is how many followers that anti-vaxxer and their associated organisations have lost due to having their accounts deplatformed based on our tracking of anti-vaxxer accounts dating back to December 2019.

Each profile also collates some of the financial information relevant to each anti-vaxxer present in the rest of this report, and tries to show how online misinformation is intimately linked to anti-vaxxers' attempts to sell products or raise donations.



Joseph Mercola

How the anti-vaxx entrepreneur has profited during the pandemic

Followers	4,155,110	Revenue	\$7,218,562
Facebook	2,797,577	PPP Loans	\$617,500
Instagram	354,033	Employees	159
YouTube	411,622	Salary	N/A
Twitter	591.878	_	

Joseph Mercola runs the world's most popular alternative health news site, Mercola.com, sometimes using health misinformation to promote the sale of supplements, books and food.<sup>44</sup> That website sits at the center of a business empire that has brought Mercola a net worth of \$100 million according to a 2017 affidavit.<sup>45</sup>

At the height of the Covid pandemic, Mercola promoted a new website called *Stop Covid Cold* designed to offer apparently independent advice on preventing or treating Covid with alternative remedies. <sup>46</sup> The site recommended a range of supplements, for example suggesting that the plant pigment quercetin is "a treatment for SARS coronavirus infections", in many cases linking back to articles on Mercola.com. <sup>47</sup>

The Stop Covid Cold website was taken down in April following a warning letter from the US Food and Drug Administration that warned Mercola to "ensure that you are not misleadingly representing your products as safe and effective for a COVID-19 related use". <sup>48</sup> Mercola later announced in May that he would permanently remove "all articles related to vitamins D, C, zinc and Covid-19" from his website. <sup>49</sup>

Mercola promoted supplements as potential remedies for Covid despite a series of previous complaints about false health claims used to promote his products. According to a 2006 warning letter, Mercola marketed the supplement Vitamin K2 with claims about alleged health advantages including it "inhibits cancer cell growth". More recently, the Federal Trade Commission forced Mercola to stop claiming that tanning beds he sold would "slash your risk of cancer" and refund \$2.59 million to over 1,300 customers who had purchased one.

Despite his claims to have removed articles about Covid from his website, Mercola.com continues to host dozens of articles about Covid vaccines with titles such as "How Covid-19 vaccine can destroy your immune system" and "Covid vaccines may bring avalanche of neurological disease". Many of these articles carry a "Fact Checked" badge despite being checked by a Mercola employee rather than an independent fact-checker. 53

Mercola uses some of his wealth to fund other anti-vaccine organisations, including the National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC). Over the past decade, the NVIC has received more than \$3.3 million in donations from Mercola's foundation accounting for close to 40% of its funding. Our previous report, *The Anti-Vaxx Industry*, showed that the NVIC had shared Mercola.com articles with its Facebook followers. 55

Alongside his media and market enterprises Mercola operates Mercola Consulting Services, a company "specializing in internet marketing, software development, and IT infrastructure", with a US head office and an offshore branch in the Philippines.<sup>56</sup>



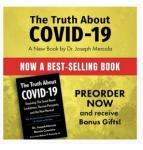
#### Mercola's new book marries alternative health with conspiracy theories

While Mercola is already the author of books on the "hidden harms" of 5G, the bird flu "hoax" and "the benefits of sunlight exposure", his latest book is his most explicit attempt yet to marry his alternative health views with popular conspiracy theories.<sup>57</sup>

Writing in *The Truth About Covid-19*, which features a foreword from fellow antivaxxer Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Mercola claims "the evidence suggests the Covid-19 pandemic is anything but accidental." Against this background of distrust in the governments and health professionals battling the pandemic, Mercola recommends his own remedies for Covid, even claiming that "nebulized hydrogen peroxide" - breathing bleach - is "the most effective therapy for acute Covid-19". 59









As well as marketing the book in posts to his X million followers, Mercola has promoted it in appearances alongside leading conspiracy theorists. In an interview with Alex Jones on InfoWars, which sells copies of Mercola's book in its online shop, Mercola claimed the Covid vaccine would kill more people than the virus itself, adding "this clearly has every sign of a depopulation strategy". <sup>60</sup> Mercola also appeared on former Trump advisor Steve Bannon "War Room" videocast, as well as Richie Allan's radio show which has previously hosted Holocaust deniers and antisemites. <sup>61</sup>

At the time of publication, Mercola's book ranks as Amazon's best seller in the vaccinations category.<sup>62</sup>







### **Andrew Wakefield**

Founder of the modern anti-vaxx movement now produces films

Followers	88,351 (- <mark>434</mark> )	Revenue	\$484,226
Facebook	45,383 ( <del>-434)</del>	PPP Loans	N/A
Instagram	32,768	Employees	3
YouTube	0	Salary	N/A
Twitter	10,200		

Andrew Wakefield launched the modern anti-vaccine movement with a now-retracted study that falsely linked the combined measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) jab to autism.<sup>63</sup> Wakefield fled the UK after his financial interests in the study were exposed, finding a new role in the US anti-vaccine movement as a producer of slick propaganda films that repackage his debunked claims about vaccines.

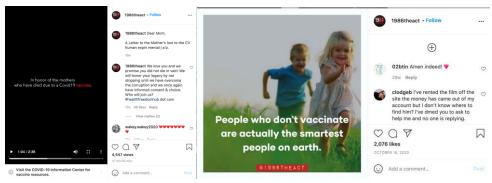
Wakefield's 1998 study linking the MMR jab to autism triggered an international panic that is still exploited by anti-vaxxers today. But in a series of investigations beginning in 2004, the journalist Brian Deer revealed that Wakefield had failed to disclose that he had been paid £435,000 by a personal injury lawyer to help build a case against vaccine manufacturers.<sup>64</sup> Wakefield had also filed a patent for a single measles shot to rival the MMR jab, hoping to raise millions from potential investors.<sup>65</sup>

Amidst the panic over vaccines and autism that he helped create, Wakefield sold his £1 million London property and moved to Austin, Texas where he became involved in autism charities, including the Thoughtful House Center for Children.<sup>66</sup>

However, by 2010 the Lancet had retracted Wakefield's study, telling the Guardian "It was utterly clear, without any ambiguity at all, that the statements in the paper were utterly false".<sup>67</sup> In the following months, Wakefield lost his UK medical license and he resigned from Thoughtful House where he received a \$280,000 salary.<sup>68</sup>

#### Wakefield promotes his films using Covid and vaccine misinformation

Facebook and Instagram accounts created to promote Wakefield's latest film, 1986: The Act, regularly share misinformation related to Covid-19 and vaccines.<sup>69</sup> Other posts link vaccine hesitancy to good parenting, a trend noted in our previous report, The Anti-Vaxx Playbook, with content that praises mothers who "fight for the truth" by deciding not to vaccinate their children.<sup>70</sup>





In 2016 Wakefield reinvented himself as an anti-vaccine filmmaker with *Vaxxed*, directed by Wakefield himself with fellow anti-vaxxer Del Bigtree serving as producer. *Vaxxed* uses testimony from parents of autistic children to prop up Wakefield's debunked claims about a link with vaccines, alleging "an alarming deception that has contributed to the skyrocketing increase of autism."

The closing credits of *Vaxxed* list the foundation owned by multi-millionaire financier Bernard Selz as a contributor.<sup>73</sup> The Selz Foundation, which has also donated millions to the organisation led by anti-vaxxer Del Bigtree, donated a total of \$848,000 to Wakefield's Autism Media Channel business and its associated non-profit in the year of the film's production.<sup>74</sup> The film grossed \$1.4 million and inspired a sequel on which Robert F. Kennedy Jr. served as executive producer.<sup>75</sup>

#### Wakefield sells his films to anti-vaxxers looking to persuade friends and family

Wakefield's appearance at the Health Freedom Summit, an anti-vaccine conference that took place in February, was accompanied by a dedicated webpage offering attendees screening licenses for his latest film, 1986: The Act, with the promise of "bringing this timely documentary to your community." Packages are accompanied by "a beautifully designed teaching guide to help you build a spectacular event", with a "Platinum License" costing \$997. The conference's organiser, Alana Newman, says in a promotional video that "you're paying for the screening license, but you can earn a great income if you do it right by hosting a screening." Wakefield's own website for the film offers a package of 100 DVDs of the film for sale at \$1,500, as well as merchandise.

Wakefield supplements income from film sales with donations and speaking fees. Social media accounts for his films and weekly podcast request donations to a PayPal account, while his Crystal Clear Films Foundation (CCFF) is listed as a charity in the Amazon Smile program. Wakefield also regularly appears at anti-vaccine conferences, charging as much as 3,000 Canadian dollars for such appearances. Responding to journalists at the Canadian broadcaster CBC, Wakefield's lawyer confirmed his activities have raised "a few million" for the anti-vaccine cause, but insisted he is not a "profiteer on this issue".

Wakefield has announced a new social media platform intended to unite people concerned about "the threat of masks, mandates, social distancing, Covid vaccines" into "a single voter bloc".<sup>82</sup> A holding page for the site, developed with Pure Social which also streams Wakefield's films, promises "we will no longer depend on big tech".<sup>83</sup>

In one recent appearance on Del Bigtree's *Highwire* show, Wakefield revealed that he spends time living on a yacht.<sup>84</sup>





## Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Promoting misinformation about African Americans and vaccines

1,040,822 (-796,731) **Followers** Revenue \$2,941,894 Facebook 474,506 **PPP Loans** \$145,399 214,607 (-796,731) **Employees** Instagram 8 \$255,000

YouTube 44,000 Salary

Twitter 307,709

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has risen to become the anti-vaccine movement's leading figure during the pandemic, driven by explosive growth on social media. Tracking carried out by CCDH shows that Kennedy's personal accounts gained nearly a million followers in 2020.

Kennedy was quick to post about popular conspiracies arising during the pandemic. Posts to his now removed Instagram account claimed that the "flu shot is 2.4x more deadly than Covid-19", that "Bill Gates wants to chip us... for surveillance and transhumanism" and that 5G technology "causes catastrophic biological damage."85

These claims are given extra weight by Kennedy's reputation as the nephew of former president John F. Kennedy, and a decade of campaigning on environmental issues as founder of the Waterkeeper Alliance. 86 From this platform, Kennedy embarked on a new campaign questioning the use of mercury in vaccines, setting up the World Mercury Project, now operating under the name Children's Health Defense with a broader mission of questioning the safety of vaccines.<sup>87</sup>

During the pandemic, Children's Health Defense rebranded its news section as "The Defender", announcing that its alternative takes on vaccines would "evade official censorship" and counter "burgeoning corporate totalitarianism" in five languages. 88 Data shows that visits to the site have risen sharply, with 2.35 million visits in March 2021.<sup>89</sup>

The site has posted several misleading articles linking Covid vaccines to deaths as well as unsustained claims about vaccine safety including that mRNA vaccines might permanently alter people's DNA and that unvaccinated children are healthier than vaccinated children.90

Organisations affiliated with Kennedy were responsible for the bulk of Facebook advertising critical of vaccinations until Facebook restricted the group's ability to advertise in 2019 on the grounds that it was spreading misinformation, according to the journal Vaccine. 91 Restrictions and removal of social media accounts clearly impair the ability to monetize social media followings, as Kennedy told NPR actions by Facebook have cost "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in lost donations to CHD.92

In August 2020, Kennedy addressed a Berlin rally against pandemic restrictions that he described as a protest against "Bill Gates's bio security agenda, the rise of authoritarian surveillance state and the Pharma sponsored coup d'etat against liberal democracy."93 Children's Health Defense has since established a base in Europe, with Kennedy explaining at its launch "if we win this battle in just one nation, the United States, we're still going to lose it globally."94



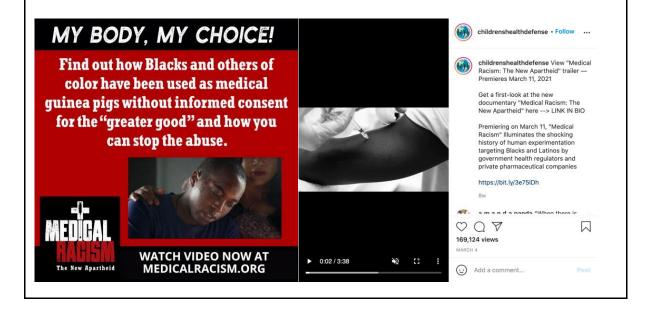
# Kennedy debuts film containing misinformation about African Americans and vaccines

In 2021, Kennedy debuted a propaganda film targeting African Americans called "Medical Racism: The New Apartheid." Promoting the film through the Children's Health Defense social media, supporters were provided with memes and other material to promote the film themselves. Soliciting donations directed towards CHD, the supporters are told donations for \$25 help reach "100 more people" or \$500 to reach "4,000 more people," with the film.

Hosted through the Children's Health Defense website and a project of CHD films, Kennedy produced his new anti-vaccine film alongside Tony Muhammad, a Nation of Islam minister. Muhammad has made statements about "wicked Jews" and "the Jewish controlled media", claiming Jews are plotting to "control" African Americans. 99

In a webinar with Tony Muhammad Kevin Jenkins of the Urban Global Health Alliance, Kennedy repeats the film's claim that "Blacks are disproportionately harmed by vaccine injury." He continues to claim that "Blacks react completely differently to vaccines," so it is "just one huge experiment on Black Americans, and they know what is happening." This echoes previous statements Kennedy has made in July 2020, claiming that "people with African blood react differently to vaccines than people with caucasian blood, they're much more sensitive." 102

The imagery for promotion and the film itself play upon the history of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in order to feed hesitancy and distrust for the Covid-19 vaccine among African Americans. Kennedy and Jenkins are Producers and featured in the film, with David Centner as Executive Producer. David Centner as Executive Producer.





# **Del Bigtree**

Anti-vaxx presenter funded by millionaire tech and pharma investor

369,215 (-734,604) \$3,457,192 **Followers** Revenue Facebook 172,107 (-341,318) PPP Loans \$165,632 Instagram 14,721 (-219,286) **Employees** 10 YouTube 1,250 (-174,000) Salary \$232,000 **Twitter** 181,137

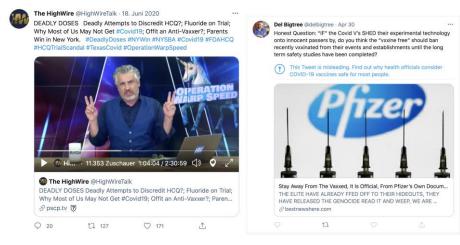
Del Bigtree hosts *The Highwire*, a slick, magazine-style anti-vaccine show that was broadcast live to over 600,000 followers until it was deplatformed from Facebook and YouTube last year following reports he had advised viewers to intentionally contract Covid.<sup>105</sup> Bigtree and his campaign organisation, Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN), still reach 370,000 followers through their own accounts.

A former producer on the TV health talk show *The Doctors*, Bigtree has no medical credentials but began his campaigning against vaccines as a producer for the film *Vaxxed*, which promoted director Andrew Wakefield's debunked claims linking vaccines to autism.<sup>106</sup>

The same year *Vaxxed* was released, Bigtree established his Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN) where he now serves as Executive Director.<sup>107</sup> As well as producing Bigtree's *Highwire* online show, ICAN regularly launches legal challenges against government agencies and pharmaceutical companies, using any information obtained by the proceedings to lend credibility to the group's campaigning and fundraising efforts.<sup>108</sup>

#### Bigtree's Highwire show is still broadcast on Twitter

Bigtree is still active on Twitter where he has more than 180,000 followers, and has used the platform to suggest that African Americans are unknowing test subjects for Covid vaccines. In another recent tweet, Bigtree shared an article falsely claiming Pfizer's own documents say that unvaccinated women who get exposed to vaccinated people can "A: miscarry, B: spontaneously abort, C. poison a baby via her breast milk, D: Have babies that have cognitive difficulties."





