

# DISINFORMATION DOZEN: THE SEQUEL

HOW BIG TECH IS FAILING TO ACT ON LEADING ANTI-VAXXERS
DESPITE BIPARTISAN CALLS FROM CONGRESS





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The Center for Countering Digital Hate is a not-for-profit NGO that seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and misinformation.

Digital technology has changed forever the way we communicate, build relationships, share knowledge, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values.

Digital spaces have been colonised and their unique dynamics exploited by fringe movements that instrumentalise hate and misinformation. These movements are opportunistic, agile and confident in exerting influence and persuading people.

Over time these actors, advocating diverse causes - from anti-feminism to ethnic nationalism to denial of scientific consensus - have formed a Digital Counter Enlightenment. Their trolling, disinformation and skilled advocacy of their causes has resocialised the offline world for the worse.

The Center's work combines both analysis and active disruption of these networks. CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure - the actors, systems and culture - that support, and often profit from hate and misinformation.

#### **Anti-Vax Watch**

Anti-Vax Watch is an alliance of concerned individuals who are seeking to educate the American public about the dangers of the anti-vax industry.

As the anti-vaccine industry actively seeks to undermine the rollout of the COVID vaccine – capitalizing on a heightened sense of hesitancy from the public and targeting communities of color who have already been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – we recognize that this is an all-hands-on-deck moment. We believe we must join together to bring science and facts to the forefront and alert the public to the dangerous agenda of anti-vaccine leaders.

Our efforts center around bringing to light the nefarious activities of the anti-vaccine industry and working with leading experts to dispute their falsehoods and non-medical disinformation with science, research and expert analysis. Our goal is to support the efforts of leading health experts, pro-vaccine researchers and educators, civil rights and business organizations, and others who, like us, recognize the importance of raising awareness of the science of vaccines.



#### Introduction

In March 2021, CCDH and Anti-Vax Watch identified the top 12 spreaders of anti-vaccine disinformation on social media in our report, <u>The Disinformation Dozen</u>. The CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google responded by pledging to strengthen and better enforce their policies; crack down on vaccine disinformation on their platforms; and protect public health – but they have not kept their promises. Despite continued violations of community standards, the majority of the Disinformation Dozen remain online and active in their disinformation-spreading campaigns on at least one platform.

Facebook, Twitter, and Google CEOs were put on notice by <u>bipartisan members</u> of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee in a March 25 hearing about the dangers of the misinformation spread by the Disinformation Dozen. Senators <u>Klobuchar, Luján</u> and <u>Warner</u> and a group of <u>12 state Attorneys General</u> also sounded the alarm.

Since the hearing with legislators, the CEOs' failure to back up their promises with actions has allowed The Disinformation Dozen to post 105 pieces of disinformation generating up to 29 million impressions.

Covid-19 has taken more than 3 million lives worldwide and 570,000 in the United States, yet a small number of organized actors continue to profit by spreading disinformation about vaccines. These modern snake oil salesmen use social media to spread lies and persuade vulnerable people to pay them for false cures and malignant content and to turn them into disinformation carriers. According to our research, antivaccine activists on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter reach more than 59 million followers, being drip-fed disinformation daily.

By analyzing a sample of anti-vaccine content shared on Facebook and Twitter between 1 February and 16 March 2021, we found that 65% of all anti-vaccine content was attributable to a member of the Disinformation Dozen, who repeatedly violated Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter's stated community standards.

Facebook, Twitter and Google have time and again failed to enforce their own community standards, despite pleas by elected officials, health experts, and concerned advocates, putting public health at further risk. Further, their moderation practices remain unregulated and unchecked by elected bodies. Big Tech sets the rules – they are judge, jury, and jailor – with no democratic checks or balances.

We know the most effective way to disrupt the dissemination of harmful misinformation is to stop providing services to the most egregious repeat offenders. Each day the Disinformation Dozen's accounts remain active is another day that their lies cost lives. It's time to finish the job.

Imran Ahmed CEO, CCDH



#### **Foreword**

A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to work tirelessly to bring an end to this global health crisis. With vaccines now widely available to the public, hope is on the horizon. Unfortunately, standing in the way are a small group of individuals who are using social media platforms to mislead our patients, friends and family members with maliciously false information about COVID-19 and the safety and efficacy of the vaccines.

