The next morning, I found Holmes out behind his cottage, tending to his bees. If you are just joining us, I was visiting Sussex to consult with the world's first and only consulting detective, the venerable Mr. Sherlock Holmes, to gain some insight into the mystery of the anti-vaccine movement, or 'anti-vaxxers.' I had met him through his colleague, Dr. John H. Watson, but of course, I knew of him, having read every one of his adventures several times. I ‘de v e n’ listened to all of them thanks to the invention of audiobooks and the narrating talents of Mr. Stephen Fry, who, among his many stellar accomplishments, marvellously played the marvellous Jeeves to Hugh Laurie’s Wooster. But I digress. (Yes, already.) As I approached Holmes, I applied his methods, having learned of them from the above (i.e. reading/listening to his adventures, not the works of P.G. Wodehouse). I couldn’t resist.

“Mr. Holmes?” I said, keeping my distance from the hives. Nasty things, bees, except for the honey, which I guess is the reason to keep them.

“I observe that you were up before the sun, had one, no two eggs, toast, and marmalade for breakfast, and had a visit from a carpenter who walks with a limp and mumbles, despite having very good teeth.”

He looked at me from under his beekeeping helmet and grunted. “Obviously,” he said, but I detected a hint of a smile. Some minutes later we were being warmed by a robust fire and drinking tea, although, unfortunately, not ‘tea,’ as it was still morning. His violin was perched against his chair somewhat precariously, but he took no notice. “Right,” he said, rubbing his hands together, “you’ve visited me again to continue our discussion into the riddle of vaccine hesitancy and the mystery of the anti-vaxxers. We dealt with the one yesterday, and today, we will dispatch with the latter.” He stopped, and looked at me, expectantly. I asked if he had solved it. “Oh, of course I’ve solved it, Mole.” He waved a hand as to dismiss any other possibility. “The question before us, now, is what we do about it!”

I persisted, however, and insisted he tell me of his solution. Who is promoting the anti-vaxxer movement? Who are these people who assert that (a) vaccines are dangerous, (b) you don’t need them, and (c) herd immunity is your friend. (Indeed, these lines are taken from one Del Bigtree, a notorious anti-vaxxer, but similar drivel comes from David Icke in the UK and Sheri Tenpenny in the U.S. I mused that these names sounded made up, like ‘Mr. Bigbooty’ – pronounced big-boo-tay – the alien leader in The Adventures of Buckeroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension.) “Mole?” said Holmes, “Ah there you are, back with us. Hand me that volume there, on the shelf.” I fetched the large book into which various notes and papers had been inserted, being careful not to dislodge anything, and handed it to him. He opened it to an article published in Cureus in 2018, by Hussain and colleagues, who are clinical psychologists. I hadn’t read it.

Holmes clearly had. “The anti-vaccine movement is certainly not new,” he noted, not even glancing at the copy. “In the 18th century, John Williams in the U.S. and the Reverend Edmund Massey in the UK opposed vaccines on religious grounds, something along the lines of tampering with the heavenly punishment of sinners. Massey called them ‘dangerous operations’ in his sermon of 1772, ‘The Dangerous and Sinful Practice of Inoculation.’ It has never gone away. The middle of the 18th century saw the formation of the Anti-Vaccination League in London that opposed, successfully, the mandatory vaccination of children. And of course, in more recent times, a fully debunked paper in the Lancet by Andrew Wakefield, asserting a link between vaccination and autism, has driven much of the resistance. But none of these can explain how this ‘movement’ has escalated. Today, a staggering number of people in the Western world – about 1 in 6 in the UK – have announced that they will not take a vaccine for Covid-19, I think you call it the Terrible Pandemic, under any circumstances, and a similar number report being ‘undecided.’ But I think you know all this?” I nodded, and...
urged him to continue. He shifted the pages of his book and gave it a quick glance at a copy of another article. It was clear that he was well prepared.

“This rather recent paper in the Lancet cites a report from the aptly named Centre for Countering Digital Hate, noting that the so-called anti-vaxxer movement has added between seven and eight million,” he shook his head, “followers since 2019. But here it gets interesting.” He leaned forward, energized. “I had assumed, as I think you had, that this was the work of misguided campaigners and communities on social media, but I was wrong. A survey commissioned by the CCDH and released with their report concluded that these accounted for only a small percentage of the total anti-vaxxer audience. The majority of this audience has been reached by a different, far more dangerous cabal who are driven by the singular desire that drives most criminal enterprises – money.

“The majority of the anti-vaxxer movement is promoted by nefarious ‘businesses’ that seek to thrive by instilling distrust and fear of vaccines in favor of their own worthless ‘remedies.’ They encourage the gullible to deny themselves the single most effective preventative for potentially lethal infections in favor of their useless herbal extracts, silver clothing, pillows, crystals, and amulets. Quite literally, these charlatans commit murder for money. And they are massively assisted in this enterprise.” He stopped, expectantly. I obliged, asking by whom they were assisted.

