

Health Experts Don't Understand How Information Moves | The Atlantic

By Renée DiResta

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In a 10-week span at the end of 2019, 83 people—most under the age of 5—died from a disease outbreak in the South Pacific island nation of Samoa. The government undertook drastic measures to stop the highly contagious disease that had infected thousands, resulting in the hospitalization of [33 percent](#) of those who contracted it. Schools were shut down and children were banned from public gatherings.

In that case, the disease was measles, which is preventable. The measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination rate had already begun to fall in Samoa when, in 2018, two children died after receiving improperly prepared injections—after which the vaccination rate dropped to just 34 percent. When the 2019 measles outbreak struck, the disease spread quickly. As the Samoan government declared a state of emergency, anti-vaccine activists emerged to do what they always do during epidemics: push conspiracy theories, hawk specious cures, and [spam the social-media pages](#) of the government and health authorities trying to get [accurate information](#) to the public. The anti-vaccine groups—some with more than 100,000 members—worked together to try to undermine the vaccination campaign the government implemented, directing members to comment on specific posts and vote in online public-opinion polls. To any observer who didn't know better, it looked like a mass public uprising—one with its own folk hero.

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