

A grid of social media icons including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, arranged in a 2x4 pattern. The icons are slightly blurred and have a blue-to-orange gradient background.

The Dark Side of **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Bradley Steffens





About the Author

Bradley Steffens is a novelist, poet, and award-winning author of more than sixty nonfiction books for children and young adults.

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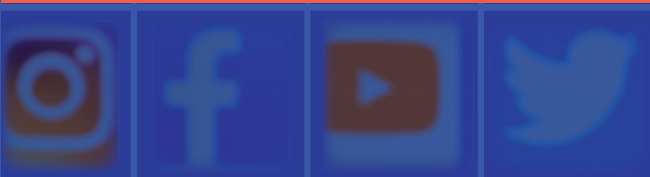
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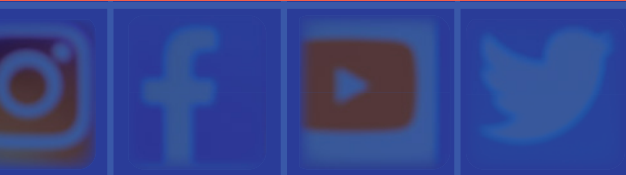
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Tearing at the Fabric of Society

In December 2020, as the first COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available in the United States, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research asked US adults about their attitudes toward the vaccine. The researchers found that fewer than half of US adults—47 percent—planned to get the vaccine. Among those under age forty-five, the percentage was even lower. Only 37 percent planned to get the vaccine. The reluctance to get the vaccine presented a major public health problem. At least 70 percent of a population needs to be immune to a disease before it dies out. Reaching this level of immunity would be impossible without the cooperation of many of those who said they would not take the vaccine. The question is, why were so many people rejecting vaccination?

