

# Misinformation or Public Debate?

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## Introduction

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In recent years, there has been an upsurge of concern about online misinformation and disinformation, with efforts to thwart it. In many cases, claims about false information serve to justify censorship. To better understand what's going on, it's useful to examine assumptions underlying the anti-misinformation enterprise.

This is such a big and complex field that making sense of it as a whole is difficult. To examine assumptions, it is convenient to look at just one aspect of the field, platform policies concerning Covid vaccines. To begin, I examine earlier public debates involving health, with attention to dissent and censorship. Then I propose five assumptions as underlying recent policies about vaccine "misinformation," with an illustration from YouTube. This approach can readily be applied to other topics.

For the purposes here, there's no need to delve into the differences between misinformation and disinformation, between being wrong sincerely versus intentionally. There's enough research on self-deception to question whether intent can be reliably determined.

## Scientific Controversies

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For decades, there have been fierce public controversies over health-related issues, including nuclear war, smoking, nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation and genetically modified organisms. In every one of these debates, partisans have claimed their opponents were wrong, misguided, biased or concealing the truth. However, the language of misinformation was not deployed. What today is called misinformation would, years ago, just be called being wrong.

However, in previous scientific controversies, being wrong was seldom treated as a justification for censorship. Consider an issue with an undoubted implication for public health, nuclear war. There was a dominant view, endorsed by national and military leaders, that nuclear weapons are needed for defence, specifically to deter attack, and that disarmament is tantamount to surrender. From their point of view, calls for nuclear disarmament amounted to misinformation, or even disinformation if sponsored by the Soviet Communist Party. Yet there were no attempts to officially censor contrary views, at least not because they were misinformation.

Or consider nuclear power, a technology that has been heavily contested since the 1970s. Back then, the dominant view among scientists, engineers and most politicians was that nuclear power was a safe, clean and low-cost method of providing energy, needed to take over from dangerous and dirty fossil fuels. Despite this expert consensus, there was no attempt to claim that contrary views were misinformation and, on that basis, warranted censorship. Many nuclear dissidents from technical fields were attacked in various ways, losing research grants and jobs, but citizen campaigners were not systematically censored, and certainly not on the grounds that they were spouting misinformation.

The same pattern can be found in several other public scientific controversies, such as fluoridation and pesticides. In nearly every one of these issues, scientific orthodoxy has been aligned with the interests of powerful groups: governments, corporations or professions. For example, support for pesticides aligns with the interests of the chemical companies that manufacture them.

One apparent exception is the debate over the health hazards of smoking. But let's go back in time, before the now-dominant view that smoking is bad for people's health. Before the 1960s, smoking was widely accepted. Doctors smoked, and so did many other people, in all sorts of places. To advocate controls over smoking would have been considered misinformation. It was only after the 1964 US Surgeon-General's report that opposition gained credibility.

In this case, the implication is straightforward: public debate can be beneficial to public health. It can point to potential dangers, provide pressure to counter the influence of vested interests, and spur efforts to develop alternative policies and practices.

Today, regarding smoking, the tide has turned and, in some countries, there are heavy restrictions on tobacco advertising and sponsorship. Considering that smoking may cause a billion deaths in this century, have there been calls for social media companies to ban individuals who say positive things about smoking?

In 2019, the World Health Organisation listed "vaccine hesitancy" as one of the top ten threats to global health. Vaccine hesitancy refers to "the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines." Why is there no similar concern about "nonsmoking hesitancy," a continuation of smoking despite its hazards?

## **The Assumptions**

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Here, for consideration, are five assumptions that seem to underlie much of the concern about alleged Covid vaccine misinformation and disinformation.

1. Misinformation warrants censorship.
2. Authorities decide what counts as misinformation.
3. Value judgements underlying the authorities' position are not questioned.
4. False claims that serve powerful groups are ignored.
5. Censorship is an appropriate response to misinformation.

Most of these are self-explanatory. #3 is a bit complex. Every public scientific controversy involves a mixture of facts and values. For example, there are facts about the rates of lung cancer among smokers and non-smokers, and facts about greenhouse gas emissions. Scientific controversies involve fierce debates about the facts, and in many cases even basic statements are disputed. But in addition to facts, however contentious, there are also value judgements. In the smoking debate, the benefits people gain from not being exposed to

tobacco smoke clash with the right of people to smoke wherever they want. Sometimes, certain values are so widely accepted that they seem to be common sense, but they are still value judgements.

