

Anti-vaccine online movement targeting undecided groups in social media, spreading disinformation about safety and coronavirus containment efforts, study warns

As scientists work to create a vaccine against COVID-19, a small but fervent anti-vaccination movement is marshalling against it. Campaigners are seeding outlandish narratives.

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It's not known how many people would actually refuse a COVID-19 vaccine — and general support for vaccines remains high. But some researchers studying vaccine-opposition movements say they're concerned that the messages could undermine efforts to establish herd immunity to the new coronavirus. Online opposition to vaccines has rapidly pivoted to talk of the pandemic, says Neil Johnson, a physicist at George Washington University in Washington DC, who is studying the campaigners' tactics. "For a lot of these groups, it's all about COVID now," he says.

Groups opposing vaccines are small in size, but their online-communications strategy is worryingly effective and far-reaching, a report from Johnson's team suggests.

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not for publication known

Anti-vaccine campaigners tend to win converts with personalized, emotive messages, says [Heidi] Larson [who directs the Vaccine Confidence Project, a group that monitors public trust in vaccines, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine]; these are built not necessarily on fear ("Vaccines will kill you."), but on appeals to the heart ("Do you love your children?"). The public-health community, meanwhile, has simply been trying to get more people vaccinated, she says — which might lead to a feeling that they are just trying to get their numbers up. "The approach needs to be quite different with people who are undecided," she says.

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