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Conservatives worry Biden and Big Tech would go overboard with censorship in curbing coronavirus misinformation

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Many conservatives want to reduce coronavirus misinformation online that is resulting in fewer people getting vaccinated. Still, they are wary of social media giants and the government becoming the arbiters of truth.

These conservatives want the Biden administration to work with former President Donald Trump to create trust in the vaccines while encouraging social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to moderate content, label misleading posts, and boost accurate information from credible scientific sources — rather than just censoring users content.

A large study on vaccine misinformation published in February found the number of people intending to get vaccinated decreased by 6% after exposure to vaccine falsehoods. Another study from earlier this year found Republicans, Fox News viewers, and those who relied on social media for virus information were less likely to get vaccinated.

“Misinformation around the COVID vaccines is a very serious issue because millions of Americans have been affected by it based on Facebook data and random sampling,” said Emerson Brooking, who studies digital platforms and misinformation at the Atlantic Council, a centrist think tank. “Most American social media users have been at least incidentally exposed to it, and it has reduced vaccination rates.”

A more recent Axios-Ipsos poll shows those who believe common online myths about the vaccine are far less likely to get it.

Conservatives with a medical background are disappointed by social media posts that try to sow seeds of doubt regarding the vaccines into people’s minds without scientific facts.

“The misinformation can frighten people away from getting the vaccines, which are one of the greatest scientific discoveries in history, so I get very frustrated when people are swayed by such

false information,” said Jeff Singer, a health policy scholar and surgeon with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

He added that although he wants to see coronavirus-related misinformation decrease significantly, he is not in favor of social media platforms censoring content because it results in more fear and paranoia around the vaccine.

“Social media platforms can place labels on posts that contain misinformation to direct people to other more accurate information and give them a better perspective. That would be much better than outright censorship,” Singer said.

Conservatives are eager to curb false and misleading information on the coronavirus vaccines but are worried about who determines what is or isn’t classified as misinformation.

“If there is false or misleading information on the COVID vaccine, that is not good, and we shouldn’t be propagating that on tech or other platforms,” said Makan Delrahim, the former top antitrust official at the Justice Department during the Trump administration.

“Now, who becomes the arbitrator of what is false or not false information? That is an important and controversial task,” said Delrahim, who investigated and regulated Big Tech platforms under Trump.

Republicans are worried about the Biden administration working directly with social media companies to stifle speech after the White House said last week that it's in close communication with online platforms, such as Facebook, to curb the spread of vaccine-related misinformation.

Facebook maintains it is taking the issue of vaccine misinformation seriously, claiming to have pushed out accurate information to more than 2 billion people and rejecting contentions by President Joe Biden the platform was "killing people" due to the spread of misinformation on its website.

For years, conservatives have said the antidote to dangerous misinformation online is to put out better information to counter false facts.

When it comes to the coronavirus and its vaccines, conservatives have been in favor of social media platforms and the federal government pushing out accurate information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization instead of taking down misleading content.

“Social media platforms should create groups and messaging initiatives to target the various groups that are facing misinformation and push out the negative information and misinformation with positive and accurate information instead,” said Dan Gainor, vice president at the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog tracking censorship on Big Tech platforms.

“Also, the Biden administration should actively work to work with team Trump side-by-side on the same stage to promote a message of unity. If there’s a bipartisan message that can help persuade people rather than try to bully them into taking the vaccine,” Gainor said.

He added that trying to censor people would create further distrust in the platforms and vaccines, resulting in the “slippery slope” of content censorship on controversial issues such as abortion, climate change, and immigration.

Those who study misinformation say content moderation and censorship are not ideal solutions to misinformation. Nevertheless, they are sometimes needed to save lives during certain crises.

“When you choose to refuse vaccination, you are not making a stand for liberty. Instead, you are making a choice to endanger the lives of your neighbors and loved ones. Saving lives is more important than winning petty political arguments,” Brookings said.

“I believe Facebook can and should take more aggressive action here with vaccines because the decision to remove content has saved lives in the past,” he added.