As medical professionals, our days are now filled with conversations between patients, families and colleagues discussing and debunking harmful lies and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccines, their safety and side effects.

It has become alarmingly clear that these anti-vaccine individuals and groups are taking advantage of the current situation, and in many cases, are proving successful in their attempts to capitalize on any hesitations or fears with disproven claims and false information. The longer social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter allow these dangerous lies to continue circulating, the more lives will be unnecessarily at risk.

We strongly urge these platforms to enforce their own policies on disinformation. We respectfully ask that all enforcement be prompt, consistent and fully transparent. By simply following through on the statements, rules and regulations these companies have announced, they can stem the tide of dangerous lies. Failure to do so will certainly prolong the pandemic and needlessly leave countless lives in the balance.

With a possible end to the pandemic in sight, it is time social media platforms do their part to stop the spread of disinformation. Enforcement of their policies will have a direct impact on the number of lives lost or saved as we continue fighting to bring the pandemic to a swift end.

Jennifer Nuzzo, DrPH, SM Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Céline Gounder, MD, ScM, FIDSA Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine and Infectious Diseases, New York University School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital

Atul Nakhasi, MD
Primary Care Physician and Co-Founder of #ThisIsOurShot

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#### **Executive Summary**

- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Google have announced policies to address Covid-19 and vaccine disinformation on their platforms to protect public health and safety; however, to-date, countless examples of anti-vaccine rhetoric remain, and platforms have failed to fully enforce their existing policies and unilaterally remove the top disseminators of disinformation.
- 2. According to our analysis, 65% of online anti-vaccine content is attributable to 12 anti-vaccine activists, the Disinformation Dozen, who play leading roles in spreading digital misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines. Despite numerous policy violations by these individuals, Facebook and Twitter have yet to take action against the majority of the Disinformation Dozen.
- 3. Members of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee presented this information to the CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google at a joint subcommittee hearing on 25 March 2021. They were pressed by members of Congress to review our report on the Disinformation Dozen and take action to enforce their existing policies.<sup>2</sup>
- 4. Since our previous report's release on 24 March, social media platform operators have taken some enforcement action, and a handful of the Disinformation Dozen members' accounts were removed from at least one platform. However, social media CEOs have not followed through with comprehensive action against the majority of the Disinformation Dozen. As of 25 April 2021, 10 of the 12 anti-vax leaders remain on Facebook and Twitter, and nine of 12 remain on Instagram.
- 5. We have been monitoring the online activities of the Disinformation Dozen in the month since the hearing, identifying 105 pieces of content that violate Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements.
- 6. This content generated up to 29 million potential impressions from the existing followers of Disinformation Dozen accounts, not including the reach of Facebook's private groups, hidden messages and other tactics being used by leading antivaxxers to continue to operate amid heightened scrutiny by our groups and others.
- 7. The failure by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to address the offenders of these clear policy violations, despite having the identities of these individuals handed to them by members of Congress on 25 March, is emblematic of platforms' inability to successfully regulate disinformation on a much larger scale highlighted in our reports:
  - a. Research conducted by CCDH last year has shown that platforms fail to act on 95 percent of the Covid and vaccine misinformation reported to them.
  - b. CCDH's recent report, Malgorithm, uncovered evidence that Instagram's algorithm actively recommends similar misinformation.
  - c. Tracking of 425 anti-vaccine accounts by CCDH shows that their total following across platforms now stood at 59.2 million in December, an increase of 877,000 more than they had in June.
  - d. CCDH's ongoing tracking shows that the 20 anti-vaxxers with the largest followings account for over two-thirds of this total cross-platform following of 59.2 million.
- 8. The most effective and efficient way to stop the dissemination of harmful information is to deplatform the most highly visible repeat offenders. This should also include the organizations these individuals control, as well as any backup accounts they have established to evade removal.



# The Disinformation Dozen hit up to 29m impressions while Big Tech failed to act

Our last report, <u>The Disinformation Dozen</u>, identified a dozen individuals responsible for up to 65 percent of anti-vaccine content circulating on social media platforms. It shows that by taking action on this tiny group of "superspreaders", platforms can make a significant impact on the spread of dangerous vaccine misinformation.

In total, 18 accounts operated by the Disinformation Dozen have been removed following the publication of the CCDH and Anti-Vax Watch's report last month.