Bigtree introduces episodes of *The Highwire* by telling viewers "I don't want corporate sponsors telling us what to investigate or what to say, instead, you're our sponsors."<sup>111</sup> However, filings for ICAN's largest donor, the Selz Foundation show it donated more than \$2.9 million between 2016 and 2018, including a crucial \$100,000 in ICAN's first year.<sup>112</sup>

This funding, which accounted for the majority of the organization's revenue, was directed by Bernard Selz, a multi-millionaire tech and pharma investor and owner of Selz Capital and his wife Lisa Selz. Capital owns multimillion dollar holdings in the drug companies Flexion Therapeutics and Constellation Pharmaceuticals, as well as \$25.5 million in Amazon shares, \$15 million in Microsoft, \$10 million in Google and \$1.6 million in Paypal. Lisa Selz served as ICAN's president until 2018, according to tax records, but is no longer listed in that role in the 2019 form.

Records for another non-profit called "T. Row Price Charitable" show that it donated a total of \$2,460,000 to "Informed Consent Action Network" in 2019, and another \$900,000 the year before.<sup>116</sup> The non-profit describes itself as a "donor-advised fund" which receives contributions before individual donors who then recommends how those assets should be distributed to other charities or causes.<sup>117</sup>

Bigtree reportedly charges as much as \$3,000 for speaking engagements, not including airfare and hotel. He reportedly told the journalists that they "help to fund the greater part of my work, which involves travelling state to state to speak and educate for free."<sup>118</sup>

#### Bigtree took part in January 6th anti-vaxx rally in Washington DC

On January the 6th 2021, Bigtree spoke at the "MAGA Freedom Rally D.C." in Washington DC which was headed by Ty and Charlene Bollinger. Speaking about a block from the Capitol, Bigtree told the crowd "I wish I could tell you I believed in the CDC... I wish I could tell you that this Pandemic really is dangerous..." he said. "I wish I could believe that voting machines worked... but none of this is happening." 120



Following the removal of their two channels, ICAN launched legal action against Facebook and YouTube. The case documents reveal that "Facebook's actions have caused ICAN to lose its 360,000 followers on Facebook and all its analytical data pertaining to all videos uploaded since 2017" and "have severely curtailed ICAN's ability to reach its followers and raise funds". <sup>121</sup> Likewise, ICAN stated that it "had to raise and expend thousands of dollars to get its own website up and running". <sup>122</sup> The show's new home at thehighwire.com has seen its traffic rise to 910,000 monthly visits, less than half the 1.9 million monthly views *The Highwire* previously received on YouTube alone. <sup>123</sup>



# **Larry Cook**

Facebook group founder turns to QAnon conspiracy theories

Followers	69,461 ( <del>-373,188</del> )	Revenue	\$79,000
Facebook	17,461 (-368,966)	PPP Loans	N/A
Instagram	0	Employees	N/A
YouTube	52,000	Salary	N/A
Twitter	0		

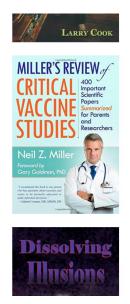
Larry Cook is a former alternative health entrepreneur who turned his stewardship of Facebook's largest anti-vaccine Facebook Group into a career of full-time activism. 124

Cook's main Facebook Group, named "Stop Mandatory Vaccination", already had close to 200,000 members at the outset of the pandemic. Health misinformation shared in the Group has had deadly consequences: one four-year-old is known to have died after his mother decided against using the prescription drug Tamiflu based on advice from its members.<sup>125</sup>

#### How the Stop Mandatory Vaccination group trained new anti-vaxx activists

Evee Clobes, the six month old child of Catelin Clobes, died in March 2019 just 36 hours after receiving routine vaccinations.<sup>126</sup> An autopsy would eventually conclude that Evee had died of accidental suffocation while co-sleeping with her mother, but in the days following her death Clobes recorded a video that went viral in anti-vaccine groups.<sup>127</sup> Within a week, she had joined the Stop Mandatory Vaccination Facebook Group, and was featured in an article on Cook's website linking the death of Evee to her routine vaccinations.<sup>128</sup>

CCDH's previous report, The Anti-Vaxx Playbook, revealed that Cook's Facebook Group hosted a range of training materials for anti-vaxx activists, including a list of talking points aimed at persuading African Americans to refuse vaccinations.<sup>129</sup>







For Cook, the Stop Mandatory Vaccination Group represented a captive audience who could fund his lifestyle as an alternative health guru and anti-vaccine activist. Despite raising money for anti-vaccine campaigns, a disclaimer written by Cook made clear that donations "go directly to me and into my bank account" and "may be used to pay my personal bills". <sup>130</sup> Cook raised \$79,000 from GoFundMe campaigns before his ban from the site in 2019. <sup>131</sup>

Cook supplements donation income by promoting a branded storefront on Amazon called "Natural Living Essentials" selling supplements and anti-vaccine books.<sup>132</sup> The storefront bears a notice that Cook "earns money from this storefront" as part of Amazon's "Influencer Program" offering commission of up to five percent on any products sold.<sup>133</sup> Cook also promotes products known to offer a commission through affiliate marketing, such as a zeolite "heavy metal detox" offered by alternative health brand Touchstone Essentials that Cook promises will "strengthen your immunity".<sup>134</sup>

Facebook removed the Stop Mandatory Vaccination Group and Page in November 2020, citing Cook's violation of rules on QAnon content, causing him to lose an audience of over 360,000.<sup>135</sup> In an affidavit offered by Cook the following month, he complains that as a result of Facebook's actions "my ability to secure ongoing revenue for my full time activist work has been demolished."<sup>136</sup>

Now reduced to a much smaller following on mainstream platforms, Cook has attempted to build a new community on his own "Covid-19 Refusers" website. The site, which pushes misinformation about Covid, QAnon conspiracies and Cook's "vaccine free parenting masterclass", currently has just under 3,200 members.<sup>137</sup>

#### Cook's attempt to merge the QAnon and anti-vaxx movements

In a video posted to his YouTube channel in May 2020, Larry Cook launched a new online community called "Medical Freedom Patriots".<sup>138</sup> Cook was explicit that his new project was focused on "educating the Republican voting base about why we oppose vaccine mandates", describing his "target demographic" as "pro President Trump", "anti vaccine" and "QAnon friendly".<sup>139</sup> Cook is now an enthusiastic proponent of the QAnon conspiracy theory, stating that "When you wrap your head around the idea that it's the deep state that is facilitating the vaccine mandates… all of a sudden it makes complete sense."<sup>140</sup>





### Ty and Charlene Bollinger

Anti-vaxxer couple marketing vaccine disinformation

Followers	1,581,529 (- <mark>193,221</mark> )	Revenue	\$3,138,717
Facebook	1,294,501	PPP Loans	\$473,727
Instagram	122,028 (-76,500)	Employees	27
YouTube	165,000 (-74,200)	Salary	N/A
<b>—</b> 100	0 ( ( ) = 34)		

Twitter 0 (-42,521)



Ty and Charlene Bollinger have made a career out of marketing paid-for documentaries spreading misinformation about cancer treatments and vaccines promoted to a social media audience of over 1.6 million followers at the height of the pandemic.<sup>141</sup>

The Bollingers established the docuseries brand *The Truth About Cancer* (TTAC) in 2014 after losing family members to the disease. The series promises to give customers up to \$499 access to "secret' information so that you can understand exactly what causes cancer and how to avoid it." Amongst other health misinformation promoted by the docuseries and its website is one section titled "Do Vaccines Cause Cancer?". 144

In 2017 the Bollingers established a new brand, *The Truth About Vaccines* (TTAV).<sup>145</sup> Following the same model they established with their series on cancer, TTAV promotes paid-for disinformation about vaccines at prices of up to \$499.<sup>146</sup> Promotional videos for the series shared with 120,000 followers of the TTAV Facebook Page feature former doctor Andrew Wakefield claiming that "the environment isn't going to kill us in anything like the same time frame that vaccines are going to kill us" and that "autism is just a small part of the damage done" by vaccines.<sup>147</sup>

#### How the Bollingers focus on anxious parents with their anti-vaccine marketing

Promotional materials for *The Truth About Vaccines* include suggested posts for Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. They feature graphics of children and vaccine needles with suggestive questions targeting parents and the vaccine hesitant, such as "Can getting so many vaccines at once harm my baby?" 149







In 2020, the Bollingers produced a new edition of TTAV, featuring leading anti-vaxxers including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Sherri Tenpenny, Mike Adams, Andrew Wakefield, Barbara Loe Fisher, Del Bigtree, Sayer Ji, Joseph Mercola, and Rashid Buttar.<sup>150</sup> Materials created to promote this series include a "Coronavirus Field Guide," which falsely links Covid-19 to 5G conspiracies and promotes "intravenous Vitamin C" as a way to combat the virus.<sup>151</sup>

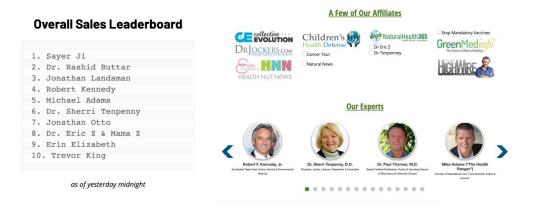
When purchasing a TTAV package, a portion of the proceeds are donated to Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Children's Health Defense organisation, which also promoted the series in social media posts.<sup>152</sup>

Both docuseries produced by the Bollingers have used an affiliate marketing scheme, where partners promote the series to their own audiences and receive a commission on the sales they generate. Legal documents from a 2020 lawsuit filed by Jeff Hays, a participant in the Bollingers' affiliate program, shows that he had earned \$238,881 in commissions from over 34,000 "leads" on potential customers.<sup>153</sup>

#### The Bollingers' affiliate marketing scheme helps fund the anti-vaccine industry

The Bollingers employed an affiliate program to sell the 2020 edition of their docuseries, *The Truth About Vaccines* (TTAV). Affiliates named on the partner website for TTAV 2020 include logos for Robert F. Kennedy's Children's Health Defense, Sayer Ji's GreenMedInfo, Sherri Tenpenny, Larry Cook's Stop Mandatory Vaccines, and Del Bigtree's The Highwire.<sup>154</sup> Affiliates were provided with social media and email copy, promotional materials and graphics, and the Coronavirus Field Guide.

Web archives reveal that shortly after TTAV's launch in April 2020, a number of leading anti-vaxxers were listed in a top ten sales leaderboard for the series.<sup>155</sup> A "Kick-off Contest" associated with the launch of TTAV 2020 advertised \$15,000 in cash prizes for those who produced the most leads.<sup>156</sup>



In a video from 2016, Ty Bollinger describes his affiliate marketing scheme as a "time-tested and proven model that has earned our partners millions of dollars." By 2019, an affiliate hub for *The Truth About Cancer* claimed the scheme had paid out \$14 million to partners. 158

The Bollingers have expressed support for former US President Donald Trump despite his backing for Covid vaccines and have shared posts promoting the pro-Trump QAnon



conspiracy theory.<sup>159</sup> In 2020 the Bollingers founded the *United Medical Freedom Super PAC* to campaign against vaccines in the US elections.<sup>160</sup>

The Bollingers used their PAC to organise an anti-vaccine rally in Washington DC on the same day that Trump supporters stormed the Capitol. Amongst the anti-vaxxers and pro-Trump political figures to address the rally was Roger Stone, the former Trump advisor who was convicted of lying to Congress and obstructing the investigation into the Trump campaign's coordination with Russia for the 2016 election. Stone had previously received a \$11,236 "honorarium" from the PAC according to FEC filings.





# Sherri Tenpenny

Anti-vaxx entrepreneur profiting from training an "army" of activists

Followers	262,335 ( <del>-346,658</del> )	Revenue	\$2,130,000
Facebook	79,963 (- <mark>234,190</mark> )	PPP Loans	\$72,500
Instagram	88,495 ( <del>-112,468</del> )	Employees	13
YouTube	0	Salary	N/A
Twitter	93,877		

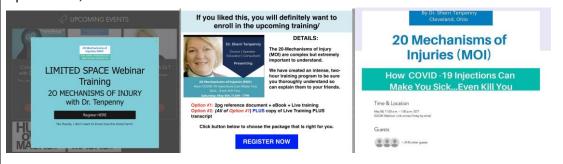
Sherri Tenpenny is a practising osteopathic physician and alternative health entrepreneur who offers paid-for "boot camps" on anti-vaccine activism. The self-proclaimed "doctor, speaker, educator, consultant" promotes her services through a network of social media accounts with 260,000 followers.<sup>164</sup>

During the pandemic, Tenpenny held a training session that discussed how to target vaccine hesitant people and spread doubt about information from public health agencies. According to the journalists, Tenpenny told participants "my job is to teach the 400 of you in the class... so each one of you go out and teach 1,000", adding "we're going to build an entire army". 165

With tickets reported to cost over \$500, Tenpenny and her associates could have made over \$200,000 in total from the event. According to reporters at CBC, this course was the eighth of its kind since 2017, with previous courses focusing on anti-vaccination information while the most recent session was Covid specific. 167

#### Tenpenny's training on how "Covid-19 injections can make you sick... even kill you"

In early May 2021, Sherri Tenpenny hosted a "How Covid-19 Injections Can Make You Sick ...Even Kill You" training webinar through Zoom, costing up to \$199 to attend. In promotional material for the training Tenpenny claimed "we may soon be seeing the largest amount of chronic illness and deaths - caused by an injection - ever encountered in history." Tenpenny's website claimed that another vaccine injury event had 2,145 attendees paying at least \$165 a ticket, which could have earned her up to \$353,925.



Tenpenny, who has referred to the Covid pandemic as a "scamdemic" and the coronavirus vaccines as a "genocidal, DNA-manipulating, infertility-causing, dementia-causing machine", has also highlighted the pandemic as an opportunity to build a wider movement with campaigners against masks and lockdowns.<sup>171</sup> In an attempt to develop



"leaders and activists", she hosted an eight week training program for members of the anti-lockdown and anti-mask organisation Hugs Over Masks in August 2020.<sup>172</sup>

According to her webpage, the osteopathic physician still attends to patients at her Tenpenny Integrative Medical Center in Ohio three days per week.<sup>173</sup> She also hosts several shows which promoted misinformation about vaccines, including a podcast called *The Tenpenny Files.*<sup>174</sup> It offers listeners exclusive, member-only content and currently has 84 patrons giving a combined \$2,199 in donations per month.<sup>175</sup>

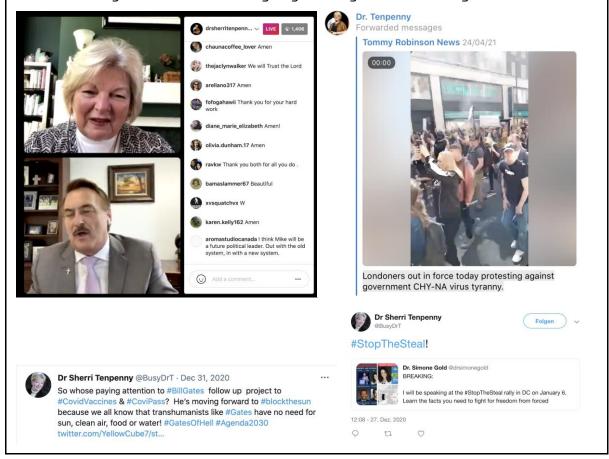
Despite the removal of her main Facebook and Instagram accounts, representing the loss of nearly 350,000 followers, Tenpenny has maintained a presence on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter.

