

## COVID-19 Countering Foreign Influence Task Force Reporting and Analysis

### (U) Trends:

#### (U) Emerging Trends:

- **(U) Online Misinformation Erode Public Confidence in Yet to be Developed COVID-19 Vaccine:**  
 The proliferation of COVID-19-related online anti-vaccination content is negatively impacting public confidence in a yet to be developed COVID-19 vaccine. 35 percent of Americans said they are either unlikely or definitely will not get a COVID-19 vaccine if one becomes available, according to a June 10 Farleigh Dickinson University poll. Public reluctance to receive a COVID-19 vaccine could inhibit the U.S.'s ability to achieve the herd immunity necessary to safely reopen society without risking additional waves of infection. While data on the exact infection rate of the virus, necessary to calculate the percentage of public inoculation required for COVID-19 herd immunity, are in flux, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious diseases expert, last week guessed it will probably require 50% to 75% of a population to be immune before achieving herd immunity — a goal that should be achieved not just through infected people recovering but also through vaccination.

By contributing to a reduction in the number of people willing to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, continued COVID-19 focused anti-vaccination misinformation, such as the viral misinformation documentary "Plandemic," threatens the U.S.'s capacity to reach the inoculation threshold required to achieve herd immunity to COVID-19.

Fortunately, as of June 11, Russia and China-state backed disinformation outlets have largely pivoted the majority of their coverage from the pandemic to focus on ongoing protests. This presents an opportunity for public health messengers to increase the ratio of accurate information in the COVID-19 information space to raise public confidence in a potential COVID-19 vaccine and increase the likelihood that the U.S. can achieve herd immunity if a vaccine becomes available. (Source: Farleigh Dickinson University, Science Alert, Alliance for Securing Democracy, Business Insider)

- **(U) Russian State-Backed Media Focuses Propaganda on Big Tech, Claims COVID-19 Misinformation Mitigation Measures Evidence of Creeping Fascism:** Russian-state backed media outlet RT has increasingly sought to undermine public confidence in tech companies' efforts to mitigate the flood of COVID-19 related misinformation spreading on social media. RT's framing of the issue as a sign of "big brother's" creeping COVID-19 fueled totalitarianism dovetails easily with other ongoing Russian disinformation narratives seeking to erode global faith in democracy as a system of governance. Ludicrous claims that tech companies counter COVID-19 misinformation efforts are the same as "digital censorship in China" highlights the

adaptability of Russia's false equivalency, whataboutism, and boundless moral relativism as disinformation tactics. In addition, it shows the likelihood the Russian disinformation ecosystem will increasingly seize on tech platform mitigation efforts as a wedge issue to promote polarization, erode public confidence in U.S. authorities and counter-misinformation efforts, and undermine the very notion of objective truth. Examples from RT include,

- (U) "Knowledge is power, and whoever controls the media, controls the information flow and controls the power. That's how these tech companies set out to achieve a common goal: controlling your cognitive map. It's not about what's said and debated, it's about what's buried and left out.

"Why does it seem like Silicon Valley's digital censorship is the same digital censorship as in China? Simple, it's the same. As Covid-19 ravages the world, digital tyranny is killing democracy while the US Congress sits silently and lets it happen." (Source: RT)

- (U) **Evolving Tactics: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theorists and Anti-Vaxxers Use Facebook Groups and "Streisand Effect" to Amplify Misinformation:** The recent viral spread of the COVID-19 misinformation documentary "Plandemic" illustrates the evolving tactics of COVID-19 misinformation actors. The documentary spread organically from Vimeo to anti-vaccination and conspiracy Facebook groups, where it was amplified in tightly-knit echo chambers before crossing over to more mainstream online conversations and going viral. Users then reuploaded the video with minor changes to evade automated takedowns. Pre-conceived conspiracy theories that big tech would seek to silence "the truth" increased Streisand effect—a phenomenon where attempts to censor internet content paradoxically facilitates its spread—amplification of the video.