- 1. Joseph Mercola
- 2. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
- 3. Ty and Charlene Bollinger
- 4. Sherri Tenpenny
- 5. Rizza Islam
- 6. Rashid Buttar
- 7. Erin Elizabeth
- 8. Sayer Ji
- 9. Kelly Brogan
- 10. Christiane Northrup
- 11. Ben Tapper
- 12. Kevin Jenkins

#### Members of Congress called for action on the Disinformation Dozen

On 25 March 2021, members of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee raised our findings to the CEOs of Facebook, Twitter and Google at a joint subcommittee hearing. They were pressed by members of Congress to review our report on the Disinformation Dozen and take action to enforce their existing policies.

Representative Mike Doyle raised our findings about the Disinformation Dozen and asked all three CEOs to "look at it today and get back to us tomorrow", prompting Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to respond "yes, we remove everything against our policy".<sup>3</sup> Representative McNerney stated that he was "concerned" by the CEOs' "unwillingness to commit to enforcing your own policies and remove the 12 most egregious spreaders of vaccine disinformation from your platforms".<sup>4</sup>

Separately, Representatives Eshoo and Guthrie challenged Jack Dorsey over a post from Robert F. Kennedy Jr. falsely linking the death of baseball player Hank Aaron to Covid vaccines.<sup>5</sup>

#### Platforms failed to act – exposing users to anti-vaccine content millions of times

From 25 March to 24 April, 2021, researchers captured the content from social media accounts associated with the Disinformation Dozen multiple times daily. Each piece of content and the content of any videos or links it contained were then analyzed for potential violations of the containing platform's policies related to Covid and vaccine misinformation. Potential violations were logged and received a further quality check before being selected for us in this report.



As the platforms themselves are opaque about the reach and impact of any post, we elected to represent the total potential impact using "potential impressions". We calculated this metric by taking each violating post and multiplying it by the number of followers of the posting account as of 24 April 2021.

This process revealed that the Disinformation Dozen have posted 105 pieces of content that violate platform service agreements in the month since members of Congress called on tech CEOs to deplatform them.

This content generated up to 29 million potential impressions from the existing followers of Disinformation Dozen accounts, not including the reach of Facebook's private groups, hidden messages and other tactics being used by leading anti-vaxxers to continue to operate amid heightened scrutiny by our groups and others.

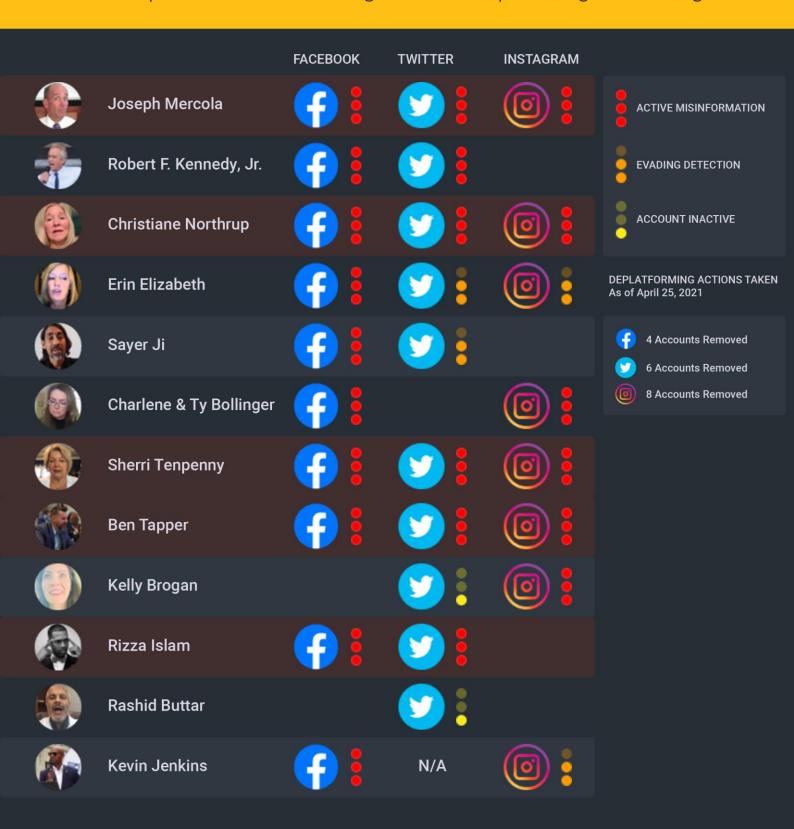
Despite repeatedly violating Facebook, Instagram and Twitter's terms of service agreements, half of the Disinformation Dozen remain on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Nine of the 12 remain on Facebook, 10 of the 12 remain on Twitter, and 9 of the 12 remain on Instagram, with no discernible consistency or transparency in how platforms treat violations.

