Vaccine hesitancy was not new in South Africa. Small groups of individuals have taken a position against vaccinating their children and some have promoted anti-vaccine sentiment. In Covid-19, vaccine hesitancy grew markedly, with estimates ranging from 8% to 24% of the population at different times during the pandemic.

Unlike the situation in the US, where vaccine hesitancy is politically partisan, this was not the case in South Africa. With somewhere between one in four and one in ten people being vaccine hesitant across the political spectrum, this was a different problem from the one the country had to deal with in the past.

Vaccine hesitancy took many different paths in South Africa, but social media was a common factor. Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook were the main social media platforms used to disseminate incorrect information about Covid-19 vaccines. Given their role in disseminating disinformation in the name of free speech, social media platforms have some culpability for the consequences. Yes, we do need to actively protect free speech, but I have difficulty categorizing disinformation as free speech. There is a fine line when free speech leads to harm to others, including death when not vaccinated. In my view, social media platforms must be held accountable for their role in spreading misinformation.

A further disinformation challenge voiced by ugliest head every now and then, namely the origins of the virus. I was very familiar with this issue, having spent a lot of time counteracting the origins of disinformation and the consequences of Operation hi-Fi. Several people were sending me videos of interviews on the origins issue such as right wing US television broadcasts where individuals with little knowledge of virology and the origins of past epidemics espoused grand theories about how Chinese scientists made the virus in collaboration with American researchers dueing gain of function research.

I became concerned when I learned that a survey conducted in six African countries on behalf of the Africa CDC found that 27% of the over 1,000 respondents believed that SARS-CoV-2 was made up. It perpetuated the narrative that the West was responsible for problems in Africa, absolving local leaders for failing to act in limiting the spread of the virus. This was deja vu. I had had to refute a very similar argument in HIV more than two decades before.

Exaggerated by the irresponsible flow of misinformation, I agreed to an interview with Sally Hunted on ECA at the end of January 13th in an attempt to help dispel some of the myths about Covid 19 generally, and vaccines in particular. I made a distinction between three types of vaccine hesitancy: those individuals who are uninformed, those who are misinformed, and those who are deliberately anti-vaccination and are often responsible for spreading misinformation, helped along by social media.

Again, I seized the opportunity of a live television broadcast to remind everyone of their responsibility to provide the most accurate information possible about vaccines. I said, “They must make up their own minds (without getting vaccinated), but if they are not sure, it’s our job, all of us – the media, the public, community-based organizations, government and private sector – to ensure that we promote the most accurate information on vaccines for people to make an informed decision.”

Every one of us who understands vaccines has to talk to others about it. We are all agents of change and can play that role.”

It was essentially the same message I had given shortly before in a student webinar. At the close of my keynote address, I urged students to remember their role as ambassadors of truth and science in the context of misinformation. As custodians and generators of knowledge, I said, they should all be challenging false news and conspiracy theories when they encountered them. If they are not challenged, social media, which amplifies mistruths, will ensure that such falsehoods grow and spread to the detriment of public trust in science.

In taking up this challenge of repudiating disinformation on denials, vaccines, viral origins, fake treatments and others, I had become a target. I was regularly challenging myths and conspiracy theories in the broadcast media, press interviews, webinars and my writings. This led to a substantial backlash against me – attacks, insults, “flock-him-up” tweets and death threats. I knew that I would be a prime target of the anti-vaxers because of my high profile. But the attacks went deeper. They targeted my wife and daughters too.

Quarantine was included in a three-part article attacking me. Salma’s job was under threat when her boss was called by a research funder concerned about her role in Covid 19 vaccines. Aisha was receiving hate mail and hate tweets. I had never been so naive as to think that the opposition would make it a clean fight. Fortunately, my family members never came under the threats and pressure. They remained steadfast in their resolve. They were not going to stop standing up for science.

I personally found that the way to deal with the attacks, political manipulation and misinformation during the pandemic was to understand their content and source – and simply to stick to the science. When faced with this situation, ask yourself: What is the evidence? What does it say? How does it say it? Should we have confidence in it? My personal challenge when it came to public communication was often: How do I promote an evidence-based approach without inflaming controversy? I tried to adopt this approach with feromenc and vaccines but paid the price of severe opprobrium from some quarters. Naturally, I would do the same again.

I also took this line on the issue of schools reopening and again paid the price in the currency of political muscling. South Africa is fortunate to have many scientists who are skilled in communication and who take up the challenge of refuting myths and disinformation. We need to go one step further. Every one of us, I believe, can be a myth-buster and an ambassador of science.