

Opinion **Social Media****To curse social media is to exonerate society**

The demand for vaccine disinformation is more troubling than the supply of it

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No doubt, great torrents of cant and quackery wash through Facebook. But so do facts about vaccine efficacy © Chris Delmas/AFP/Getty

Janan Ganesh JULY 20 2021

Europe's failure to produce a Twitter or Snapchat endears the continent to me. I don't think I have ever made an Instagram or Facebook post. I found the last of these companies unctuous and megalomaniacal when it was still linked to [Barack Obama's rise](#), not Donald Trump's. The value of such outlets to the world's brutally governed stops me — *just* — wishing them gone.

It is with no tenderness, then, that I wince to hear a US president claim they are “killing people”. Taste matters: half the point of [Joe Biden](#), who used the phrase twice, is to drain public life of its vitriol. Truth matters even more. The idea that social media is the source of vaccine avoidance evokes the bots-caused-Brexit hype of yesteryear. It is not just hard to stand up. It suggests a political class in gleeful possession of a villain for all seasons.

No doubt, great torrents of cant and quackery wash through Facebook. But so do facts about vaccine efficacy and [dispenser locations](#) that might otherwise elude millions of users. To a degree that is almost unique on a public policy issue, the site takes an unambiguously pro-vaccine line. The premise that the bad and the good here nets out in favour of the bad is quite the leap. A less esteemed personage than the president might have been invited to make good on the claim.

With eerie if not absolute consistency, the least vaccinated states [vote Republican](#). That is less true of social media users. According to the non-partisan Pew Research Center, Democrats are slightly more likely than Republicans to be on Facebook. On Twitter, Reddit and WhatsApp, the [leftward skew is wider](#). Facebook is more popular among graduates than non-graduates, as are the vaccines. By itself, none of this refutes Biden. But it does raise the inverse claim: that take-up rates might be worse without social media as a source of reassurance among the liberal-minded.

The global context is no more help to the president's case. Lots of middle-income to rich countries have grievously low vaccination rates for reasons that span ingrained [mistrust of government](#) (Russia), insouciance born of a mild pandemic (South Korea) and both (Hong Kong). Next to such fundamentals, social media seems less than decisive. New Zealand, whose leader received a kind of secular beatification last year, has fully vaccinated a mere [12 per cent](#) of its people. The US, Facebook's home market, has managed [almost half](#).

What remains is social media as a cipher for a harder-to-discuss problem. This is human credulity: the demand for nonsense, not the supply of it. Anyone prone to mistrusting a vaccine, or an [election result](#), will hunt out or overvalue corroborating news. If Facebook provides it, so too do talk radio, cable television and word of mouth. At some point, the instrument of misinformation becomes less troubling than the underlying receptiveness to it.

A large minority of US voters are more or less boundless in their [cynicism](#). Once a Democratic-led federal government banged the drum for vaccination, their dissent was assured. But because it is elitist to say so, the recourse is to blame a corrupting influence.

The result is that weird tic in which social media users are discussed as if they were passive victims of demonic possession. The implication, that they would be model citizens were it not for the apps, slips by unquestioned. The politics is impeccable. It is safer to challenge a business than the public. But if the point is to fathom the problem, the evasion becomes self-defeating.

Biden is more prone to it than most. His defining trait is a willingness to think well of his compatriots. There is the mood of a Frank Capra film in his appeals to the good sense and [basic oneness](#) of America. As Republicans know, it screens him from the smears of radicalism or hauteur that bring down other liberals. If only it did not also sometimes block his view of awkward reality.

In 1994, the right swept Congress with new cadres who were shrill in both anti-government creed and partisan style. Mark Zuckerberg was 10 years old. When Sarah Palin played the [proto-Trump](#) on a presidential ticket in 2008, Twitter was still budding. What the scholar Richard Hofstadter called the “paranoid style” of politics was nearing escape velocity before social media gave it, at most, a last kick.

The crusade against these apps is hardly groundless. But it has become a way of dodging the age and depth of civic rot, and not just in the US. Facebook is easier to confront than the prospect that [mature democracies](#) must live with a permanent mass of essentially unreachable citizens. To curse social media is to exonerate society.

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