Anti-vaccination & vaccine hesitant narratives intensify in Australian Facebook Groups

Reset.
AUSTRALIA
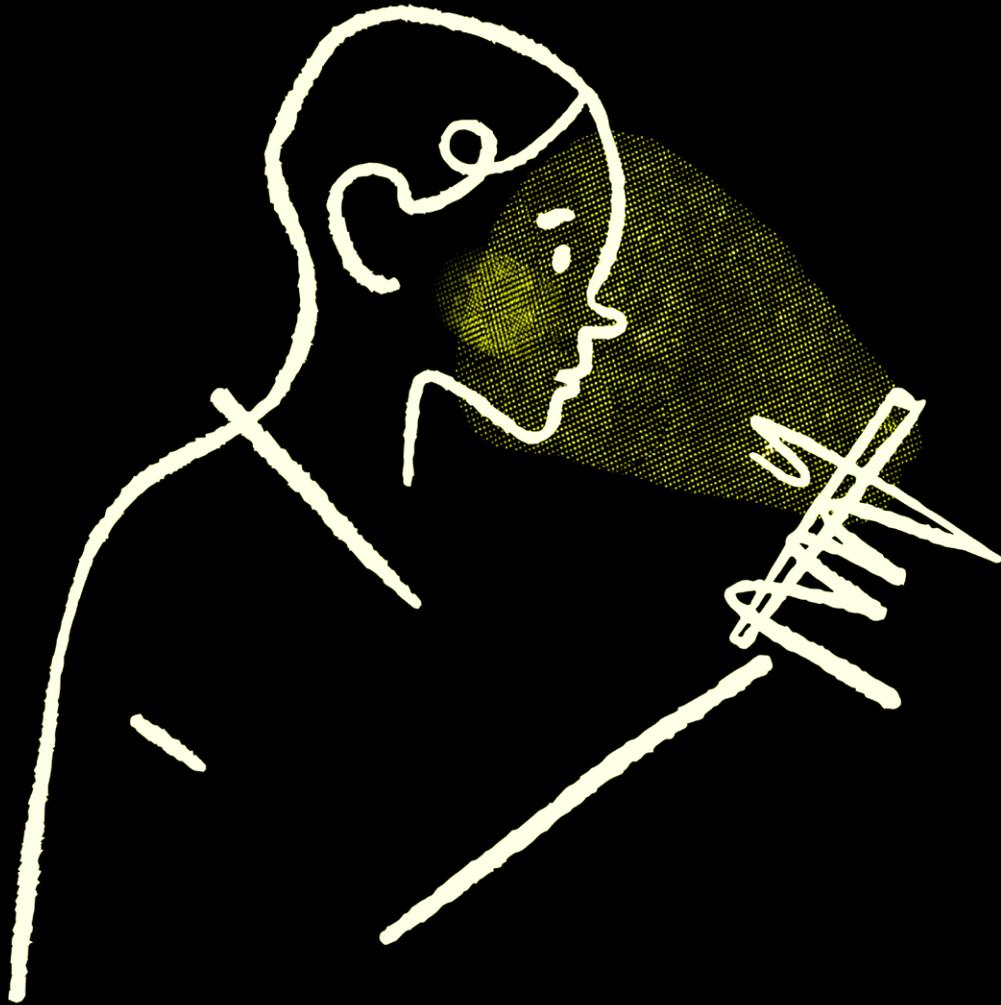
01. Introduction
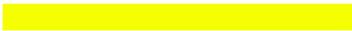
'Anti-vaxx' and vaccine hesitant content is both easily accessible on the leading social media platforms in Australia *and* on the rise.

Controversy around leading public figures such as Pete Evans and Craig Kelly spreading false and misleading information related to the pandemic have been covered widely. However, this report demonstrates that national pro-vaccine campaigns are being **undermined by online disinformation and misinformation proliferating in Facebook groups.**

Facebook groups are highly emotional spaces with dynamics that reflect those of peer-to-peer messaging apps, where the semi-closed nature and coming together around shared interest encourages members to express their opinion. These groups are designed to increase engagement, with group updates giving users a new reason to check the platform regularly therefore increasing the time users interact with the platform and its content. Maintaining engagement is key to Facebook's business model, as the longer they can keep someone scrolling, the more advertising units they can sell.

