



Royal Institution: Counter Pseudoscience Project

Costed Project Outline: Two-phase social media project comprising of multi-strand research and media campaign

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Background:

Valent Projects is a digital communications company that focuses on social impact. Based in West London, the company has conducted extensive research and implementation work in the area of Disinformation and malign influence in the UK and abroad, including:

- Researching the [spread of 5G conspiracy theories](#) for submission to a parliamentary inquiry
- Investigating the [use of Disinformation in the 2019 UK general election campaign](#)
- Investigating Disinformation and supporting newly democratising governments deal with the phenomenon (for USAID)

Overview:

Valent Projects is proposing a two-phase project designed to curb the influence of pseudoscience material online, with specific emphasis on Coronavirus-related ‘anti-vaxxing’ sentiment. The project ultimately seeks to develop an understanding of the psychological drivers behind the generation and spread of anti-vaxxer narratives, which will also be relevant to broader pseudoscience narratives, and use this understanding to develop and test public messaging responses. The findings from this project can be used to inform other programming by Challenging Pseudoscience at the Ri as well as other stakeholders including the science community and concerned governments and public health bodies.

The first phase of the project will comprise research - both online and ethnographic. The second phase will focus on using the insight provided by the research to design an intervention in collaboration with YouTuber Abigail Thorn who runs the highly popular channel Philosophy Tube.

The online data and ethnographic research components are envisaged to complement each other. The online research allows the project to identify target audience(s) through their online engagement with the topic and then examine their demographic profiles. The ethnographic component of the research then conducts a deep-dive investigation that allows us to understand the psycho-social underpinnings of the audience’s views.

Along with Valent Projects, the partners collaborating on this project are:

- TellTale Research - Ethnographic research
- Abigail Thorn - YouTuber
- Challenging Pseudoscience at the Ri
- A number of online research software companies will also be engaged including Graphika, Newswhip and Murmurate



Project Approach:

Phase 1:

- The online data research will help us understand the dynamics of narrative formulation and information sharing; and, crucially, demographic information about UK-based audiences engaged in this activity
- The ethnographic research will use insights from the online research to select a real-world research sample for deep-dive examinations into the psycho-social drivers behind individuals' online activity
- Comprehensive insights into:
 - The online ecosystem driving anti-vaxxing sentiment around the Coronavirus crisis
 - Detailed demographic information on key audience groups driving related narratives online
 - Deep understanding of the psycho-social drivers behind the key audience groups' actions
- A key output from the research phase will be audience profiles that identify the underlying causes at play in the popularisation of anti-vaxxing beliefs and provide evidence-based insights that can be used to design an intervention strategy
- The combination of insights from online as well as ethnographic research also provides extensive contextual understanding that can be used to develop a robust theory of change for Phase 2.

Phase 2:

During the second phase, the project will leverage the insights from the research to:

- Identify key audiences (superspreaders) contributing to the spread of anti vaxxer narratives in the UK
- Understand the psychological drivers behind the actions of those superspreaders
- Create content that is psychologically attuned to key audiences psychological drivers
- Deliver content through channels and mediums that is most accessible and credible to those key audiences
- Monitor audience reactions in order to refine delivery and evaluate performance

Methodology:

Phase 1:

Online Data Research

- Research will begin with data analysis conducted using high-end data analysis tool Graphika
- This dataset will be used to identify likely inauthentic accounts disseminating Coronavirus information and the most common hashtags, topics, news sources, and Facebook posts/pages (so as to obtain a sample of Tweets most likely to contain Mis/Disinformation)
- Qualitative analysis of the extracted information will be used to determine the content of Mis/Disinformation campaigns, wider Coronavirus-related Misinformation narratives, and relative prevalence of inauthentic versus organic activity



- The information gathered will be used to identify Coronavirus Mis/Disinformation activity on Facebook and examine the audience(s) driving the debate. The analysis will look at gender and age distribution, location, other interests and influencers, among other factors

Ethnographic Research:

- TellTale research will conduct ethnographic research. This will involve interviewing individual members of the audience groups identified by the previous round of demographic research. This allows for a deeper understanding of the most prolific producers, consumers, sharers of anti-vaxxing pseudoscience.
- Topics explored through ethnographic research include:
 - How do people come to believe in anti-vaxxing?
 - Sources of information
 - How are sources found
 - Why do people believe in anti-vaxxing theories?
 - What role do anti-vaxxing theories play in their lives?
 - How does belief in anti-vaxxing theories affect them emotionally?
 - Does belief in anti-vaxxing theories cause a positive or negative impact on individuals' lives?
 - What psychological gap does anti-vaxxing adherence fill?
 - What is the logical argument individuals use to justify anti-vaxxing belief?
 - Views towards experts with opposing views?
 - What psychological impact do the views of experts with opposing views have on anti-vaxxing adherents?
 - What do opposing experts represent to anti-vaxxing adherents?
 - What motives do they ascribe to experts representing opposing views?
 - Mechanisms used to make anti-vaxxing views credible
 - Language
 - Semiotics
 - Images
 - Sharing anti-vaxxing material
 - What are the benefits of sharing as experienced by adherents
 - Why do adherents feel it is important to share?

