

# Countering Misinformation

---

Jan 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Joe Smyser, PhD, MSPH  
CEO, PGP  
[joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org](mailto:joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org)

# PGP's Related Projects

## Misinformation Monitoring

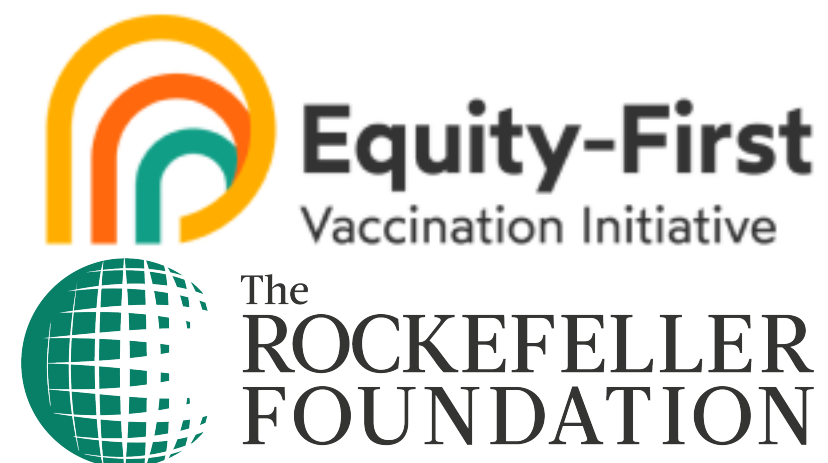


PROJECT VCTR



Vaccination  
Demand  
Observatory

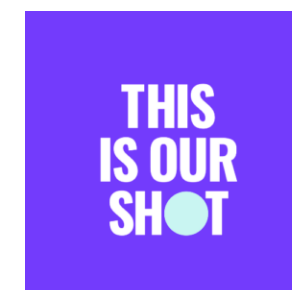
## Collective Impact



## Digital Influencers



KAISER PERMANENTE®



## Campaigns & Programs





# Current Landscape

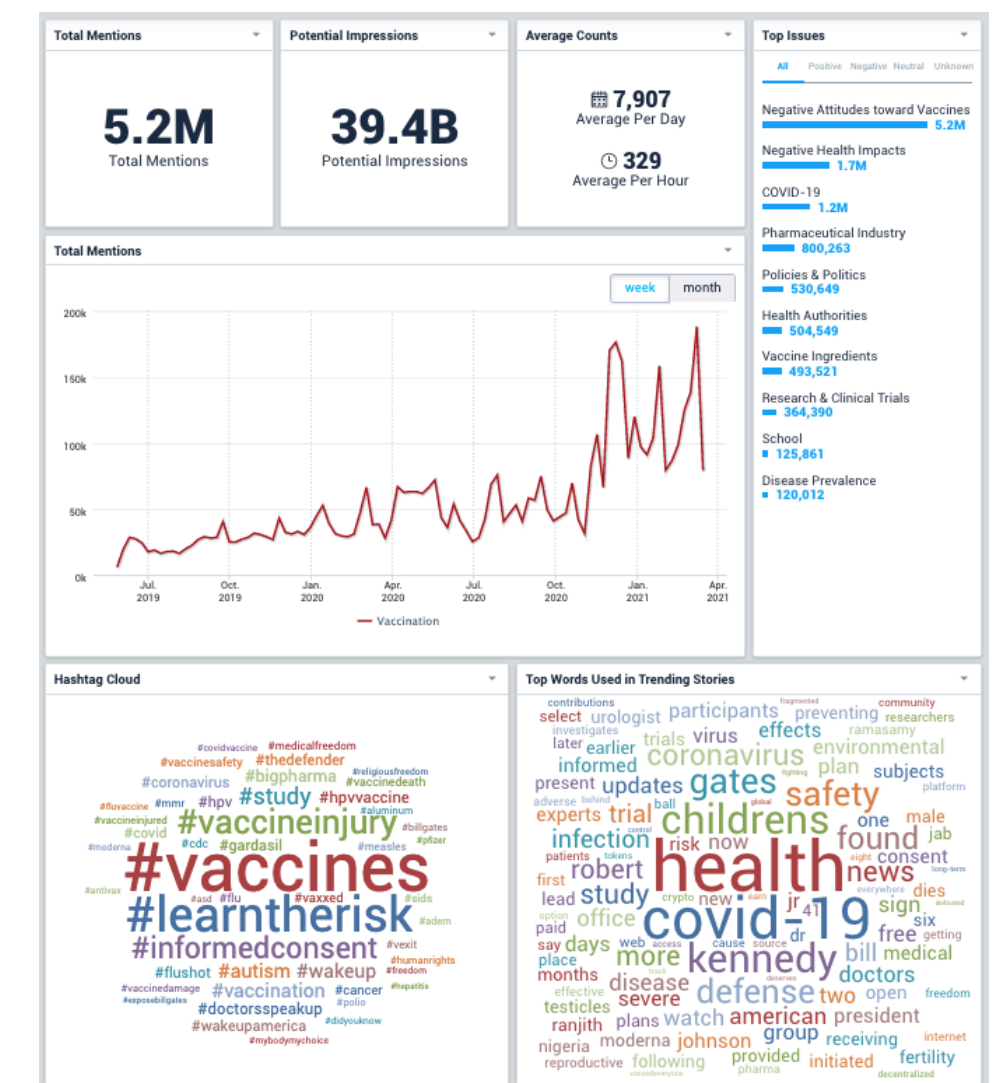
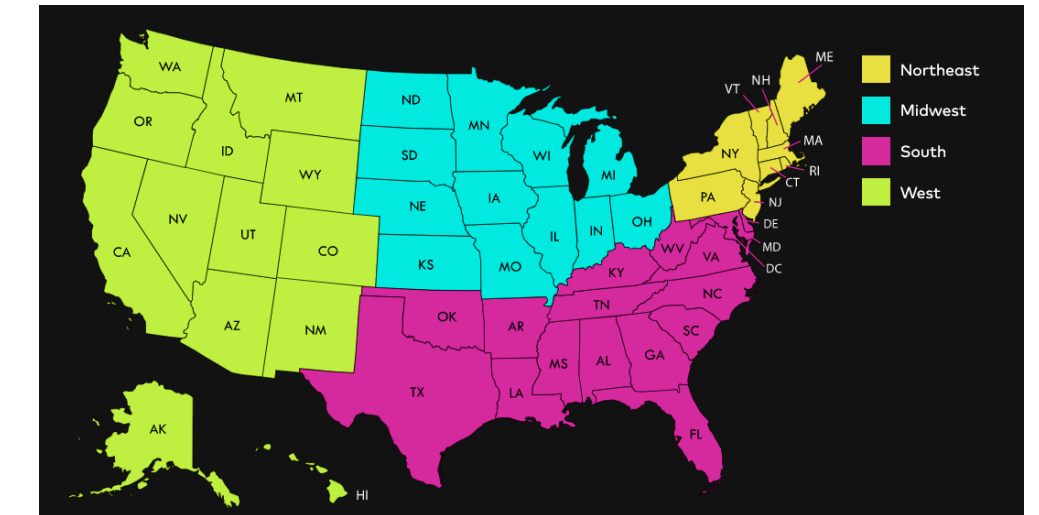
---

# Project VCTR

Vaccine opposition is a threat to global health. Digital and social media are a primary source of misinformation and means of organizing vaccine opposition.

