

To:
1. Minister for Digital and Culture
2. Secretary of State

From: NR
Security & Online Harms
Approving DD: Oscar Tapp-Scotting
Date: 22 July 2020

**REVISED SUBMISSION: UPDATE ON PREEMPTIVE WORK TO ADDRESS COVID-19 VACCINE
DISINFORMATION**

Issue

1. Update on measures to tackle anti-vaccination disinformation in advance of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Timing

2. Priority

Recommendation

3. That you:
 - a. **note** the Counter Disinformation Cell's current role in the COVID-19 Vaccine Programme Board to tackle anti-vaccination misinformation and disinformation, and the proposed objectives to achieve this. (**paras 6-13**);
 - b. **note** the risks of delivering these objectives and **agree** our recommended mitigations (**paras 14-16**);
 - c. **note** the summaries of COVID-19 vaccine disinformation narratives observed by the Cell (**Annex A**) and of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate's report: *The Anti-Vaxx Industry - How Big Tech powers and profits from vaccine misinformation* (**Annex B**).

Context

4. **Since March 2019, DCMS has been supporting DHSC in developing a strategy to curtail the spread of harmful misinformation about vaccines.** While DHSC and Public Health England's current assumptions are that an effective way to tackle COVID 19 will be through the deployment of a safe and effective vaccine, there is a risk that any existing hesitancy towards vaccine uptake is likely to be made worse by false and misleading information about any vaccine.
5. **Since being stood up on 5 March 2020, the Counter Disinformation Cell ('the cell') has observed an increasing number of anti-vaccination narratives, but with limited traction.** For example, the Cell has already flagged several false claims to social media platforms which have originated from outside the anti-vaxx community, including that a participant in the Oxford vaccine trial had died and that the UK has passed legislation introducing mandatory vaccinations, which was quickly debunked. The Cell has also observed wider conspiracy theory content which portrays vaccination as a means of social control and claims symptoms of the virus are caused by the vaccine. These narratives appear to be circulating mainly within existing anti-vaccination and conspiracy communities, probably because they are usually combined with other far-fetched narratives about state control, and because among the wider population trust in the NHS and health authorities remains high. A summary of these narratives is at **Annex A**.
6. **DCMS has been designated as the counter-disinformation workstream lead within the cross-HMG COVID-19 Vaccine Programme Board.** The COVID-19 Vaccine Programme Board, chaired by Public Health England, which reports into the Vaccines Taskforce (led by BEIS and

Annex A - COVID-19 anti-vaccine narratives

This Annex outlines a summary of key COVID-19 anti-vaccination narratives identified by the Cell to date. It draws out engagement statistics and key dates where relevant.

Methodology

1. **To prepare this paper**, the Counter Disinformation Cell Monitoring and Analysis team have drawn together narratives identified from a number of sources, including:
 - a. Reports from cross-Whitehall monitoring teams
 - b. Content identified and escalated by the Cell to platforms
 - c. FCO Report on Psychology of Anti-Vaccination
2. **Next steps**: continue monitoring anti-vaccination narratives over the coming weeks, and widen the scope to include external and media reporting, and Home Office anti-vaxx deep dive due end of August.

Summary

3. Since late April 2020, a range of anti-vaccination narratives have been observed by the Cross-Whitehall Counter Disinformation Cell (the Cell). Themes have included:
 - a. Vaccines as a form of population control:
 - o The COVID-19 vaccine is a means by government or elites to modify/control the population
 - o The UK Government will introduce mandatory vaccines
 - o The future vaccine is a cover to inject the population with a microchip
 - b. Vaccine trials:
 - o Vaccines are being trialed on those from BAME groups or frontline workers
 - o Death of participants in vaccine trials
 - c. Bill Gates and elites:
 - o Wider New World Order narratives based on Bill Gates' involvement with both Dexamethasone and vaccination
 - o The UK Vaccine Network is corrupted and controlled by Bill Gates
 - o The belief that elite billionaires are responsible for COVID-19 as they plan to use a future vaccine as a way to make money
 - d. A vaccine is not necessary:
 - o There are alternative cures, for example propositions that bleach or silver solution can cure COVID-19, or homeopathic cures¹
 - o COVID-19 is actually harmless
 - e. Vaccines are harming health
 - o The vaccine is harmful and ineffective
 - o The vaccine has had side effects on those involved in trials (joint above)
 - o The Flu Jab is causing COVID-19
4. Analysis has also found potential for anti-vaccine narratives to combine with 5G and anti-lockdown conspiracies to form an overarching 'super conspiracy'.

¹ These narratives do not always relate to anti-vaccination sentiment, but could be considered substitutes. These have been observed consistently since the cell stood up on 5 March.