



28 JUN, 2020

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Sunday Telegraph, Sydney



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A WAR against science is being fought on social media by small but noisy groups of anti-vaxxers — and experts warn unless we fight back, the crazy conspiracies might win.

The COVID-19 pandemic and hunt for a vaccine has seen conspiracy theories go viral as these groups outsmart “crackdowns” by social media giants.

Associate Professor Margie Danchin, paediatrician and immunisation expert with the Murdoch Children's Research

Institute, said COVID-19 had provided a perfect platform to exploit fear.

“There has been a massive uptick in anti-vax activity in the media, particularly on Facebook, a 900 per cent increase in May,” Prof Danchin said. “They are selling a powerful narrative and they are selling fear. Unfortunately it will get worse and we need to be on the front foot.”

Pete Evans, Kate and Anthony Golle, and Frank and Taylor Winterstein are all using Facebook and Instagram to promote conspiracy theories, rally support-

ers to action and spread misinformation.

Prof Danchin said Australia needs to counter with a new, strong pro-vaccine social media campaign. “Our pro-vax messaging and the science community is perceived as very vanilla,” she said. “We need influencers that are ... not some stuffy old man in a jacket.”

Prof Danchin said there was already anecdotal evidence routine vaccination was slipping.

Last year, social media giants announced a crackdown on misinformation. However, anti-vaxxers are easily outwit-

ting Facebook by replacing words like “Plandemic” — the nonsensical conspiracy film claiming that COVID-19 was planned — with “pl@ndemic”, or changing “vaccine” to “va((ine”.

“It is always going to be a bit of an arms race where changes are made by social media then anti-vaccine activists will develop other ways to keep their voice being heard,” said Maryke Steffens of Macquarie University's Australian Institute of Health Innovation. “Rumours and misinformation and falsehoods spread more readily than truth.”



Dr Margie Danchin.