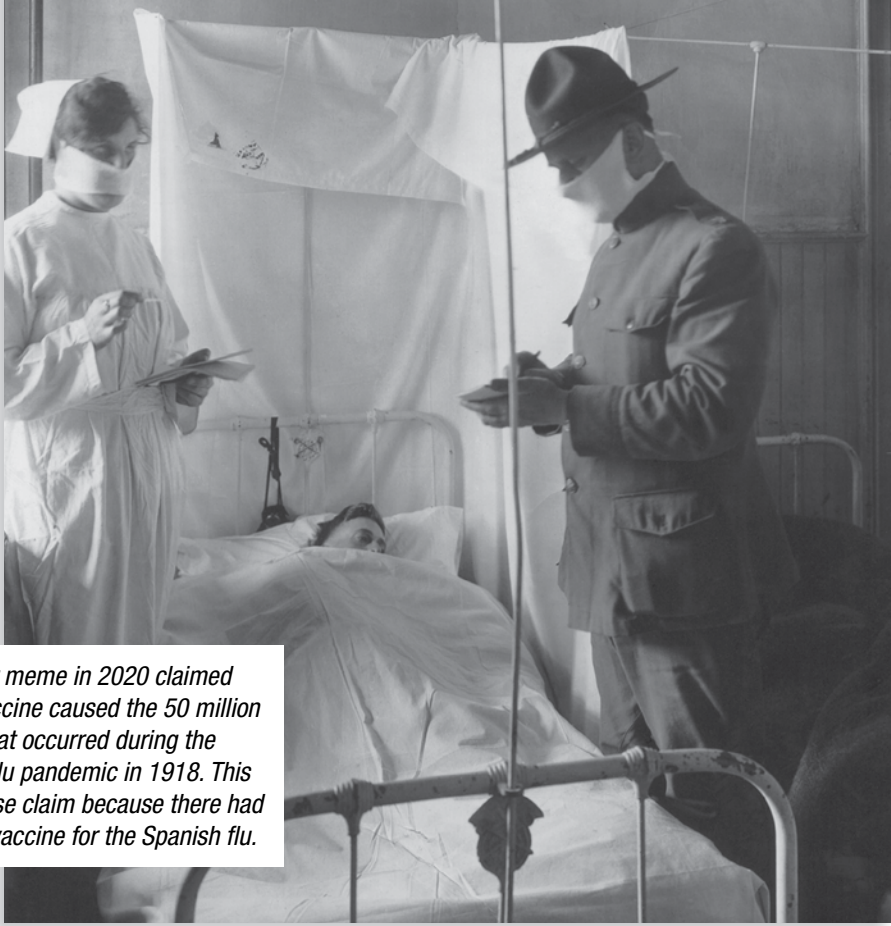
Scare Tactics

At least some of the concerns about the vaccine were related to false information that circulated on social media while the vaccines were being developed. For example, one meme claimed that the 50 million deaths that occurred worldwide during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 were not due to the illness but to vaccines that governments

forced people to take. The meme added that the governments were repeating the same pattern with COVID-19 vaccines. The message is 100 percent false. There was no flu vaccine in 1918, so it could not have been given to people or killed anyone. The ominous ending of the meme was a scare tactic, designed to discourage people from taking the COVID-19 vaccine.

Another false vaccine meme featured two images of the rapper Drake, one above the other. The upper image showed Drake holding up his hand, as if saying no to the vaccine. Unlike the Spanish flu meme, the Drake meme did not exaggerate dangers of the vaccine. Instead, it understated dangers of COVID-19, claiming that the disease was thirty-three times less dangerous than experts believe it actually is. The meme states that the virus has a 99.97 percent recovery rate—suggesting that the disease is fatal to just three people out of ten thousand. The actual recovery rate is about 99 percent, meaning that one hundred out of ten thousand people contracting the disease die from it—a figure thirty-three times higher than claimed by the meme.

The lower half of the meme shows a smiling Drake accompanied by the words, “Alter my DNA from an experimental vaccine, with NO liability, from a corrupt industry.”³ Like many false memes, this one contains a grain of truth. The vaccine makers were shielded from lawsuits to help rapid development of the vaccine. And since the vaccine had never been deployed before, it could be considered experimental, although it had gone through rigorous testing and trials, just like other drugs. The most important claim—that the new vaccine alters a person’s DNA—is based on the idea that the new vaccines use messenger RNA—also called mRNA. In at least two of the vaccines, mRNA enters the patient’s immune cells and instructs them to make the spike proteins of the virus that causes COVID-19. The immune system recognizes these changed cells as a danger and destroys them. However, it retains a chemical memory of the spike structure, so the real virus can be recognized quickly and destroyed. After making the spike protein, the cell destroys



A popular meme in 2020 claimed that a vaccine caused the 50 million deaths that occurred during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. This was a false claim because there had been no vaccine for the Spanish flu.

the vaccine's mRNA and flushes it out of the system. During this process, the mRNA never enters the nucleus of the cell, where the DNA is stored, and it does not change the DNA in any way.

The Drake meme is not the only social media source suggesting that the vaccine changes a person's DNA, creating a type of hybrid human. This same false claim has also circulated on social media, thanks to the efforts of Carrie Madej, a Georgia osteopathic doctor. "The coronavirus COVID-19 vaccines are designed to make us into genetically modified organisms," Madej says in a self-produced video posted on BitChute. "We are entering into uncharted territory that can change what it means to be human."⁴

Alternate Sets of Facts

The COVID-19 misinformation does more than endanger plans for halting the spread of the virus. It adds to the widespread feeling

that people do not know what to believe or whom to trust—not the government, not the medical establishment, and not drug companies. This confusion is tearing at the fabric of society. Rather than sharing a foundation of agreed-upon facts, Americans increasingly are adopting beliefs based on so-called alternate sets of facts. This is especially true in the realm of political debate. For example, both liberals and conservatives believe that global climate change is real, but far more liberals than conservatives believe that human activity is causing climate change. This disparity exists despite years of warnings by climate scientists and other researchers that human activity is primarily to blame for climate change. Because people do not agree on what is causing the problem, they cannot agree on the policies aimed at solving the problem.

