



Despite NewsGuard’s prior warnings in reports to the WHO, Facebook and Instagram have allowed known anti-vaccine misinformation superspreaders to flourish on their platforms.

By Alex Cadier

More than a dozen accounts, pages or groups on Facebook and Instagram which spread COVID-19 or anti-vaccine misinformation have been allowed to thrive on the platforms, gaining over 370,000 new followers or members between them in the past year, with little to no warning to users from the tech giant.

Since September 2020, NewsGuard has submitted regular reports to the World Health Organization at its request highlighting accounts, pages and groups which spread COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook and Instagram, along with other digital platforms. The WHO uses these reports in working with social media platforms to mitigate the harms of such information.

Twenty of these accounts, pages or groups have gained tens of thousands of followers in the twelve months since NewsGuard began issuing these reports.

These include posts in Facebook groups which claim that children are being “murdered by the experimental jab they’re being pressured to take,” pages which claim that the risks of the COVID-19 vaccines are “infinite and unknown,” or Instagram pages which imply that the vaccines are poison. None of these examples has been debunked by Facebook or Instagram, which do not provide their users with trustworthiness ratings for sources of news and information.

Accounts include high-profile purveyors of misinformation associated with NewsGuard red-rated websites, such as Children’s Health Defense (175,000 Facebook followers and 272,000 Instagram followers) and its founder, Robert F. Kennedy Jr who, despite having been removed from Instagram for spreading anti-vaccine misinformation, enjoys more than 330,000 followers on Facebook. Also featured are the Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN) pages with more than 50,000 Facebook followers and 48,100 followers on Instagram, up from 6,600 followers in February 2021. ICAN has been identified as spreading healthcare misinformation in four of NewsGuard’s reports to the WHO.

Another example is the case of Dr. Joseph Mercola, who has been identified by NewsGuard as a frequent and popular source of COVID-19 misinformation. Dr. Mercola's Facebook account lost just over 15,500 followers since February 2021, but this had been more than made up by the 112,000 new followers he gained on Instagram. Both Dr Mercola's Facebook and Instagram accounts are "verified" by the platform and a blue tick to that effect appears on his profiles. Among other falsehoods, Dr Mercola wrongly claimed that COVID-19 vaccines "alter your genetic coding." He has received warning letters from the US Food and Drug Administration for selling unapproved health products in 2005, 2006 and 2011.

These twenty accounts appear to be based in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and France, and the problem is not limited to English language accounts. In fact, the Instagram account for francesoirfr, a NewsGuard red-rated site which shares anti-vaccine misinformation, has seen its number of followers nearly double, from 8,982 in April 2021 to 16,500 in October 2021.

Many of these pages have Facebook-generated generic labels on them which inform users that "this page posts about COVID-19." However, these labels do not inform users whether the source of this information is generally trustworthy or not. In Facebook Groups, the labels simply say, "See the latest coronavirus info," while Instagram offers no links to reliable information. Although some posts seen in Groups or published by these pages have been fact-checked by Facebook's third-party fact checkers, they remain a small proportion of the content published. By failing to provide its users with information about the trustworthiness of sources distributed and recommended on its platform, Facebook has failed to empower its users with the information they need to know the reliability of information in their Facebook news feeds or in Facebook Groups.

These twenty accounts by no means represent an exhaustive list. NewsGuard found nine other accounts, which featured in past reports to the WHO which, despite losing some followers, were still active on Facebook and Instagram with no warnings or other mitigation efforts provided by Facebook.

It should be noted that Facebook could take a variety of constructive steps to mitigate the damage posed by these publishers beyond the opaque, unaccountable, and demonstrably inconsistent step of simply censoring them by removing them. These could include fact-checking individual posts, or the more scalable step of proactively providing labels explaining to its users that a source in their news feeds or in Facebook Groups is a known spreader of false information and that users should proceed with caution.