Since 2019, Project VCTR has tracked vaccine-related communication within all 50 US states, across 12+ media sources. Each week, PGP's public health analysts and journalists provide weekly insights on trending stories across the U.S, including conversation about legislation and advocacy.

Project VCTR is a free resource designed for health organizations, health educators, or members of the press who routinely report on public health. For more information, visit [www.ProjectVCTR.com](http://www.ProjectVCTR.com)



PROJECT VCTR

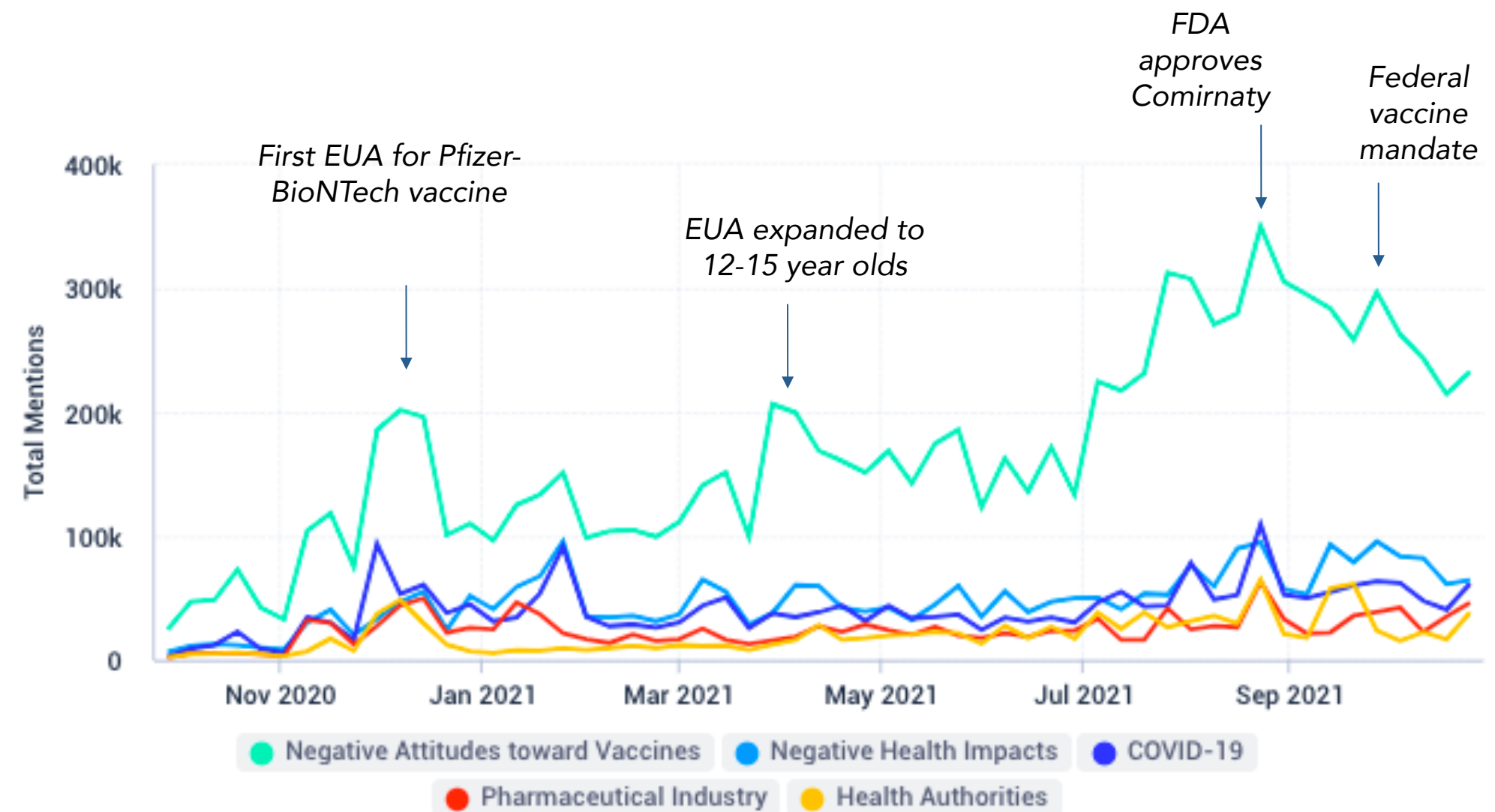


# Vaccine Conversations

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine opposition in public media data has increased.<sup>1</sup>

From Nov 2020 - Nov 2021, Project VCTR identified 8,894,320 conversations demonstrating vaccine opposition and mis/disinformation, an average of 24,368 per day.

From Nov 2019 - Nov 2020, Project VCTR identified an average of 5,368 per day.



1. Bonnevie, E., Gallegos-Jeffrey, A., Goldbarg, J., Byrd, B., & Smyser, J. (2021). Quantifying the rise of vaccine opposition on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of communication in healthcare*, 14(1), 12-19.

# Terms to Know

1

## INFORMATION

'Data with meaning': the basis of knowledge when it is resonant, actionable, trusted

2

## RUMOUR

Unverified information: stories/reports that spread rapidly through a group or population - can be true or false

3

## MISINFORMATION

Accidental falsehoods. Wrong or misleading information with the power to dilute, distract, distort

4

## DISINFORMATION

Deliberate, engineered falsehoods circulated with malicious intent or for the purpose of serving a personal, political or economic agenda



# Misinfo's Impact



*"A reliable way to make people believe falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth."*

-Daniel Kahneman

Source: Vaccine Misinformation Management Field Guide, 2020

Vaccine skepticism is no longer a fringe movement. As occurred with the Tea Party, its leaders and organizations are increasingly normalized. Its views are represented by elected officials, party platforms, and in news programs.

Public health is mobilizing: nearly all states are building media monitoring / infodemic teams. But there is much work to be done.

# Experts Have Emerged

## Infodemiology:

“The science of managing infodemics” compares pathogens in epidemics to misinformation in health emergency response

