

New insight into the thinking of anti-vaccination activists

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Credit: Australian National University

Anti-vaccination activists demonstrate similar beliefs around being persecuted as conspiracy theorists and their networks are immune to outside influences, new research has found.

The big data study was undertaken by Dr. Tim Graham, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The Australian National University (ANU), and Dr.

Naomi Smith from Federation University.

They analysed almost 300,000 text comments from around 14,700 individual posts on six anti-vaccination Facebook pages from Australia and North America.

"When we analysed what individuals said in these comments, we identified similar topics to conspiracy theorists," said Dr. Graham, from the ANU College of Engineering and Computer Science and the ANU School of Sociology.

"They believe the government and the media underplay, deny and perpetuate perceived harms caused by vaccinations."

The research also found the anti-vaccination movement might be less close-knit than previously assumed.

"Most users of the pages we studied appeared to be transient; they came on, commented on a few posts and then you never see them again," Dr. Graham said.

The networks were found to be 'small world', meaning that information spreads extremely rapidly throughout the [network](#) and the networks are resilient to attack or outside influence.

"Interestingly, there was also a significant gender skew. Three-quarters of those involved in the anti-vaccination Facebook pages were women. This is reflective of vaccination still being perceived as 'a mother's question'."

The research was published in the *Information, Communication and Society* journal.

More information: Naomi Smith et al. Mapping the anti-vaccination movement on Facebook, *Information, Communication & Society* (2017). DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2017.1418406](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1418406)

Provided by Australian National University

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