

## How one physician stood up to disinformation and what she learned with Natalia Solenkova, MD, PhD

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AMA Update covers a range of health care topics affecting the lives of physicians, residents, medical students and patients. From private practice and health system leaders to scientists and public health officials, hear from the experts in medicine on COVID-19, medical education, advocacy issues, burnout, vaccines and more.

### Featured topic and speakers

In today's AMA Update, Natalia Solenkova, MD, PhD, shares how she became the target of a coordinated anti-vaccine campaign when a fake tweet went viral. She talks about how the AMA, the media and the online physician community supported her, what physicians can do to protect themselves and the continued importance of physicians addressing misinformation through online advocacy. AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger hosts.

#### Speaker

- Natalia Solenkova, MD, PhD, intensivist

### Transcript

**Unger:** Hello and welcome to the AMA Update video and podcast. Today, we're hearing one physician story about online identity theft and what she wants other physicians to know. I'm joined by Dr. Natalia Solenkova, an intensivist in Miami and a frequent patient advocate on social media. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer, in Chicago. Dr. Solenkova, thanks so much for joining us today.

**Dr. Solenkova:** Hi, Todd, and thank you for having me. I'm very happy to be here.

**Unger:** Well, I know it's been a difficult month that you've been facing, starting with the fact of discovering that you'd been the victim of online identity theft, but let's kind of start at the beginning here. Take us back to the initial moments. How did you first realize that something was wrong?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Well, Twitter has become a part of my life in the last three years, so on January 2, I woke up. I saw something was wrong with my account. I suddenly gained a bunch of followers, and the followers were commenting on my previous tweets and there was a lot of aggressive, hateful messaging. There was a screenshot of a tweet under my name, my Twitter handle and tweet was something that I never wrote. And that Twitter said that I would inject a poison even if I knew that it was a poison, I still did it out of love and people who didn't get vaccinated did it out of hate. But the main thing for me was that it was my photograph, my name and my Twitter handle attached to the text that I never wrote.

**Unger:** So this has got to be pretty shocking when something like that happens to you. And for people out there, this is not an issue of where your account was hacked. This is somebody who's got a new account that basically makes it look like it's yours and you later discovered that the tweet is what misinformation researchers call a cheap fake. It's a term used for fake media, like an image or video, that takes not a lot of effort to produce. What did you do once you realized what had happened and how quickly did something like that spread?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Well, I started researching which account published this tweet first and I came to a bunch of accounts with a very large follower base who retweeted that sort of screenshot, the fake screenshot and accounts that had 800,000 followers—accounts that had 100,000 followers and a lot of followers started tagging my name. And I mean, the tweet definitely spread really quick in those accounts.

**Unger:** Let's talk about, in particular, one very, very significant account that retweeted this without confirming the information. Who was that?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Joe Rogan.

**Unger:** So how did that feel when you saw something like that happen?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Well, I was shocked because that—I mean, knowing that he has millions and millions of followers, that felt threatening. That felt threatening to my career, threatening to my job, threatening to my reputation.

**Unger:** Talk to us a little bit about how do you—you're one voice. You're one physician out there. How do you get something like that turned around?

**Dr. Solenkova:** I think that was important to get mobilized and mobilize every resource possible. So I started thinking of who I can reach out. And during the pandemic, I have been in contact with a lot of physicians who did advocacy and I got quickly connected with journalists. I spoke to Taylor Lorenz. I spoke to Brandy Zadrozny. I spoke to a few other journalists from other media sources.

And I think with media responding really quickly and Brandy Zadrozny writing an article, very extensive article, and then article coming in the *LA Times*, and the fact that Joe Rogan acknowledged relatively quickly his mistake, as well as Bret Weinstein, who was his guest on the podcast. It was very helpful that they wrote that they were duped and the tweet was fake. So I think that helped a lot to not to have your reputation hurt.