More than 8 million people watched the video across social platforms before the company removed it for good. It has since migrated to more fringe platforms such as bitchute, and independent users continue to amplify the video's central claims across social media.

Platforms reactively intervene when problematic content has already spread, and media manipulators modify their tactics in innovative ways by putting to use distributed networks and loosely-aligned factions. Fringe influencers become crucial distribution nodes, and junk news helps create the impression of veracity. When journalists step in to cover content takedowns it can further exacerbate the issue, but nevertheless their coverage is crucial for countering the health misinformation contained in the video. (Source: Meme War Weekly, Harvard Kennedy School)

Anti-vaxx activists and other public health conspiracy theorists are currently using similar tactics to spread COVID-19 related misinformation, even attempting to hijack unrelated Facebook groups to spread misinformation to new targets. Researchers who released a new study on COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook expected to see that, in the map of the online world, there will be a core of the central establishment, accepted medical science, government public health advice, surrounded maybe by some fringe kind of buzzing around. They found the opposite. The core of the whole online debate is really dominated by these relatively small but

well-distributed organized communities of distrust that have embedded themselves with everyday other communities, such as pet lovers or parents' associations. And the establishment communities are off to one side.

- (U) **Once Accurate COVID 19 Data Can Become Misinformation With Age:** Given the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic even valid data might be misused simply by being published or amplified several days or weeks after its initial release date. Once-accurate information can become misinformation as it ages, leading to erroneous conclusions and misinterpretation of the current situation. (Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)
- (U//FOUO) **Terrorists Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic in an Attempt to Incite Violence** Violent extremists probably are seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, intimidate targets, and promote their ideologies, and we assess these efforts will intensify in the coming months. Since early March, violent extremists have used online platforms to spread misinformation related to federal, state, and local government mitigation efforts and, in some cases, infected individuals with COVID-19. Increased travel restrictions and social distancing possibly will complicate violent extremist efforts to operationalize attacks against more traditional terrorist targets in the Homeland, and we have no information indicating any active plotting is underway.
- (U//FOUO) Other social media users are sharing and discussing perceived threats associated with the US Government response to the outbreak, specifically tied to social media rumors and fears of martial law and gun confiscation. Some domestic terrorism-related activity in the United States historically has been driven by similar conspiracy theories, increasing our concern that a violent extremist could seek to conduct an attack based on this misinformation. (Source: DHS)
- (U) **China has increasingly adopted Russian disinformation tactics** in response to COVID-19. Key tactics and trends include,
  - **Chinese officials are dramatically increasing their presence on Western social media platforms.**
    - China's diplomatic corps is increasingly **leveraging** Twitter — which is blocked in China — as a platform to influence global public opinion. Since the Hong Kong protests began in April 2019, Twitter accounts connected to Chinese embassies, consulates, and ambassadors have increased by more than 250 percent
    - It was only a month before that surge began that, for the **first time**, **Google, Twitter and Facebook each deactivated networks of accounts** found to be waging Beijing-backed global influence campaigns designed to reach the west (in that case, focused on discrediting Hong Kong protesters). Taken together, these developments suggest that Beijing is increasingly seeking to shape the global information environment beyond its borders.