“By government-supported internet trolls!” he announced, pounding a fist on his knee. “In 2019, before the Terrible Pandemic, it was proven that the same government troll farm that had interfered in the U.S. election of 2016 was using bots to massively amplify misinformation on the measles vaccine. Of course, this goes beyond the desire for money; it has the goal of weakening western society, as the measles outbreaks in recent years testify. With the advent of Covid, these efforts have intensified.

“This is, of course, not the whole story. Some government-led efforts appear to be about national pride and solidification of power. For example, a government-sponsored group – I will not say which government – promoted debunked misinformation about supposedly lethal effects of the Pfizer vaccine and a ridiculous conspiracy theory linking SARS-CoV2 to a military facility in Maryland, suspiciously posting this the day following a report that the same government’s vaccine had shown less efficacy than hoped for. Apparently, the post received over a billion views.”

My mind reeled. “Scoundrels!” I cried. “Holmes, we must act. The game is afoot!” I moved to stand, but he placed a hand on my shoulder.

“No, Mole, calm yourself. The most important thing we can do right now is to get this message out. Indeed, it is already working to some extent. Pressure by the public on social media companies is rising; Fakebook – is that what it is called? – has taken down twelve million anti-vaccine posts and flagged another one hundred and sixty seven million as misinformation. Clearly, this is only a start, and the pressure must continue.

“But there is more that can be done. Not only must we get factual information into the hands and minds of the public, but have to teach them how to access it. There is a way to do that, a process that is now being taught in schools and proving effective as a way to disrupt the flow of misinformation. The problem, it appears, is that the way we are taught to evaluate information, by rationally thinking about the claims, can actually result in the spread of malicious falsehoods through social media, since the refined psychological skills of the propagandists far exceeds our ability to parse fact from fiction. Instead, we should apply S.I.F.T. Remember that acronym!” I looked confused, I’m sure. He continued, counting off the letters on the fingers of his hand. “When you read something that invites consideration – and possibly your own social amplification – first S: Stop. I: Investigate the source. F: Find better coverage. And then, T: Trace the claims, quotes, and media to their original contexts. Here, come with me.” Holmes stood and walked into his dining room, where I was amazed (but perhaps should not have been) to see a shiny laptop was open on the table. He dexterously navigated to a post on a social media site that purported that the SARS-CoV2 vaccine contains microchips that the government will use to track vaccinated individuals. “As outlandish as this sounds, a recent survey shows 28% of Americans believe this nonsense,” said Holmes. “Okay, so S.I.F.T. it. S: We stop. I: The posts arise from the head of the Russian Communist party, a lawyer best known for wild conspiracy theories, another lawyer convicted of multiple crimes, and Kanye West. Enough said. F: Here are fact-checking reports from the BBC, the New York Times, and other trusted sources. T: Tracing the original source, Bill Gates explained during an interview that his foundation sought to develop ‘digital certificates’ of who had contracted, recovered, and/or been vaccinated. This was an open source digital platform not a microchip. The Gates Foundation had also funded a study to develop a technology with the potential to store medical information via a special ink that might be delivered at the time of a vaccination. None of this relates to microchips in vaccines or government surveillance. You see? We need to teach people to S.I.F.T. before spreading malicious and dangerous misinformation.

“But there is good news. The vaccines are proving both safe and effective. Of course, we hope for genuine herd immunity, but as you know, this will probably require more immunizations that are likely to occur. However, as the population of the unvaccinated dwindles and the infections concentrate among these misguided individuals, I think we will see more positive decisions among the undecided. Yes, I worry about those souls who cannot take the vaccines for medical reasons and it is grossly unfair to these people to continue to expose them, and I hope that we continue to use safe practices in the community to protect them. But, in the end, I think that the vaccines and verifiable information about them will overcome the anti-vaxxers, who will once again be forced to the fringes of our society.”

I thought about the hucksters peddling snake oil treatments, and asked Holmes what we can do about them. “Alas,” he agreed, “their criminal activity should be addressed. Perhaps, as the unvaccinated population shrinks, we will see some justice as those who were duped seek recompense. Take away the charlatan’s amplification by government-sponsored trolls, and I think we will see these, too, slink away. It is, at least, a hope.” I saw that the morning had advanced to late afternoon and that Holmes was anxious to get back to his bees. I rose to take my leave, but one more question puzzled me. “Holmes, before I go, please allow me to ask how it could be, if you will pardon the indelicacy, that you are still alive?”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “Mole! That is the simplest riddle of all. I am a fictitious character!” He turned to leave, once again leaving me to find my own way out, but before I did so, I heard him say, “As, I believe, are you.”