**Unger:** Now you also turned to the AMA, and I'd like to know a little bit about what that experience was like and why did you reach out to the AMA?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Well, I felt that—well, first of all, I am an active member, as you know, of the AMA, and I participate in most of the activities of the AMA that I can participate and I am present on Annual and Interim meetings. And for me, it felt that it was my advocacy work—I use my Twitter pretty much for medical advocacy. I don't use it for personal—some social tweets or something like that. It's usually medical and healthcare-related tweeting, and it usually aligns with policies of AMA, and I have shared policies of AMA and policies that we vote for or letters from the AMA. Therefore, I felt like maybe AMA will provide me with help and a guide me or maybe help me to protect my reputation and my name.

**Unger:** And fortunately, working with Twitter, we were able to make a difference there and in combination with the media coverage that you received, began to really kind of help turn the tide in the conversation and gain even more support from the online physician community and others. I know you've had just an incredibly tough month. You must be exhausted from this. Where do things stand right now? Are they settled down at all?

**Dr. Solenkova:** Yes, thankfully, the things settled down significantly and I don't receive hateful messages that I've received in the first week of this bad tweet. And from that perspective, harassment has definitely gone down. And even I've seen people on Twitter, if somebody brings up that tweet, there are people who say no, no, no, this is a fake tweet. That was debunked, so don't even use that.

**Unger:** I think it's even kind of labeled.

**Dr. Solenkova:** In one of the accounts, I've seen it was labeled as a misleading tweet. In some of the accounts, it's still not labeled and it still exists, but at least in some of the accounts, it's labeled, which is also helpful. And some accounts deleted that tweet completely. So from that perspective, it is definitely an achievement. However, I'm still—I have an attorney and we're still in the legal work, so I can't really talk much about the legal part of it, but it's still in progress.

**Unger:** Listen, this has got to be very harrowing for you, given the nature of what happened here and the kind of low bar that someone can target physicians like this. You're probably not the last person this is going to happen to. I'm curious, what's your advice to other physicians out there, those that are vocal, those that are standing up to misinformation on social platforms like this? What did you learn that you can pass on to them so that if this does happen, they can know what to do?

**Dr. Solenkova:** I think, first of all, doctors who do advocacy work and they're vocal on social media, they have to know before they start their social media advocacy that advocacy on social media comes with at a certain expense. And this is the expense that you will have to deal with hate and there will be people who have totally different opinion than yours. You should be prepared and you should realize how far you want to go in your advocacy, especially on controversial topics like disinformation, vaccines.

And when you do a Google search, see what's available. Do you have your home address available? Do you have your phone number easily available in the Google search? And make sure that maybe you can delete it first. You can reach out to the third-party websites and get your information down before it can be used by haters. So I think that's very important—minimize your personal information online.

**Unger:** Dr. Solenkova, I've got to ask because that's a tough lesson and a bit of a steep hill for those that are going to be active on social media and there are a lot out there. Is that something you're reconsidering at this point?

**Dr. Solenkova:** I did stay quiet for most of January, as I felt it took a lot of time to deal with this problem. And I stayed relatively quiet and then my account was locked. I recently unlocked my account on Twitter again and I am tweeting again. I do feel that somebody still has to do advocacy, and I'm already out there and I will continue my advocacy work, knowing that we are threatened—we can be threatened. Again, our careers can be threatened.

**Unger:** Dr. Solenkova, thank you so much for sharing your story. It's an important one and, of course, one that we're going to continue to deal with as forces of misinformation are very, very active and do target physicians. Thanks for standing up to that. Really appreciate it.

**Dr. Solenkova:** Thank you very much for having me. And I just want to say one last thing, that I do believe that physicians need to know the story. It's extremely important. And we need to keep organizing against disinformation and we need to stay organized, and we need to stand up to this disinformation and this harassment. So I really appreciate you having me here and letting me speak about this. Thank you.

**Unger:** Thank you for being here. That's it for today's AMA Update. We'll be back with another episode soon. In the meantime, you can find all our videos and podcasts at [ama-assn.org/podcasts](https://ama-assn.org/podcasts). Thanks for joining us today. Please take care.

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