The table below collates this information, marking members of the Disinformation Dozen according to whether they are actively using platforms to spread misinformation. Where an anti-vaxxer is actively posting misinformation on a platform, it is marked as "Active Misinformation".

Where members of the Disinformation Dozen have modified their behaviour to direct followers to backup accounts posting misinformation on other platforms such as Telegram, they are marked as "Evading Detection". Finally, cases where a member of the Disinformation Dozen has stopped using a platform are marked as "Account Inactive".

#### **POLICY ENFORCEMENT FAILURES**

"We enforce our policies" platform CEOs testified in front of Congress on March 25, 2021. In just one month since that testimony, the Disinformation Dozen has violated platform policies at a level that qualifies 22 of their remaining accounts for deplatforming under existing rules.



29.0 Million

The number of potential disinformation impressions generated by violating content from these accounts from March 25 - April 24, 2021



#### **Example Policy Violations**

Monitoring of the Disinformation Dozen since members of Congress called for them to be deplatformed on 25 March 2021 shows that they have all continued to use their social media accounts to spread misinformation. Key examples for each member of the Disinformation Dozen can be found below.

#### 1 Joseph Mercola

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Joseph Mercola is a successful anti-vaccine entrepreneur, peddling dietary supplements and false cures as alternatives to vaccines. Mercola's combined personal social media accounts have around 3.6 million followers.

The control of the co

We are now living in a world that is increasingly ruled, not by our democratic systems and institutions, but by public health flat, carried out by politicians who rule by instilling fear and panic.

In The Truth About COVID-19, Dr. Mercola and Cummins reveal new and emerging evidence that:



- PREORDER
  YOUR COPY NOW!
- (Visit the COVID-19 Information Center for vaccine resources.
   (S)
   (44)
   (4 Shares

- The SARS-CoV-2 virus was, indeed, lab-engineered and emerged from a negligently managed bioweapons lab in Wuhan, China
- The global pandemic was long anticipated by global elites who have used it to facilitate and hide the largest upward transfer of wealth in human history
- PCR testing, case counts, morbidity, and vaccine safety and efficacy data have been widely manipulated and misrepresented
- Obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are known to worsen COVID-19 outcomes, but the junk food industry continues to push its agenda at the expense of public health
- Safe, simple, and inexpensive treatment and prevention for COVID-19 have been censored and suppressed to create a clear path for vaccine acceptance
- Effectiveness of the vaccines has been wildly exaggerated and major safety questions have gone
  unanswered

Joseph Mercola is using his social media accounts to promote a forthcoming book that carries the conspiracy theory that Covid was "lab-engineered" in China and "anticipated by global elites".



#### 2 Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

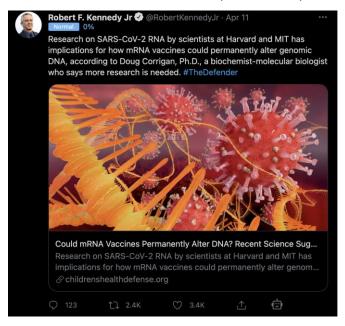
Facebook: Active Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed

Kennedy is a long-standing anti-vaxxer, and his Children's Health Defense (CHD) hosts a range of anti-vaccine articles.

Kennedy's account was banned from Instagram on 8 February, but his Facebook Page remains active, as does the CHD's Instagram page.

Kennedy and <u>Children's Health Defense released a film</u> in mid-March targeting members of the Black and Latino communities with tailored anti-vaccine messages. Facebook and Twitter continue to allow him a platform to promote these false claims.