- **China's more confrontational posture on COVID-19 represents a clear departure from its past behavior and signals a move toward a style of information manipulation more like Russia's.**
    - Its goal appears to be **highlighting the chaotic nature of the United States' governance model, in contrast to its own.** On Twitter, Chinese diplomatic and embassy **accounts** promoted conspiracy theories from fringe websites.
  - **Official Chinese messengers piggyback off Iranian and Russian propaganda networks.**
    - There is a circular amplification that occurs between and among overt Chinese, Iranian, and Russian propaganda sites that push anti-U.S., anti-Western content.
  - **China is more confident in its brand than Russia.**
    - Whereas Russia's information strategy is to repel audiences from the West rather than attract them to Russia, China's government tends to promote a positive image of the country and its governance model.
- **(U) Increased REMVE Propaganda and Potential for Violence:** Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (REMVE) groups are increasingly likely to use the COVID-19 pandemic to bolster "accelerationism" propaganda. Accelerationism is the most inherently violent ideology circulating in the global REMVE community. Accelerationists believe in the violent overthrow of the "system" to facilitate a societal collapse, spark a racial civil war (referred to as "boogaloo" or "RaHoWa"), and ultimately force the formation of an all-white "ethno-state."
    - (U) The recent FBI disrupted REMVE plot to bomb a hospital in Missouri amidst the ongoing pandemic shows the continued potential for accelerationist propaganda to inspire individuals to mobilize to violence against soft targets, minority communities, law enforcement, and critical infrastructure related to the COVID-19 response. (Source: State of New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness; Counter Extremism Project; Valens Global; Vice)
  - **(U) China's Evolving COVID-19 Disinformation TTPs:** China has increasingly employed social media account hacking and hijacking tactics, including against U.S. citizens, to advance its COVID-19 disinformation campaign. Suspected Chinese operatives have stepped up their efforts in recent days, according to private messages shared with ProPublica, offering influential Chinese-speaking Twitter users cash for favorable posts. These efforts appear to be aimed at disparate audiences outside of China. Most of the posts uncovered are in Chinese and appear aimed at influencing the millions of ethnic Chinese who live outside of China's borders. Others are in English. (Source: ProPublica; The Daily Beast)

**(U) Previously Identified Trends:**

- **(U) China's Evolving Disinformation Tactics:** China has adopted Russia's disinformation tactics, using the COVID-19 crisis to its advantage in the information domain and promoting conspiracy theories that the virus originated in the U.S. or is an American bioweapon. Beijing's shift in

tactics corresponds with increased narrative alignment between Russian, Chinese, and Iranian state-backed media, which amplify conspiracy theories that blame the U.S. for creating the virus and promote false or misleading content to contrast the supposedly superior crisis response of authoritarian governments to the response of Western democracies.

- (U) As COVID-19 cases drop in China, Beijing will likely utilize its increased bureaucratic capacity to ramp up COVID-19 related foreign propaganda efforts, according to the Alliance for Securing Democracy. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy; EU vs Disinfo)
- (U) **REMOVE Propaganda and Potential for Violence:** There has been an increase in open-source reporting on Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMOVED) calling for ideological adherents to intentionally spread the virus to minorities and law enforcement.
- (U) **COVID-19 as Hacking/Disinfo Lure:** By taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis, threat actors can increase their chances of gaining access to hacking targets of interest, according to FireEye. FireEye anticipates that malicious actors, including cybercriminals and foreign intelligence services, will continue to exploit populations' senses of urgency, fear, goodwill and mistrust to enhance their operations, particularly regarding events within the medical field, government announcements, economic implications, deaths of high-profile individuals, and civil disturbances.
- (U) **Evolving TTPs:** U.S. adversaries are becoming savvier about spreading false information in ways that are harder for government and social media companies to track. Fraudulent text messages claiming President Trump would announce a national quarantine, for example, spread widely by email, text message, WhatsApp and TikTok -- not on Facebook and Twitter where they'd be easier to spot because of social networks' safeguards against disinformation. The falsehoods also spread via screenshots and it's more difficult for tech companies to detect keywords in images. The personal nature of direct messages also makes users more likely to trust the information they're receiving, according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.
- (U) **Fraudulent Text Messages:** Of primary concern is open-source reporting of malicious actors using COVID disinformation, including fraudulent messaging from government sources, in an attempt to incite panic and, in some cases, spark violence.
- (U) **COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives:** COVID-19 online dis/mis information primarily continues to be comprised of conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus and claims that the virus is a "bioweapon;" erroneous treatments for the virus, such as drinking bleach, vitamin C, or using cocaine, or erroneous claims that alcohol-based hand sanitizers do not work; falsely claiming 5G infrastructure in China weakened immune systems and led to the outbreak; narratives seeking to either overhype or minimize the scale of the pandemic; false claims that

the U.S. engineered the virus to collapse China's economy and financially benefit "big pharma"; and racist narratives blaming minorities for the spread of the virus.