The same is true in many other areas, from the effect of tax cuts on the economy to the impact of systemic racism on the nation's health and economic prosperity. People from all political groups acknowledge the existence of this fact gap. A 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 80 percent of all US adults—regardless of their political affiliations—believe that people today not only disagree about political policies, they also disagree about the facts underlying those policies. This breakdown of a consensus about what is true and what is false is driving people apart.

A Lack of Editorial Oversight

Social media is playing a role in widening the fact gap because it makes it easy for partisans on both sides to spread misinformation. Traditional media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and news websites have editors and fact-checkers who make sure information is accurate before it is published. Social media, by contrast, allows individuals to post anything they want, with only a few exceptions. The lack of editorial control enables social media users to spread false information. As a result, many ideas that might never have gained an audience are widely seen and oftentimes accepted as true. “The major new challenge in reporting news is the new shape of truth,” says Kevin Kelly, cofounder

“Truth is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counterfact and all these counterfacts and facts look identical online, which is confusing to most people.”⁵

—Kevin Kelly, cofounder of *Wired* magazine

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Another factor driving the breakdown in agreed-upon facts is the popularity of social media as a source of news and information. If only a small number of people got their news from social media, the scope of the dis-

information problem would be limited. But social media is the primary source of news among adults age eighteen to twenty-nine, according to a 2020 Pew Research Center study. Because of this large following among younger adults, social media has surpassed print media as a primary source of news for many US adults.

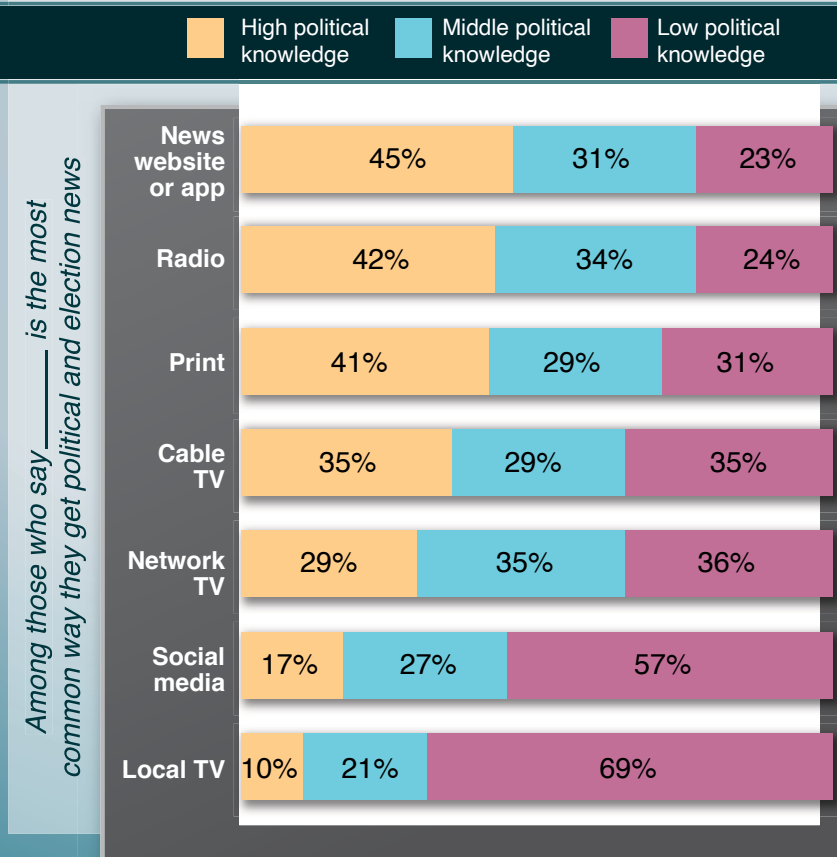
The Effects of Disinformation

The disinformation absorbed by social media users affects their knowledge of real events in a way that can be measured. According to a July 2020 Pew Research Center survey, those who depend on social media for political news knew less about political events than did people who got their news from other sources. The survey included nine questions about basic political issues, including which political party supports particular policies. People who correctly answered eight or nine questions were rated with high knowledge. About 45 percent of those who get their news mainly from news websites displayed high levels of knowledge, while only 17 percent of those who get their news from social media achieved the high rating. Such low levels of political knowledge pose a danger to the democratic process itself. “On page one of any political science textbook it will say that democracy relies on people being informed about the issues so they can

What Happens When People Rely on Social Media for News?

