

Talking Points for Inaccurate Information

Overall points:

- Individuals should use caution/skepticism when viewing scientific claims on social media, specifically those from sources that are not scientifically verified.
- Individuals should follow trusted sources, and should not share or repost information from sources that are not trusted.
- Discerning information for its accuracy is not always easy. However, some safeguards for individuals include: developing a critical mindset, checking source(s), seeing who else is reporting this information, examining evidence, and remembering not to take images at face value (as they can be easily manipulated).

Did a Stanford/NIH scientist or study actually say that masks are bad for you?

- No. The paper was published by an exercise physiologist with no academic connection to Stanford University or the NIH in a journal that states that it accepts “radical, speculative and non-mainstream scientific ideas.”
- The journal Medical Hypotheses publishes extremely speculative notions without the burden of “traditional” peer review. Among its articles: those arguing that masturbation is [a cure](#) for nasal congestion, that the Gulf War syndrome is caused by [a beef allergy](#), and that high heels [cause schizophrenia](#).
- In November 2020, that journal (Medical Hypotheses) published [a paper](#) that argued using face masks to prevent COVID-19 transmission does not work and, further, that face masks cause a litany of adverse reactions, including “activation of fear and stress response” and “depression.”
 - The research articles that this alleged “study” cites in support of its hypothesis actually present data that refutes the hypothesis. In other words, the cited research papers provide evidence that masks are NOT harmful.
- Despite this journal’s lack of traditional peer review and its unique editorial philosophy, the face-mask paper has been billed as authoritative empirical evidence against mask use during the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources attempt to impart further credibility to the ideas presented by describing this paper as a “Stanford study” or an “NIH study,” referring to the U.S. National Institutes of Health. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The use of ‘bots’ to advance discord in regards to pandemic, vaccines

- Twitter bots, also known as zombies, are automated Twitter accounts controlled by bot software. They are programmed to perform tasks that resemble those of everyday Twitter users – such as liking tweets and following other users. **Their purpose is to tweet and retweet content for specific goals on a large scale.**

- The use of misinformation or disinformation campaigns to create discord is not new. During the “Operation Infektion” campaign (also known as “Operation Denver”), the KGB, assisted by the USSR’s Novosti Press Agency and the allied intelligence services of the Soviet bloc, sought to spread the thesis internationally that HIV – the virus that causes AIDS – was genetically engineered or otherwise concocted by the Pentagon, as part of its alleged research in biological weapons at the U.S. Army’s Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Maryland.
- Several studies and lay articles (below) have shown that the Russian government and others with a vested interest in a weakened United States have used Twitter to create discord amongst the American public in regard to the effectiveness of vaccines.
- From the American Journal of Public Health, “Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate,” by Broniatowski, et al.”
 - Russian trolls and sophisticated Twitter bots post content about vaccination at significantly higher rates than does the average user. Content from these sources gives equal attention to pro-and antivaccination arguments. This is consistent with a strategy of promoting discord across a range of controversial topics—a known tactic employed by Russian troll accounts.”
 - “Proportionally more antivaccine tweets may be generated by accounts using a somewhat sophisticated semiautomated approach to avoid detection. This creates the false impression of grassroots debate regarding vaccine efficacy—a technique known as ‘astroturfing’”
 - Whereas bots that spread malware and unsolicited content disseminated antivaccine messages, Russian trolls promoted discord.
- Wall Street Journal article: “Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other COVID-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say”
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200>
- Alliance for Securing Democracy article: “Influence-enza: How Russia, China and Iran have Shaped and Manipulated Coronavirus Vaccine Narratives”
<https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russia-china-iran-covid-vaccine-disinformation/>
 - Among the key findings:
 - While there were few instances of any studied country promoting verifiably false information about vaccines, reports of safety concerns related to the administration of certain Western-produced vaccines were often sensationalized while downplaying or completely omitting key contextual information. For example, Iran’s Arabic-language Fars News Agency [tweeted](#) that the Pfizer vaccine “kill[ed] six people in America,” omitting (and never correcting) that four of the six people who died during the vaccine trial had [received](#) a placebo and that authorities determined there was no causal connection between the vaccine and the deaths of the other two participants.
 - Of the three COVID-19 vaccines authorized for use by the European Commission, the Pfizer vaccine was mentioned more often by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian accounts than the Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines combined. It is unclear

why Pfizer received more negative coverage than Moderna, though possible explanations include: a) they were the first Western vaccine to be approved and therefore were viewed as the primary competition to Russian and Chinese vaccines, b) there have been safety concerns that have popped up that made them an easy target for mal-information campaigns, and c) they are simply a more globally recognizable U.S. brand than Moderna and thus served as a better target for anti-Big Pharma campaigns.

- Pfizer received by far the most unfavorable coverage of any vaccine, particularly from Kremlin-funded outlets and Iranian state media and government accounts. Of the 50 most-retweeted tweets mentioning Pfizer posted by Russian state media outlets, 43 (86 percent) mentioned either an adverse reaction to the vaccine (including deaths) or negative information about the company itself. In Iranian government and state media tweets, 92 percent of mentions of Pfizer were negative.
- But the notion that Russian, Chinese and Iranian diplomats and state media outlets seek to disparage and undermine Western vaccines writ large is not entirely accurate, as coverage of Moderna's vaccine was mixed and reporting on Oxford-AstraZeneca's vaccine was largely neutral or positive.