

Facebook, Fox, and what ‘killing people’ means in a pandemic | Columbia Journalism Review

By Jon Allsop

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Last Thursday, with confirmed cases of COVID-19 again rising across the US, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general, issued his first advisory since the Biden administration took office: health mis- and disinformation, he said, has prolonged the pandemic, not least by exposing Americans to anti-vax propaganda, and social-media companies should do more to stamp it out. On Friday, Biden himself put a finer point on things. Asked by an NBC reporter for his message to platforms, particularly Facebook, Biden replied, “They’re killing people,” then added, “The only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated.” His bluntness drove a media frenzy and infuriated Facebook, which hit back—claiming that it is actually “helping save lives, period,” by putting good vaccine information in front of billions of users, and accusing Biden of making the company a “scapegoat” for his administration’s missed vaccination targets. On Monday, Biden was asked about his remark, and said this time that Facebook “isn’t killing people”; rather, a small but prolific number of users are. Some news outlets reported that Biden had “clarified” his earlier comment. Others saw a “softening,” a “walk back,” even a “U-turn.”

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