#### Tenpenny's promotion of election conspiracies and far-right figures

As well as anti-vaccine content, Tenpenny has shared election misinformation and she recently interviewed US election conspiracist Mike Lindell live on her Instagram channel.<sup>176</sup>

On Telegram, Tenpenny has reposted videos from anti-lockdown protests including content from far-right UK activist Tommy Robinson which claimed "Londoners out in force today protesting against government CHY-NA virus tyranny." <sup>177</sup>

The alternative health entrepreneur has also reportedly appeared on several QAnon shows in March and April 2021 and tweeted about an impending transhumanist plot, orchestrated by Bill Gates who is allegedly working toward blocking out the sun.<sup>178</sup>





### Mike Adams

Anti-vaxx conspiracist using alt-tech to push survival gear

Followers	251,838	Revenue	\$4,151,329
Facebook	0	PPP Loans	\$21,179
Instagram	0	Employees	5
YouTube	251,000	Salary	N/A
Twitter	838		

Mike Adams is the founder of Natural News and Brighteon.com where he peddles conspiracies about attacks on public health and liberty while plugging survivalist products.<sup>179</sup>



Natural News, registered in 2005, appears to be the largest alternative health news site after Mercola.com, receiving 3.7m visits in March 2021. Many of its articles promote fake cures and conspiracy theories about vaccines, 9/11, climate change, 5G and Covid. Link to Adams' "Health Ranger Store" are featured throughout the site, selling products such as dietary supplements and preparedness supplies.

#### Adams claims "vaccinated people are making healthy people sick"

Adams claims that mRNA vaccines are "extermination machines" that can cause brain damage and alter the human genome.<sup>183</sup> He also refers to the vaccine rollout as a "leftwing vaccine suicide cult", insisting that "vaccinated people are making healthy people sick" via "shedding" of the vaccine, causing stroke, heart attack and infertility.<sup>184</sup> Adams says vaccinated people will become diseased and be replaced by "obedient third world illegals" while those refusing vaccines will be "hunted for extermination".<sup>185</sup>





In 2018, YouTube banned The Health Ranger and Adams responded by launching Brighteon.com.<sup>186</sup> Announcing "the online destination for videos and documentaries that are banned elsewhere (because they contain too much truth, usually)", Adams claimed to have spent at least \$2.5 million on the platform while simultaneously soliciting online donations.<sup>187</sup> Brighteon reached more than 8.7 million people in January 2021.<sup>188</sup>



Brighteon.com frequently advertises Adams' products and services.<sup>189</sup> One video where Adams claims "they are out to kill us with weaponized vaccines" advertises iodine tablets and non-GMO vitamin C, available to buy on a Brighteon-branded store.<sup>190</sup>



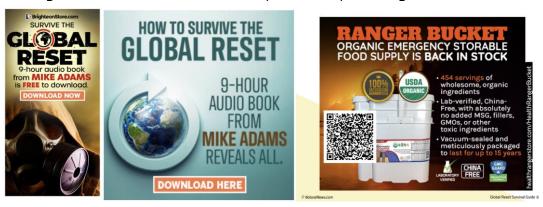
Adams' network of websites has amplified right-wing conspiracy theories<sup>191</sup> about US election fraud, The Great Reset and the QAnon-related blood-harvesting theory.<sup>192</sup> He has

guest-hosted conspiracist Alex Jones's Infowars show<sup>193</sup> and in April 2021, spoke at the Tulsa Health & Freedom Conference with anti-vaxxers the Bollingers and Andrew Wakefield and conspiracists General Michael Flynn, Lin Wood and Sidney Powell.<sup>194</sup>

#### Adams invites his followers to be "among the 10% who survive" the Great Reset

Adams, who has previously warned that the year 2000 would bring catastrophe, claims The Global Reset "aims to eliminate 90% of the human population on planet earth". His Global Reset Survival Guide 2020 - 2025 is an audiobook and PDF he says is for "the 10% who survive". 195

The PDF advertises survival products sold on Adams' Health Ranger Store and "Global Reset" promo codes for the Brighteon Store. He claims: "the coronavirus release, the punishing economic shutdowns, the engineered riots and the violent left-wing mobs running loose in America's cities are all part of the planned global reset." 198



The NaturalNews Facebook Page had nearly 3 million followers when it was removed in June 2019. However, Adams continued to push medical disinformation on Facebook by posting content on Natural News-branded disinformation groups and using affiliated website links. By May 2020, Facebook banned outbound links to Adams' domains after they had allegedly pushed engagement via content farms. 199



## **Rashid Buttar**

Reprimanded osteopathic physician pushing unproven treatments

Followers	82,599 (-1,176,999)	Revenue	\$581,584
Facebook	2,643 (-398,999)	PPP Loans	N/A
Instagram	0 (-278,000)	Employees	6
YouTube	0 (-500,000)	Salary	N/A
Twitter	79,956		

Rashid Buttar is a osteopathic physician and anti-vaxx entrepreneur who uses controversial chelation therapy to attempt to treat conditions such as autism and cancer.<sup>200</sup> He has been cited by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for mismarketing supplements and formally reprimanded by the North Carolina Medical Board which alleged he had given cancer patients treatments "so unproven the only possible benefit would be to give false hope".<sup>201</sup>

Buttar has claimed on social media that Covid is a bioweapon with links to 5G, the vaccine could cause infertility and the flu vaccine could cause Covid.<sup>202</sup> He has also promoted unproven Covid remedies and amplified discredited public health officials.<sup>203</sup> Buttar's Covid conspiracy videos propelled him from 4,200 YouTube subscribers in March 2020 to nearly 400,000 by May 2020. By the time YouTube removed his channel in May 2021, it had accumulated half a million subscribers.<sup>204</sup>

Buttar previously sold audio seminars and DVDs marketed to people affected by cancer, heart disease, autism and stroke with the promise that "this may be the most important information you will ever learn". With the advent of social media, Buttar has adapted this model to the issues of Covid and vaccines, amassing a large YouTube following to sell products to. 206

Those videos direct viewers to Buttar's *International Association for a Disease Free World* (IADFW) website, where he invites would-be customers to pay \$99 to join the association and "exit the public domain", allowing them access members' only content. Buttar explains that this is necessary because "there are certain things that you cannot say if you are in the health world today."

This area includes a shop selling "The Drops of Life", a range of four products with no listed ingredients, priced from \$90-\$180 and marketed with health claims around "hormones for a greater sense of wellbeing", "the symptoms of arthritic joint pain" and "acute or chronic conditions of the prostate" including cancer.<sup>207</sup>





"ND-04 Feminine-Sol" is described as a "bottle of Progesterone 3/.3", resembling the description of another "Progesterone-3/.3" product the FDA refers to in a letter to Buttar criticising his health claims for products "not generally recognized as safe and effective for use under the conditions prescribed, recommended, or suggested in their labeling." <sup>208</sup>

Although Buttar's Facebook and Instagram accounts were disabled in March, he continues to promote Covid and vaccine misinformation in livestreams broadcast to over 80,000 followers on Twitter.<sup>209</sup>

Buttar recently shared a livestream video to Twitter in which he referred to the pandemic as "plandemic" and told viewers "remember that if you put that mask on and you don't at least try to make a stand for it then you are essentially consenting to having your rights erode away."<sup>210</sup>

#### Buttar's mask-free conferences and healing retreats

Promotional materials for Buttar's forthcoming *Advanced Medicine Conference* featuring leading anti-vaxxers including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Bollingers and Del Bigtree promise "there will be NO facemasks or social distancing at our conference!" The event's website claims that 1,200 people could attend the conference, equivalent to ticket sales of up to \$538,000 based on the sale of single tickets at \$449.

Buttar has also led retreats, including a 2020 event in Mexico titled "The Healing Power of Energy". Analysis Marketing material advertised a 7-night "transformative retreat... fusing ancient healing wisdom with advanced modern technology". Prices ranged from \$7,550 for a single Casitas to \$15,360 for a double Bungalow, with villa prices available on request, translating to revenues of up to \$614,400.





## **Barbara Loe Fisher**

President of anti-vaccine campaign part-funded by Joseph Mercola

Followers	14,000 (-294,507)	Revenue	\$1,265,905
Facebook	0 (-218,533)	PPP Loans	\$136,070
Instagram	0 (-55,500)	Employees	21
YouTube	14,000	Salary	\$55,950
Twitter	0 (-20,474)		

Barbara Loe Fisher is co-founder and president of the National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC).<sup>215</sup> Founded in 1982, it is one of the most influential anti-vaxx organizations, hosting conferences, lobbying against vaccine mandates, and spreading misinformation about vaccines, specifically targeting parents.<sup>216</sup>

Fisher's anti-vaxx activism when she claimed that her son had suffered a DPT vaccine injury.<sup>217</sup> After co-authoring the 1985 book *DPT: A Shot in the Dark*, Fisher and the NVIC helped develop the National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, and the US's National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (NVICP).<sup>218</sup>

Fisher runs "The Vaccine Reaction," an online journal including Covid and vaccine misinformation.<sup>219</sup> She also hosts the NVIC's podcast, streamed on the NVIC's YouTube channel under the titles: "Seeing Through the COVID-19 Spin," "Vaccination & Censorship: The Truth Will Set Us Free" and "How Fear of a Virus Changed Our World."<sup>220</sup>

Donors who contribute \$25 or more receive 'thank you' gifts, including copies of Fisher's book on vaccines and autism and copies of the Wakefield film 1986: The Act.<sup>221</sup> The NVIC is also supported through Amazon Smile, where a portion of sales can be donated to charitable organizations, reportedly raising more than \$40,000.<sup>222</sup>

#### How anti-vaxx entrepreneur Joseph Mercola helps fund the NVIC

Tax forms indicate Joseph Mercola's Natural Health Resource Foundation donated \$3.38 million to the organisation since 2009 and nearly a third of the NVIC's \$1.2 million 2019 revenue.<sup>223</sup> Mercola and the NVIC regularly collaborate: he has written for the NVIC's Vaccine Reaction site and Mercola.com features Fisher's articles and videos.<sup>224</sup>





CCDH's previous report, *The Anti-Vaxx Playbook*, records and analyses an NVIC conference that took place in October 2020 at which anti-vaxxers discussed their approach to forthcoming Covid vaccines.<sup>225</sup> Prices for the conference ranged from \$80 for a standard ticket up to \$5,000 to be publicly promoted at a sponsor of the conference.<sup>226</sup>

The conference had 3,000 registrants who heard from leading anti-vaxxers including Joseph Mercola, Del Bigtree, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Sherri Tenpenny and Andrew Wakefield.<sup>227</sup> Fisher delivered a speech titled "Defending Life and Liberty in the Vaccine Culture War," where she said that "coronavirus is near the bottom of the infectious disease mortality scale".<sup>228</sup>

#### Following bans, NVIC continues to spread misinformation on social media

In 2021, the NVIC was removed from Facebook for repeated violations of community standards. In a statement following the removal, Fisher said "we are not surprised that Mark Zuckerberg views the truthful information that NVIC publishes about vaccine science, policy and law as a threat to perpetuating false narratives about vaccine safety created by the pharmaceutical industry and its business partners."<sup>229</sup> The NVIC then recommended supporters to "leave social media networks eroding civil liberties" and migrate to alt-tech platforms including Gab, Telegram, and Parler.<sup>230</sup> Fisher continued to post anti-vaccine content on Twitter until her account was removed in May 2021.<sup>231</sup>





# Sayer Ji

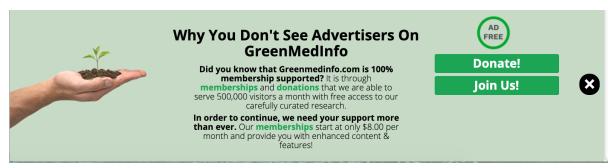
Alt-health entrepreneur linking vaccines to "genocide"

Followers	78,401 ( <del>-673,910</del> )	Revenue	\$211,129
Facebook	52,539 (-545,028)	PPP Loans	\$47,966
Instagram	493 (-105,707)	Employees	3
YouTube	15,400	Salary	N/A
Twitter	9,969 (-23,175)		



Sayer Ji founded Greenmedinfo, a website aggregating alternative health articles.<sup>232</sup> Contributors include Ji, the "GreenMedInfo Research Group" and occasionally antivaxxers such as Joseph Mercola and Children's Health Defense. In 2019, Ji co-founded the Stand for Health Freedom PAC.<sup>233</sup>

GreenMedInfo.com declares it is "100% membership supported". Subscriptions ranging \$8 to \$849 per year provide stratified access to newsletters, online courses, and PDFs.<sup>234</sup>



In a Facebook video streamed to GreenMedInfo's 500,000 Facebook followers and 15,000 YouTube subscribers, Ji describes the Covid vaccine and potential vaccine passports as "the new medical apartheid, this is the new bio-segregation, and this is what they want to roll out throughout the world" and tells supporters "we have the right to deny an experimental vaccine".<sup>235</sup>

One GreenMedInfo.com post has drawn comparisons between the Holocaust and vaccine development, claiming that the vaccine rollout had a "resemblance to previous phases of human history marred by genocide" accompanied by an illustration of a yellow star reading "No Vax".<sup>236</sup>



#### Vaccine Extremism, Hate Speech, and the Well-Beaten Path Towards Genocide

Written by Sayer Ji, Founder

Dehumanizing and violent messages -- now rampant within social media and mainstream news outlets -- targeting those exercising their Constitutionally protected health freedoms, bear concerning resemblance to previous phases of human history marred by genocide.

In 2020, Ji published *Regenerate: Unlocking Your Body's Radical Resilience Through the New Biology.*<sup>237</sup> On the book's companion website Regenerate Project, Ji declares he no longer "uncritically accepts the basic tenets of classical germ theory," and instead uses vitamin C and reduced 5G exposure as remedies.<sup>238</sup> Regenerate Project contains affiliate links for supplements such as vitamin C products and alternative health products.<sup>239</sup>

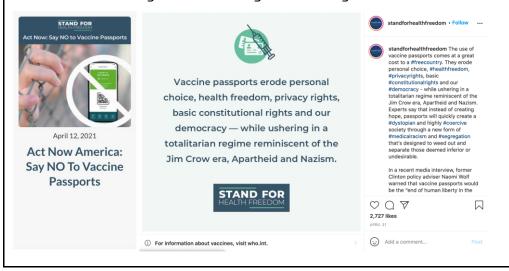


Ji was removed from Instagram and Twitter in March 2020, and Facebook shortly after, representing the loss of 670,000 followers in total.<sup>240</sup> Prior to this, he adopted what our previous report, *The Anti-Vaxx Playbook*, called a "lifeboat strategy", asking his followers to join him on chat app Telegram to avoid "censorship and interference".<sup>241</sup>

#### Ji's Stand for Health Freedom PAC aiming to "unify this movement"

The Stand for Health Freedom PAC operates in 14 US states and Canada.<sup>242</sup> and launches actions against mask mandates and vaccine passports.<sup>243</sup> In March 2021, the PAC called for "a special grand jury to investigate the CDC's conduct during Covid-19,"in a petition that has since gained 37,000 signatures.<sup>244</sup> Repeating Ji's comparisons between vaccine passports and apartheid, Stand for Medical Freedom's Instagram page regularly posts misinformation about vaccines and Covid.<sup>245</sup>

Stand for Health Freedom's mask campaign "has sent 300,000 emails", Ji claims, adding "We work closely with NVIC, we partner with other organizations, we support them...We are trying to unify this movement." Ji calls for supporters to "stand up in greater numbers against medical tyranny". The Stand for Health Freedom website has raised \$100,000, Ji says, through \$22 monthly subscriptions, \$246 one-time donations and selling t-shirts reading: "Mandatory Vaccines Violate Human Rights".





# Kelly Brogan

"Holistic psychiatrist" promoting vaccine misinformation

Followers	174,538 ( <del>-130,382</del> )	Revenue	\$225,815
Facebook	0 (-130,382)	PPP Loans	\$55,929
Instagram	133,927	Employees	4
YouTube	23,200	Salary	N/A
Twitter	17,411		

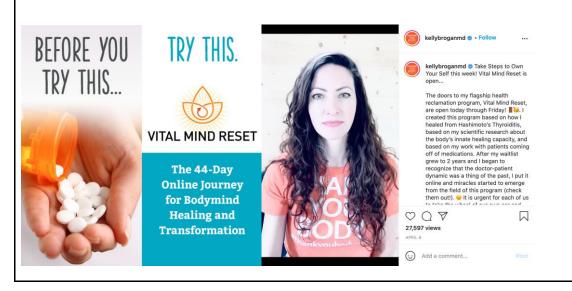
Kelly Brogan is an alternative health entrepreneur and holistic psychiatrist who recommends patients turn to "radical self-healing" instead of conventional medical treatments.<sup>248</sup>

Brogan deploys pseudo-scientific language alongside aphorisms like "you have the power to heal," as she aims to discredit the "medical tyranny" of mainstream medicine<sup>249</sup> while encouraging followers "to live "without victimhood," that is, without dependence on the medical establishment.<sup>250</sup> Her book, *Own Your Self*, is sold on her website with the promise that it offers the means to "reclaim your real Self from conventional medicine."