(U) Week of 11/30

(U) The Covid-19 and Other Vaccines: Where We're Failing to Provide the Right Information:

Data deficits and oversupply: an information market failure

Our analysis of the most influential online vaccine conversations revealed an environment cluttered with a confusing patchwork of harmful narratives and data deficits related to vaccines in general and the Covid-19 vaccine in particular.

Not only is this environment fertile for the organic spread of misleading content around a Covid-19 vaccine, but it is also full of vulnerabilities that can be exploited by malicious actors.

Here we explain what vaccine data deficits are, highlight ones that are currently particularly susceptible to misinformation as well as some of the tactics that are being used to suppress confidence in vaccines.



There are two main types of market failure within the information industry: data deficits and data oversupply. A **data deficit** is the negative difference between the level of supply of accurate and reliable information about a given topic and the level of demand for it. Low supply may occur because credible information is evolving, because it isn't reaching people effectively or because it doesn't exist.

Rather than a void or gap, high demand and low supply result in a data deficit — a lack of credible information, where results exist but they are misleading, confusing, false or even harmful.

These deficits are not the result of deliberate actions from bad actors. In fact, they typically occur when quality information providers are unaware of the demand for information on a given topic or are unable to provide the information in an effective, compelling manner. However, bad actors can exploit these deficits, filling them with content meant to deceive or that fits their agenda.

Conversely, a data or informational oversupply is a situation where people are overloaded with information on a given topic. The sheer quantity of information, as well as its technically complex or seemingly contradictory nature, often leads to confusion and ultimately news avoidance.

Here are some of the key data deficits and surpluses identified within the most influential vaccine-related online conversations.

#### **mRNA technology and DNA alteration**

References to the novel messenger Ribonucleic acid vaccine technology and DNA appeared in a combined 4 per cent of posts in English and French. Most tellingly, only two of these posts centered around the development of vaccines, while more than 85 per cent were linked to safety, "political and economic motives" or "conspiracy theories." The types of claims and narratives within these topics, as well as the complete absence of neutral, fact-based, informative posts, underlined the significance of this data deficit. Certain posts claimed Moderna's new potential Covid-19 vaccine will change people's DNA, and some posts presented the mRNA vaccine as the definitive future Covid-19 vaccine or discredited any future Covid-19 vaccine altogether. Others even linked Moderna's vaccine and mRNA vaccines generally to targeted depopulation efforts or malign human engineering programs. While some of the highest-performing posts related to mRNA technology were labeled as false or misleading by fact-checking organizations, the time delays and limited reach associated with these actions mean quality proactive reporting and messaging around this topic are urgently needed.

#### **GMOs and aluminium**

Similar dynamics were observed for the topics of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and aluminium in relation to vaccines: Among the 29 posts mentioning either GMOs or aluminium, only one post was identified as supplying important contextual information on either topic. By contrast, posts suggesting that vaccines were unsafe based on their links to GMOs and aluminium thrived in English, and to an even greater extent in Francophone language communities.

### **Vaccine development and foreign propaganda narratives**

There is a lack of clear, reliable information detailing the steps involved in the vaccine development process, the scientific norms associated with it and what ultimately constitutes a “safe” vaccine. This deficit presents an opportunity for actors wishing to circumvent these established norms and procedures to bypass scrutiny. For example, numerous unverified accounts presenting themselves as news sources or health specialists reported the unveiling of the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V” in an uncritically positive and largely decontextualized manner. These reports failed to highlight the fact that the vaccine was approved before it had gone through large-scale Phase 3 trials, which provoked widespread concern and objections from the scientific community.[1] These kinds of reports were especially noticeable in Francophone African Instagram and Latin American Facebook communities. At the same time, an attempt to undermine the credibility of Western vaccine development with fabricated information from sources dedicated to the amplification of foreign actors’ narratives was identified among the most influential French posts.[2] Coincidentally, this disinformation narrative had also gained traction across other language communities, and one of its versions exploited the mRNA vaccine technology data deficit detailed here.

