

From ‘Data Dumping’ to ‘Webbing’: How Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Sells Misleading Ideas

The candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination uses logical leaps and rhetorical devices to create false or misleading messages.



By **Stuart A. Thompson**

Stuart Thompson listened to dozens of hours of interviews featuring Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and searched through nearly 200 podcast transcripts to report this article.

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When Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the anti-vaccine activist running a long-shot campaign for president, tried to warn about vaccine risks during a podcast interview in the early days of the pandemic, he used a rhetorical device known as data dumping that is commonly used by conspiracy theorists.

In a dizzying three-minute monologue, he offered a litany of acronyms, numbers and obscure methodologies to falsely conclude that vaccine injuries were remarkably common.

Mr. Kennedy often communicates with such flourishes, giving his misleading claims an air of authority, according to experts who study disinformation and language. That has helped him share his misleading views on vaccines, 5G cellular technology and global farming.

The New York Times analyzed dozens of hours of interviews, including nearly 200 podcast transcripts collected by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, to uncover the rhetorical tricks Mr. Kennedy has often relied upon. Although his campaign has been fading in recent weeks, and he doesn’t appear to pose a threat to President Biden, the findings show how a high-profile figure can spread false and misleading ideas at a large scale.

Mr. Kennedy’s campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

Here are some of the rhetorical devices used by Mr. Kennedy that researchers helped identify:

‘Data Dumping’

In a podcast interview with “The Highwire With Del Bigtree” in the first summer of the pandemic, Mr. Kennedy argued that vaccine injury rates were far higher than officials suggested.

Mr. Kennedy’s data-dumping anecdote about vaccine risks appeared well researched. However, it relied on a misleading interpretation of a 2010 study, according to Michael Klompas, a doctor involved in the research.



How Mr. Kennedy uses “data dumping”

From “The Highwire With Del Bigtree,” July 30, 2020

“The C.D.C.’s official position is that one in a million² people get injured³ by vaccines.

“And yet, when H.H.S.⁴ actually looked at that issue in 2010⁵, they went out and they did machine counting⁶, they — one of their own agencies, the Agency for Health Care Research⁷, went and looked at one of the big H.M.O.s, the Harvard Pilgrim H.M.O.⁸, and they said, ‘We’re going to actually find out what the real rate of vaccine injury⁹ is.’

“And what they came back with — they did a cluster analysis¹⁰, so they did, you know, artificial intelligence¹¹, a very accurate machine

- 1 The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 2 The C.D.C. provides no such estimate.
- 3 Mr. Kennedy does not define “injured,” but adverse events can include sore arms, fatigue or injuries unrelated to vaccines.
- 4 The Department of Health and Human Services.
- 5 A follow-up study from 2015 found results less favorable to Mr. Kennedy’s argument.
- 6 It is not clear what Mr. Kennedy means by “machine counting” and the study makes no mention of the technique.
- 7 The Agency for Health Care Research and Quality is a group within H.H.S.
- 8 The study did not use data from Harvard Pilgrim H.M.O.
- 9 Mr. Kennedy does not define “vaccine injury” and that was not the goal of the study.

counting¹² analysis of what the rate, the true rate of vaccine injury¹³. And the number they came back with was 2.6 percent¹⁴.”

- 10 The study did not use “cluster analysis,” a method for finding naturally occurring groups in a data set.
- 11 The study did not use “artificial intelligence.”
- 12 Mr. Kennedy again uses the technical jargon “machine counting.”
- 13 The study sought to increase reporting of possible adverse reactions, not the rate of vaccine injury.
- 14 The final rate included all adverse events, not just injuries. A subsequent study found that only 0.03 percent of reported events were potentially related to vaccines.

Dr. Klompas said researchers were not examining the rate of vaccine injury, as Mr. Kennedy had claimed. Instead, they wanted to see if a tool that monitored changes in a patient’s medical condition after vaccination could improve the completeness of a vaccine event reporting system. Nor, he said, did researchers use the techniques Mr. Kennedy described, like machine learning or artificial intelligence.

The study’s ultimate finding: The tool showed that it was possible to boost vaccine event reporting by tracking health records, but that most of the reports probably had nothing to do with vaccine injuries. Mr. Kennedy’s conclusion was wrong.

Mr. Kennedy tends to “dump a billion studies, footnotes and pieces of evidence in front of us,” said Stephanie Kelley-Romano, a professor of rhetoric at Bates College. “People aren’t fact-checking it, and so it feels true.”

‘Semantic Switching’

Conspiracy theorists often play with the meaning of words to make their beliefs sound more in line with mainstream thinking, a technique called “semantic switching” or “equivocation.” Mr. Kennedy often misuses medical jargon in his anti-vaccine claims.

He has repeatedly claimed that vaccines are not tested using “placebo trials” — a type of study where some participants receive medication while others receive a substance that does not confer immunity, called a placebo.



How Mr. Kennedy uses “semantic switching”
On “London Real,” May 7, 2020

“Vaccines are not safety tested.¹ So, of the 72 vaccines² that are now mandated³ for American children in our country, not a single one has ever been tested against an inert placebo⁴.”