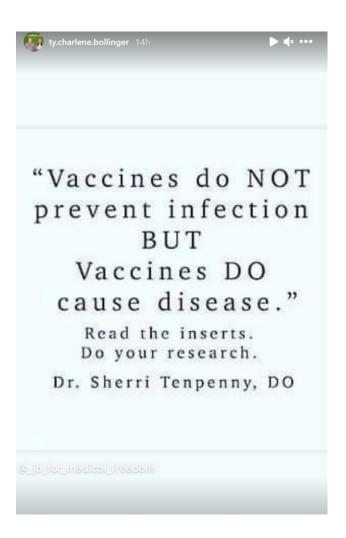


#### 3 Ty & Charlene Bollinger

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Removed
Instagram: Part Removed



Ty and Charlene Bollinger are anti-vax entrepreneurs who run a network of accounts that market books and DVDs about vaccines, cancer and COVID-19. In 2020 they launched the United Medical Freedom Super PAC ahead of last year's United States elections. Instagram has removed one of the Bollingers' Instagram accounts, but two are still active.





#### 4 Sherri Tenpenny

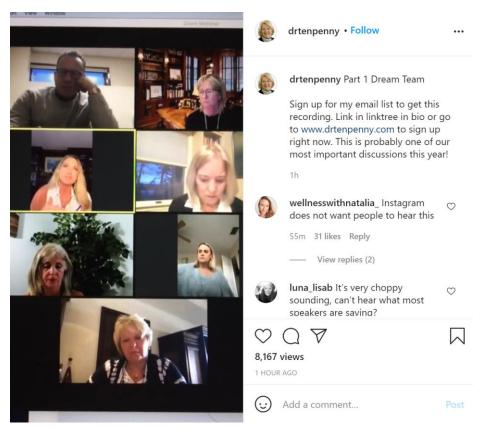
Facebook: Part Removed

Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed



Sherri Tenpenny is an osteopath physician who spreads anti-vaccine sentiment and false claims about the safety and efficacy of masks via her social media channels. While her main Facebook account has been removed, her Twitter and backup Instagram accounts are still intact.



"This is not a vaccine. A vaccine is supposed to protect us against a bacterial or viral infection. There is nothing in any of these shots that is designed to protect us against a virus infection." 11:11-11:26



#### 5 Rizza Islam

Facebook: Part Removed

Twitter: Active

Instagram: Part Removed



Rizza Islam's anti-vaccine posts aim to spread vaccine hesitancy amongst African Americans. Islam's main Facebook Page was removed in February, followed by his main Instagram account in March, but he continues to post anti-vaccine misinformation from his Twitter account as well as backup Facebook and Instagram accounts.





#### **6 Rashid Buttar**

Facebook: Removed Twitter: Active Instagram: Removed



Rashid Buttar is an osteopath physician and conspiracy theorist known for <u>videos</u> posted to his YouTube channel.



"This is no different than the regular flu, the numbers, even with them artificially inflating them, haven't changed anything." 10:10

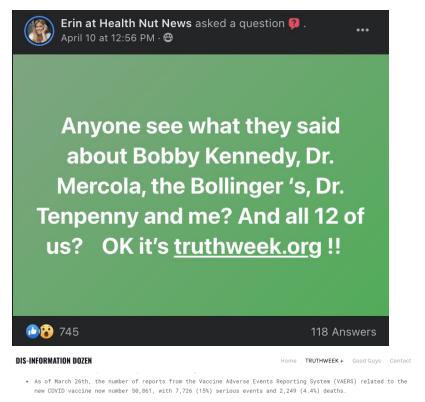


#### 7 Erin Elizabeth

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Erin Elizabeth, partner to Joseph Mercola, runs <u>Health Nut News</u>, a prominent 'alternative health' website with affiliated newsletter and social media accounts.



Erin Elizabeth has shared links to "truthweek.org" which misrepresents VAERS data to falsely link Covid vaccines to deaths.