Ethnographic Research Delivery:

- TellTale will conduct:
 - Community discussion with 10 participants
 - 10 Skype conversations
 - 5 filmed ethnographic interviews (as circumstances and budgets allow)
- TellTale will deliver:
 - Analysis of interviews
 - Summary report showing findings (in the form of PowerPoint slides)



- 1 video product showing the report’s main findings

- Coordination:

- 1 session with Valent Projects and Abigail Thorn to incorporate online research
- 1-2 collaborative sessions with Valent Projects, Abigail Thorn (and other project stakeholders) to input on intervention design
- 0-3 presentations to the Royal Institution pseudoscience board. (likely through online means)

Phase 2:

Phase 2 is the strategy formulation stage. The specific objectives and methodologies will be developed from the research undertaken during Phase 1. As such, this document does not outline predetermined steps since these will be decided once research findings have been analysed.

The methodology proposed here is not without precedent. Included here is [an article by a former Amnesty head of communications](#) discussing the potential to understand and address psychological vulnerabilities where others have attempted to exploit them.

The findings will be used to devise a campaign that utilises YouTuber Abigail Thorn’s existing platform to achieve a measurable cognitive shift in the target audience. This will be achieved by incorporating a defined thought-driven action as the outcome of the approach (e.g. changing viewing/sharing habits, signing up for an event etc)

Viewers on Thorn’s channel, Philosophy Tube, are mostly between 18 and 35. As the existing research suggests, the most prolific consumers of pseudoscience material are 45 plus. It is most likely that the best topic to address this issue is probably along the lines of “the thing about expertise”. As previously mentioned, research insights will help decided narrative approach as well as other campaign criteria such as number of campaign products, online and/or real-world promotion and branding (whether it is a Royal Institution or solely an Oliver Thorn production).

Timelines:

Timescale	Activity	Implementer
1st Week	Desk Based Research - Identification of information sources	Valent Projects
2nd and 3rd Week	Data Collection - Data gathering from information sources	Valent Projects
4th Week	Data Extraction and Processing	Valent Projects



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5th Week	Reporting - Producing information and analysis in report form	Valent Projects
6th Week	Findings presentation and	Valent Projects and Telltale
7th Week	Conducting Digital ethnography and Skype interviews	TellTale Research
8th Week	Analysis & preparation of ethnographic interviews	TellTale Research
9th Week	Conducting ethnographic interviews	TellTale Research
10th Week	Ethnographic data analysis & editing	TellTale Research
11th Week	Intervention planning	Valent, Projects TellTale and Abigail Thorn
12th Week	Video production and promotion	Abigail Thorn and Valent Projects
13th Week	Video editing and promotion	Abigail Thorn, Valent Projects
14th Week and onwards	Video release and associated publicity	Abigail Thorn and Valent Projects
15th Week	Evaluation	Abigail Thorn, Valent Projects



Deliverables:

Phase 1

- Online Data Research: A findings and analysis report that presents a comprehensive understanding of the key online audiences driving anti-vaxxing Mis/Disinformation around the Coronavirus pandemic. Audience profiles including demographic information is the preferred format.
- Ethnographic Research:
 - Analysis of interviews
 - Summary report showing findings (in the form of PowerPoint slides)
 - 1 video product showing the report's main findings
- Final Analysis: Valent Projects will draw together insights from the two research components to develop comprehensive audience profiles that will be used to develop the Phase 2 intervention.

Phase 2:

The exact nature of Phase 2 will be determined by the findings derived from research carried out in Phase 1. However, a number of project characteristics and objective have already been determined due to the nature of the project being designed and the partners involved:

- Mass appeal social media campaign fronted and owned by prominent social media figure Abigail Thorn
- Social media campaign includes call to action that allows for evaluation of project impact
- Data-based project findings will be captured and used to provide evidence-based models that can be used by a broad collection of stakeholders