

Debunking the lies can be challenging

Kelly Hawes

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The woman describes herself as a spiritual consultant, an intuitive energy healer for the soul, mind and body.

“Who is really brainwashed?” she asks in a recent email. “The vaccinated or the unvaccinated?”

She’s pretty sure she already knows the answer.

“The vaccinated believe that what we say is misinformation when it’s the truth!” she writes.

The vaccinated, she says, put great stock in the words of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the face of this pandemic. The unvaccinated are not fooled.

“We see Fauci lying,” the woman writes. “The government is lying because it’s evil. And we have many proofs. The truth needs to show up. It’s time. It’s getting too dangerous.”

I’m reminded of a meme still making the rounds on Facebook. First posted in July of 2020, the message appears to have originated with a man named Philip Fraley, a public policy analyst based in New Orleans. It has been shared more than 38,000 times.

“Have you ever wanted to practice medicine without all the hassle of being responsible for people dying?” it asks. “Well, here at the University of Facebook School of Medicine, our philosophy is ‘Anyone can be a Doctor.’”

The university’s most popular courses, it says, are “Why facemasks don’t work” and “Masks are unhealthy and cause you to get sick.”

“Don’t let your lack of medical training or experience stop you from posting bad medical advice,” the post says. “Our online courses are not limited by classroom size, and best of all, no enrollment fees or intelligence are required. So enroll now and start your career as an unqualified Facebook doctor today!”

Social media is rife with such messages.

Comedian Seth McFarlane stirred up a hornet’s nest in February with a cartoon drawn by New Yorker cartoonist Jon Adams. The cartoon showed a guy sitting at his laptop.

“Honey, come look!” the man shouts. “I’ve found some information all the world’s top scientists and doctors missed.”

The tweet drew lots of reactions, many of them from Twitter users offering alternative captions.

“Honey, come look,” one says. “I’m being told I don’t know how to think for myself by a guy who draws stupid cartoons.”

Someone using the name Justin Credible offered this: ““Honey, come look! Another celebrity is mocking free thought in favor of big pharma!”

Folks don’t learn much from all the shouting on social media, and turning the doubters into a punch line isn’t likely to change their minds.

Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor for Reason magazine, addressed the dilemma in a Twitter thread.

“Because I like exterminating any residual shreds of faith in humanity,” he writes, “I looked through the overwhelmingly hostile comments on a YouTube video by a doctor debunking some COVID misinformation tonight.”

The folks spreading misinformation typically put forth mountains of technical jargon and so-called “evidence,” and the actual experts struggle for an effective response. After all, you can’t crowd years of medical training into a 20-minute YouTube video.

“So past a fairly superficial point,” he writes, “they go with some version of ‘99% of us who spent years studying this are on the same page, and you sort of have to trust us.’ Which can feel patronizing.”

In the end, though, the purveyors of misinformation are even more condescending. They pretend not to rely on trust, Sanchez writes, and so they get exactly that.

“What the crank is giving people is the *illusion* of not trusting an authority – unlike all those sheep who trust the *mainstream* authorities,” he writes. “A bit like the media elites who win large followings by telling you not to trust media elites.”

What can experts do to break through all the noise? That’s a puzzle lots of folks would dearly love to solve.