Facebook has stated that with the growth of private messaging and small groups, they intend to shift the social network more toward 'community spaces', with a focus on private groups. This shift in strategy - moving away from the public News Feed to push interactions in private spaces - raises concerns about the level of reliable, factually accurate information circulating in these groups.

02. Research Findings

As part of Reset Australia's research we identified and collected data for **13 Public Facebook Groups** between January 2020 - March 2021. As of March 2021, these groups had a combined total of over **115,000** members, generating over **2.66 million interactions** throughout the period of analysis. During the research period, subscription to these groups grew by **280%**.

By consulting the latest information from First Draft's Vaccine Insights Hub and fact-checked material reported in RMIT ABC CoronaCheck, we were able to build powerful keyword searches to identify posts and groups using any language associated with recognised and emerging disinformation and misinformation tropes and narratives. Using CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned social media analysis tool, our researchers organised any relevant information into a database. This data was then used to identify widely shared links, interaction rates and periods of high activity. All results were then filtered to only include data from groups where 'admins' are predominantly users based in Australia.

The identified groups vary in size from smaller groups started in direct response to lockdown restrictions such as **'End the Lockdown in Australia'**, **'Digital Warfare'**

& **'Australian Freedom Alliance'** to long established and large anti-vaxx and conspiracy-led groups such as **'Australians for Safe Technology.'** Despite variations in the nature of the content shared and associated comments, it is evident that misinformation and disinformation related to the pandemic and vaccine has accelerated overall engagement within these groups.

As the graph on the following page shows, periods of high engagement for the identified groups correlate to national lockdown restrictions (Mid-late March 2020), regional Melbourne lockdown (July 7 - October 28 2020) and the vaccine approval and rollout from January 2021. Following the introduction of the lockdown restrictions in Melbourne, engagement has remained consistently high, generating over 177,000 monthly interactions.

INTERACTION TYPE

- Likes
- Comments
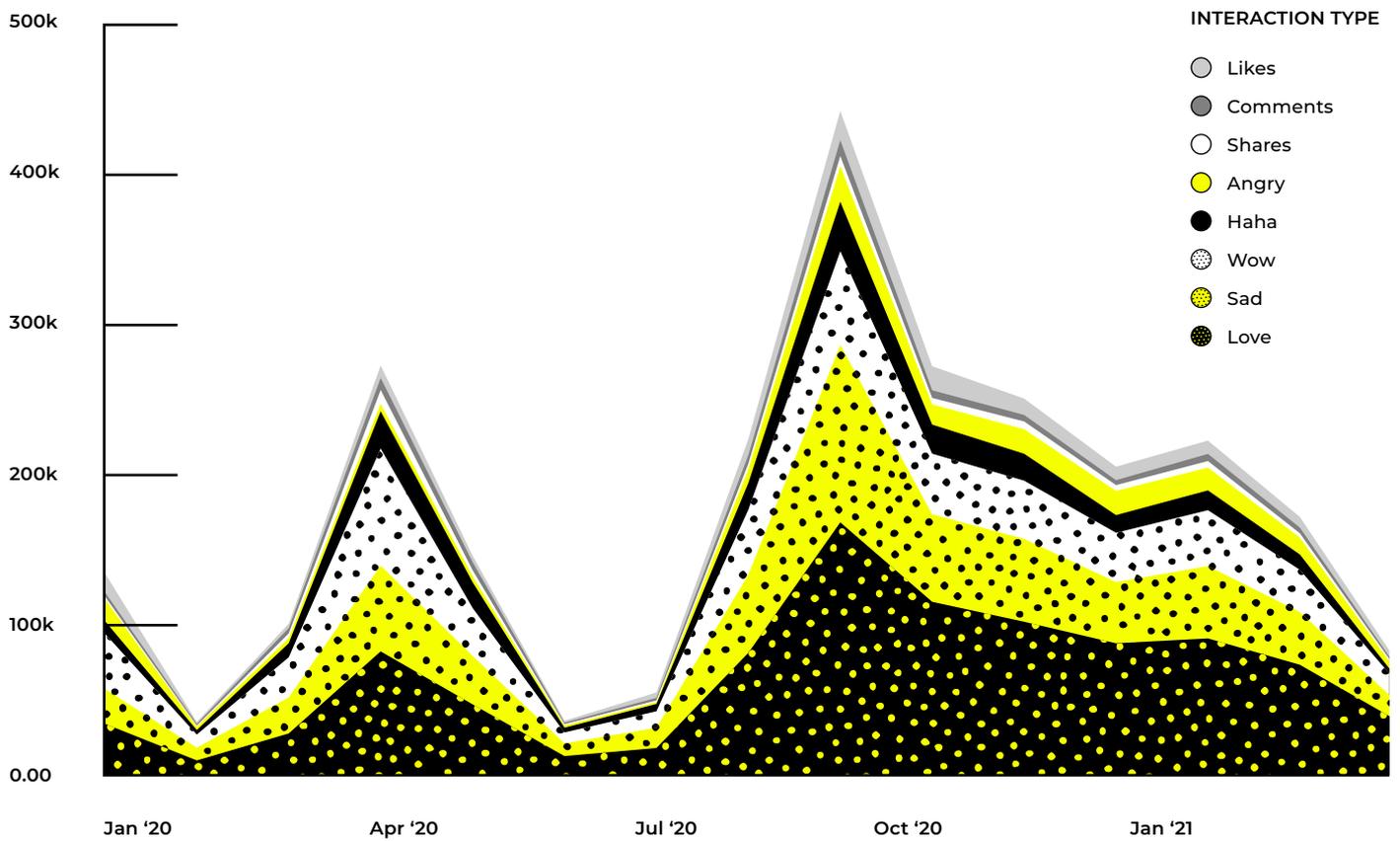- Shares
- Angry
- Haha
- Wow
- Sad
- Love

