

Why we need a Google Trends for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Reddit | First Draft

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Everyone needs access to credible information during a pandemic. Without it, people die.

We are especially vulnerable when we want to know something — such as how to treat Covid-19 — but no credible information exists. At the beginning of the pandemic, confusion about symptoms, causes and treatments reined. Viral posts claimed a runny nose was not a sign of the disease, or that garlic, alcohol or sunlight were good preventative measures. A range of medicines have been tried and tested, including chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, favipiravir, remdesivir, azithromycin and dexamethasone. Some were found to be effective, others less so.

If more speculation or misinformation exists around these terms than credible facts, then search engines often present that to people who, in the midst of a pandemic, may be in a desperate moment. This can lead to confusion, conspiracy theories, self-medication, stockpiling and overdoses.

These invisible moments of vulnerability are known as data voids: when there are high levels of demand for information on a topic, but low levels of credible supply. Data voids were first defined by Michael Golebiewski and danah boyd in 2019, and describe vulnerabilities that emerge from search engines like Google.

When it comes to data voids, a distinction is usually drawn between search engines and social media platforms. Whereas the primary interface of search engines is the search bar, the primary interface of social media platforms is the feed: algorithmic encounters with posts based on general interest, not a specific question you're searching to answer.

It's therefore easy to miss the fact that data voids exist here, too: Even though

search isn't the primary interface, it's still a major feature. And with billions of users, they may be creating major social vulnerabilities.

First Draft spent recent months building a dashboard to monitor data voids in partnership with the University of Sheffield, looking to find a way to identify where the demand for credible information far outstrips the supply. The results of that research will be published soon, but more urgent is fully understanding the threat these data voids pose to our recovery from the pandemic.

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Source: [Why we need a Google Trends for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Reddit](#)