

SoS Disinformation Update 28 January 2021 - 04 February 2021

None of the Cell indicators for a disinformation campaign targeting the UK have been met.

Narratives observed

1. Over the past week the Cell has observed **57** pieces of content and made **16** escalations to platforms.¹ The dominant disinformation themes observed in content flagged by the Cell have included anti-vaccination narratives, health misinformation and COVID-19 hoax conspiracy theories.

Anti-Vaxx

2. The Cell continued to observe multiple instances of vaccination disinformation including a video on Facebook which claimed that the impact of COVID-19 vaccines were "deaths and disablement like we have never seen before" with the post suggesting the results of the vaccination rollout had been "devastating", **(flagged; video removed)**. The Cell also observed a tweet which claimed that vaccines have not been tested, were not vaccines, and "can kill" **(flagged; account locked)**.
3. The Cell observed two Facebook videos related to vaccine side-effects. The first video claimed that one in ten recipients of the second dose will experience serious adverse side effects, and of those who are aged 80 and above, 80% will have life-limiting adverse effects **(flagged; video removed)**. The second video featured a doctor making false claims about the dangers of mRNA vaccines, alleging that mRNA vaccines could cause auto-immune diseases and/or could genetically alter cells, **(flagged; video removed)**.

Health Misinformation

4. The Cell observed two pieces of content which suggested the drug Ivermectin is an effective COVID-19 cure and should be made available immediately. This was flagged as misinformation because global health authority advice warns against taking Ivermectin as it is not an approved medicine for the treatment of COVID-19. One was a video of a US based doctor featured in the video claiming Ivermectin is proving to be of "miraculous impact" **(flagged; rejected)** and the other was a tweet which shared an article from August which claims that Ivermectin is "amazingly successful in killing coronavirus" **(flagged; rejected)**.
5. The Cell also flagged a Youtube video featuring a doctor making several false claims, including a claim that the pandemic is a "biologically manipulated bio weapon" and that COVID-19 is "a naturally occurring, very benign virus [which] at the most gives you a common cold but doesn't kill you and doesn't make you very sick" **(flagged to YouTube, awaiting response)**.

Public Order

¹ As mentioned in our update last week there has been a decrease in the volume of content observed which violates platform Terms of Service, as our new supplier has also been identifying high performing content which provides an insight into key trends in narratives which don't specifically violate platform Terms of Service.

6. **COVID-19 Hoax:** The Cell continued to observe and flag conspiratorial claims including a tweet claiming there is no pandemic (**flagged; account locked**) and a tweet which claims that COVID-19 is a bioweapon (**flagged; account locked**).

Ongoing investigations

7. The Cell has been conducting initial investigations into suspected coordinated inauthentic activity targeting the Twitter account of the Chief Medical Officer. Initial analysis suggests that there may be evidence of inauthentic behaviour and interaction with posts from the official @CMO_England account. The Cell is conducting further analysis to make a conclusive assessment of whether there is inauthentic behaviour and will provide a further update on this work next week.
8. The Cell commissioned analysis of the response to the announcement that Germany would not be giving the AstraZeneca vaccine to over 65s (28 January). Reporting found that the announcement was not widely discussed online and did not appear to fuel disinformation narratives. Where it was discussed online, rebuttals featured prominently.

Platform Actions and Updates

9. **The Facebook Oversight Board made its first rulings 28 January, ordering content to be restored in four out five of the cases it heard.** The Oversight Board is an independent expert panel to hear appeals for users who believe Facebook has removed their content unfairly. It selects cases that will set broad precedent for interpreting platform policies and its decisions are binding. One decision concerns a video taken down for containing health misinformation about false COVID-19 “cures”, which the board ruled should be restored on the grounds it discussed the French government’s health policy rather than promoting self-medication. We are engaging with Facebook on the implications for their COVID-19 misinformation policy, and will provide further advice on significant decisions by the Oversight Board relating to dis- and misinformation.
10. **Facebook has announced it will no longer recommend political and civic groups to users.** The platform paused recommendations of these groups for US users only in October 2020 ahead of the US presidential election. However, Facebook is now making the policy permanent and introducing it globally in an effort to discourage divisive conversations on the platform. Facebook has not yet released details of how it will define ‘political and civic groups’. These groups will still be available on the platform, but new groups that users may be interested in will not be actively recommended by the algorithm.
11. **The Counter Disinformation Policy Forum met on Friday 29 January to discuss information sharing and measuring effectiveness.** An update on the vaccine rollout was provided by DHSC, followed by discussion amongst platforms, civil society organisations and academics on the practicalities and principles of implementing enhanced information-sharing amongst Forum participants. Measures for evaluating the success of current counter-disinformation interventions were covered with a view to understanding how the current picture of all counter-disinformation activity across this group can be captured. The readout from the meeting will be included in next