Fig.1: Peaks in activity across all groups correlating to lockdown measures.
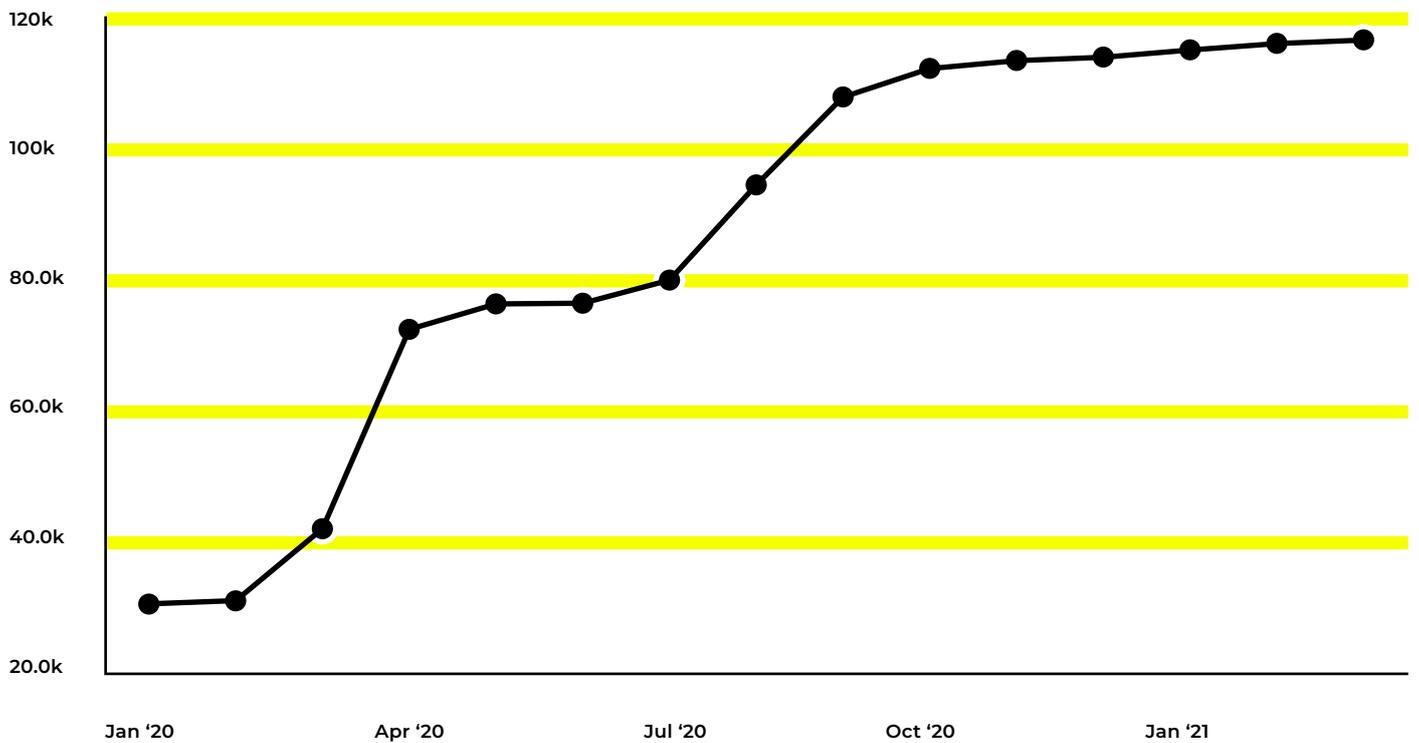

