Mapping Connections in Online Communities of AIDS Denialists

Studying webs of Russians who espouse such anti-science views about HIV may help prevent them from spreading harmful ideas.

August 3, 2017

A team of researchers has diagrammed the structure of connections within online communities of Russian AIDS denialists—those who adhere to anti-science views about HIV. Such analyses of the connections between these individuals may help scientists develop means of combating their ability to spread harmful messages to susceptible individuals.

Publishing their findings in American Behavioral Scientist, the study authors analyzed the behavior of and interactions between the 15,000 members of the most popular Russian AIDS-denialist community on the social networking site VK.com.

“Our earlier studies reveal some of the reasons why such online communities are so popular, including a perceived inconsistency between real-life stories and popular stereotypes about HIV, mere curiosity, doubting the accuracy of [HIV] test results, wishing to convince other community members that they are wrong or, conversely, support them in their search for truth,” Peter Meylakhs, PhD, senior research fellow of the International Centre for Health Economics, Management and Policy at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, said in a press release.

The investigators divided the members of this community into four categories: the convinced, who subscribed fully to AIDS denialism; those who had doubts about standard scientific views about HIV; the orthodox, who supported medical science on the issue; and those whose perspective on the matter was undetermined.

The study authors found that the more active a user was—posting more comments and getting more online “likes”—the more likely that he or she was a denialist. The core group of such heavy users consisted of 276 people who promoted denialist views, sharing them with one another in an echo chamber effect. These individuals, mostly men, maintained ties with at least one other convinced user and often made contact with less active users as well.

An additional 1,369 users were at risk of becoming denialists, according to the researchers, including all those who had doubts about such a mindset.

“People share allegedly personal stories about how they have had no symptoms for years, and this produces a serious effect,” Yuri Rykov, of the HSE Laboratory for Internet Studies, said in the same press release. “This effect must be due to what is called social infection, where people tend to be influenced not by information per se but by information backed by personal contact and thus trusted more; therefore, the high-risk group are not all those who join the online community but those who begin to interact directly with its more convinced members.”

The study authors believe that further research into how individuals in such online communities interact can help identify and intervene with users at risk of adopting harmful mindsets about HIV that might, for example, dissuade them from seeking treatment for the virus.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the study abstract, click here.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/mapping-connections-online-communities-aids-denialists