#### 8 Sayer Ji

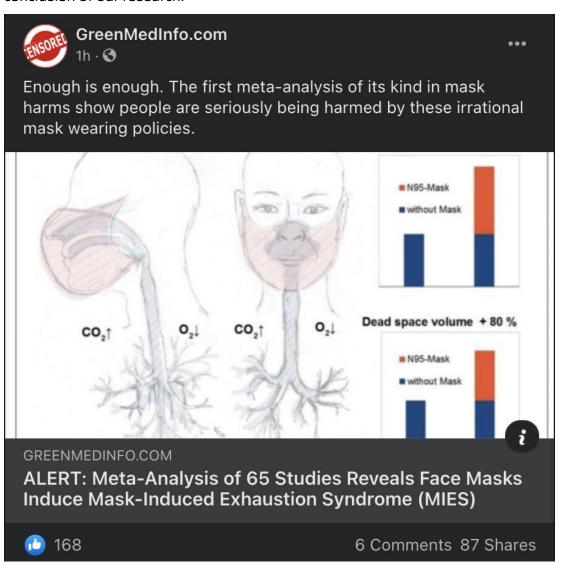
Facebook: Active

Twitter: Part Removed Instagram: Removed



Sayer Ji runs a popular alternative health website, <u>GreenMedInfo.com</u>, and affiliated social media accounts that promote pseudoscience and anti-vaccine misinformation. Despite his GreenMedInfo accounts being removed by Twitter and Instagram, it is still available on Facebook.

Sayer Ji's personal Instagram account was removed on 24 April 2021, coinciding with the conclusion of our research.



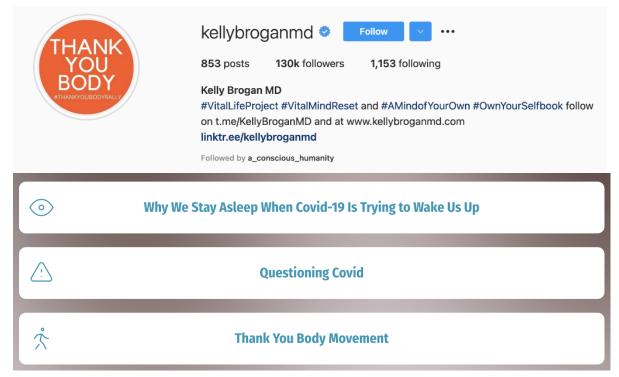


#### 9 Kelly Brogan

Facebook: Removed
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Kelly Brogan is the partner of fellow alternative health entrepreneur Sayer Ji. She claims to practice "holistic psychiatry" and sells a range of books and courses from her website.



 that doctors are being told to code all deaths as covid without so much as the facade of testing when up to 99% of case fatalities are in individuals with multiple pre-existing conditions, the vast majority of them elderly?

The link in Kelly Brogan's Instagram biography leads to misinformation about Covid and mask-wearing.



#### **10 Christiane Northrup**

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Christiane Northrup is an obstetrics and gynecology physician who has embraced alternative medicine and anti-vaccine conspiracies. She has used her social media accounts to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine.





## 11 Ben Tapper

Facebook: Active
Twitter: Active
Instagram: Active



Ben Tapper is a chiropractor with a growing following on social media. He has routinely posted COVID disinformation and <u>spoken out against masking</u>.

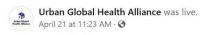




#### 12 Kevin Jenkins

Facebook: Active
Twitter: N/A
Instagram: Active

Kevin Jenkins is an anti-vaccine activist with a growing social media presence who has appeared at public events with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Jenkins has <u>called</u> vaccines a "conspiracy" to "wipe out" black people and is a <u>co-founder of the Freedom Airway & Freedom Travel Alliance</u>, a company founded in late 2020 to help its members travel around the world without observing any masking, quarantining, vaccination, or other pandemic control measures.



Updates & Highlights



**(1)** 28

12 Comments 3 Shares

"I just came from a supermarket in Tulsa; it was great to connect--I connected with so many people. it was just amazing to see so many Americans unmasked, seeking the truth, trying to find out the information that was important for their families and their communities. And I gotta tell you, it was very touching. But one of the things I got out of it, a lot of us as Americans, we're not talking about the same thing. they didn't know about the vaccine passport, they didn't really know about the dangers of this vaccine biologic that's being put in their bodies right now. They didn't know. So we have a lot of work to do." 1:08 - 1:42



## **Appendix: Policy Violations**

Screenshots of all 105 pieces of Disinformation Dozen content violating platform standards are available on our website at <a href="mailto:counterhate.com/ftadisinfodozen">counterhate.com/ftadisinfodozen</a>.



## Published 28 April 2021 © 2020 Center for Countering Digital Hate Ltd

<sup>1</sup> "The Disinformation Dozen", Center for Countering Digital Hate & Anti-Vax Watch, 24 March 2021, <a href="https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen">https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen</a>

CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375134082968006665">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375134082968006665</a>
 CCDH, Twitter, 25 March 2021, <a href="https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375147632797102082">https://twitter.com/CCDHate/status/1375159371978670092</a>
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