

## YouTube's anti-vax ban: Necessary public health measure or unjustified censorship?



YouTube triggered an uproar [recently], announcing that it would take “down several video channels associated with high-profile anti-vaccine activists including Joseph Mercola and Robert F. Kennedy Jr,” the [Washington Post reported](#) on [September 29]. The move is designed to silence controversial voices “experts say are partially responsible for helping seed the skepticism that’s contributed to slowing vaccination rates across the country.”

The new policy strikes all the right chords with most people in the science community. It supposedly shuts up belligerent activists with no interest in telling the truth, and perhaps makes it easier to educate the public about vaccination. But the situation isn’t that simple.

YouTube is a private company and its new policy isn’t a First Amendment issue as a result. But the platform’s heightened restrictions still come with a high price tag: they invite federal speech regulations that could silence other voices, including those of reputable scientists, and they leave many high-profile misinformation spreaders unaffected.

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### **The media: champions of vaccine skepticism**

The assumption behind the new policy is that banning certain content creators will cut into the infodemic currently plaguing the world, and it should have come much sooner. According to the Post:

‘You create this breeding ground and when you deplatform it doesn’t go away, they just migrate,’ said Hany Farid, a computer science professor and misinformation researcher at the University of California at Berkeley. ‘This is not one that should have been complicated. We had 18 months to think about these issues, we knew the vaccine was coming, why was this not the policy from the very beginning?’

There’s actually much more to the story than Professor Farid lets on. We can’t point the finger at YouTube and call it a day, because the modern anti-vaccine movement “goes back to well before the pandemic,” the Post noted just a few paragraphs later. “False scientific claims that childhood vaccines caused autism made in the late 1990s have contributed to rising numbers of people refusing to let their kids get shots that had been commonplace for decades.” Scientists and journalists later learned that the study was fraudulent and the doctor behind it, Andrew Wakefield, had his medical degrees revoked.

As many readers will recall, social media didn't exist in the 1990s, nor in the 1970s when safety concerns about the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTP) vaccine erupted across the world. It wasn't YouTube or Facebook that amplified these fears; instead "Television documentaries and newspaper reports drew public attention to the controversy," [according to the](#) College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

