

What is an infodemic?

Through education, confidence in preventative healthcare can increase demand and raise awareness, thereby preventing disease in and of itself. The veterinary world is currently facing an infodemic, due to widespread access to information via the internet including false and misleading information [1]. As of January 2023, there were 4.76 billion social media users (59.4% of the global population) [2]. Misinformation can decrease the level of confidence in veterinary authorities and result in preventable deaths and/or disease [1].

Number of people using social media platforms

Estimates correspond to monthly active users (MAUs). Facebook, for example, measures MAUs as users that have logged in during the past 30 days. See source for more details.

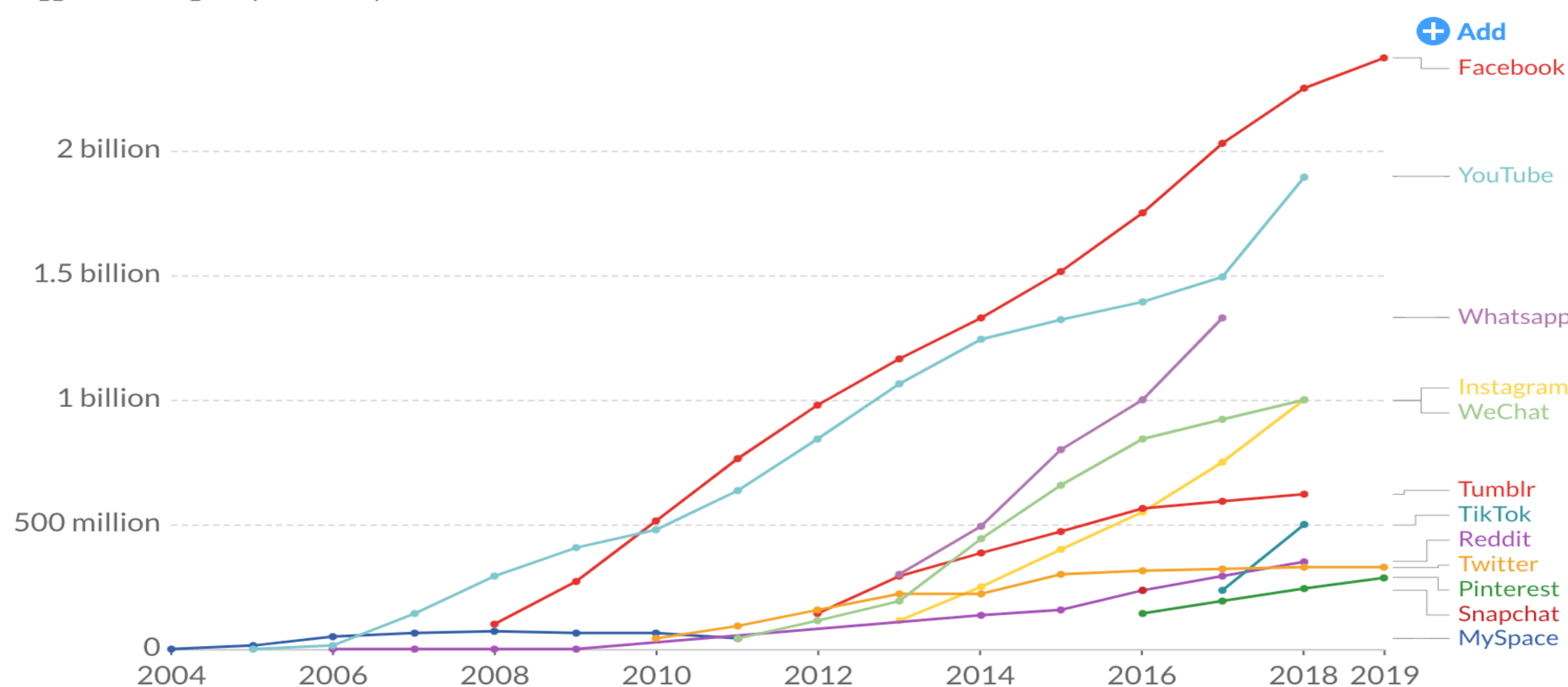


Figure 1: Social media platform use (Chaffey, 2023)

The vets current role:

Vets educate their clients through a variety of methods:

- **Consultations/puppy parties/ educational-open days**, which usually occur 6-12 monthly. Clients can go long periods between seeing and speaking to their veterinarian. Appointments are often time limited and have limited reach, averaging 10-20 minutes [6].
- **Online articles, journals and seminars**, although containing correct information these may be monetised or require a scientific background, making them inaccessible to the general public [7].
- **Reporting adverse affects from preventative healthcare**, correct reporting can increase trust in veterinary authorities, but it can be hard to determine whether an 'adverse affect' is caused by the preventative healthcare or a coincidence.

