

Independent search engines respect your privacy but give more visibility to misinformation

13 August 2020



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Anti-vaccine websites, which could play a key role in promoting public hesitancy about a potential COVID vaccine, are far more likely to be found via independent search engines than through an internet giant like Google.

The study, led by researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS), showed that independent [search](#) engines returned between 3 and 16 anti-vaccine websites in the first 30 results, while Google.com returned none.

Lead author Professor Pietro Ghezzi, RM Phillips Chair in Experimental Medicine at BSMS, said the study raises concerns that people who are being exposed to these websites are often people who have turned to alternative search engines because they are worried about use of their personal data by the internet giants.

"Vaccine hesitancy was defined by the World Health Organisation as one of the top ten threats

to global health last year," said Professor Ghezzi. "Since then we've had the COVID crisis, a recent report showed that (50%) of people in the UK would not take a Coronavirus vaccine if it was available. This is frightening—and this study perhaps gives some indication as to why this is happening."

"There are two main messages here. One is to the Internet giants, who are becoming more responsible in terms of avoiding misinformation, but need to build trust with users regarding privacy because of their use of personal data; and the other is to the alternative search engines, who could be responsible for spreading misinformation on vaccines, unless they become better in their role as information gatekeepers. This suggests that quality of the information provided, not just privacy, should be regulated."

The study, involving researchers in the UK, Belgium, Italy and Spain, has analyzed 840 websites returned by 28 search engines in four languages, and compared the ranking of anti-vaccine websites.

The study also found that some localized version of Google (English-UK, Italian and Spanish) also return more anti-vaccine websites than the main, US English, Google.com.

More information: Pietro Ghezzi et al, Online Information of Vaccines: Information Quality, Not Only Privacy, Is an Ethical Responsibility of Search Engines, *Frontiers in Medicine* (2020). DOI: [10.3389/fmed.2020.00400](https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2020.00400)

Provided by University of Sussex

APA citation: Independent search engines respect your privacy but give more visibility to misinformation (2020, August 13) retrieved 12 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-independent-respect-privacy-visibility-misinformation.html>

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