

POLITICS

Young Vietnamese Americans Say Their Parents Are Falling Prey To Conspiracy Videos

Doubt around vaccines and conspiracy theories have left young Vietnamese Americans scared for their parents' safety. They're begging social media companies to pay attention.

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Young Vietnamese Americans are desperately trying to counter social media algorithms and far-right YouTube personalities that have pulled their families into conspiracy theories, strained relationships, and caused paranoia about the safety of vaccinations.

"If you spoke to any young Vietnamese American now, they'll probably talk about how horrified they are about what their parents are watching," said Anh Thu Bui, a board member of the Progressive Vietnamese American Organization (PIVOT), a group of progressive organizers who launched Viet Fact Check, a volunteer-led project to fact-check misinformation.

The YouTube channels have become ubiquitous in some Vietnamese homes. They have spread a range of conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic and vaccinations, including lies that people who wear masks are more likely to contract the disease, that the COVID-19 death toll has been exaggerated, and that more people have died from receiving the vaccine than from COVID-19.

They've also capitalized on the country's political divide and spread misinformation about last summer's Black Lives Matter protests and the 2020 election.

YouTube removed some of these videos when BuzzFeed News reached out for comment. Elena Hernandez, a YouTube spokesperson, said the company's approach to addressing misinformation applies "across all languages." According to YouTube, Vietnam frequently appears within the top 10 countries for videos removed, but the company did not provide data for Vietnamese-language content in other countries.

Organizers and family members who spoke to BuzzFeed News cited language barriers and the vacuum of credible news channels that broadcast in Vietnamese and English as the key factors for

the widespread issue. Because of the vacuum, they said, many people turn to YouTube channels and Facebook livestreams that post daily content in Vietnamese that feels familiar and reliable but often contains misinformation.

“They see YouTube and Facebook as a big brand, so if it’s on YouTube, it must be OK,” Diep Tran, the managing editor of Viet Fact Check, told BuzzFeed News.

The group recently surveyed where community members were getting information, and the sources cited included an array of YouTube channels and outlets like the Epoch Times.

The survey’s top source was Nguy Vũ, a Vietnamese refugee, author, and longtime radio host known as The KingRadio. He’s based at Eden Center, a hub for Vietnamese culture and business near DC, where he’s hosted hundreds of his unmasked subscribers for rallies.

The KingRadio has been in the US for almost 30 years and has become one of the community’s most influential YouTubers, with nearly 96,000 subscribers. He started making YouTube videos to supplement his radio show for fun and has since cultivated a community, he told BuzzFeed News.

“The people listen to me night and day... I make them sob. I make them laugh. I share with them,” he said. “My community, you know, it’s not Virginia. My community is worldwide. The people from my country, they still listen to me.”

When asked about the claims he makes about COVID-19 in his videos, The KingRadio told BuzzFeed News: “The media for my people, for my community, is different from your media.”

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Political organizers who spoke with BuzzFeed News said they’ve heard from concerned family members who say these YouTube videos play all day in their homes and that the channels put their audiences in danger.

Bui recalled a recent online town hall where questions about the vaccine were filled with misinformation pulled from YouTube, including concerns about vaccines containing government tracking devices.

While groups like PIVOT have launched efforts to address the misinformation, many young Vietnamese Americans told BuzzFeed News that they’ve faced language barriers and pushback when they criticize misinformation online. The problem has left many increasingly worried about their parents’ safety.

Calvin Truong, a 15-year-old from California, has hidden his older sister's vaccination from their dad, who believes the vaccine is deadly and regularly threatens to "flee to Texas" if the state makes vaccines mandatory. In Connecticut, Peter Lai's parents also won't get vaccinated, pointing to YouTube videos that falsely told them that COVID-19 can be cured with vitamins and oranges.

In Southern California, Michelle Pham, a 22-year-old nursing student, is worried about her 54-year-old mom who has sworn off the vaccine ever since The KingRadio incorrectly told her it contains aborted fetus cells.

