

British Society for Immunology Response to the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation's Inquiry on Misinformation and Trusted Voices

The British Society for Immunology is the leading UK charity organisation representing scientists and clinicians who study the immune system. As a membership organisation, we act as a focal hub for the immunology community, supporting and empowering immunologists working in academic, industry and clinical settings to drive forward scientific discovery and application together. We often encounter misinformation around vaccines and COVID-19.

1. Which organisations are the most trusted sources of information in the UK?

In the space about information regarding vaccines, there is much unverified information on social media and the internet more widely, that perpetuates myths that discourage individuals from choosing to have vaccinations offered to them, which ultimately is to the detriment of public health. The reason that these sources of misinformation have been able to seep into mainstream public discourse is purported to have its routes in the historic attitude that medical practitioners should not be questioned, even when a patient or parent has valid questions or concernsⁱ.

There is a wide variety of trusted sources of information online regarding vaccines, however. Apart from the British Society for Immunology's own [public engagement website](#), the NHS, across the UK the University of Oxford's Vaccine Knowledge Project, the UKHSA, UKRI, the British Islamic Medical Association, the World Health Organization, the London School of Health and Tropical Medicine, and the Science Museum to name but a few all have resources aimed at setting the record straight on vaccine, and COVID-19 vaccines in particular. There are myriad other resources too numerous to list here individually.

Can we add something in here about how difficult it can be sometimes for people to tell reliable sources of info from unreliable ones?

2. Where do you seek authoritative information to make up your mind about matters of national debate (such as vaccines and climate change)?
3. Are you able to "do your own research" on matters of national debate?
4. What role should the National Academies have in being a source of authoritative, trustworthy information?

The National Academies and other learned societies have taken a leading role in countering misinformation surrounding vaccines and COVID-19 and should continue to have a leading role to play in ensuring accurate and easy to understand information about vaccines is in the public domain and providing resources to counter myths about vaccination. The British Society for Immunology, for example, worked with the Academy of Medical Sciences at the beginning of the pandemic to establish the [Immunology and COVID-19 Taskforce](#). The taskforce published reports on a number of themes including immunity and COVID-19, long COVID-19, and ageing and COVID-19 in order to make the latest scientific information available and accessible to the general public. The taskforce also engaged with policymakers through meetings, communications, oral and written evidence submitted to Houses of Commons and Lords Select Committee inquiries, and presenting findings to SAGE, in order to both place trustworthy information in the public domain and make it available to parliamentarians engaging with constituents and the wider public.

Learned societies have a vital role in engaging with communities who may not have been so open to previous government communications on the topic. The BSI has a history of reaching out to minority communities on this issue.

Most learned societies are small charities, however, and are not equipped with either the resources or the manpower to take a full time lead in tackling the vast swathes of misinformation around their topics of expertise that permeate online. Whilst many are happy and enthusiastic to take a role in engaging with the public and offering a trusted voice as part of their charitable objectives, they also have other core functions such as operating as membership organisations to support those working in their sectors more widely. The BSI has taken the lead in reaching out to minority communities both online and off. Were national academies and learned societies to take a greater role in the area of tackling misinformation, it would need funding to be provided, either by government or by interested private sector stakeholders such as social media companies.

5. Are National Academies prominent enough voices in engaging with the variety of debates on the internet?

The role of the National Academies and learned societies should be to make correct and trusted information available and accessible to those individuals who need it. There is a role to be played in discussing and debating policy in, for example, opinion editorials or on online panels, but there is very little value in extending that debate to social media. To do the latter can not only give a platform to fringe views, such as those of anti-vaxxers, but can also sap the resources and time that these organisations could better spend on other areas of outreach, both online and offline, that would be more effective. Responding directly to anti-vax views puts non-scientific views on the same platform as pro vaccine views; this should not be the case.

Can you again reemphasise the funding issue here and that National Academies are well placed with the relevant expertise to play the role of honest brokers in putting info into the public domain but need to have the resources and funding to do so too.

6. Is the provision of authoritative information responsive enough to meet the challenge of misinformation that is spread on social media?

Whilst we do not support the banning of anti-vaxxer speech, as this would be playing into their narrative of a conspiracy by government and the media to suppress their views, as well as having possible unintended consequences on ensuring science and medicine are accountable, we do believe that more support is needed to meet the challenge of misinformation surrounding vaccines and COVID-19 on social media, with a particular focus on targeting the unwarranted and extreme abuse received by many individuals who speak up to champion evidence-based information on vaccines. The government, social media companies, Google and other search engines, along with representatives of science and medicine all have a role to play in ensuring that misinformation does not go uncontested. Social media companies have a responsibility to better signpost people to authoritative sources of trusted information regarding vaccines when labelling anti-vax posts, search engines should ensure that their algorithms do not make such misinformation easily accessible, and government, scientists, and health workers should work together to produce information that rejects the outlandish and dangerous claims being made.

ⁱ <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/online-information-environment/oie-vaccine-misinformation.pdf>