

Studying—and fighting—misinformation should be a top scientific priority, biologist argues | Science | AAAS

By Kai Kupferschmidt

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When Carl Bergstrom worked on plans to prepare the United States for a hypothetical pandemic, in the early 2000s, he and his colleagues were worried vaccines might not get to those who needed them most. “We thought the problem would be to keep people from putting up barricades and stopping the truck and taking all the vaccines off it, giving them to each other,” he recalls.

When COVID-19 arrived, things played out quite differently. One-quarter of U.S. adults remain unvaccinated against a virus that has killed more than 1 million Americans. “Our ability to convince people that this was a vaccine that was going to save a lot of lives and that everyone needed to take was much, much worse than most of us imagined,” Bergstrom says.

He is convinced this catastrophic failure can be traced to social media networks and their power to spread false information—in this case about vaccines—far and fast. “Bullshit” is Bergstrom’s umbrella term for the falsehoods that propagate online—both misinformation, which is spread inadvertently, and disinformation, designed to spread falsehoods deliberately.

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