How the ‘Plandemic’ Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online

Conspiracy theories about the pandemic have gained more traction than mainstream online events. Here’s how.

By Sheera Frenkel, Ben Decker and Davey Alba

There have been plenty of jaw-dropping digital moments during the coronavirus pandemic.

There was the time this month when Taylor Swift announced she would air her “City of Lover” concert on television. The time that the cast of “The Office” reunited for an 18-minute-long Zoom wedding. And the time last month that the Pentagon posted three videos that showed unexplained “aerial phenomena.”

Yet none of those went as viral as a 26-minute video called “Plandemic,” a slickly produced narration that wrongly claimed a shadowy cabal of elites was using the virus and a potential vaccine to profit and gain power. The video featured a discredited scientist, Judy Mikovits, who said her research about the harm from vaccines had been buried.

“Plandemic” went online on May 4 when its maker, Mikki Willis, a little-known film producer, posted it to Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo and a separate website set up to share the video. For three days, it gathered steam in Facebook pages dedicated to conspiracy theories and the anti-
vaccine movement, most of which linked to the video hosted on YouTube. Then it tipped into the mainstream and exploded.

Just over a week after “Plandemic” was released, it had been viewed more than eight million times on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and had generated countless other posts.

The New York Times focused on the video’s spread on Facebook using data from CrowdTangle, a tool to analyze interactions across the social network. (YouTube and Twitter do not make their data as readily available.) The ascent of “Plandemic” was largely powered by Facebook groups and pages that shared the YouTube link.

On Facebook, “Plandemic” was liked, commented on or shared nearly 2.5 million times, according to the CrowdTangle data. That far outdid Ms. Swift’s May 8 announcement about her “City of Lover” concert, which plateaued at about 110,000 such interactions on Facebook. “The Office” cast’s Zoom wedding video, which was posted on May 10, reached 618,000 interactions in less than a week. And the Pentagon’s videos, which were posted on April 27, had one million interactions two weeks after the first post.

“Plandemic” stormed into people’s Facebook, Twitter and YouTube feeds even though its claims were widely debunked and the social media companies vowed to remove the video. Yet it has continued spreading online, raising questions about how it might damage trust in the medical community and color people’s views on a coronavirus vaccine.

Mr. Willis, who has said he plans to release a second video, did not respond to a request for comment.

Here’s how “Plandemic” went from a niche conspiracy video to a mainstream phenomenon.
Some “Plandemic” clips have been taken down by Facebook, and these images may not necessarily reflect how the posts appeared on the social network when they first went up.

On the morning of May 5, less than 24 hours after Mr. Willis posted “Plandemic,” a Facebook group dedicated to QAnon, a right-wing conspiracy group, posted “Plandemic” to its nearly 25,000 members with the headline “Exclusive Content, Must Watch.”

Within days, more than 1,660 people had shared the video to their own Facebook pages after watching it on the QAnon page, according to CrowdTangle. The video went from being viewed directly on YouTube to people linking out to the video on Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels, fueling its rise.
“Plandemic” posts per day on Facebook, by type of post

The live video category includes posts with completed and scheduled live videos. Posts are counted from the first one that contained the video through May 15 on public groups and pages on Facebook. Source: CrowdTangle By The New York Times
A Doctor’s Endorsement

On the afternoon of May 5, Dr. Christiane Northrup, a women’s health physician, shared “Plandemic” with her nearly half a million Facebook followers. Dr. Northrup, who had developed a following from her appearances as a medical expert on “Oprah,” had previously expressed misgivings about vaccines.

Her status as a celebrity doctor made her endorsement of “Plandemic” powerful. After Dr. Northrup shared the video, more than 1,000 people also shared it, many of them to groups that oppose mandatory vaccinations, according to an analysis by The Times. She did not respond to a request for comment.
Reopen America’s Move

By the evening of May 5, “Plandemic” had popped up on a large-scale political page on Facebook.

The page was for Reopen Alabama, which has over 36,000 members and was part of the movement by Americans who wanted to lift shelter-in-place orders. Once the video appeared on that page, which was linked to dozens of other Reopen America groups, it quickly began spreading to the pages of those other groups in a kind of forceful multiplier effect.

The Facebook user who posted “Plandemic” to the Reopen Alabama page did not respond to a request for comment.
The M.M.A. Fighter

That same night, Nick Catone, a professional mixed martial arts fighter, also shared “Plandemic” on his Facebook page. Mr. Catone, 38, with nearly 70,000 followers on Facebook, has been an anti-vaccine activist since the death of his nearly 2-year-old son in 2017. Mr. Catone, who did not respond to a request for comment, has publicly blamed vaccines for his son’s death.

More than 2,000 people quickly liked Mr. Catone’s post about “Plandemic,” which he exhorted people to watch before it was taken down. His post was one of the first by a public figure who had no special medical expertise.
Two days after “Plandemic” went online, it came to the attention of Melissa Ackison, who lost in the Republican primary for Ohio’s 26th District Senate seat last month.

On May 6, Ms. Ackison, 41, an anti-Obamacare campaigner, posted the video and told her 20,000 followers on Facebook, “If you watch ANYTHING on my page, it needs to be this.”

Her post spread the video to a broader political audience, which then shared it among conservative groups and other Republican campaign pages.

“I knew when I shared that video that people would watch,” Ms. Ackison said. “People know me as a person who is skeptical of what the mainstream media narrative is telling them.”
Mainstream Media’s Tipping Point

BuzzFeed wrote [an article](https://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/plandemic-video-exploded-online-falsehoods) on May 7 about “Plandemic” and its falsehoods, in one of the first signs that the mainstream news media had noticed the video. The article was shared on 63 Facebook pages, including the page of [Occupy Democrats](https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats), a popular left-wing group, according to The Times’s analysis.

“‘Plandemic’ is a part of a larger narrative of conspiracy theories and disinformation reporters have been highlighting since the pandemic began,” Jane Lytvynenko, who reported on the video for BuzzFeed, said in an email. “Its popularity shows how vital it is to keep reporting on false and misleading information and take online events as seriously as offline ones.”

After BuzzFeed published its piece, the tenor of comments and shares around “Plandemic” shifted. More people began to fact-check and debunk the video.

That same day, YouTube and Facebook removed “Plandemic” for violating their misinformation policies. By then, the video was fully in the mainstream.

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