Proponents of vaccination argue for the benefits of “herd immunity”: when a sufficiently large proportion of the population has acquired immunity to a contagious disease due to vaccination, then individuals who cannot be vaccinated are protected. While the facts about vaccination and immunity can be questioned, there is also a value judgement involved with coercive measures to promote vaccination, namely that the health of people protected by herd immunity is more important than the right of people to refuse vaccination for themselves or their children.

Regarding assumption #4, that false claims by powerful groups are ignored so far as concerns about misinformation are concerned, it’s worth noting that the intelligence agencies in many governments are well versed in disinformation operations. Media coverage might mention foreign disinformation, but not disinformation by their own governments. Consider also the conclusion by eminent scientist John Ioannidis that most published research findings are false. How often are wrong research findings labelled misinformation?

## YouTube Policy

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A YouTube blog post from 29 September 2021 is useful for illustrating these assumptions. This is not because YouTube is especially censorious. Many other documents could be examined for this purpose, for example [a long analysis](#) by the Virality Project. The YouTube post, titled “[Managing harmful vaccine content on YouTube](#),” is convenient because it is short, simple, direct and publicly available.

Assumption #1, “Misinformation warrants censorship.” This is implicit but obvious. The post says, for example, that “Specifically, content that falsely alleges that approved vaccines are dangerous and cause chronic health effects, claims that vaccines do not reduce transmission or contraction of disease, or contains misinformation on the substances contained in vaccines will be removed.” Here, misinformation is taken to be content that is false.

#2, “Authorities decide what counts as misinformation.” The post says, “As with our COVID guidelines, we consulted with local and international health organizations and experts in developing these policies. For example, our new guidance on vaccine side effects maps to public vaccine resources provided by health authorities and backed by medical consensus.” YouTube, in this case, decides what counts as misinformation, based on its understanding of the views of experts, health organisations, health authorities, and “medical consensus.”

In short, authorities and medical consensus decide what is valid information and what isn’t, and then anything that isn’t valid should be censored.

#3, “Value judgements underlying the authorities’ position are not questioned.” The post talks about “medical misinformation,” and doesn’t overtly mention anything about value judgements in discussions of vaccination. The post states that “Vaccines in particular have been a source of fierce debate over the years, despite consistent guidance from health authorities about their effectiveness.” This implies that the issue is the effectiveness of vaccines, with value conflicts ignored.

#4, “False claims that serve powerful groups are invisible or ignored.” Pharmaceutical companies have been fined billions of dollars for fraudulent activities. That some claims by these companies might be false or misleading is not mentioned.

#5, “Censorship is an appropriate response to misinformation.” The post does not mention any downsides to YouTube’s policy, for example that the existence of censorship might cause a loss of trust in YouTube itself and, by association, with the health authorities on which it relies. It does not mention that censorship can backfire by fostering greater attention to the censored material. No alternatives to censorship are noted in the post.

## Conclusion

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It’s quite reasonable to support the orthodox viewpoint concerning Covid vaccines. But is it reasonable to banish disagreement from public forums?

Using these five assumptions, censorship would be justified in a wide range of controversial issues, such as nuclear war, smoking, pesticides, and climate change. In practice, though, this has not occurred, at least not systematically. The movement against nuclear weapons, which was especially prominent in the 1980s, was not systematically censored in the West. Nor were peace campaigners condemned for promoting “nuclear weapons hesitancy.”

The historical experience concerning such issues suggests that much of the current alarm being drummed up about misinformation and disinformation is a way of justifying censorship and discrediting genuine disagreement about policies.

This analysis of assumptions is directly relevant to the vaccination controversy. It may also apply to other issues, where somewhat different assumptions may apply. This is a matter for investigation and assessment. In any case, it is unwise to accept at face value concerns about misinformation and disinformation without probing and questioning underlying assumptions.

Thanks to Sue Curry Jansen for useful comments.

(Featured Image: “The worst thing about #censorship is ” by darinrmcclure is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)

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