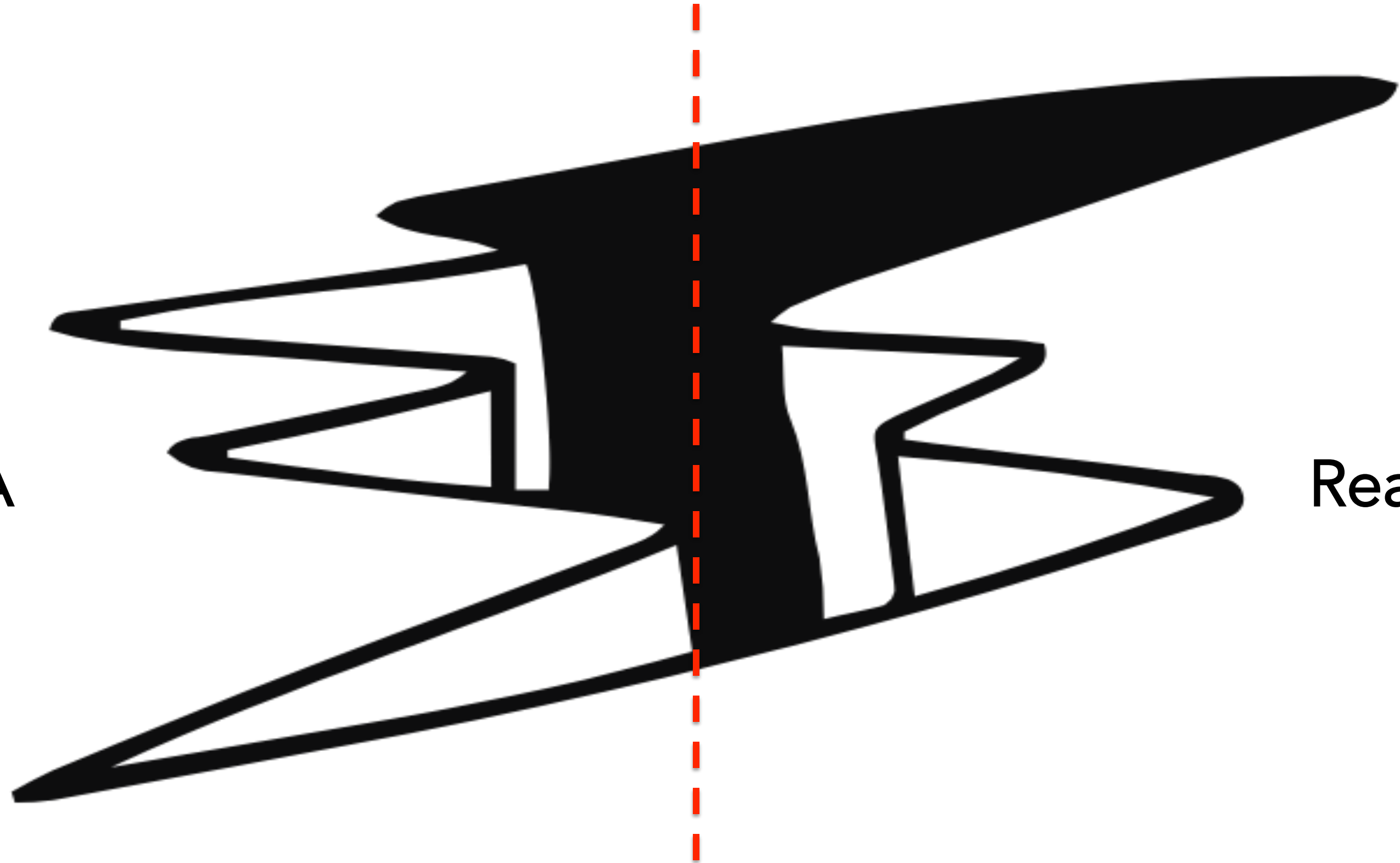
Source: WHO, 2020

Journalism	 <b>FIRST DRAFT</b>	<b>Poynter.</b>
Academia	 <b>Misinformation Review</b>	
Public Health	 <b>unicef</b>	<b>Public Health Communications COLLABORATIVE</b>
Data Tracking/ NGOs	 <b>NCoC</b> National Conference on Citizenship	 <b>CCDH</b> Center for Countering Digital Hate



# Current State

Reality A



Reality B

# Current State

Reality A

Reality B





# Vaccine Opposition

## Common Motivators



1. Profit
2. Politics\*
3. Power

## Repeat Tactics



1. Cherry-pick data
2. Reference to fake experts
3. Race-baiting
4. Values-baiting

## Recurring Themes



1. Negative health impacts
2. Pharma industry
3. Politics/policies
4. Vaccine ingredients
5. Federal Health Authorities
6. Research/clinical trials
7. Religion
8. Vaccine safety
9. Disease prevalence
10. School
11. Family

## Types of Key Players



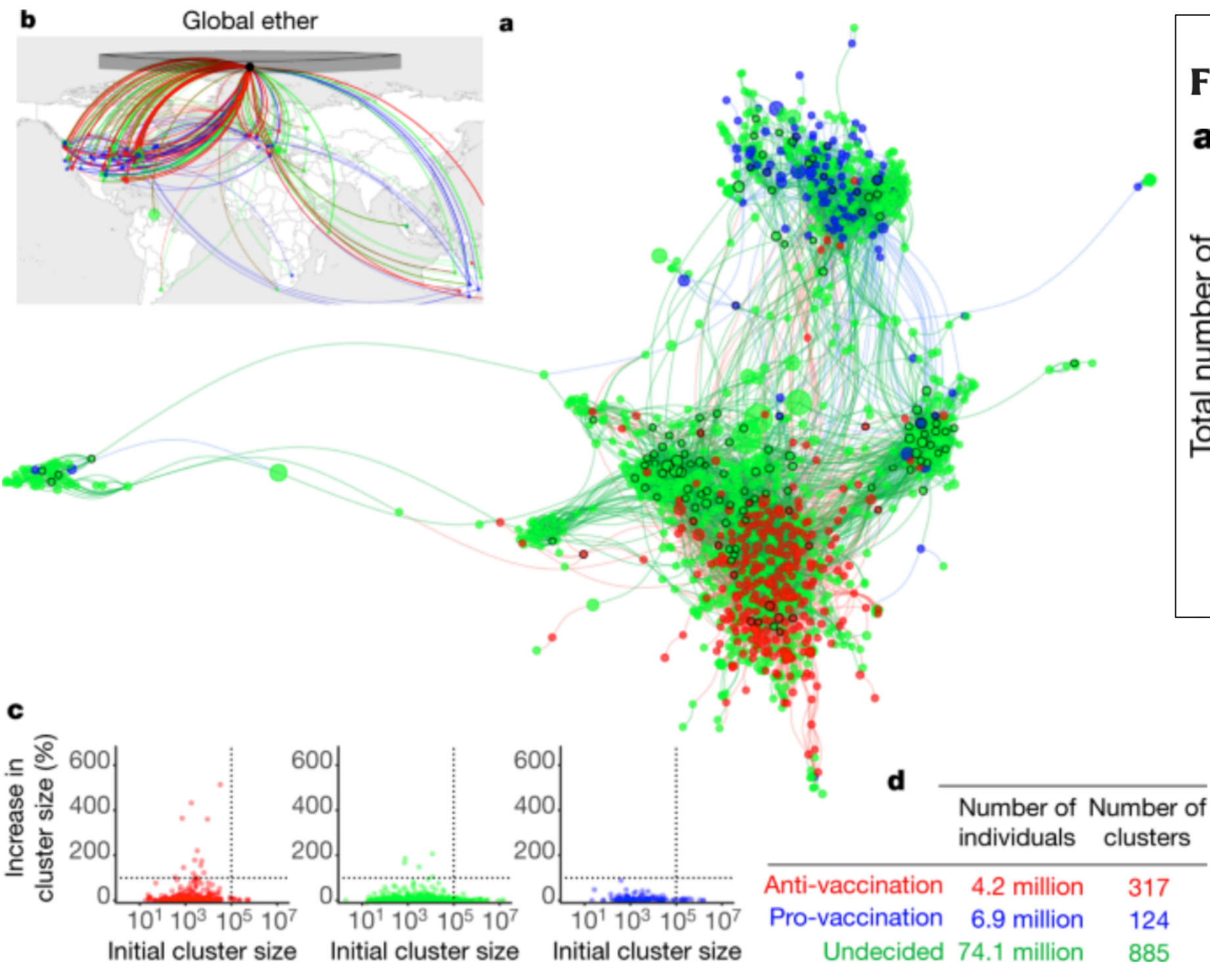
1. Traditional Anti-Vaxxers
2. Conspiracy theorists
3. Opportunists - White supremacists etc
4. Foreign actors
5. Our own politicians

