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The New York Times  
**On Tech**  
With Shira Ovide  
May 11, 2020

Let's clean up the toxic internet





Timo Lenzen



By Shira Ovide

Sometimes the online cesspool makes me want to scream my head off. Like right now.

Millions of people [have watched an online video](#) that recycled discredited health conspiracies into what looked like a slick documentary about the coronavirus and vaccines.

The success of the video, part of a documentary called “Plandemic,” has crystallized everything terrible about the internet. People pushing a baseless conspiracy used extreme online savvy to unleash a misinformation goulash, the internet companies couldn’t do enough to prevent its spread, and we ate it up

This happens [again](#) and [again](#). But we can help stop it.

All of us need to understand that misinformation spreads with the sophistication of a blockbuster-movie marketing campaign. Authority figures must learn to play the game of online popularity like a Kardashian. And the online hangouts need to coordinate effectively against the garbage-peddling showmen.

First, there is power in [understanding the mechanics](#) that made the “Plandemic” scene go wild.

My colleague [Davey Alba described](#) how a fringe group of people, dubious news outlets and online personalities started weeks ago to promote the discredited scientist featured in the video. And once it was released, online groups that frequently promote false conspiracies [helped spread](#) it on Facebook and YouTube. Great marketing makes a product — whether a superhero movie or baseless video — go big.

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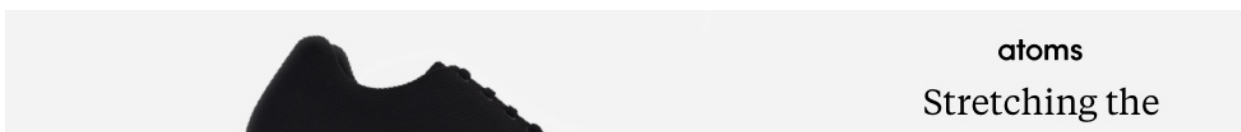
Even those who didn't believe the pseudoscience in the video may have inadvertently been helping spread its false ideas. When we share information our social circles — even to tell people how wrong we think it is — it spreads even more, said Ben Decker, a disinformation researcher who works with The Times.

Instead, if we want to fight misinformation in our networks, we should talk to our loved ones directly, and [have empathy](#) for why they might believe bad information.

Decker also said the internet companies needed to work together to slow misinformation that is coordinated across multiple online hangouts. Facebook and YouTube did delete the original “Plandemic” scene — after millions of people saw it. And versions keep popping up.

After the mass murder at a New Zealand mosque last year, Facebook [put identifiable markers in a live-streamed video](#) from the shooter, so pieces of it couldn't be reposted when the original video was deleted. That hadn't happen yet with the “Plandemic” video, Decker said.

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To their credit, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and others have tried to fight the spread of misinformation related to the coronavirus by directing people to reliable sources like the World Health Organization.

But as my colleague [Kevin Roose](#) and the misinformation researcher [Renée DiResta](#) have pointed out, conventional authority figures largely [haven't learned to make accurate information as appealing](#) for internet audiences as have the worst online actors. And unfortunately, accurate information is often more complex than the appealing clarity of conspiracy theories.

Bogus information is only going to get worse in this pandemic as some people sow distrust of medical experts and any potential coronavirus vaccines. This is dangerous, and we can stop them by understanding the mechanics of bad information, and by not fanning the flames.

## Tip of the Week

# Spotting bogus information

[Brian X. Chen](#), a personal technology columnist for *The Times*, has some practical advice for recognizing false information in our online feeds that appears to come from a recognizable news source:

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Misinformation on the web comes in many forms. This makes finding accurate information about the pandemic extra challenging.

Social media sites are a major contributor to the spread of misinformation, because anyone can post something that looks like a legitimate news article but is actually from a bogus source.

Many fake news articles, fortunately, can be easy to spot. Here are some telltale signs:

- **A shady URL:** Fake news sites sometimes use legitimate brand names, but their domain names may end with “.com.co,” “.ma” or “.co.” ABCNews.com.co, now a defunct site, was a famous example.
- **Grammatical errors:** Fake news writers aren’t exactly wordsmiths, so one big giveaway is the number of typos and grammatical errors that make it into their stories.
- **Unverifiable information:** If an article’s information were legitimately outrageous, plenty of other news outlets would have written about it, too. When in doubt, do a Google search to check if trustworthy publications have reported the same information.

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## Before we go ...

- **The land grab for back-to-work technology:** Eager to reopen factories and offices, employers are buying apps that check symptoms and fever-screeners that [promise to spot sick workers](#). But the

technology may not work, it might let your boss spy on you, or both, my colleague [Natasha Singer](#) writes. (I'll have a conversation with Natasha in Tuesday's newsletter.)

- **Could Goliath write checks to David?** [Ben Smith](#), the media columnist for The Times, writes that he is encouraged about regulatory rules and political pressure that may [compel Google and Facebook to pay news outlets](#) for posting snippets of their work or full articles in search results and on social media feeds.
- **National protection for computer chips:** The federal government wants to encourage computer chip makers to manufacture their products in the United States, The Wall Street Journal [reported](#). There has been anxiety for years that essential technologies such as mobile internet equipment and the chips that power smartphones are mostly controlled by foreign companies or produced in overseas factories.

## Hugs to this

“[Why are birds so perfect](#) we don't deserve them,” my colleague (and apparent avian lover) Taylor Lorenz tweeted.

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