The Anti-Vaxx Playbook: How to Spread Anti-Vaccine Propaganda

By Thom Golab — January 15, 2021

A dangerous five-step program converts "vaccine-hesitant" people into full-blown anti-vaxxers.

For as long as anti-vaxxers have been around, the American Council on Science and Health has used sound science to expose their lies and distortions. The coronavirus pandemic, and the need to produce an effective vaccine to counter it, provided a new and intensified effort to squelch vaccines.

A non-profit organization based in the United States and United Kingdom called the Center for Countering Digital Hate has produced The Anti-Vaxx Playbook to expose the anti-vaxxers for what they truly are: anti-science fearmongers.

The report reveals the messages and strategies anti-vaxxers are using to exploit the COVID pandemic and disrupt the rollout of the COVID vaccine. They include detailed recommendations on how to counter anti-vaxxer narratives.

In late October, the world’s leading anti-vaxxers held a private three-day meeting in which they discussed how to destroy confidence in the COVID vaccine. A CCHD research team was present to record, transcribe, and analyze their candid discussions.

This is a brief overview of what the report presents. To read the entire report click here, or you
The Anti-Vaxx Playbook

The online debate between vaccine advocates and anti-vaxxers is not symmetrical. The medical and scientific professionals attempting to turn the tide of the COVID pandemic must ask others to take action: to accept a COVID vaccine. To do so, they must convince the public that COVID is dangerous and give them confidence that a vaccine is safe and effective.

The same is not true for anti-vaxxers: they win the debate by default if a skeptical public fails to take action and use the vaccine. This is why the term “vaccine hesitant” applies to people who are uncertain whether they will use a vaccine, as well as those who are sure they won’t. It is also why generating uncertainty and confusion is a powerful strategy for anti-vaxxers.

Anti-vaxxers have developed a sophisticated playbook for spreading uncertainty about a COVID vaccine and answering the concerns of vaccine hesitant people with anti-vaccine misinformation.

#1. Establishing the anti-vaxx “master narrative” on COVID vaccines

Online anti-vaxxers have organized themselves around a “master narrative” comprised of three key messages: COVID is not dangerous, the vaccine is dangerous, and vaccine advocates cannot be trusted.

#2. Adapting the master narrative for online subcultures

Different elements of the online anti-vaccine movement adapt the master narrative to expand its reach. Alternative health practitioners, conspiracy theorists, and accounts directed at parents or ethnic communities add their reach to the master narrative and tailor it for their audiences. In doing so, they add to the uncertainty around COVID and the vaccine.

#3. Offering spaces for vaccine-hesitant people

Anti-vaxxers harness the uncertainty that they create by offering online “answering spaces” where people with doubts about COVID or the vaccine can direct their questions. These spaces are often more easily accessible or more tailored to their audience’s interests than their pro-vaccine equivalents. People entering these spaces are met with answers that harden their doubts into vaccine hesitancy.

#4. Converting the vaccine-hesitant into anti-vaxxers

The most established “answering spaces” identify vaccine hesitant individuals, convert them into committed anti-vaxxers, and offer training to make them more effective activists.

#5. Mitigating attacks on their online infrastructure

Leading online anti-vaxxers have adopted a “Lifeboat Strategy” to migrate their followers to “alt-tech” platforms such as Telegram and Parler in anticipation that their mainstream accounts will be removed. They have also developed techniques for undermining fact-checking and attempts to remove their misinformation.
Source URL: https://www.acsh.org/news/2021/01/15/anti-vaxx-playbook-how-spread-anti-vaccine-propaganda-15278

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