Fig.2: 280% growth in 'page likes' for all groups over period - from 30k to over 115k since Jan 2020

Closer examination of the collected data highlights one group named **'Wake Up Australia'** in particular. Set up in August 2020, it has grown to over 21,500 members. It accounts for nearly a **⅓ of all the data collected**, with an average of 121 posts a day that generated just under 1 million interactions over the period of research.
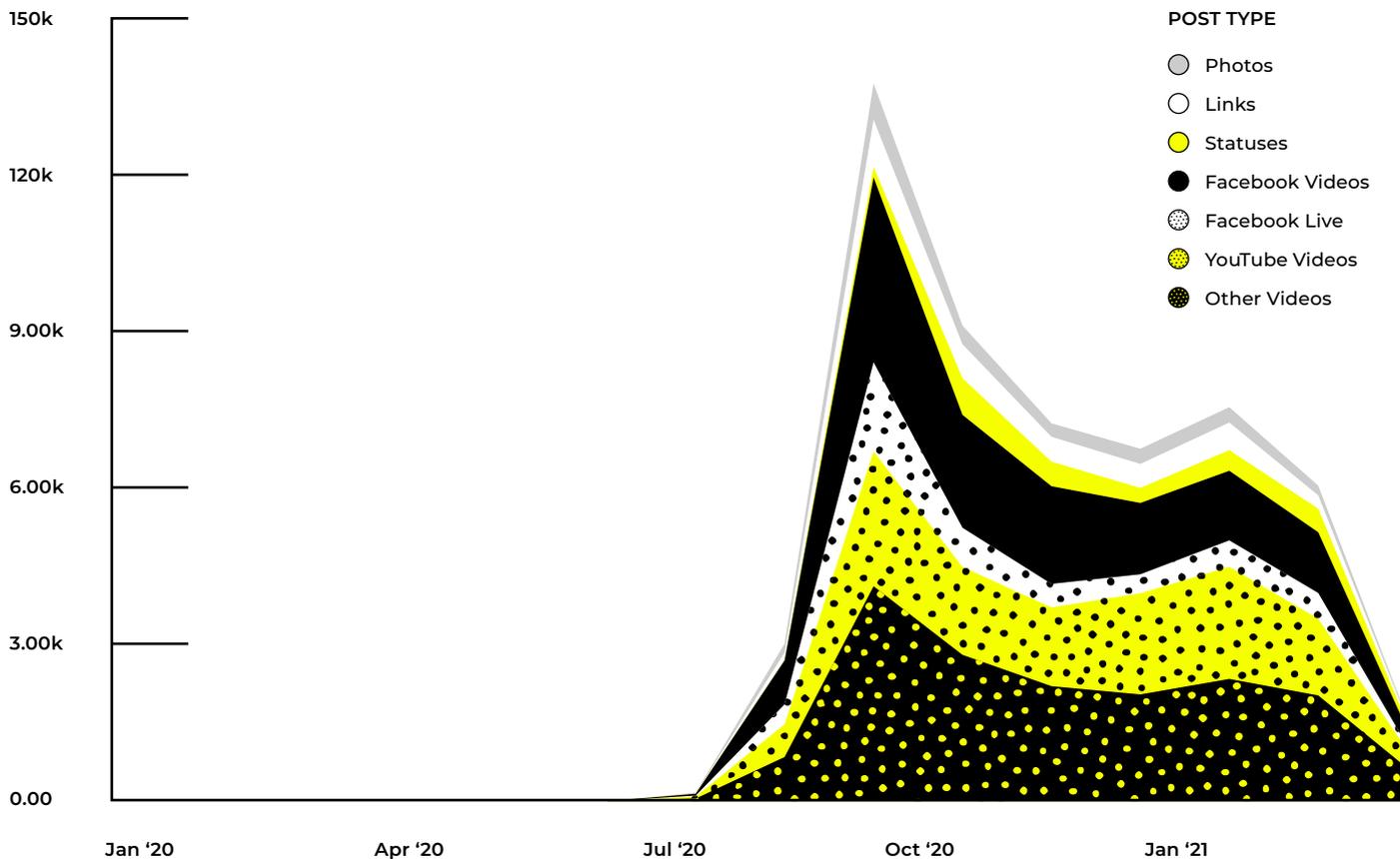