# The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views.

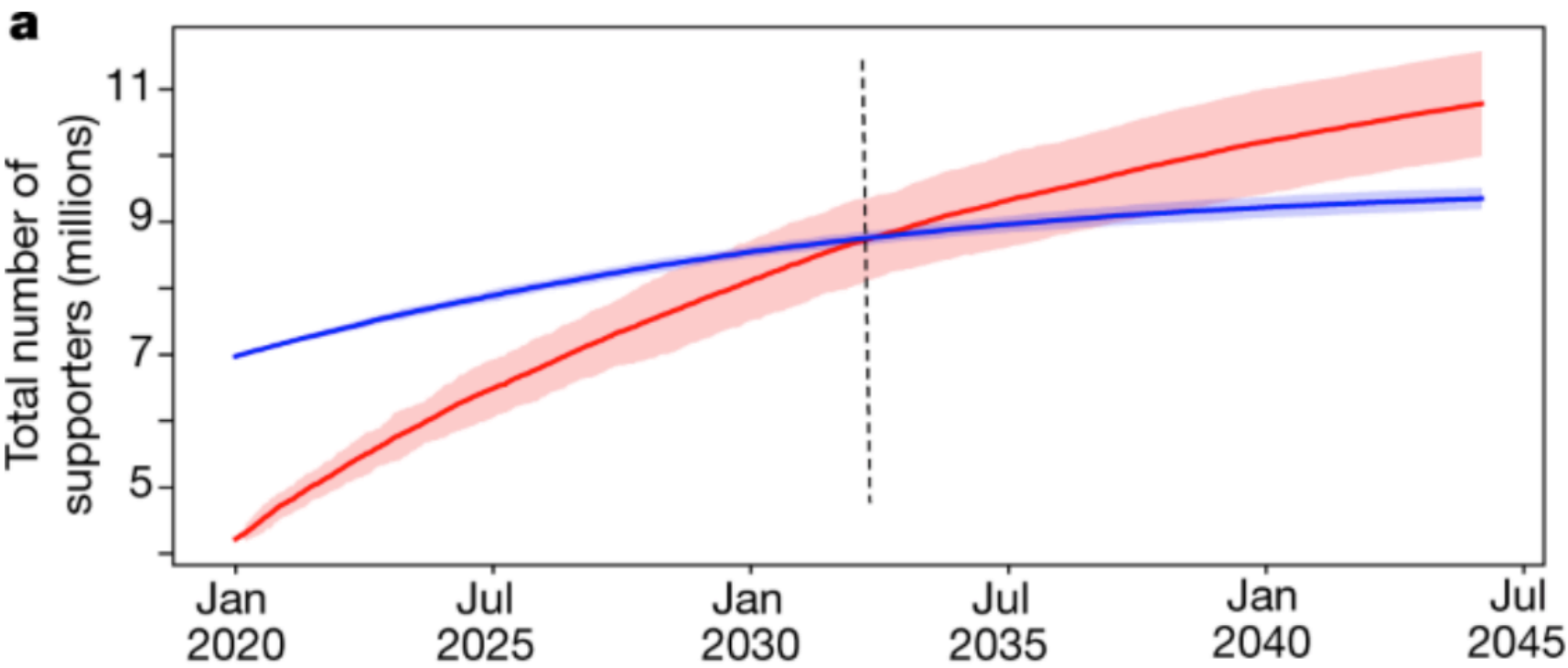
**nature**

May 13, 2020

**Fig. 1: Online ecology of vaccine views.**



**Fig. 3: Predictions and interventions.**



The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views.

Johnson, N.F., Velásquez, N., Restrepo, N.J. *et al.*  
*Nature* **582**, 230–233 (2020).



# What You Can Do: With Messaging

---

# 3 Main Response Scenarios

## Debunk

- Respond to false information where you find it
- Provide science, data, or true information
- We are seeing local sources, and nontraditional sources, be more effective

## Inoculate

(Prebunk)

- Equip people with counter-arguments to build resistance to future misinformation
- If people see truth before fiction, they're more likely to believe the truth

## Report

- Help hold social platforms accountable
- Help social platforms hold super spreader users accountable
- Keep a log as an org, inform across teams



# Debunk

## Example From Stronger

### SENIOR CITIZENS

A man claiming to be a CNA is spreading misinformation about the vaccine's safety for senior citizens.

This is part of a larger misinfo trend that we're seeing all over the world.

**Senior citizens account for 80% of all COVID-19 deaths. No one has been killed by the vaccine.**

### ADVERSE REACTIONS

Beware of a fake "CDC" document that compiles social media posts from people alleging to have experienced vaccine side effects. **The document is NOT from the CDC, and its claims are unverified.**

Adverse reactions to vaccines do happen. Severe reactions are rare, and are always investigated.

**To date, no one has died from taking the COVID-19 vaccine. Experts agree that the benefits of taking the vaccine far outweigh the risks for senior citizens.**

### IT'S NOT A FLU

A debunked video has resurfaced, along with claims that COVID-19 is just a typical flu, and that the vaccine is "gene therapy."

Let us repeat: COVID-19 is not the flu. It is currently the #1 killer in America, with a death toll of over 460,000 people.

**The vaccine does not (and cannot) alter your DNA.**

# Debunk

## Example Comments

When someone on your timeline has posted misinformation.

Response depends on your comfort in that situation. You can comment truth, message the person privately, report it to the platform, or do nothing.

**Remember:** don't demonize the poster

The screenshot shows a social media interface with a post and two replies. The post is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the post is: "And the shot doesn't keep you from getting the virus or spreading it or being hospitalized or dying ... So why bother". Below the post are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", "Send Message", and a timestamp "6d". There is a blue heart icon with the number "1" next to it.

The first reply is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the reply is: "But the jab isn't just one and done like the polio shot.....". Below the reply are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", and a timestamp "3w". There is a blue heart icon with the number "1" next to it.

The second reply is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the reply is: "The polio shot required 4 shots.. It's normal for vaccines to be given in multiple doses—they keep us healthy." Below the reply are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", and a timestamp "3w". There is a blue heart icon with the number "1" next to it.

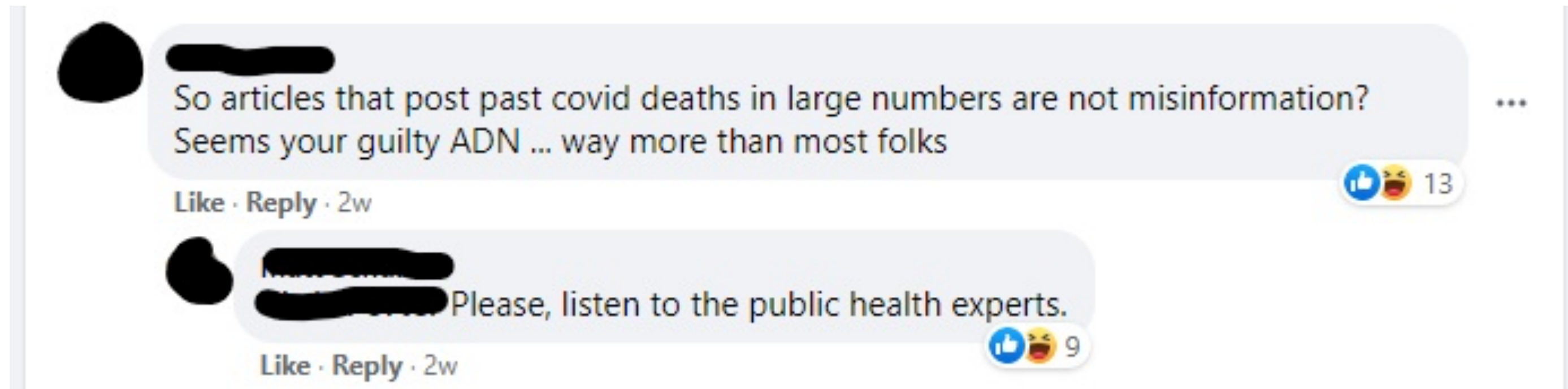
The third reply is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the reply is: "You're the one spreading misinformation! Just because YOU say they're safe doesn't make it true... People are doing their own research which says otherwise..". Below the reply are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", and a timestamp "2w". There is a blue heart icon with the number "4" next to it.