How can the vets role be improved?

As part of the RCVS day 1 competencies, vets must adapt to changes. This includes improving their current education methods in response to the infodemic by [8]:

- **Encouraging trust in veterinary authorities.**
- **Make information more accessible**, so no scientific background is needed to understand information.
- **Make information more engaging** than misinformation so it can reach a wider audience.
- **Increase reach by taking advantage of social media.** Social media users spend on average 108 minutes per day on social media accounts such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram [9][10].

Examples of veterinary misinformation in media:

- Common misconception that if dogs eat ice cubes their hypothalamus will stop functioning correctly or cause bloating [3]. This information is frequently spread in summer months.
- The adverse reactions of L2 and L4 vaccines are fewer than 2 in 10,000 vs 6 in 10,000 [4]. Anti-vaxxers and those with bias can use these figures and proclaim that the L4 vaccine is 300% more likely to cause adverse reactions (instilling fear of vaccines to the public). The chance of an adverse reaction from the L4 vaccines is the same as a stroke from aspirin.
- During covid, misinformation surrounding pets catching and spreading covid resulting in an increase of rehoming/abandonment [5].

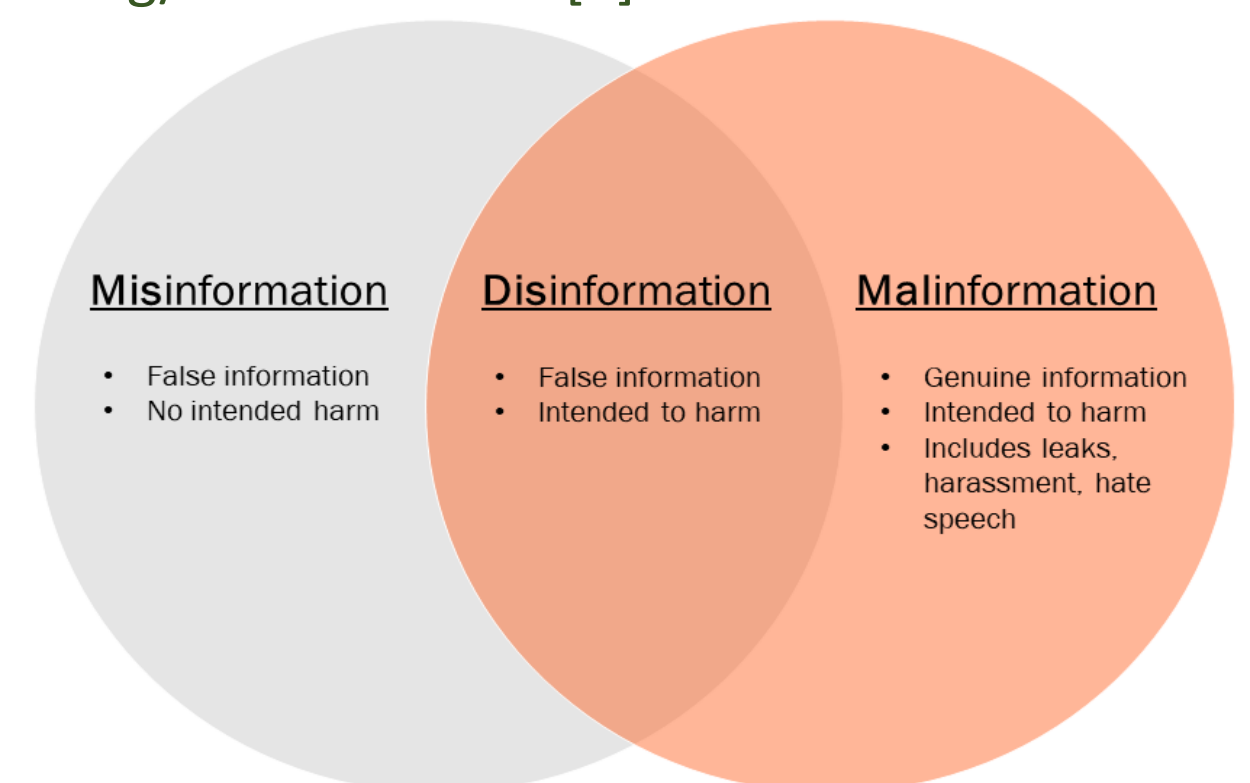


Figure 2: How misinformation and disinformation differ (Blankenship & Graham, 2020)