### **Tactics used to take advantage of the data deficits**

The data deficits mentioned here highlight how the online vaccine information ecosystem is pockmarked with vulnerabilities and weak spots. Where there is a data deficit, there will likely be actors spreading mis- and disinformation. Here we outline the different ways or tactics implemented among the posts we coded to facilitate the spread of misinformation.

### **Headline laundering**

The laundering of news headlines related to vaccines by particular groups online to fit their own vaccine-skeptic agenda. News articles providing negative or ambiguous coverage of vaccines, especially where headlines might not be telling the whole story, are recycled within anti-vax communities and spun to fit their agenda.

### **The rehashing of old misinformation tropes**

Old or “zombie” vaccine misinformation content continues to be shared by highly followed anti-vaccination sources. Examples include the purported link between the MMR vaccines and autism, the guinea pig or “lab rat” narrative to talk about Africans involved in vaccine development, and the role of vaccines as part of wider conspiracies, such as the imposition of totalitarian systems aided by mass population tracking capabilities, for example.

### **Highly adaptive disinformation: the chameleon effect**



The highly adaptive nature of anti-vaccination networks proved particularly noticeable through the adaptation of old misinformation narratives to the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the general notion that vaccines aren't safe was levied through false claims that the flu vaccine is associated with a higher likelihood of contracting Covid-19 and thus higher likelihood of death.[5] Similarly, one of the prominent anti-vaccination narratives based on individual liberty arguments in North American communities referenced the imposition of mask-wearing rules in public spaces to suggest the same will soon be applied to vaccine uptake. This trend was equally noticeable in regard to narratives linking vaccines to wider conspiracies, as certain "transhumanism" conspiracy theories included multiple references to the coronavirus pandemic in addition to vaccines. Finally, the narrative that the most public proponents of vaccines are corrupt or don't vaccinate their own children was applied to current political actors such as Marine Le Pen, while an extract from a vaccine misinformation article was falsely framed as a Melania Trump quote.

### Graphic, emotive content and long-form videos

The well-documented use of graphic, emotive visual content by anti-vaccination groups to portray vaccines as dangerous remains a defining feature of anti-vaccine discourse. Children are often used to add even more emotional bite to these messages. The emotions resulting from any kind of harm done to children, for example, make this strategy particularly effective, as evidenced by QAnon's hijacking of the "saveourchildren" hashtag.[6] Moreover, the prevalence of superior video production quality and long-form vlog-style videos among the top most interacted with Facebook and Instagram posts was noticeable. For example, more than 15 per cent of Francophone Facebook posts included a native video; many of these advanced misleading anti-vaccination and conspiratorial narratives. Inevitably, long-form videos present a difficult practical challenge for fact-checking organizations in the same way that has made YouTube something of a blind spot for misinformation monitoring. (Source: Fist Draft)

### (U) Lies About the Coronavirus Vaccines Are Already Spreading. How Can They Be Stopped?

THE **CORONAVIRUS** vaccines are coming, which means the coronavirus vaccine disinformation is coming, too. In fact, it is already here.

"Will New COVID Vaccine Make You Transhuman?" asks one conspiratorial article about the upcoming inoculations, feeding into a wackadoodle charge about the "reprogramming" of DNA. "This vaccine will not only 'mark' you like a cattle," reads another website, "you will be injected with nano particules that will make you a Perfect antenna for the 5g frequencies." And one similarly baseless narrative dates to the early days of the pandemic: that Bill Gates created the coronavirus itself in an effort to create mandatory vaccines.