#### Brogan promotes her "Vital Mind Reset" with vaccine disinformation

Brogan offers a 44-day boot camp called the "Vital Mind Reset". Since its 2016 launch it has garnered 2,300 paid members who are told they can prepare for "psychiatric medication tapers", a concept that has led to criticism of Brogan's medical practice. Brogan has used an affiliate marketing program to promote Vital Mind Reset, with affiliates earning 50 percent commission on subscription payments of up to \$436.253

Promoting Vital Mind Reset in an Instagram video, Brogan says "We have come under a spell cast by the cult of conventional Western medicine", adding "the truth is you can't alchemize the adverse effects of a vaccine with spiritual fairy dust any more than you can take a pill for a psycho-emotional crisis."<sup>254</sup>



Brogan spreads conspiracy theories about Covid insisting "we're not experiencing a real medical pandemic," and that "fear has been used to manipulate the public into accepting

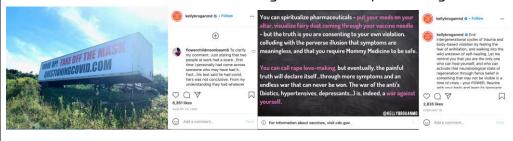


an experimental vaccine."<sup>255</sup> She claims that The Gates Foundation is pursuing an agenda of "depopulation, transhumanism, and eugenics" that she resists.<sup>256</sup>

Brogan uses her website to promote products known to operate affiliate marketing schemes such as Ty and Charlene Bollinger's documentary packages sold for up to \$499.257 Brogan also promotes the "Greater Good Movie Vaccine Resource," documentary as "a parent-friendly resource for science-based information around vaccination" despite it containing claims about vaccines being fatally dangerous for children.258

#### Brogan's "Questioning Covid" website spreads pandemic disinformation

Brogan launched questioningcovid.com to "interrogate the mainstream narrative around the pandemic."<sup>259</sup>, framing it as "an opportunity to expose and transform antiquated ideologies that restrict health freedom."<sup>260</sup> Posting to Instagram, Brogan has questioned the purpose of masks and shared a promotional billboard reading "WAKE UP! TAKE OFF THE MASK" alongside a link to questioningcovid.com.<sup>261</sup>



Brogan co-runs paid membership community Vital Life Project with Sayer Ji, her partner. Through subscriptions of \$40 monthly or \$400 annually, members can access exclusive content encouraging "a doctor and medication-free life," with the promise that "bodily sovereignty, health freedom, radical healing...can only be fully experienced beyond the framework of pharmaceutically driven medicine and associated mainstream media indoctrination."

In June 2020, Brogan told followers she would migrate to MeWe to avoid Facebook "censorship".<sup>264</sup> Facebook removed Brogan's Page in March 2021.<sup>265</sup>



## Recommendations

This report demonstrates that the use of social media is instrumental to the business and campaigning strategies of anti-vaxxers. When their ability to reach a large audience online is reduced, anti-vaxxers cannot broadcast their deadly messages, recruit new anti-vaccine campaigners, or raise funding from donations or products.

Platforms must act: their failure to do so has allowed anti-vaxxers to gain 62 million followers on mainstream platforms during a deadly pandemic. Our research shows that the following interventions could be quickly and effectively implemented by platforms. If they continue failing to act, governments must be prepared to hold them accountable for the spread of deadly misinformation.

#### Label paid promotions

Leading anti-vaxxers and their organisations have promoted paid-for vaccine misinformation without declaring that they stand to profit from it. Platforms already have clear rules against undeclared paid promotions: they must now be applied to anti-vaxxers, revealing to users that many have a profit motive.

Regulatory agencies should assess the alternative health industry's use of social media to promote products and services, specifically those marketing as alternatives, remedies, or cures for Covid-19.

#### **Deplatforming works**

Legal complaints from organisations associated with leading anti-vaxxers reveal that deplatforming has prevented them from reaching a wider audience and raising funds. Leading anti-vaxxers are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the vaccine misinformation spreading on social media. Platforms must act on leading anti-vaxxers who repeatedly violate standards on vaccine misinformation, as documented in reports by CCDH and others. Leading anti-vaxxers who repeatedly violate standards on vaccine misinformation.

#### Stop profiting from misinformation

The total universe of the anti-vaxx accounts tracked by CCDH has now reached 62 million followers, valued at an estimated \$1 billion in revenue for social media companies. Platforms promised not to profit from vaccine misinformation: if they are to keep that promise, they must remove leading anti-vaxxers despite the impact it might have on traffic and ad revenues.<sup>269</sup>

#### Display corrections to users exposed to misinformation

Serve users who have been exposed to content deemed to be in violation of the policy with corrective posts from trusted providers at three times the frequency at which they consumed misinformation. These corrective posts should be designed with input from experts to ensure that they help address the negative social consequences of misinformation such as vaccine hesitancy without inadvertently entrenching their opinions through the "backfire effect". <sup>270</sup> When an account is removed for spreading vaccine misinformation, the reason for their removal should be clearly communicated to users along with corrections.



#### Establish a clear threshold for enforcement action

A low threshold, such as two strikes, would allow for moderate enforcement that does not rise to the level of removal, such as restriction of a page's ability to go live or post video content without moderated review. Such an approach could allow for efficient balancing of harm reduction with the preservation of free speech on a large scale.

#### Add warning screens when users click links to misinformation sites

Add a warning screen in front of third-party websites housing content associated with vaccine misinformation profiteering. Additionally, platforms should stand up a task force to maintain awareness of trends in vaccine misinformation dissemination and provide updated recommendations as needed.

#### **Institute an Accountability API**

Institute an Accountability API to allow experts on sensitive and high-importance topics to perform the human analysis that will ultimately make Facebook's AI more effective. Platforms can also offer guidance for users wishing to debunk information without running afoul of enforcers.

#### Ban private and secret anti-vaccine Facebook Groups

Ban private groups that traffic primarily in vaccine disinformation and prevent groups that require a Facebook disclaimer from existing as private or secret Groups. Anti-vaxxers rely on the privacy of these Groups to spread dangerous anti-vaccine disinformation with impunity.



# **Appendix: Data Tables**

The following data tables collate financial information referred to elsewhere in this report, with hyperlinks to sources where appropriate.

#### 1 Revenue

Name	Organisation	Year	Source	Revenue
Andrew Wakefield	Crystal Clear Film Foundation	2019	990 Form	\$484,226
Barbara Loe Fisher	National Vaccine Information Center	2019	990 Form	\$1,265,905
Del Bigtree	Informed Consent Action Network	2019	990 Form	\$3,457,192
Joseph Mercola	Mercola Consulting Services LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$347,940
Joseph Mercola	Mercola.com Health Resources LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$5,310,000
Joseph Mercola	Mercola.com LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$9,800,000
Joseph Mercola	Natural Health Research Foundation	2019	990 Form	\$1,560,622
Kelly Brogan	Kelly Brogan MD PC	2019	Dun & Bradstreet	\$225,815
Larry Cook	Stop Mandatory Vaccination	2019	GoFundMe Campaigns/ Daily Beast Article	\$79,900
Mike Adams	NN Store LLC	Unknown	Dun & Bradstreet	\$4,000,000
Mike Adams	Webseed Inc	Unknown	Dun & Bradstreet	\$151,329
Rashid A Buttar	Advanced Concepts in Medicine	2020	Dun & Bradstreet	\$527,452
Rashid A Buttar	Centers For Advanced Medicine & Clinical	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$54,132
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	Children's Health Defense	2019	990 Form	\$2,941,894
Sayer Ji	Greenmedinfo LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$146,011
Sayer Ji	Stand for Health Freedom	2019	990 Form	\$65,118
Sayer Ji & Kelly Brogan	Our Spiral Path LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$94,459
Sherri Tenpenny	Osteomed II, Inc.	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$2,130,000
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	Cancer Step Outside the Box LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$79,288
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	TTAC Publishing LLC (NV)	2021	<u>Dun &amp; Bradstreet</u>	\$2,920,000
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	TTAC Publishing LLC (TN)	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	\$76,218
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	United Medical Freedom PAC	2020	FEC Filing	\$63,211
TOTAL				\$35,780,712



#### 2 PPP Loans

Name	Organisation	Year	Source	Value
Barbara Loe Fisher	National Vaccine Information Center	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$136,070
Del Bigtree	Informed Consent Action Network	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$165,632
Joseph Mercola	Mercola Consulting Services LLC	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$282,500
Joseph Mercola	Mercola.com Health Resources LLC	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$335,000
Kelly Brogan	Kelly Brogan MD PC	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$55,929
Mike Adams	Webseed Inc	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$21,179
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	Children's Health Defense	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$145,399
Sayer Ji	Greenmedinfo LLC	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$47,966
Sherri Tenpenny	Tenpenny Integrative Medical Center LLC	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$72,500
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	TTAC Publishing LLC (TN)	2020	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$250,376
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	TTAC Publishing LLC (TN)	2021	<u>FederalPay</u>	\$223,351
TOTAL				\$1,512,551

#### 3 Salaries

Name	Company	Year	Source	Value
Barbara Loe Fisher	National Vaccine Information Center	2019	990 Form	\$55,950
Del Bigtree	Informed Consent Action Network	2019	990 Form	\$232,000
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	Children's Health Defense	2019	990 Form	\$255,000
TOTAL				\$542,950



### Employees and Estimated Payroll

Name	Organisation	Year	Source	Est. Wage Bill	Employees
Andrew Wakefield	Autism Media Channel LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	2
Andrew Wakefield	Crystal Clear Film Foundation	2019	<u>990 Form</u>	\$0	0
Andrew Wakefield	Seventh Chakra Films LLC	2018	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	1
Barbara Loe Fisher	National Vaccine Information Center	2020	PPP Loan	\$653,136	21
Del Bigtree	Informed Consent Action Network	2020	PPP Loan	\$795,034	10
Joseph Mercola	Mercola Consulting Services LLC	2020	PPP Loan	\$1,360,000	33
Joseph Mercola	Mercola.com Health Resources LLC	2020	PPP Loan	\$1,610,000	61
Joseph Mercola	Mercola.com LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	65
Joseph Mercola	Natural Health Research Foundation	2019	990 Form	\$0	0
Kelly Brogan	Kelly Brogan MD PC	2020	PPP Loan	\$268,459	4
Mike Adams	NN Store LLC		Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	3
Mike Adams	Webseed Inc	2020	PPP Loan	\$101,659	2
Rashid A Buttar	Advanced Concepts in Medicine	2020	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	3
Rashid A Buttar	Centers For Advanced Medicine & Clinical	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	3
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	Children's Health Defense	2019	990 Form	\$889,202	8
Sayer Ji	Greenmedinfo LLC	2020	PPP Loan	\$230,237	3
Sayer Ji	Stand for Health Freedom	2019	<u>990 Form</u>	\$0	0
Sayer Ji & Kelly Brogan	Our Spiral Path LLC	2021	Dun & Bradstreet	N/A	7
Sherri Tenpenny	Tenpenny Integrative Medical Center LLC	2020	PPP Loan	\$348,000	13
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	TTAC Publishing LLC (TN)	2021	PPP Loan	\$1,070,000	27
TOTAL				\$7,325,727	266



### **5 Marketing Schemes**

Name	TTAV/TTAC	Vaccines Revealed	Health Freedom Summit
Andrew Wakefield	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Barbara Loe Fisher	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Del Bigtree	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Speaker</u>
Joseph Mercola	<u>Speaker</u>	No	<u>Speaker</u>
Kelly Brogan	<u>Promoter</u>	No	No
Larry Cook	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Mike Adams	<u>Promoter</u>	No	No
Rashid A Buttar	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	No
Robert F. Kennedy Jr.	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Sayer Ji	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Speaker</u>
Sherri Tenpenny	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>	<u>Promoter</u>
Ty and Charlene Bollinger	Owner	No	<u>Speaker</u>



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# DISINFORMATION DOZEN: THE SEQUEL

HOW BIG TECH IS FAILING TO ACT ON LEADING ANTI-VAXXERS
DESPITE BIPARTISAN CALLS FROM CONGRESS





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The Center for Countering Digital Hate is a not-for-profit NGO that seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and misinformation.

Digital technology has changed forever the way we communicate, build relationships, share knowledge, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values.

Digital spaces have been colonised and their unique dynamics exploited by fringe movements that instrumentalise hate and misinformation. These movements are opportunistic, agile and confident in exerting influence and persuading people.

Over time these actors, advocating diverse causes - from anti-feminism to ethnic nationalism to denial of scientific consensus - have formed a Digital Counter Enlightenment. Their trolling, disinformation and skilled advocacy of their causes has resocialised the offline world for the worse.

The Center's work combines both analysis and active disruption of these networks. CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure - the actors, systems and culture - that support, and often profit from hate and misinformation.

#### **Anti-Vax Watch**

Anti-Vax Watch is an alliance of concerned individuals who are seeking to educate the American public about the dangers of the anti-vax industry.

As the anti-vaccine industry actively seeks to undermine the rollout of the COVID vaccine – capitalizing on a heightened sense of hesitancy from the public and targeting communities of color who have already been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – we recognize that this is an all-hands-on-deck moment. We believe we must join together to bring science and facts to the forefront and alert the public to the dangerous agenda of anti-vaccine leaders.

Our efforts center around bringing to light the nefarious activities of the anti-vaccine industry and working with leading experts to dispute their falsehoods and non-medical disinformation with science, research and expert analysis. Our goal is to support the efforts of leading health experts, pro-vaccine researchers and educators, civil rights and business organizations, and others who, like us, recognize the importance of raising awareness of the science of vaccines.



#### Introduction

In March 2021, CCDH and Anti-Vax Watch identified the top 12 spreaders of anti-vaccine disinformation on social media in our report, <u>The Disinformation Dozen</u>. The CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google responded by pledging to strengthen and better enforce their policies; crack down on vaccine disinformation on their platforms; and protect public health – but they have not kept their promises. Despite continued violations of community standards, the majority of the Disinformation Dozen remain online and active in their disinformation-spreading campaigns on at least one platform.

Facebook, Twitter, and Google CEOs were put on notice by <u>bipartisan members</u> of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee in a March 25 hearing about the dangers of the misinformation spread by the Disinformation Dozen. Senators <u>Klobuchar, Luján</u> and <u>Warner</u> and a group of <u>12 state Attorneys General</u> also sounded the alarm.

Since the hearing with legislators, the CEOs' failure to back up their promises with actions has allowed The Disinformation Dozen to post 105 pieces of disinformation generating up to 29 million impressions.

Covid-19 has taken more than 3 million lives worldwide and 570,000 in the United States, yet a small number of organized actors continue to profit by spreading disinformation about vaccines. These modern snake oil salesmen use social media to spread lies and persuade vulnerable people to pay them for false cures and malignant content and to turn them into disinformation carriers. According to our research, antivaccine activists on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter reach more than 59 million followers, being drip-fed disinformation daily.

By analyzing a sample of anti-vaccine content shared on Facebook and Twitter between 1 February and 16 March 2021, we found that 65% of all anti-vaccine content was attributable to a member of the Disinformation Dozen, who repeatedly violated Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter's stated community standards.

Facebook, Twitter and Google have time and again failed to enforce their own community standards, despite pleas by elected officials, health experts, and concerned advocates, putting public health at further risk. Further, their moderation practices remain unregulated and unchecked by elected bodies. Big Tech sets the rules – they are judge, jury, and jailor – with no democratic checks or balances.