What is clear, however, is that whatever action is being taken at Facebook and Instagram, it is not working.

List of the 20 accounts, pages or groups, their followers increases and the NewsGuard reports that flagged them:

Facebook pages

- **“Robert F. Kennedy, Jr”** – (9.6% follower growth) – 301k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 330k followers on October 27, 2021 – *Note: Robert F. Kennedy, Jr was banned from Instagram for spreading COVID-19 vaccine misinformation in February 2021.*
<https://www.facebook.com/rfkjr>
- **“Del Bigtree”** – (11% follower growth) – 115k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 128k on October 27th, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/delbigtreevaxxed>
- **“Informed Consent Action Network”** – (20% follower growth) – 44k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 53k on October 27, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/ICANdecide>
- **“Dr Joseph Mercola”** – (0.9% follower loss) – 1,772,406 followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 1,756 656 followers on October 28, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/doctor.health>
- **“RethinkVaccines”** – (55.5% follower growth) – 2.7k on [April 5, 2021](#) – 4.2k on October 27, 2021
https://www.facebook.com/Rethinkvaccines1/?ref=page_internal
- **“UK Column”** – (15.7% follower growth) – 56k followers on [June 22, 2021](#) – 64.8k on October 27, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/ukcolumn>

Instagram pages

- **@childrenshealthdefense** – (65.2% follower growth) – 164k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 271k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/childrenshealthdefense/>
- **@fr3volution** – (1.3% follower growth) – 55.8k on [December 17th, 2020](#) – 56.5k on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/fr3volution/>

- **@thefreethoughtproject** – (3% follower growth) – 357k followers on [December 17, 2020](#) – 368k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/thefreethoughtproject/>
- **@icandecide** (Informed Consent Action Network) – (706.6 % follower growth) - 6k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 48.4k followers on October 27th, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/icandecide/>
- **@drmercola** (Dr Joseph Mercola) – (39.8% follower growth) – 281k followers on [February 2, 2021](#) – 393k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/drmercola/>
- **@1986theact** (Andrew Wakefield) – (7.2% follower growth) – 29.1k followers on [April 20, 2021](#) – 31.2k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/1986theact/>
- **@redpillrevv** – (11.7% follower growth) – 47.7k followers on [June 22, 2021](#) – 53.3k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/redpillrevv/>
- **@picphysicians** – (38.5% follower growth) - 39.7k followers on [June 22, 2021](#) – 55k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/picphysicians/>
- **@francesoirfr** – (83.7% follower growth) – 8,982 followers on [April 20, 2021](#) – 16.5k followers on October 27, 2021
<https://www.instagram.com/francesoirfr/>
- **@visforvaccine** – (22.9% follower growth) – 28.7k followers on April 20, 2021 – 35.3k followers
<https://www.instagram.com/visforvaccine/>

Facebook Groups

- **“The government are chatting shit” (formerly “The Whitty, Johnson, Hancock and Vallance Un Appreciation Society”)**. (24.5% follower growth) - *private group formerly called “The Whitty, Johnson, Hancock and Vallance Un Appreciation Society”*.

1,927 members on [October 5th 2020](#) – 2,400 members on October 27th, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/339932303352378>

- **“Against Covid19 Vaccine”** (8.3% follower growth) – *private group* - 1.2k members on [April 5th 2021](#) – 1.3k members on October 27th, 2021.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/686605928868937>
- **“Fauci, Gates & Soros to prison worldwide Resistance** (3.6% follower growth) – *private group* - 11k members on [April 5th 2021](#) – 11.4k on October 27th, 2021
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1140218829669777>
- **“Anti-vaccination Australia”** – (1.1% follower growth) – *private group* – 16.9k members on [June 22, 2021](#) – 17.1k on October 27, 2021
https://www.facebook.com/groups/antivaxaus/?notif_id=1624015499603003¬if_t=group_r2j_approved&ref=notif

Total combined follower growth: approx 372,670