- 1 Most vaccines are tested in placebo trials.
- 2 There are closer to 17 vaccines and about 60 doses that are recommended for children before the age of 18.
- 3 The vaccines are recommended. None are mandated at the federal level, but many schools require them.
- 4 All vaccines are safety-tested using comparisons against placebos or previously-tested vaccines.

Vaccine trials almost always use placebos, a fact that Mr. Kennedy disputes. The placebos can include water, salt and other ingredients found in vaccines that are unrelated to immunization. In cases where using a placebo instead of a proven vaccine would put a patient at a serious disadvantage, researchers may test newer vaccines against older versions whose side effects are known.

“It’s really disingenuous because their goal is to just scare people about vaccines and make them think that they’re unsafe, that they’re not properly tested,” said Dr. Paul Offit, the director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and an adviser to the Food and Drug Administration, in an interview.

It is also untrue that children are mandated to receive 72 vaccines, as Mr. Kennedy has claimed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends administering closer to 17 vaccines, spread out over dozens of doses over 18 years.

“Like most conspiracy theories, it’s incredibly pernicious because there is a grain of truth,” Ms. Kelley-Romano said. “But it’s wrapped up in speculation, conjecture and hyperbole.”

‘Reluctant Leader’

Mr. Kennedy has risen to prominence as an anti-vaccine activist despite having no medical training. He has claimed in multiple interviews that he felt compelled to take up the fight after mothers who have said their children were injured by vaccines asked him to do so.



How Mr. Kennedy became a “reluctant leader”
From “America’s Thought Leaders,” March 13, 2023

“I got into this unwillingly¹, kicking and screaming. And, you know, it has not been a good career choice² for me or, you know, you know, for social or friendship. It’s cost me a lot in terms of my family relationships, my friend relationships, business deals and relationships, and political relationships, which, by the way, I’m not complaining about³. But it’s a fact.”

- 1 Mr. Kennedy claims he was not seeking out the topic.
- 2 He describes paying a personal cost.
- 3 He accepts his role as reluctant leader.

Positioning oneself as a “reluctant leader” is common among conspiracy theorists, who tend to present their group as underdogs in an existential battle between good and evil, according to Karen Schroeder Sorensen, an associate professor at Winona State University and the author of “Fringe Rhetorics: Conspiracy Theories and the Paranormal.”

Staking a position outside mainstream institutions lets them “claim that they have not been indoctrinated, that they are able to speak openly and truthfully about the topic,” Ms. Schroeder Sorensen said. “It’s the inverse of what would establish a voice of authority in traditional circles.”

The Mysterious ‘They’

Many of Mr. Kennedy’s views display patterns universally found in conspiracy theories. Central to many claims is a mysterious figure in the center — often described as “they” — who orchestrated a cover-up to hide their true intentions.

In podcast appearances, Mr. Kennedy has repeatedly made arguments about the dangers of vaccines and 5G cellular technology, blaming a mysterious figure in the middle.



How Mr. Kennedy uses “the mysterious ‘they’”
On “London Real,” May 7, 2020

“Why are they¹ investing in a trillion dollars? To give you — so that you can download² your video games maybe a couple of seconds faster? Or that you can download movies a couple of seconds faster? Does that make any sense to anybody? Nobody’s going to pay that money for that. 5G has zero to do with giving you faster downloads. It is — it is a completely — it is a system that is completely geared towards harvesting³ human data.”

- 1 Conspiracy theorists often target a mysterious “they.” Mr. Kennedy vaguely refers to telecommunication companies and Bill Gates, among others.
- 2 A cover story is a public explanation for their behavior.
- 3 Conspiracy theorists often point to a hidden, ulterior motive.

'Webbing'

Conspiracy theorists often build their narratives by connecting multiple plots into a larger master plan, a technique Ms. Kelley-Romano has called "webbing."

In multiple media appearances, Mr. Kennedy has falsely claimed that Bill Gates, the billionaire tech mogul, was the mastermind of several projects divined by conspiracy theorists, including a global farming takeover, deadly vaccine production, weaponized medicine and spy technology powered by 5G cell towers. Mr. Gates was mentioned in nearly 15 percent of the podcasts reviewed by the Brookings Institution.

How Mr. Kennedy creates a web of conspiracy theories

From "RFK Jr. Podcast," Feb. 9 and Feb. 28, 2021, and "The Highwire With Del Bigtree," Aug. 20, 2021.

Global farming

Mr. Kennedy claimed that Bill Gates invests in farming "so he can patent all of the life that has been developed through 20,000 years of agriculture on this planet."

Climate change

Mr. Kennedy claimed that climate change "has been captured — hijacked in many ways — by the World Economic Forum and particularly by Bill Gates."

5G Technology

"Now you have Bill Gates building an analytics center — an entire city in Arizona, 60,000 people in it. Their only job is to analyze this data, monetize it, and sell it back to companies that can use it to attack you."

Vaccines and treatments

Mr. Kennedy claimed that Bill Gates "paid for studies to kill ivermectin, to kill hydroxychloroquine, to discredit them."

Technology surrounding 5G, the next generation of cellphone infrastructure, has become a target of conspiracy theorists who falsely believe that radiation emitted by 5G towers is dangerous or that governments are pursuing the technology for sinister motives.