POST TYPE
- ◐ Photos
- ○ Links
- ● Statuses (yellow)
- ● Facebook Videos
- ⦿ Facebook Live
- ⦿ YouTube Videos
- ⦿ Other Videos

Fig.3: Interactions totalling 975k at 108.3k a month for 'Wake Up Australia' group

As the examples on the following page show (fig.4) members of the group **'Wake Up Australia'** frequently share links, photos, videos and statuses perpetuating misleading and inaccurate information related to the pandemic and vaccines. Common themes include: the safety and efficacy of vaccines including the promotion of treatments using Ivermectin (201 mentions) and Hydroxychloroquine (601 mentions); threats to civil liberties and personal freedoms that lockdowns pose; mandatory vaccination programmes (1649 mentions); the political and economic motives of leading political figures such as Bill Gates (1390 mentions) and Dan Andrews (1592 mentions); and well-established and novel conspiracy theories such as the The Great Reset (927 mentions).

Inspection of the links shared in the group highlight a number of websites (such as vaccinedecisions.net) and petitions (such as makeaustraliahealthyagain.org) that provide legitimacy and authority to the misinformation and disinformation spreading on the platform. Many of the links shared in the group are often international in focus; placing **'Wake Up Australia'** within a global network of pages and groups that expose online audiences to 'anti-vaxx' and vaccine hesitant content. Members have frequently shared links to bitchute (a YouTube alternative known for accommodating far-right individuals and conspiracy theorists) and to a conspiracy-led website called Stop World Control (landing page shared on facebook over 100,000 times).

Fig.4: Example posts from Facebook group 'Wake Up Australia'

03. Conclusion

Reset Australia's analysis of Facebook groups reveals a disturbing trend over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Membership of and engagement with Facebook groups that peddled misinformation and disinformation increased significantly over the period studied.

This trend shows that despite actions from Facebook to connect users to accurate information about vaccines, such as removing groups and pages that spread vaccine misinformation from recommendations or directing people to authoritative sources, the spread of 'Anti-vaxx' and vaccine hesitant content in Facebook groups continues to be a significant problem for the platform.

Due to limitations in accessing quantifiable data for private groups, our analysis of public groups represents only a fraction of the disinformation and misinformation presently circulating on the platform as a whole.

Reset Australia has developed a policy, the Data Access Mandate for a Better COVID-19 Response in Australia, that would allow public health officials, researchers and journalists access to anonymised data about what COVID-19 related content is being shared in these kinds of private groups.

This policy would force social media companies to generate a 'Live List' of the most popular COVID-19 related URLs shared on their platforms, including in private and public groups, and keep it updated in real time. Such a Live List would help Australian public health authorities identify anti-vaccination narratives to inform community engagement responses.

Reset.

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Reset Australia is an independent
organisation raising awareness and
advocating for better policy
to address the digital threats
to Australian democracy.

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