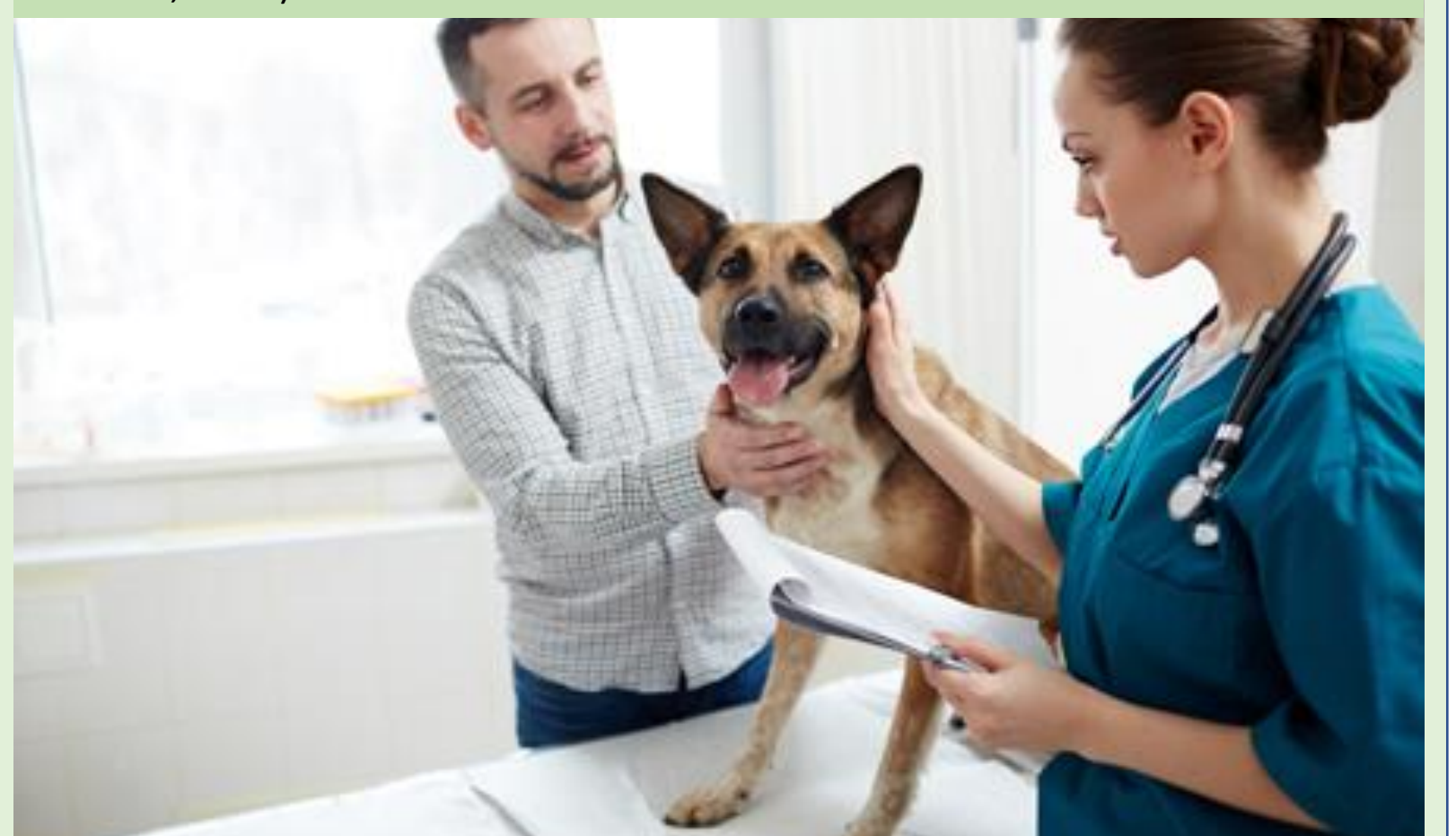


Figure 3: The vets role in client consultations (Birnam Veterinary Clinic, 2018)

Should legislation be introduced?

Legislation against misinformation may conflict with the public's right to free speech. However, deliberate intent to spread disinformation could result in preventable deaths, is this ethical? Suffocating relevant discussion could result in a lack of confidence and consequently an increase in misinformation [11].