People who get most of their political news from social media know less about major current events and politics than those who get news from other sources. This is the finding of a Pew Research Center survey that was published in July 2020. As part of the survey, participants were asked nine questions that focused on basic political knowledge. Topics included the federal budget deficit and political party positions on certain policies. Those who get their news from news websites and apps or from radio or print news were shown to have much higher political knowledge than those who primarily get their news from social media.

Percent of US adults who have _____, according to an index of nine knowledge questions



Note: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. High political knowledge includes those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge includes those who answered six or seven questions correctly, and low knowledge includes those who answered five or fewer questions correctly.

Source: Amy Mitchell et al., "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable," Pew Research Center, July 30, 2020. www.journalism.org.

“Democracy relies on people being informed about the issues so they can have a debate and make a decision. Having a large number of people in a society who are misinformed and have their own set of facts is absolutely devastating and extremely difficult to cope with.”⁶

—Stephan Lewandowsky, cognitive scientist at the University of Bristol

have a debate and make a decision,” says Stephan Lewandowsky, a cognitive scientist at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, who studies the effects of misinformation. “Having a large number of people in a society who are misinformed and have their own set of facts is absolutely devastating and extremely difficult to cope with.”⁶

When it comes to conspiracy theories, people who get their news from social media are the most knowledgeable, according to the Pew Research

Center. For example, 81 percent of those who get their news from social media had heard at least a little about the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 pandemic, and 26 percent had heard a lot about it. This was a significantly higher percentage than those who get their news from television, radio, print, or online news media.

Social Media Companies Take Action

Social media companies have begun cracking down on the spread of false information on their platforms. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have all enacted policies to remove or flag information they deem to be false. These actions are performed in part by human beings who fact-check content and in part by computers that use artificial intelligence (AI) software to identify which posts contain the false information. For example, in December 2020 a meme attributed to conservative activist Laurice Mitchell listed thirty-six expenditures included in the second COVID-19 relief package passed by Congress. The headline on the meme said, “Let’s read line 17 out together.” The seventeenth line stated, “\$25,000,000 for additional salary for House of Representatives.” Facebook covered the meme with a gray

screen that stated, “False Information. The same information was checked in another post by independent fact-checkers.” The gray screen included two icons, one to remove the screen and view the meme and another to see why the post was flagged. Facebook placed a box labeled “Related Articles” beneath the post. This box contained a link to a story in *USA Today* entitled “Fact check: Coronavirus relief package does not include congressional pay raise,”⁷ so viewers of the post could read why the information in the post was false.

Similarly, Twitter flags posts containing information it considers false or misleading with a light blue exclamation point and a statement, also in blue, explaining what is wrong with the tweet. For example, on December 28, 2020, Trump tweeted, “Breaking News: In Pennsylvania there were 205,000 more votes than there were voters. This alone flips the state to President Trump.”⁸ Twitter flagged the tweet and stated, “Election officials have certified Joe Biden as

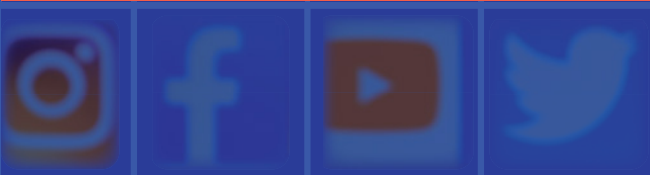
The Bill Gates Microchip Rumor

One of the most widely circulated rumors about the COVID-19 vaccines involves Microsoft founder Bill Gates. A meme shows an image of Gates and the words “It’s simple, we manipulate your DNA with a vaccine, implant you with a [computer] chip, make society cashless and put all money on the chip. Then you will do exactly as you’re told or we turn off your chip and you starve until you decide you’re ready to be obedient again.”