The fourth reply is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the reply is: "Medical science shows that vaccine reduces both mortality and morbidity. Here is excerpt: 'BACKGROUND Vaccines against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), have been used since December 2020 in the United Kingdom. Real-world data have shown the vaccines to be highly effective against Covid-19 and related severe disease and death. Vaccine effectiveness may wane over time since the receipt of the second dose of the ChAdOx1-S (ChAdOx1 nCoV-19) and BNT162b2 vaccines.' The reference: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2115481>". Below the reply are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", "Send Message", and a timestamp "6d". There is a blue heart icon with the number "1" next to it.

The fifth reply is from a user with a blue profile picture and a blue header bar. The text of the reply is: "NEJM.ORG Duration of Protection against Mild and Severe Disease by...". Below the reply are interaction buttons: "Like", "Reply", "Hide", "Send Message", and a timestamp "6d". There is a blue heart icon with the number "1" next to it.

# Debunk

## Observational Correction



Two targets for any corrective message:

1. The Sharer: May have a higher resistance to correction. Values and reputation are at stake.
2. Observers: Anyone who sees this post.

Research has documented the ability of observational correction to reduce health misperceptions across platforms and topics, and including correction from a variety of sources



# Inoculate

## Inoculate (Prebunk) Misinformation Before False Beliefs Take Hold

**Goal:** Expose people to a weakened version of the misinfo and equip them with counter-arguments



### FACT

Lead with the fact

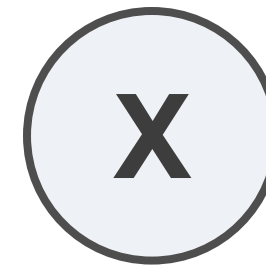
Make it clear, relevant, sticky



### WARNING

Misinformation alert!

Misleading tactics alert!



### FALLACY

Flag tactics used to deceive

Undermine trust in  
disinformation authors



### FACT

Provide alternative correct info

Must replace misinformation,  
cannot leave a vacuum

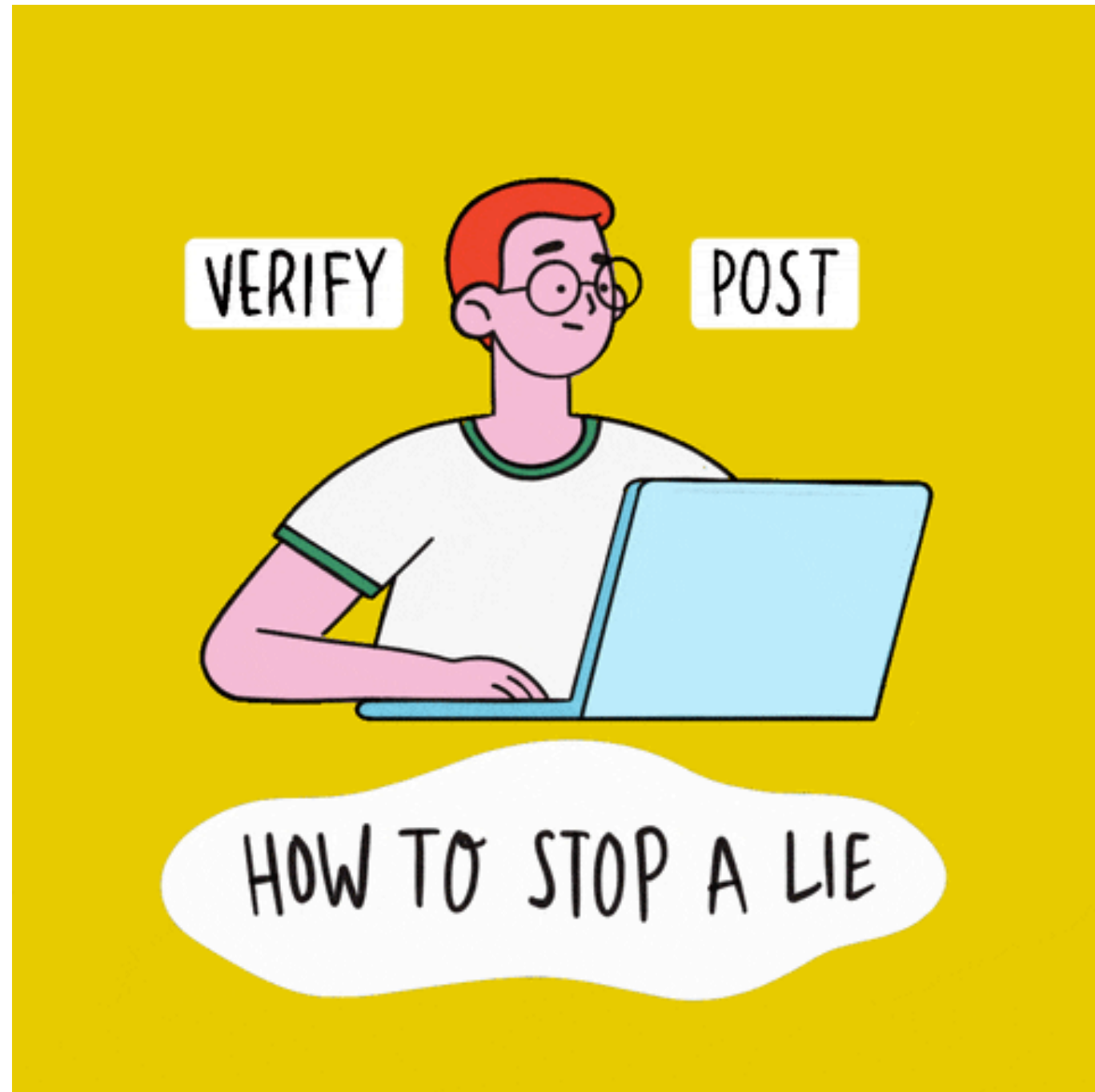
Make correct information stickier  
than misinformation

# Inoculate

## Stronger Example



# Report



- Social media platforms have committed to taking down misinformation about vaccines and COVID-19
- Reporting misinformation helps hold the platforms accountable, and helps the platforms hold publishers, outlets, and superspreaders accountable
- Each platform has a menu button next to each post with a 'report' option.  
[Here is a walkthrough of how to report on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.](#)
- Focus on posts sharing links to content from major misinfo sources

**Goal:** Get misinformation taken down or flagged before it spreads further



# Do's and Don'ts

# You May Need to Adjust...

## DO

- Be personal and empathetic
- Listen and validate the person's concerns
- Rely on science and data - *and personal experience*
- Account for the varying experiences of people in different demographic groups
  - Many communities of color have valid reasons to be skeptical of the health system

## DON'T

- Get political
- Repeat misinformation
- Take it personally
- Vilify the sharer
- Rely on fear\*

