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Feature BMJ Investigation

Covid-19: Researcher blows the whistle on data integrity issues in Pfizer's vaccine trial

BMJ 2021; 375 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2635> (Published 02 November 2021) Cite this as: BMJ 2021;375:n2635

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Rapid Response:

Open letter from The BMJ to Mark Zuckerberg

Dear Mark Zuckerberg,

We are Fiona Godlee and Kamran Abbasi, editors of The BMJ, one of the world's oldest and most influential general medical journals. We are writing to raise serious concerns about the "fact checking" being undertaken by third party providers on behalf of Facebook/Meta.

In September, a former employee of Ventavia, a contract research company helping carry out the main Pfizer covid-19 vaccine trial, began providing The BMJ with dozens of internal company documents, photos, audio recordings, and emails. These materials revealed a host of poor clinical trial research practices occurring at Ventavia that could impact data integrity and patient safety. We also discovered that, despite receiving a direct complaint about these problems over a year ago, the FDA did not inspect Ventavia's trial sites.

The BMJ commissioned an investigative reporter to write up the story for our journal. The article was published on 2 November, following legal review, external peer review and subject to The BMJ's usual high level editorial oversight and review.[1]

But from November 10, readers began reporting a variety of problems when trying to share our article. Some reported being unable to share it. Many others reported having their posts flagged with a warning about "Missing context ... Independent fact-checkers say this information could mislead people." Those trying to post the article were informed by Facebook that people who repeatedly share "false information" might have their posts moved lower in Facebook's News Feed. Group administrators where the article was shared received messages from Facebook informing them that such posts were "partly false."

Readers were directed to a "fact check" performed by a Facebook contractor named Lead Stories.[2]

We find the "fact check" performed by Lead Stories to be inaccurate, incompetent and irresponsible.

- It fails to provide any assertions of fact that The BMJ article got wrong
- It has a nonsensical title: "Fact Check: The British Medical Journal Did NOT Reveal Disqualifying And Ignored Reports Of Flaws In Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine Trials"
- The first paragraph inaccurately labels The BMJ a "news blog"
- It contains a screenshot of our article with a stamp over it stating "Flaws Reviewed," despite the Lead Stories article not identifying anything false or untrue in The BMJ article
- It published the story on its website under a URL that contains the phrase "hoax-alert"

We have contacted Lead Stories, but they refuse to change anything about their article or actions that have led to Facebook flagging our article.

We have also contacted Facebook directly, requesting immediate removal of the "fact checking" label and any link to the Lead Stories article, thereby allowing our readers to freely share the article on your platform.

There is also a wider concern that we wish to raise. We are aware that The BMJ is not the only high quality information provider to have been affected by the incompetence of Meta's fact checking regime. To give one other example, we would highlight the treatment by Instagram (also owned by Meta) of Cochrane, the international provider of high quality systematic reviews of the medical evidence.[3] Rather than investing a proportion of Meta's substantial profits to help ensure the accuracy of medical information shared through social media, you have apparently delegated responsibility to people incompetent in carrying out this crucial task. Fact checking has been a staple of good journalism for decades. What has happened in this instance should be of concern to anyone who values and relies on sources such as The BMJ.

We hope you will act swiftly: specifically to correct the error relating to The BMJ's article and to review the processes that led to the error; and generally to reconsider your investment in and approach to fact checking overall.

Best wishes,

Fiona Godlee, editor in chief
Kamran Abbasi, incoming editor in chief
The BMJ

Competing interests:

As current and incoming editors in chief, we are responsible for everything The BMJ contains.

References:

[1] Thacker PD. Covid-19: Researcher blows the whistle on data integrity issues in Pfizer's vaccine trial. BMJ. 2021 Nov 2;375:n2635. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n2635. PMID: 34728500. <https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n2635>

[2] Miller D. Fact Check: The British Medical Journal Did NOT Reveal Disqualifying And Ignored Reports Of Flaws In Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine Trials. Nov 10, 2021. <https://leadstories.com/hoax-alert/2021/11/fact-check-british-medical-jo...>

[3] <https://twitter.com/cochranecollab/status/1458439812357185536>

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