

## YouTube's Ban on Misinformation

And why it isn't about us.

By [Shira Ovide](#)

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[Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Twitter](#) have long lists of no-nos to limit information on their sites that they consider misleading about the coronavirus. YouTube went further last week with a [fairly broad ban](#) of videos that question the effectiveness or safety of approved vaccines including those for measles.

Maybe those rules make sense to you. But they may also feel like an assault on expression — and an insult to our intelligence.

Most people who see [YouTube](#) videos ([falsely](#)) claiming that an animal deworming medicine cures the coronavirus won't guzzle Fido's pills, and most people who post their concerns about vaccine side effects are not anti-vaccine zealots. Aren't we capable of talking freely on the internet and making up our own minds? Isn't it counterproductive and un-American to declare certain discussions off limits?

There are no easy answers to these questions. But I want to share how my perceptions changed a bit after talking with [Brendan Nyhan](#), a Dartmouth College professor who studies misperceptions about politics and health care. Dr. Nyhan gave me a different way to think about online misinformation: It's not about you.

Dr. Nyhan suggested that we think about the internet companies' rules as being crafted for the tiny number of people who strongly believe in or are inclined to believe in demonstratively false and potentially dangerous things. Stick with me.

The conversation resonated because it got to something that bugs me about the catchall term "misinformation." It conjures a world in which everyone is either a neo-Nazi, anarchist or grifter selling fake health potions — or vulnerable to being taken in by them.

We know that's hogwash. But Dr. Nyhan said that it was crucial that we had rules on the internet for the extremes of both speaker and listener.

"Lots of people will be exposed to misinformation, and it won't have any effect," Dr. Nyhan told me. "But if even a few people believe in powerful false claims like an election was illegitimate or this vaccine causes autism, then that might call for a more aggressive approach."

Dr. Nyhan isn't saying that popular websites should restrict any discussions that include extreme or unpopular views. (He has written that the kinds of online limits on Covid-19 discussions [shouldn't apply to most political expression](#).)

But for a selection of high-stakes issues that could lead to real world harm, internet companies may need restrictive rules. Internet companies have also [been encouraging people to think carefully](#) about what they read and share, without banning certain kinds of conversations.

Dr. Nyhan recognizes that it's hard to decide what topics are high stakes, and he's worried that a handful of internet companies have grown so influential that they dictate public discourse, and they often enforce their policies poorly.

Most of all, Dr. Nyhan rejects two overly simplistic ideas: that the average person is susceptible to falling for any kooky thing that they read online, and that those kooky things online pose little risk.

"We need to focus more on how the platforms can enable an extremist minority to foment harm and not on how the average person might be brainwashed by a piece of content they viewed a few times," Dr. Nyhan said. "We should be thinking about the [people who consume a large amount of hateful or extremist content on YouTube](#), or the anti-vaccine groups that don't reach a lot of people but could do a lot of harm to the people they do reach."

Honestly, I hate this. Why should sites like YouTube and Facebook be designed to diffuse the worst risks of conspiracists and racists? What about the parent who's worried about side effects from his child's measles vaccine or your co-worker who wonders about [the Arizona election recount](#)? Not all things we're curious about or are questioning are misinformation. Can't we just, you know, talk about stuff on the internet? Won't it be fine?

Dr. Nyhan's answer is basically, yes, it will probably be fine for most of us — but we have to think about the margins. And on rare occasions that might mean sacrificing the ability to immediately say absolutely anything online in order to protect us all.