

Misinformation on vaccines readily available online

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Parents researching childhood vaccinations online are likely to encounter significant levels of negative information, researchers at the University of Otago, Wellington, have found.

Lead researcher Dr. Lucy Elkin says negative information about vaccines remains readily available on Google, Facebook and YouTube,

despite attempts by the internet platforms to better control access to misinformation through algorithm and policy changes.

The researchers searched the three platforms for information on vaccines, mimicking the kind of 'real-life' search that would be conducted by a parent looking for information on [childhood vaccinations](#). Their research is published in the leading scientific journal *Vaccine*.

Dr. Elkin says that while most of the websites generated by Google (80 per cent) and videos published on YouTube (75 per cent) were positive about vaccines, half of the Facebook pages were negative towards vaccines.

"Parents would be able to find information encouraging or discouraging vaccination on the vast majority of the websites, Facebook pages and YouTube videos analysed, but popular pages on Facebook containing vaccine information were more polarised."

She says steps being taken to reduce the amount of "vaccine misinformation" shared on websites are likely to be improving the quality of information available on Google and YouTube.

"The greater proportion of vaccine negative content on Facebook compared to YouTube may reflect the different degrees to which providers are censoring vaccine-negative content.

"Facebook state that the purpose of their platform is to 'build community' and to 'connect with others'. This could mean that Facebook may intentionally connect people with like-minded views on vaccination and therefore have little interest in censoring vaccine-negative content.

"This is significant because, typically, when browsing anything on the internet, a person's search history is remembered and further similar

content will be generated. Those reading vaccine-critical information on Facebook are more likely to come across vaccine-critical information in subsequent searches on any platform, regardless of whether they are looking on social media, or on a search engine."

Dr. Elkin says the level of vaccine critical information on Facebook is concerning because evidence shows those viewing vaccine-critical information online are more likely to be hesitant about getting their children vaccinated.

"It is important that vaccine-promoting agencies continue to make every effort to maximize their presence online so that parents who are researching whether or not to vaccinate their children will encounter evidence-based information online."

She says [health professionals](#) can also help to accurately inform and support [parents](#) by referring them to credible websites containing well-validated information.

The [research paper](#), "Should I vaccinate my child? comparing the displayed stances of [vaccine](#) information retrieved from Google, Facebook and YouTube" is published in the international journal *Vaccine*.

More information: Lucy E Elkin et al, 'Should I vaccinate my child?' comparing the displayed stances of vaccine information retrieved from Google, Facebook and YouTube, *Vaccine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2020.02.041](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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