According to a YouGov poll of 1,640 US adults in May 2020, 28 percent of those surveyed believed that Gates wanted to use vaccines to implant microchips in people. The meme grew out of a statement Gates made on the social media site Reddit. Discussing how to know whether people have had the COVID-19 vaccine, Gates revealed that his foundation was working on creating digital certificates that would show who has received a vaccine. Such certificates would be made up of chemicals injected under the skin along with the vaccine. The chemicals would store a person’s vaccine records. The digital signature would not be a microchip, but the rumor started anyway and spread to millions through social media.

Quoted in Flora Carmichael and Jack Goodman, “Vaccine Rumours Debunked: Microchips, ‘Altered DNA’ and More,” BBC, December 2, 2020. www.bbc.com.



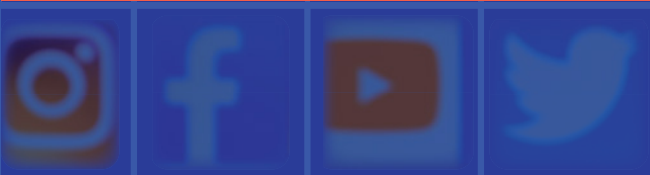


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2. Twitter Inc., “Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump,” *Twitter Blog*, January 8, 2021. <https://blog.twitter.com>.

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8. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), ““Breaking News: In Pennsylvania there were 205,000 more votes than there were voters,”” Twitter, December 28, 2020. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1343663159085834248>.
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10. Quoted in Louise Hall, “Twitter Immediately Flags Trump’s First Six Tweets as Misleading on Day After Biden’s Win,” *The Independent*, November 8, 2020. www.independent.co.uk.
11. *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).



Organizations and Websites

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use

www.cyberbully.org

The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use helps young people keep themselves safe and respect others on the internet. Its website contains information designed to help people learn about responsible internet behavior.

Common Sense Media

www.commonsensemedia.org

Common Sense Media is an independent nonprofit organization that provides education, ratings, and tools to families to promote safe technology and media for children and teens. Its goal is to help kids thrive in a world of media and technology.

FactCheck.org

www.factcheck.org

FactCheck.org is a nonprofit website with the self-described mission of reducing the level of deception and confusion in US politics. The website features a Viral Spiral section devoted to debunking social media misinformation.

Get Net Wise

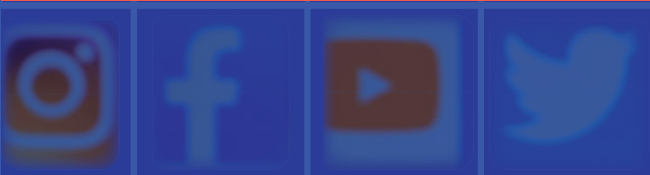
www.getnetwise.org

Get Net Wise is a website supported by internet industry corporations and public interest organizations. Its goal is to ensure that internet users have safe and constructive online experiences. The website contains information about digital citizenship, media literacy, and online misinformation.

Internet & American Life Project

<http://pewinternet.org>

Through its Internet & American Life Project, the Pew Research Center studies how Americans use the internet and how digital technologies are shaping the world today. Its website has the results of numerous studies about social media and the internet.



For Further Research

Books

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: Norton, 2020.

Mark Carrier, *From Smartphones to Social Media: How Technology Affects Our Brains and Behavior*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2018.

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Carla Mooney, *Fake News and the Manipulation of Public Opinion*. San Diego: ReferencePoint, 2019.

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Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.

Nancy Jo Sales, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*. New York: Vintage, 2017.

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