"She thinks the vaccine won't work on anyone who's not a caucasian male, because the videos said they only used cells from male fetuses for testing," Pham explained, frustrated she's been unable to convince her mom otherwise.

Her mom was introduced to the channels when YouTube's algorithm placed them in her suggested video list after the two started watching clips from the popular Vietnamese musical variety show Paris by Night.

"She'll watch a couple videos, and then she'll call one of her friends to talk about it before she goes to bed," Pham said. Pham almost convinced her mom, who previously worked in the healthcare industry, to get vaccinated, but her friends talked her out of scheduling an appointment.

Cookie Duong, a 23-year-old TikTok creator and cofounder of the Interpreter, an initiative that works to translate news articles from reputable media outlets into Vietnamese, said she's received thousands of comments from young people who relate to her TikToks about struggling to pull her own family away from YouTube. "They say these YouTube channels are on in their houses 24/7, even during dinner," Duong said.

The channels have a substantial following of older Vietnamese people who lean conservative and have limited English proficiency. Vietnamese Americans were the only group of Asian Americans who showed a preference for Donald Trump over Joe Biden in a survey conducted by AAPI Data before the 2020 election.

Organizers say the YouTubers have capitalized on issues they know will strike a chord among conservatives in the community, like comparing the Democratic Party to communists and asserting that the party is tied to the Chinese government. Duong explained that for many Vietnamese Americans who immigrated to the United States, this hostility for China dates back to the American war in Vietnam.

She added that she's seen photoshopped images of Secretary of State Antony Blinken bowing to Chinese government officials spread in Vietnamese Facebook groups to "make the Democrats look subservient to China."

These fears about communism and overthrowing the government have become weaponized, Dede Tran said, remembering how she read Facebook posts from Vietnamese people who attended the insurrection at the US Capitol in January, saying they didn't want the US to "fall into communism."

The YouTube channels have also capitalized on hate crimes against Asian Americans to push anti-Black rhetoric. Henry Nguyen, a 33-year-old from Hawthorne, California, who lives with his parents, has convinced them to get the vaccine, but now he's aiming to get them to step away from the anti-Black views the YouTube channels are feeding them.

Nguyen said his dad has been afraid to leave their house due to anti-Asian attacks since the start of the pandemic and that his dad's friend chose not to report that he'd been beaten up in San Jose because he feared "retaliation" from the Black and Latinx people who his friends blame for the attacks. Nguyen said that fear has been constantly reaffirmed on Vietnamese YouTube channels.

Truong said his father had also repeated conspiracy theories from YouTube channels about looting and rioting during the Black Lives Matter protests last summer.

The fears have also hindered efforts to stop misinformation. Organizers with Viet Fact Check said their efforts to launch a physical newspaper and distribute flyers have been difficult because businesses fear they'll be boycotted or called communists.

Duong has faced similar issues both in social media groups through her work with the Interpreter and at home with her parents. Online, she gets called a communist by people who believe the Interpreter is backed by "foreign organizations" attempting to "destroy" the country. At home, she's told that she's been "brainwashed" by her school.

Organizers who've tried to combat the fake news say they understand why it's happening, but they blame the social media companies for ignoring repeated reports and complaints about the content of the videos and threats they've received from creators who they've called out.

Mẹ Năm, a human rights activist and Vietnamese blogger known as Mother Mushroom, who was granted asylum in the US in 2018 after she was jailed in Vietnam for speaking out against the Vietnamese government, has been targeted by far-right Vietnamese YouTubers for questioning their videos.

The backlash began after she wrote a Facebook post critiquing former president Donald Trump's promotion of malaria medication to treat COVID-19. The YouTubers sprang to action, calling Nấm an "undercover communist" set out to undermine Trump and America and launched a petition, signed by thousands, to get her deported from the US.

The KingRadio also directed his fans to "smash out her teeth and attack her relatives" after she posted a vlog questioning his business practices in January.