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Opinion | Anti-vaccine extremism is akin to domestic terrorism

By Richard Pan February 28, 2021 at 10:00 a.m. EST

5-6 minutes

Richard Pan is a pediatrician and California state senator. He is the honorary co-chair of ReadytoVaccinate.org.

Vaccines don't stop viruses. Vaccinations do. This common public health saying means a vaccine does no good if we can't get it into people's arms.

Insufficient supplies, natural disasters and bureaucratic mistakes have slowed efforts, but the overall goal of vaccinating a large majority of the U.S. population may ultimately be hampered by the anti-vaccine movement unless steps are taken to limit its impact.

Otherwise, America may witness more scenes like the one in Los Angeles on Jan. 30, when a mob of anti-vaccine protesters [stormed](#) Dodger Stadium, one of the nation's largest vaccination centers.

These extremists succeeded in temporarily shutting down the site, delaying patients, many of them elderly, from getting their shots. The anti-vaccine activists have told the Los Angeles Times that they [intend](#) to keep disrupting vaccination efforts.



This Video is Being Viewed in Another Window

The Food and Drug Administration authorized Johnson & Johnson's coronavirus vaccine for emergency use for people 18 and older on Feb. 28. (Video: Reuters)

This campaign to deny potentially lifesaving vaccines to those seeking them, and to poison public opinion against vaccinations, could result in countless American deaths. That is akin to domestic

terrorism.

Public health officials, police and fire departments must join hands with a common goal of securing vaccination sites for patients. But, like the virus itself, anti-vaccine extremists are crafty at finding new ways to threaten people. Disruptions are possible anywhere vaccinations are being administered, at sites large and small — even at pharmacies, just as anti-maskers have [harassed](#) employees and customers at stores.

Laws need to be strengthened to deter such actions. We can still honor the First Amendment and make sure people have access to vaccinations. Laws have been in place for years creating buffer zones to distance protesters from abortion clinics — legislation that has withstood plenty of court [challenges](#). Los Angeles is [planning](#) such a zone for Dodger Stadium.

Surely similar laws can be enacted to discourage harassment of those seeking protection from a deadly virus.

A major weapon of anti-vaccine extremists is the ability to organize disinformation campaigns on

[Facebook](#) and other social media. Corporate owners of these platforms can moderate and [close down](#) groups that promote disinformation and endanger lives. Why don't these companies treat anti-vaccine activists the same way?

A troubling thought is that both the social media companies and the extremists have a financial interest in continuing as before. Coordinated attacks on the truth by anti-vaccine propagandists are the best advertising for the [alternative remedies](#) and magical supplements that many anti-vaccine leaders [sell](#) to their followers.

In other words, some anti-vaccine leaders' financial well-being depends on endangering everyone else's health and safety. Social media companies should not be complicit in this dangerous movement.

I don't underestimate the backlash from anti-vaccine protesters that awaits anyone who tries to rein in their poisonous efforts. When [measles](#) hit Disneyland in 2015 — one sad result of a sustained, misinformation campaign against the measles vaccine — I wrote a California law that abolished nonmedical exemptions for vaccinations required for

school enrollment. We needed to restore community immunity to measles, and that was the best way to achieve it. Because I sponsored the bill, I was attacked — and continue to be harassed — by these anti-science extremists. In 2019, one of them [physically attacked](#) me on the street in Sacramento, proudly live-streaming it to his 4,500 Facebook followers.

Taking concerted steps to counter the [coronavirus](#) anti-vaccine movement has already resulted in [violent threats](#) being hurled at me and my legislative colleagues as recently as [Thursday](#). Last month, an anti-vaccine extremist [shouted](#) from the Senate gallery, “We didn’t buy guns for nothing.” But that should not deter anyone who’s interested in fighting the pandemic from championing evidence-based policies.

Beyond legislation, government must better educate people about how vaccines benefit the entire community. We should fully fund local health departments, [protect](#) public health officials, and rely on those officials — not politicians — to lead in times of health crisis. There’s no room for

partisanship in a pandemic that has killed more than a half-million Americans.

The country's founding motto, "E pluribus unum," or, "Out of many, one," defines our sacred civic duty to love others as much as ourselves. As Pope Francis has said of the coronavirus [vaccines](#), "It is the moral choice because it is about your life but also the lives of others." Getting vaccinated is a patriotic act. So is speaking up to support public health efforts. Let's not allow extremism, division or fear to slow the efforts to end this deadly chapter in our nation's history.

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