

Study examines spread of COVID vaccine information online

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A new study from The University of Western Australia has established how rumors of alleged adverse events were spread around the world during the first months of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

Dr. Tael Harper, a media and communication expert from UWA's Coronavax project, led the study, "How vaccination rumors spread online: Tracing the dissemination of information regarding adverse events of COVID-19 vaccines," published in the *International Journal of Public Health*.

Weekly Google Trends were used to trace the emergence and dissemination of the most prominent rumors about potential adverse effects of COVID vaccines.

"We then used CrowdTangle and Factiva searches to examine how discussions about the five most prominent adverse effects have spread through traditional media channels and Facebook," Dr. Harper said.

The study found traditional mass media reporting remains crucial in both promoting and moderating discussions around alleged adverse effects.

"While some cases illustrate that [social media networks](#) can synthesize and amplify rumors about adverse effects, traditional media coverage remains crucial as a forum for exploring and debunking spurious claims," he said.

"Hyperbolic reporting tends to be shared more widely, so writers and platforms incentivized by clicks may exaggerate claims.

"Journalists should therefore be encouraged to be particularly earnest when reporting such stories, and the [vaccine](#) social science community should aid journalists in this task by clearly reporting on any rumors emerging online."

The study concluded scientists and health professionals should also look to promote their own perspectives when they believe that a story about adverse events needs clarifying.

Co-author Associate Professor Katie Attwell said the study suggested that such activities had a significant impact on the spread of [rumors](#) about adverse events, and therefore pointed to a need for available experts to help correct misinformation.

More information: Tael Harper et al, How Vaccination Rumours Spread Online: Tracing the Dissemination of Information Regarding Adverse Events of COVID-19 Vaccines, *International Journal of Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/ijph.2022.1604228](https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2022.1604228)

Provided by University of Western Australia

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