We know the most effective way to disrupt the dissemination of harmful misinformation is to stop providing services to the most egregious repeat offenders. Each day the Disinformation Dozen's accounts remain active is another day that their lies cost lives. It's time to finish the job.

Imran Ahmed CEO, CCDH



#### **Foreword**

A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to work tirelessly to bring an end to this global health crisis. With vaccines now widely available to the public, hope is on the horizon. Unfortunately, standing in the way are a small group of individuals who are using social media platforms to mislead our patients, friends and family members with maliciously false information about COVID-19 and the safety and efficacy of the vaccines.

As medical professionals, our days are now filled with conversations between patients, families and colleagues discussing and debunking harmful lies and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccines, their safety and side effects.

It has become alarmingly clear that these anti-vaccine individuals and groups are taking advantage of the current situation, and in many cases, are proving successful in their attempts to capitalize on any hesitations or fears with disproven claims and false information. The longer social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter allow these dangerous lies to continue circulating, the more lives will be unnecessarily at risk.

We strongly urge these platforms to enforce their own policies on disinformation. We respectfully ask that all enforcement be prompt, consistent and fully transparent. By simply following through on the statements, rules and regulations these companies have announced, they can stem the tide of dangerous lies. Failure to do so will certainly prolong the pandemic and needlessly leave countless lives in the balance.

With a possible end to the pandemic in sight, it is time social media platforms do their part to stop the spread of disinformation. Enforcement of their policies will have a direct impact on the number of lives lost or saved as we continue fighting to bring the pandemic to a swift end.

Jennifer Nuzzo, DrPH, SM Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Céline Gounder, MD, ScM, FIDSA Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine and Infectious Diseases, New York University School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital

Atul Nakhasi, MD
Primary Care Physician and Co-Founder of #ThisIsOurShot

Sunny Jha, MD

Anesthesiologist, Pain Physician, Patient and Physician Advocate and Co-Founder of
#ThisIsOurShot



#### **Executive Summary**

- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Google have announced policies to address Covid-19 and vaccine disinformation on their platforms to protect public health and safety; however, to-date, countless examples of anti-vaccine rhetoric remain, and platforms have failed to fully enforce their existing policies and unilaterally remove the top disseminators of disinformation.
- 2. According to our analysis, 65% of online anti-vaccine content is attributable to 12 anti-vaccine activists, the Disinformation Dozen, who play leading roles in spreading digital misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines. Despite numerous policy violations by these individuals, Facebook and Twitter have yet to take action against the majority of the Disinformation Dozen.
- 3. Members of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee presented this information to the CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google at a joint subcommittee hearing on 25 March 2021. They were pressed by members of Congress to review our report on the Disinformation Dozen and take action to enforce their existing policies.<sup>2</sup>
- 4. Since our previous report's release on 24 March, social media platform operators have taken some enforcement action, and a handful of the Disinformation Dozen members' accounts were removed from at least one platform. However, social media CEOs have not followed through with comprehensive action against the majority of the Disinformation Dozen. As of 25 April 2021, 10 of the 12 anti-vax leaders remain on Facebook and Twitter, and nine of 12 remain on Instagram.
- 5. We have been monitoring the online activities of the Disinformation Dozen in the month since the hearing, identifying 105 pieces of content that violate Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements.
- 6. This content generated up to 29 million potential impressions from the existing followers of Disinformation Dozen accounts, not including the reach of Facebook's private groups, hidden messages and other tactics being used by leading antivaxxers to continue to operate amid heightened scrutiny by our groups and others.
- 7. The failure by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to address the offenders of these clear policy violations, despite having the identities of these individuals handed to them by members of Congress on 25 March, is emblematic of platforms' inability to successfully regulate disinformation on a much larger scale highlighted in our reports:
  - a. Research conducted by CCDH last year has shown that platforms fail to act on 95 percent of the Covid and vaccine misinformation reported to them.
  - b. CCDH's recent report, Malgorithm, uncovered evidence that Instagram's algorithm actively recommends similar misinformation.
  - c. Tracking of 425 anti-vaccine accounts by CCDH shows that their total following across platforms now stood at 59.2 million in December, an increase of 877,000 more than they had in June.
  - d. CCDH's ongoing tracking shows that the 20 anti-vaxxers with the largest followings account for over two-thirds of this total cross-platform following of 59.2 million.
- 8. The most effective and efficient way to stop the dissemination of harmful information is to deplatform the most highly visible repeat offenders. This should also include the organizations these individuals control, as well as any backup accounts they have established to evade removal.



# The Disinformation Dozen hit up to 29m impressions while Big Tech failed to act

Our last report, <u>The Disinformation Dozen</u>, identified a dozen individuals responsible for up to 65 percent of anti-vaccine content circulating on social media platforms. It shows that by taking action on this tiny group of "superspreaders", platforms can make a significant impact on the spread of dangerous vaccine misinformation.

In total, 18 accounts operated by the Disinformation Dozen have been removed following the publication of the CCDH and Anti-Vax Watch's report last month.

- 1. Joseph Mercola
- 2. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
- 3. Ty and Charlene Bollinger
- 4. Sherri Tenpenny
- 5. Rizza Islam
- 6. Rashid Buttar
- 7. Erin Elizabeth
- 8. Sayer Ji
- 9. Kelly Brogan
- 10. Christiane Northrup
- 11. Ben Tapper
- 12. Kevin Jenkins

#### Members of Congress called for action on the Disinformation Dozen

On 25 March 2021, members of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee raised our findings to the CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google at a joint subcommittee hearing. They were pressed by members of Congress to review our report on the Disinformation Dozen and take action to enforce their existing policies.

Representative Mike Doyle raised our findings about the Disinformation Dozen and asked all three CEOs to "look at it today and get back to us tomorrow", prompting Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to respond "yes, we remove everything against our policy".<sup>3</sup> Representative McNerney stated that he was "concerned" by the CEOs' "unwillingness to commit to enforcing your own policies and remove the 12 most egregious spreaders of vaccine disinformation from your platforms".<sup>4</sup>

Separately, Representatives Eshoo and Guthrie challenged Jack Dorsey over a post from Robert F. Kennedy Jr. falsely linking the death of baseball player Hank Aaron to Covid vaccines.<sup>5</sup>

#### Platforms failed to act – exposing users to anti-vaccine content millions of times

From 25 March to 24 April, 2021, researchers captured the content from social media accounts associated with the Disinformation Dozen multiple times daily. Each piece of content and the content of any videos or links it contained were then analyzed for potential violations of the containing platform's policies related to Covid and vaccine misinformation. Potential violations were logged and received a further quality check before being selected for us in this report.



As the platforms themselves are opaque about the reach and impact of any post, we elected to represent the total potential impact using "potential impressions". We calculated this metric by taking each violating post and multiplying it by the number of followers of the posting account as of 24 April 2021.

This process revealed that the Disinformation Dozen have posted 105 pieces of content that violate platform service agreements in the month since members of Congress called on tech CEOs to deplatform them.

This content generated up to 29 million potential impressions from the existing followers of Disinformation Dozen accounts, not including the reach of Facebook's private groups, hidden messages and other tactics being used by leading anti-vaxxers to continue to operate amid heightened scrutiny by our groups and others.

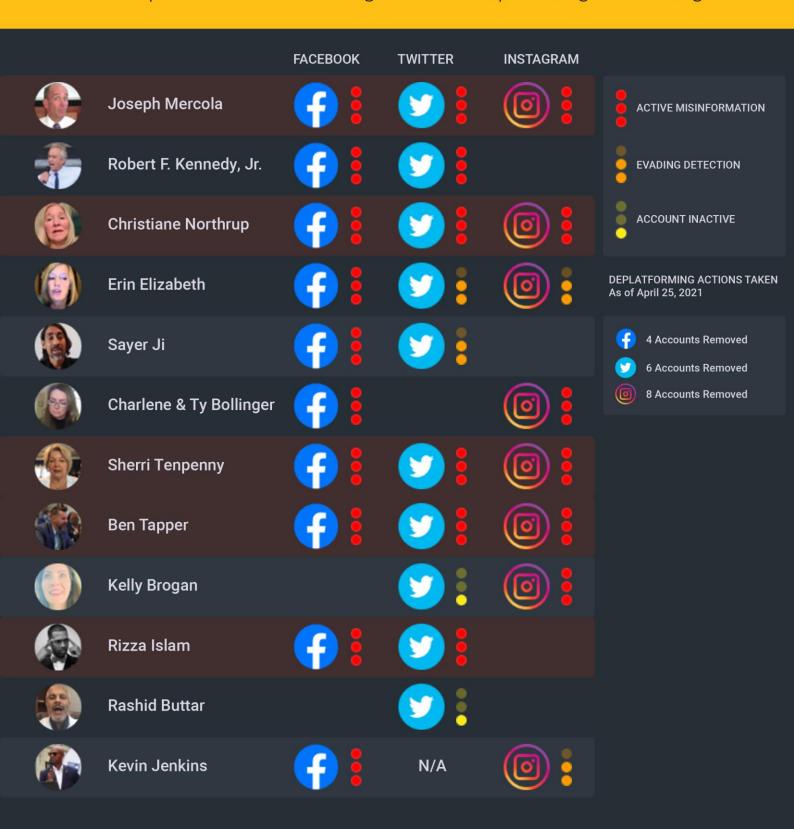
Despite repeatedly violating Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements, half of the Disinformation Dozen remain on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Nine of the 12 remain on Facebook, 10 of the 12 remain on Twitter, and 9 of the 12 remain on Instagram, with no discernible consistency or transparency in how platforms treat violations.

The table below collates this information, marking members of the Disinformation Dozen according to whether they are actively using platforms to spread misinformation. Where an anti-vaxxer is actively posting misinformation on a platform, it is marked as "Active Misinformation".

Where members of the Disinformation Dozen have modified their behaviour to direct followers to backup accounts posting misinformation on other platforms such as Telegram, they are marked as "Evading Detection". Finally, cases where a member of the Disinformation Dozen has stopped using a platform are marked as "Account Inactive".

#### **POLICY ENFORCEMENT FAILURES**

"We enforce our policies" platform CEOs testified in front of Congress on March 25, 2021. In just one month since that testimony, the Disinformation Dozen has violated platform policies at a level that qualifies 22 of their remaining accounts for deplatforming under existing rules.



29.0 Million

The number of potential disinformation impressions generated by violating content from these accounts from March 25 - April 24, 2021



#### **Example Policy Violations**

Monitoring of the Disinformation Dozen since members of Congress called for them to be deplatformed on 25 March 2021 shows that they have all continued to use their social media accounts to spread misinformation. Key examples for each member of the Disinformation Dozen can be found below.

#### 1 Joseph Mercola

Facebook: Active Twitter: Active Instagram: Active



Joseph Mercola is a successful anti-vaccine entrepreneur, peddling dietary supplements and false cures as alternatives to vaccines. Mercola's combined personal social media accounts have around 3.6 million followers.



We are now living in a world that is increasingly ruled, not by our democratic systems and institutions, but by public health flat, carried out by politicians who rule by instilling fear and panic.

In The Truth About COVID-19, Dr. Mercola and Cummins reveal new and emerging evidence that:



- The SARS-CoV-2 virus was, indeed, lab-engineered and emerged from a negligently managed bioweapons lab in Wuhan, China
- The global pandemic was long anticipated by global elites who have used it to facilitate and hide the largest upward transfer of wealth in human history
- PCR testing, case counts, morbidity, and vaccine safety and efficacy data have been widely manipulated and misrepresented
- Obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are known to worsen COVID-19 outcomes, but the junk food industry continues to push its agenda at the expense of public health
- Safe, simple, and inexpensive treatment and prevention for COVID-19 have been censored and suppressed to create a clear path for vaccine acceptance
- Effectiveness of the vaccines has been wildly exaggerated and major safety questions have gone
  unanswered

Joseph Mercola is using his social media accounts to promote a forthcoming book that carries the conspiracy theory that Covid was "lab-engineered" in China and "anticipated by global elites".



#### 2 Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

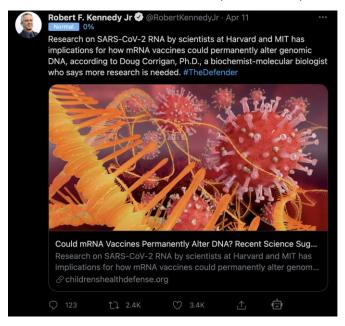
Facebook: Active Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed

Kennedy is a long-standing anti-vaxxer, and his Children's Health Defense (CHD) hosts a range of anti-vaccine articles.

Kennedy's account was banned from Instagram on 8 February, but his Facebook Page remains active, as does the CHD's Instagram page.

Kennedy and <u>Children's Health Defense released a film</u> in mid-March targeting members of the Black and Latino communities with tailored anti-vaccine messages. Facebook and Twitter continue to allow him a platform to promote these false claims.





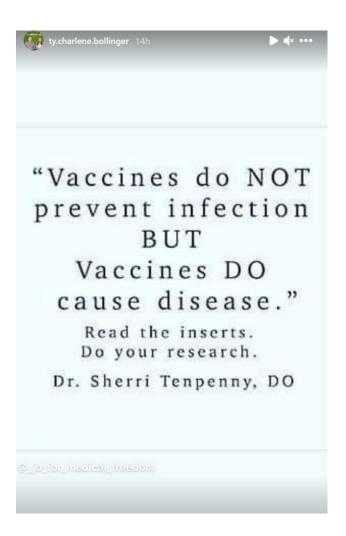


## 3 Ty & Charlene Bollinger

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Removed
Instagram: Part Removed



Ty and Charlene Bollinger are anti-vax entrepreneurs who run a network of accounts that market books and DVDs about vaccines, cancer and COVID-19. In 2020 they launched the United Medical Freedom Super PAC ahead of last year's United States elections. Instagram has removed one of the Bollingers' Instagram accounts, but two are still active.





## 4 Sherri Tenpenny

Facebook: Part Removed

Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed



Sherri Tenpenny is an osteopath physician who spreads anti-vaccine sentiment and false claims about the safety and efficacy of masks via her social media channels. While her main Facebook account has been removed, her Twitter and backup Instagram accounts are still intact.



"This is not a vaccine. A vaccine is supposed to protect us against a bacterial or viral infection. There is nothing in any of these shots that is designed to protect us against a virus infection." 11:11-11:26



#### 5 Rizza Islam

Facebook: Part Removed

Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed



Rizza Islam's anti-vaccine posts aim to spread vaccine hesitancy amongst African Americans. Islam's main Facebook Page was removed in February, followed by his main Instagram account in March, but he continues to post anti-vaccine misinformation from his Twitter account as well as backup Facebook and Instagram accounts.





#### **6 Rashid Buttar**

Facebook: Removed Twitter: Active Instagram: Removed



Rashid Buttar is an osteopath physician and conspiracy theorist known for <u>videos</u> posted to his YouTube channel.



"This is no different than the regular flu, the numbers, even with them artificially inflating them, haven't changed anything." 10:10

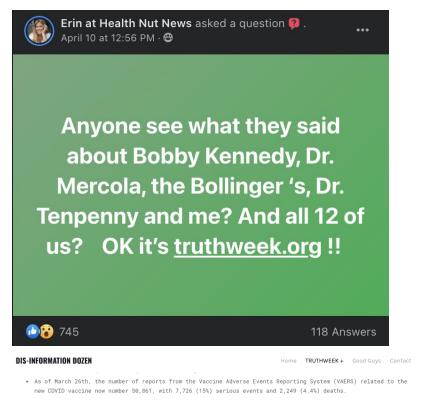


#### 7 Erin Elizabeth

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Erin Elizabeth, partner to Joseph Mercola, runs <u>Health Nut News</u>, a prominent 'alternative health' website with affiliated newsletter and social media accounts.



Erin Elizabeth has shared links to "truthweek.org" which misrepresents VAERS data to falsely link Covid vaccines to deaths.