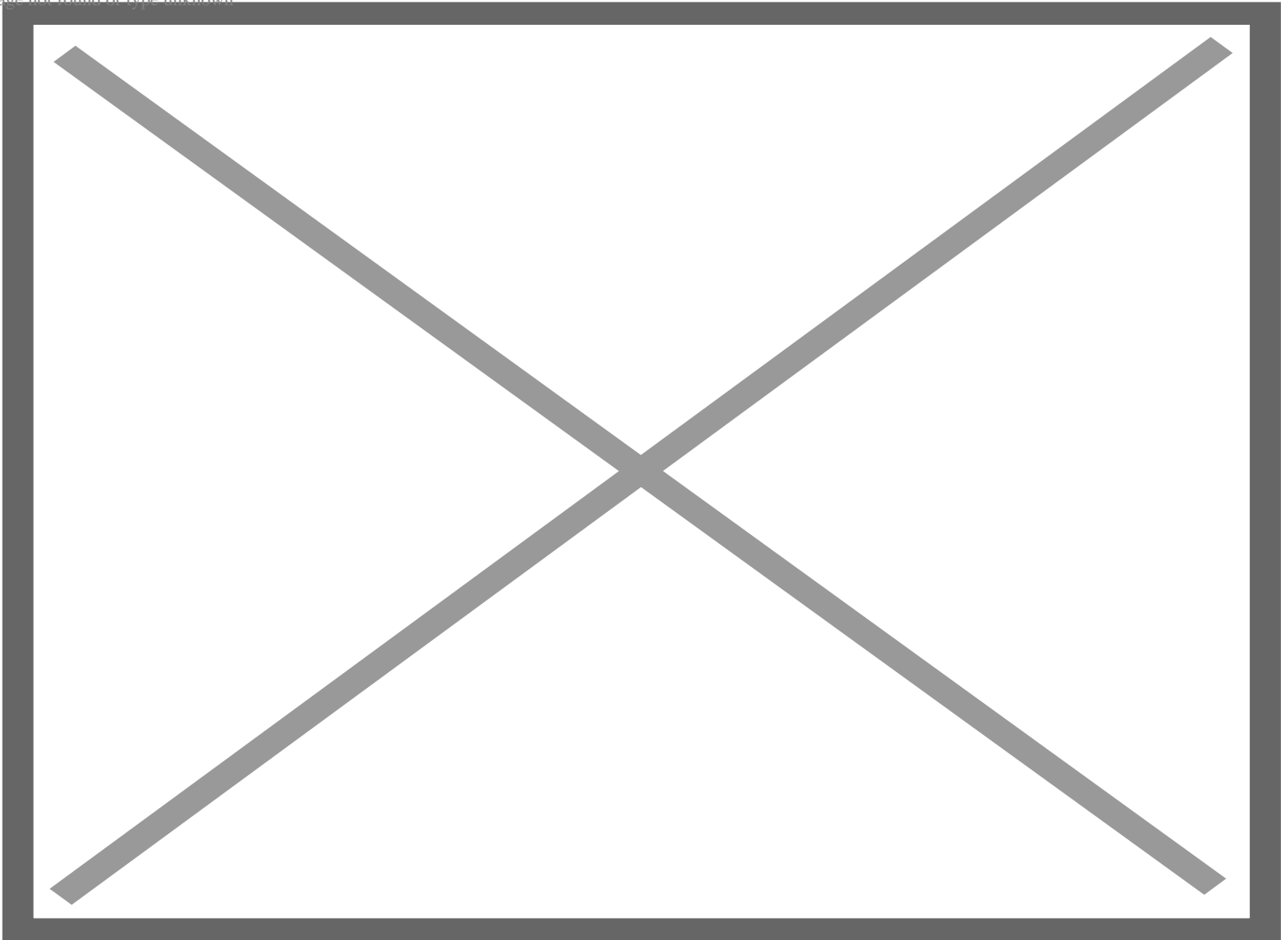
In America, the "controversy began with media attention on the alleged risks of DTP," the [College notes](#), specifically from a 1982 documentary, [produced by](#) NBC, called *DPT: Vaccination Roulette*. "That documentary gave birth to the idea that DPT caused permanent brain damage and that a vaccine could cause harm," pediatric infectious disease expert Paul Offit [told Discover last October](#). "Companies got hit with enormous lawsuits and a lot of them stopped making vaccines — and we almost lost vaccine manufacturing here in the U.S."

Recounting the debunked vaccine-autism scandal from the late 1990s, risk perception expert David Ropeik outlined the media's crucial role in amplifying [the controversy](#):

In fact, it was widespread media coverage of some claims Wakefield subsequently made to reporters that set this fear in motion, creating a controversy the press magnified and repeated for years ... But this coverage did not create the fear of vaccines ... What the news media really do is not create fear but magnify it by emphasizing the emotional characteristics that make the risk more alarming..."

It was the mainstream press that gave anti-vaccine activism the attention it needed to gain legitimacy in the minds of many Americans, and the coverage hasn't stopped. In April, ABC published a [badly misleading report](#) about breakthrough COVID cases in Washington state. That same month, of all the newspapers in the world, The Washington Post [published an article](#) by Stephanie Seneff, an MIT computer scientist and well-known vaccine skeptic, who also [blamed the pandemic](#) on the weedkiller glyphosate. Of course, Fox News [is guilty of the same](#) science-free shenanigans when it comes to slanted vaccine reporting.

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In sum, the media has been a powerful, if unintentional, ally to the anti-vaccine movement over the years. It seems that newspapers, book publishers, and cable news networks deserve to split a good portion of the blame we have to dole out. If protecting the public from misinformation is the goal, why would we exclude giant media companies with enormous audiences from this social media purge?