President-elect Joe Biden has rightly put the public health crisis at the top of his priority list. This shift away from chaos and toward coherence should help to stem the uncontrolled flow of falsehoods that thrive amid uncertainty. Yet **more needs to be done** by a government whose leader would rather set the record straight than spend his day warping it on Twitter: The anti-vaccination movement **learned its**

way around the Web long before covid-19 struck, and the **disinformation war** it has started even before these lifesaving medicines are widely available must be countered with a preemptive defense.

How? Trying to prevent propaganda discouraging vaccines altogether is futile. While social media sites should **continue to take a tough line** against false claims surrounding covid-19, promoting authoritative sources in their place, that strategy depends on the quality of those sources — and the administration has the highest authority out there.

**Researchers have identified** the importance of filling “**data deficits**” to give people the right answers before opportunists can give them the wrong ones. This must occur in a manner that explains without overwhelming, as complexity can push people toward the comfort of simple answers no matter their veracity. The government needs to figure out how to communicate with the country’s citizens about vaccines frequently, specifically and sensitively, tailoring its messages to existing misconceptions as well as to different types of audiences.

This conundrum must sit at the center of the incoming government’s coronavirus response — which means, first, that the task force devoted to combating the disease ought to have at least one member who is an **expert in misinformation**. Together with experts in medicine, this person could refine both the messages to send and how to send them. Alex Stamos of Stanford’s Internet Observatory **suggests** repurposing the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency’s “**Rumor Control**” **website**, previously dedicated to election integrity, to refute the inaccuracies of the day with links to primary sources, coordinating with the Food & Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Operation Warp Speed. Refuting anticipated inaccuracies would be helpful, too, as experts can track what narratives are brewing before they take off into near-virality. Partnerships with platforms will also be key.

Whatever the method, the aim is clear: to spread counternarratives that are as compelling as the disinformation narratives already plaguing our society but that also have the benefit of being true. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Facebook to Remove Misinformation About COVID Vaccines:** Facebook said Thursday it will start removing misinformation about coronavirus vaccines as countries around the world prepare to start rolling them out.

Facebook’s policy has been to remove false claims about Covid-19 that it says could lead to “imminent physical harm,” such as posts promoting false cures or bogus conspiracy theories linking the virus to 5G. The company removed 12 million posts as a result of this policy between March and October.

But it hadn’t yet taken a firm stance on vaccines, other than to ban ads that promote anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. The company has only removed posts containing misinformation about vaccines in Pakistan and Samoa in the past, and those examples weren’t related to Covid.

On Monday, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the social media giant would show its users “authoritative information about the vaccines,” without elaborating on how it planned to distribute this information.

Now, as major pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and AstraZeneca say they’ve developed effective Covid vaccines and after the U.K. became the first country to approve one of the frontrunners, Facebook has outlined a stance to delete false claims about them.

The company said it will “start removing false claims about these vaccines that have been debunked by public health experts on Facebook and Instagram.”

Tackling misinformation about Covid vaccines will prove difficult for social media platforms as governments globally look to start immunizing people against the disease.

Google’s YouTube video-sharing service and Chinese-owned social media app TikTok have said they will remove false claims about such vaccines, while Twitter says it’s working through its plans before a medically approved vaccine becomes available. (Source: NBC)