#### 8 Sayer Ji

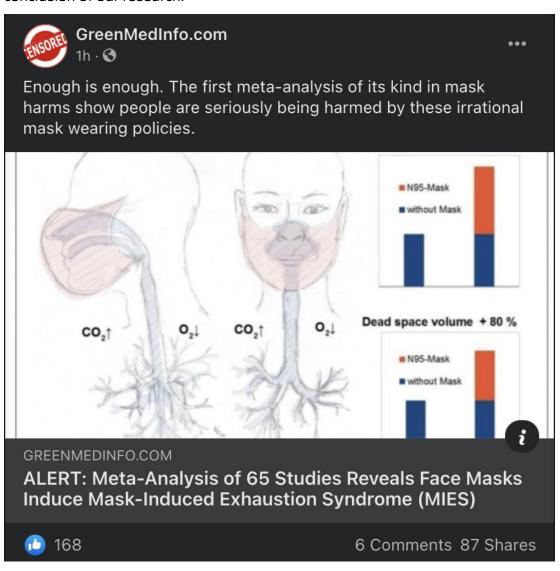
Facebook: Active

Twitter: Part Removed Instagram: Removed



Sayer Ji runs a popular alternative health website, <u>GreenMedInfo.com</u>, and affiliated social media accounts that promote pseudoscience and anti-vaccine misinformation. Despite his GreenMedInfo accounts being removed by Twitter and Instagram, it is still available on Facebook.

Sayer Ji's personal Instagram account was removed on 24 April 2021, coinciding with the conclusion of our research.



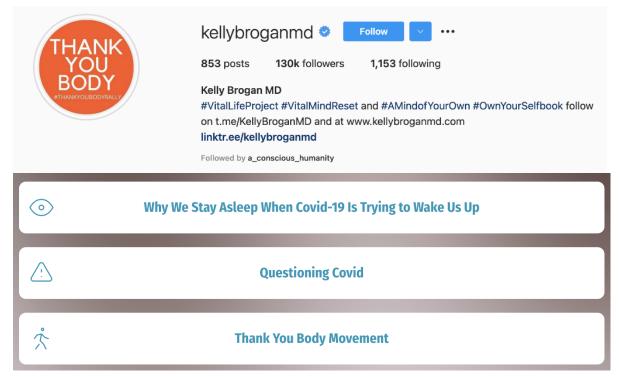


## 9 Kelly Brogan

Facebook: Removed
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Kelly Brogan is the partner of fellow alternative health entrepreneur Sayer Ji. She claims to practice "holistic psychiatry" and sells a range of books and courses from her website.



 that doctors are being told to code all deaths as covid without so much as the facade of testing when up to 99% of case fatalities are in individuals with multiple pre-existing conditions, the vast majority of them elderly?

The link in Kelly Brogan's Instagram biography leads to misinformation about Covid and mask-wearing.



## **10 Christiane Northrup**

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Christiane Northrup is an obstetrics and gynecology physician who has embraced alternative medicine and anti-vaccine conspiracies. She has used her social media accounts to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine.





## 11 Ben Tapper

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Ben Tapper is a chiropractor with a growing following on social media. He has routinely posted COVID disinformation and <u>spoken out against masking</u>.





#### 12 Kevin Jenkins

Facebook: Active
Twitter: N/A
Instagram: Active

Kevin Jenkins is an anti-vaccine activist with a growing social media presence who has appeared at public events with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Jenkins has <u>called</u> vaccines a "conspiracy" to "wipe out" black people and is a <u>co-founder of the Freedom Airway & Freedom Travel Alliance</u>, a company founded in late 2020 to help its members travel around the world without observing any masking, quarantining, vaccination, or other pandemic control measures.



Updates & Highlights



**OO** 28

12 Comments 3 Shares

"I just came from a supermarket in Tulsa; it was great to connect--I connected with so many people. it was just amazing to see so many Americans unmasked, seeking the truth, trying to find out the information that was important for their families and their communities. And I gotta tell you, it was very touching. But one of the things I got out of it, a lot of us as Americans, we're not talking about the same thing. they didn't know about the vaccine passport, they didn't really know about the dangers of this vaccine biologic that's being put in their bodies right now. They didn't know. So we have a lot of work to do." 1:08 - 1:42



# **Appendix: Policy Violations**

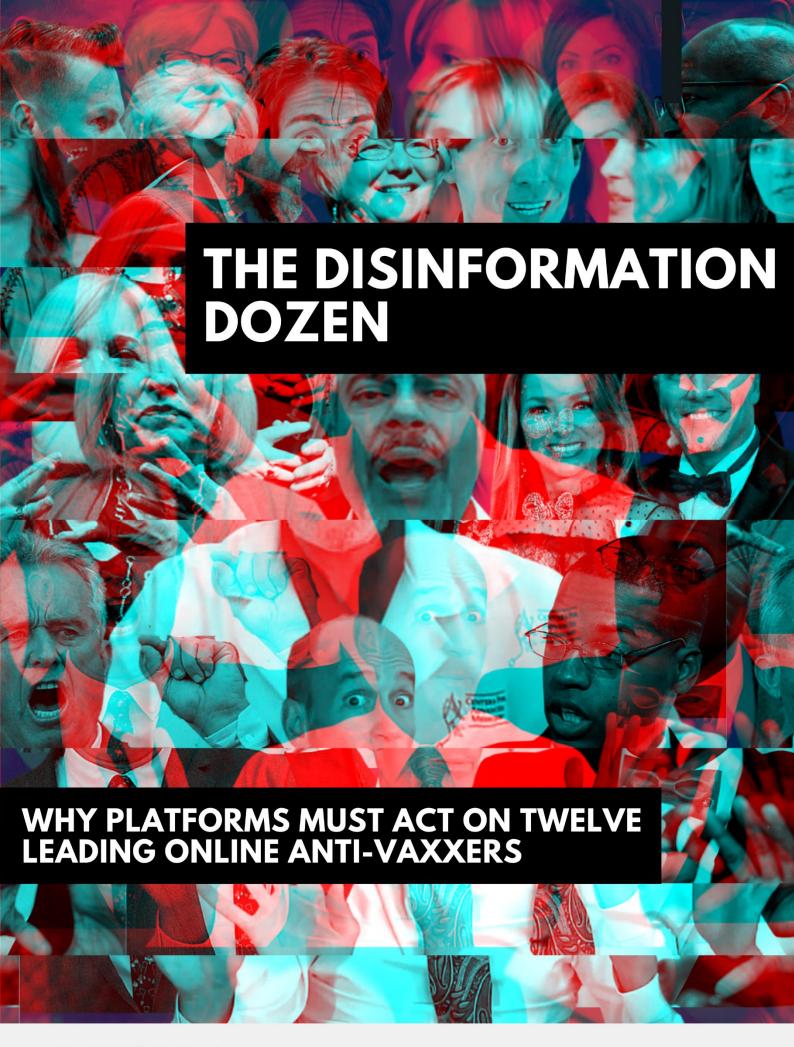
Screenshots of all 105 pieces of Disinformation Dozen content violating platform standards are available on our website at <a href="mailto:counterhate.com/disinfosequel">counterhate.com/disinfosequel</a>.



# Published 28 April 2021 © 2020 Center for Countering Digital Hate Ltd

<sup>1</sup> "The Disinformation Dozen", Center for Countering Digital Hate & Anti-Vax Watch, 24 March 2021, <a href="https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen">https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen</a>

CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375134082968006665">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375134082968006665</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375147632797102082">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375159371978670092</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375161602467622918">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375161602467622918</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375143284436262913">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375143284436262913</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375159371978670092">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375159371978670092</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375147632797102082">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375147632797102082</a>







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The Center for Countering Digital Hate is a not-for-profit NGO that seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and misinformation.

Digital technology has changed forever the way we communicate, build relationships, share knowledge, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values.

Digital spaces have been colonised and their unique dynamics exploited by fringe movements that instrumentalise hate and misinformation. These movements are opportunistic, agile and confident in exerting influence and persuading people.

Over time these actors, advocating diverse causes - from anti-feminism to ethnic nationalism to denial of scientific consensus - have formed a Digital Counter Enlightenment. Their trolling, disinformation and skilled advocacy of their causes has resocialised the offline world for the worse.

The Center's work combines both analysis and active disruption of these networks. CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure - the actors, systems and culture - that support, and often profit from hate and misinformation.

#### **Anti-Vax Watch**

Anti-Vax Watch is an alliance of concerned individuals who are seeking to educate the American public about the dangers of the anti-vax industry.

As the anti-vaccine industry actively seeks to undermine the rollout of the COVID vaccine – capitalizing on a heightened sense of hesitancy from the public and targeting communities of color who have already been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – we recognize that this is an all-hands-on-deck moment. We believe we must join together to bring science and facts to the forefront and alert the public to the dangerous agenda of anti-vaccine leaders.

Our efforts center around bringing to light the nefarious activities of the anti-vaccine industry and working with leading experts to dispute their falsehoods and non-medical disinformation with science, research and expert analysis. Our goal is to support the efforts of leading health experts, pro-vaccine researchers and educators, civil rights and business organizations, and others who, like us, recognize the importance of raising awareness of the science of vaccines.



#### Introduction

We are in the middle of the deadliest US public health crisis in more than a century. Covid-19 has killed more than 500,000 Americans and undermined the livelihood of millions of American workers and families. The virus has had a particularly devastating impact on Black, Latino, and Native American communities, all of whom are suffering severe illness and death from COVID-19 at rates far greater than the general population.<sup>1</sup> Compounding this crisis, vaccination rates in communities of color have also lagged those for whites, and skepticism and distrust of the vaccines are greater in these marginalized communities.<sup>2</sup>

With widespread distribution of coronavirus vaccines, we have an opportunity to turn a corner on the pandemic. Our recovery depends on the public's willingness to receive a vaccine. However, researchers are increasingly connecting misinformation disseminated via social media to increased vaccine hesitancy, which will ultimately cause unnecessary deaths.<sup>3</sup>

Living in full view of the public on the internet are a small group of individuals who do not have relevant medical expertise and have their own pockets to line, who are abusing social media platforms to misrepresent the threat of Covid and spread misinformation about the safety of vaccines. According to our recent report, anti-vaccine activists on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter reach more than 59 million followers, making these the largest and most important social media platforms for anti-vaxxers.<sup>4</sup> Our research has also found anti-vaxxers using social media platforms to target Black Americans, exploiting higher rates of vaccine hesitancy in that community to spread conspiracies and lies about the safety of Covid vaccines.<sup>5</sup>

Facebook, Google and Twitter have put policies into place to prevent the spread of vaccine misinformation; yet to date, all have failed to satisfactorily enforce those policies. All have been particularly ineffective at removing harmful and dangerous misinformation about coronavirus vaccines, though the scale of misinformation on Facebook, and thus the impact of their failure, is larger. Further, they have all failed to remove the accounts of prominent anti-vaxxers who have repeatedly violated their terms of service, as documented in later sections of this report.

Imran Ahmed CEO, CCDH



#### **Executive Summary**

- 1. The Disinformation Dozen are twelve anti-vaxxers who play leading roles in spreading digital misinformation about Covid vaccines. They were selected because they have large numbers of followers, produce high volumes of anti-vaccine content or have seen rapid growth of their social media accounts in the last two months.
- 2. Analysis of a sample of anti-vaccine content that was shared or posted on Facebook and Twitter a total of 812,000 times between 1 February and 16 March 2021 shows that 65 percent of anti-vaccine content is attributable to the Disinformation Dozen.
- 3. Despite repeatedly violating Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements, nine of the Disinformation Dozen remain on all three platforms, while just three have been comprehensively removed from just one platform.
- 4. This is the product of a series of failures from social media platforms:
  - a. Research conducted by CCDH last year has shown that platforms fail to act on 95 percent of the Covid and vaccine misinformation reported to them.
  - b. CCDH's recent report, Malgorithm, uncovered evidence that Instagram's algorithm actively recommends similar misinformation.
  - c. Tracking of 425 anti-vaccine accounts by CCDH shows that their total following across platforms now stood at 59.2 million in December, an increase of 877,000 more than they had in June.
  - d. CCDH's ongoing tracking shows that the 20 anti-vaxxers with the largest followings account for over two-thirds of this total cross-platform following of 59.2 million.
- 5. Analysis of anti-vaccine content posted to Facebook over 689,000 times in the last two months shows that up to 73 percent of that content originates with members of the Disinformation Dozen of leading online anti-vaxxers.
- 6. Facebook's own internal analysis of vaccine hesitant content on its platform is likely to underestimate the influence of leading anti-vaxxers by failing to address the ultimate source of this content, and by the recorded failure of its algorithms to identify content concerning vaccines.
- 7. Analysis of over 120,000 anti-vaccine tweets collected in the last two months shows that up to 17 percent feature the Disinformation Dozen of leading online anti-vaxxers.
- 8. The most effective and efficient way to stop the dissemination of harmful information is to deplatform the most highly visible repeat offenders, who we term the Disinformation Dozen. This should also include the organisations these individuals control or fund, as well as any backup accounts they have established to evade removal.
- 9. Platforms should establish a clear threshold for enforcement action, such as two strikes, after which restrictions are applied to accounts short of deplatorming them.
- 10. Users should be presented with warning screens when attempting to follow links to sites known to host vaccine misinformation, and users exposed to posts containing misinformation should be shown effective corrections.
- 11. Facebook should not allow private and secret anti-vaccine Groups where dangerous anti-vaccine disinformation can be spread with impunity.



# The Disinformation Dozen are responsible for up to 65% of antivaccine content

At the outset of this research, we identified a dozen individuals who appeared to be extremely influential creators of digital anti-vaccine content. These individuals were selected either because they run anti-vaccine social media accounts with large numbers of followers, because they produce high volumes of anti-vaccine content or because their growth was accelerating rapidly at the outset of our research in February. Full profiles of each are available at the end of this report.

- 1. Joseph Mercola
- 2. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
- 3. Ty and Charlene Bollinger
- 4. Sherri Tenpenny
- 5. Rizza Islam
- 6. Rashid Buttar
- 7. Erin Elizabeth
- 8. Sayer Ji
- 9. Kelly Brogan
- 10. Christiane Northrup
- 11. Ben Tapper
- 12. Kevin Jenkins

#### The Disinformation Dozen are responsible for up to 65% of anti-vaccine content

Our analysis of over 812,000 posts extracted from Facebook and Twitter between 1 February and 16 March 2021 shows that 65 percent of anti-vaccine content is attributable to the Disinformation Dozen.

This shows that while many people might spread anti-vaccine content on social media platforms, the content they share often comes from a much more limited range of sources. Exposure to even a small amount of online vaccine misinformation has been shown by the Vaccine Confidence Project to reduce the number of people willing to take a Covid vaccine by up to 8.8 percent.<sup>6</sup>

#### Platforms have failed to act on the Disinformation Dozen

Despite repeatedly violating Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements, nine of the Disinformation Dozen remain on all three platforms, while just three have been comprehensively removed from just one platform.

This is an extension of platforms' failure to act on vaccine misinformation. Research conducted by CCDH last year has shown that platforms fail to act on 95 percent of the Covid and vaccine misinformation reported to them, and we have uncovered evidence that Instagram's algorithm actively recommends similar misinformation.<sup>7</sup>

Tracking of 425 anti-vaccine accounts by CCDH shows that their total following across platforms now stands at 59.2 million as a result of these failures.<sup>8</sup> The 20 anti-vaxxers with the largest followings account for over two-thirds of this total.



# The Disinformation Dozen account for up to 73% of Facebook's anti-vaxx content

Analysis of anti-vaccine content posted to Facebook over 689,000 times in the last two months shows that up to 73 percent of that content originates with members of the Disinformation Dozen of leading online anti-vaxxers.

This analysis is based on a representative sample of 483 pieces of anti-vaccine content that are known to be circulating in anti-vaccine Facebook Groups.

