

Facebook is blocking access to data about how much misinformation it spreads and who is affected | Nieman Journalism Lab

By Ethan Zuckerman

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Leaked internal documents suggest Facebook — which recently renamed itself Meta — is doing far worse than it claims at minimizing Covid-19 vaccine misinformation on the Facebook social media platform.

Online misinformation about the virus and vaccines is a major concern. In one study, survey respondents who got some or all of their news from Facebook were significantly more likely to resist the Covid-19 vaccine than those who got their news from mainstream media sources.

As a researcher who studies social and civic media, I believe it's critically important to understand how misinformation spreads online. But this is easier said than done. Simply counting instances of misinformation found on a social media platform leaves two key questions unanswered: How likely are users to encounter misinformation, and are certain users especially likely to be affected by misinformation? These questions are the denominator problem and the distribution problem.

The Covid-19 misinformation study, "Facebook's Algorithm: a Major Threat to Public Health," published by public interest advocacy group Avaaz in August 2020, reported that sources that frequently shared health misinformation — 82 websites and 42 Facebook pages — had an estimated total reach of 3.8 billion views in a year.

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