

Twitter labelled scientific reporting of COVID-19 as “misinformation”

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On Thursday, the *Washington Post* published an article that said Twitter had falsely “flagged dozens of tweets with factual information about COVID-19 as misinformation” and “suspended the accounts of doctors, scientists, and patient advocates” for warning the public about the dangers of the virus.

The article, by *Post* technology columnist Taylor Lorenz, said that many of the misinformation labels had since been removed and the suspended accounts restored. However, Lorenz wrote, “the episode has shaken many scientific and medical professionals,” because Twitter is a primary vehicle for publicizing the ongoing risk of COVID-19 to the public, “that has grown weary of more than two years of shifting claims about the illness.”

Among the posts flagged by Twitter as misinformation were tweets by Chantel Moore, a science and technology writer in Vancouver, about keeping safe by wearing N95 masks and another from last June that cited information from an Instagram post by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Another Twitter user, Anita Cheng, who is a former molecular biologist and San Francisco emergency COVID response team member had a tweet promoting vaccination flagged and her account was suspended for one and a half weeks. In a tweet on Friday, Cheng reported that her account was restored while she was discussing being “in Twitter jail” with *Post* reporter Lorenz.

The *Post* report said other Twitter users had their tweets flagged or accounts suspended for sharing data on childhood deaths from COVID-19, posting links to articles from scientific journals that warn of the dangers of the virus for children and pregnant women, and studies about the impact of long COVID.

In a statement responding to specific instances

mentioned by the *Post*, Twitter’s communications manager Celeste Carswell said, “We acknowledge the mistakes made in these cases, and we are reviewing our team’s protocol to safeguard against such mistakes in the future.” Carswell added that Twitter appreciates “the community’s feedback and remains focused on reducing harm and providing informative context across Twitter.”

It is significant that the “mistakes” made by Twitter were exclusively aimed at those sharing medical and scientific information about the ongoing danger of COVID-19. In many cases, the tweets flagged by Twitter as misinformation were aimed at warning the public about false and inaccurate information circulating online that the pandemic is over, nothing should be done to prevent spreading the virus, or contracting COVID-19 is like getting the flu. Meanwhile, Twitter is not labeling as misinformation tweets that say, “mask wearing does nothing,” or, “the pandemic is over.”

As emergency physician Graham Walker told the *Post*, “Physicians who are advocating for a more cautious approach to removing covid mitigations, tend to be the physicians who are challenged and reported [for misinformation] and get harassed.” Last week, Walker’s tweet opposing anti-vaccination ideas was labeled as misinformation by Twitter. “The label was later removed,” the *Post* reported.

Conspicuously missing from Lorenz’s article was any reference to Twitter’s application of misinformation labels to links posted to a *World Socialist Web Site* article detailing two scientific papers that confirm the zoonotic origin of the COVID-19 virus and further debunking the bogus “Wuhan lab” conspiracy theory.

Tweets about the false labeling of the WSWs article

were shared widely on Twitter. Notably, the censorship was lifted temporarily, Twitter “sincerely apologizing for any inconvenience,” only to reimpose the misinformation label within hours.

WSWS writer Evan Blake asked the *Post*’s Taylor Lorenz on Twitter, “Why is there no mention of Twitter’s censorship of the @WSWS_Updates reporting on the #WuhanLab Lie? Was this not permitted by @washingtonpost, which has been a leading purveyor of this xenophobic conspiracy theory?” The question, as of this writing, has gone unanswered.

The Orwellian misinformation labeling debacle at Twitter takes place within the context of an ongoing crisis at the San Francisco-based corporation, now the 15th largest social media platform with 436 million monthly active users.

Twitter filed a lawsuit against Elon Musk on July 12 after the world’s richest individual attempted to back out of his offer to buy the company for \$44 billion and take it off the stock market. The Wall Street value of Twitter has plummeted since hitting a peak in April when Musk initially made his offer.

On Monday, Musk subpoenaed Jack Dorsey, the founder and former CEO of Twitter, as part of his effort to avoid being forced to buy the company according to the terms of his original offer of \$54.20 per share. The stock is currently trading at \$40.45, or \$12 billion less than Musk’s offer.

According to legal filings made public, Musk is seeking documents and communications from Dorsey about how Twitter counts and tracks fake accounts. The company currently claims 217 million monetized daily active users (mDAU) or users who view advertising on a daily basis. Musk says that Twitter has not been “forthcoming” about the number of bots and spam accounts counted among the mDAUs.

On Tuesday, Twitter’s former security chief, Peiter Zatkó, accused the social media company of misleading government regulators about cybersecurity practices and prioritizing growth over removing spam accounts. Zatkó filed an 84-page whistleblower complaint last month with US government agencies, alleging that Twitter servers used outdated software and were vulnerable to hackers.

On Thursday, Dorsey expressed demoralization in response to a question about whether the company

turned out the way he envisioned it. “The biggest issue and my biggest regret is that it became a company,” Dorsey tweeted. He followed this up by posting that no one “should own or run Twitter” and it should operate as “a protocol.” He concluded by saying, “Solving for the problem of it being a company however, Elon is the singular solution I trust. I trust his mission to extend the light of consciousness.”



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