There's no reasonable answer. Either we consistently silence proponents of junk science or we don't silence anyone. The second option is the better of the two.

### **Whack-a-mole bans leads to censorship**

The case against this latest wave of YouTube bans is simple: they won't rid the public square of anti-vaccine commentary, but they will encourage more intense censorship. As the Post explained, "Influential figures that get banned on YouTube can slide to another service like Telegram or Gab which have fewer

restrictions on content, and ask their followers to come with them.”

That prompts an obvious question—what do you do when skeptics like Joe Mercola and Mike Adams establish themselves on an alternative platform that won’t censor them? Well, comes the answer from misinformation experts, “If [social media companies] continue failing to act, governments must be prepared to hold them accountable for the spread of deadly misinformation,” the [Center For Countering Digital Hate](#) argues.

It’s hard to know what these accountability measures would look like in practice, but a few proposals have been advanced already. Elsewhere CFCDH warns that [social media](#) “moderation practices remain unregulated and unchecked by elected bodies,” which indicates the group’s support for legislation that would moderate the kinds of information social media users could access. Media scholars have also suggested that [we hire](#) 10,000 internet librarians to curate the content people access online.

“Their work would be similar to the public interest obligation already applied to radio,” [argues Joan Donovan](#), research director at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy “...[W]e legally require ‘broadcasting serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity as a condition of having access to the airwaves. Social media companies should tune into the frequency of democracy, rather than the static of disinformation.”

These ideas are very appealing. As I [wrote in June](#), “If I were given the power to regulate the speech of anti-biotech activist groups, I just might ‘curate’ their content off the internet forever.” But nobody in a modern, liberal society should have that kind of authority. Everybody has biases and lapses in judgment that would hinder their ability to objectively regulate speech online.

## **Silencing scientists**

In fact, the logic behind these sorts of proposals has already helped silence some researchers during the pandemic. “Some leading scientists have been subjected to such ferocious personal attacks that they have stopped their research activities,” the [British Medical Journal reported](#) earlier this year. Documenting one such case in February, the [BMJ noted that](#) Swedish epidemiologist Jonas F. Ludvigsson was viciously attacked for publishing a study showing that relatively few children in Sweden were infected early in the pandemic, though the country kept its schools open. “After the letter’s publication, the [BMJ noted](#),

he was bombarded with angry messages through social media and email criticizing the study and inferring that it and Ludvigsson were representative of the country’s covid-19 containment strategy ... The experience has taken its toll on Ludvigsson. He told the journal of the Swedish Medical Association (Lakartidningen) that ... he had now lost his ‘appetite for covid-19—both when it comes to speaking out and researching.’ He has decided to quit researching and debating covid-19.

The [BMJ’s conclusion](#):

Debate is a key driver of advances in healthcare, and we must all recognize that being wrong is an invaluable part of the scientific process ... Labeling different interpretations of evidence as 'disinformation' is inappropriate.

To be clear, anti-vaccine activists don't promote a different interpretation of the data in an ongoing scientific discussion; they attempt to seed doubt about the safety of thoroughly studied drugs. The point, however, is that social media platforms and academics who want tighter online speech restrictions [are poor judges](#) of which users are honestly discussing science and which are using academic language to misinform people.

Facebook, for instance, [suspended a scientist's account](#) earlier this year because he politely corrected another user's inaccurate post about a Monsanto weedkiller. The platform also treated a possible lab-leak origin for SARS-COV-2 as a [conspiracy theory](#) until the Biden Administration declared it a plausible scenario worthy of investigation. Clearly other factors beyond the relevant evidence determine how we judge content as "misinformation."

Anti-vaccine advocacy remains a serious problem in our society, and I'm eager to refute activists who promote nonsense. Natural News founder Mike Adams has been [my favorite punching bag](#) of late. But at some point, we have to assess the trade-off we're about to make. I don't want Adams calling COVID shots mind-control tools on YouTube or any other platform. But I'm not willing to let Harvard professors regulate my newsfeed—with the backing of the federal government—to stop him.

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