We collected this sample by analyzing anti-vaccine posts containing URL links from 10 private and 20 public anti-vaccine Facebook Groups between 1 February and 16 March 2021. Groups in this sample have between 2,500 and 235,000 members and generate up to 10,000 posts per month.

# Vaccination Re-education Discussion Forum

Private group · 236.0K members

The largest anti-vaccine Facebook Group now has 236,000 members.

Researchers then analyzed the content of these URL links, tagging each of them to indicate whether they contained a member of the Disinformation Dozen or originated from a website controlled by or related to one of those members. For example, URL links to articles hosted on Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s Children's Health Defense website were attributed to Kennedy, Jr.

Finally, in order to establish the full distribution of this content on Facebook, we used Facebook's own CrowdTangle analytics tool to establish how many times these URLs have been shared on the platform.



This article by Joseph Mercola is from our sample of posts in anti-vaccine Facebook Groups. Facebook's CrowdTangle analytics tool shows it was shared over 12,000 times on the platform.

This revealed that the anti-vaccine content in our sample had been posted or shared across Facebook a total of 689,404 times. Content attributed to members of the Disinformation Dozen had been posted or shared 503,896 times, representing 73.1 percent of the total anti-vaccine posts represented by our sample.



# Facebook is underestimating the influence of leading anti-vaxxers

Recent reports suggest that Facebook conducted its own internal analysis to understand the spread of vaccine hesitant content on its platform.<sup>9</sup>

According to these reports, Facebook's data scientists discovered that just 10 out of 638 population segments contained 50 percent of all vaccine hesitancy content on the platform. These segments represented distinct types of users, Groups and Pages that could each be at least each 3 million people.

Facebook also found that in the population segment containing the most vaccine hesitancy, just 111 individual users contributed half of all vaccine hesitant content.

These findings corroborate our research showing that just a small number of determined anti-vaxxers are responsible for much of the anti-vaccine content on Facebook, but Facebook is likely to be under-representing the concentration of the problem for two reasons.

#### Facebook does not address the sources of anti-vaccine content

Facebook's internal research does not seem to examine the ultimate source of "vaccine hesitant content" on its platform. This means that posts that share someone else's vaccine hesitant content are attributed to the individual users that share that content, instead of the ultimate source. In this case, Facebook would attribute 12,000 shares of an anti-vaccine article from Joseph Mercola's website to the individual users who shared it, instead of Mercola himself.

This approach is also in keeping with Facebook's failure to recognise the real-world connections between accounts, for example by deplatforming the Instagram accounts of some anti-vaxxers while leaving their Facebook and organisational accounts intact, as was the case with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

#### Facebook's algorithms struggle to identify vaccine content

The Center for Countering Digital Hate's previous report, Malgorithm, showed that Instagram's algorithm would not always identify posts that contained content about vaccines, and so many posts about vaccines would not carry information labels as intended. Facebook is reported to have carried out this internal research using similar "software algorithms", meaning it may have missed significant amounts of vaccine hesitant content. It also makes it far less likely that Facebook has developed algorithmic methods of distinguishing between individual expressions of vaccine hesitancy and the organised vaccine disinformation that this report examines.



# Up to 17% of anti-vaccine tweets feature the Disinformation Dozen

Analysis of over 120,000 anti-vaccine tweets collected in the last two months shows that up to 17 percent feature the Disinformation Dozen of leading online anti-vaxxers.

This analysis is based on a representative sample of 123,494 anti-vaccine tweets identified by analysis of their text contents.

We collected this sample using Brandwatch, an enterprise social listening tool, to extract anti-vaccine tweets posted between 1 February and 16 March 2021 based on text analysis. Retweets and quote tweets were also extracted to discover which pieces of anti-vaccine content were shared most frequently.

Tweets were selected based on their use of anti-vaccine keywords, phrases and hashtags, as well as selecting tweets about vaccines from known anti-vaxxers including those who are not members of the Disinformation Dozen. This process selected tweets using phrases commonly used by anti-vaxxers such as "informed consent" and "casedemic" in combination with more common terms regarding Covid vaccines.

This sample was then analysed using an automated set of rules to tag those that featured the name or username of a member of the Disinformation Dozen, or contained a link to a website controlled by or related to one of them.

Tweets that were extracted and tagged using these methods were then checked by researchers on a daily basis to maintain the quality of our data.

This analysis showed that 21,351 of the tweets in our sample featured members of the Disinformation Dozen equivalent to 17.3% of the whole sample.



An example tweet from our sample in which Rizza Islam, a member of the Disinformation Dozen, promotes an anti-vaccine film featuring Robert F. Kennedy Jr.



You have a greater chance of dying from falling in the shower than from the rona.... but yeah we all need a vaccine for the plandemic going on.



This tweet from our sample was identified by its use of the words "rona", "vaccine" and "plandemic".



# Platforms must act on the Disinformation Dozen

Social media companies must now follow their repeated promises with concrete action. Updated policies and statements hold little value unless they are strongly and consistently enforced.

With the vast majority of harmful content being spread by a select number of accounts, removing those few most dangerous individuals and groups can significantly reduce the amount of disinformation being spread across platforms.

The public cannot make informed decisions about their health when they are constantly inundated by disinformation and false content. By removing the source of disinformation, social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter can enable individuals to make a truly informed choice about vaccines.

#### **Deplatform the Disinformation Dozen**

The most effective and efficient way to stop the dissemination of harmful information is to deplatform the most highly visible repeat offenders, who we term the Disinformation Dozen. This should also include the organisations these individuals control or fund, as well as any backup accounts they have established to evade removal.

- 1. Joseph Mercola
- 2. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
- 3. Ty and Charlene Bollinger
- 4. Sherri Tenpenny
- 5. Rizza Islam
- 6. Rashid Buttar
- 7. Erin Elizabeth
- 8. Sayer Ji
- 9. Kelly Brogan
- 10. Christiane Northrup
- 11. Ben Tapper
- 12. Kevin Jenkins

#### Deplatform key anti-vaxxer organisations

In addition to deplatforming the personal accounts of the Disinformation Dozen, platforms must also acknowledge the real-world networks they use to spread their antivaccine messages. This means deplatforming key organisations that are linked to the Disinformation Dozen or simply help spread their messages.

- Children's Health Defense (Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.)
- Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN) (Del Bigtree)
- National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC) (Barbara Loe Fisher, Joseph Mercola)
- Organic Consumers Association (OCA) (Joseph Mercola)
- Millions Against Medical Mandates



# Platforms must do more to protect users from harmful misinformation

In addition to removing repeat offenders, in taking the following steps, social media platforms can make monumental strides toward decreasing the presence of misinformation on feeds.

#### Establish a clear threshold for enforcement action

A low threshold, such as two strikes, would allow for moderate enforcement that does not rise to the level of removal, such as restriction of a page's ability to go live or post video content without moderated review. Such an approach could allow for efficient balancing of harm reduction with the preservation of free speech on a large scale.

#### Display corrective posts to users exposed to disinformation

Serve users who have been exposed to content deemed to be in violation of the policy with corrective posts from trusted providers at three times the frequency at which they consumed misinformation. These corrective posts should be designed with input from experts to ensure that they help address the negative social consequences of misinformation such as vaccine hesitancy without inadvertently entrenching their opinions through the "backfire effect".<sup>11</sup>

#### Add warning screens when users click links to misinformation sites

Add a warning screen in front of third-party websites housing content associated with vaccine misinformation profiteering. Additionally, platforms should stand up a task force to maintain awareness of trends in vaccine misinformation dissemination and provide updated recommendations as needed.

#### **Institute an Accountability API**

Institute an Accountability API to allow experts on sensitive and high-importance topics to perform the human analysis that will ultimately make Facebook's AI more effective. Platforms can also offer guidance for users wishing to debunk information without running afoul of enforcers.

#### Ban private and secret anti-vaccine Facebook Groups

Ban private groups that traffic primarily in vaccine disinformation and prevent groups that require a Facebook disclaimer from existing as private or secret Groups. Anti-vaxxers rely on the privacy of these Groups to spread dangerous anti-vaccine disinformation with impunity.



## **Appendix: The Disinformation Dozen**

The following profiles of the Disinformation Dozen collate their current access to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; key biographical details; and examples of their content and posts which breach platform standards.

## 1 Joseph Mercola

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active

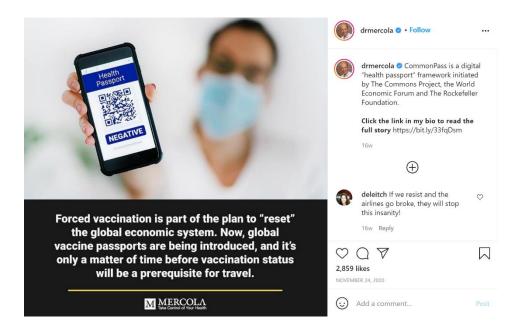


Joseph Mercola is a successful anti-vaccine entrepreneur, peddling dietary supplements and false cures as alternatives to vaccines. Mercola's combined personal social media accounts have around 3.6 million followers.

#### **Example Violations**







This Mercola article included in our sample of URLs posted in anti-vaccine Facebook Groups claims that "hydrogen peroxide treatment can successfully treat most viral respiratory illnesses, including coronavirus" has been shared on Facebook 4,600 times.

#### **Could Hydrogen Peroxide Treat Coronavirus?**







## 2 Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Facebook: Active Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed

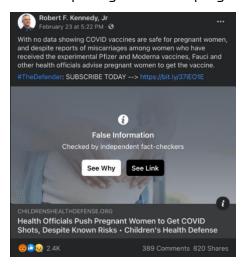
Kennedy is a long-standing anti-vaxxer, and his Children's Health Defense (CHD) hosts a range of anti-vaccine articles.

Kennedy's account was banned from Instagram on 8 February, yet his Facebook Page remains active, as does the CHD's Instagram page.

Kennedy and <u>Children's Health Defense released a film</u> in mid-March targeting members of the Black and Latino communities with tailored anti-vaccine messages. Facebook and Twitter continue to allow him a platform to promote these false claims.

#### **Example Violations**

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. shared <u>this post</u> which contains misinformation about Covid vaccines posing a threat to pregnant women.



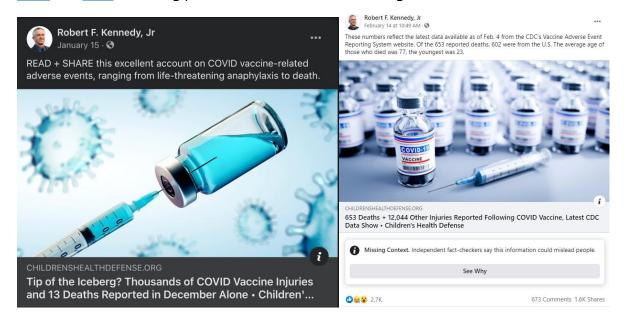
A <u>misleading claim</u> that Hank Aaron's death was "part of a wave of suspicious deaths" remains available with a "missing context" label, despite the Medical Examiner confirming no association.







#### <u>Here</u> and <u>here</u>, Kennedy promotes misinformation linking Covid vaccines to deaths.





## 3 Ty & Charlene Bollinger

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active

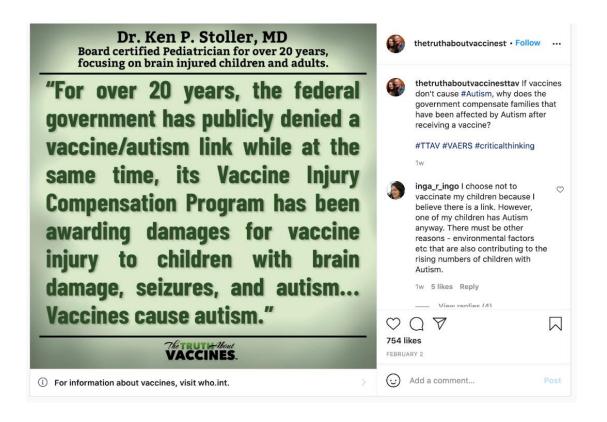


Ty and Charlene Bollinger are anti-vax entrepreneurs who run a network of accounts that market books and DVDs about vaccines, cancer and COVID-19. In 2020 they launched the United Medical Freedom Super PAC ahead of last year's United States elections.

The Bollingers have <u>promoted</u> the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates plans to inject everyone with microchips as part of a vaccination program.

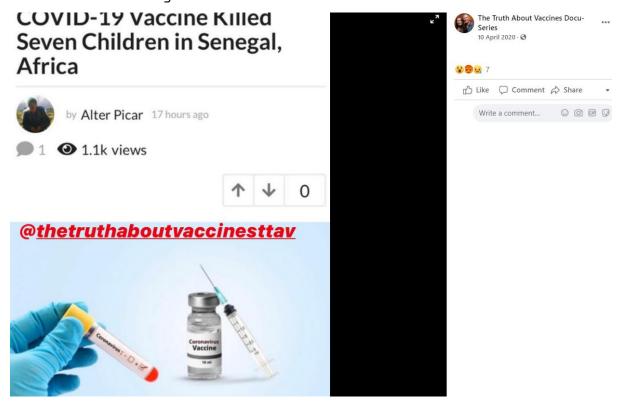
#### **Example Violations**







Promoting a <u>debunked story</u> which claims that the Covid vaccine is responsible for several deaths in Senegal.



The Bollingers have also posted content that violates platform standards on election misinformation. <u>This</u> post falsely claims the US Presidential election was "stolen" and promotes the rally the Bollingers spoke at on 6 January.





## **4 Sherri Tenpenny**

Facebook: Part Removed

Twitter: Active Instagram: Active



Sherri Tenpenny is an osteopath physician who spreads anti-vaccine sentiment and false claims about the safety and efficacy of masks via her social media channels. While her Facebook account has been removed, her Twitter and Instagram are still intact.

#### **Example Violations**

Facebook's policies state that false claims about the safety and efficacy of masks are prohibited. Tenpenny, who regularly advocates against mask-wearing, is clearly in violation of that policy <u>here</u>.





On 23 June 2020 Sherri Tenpenny <u>tweeted</u> that the longer you wear a mask, the more unhealthy you get. Tenpenny alleged that masks suppress your immune system.



The #MaskAgenda has nothing to do with health and everything to do with control & suppressing your #immunesystem. The longer you wear one, the more unhealthy you become.



7:27 PM · Jun 23, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Tenpenny <u>also posts</u>, "Stop getting tested. If you are getting tested you are part of the problem." This clearly violates Facebook's policy against claims that can discourage someone from getting a government-approved COVID-19 test.





After Instagram took down an Instagram Live with disgraced former doctor Andrew Wakefield, Tenpenny took to Instagram again with Wakefield with a video where Wakefield calls COVID-19 an "alleged plague," and errantly discusses a vaccine that "has killed more children than it has saved from the targeted disease." This video alone contains numerous violations of Facebook's stated policies yet remains available despite Instagram seeing fit to remove it the first time it was posted.





## 5 Rizza Islam

Facebook: Removed
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Rizza Islam's anti-vaccine posts aim to spread vaccine hesitancy amongst African Americans. While Facebook removed Rizza Islam's Facebook Page in February, he continues to post anti-vaccine messages from his Instagram and Twitter accounts.

#### **Example Violations**

Rizza Islam promoted the false conspiracy theory that COVID vaccines make women infertile in a <u>tweet</u> last June.



Now it has been SAID that a whistleblower at #glaxosmithkline just tested their new #COVID19 vaccine on 63 women in the UK and made 61 of them infertile! Sanofi's S-protein #Covid\_19 antigen and GSK's pandemic adjuvant technology. This information is currently being confirmed.

8:46 PM · Jun 18, 2020 · Twitter for Android

Rizza Islam recently <u>tweeted</u> that he recovered from COVID in 48 hours by following a special diet.