# Resources

FACT CHECKING	FURTHER READING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ <a href="https://healthfeedback.org">Healthfeedback.org</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://fullfact.org">Fullfact.org</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://politifact.com/poynter/">Politifact (poynter)</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://snopes.com">Snopes</a></li><li>◦ <a href="https://www.afp.com/fact-check">AFP Fact Check</a></li><li>◦ Mayo Clinic "<a href="#">Expert Answers</a>"</li><li>◦ Fact checks from <a href="#">USA Today</a>, <a href="#">Reuters</a>, <a href="#">AP</a>, etc.</li></ul></li><li>• Personal use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ <a href="#">Skeptical raptor</a></li><li>◦ <a href="#">First Draft Vaccine Insights Hub</a></li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">WHO: How infodemics affect the world &amp; how they can be managed</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Debunking Handbook</a> 2020 (climate change)</li><li>• <a href="#">Vaccine Misinformation Management Field Guide</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Changing the COVID Conversation Communications Cheat Sheet</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Facebook's misinformation policies</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Google Fact Check Explorer</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Shots Heard Toolkit</a></li></ul>





# What You Can Do: When Attacked

---

# PREPARE AND AVOID

- Have reinforcements ready
- Assess your online presence
- Prepare your workplace, office, or institution
- Monitor online account security
- Know your platform's settings
- “Google” yourself



# DEFEND

10 important actions to  
take immediately:



1. Remember: You will overcome this and you are not alone.



6. Screenshot and save all attacks, including negative comments, fraudulent reviews, and other such content.



2. Ask for support.



7. Report and block attackers and delete negative comments.



3. Don't engage with attackers.



8. Claim your businesses on [Yelp](#) and [Google](#).



4. Turn off social media notifications.



9. Inform your employer/employees of the situation.



5. Increase your privacy settings on the platform and pages of the attack.



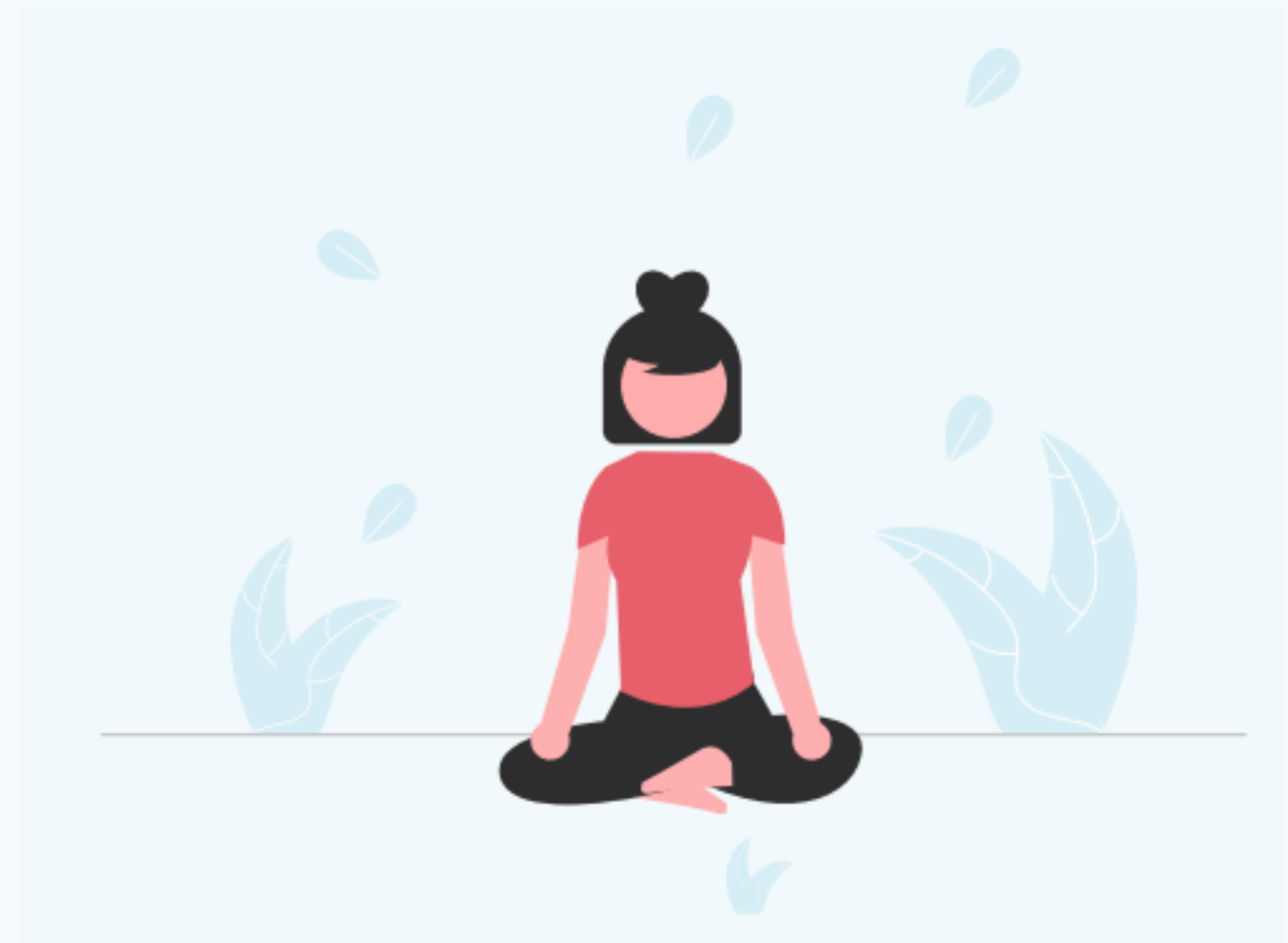
10. Take breaks to take care of yourself and your mental health.



# **MOVE FORWARD AFTER AN ATTACK**



**TAKE CARE  
OF YOURSELF**



# Recap

With the right preparation, defense, and cleanup, you can get through any online attack!



# Thank you!

---

Joe Smyser, PhD, MSPH  
CEO, PGP  
[joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org](mailto:joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org)



# Appendix

## How to Respond to an Attack

---

**By Failing to Prepare,  
You Are Preparing to Fail**



# Have Reinforcements Ready



---

# Have Reinforcements Ready

You have many friends and allies because of who you are and what you do.

On your own channels, “Friend” or “Follow” profiles that have shown positive behavior and can also be allies.

Something to remember: your attackers will come from all over so your friends should too.



---

# Assess Your Online Presence

*Don't feed the trolls.*

To prevent more negative comments, ignore negative, harassing, or bullying commenters:

Avoid unnecessary fights and engage with caution: If you're going to engage with a comment, choose your conversations wisely based on the context.