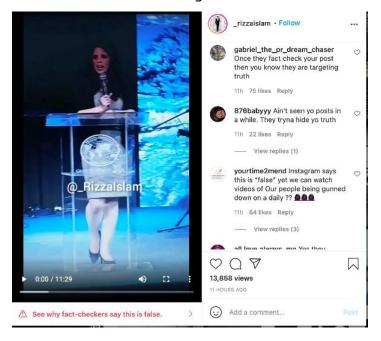
I BEAT #COVID in 48 hours. This was how; 1. No solid foods only hot soups with vegetable broth, no dairy, lots of spices including turmeric & cayenne pepper. 2. Roughly 2 gallons of water each day=4 gallons of water that i drank in 2 days. 3. 4,000 mgs of vit. C every 4 hours.

12:31 AM · Feb 3, 2021 · Twitter for Android





<u>In this February 2021 post</u>, Islam posts a video which contains contains the claim that vaccines cause autism in higher rates in non-white children.



<u>This post</u> claims that "Satan" is behind the COVID vaccine and discourages audience members from receiving the vaccine.





<u>In this February 2021 post</u>, Islam suggests that Bill Gates had a role in planning the pandemic.





## **6 Rashid Buttar**

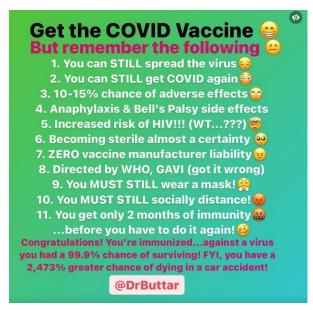
Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Rashid Buttar is an osteopath physician and conspiracy theorist known for <u>videos</u> posted to his YouTube channel.

#### **Example Violations**

In this <u>Facebook post</u>, Buttar claimed that Covid vaccines cause infertility.



In <u>this video</u> posted to Facebook, Buttar claims that COVID-19 tests have living microorganisms (discouraging people from getting government-approved tests).





### 7 Erin Elizabeth

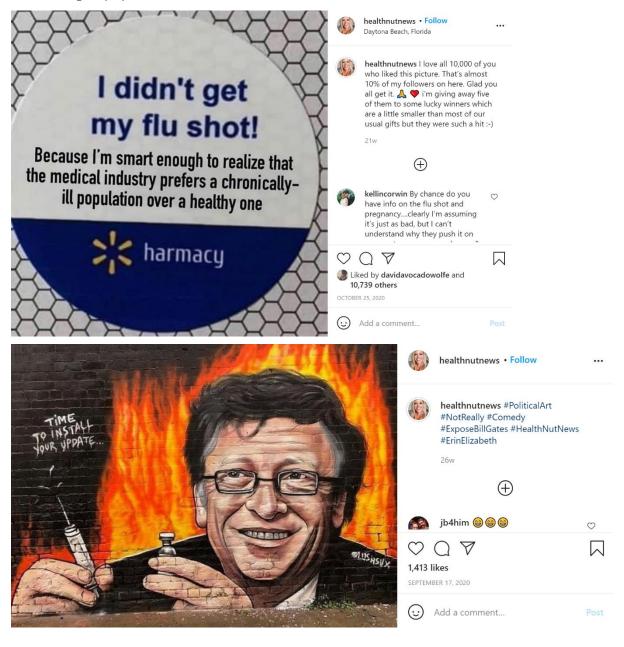
Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Erin Elizabeth, partner to Joseph Mercola, runs <u>Health Nut News</u>, a prominent 'alternative health' website with affiliated newsletter and social media accounts.

#### **Example Violations**

This <u>Instagram post</u> claims vaccines are part of a medical industry plan to create "a chronically-ill population".





## Everyone is arguing over the safety of a drug that was FDA approved in 1955, and I'm just over here like:



"Hydroxychloroquine was more thoroughly tested than the vaccines they want to mandate on your baby"



## **AGGRESSIVE**





healthnutnews • Follow

Ormond Beach, Florida



Erin Elizabeth also <u>posted</u> this antisemitic conspiracy theory about the Rothschilds to her Instagram account





## 8 Sayer Ji

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Removed
Instagram: Part Removed

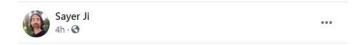


Sayer Ji runs a popular alternative health website, <u>GreenMedInfo.com</u>, and affiliated social media accounts that promote pseudoscience and anti-vaccine misinformation. Despite his GreenMedInfo accounts being removed by Twitter and Instagram, it is still available on Facebook.

An <u>article</u> on GreenMedInfo.com falsely claimed that "The FDA knows that rushed-to-market COVID-19 vaccines may cause a wide range of life-threatening side effects, including death."

#### **Example Violations**

<u>In this March 2021 post</u> Ji shares claims that the Pfizer vaccine has killed more people than COVID.



"We conclude that the Pfizer
vaccines, for the elderly, killed
during the 5-week vaccination
period about 40 times more people
than the disease itself would have
killed, and about 260 times more
people than the disease among the
younger age class. We stress that
this is in order to produce a green
passport valid at most 6 months,
and promote Pfizer sales."

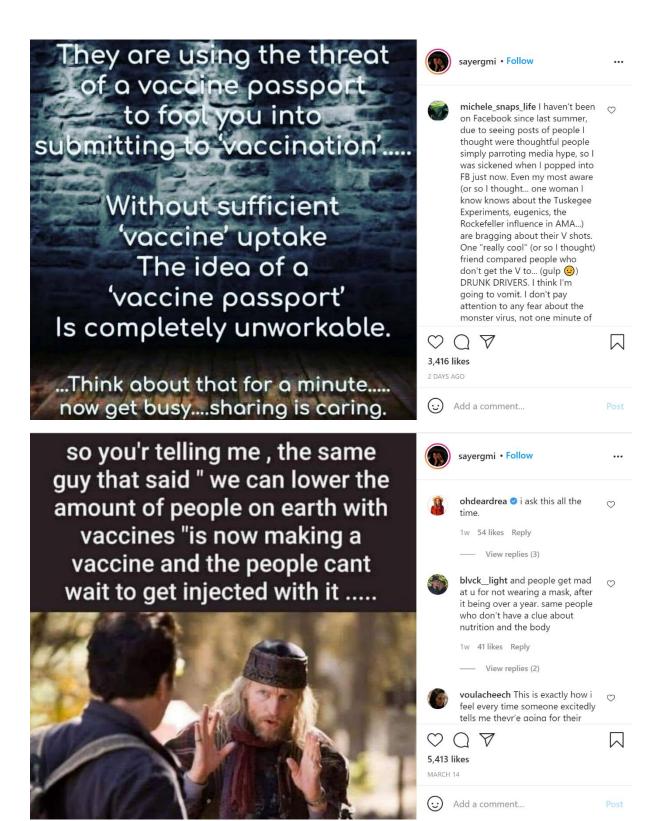
~ Haim Yativ and Dr Seligmann, Israeli researchers

GreenMedInfo.com

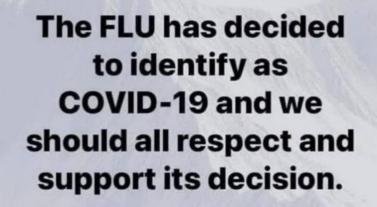
4h · ③

Please share this breaking story:
https://www.greenmedinfo.com/.../orders-magnitude-higher...
And ta... See More











in a medical conspiracy that says wearing a mask is healthy and we all pretend healthy people are ill and can make us all sick.

@sayergmi



Add a comment...

Missing Context. Independent fact-checkers say information in this post could mislead people.



## 9 Kelly Brogan

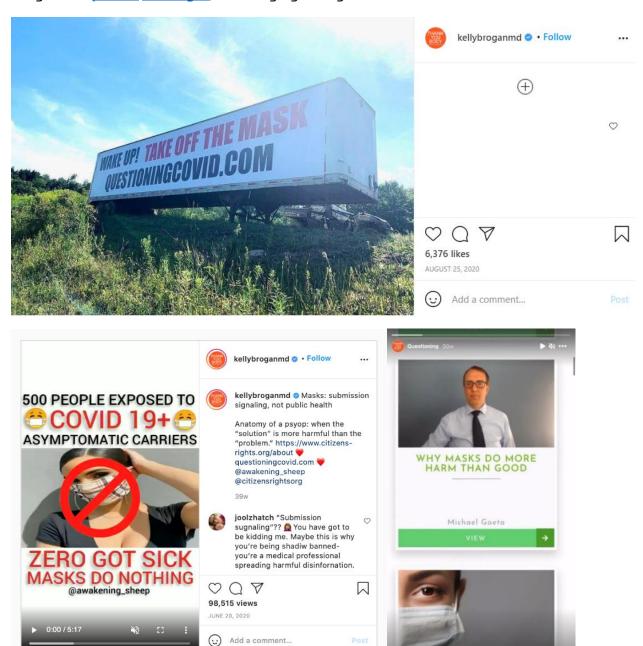
Facebook: Removed
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Kelly Brogan is the partner of fellow alternative health entrepreneur Sayer Ji. She claims to practice "holistic psychiatry" and sells a range of books and courses from her website.

#### **Example Violations**

Brogan has <u>posted messages</u> encouraging Instagram users not to wear masks





In a widely viewed video in March, 2020, Kelly Brogan <u>claimed</u> that "there is potentially no such thing as the coronavirus" because "it's not possible to prove that any given pathogen has induced death."

A <u>post</u> on Kelly Brogan's website titled "Why We Stay Asleep When Covid-19 Is Trying to Wake Us Up" cites a number of COVID conspiracy theories, including that the pandemic was planned. CrowdTangle analytics show it has been shared on Facebook nearly 11,000 times.

# Why We Stay Asleep When Covid-19 Is Trying to Wake Us Up

By Kelly Brogan, MD, Ali Zeck, Sayer Ji





## **10 Christiane Northrup**

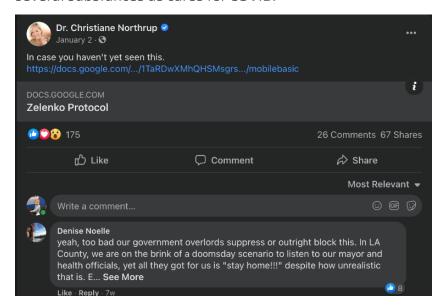
Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Christiane Northrup is an obstetrics and gynecology physician who has embraced alternative medicine and anti-vaccine conspiracies. She has used her social media accounts to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine.

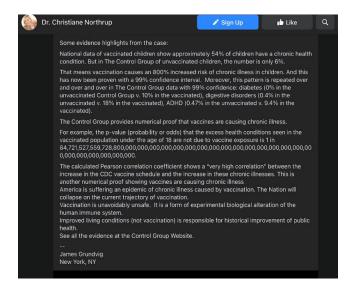
#### **Example Violations**

<u>Here</u>, Northrup links to a Google Doc that recommends HCQ and Ivermectin among several substances as cures for COVID.



<u>Here</u> she makes the baseless claim that vaccines cause an 800% increase in chronic illness.







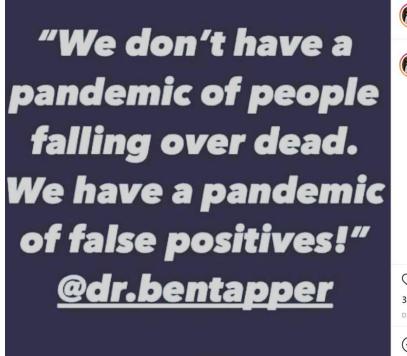
## 11 Ben Tapper

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Ben Tapper is a chiropractor with a growing following on social media. He has routinely posted COVID disinformation and spoken out against masking.

#### **Example Violations**



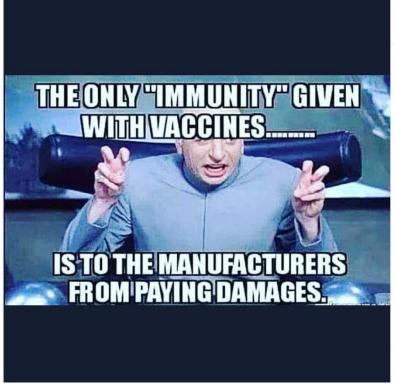














Add a comment...

Post





There is a total lack of evidence that viruses can live outside the body.

When the whole healing profession comprehends this simple fact, there will no longer be this fear of germs, nor the need for vaccines, disinfectants, or other harmful germicides.

7:26 PM · 12/21/20 · Twitter for iPhone





## 12 Kevin Jenkins

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active

Kevin Jenkins is an anti-vaccine activist with a growing social media presence who has appeared at public events with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Jenkins has <u>called</u> vaccines a "conspiracy" to "wipe out" black people and is a <u>co-founder of the Freedom Airway & Freedom Travel Alliance</u>, a company founded in late 2020 to help its members travel around the world without observing any masking, quarantining, vaccination, or other pandemic control measures.

#### **Example Violations**

In a now-deleted Facebook Live from DC on January 6th, Kevin Jenkins stands on stage and tells the crowd that Black people are being targeted with the vaccine. "They are spending a trillion dollars to convince you [the Black Community] that it's ok to kill yourselves [with the COVID vaccine]."

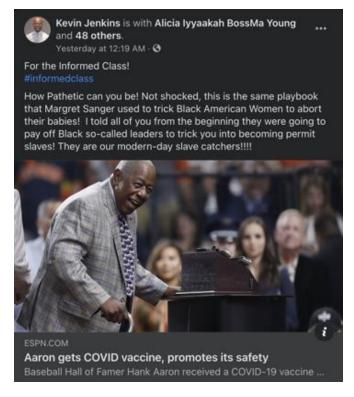




<u>Here</u> Jenkins claimed that the Black community is being targeted for experimentation with the vaccine.



In a now-deleted post, he also accused Hank Aaron of being paid off to take the vaccine - calling him a "modern-day slavecatcher."





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<sup>1</sup> CDC, 10 December 2020, <a href="https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-hospitalization.html">https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-hospitalization.html</a>

CDC, 10 December 2020, <a href="https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-deaths.html">https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-deaths.html</a>

<sup>2</sup> KFF, 17 March 2021, <a href="https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/">https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/</a>

KFF, 26 February 2021, <a href="https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-february-2021/">https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-february-2021/</a>

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Allington, Siobhan McAndrew, Vivienne Louisa Moxham-Hall, Bobby Duffy, Media usage predicts intention to be vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 in the US and the UK, Vaccine, 2021, ISSN 0264-410X, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.02.054">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.02.054</a>

<sup>4</sup> "The Anti-Vaxx Playbook", CCDH, 22 December 2020, <a href="https://www.counterhate.com/playbook">https://www.counterhate.com/playbook</a>

<sup>5</sup> USA Today, 10 March 2021, <a href="https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/03/10/covid-vaccine-facebook-youtube-instagram-black-misinformation-fight/6943180002/">https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/03/10/covid-vaccine-facebook-youtube-instagram-black-misinformation-fight/6943180002/</a>

<sup>6</sup> Loomba, S., de Figueiredo, A., Piatek, S.J. et al. Measuring the impact of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on vaccination intent in the UK and USA. Nat Hum Behav 5, 337–348 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01056-1

<sup>7</sup> "Failure to Act", Center for Countering Digital Hate, 3 September 2020, <a href="https://www.counterhate.co.uk/failure-to-act">https://www.counterhate.co.uk/failure-to-act</a>

"Malgorithm", Center for Countering Digital Hate, 8 March 2021, https://www.counterhate.com/malgorithm

<sup>8</sup> "The Anti-Vaxx Playbook", Center for Countering Digital Hate, 22 December 2020, <a href="https://www.counterhate.com/playbook">https://www.counterhate.com/playbook</a>

<sup>9</sup> Washington Post, 14 March 2021,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/14/facebook-vaccine-hesistancy-ganon/

<sup>10</sup> "Malgorithm", Center for Countering Digital Hate, 8 March 2021, https://www.counterhate.com/malgorithm

<sup>11</sup> Nyhan B, Reifler J. Does correcting myths about the flu vaccine work? An experimental evaluation of the effects of corrective information. Vaccine. 2015 Jan 9;33(3):459-64. doi: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2014.11.017. Epub 2014 Dec 8. PMID: 25499651.

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