Here are some things to consider:

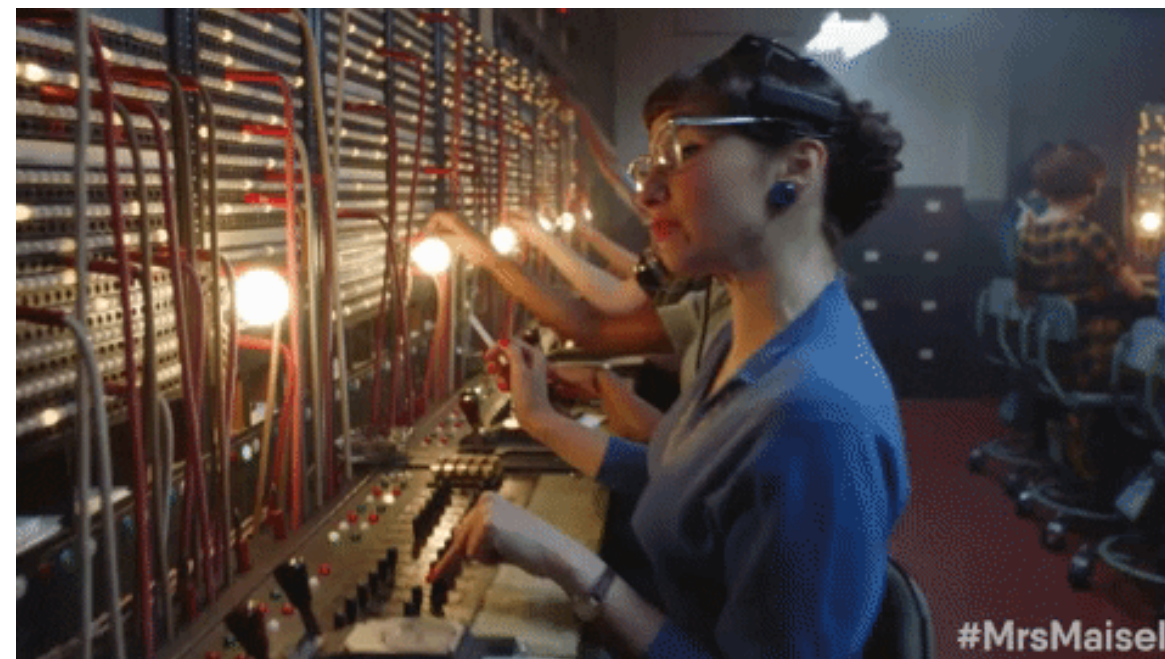
- Is the person commenting in good faith? Are they open to a productive conversation? Are they egging you on?
- Do you know this person or trust them?
- Do they have a long history of anti posts and are they part of anti groups?

# Prepare Your Team

Phones: train staff to recognize signs of an attack, how to respond, and when to notify leadership.

If your phones are ringing off the hook with negative, rude, or prank calls:

- If possible, ignore/silence the phone or turn it off
- If it's a line you must answer, determine if it's a negative call, and if so, hang up or politely dismiss
- Document the number of fraudulent phone calls and include phone numbers and messages



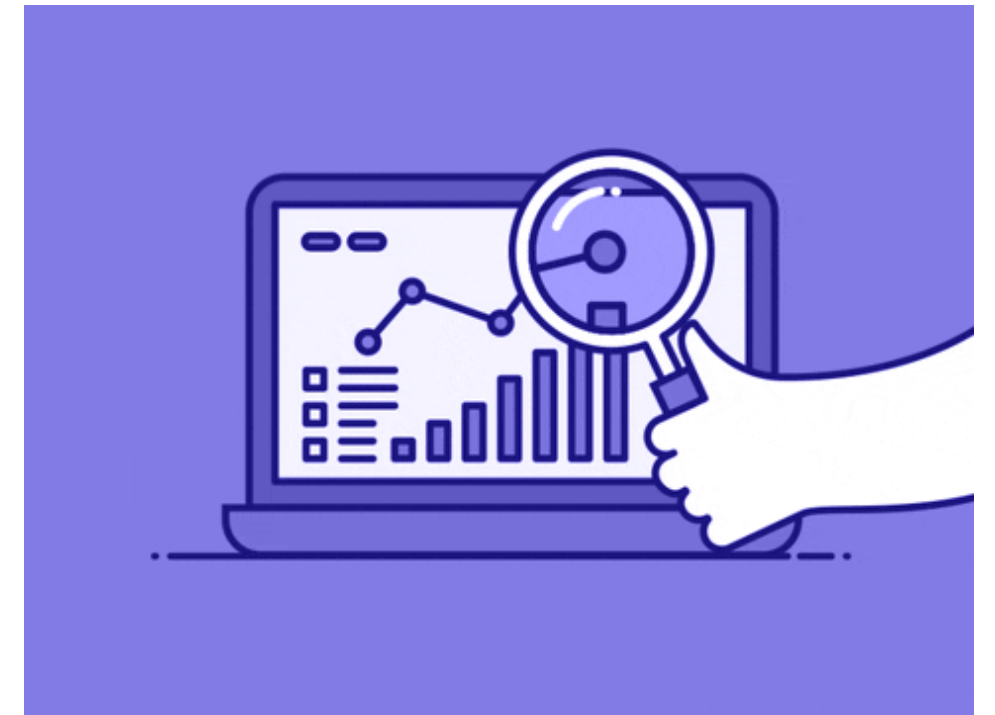
# Recognize the Signs of a Digital Tsunami

## Prepare Your Team

Know the signs of an impending social media attack.

Staff responsible for monitoring accounts should be trained to look for:

- A spike in or higher than usual volume of negative comments
- Unusually rude or mean comments from new accounts
- Links or screenshots of your page being posted in anti groups or by anti pages
- People in your pages' comments directing others to attack you
- Negative comments from suspicious, anonymous, or bot-like accounts
- Attackers contacting you through other platforms



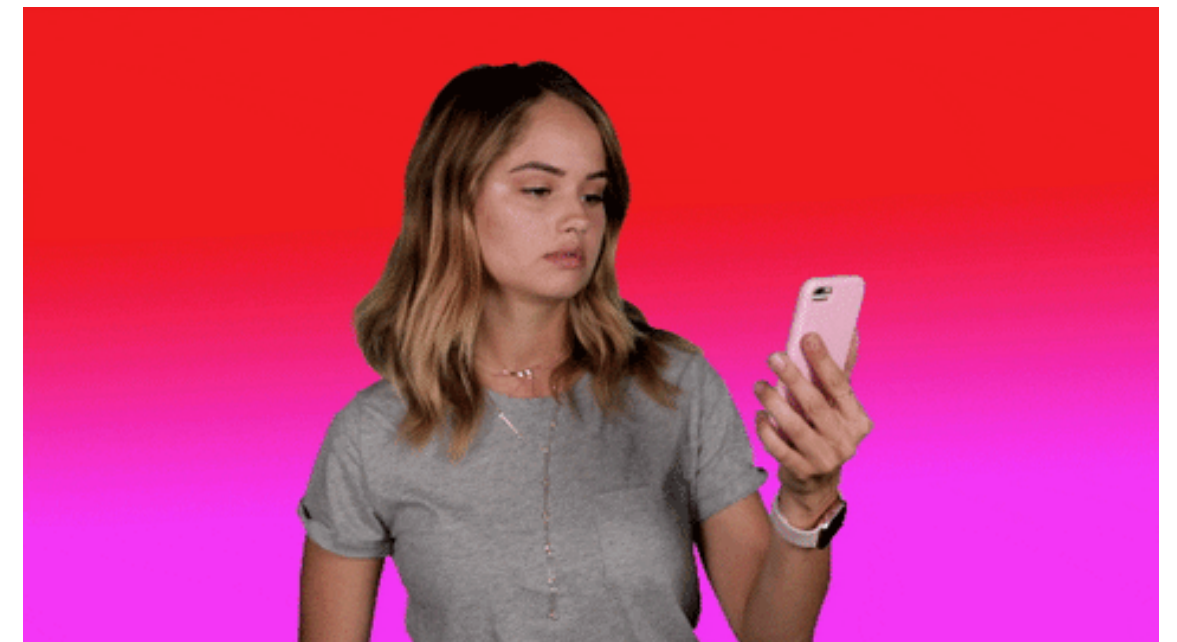
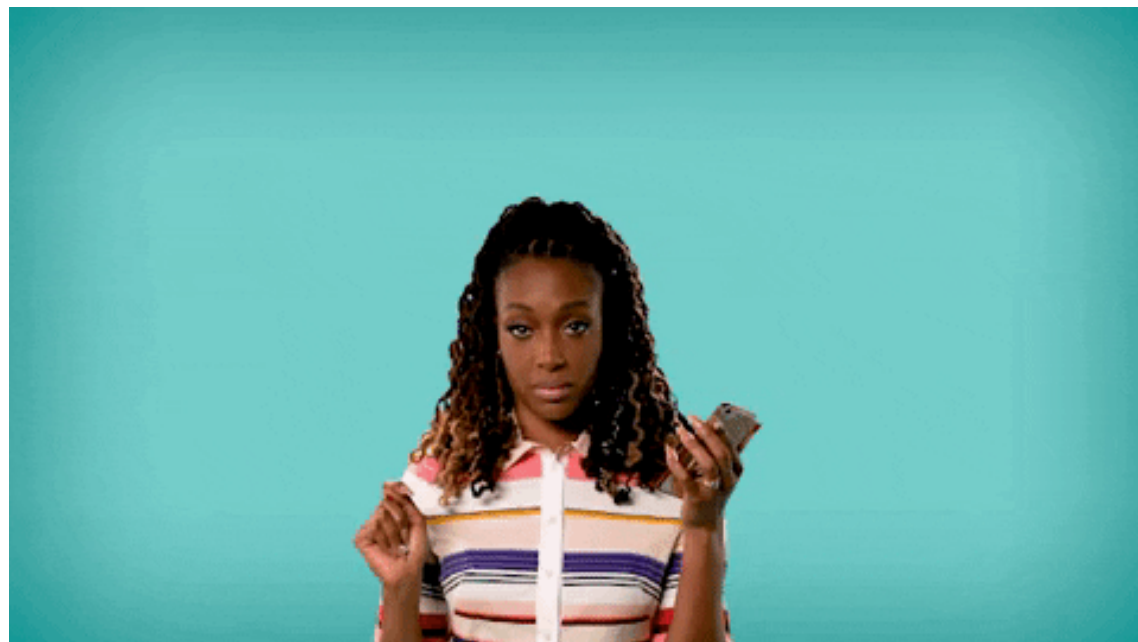


# Prepare Your Team

Monitor online account security.

Turn on two-factor authentication for all accounts that support it.  
Use strong, different passwords or a password manager.

Know your platform's settings in case of attack:  
Know how to quickly limit or turn off comments, block offending accounts, make your profile private, report offending accounts, and delete offending comments.





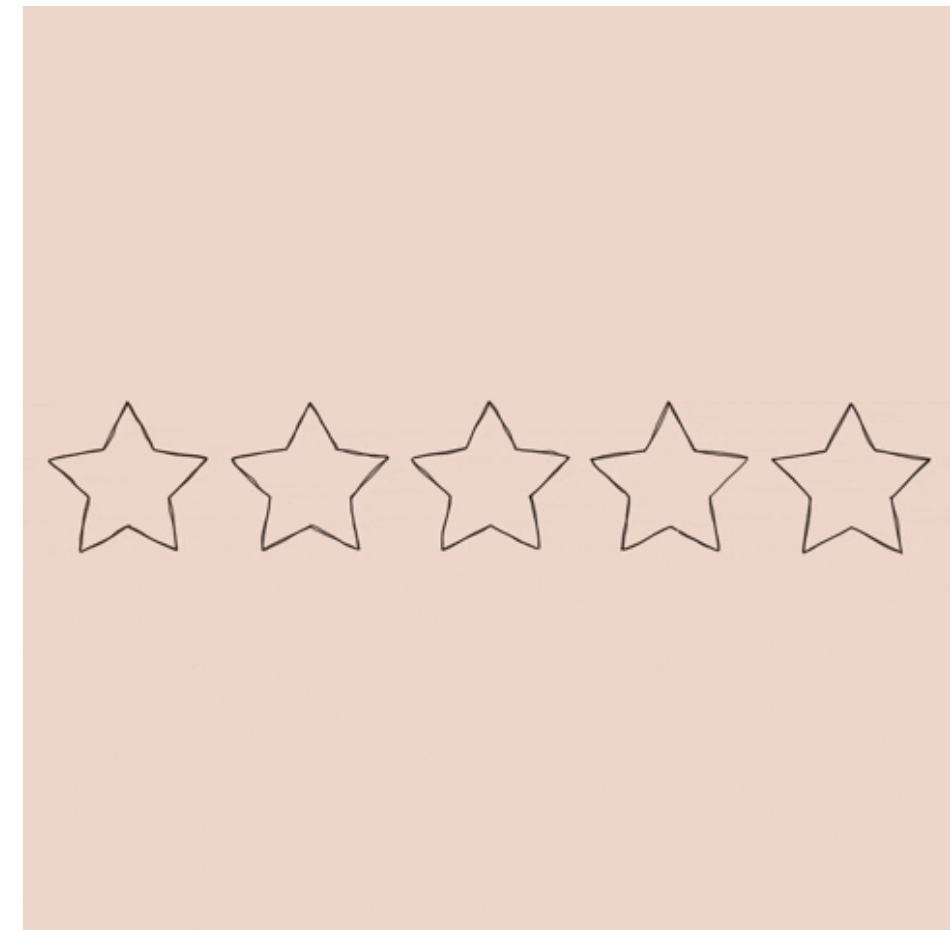
# Prepare Your Team

Consider making your accounts private.

Claim your business online (Yelp, Google).

Enable email notifications—this way you'll know quickly if an attack were to happen

- Facebook
- Yelp
- Google My Business



# Prepare Your Team

"Google" and "De-doxx" yourself

Doxxing is to publicly identify or publish private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge. It is important to know if any of your personal information is publicly available online. This information can make you more vulnerable to being doxxed.

Search for yourself on search engines like Google and delete as much information as possible from the sources that come up

Remove your information from people-search or data broker sites

Make your social media private

# Defend



1. Remember: You will overcome this and you are not alone.



6. Screenshot and save all attacks, including negative comments, fraudulent reviews, and other such content.



2. Ask for support.



7. Report and block attackers and delete negative comments.



3. Don't engage with attackers.



8. Claim your businesses on [Yelp](#) and [Google](#).



4. Turn off social media notifications.



9. Inform your employer/employees of the situation.



5. Increase your privacy settings on the platform and pages of the attack.



10. Take breaks to take care of yourself and your mental health.



# Move Forward

---

# Step by Step

Attacks can end gradually or rapidly, but either way you'll notice negative engagement decline when the attackers limit their engagement, are blocked, and lose interest. As you notice this, it is critical to take time to rest, clean up your pages, and get organized.

- Organize all screenshots and records from the attack
- Debrief with any staff, moderators, or family who have access to your page or witnessed the attack.
- Make sure to collect all evidence, assess access moving forward, and check on everyone's mental health – including your own.

# THANK YOU!

**For additional information, see Shots  
Heard toolkit: <https://shotsheard.org/>**

Joe Smyser, PhD, MSPH  
CEO, PGP  
[joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org](mailto:joe.smyser@publicgoodprojects.org)