**(U) European External Action Service Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic:**

- Since the last special report, COVID-19 related online mis- and disinformation decreased and shifted focus towards vaccines, according to multiple analyses of thousands of available fact-checks since the beginning of the pandemic. The spread and reach of mis- and disinformation online remains worryingly high. A lack of tools and access to relevant data hinders research to estimate its direct impact on human behaviour.
- Based on current developments and observations, we expect that the health crisis around COVID-19 will continue to provide ample of opportunities worldwide for the spread of mis- and disinformation. They can be expected especially concerning tightening confinement measures as well as vaccine development and distribution.
- State actors like China and Russia are maximising the effect of the so-called “vaccine diplomacy” in their communication efforts, most likely with the intent to enhance their reputation and economic position abroad. They are leveraging diplomatic channels, state-controlled media and networks of supportive and alternative media outlets and social media to distribute their messages.
- While in the MENA region disinformation narratives are not yet at play given the delayed COVID-19 second wave, in Syria the regime continues to leverage COVID-19 to advance its political agenda through recurring disinformation on the EU sanctions.
- In the EU and its neighbouring countries, pro-Kremlin outlets continue to amplify voices that downplay the threat of the virus and aim to undermine governments’ strategies of curbing the second wave of infections.

- Assessments facilitated by the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation show continuous efforts by platforms to curb the spread of mis- and disinformation. However, proliferation, profitability and visibility of potentially harmful information remains high across online platforms.
- The work of fact-checkers and professional, independent media since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic remains indispensable to uncover and debunk false, misleading and potentially harmful information. Fact-checking spread has shown to have a positive impact in reducing misinformation about specific COVID-19 related claims[1](opens in a new tab). This activity is paramount in mitigating the potential harmful consequences and enhancing societal resilience.

### In detail: COVID-19 related disinformation, misinformation and other activities (May – November)

With respect to the ongoing debate[2](opens in a new tab) to establish clearly outlined definitions for various types of false, misleading and potentially harmful information, this report will make conscious references to misinformation, which “refers to untrue information that individuals spread without any intent to mislead, though the effects of such misinformation can still be harmful”

and disinformation, which describes “verifiably false content that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to *intentionally* deceive the public, and may cause public harm”.

These are often part of Information Influence Operations, which refer to coordinated efforts by either domestic or foreign actors to influence a target audience using a range of deceptive means, including suppressing independent information sources in combination with disinformation.

If in earlier reporting periods, pro-Kremlin media cast doubts on EU actions and solidarity in response to COVID-19, now the main narrative shifted towards vaccines. Throughout the summer, conspiratorial narratives such as the virus being a laboratory creation or a tool of globalist elites for wrecking economic havoc continued to fade[3](opens in a new tab). Triumphant narratives[4](opens in a new tab) about Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine replaced them. Pro-Kremlin media hail the Sputnik V vaccine across the different language audiences, at times falsely alleging strong international support[5](opens in a new tab), and accusing the West of attempts to sabotage the Sputnik V vaccine for political and economic reasons[6](opens in a new tab).

Western vaccine manufacturers are openly mocked on multi-lingual Russian state-controlled media, including for developing “the monkey vaccine”[7](opens in a new tab) (as some of the manufacturers use a chimpanzee viral vector). In some cases, this lead to conspiracy narratives that the vaccine will “turn people into monkeys”[8](opens in a new tab).

To reach domestic audiences, Russian state-controlled media employ similar narratives as for audiences abroad: according to these, China[9](opens in a new tab) and Russia are handling the pandemic situation better than EU member states[10](opens in a new tab) or Ukraine, with safe and effective vaccines[11](opens in a new tab) at an advanced stage of development, which are sought after by other countries[12](opens in a new tab).

In Europe, pro-Kremlin media has been actively amplifying voices against lock-down measures. In Italy pro-Kremlin media consistently amplify[13](opens in a new tab) local voices, which call the government’s strategy of handling the second wave of the infections senseless, including claims that the

wearing of masks is useless. Pro-Kremlin media has also called COVID-19 restrictions “a result of a bizarre psychosis and collective paranoia[14](opens in a new tab)”. At the same time, Sputnik regularly publishes updates on the success[15](opens in a new tab) of the Russian vaccine. In Germany, RT has also amplified voices questioning the threat of COVID-19, and calling testing and mask-wearing into question. An RT video[16](opens in a new tab) interview with a local physician expressing such views has been viewed over 1 million times. There is a risk that COVID-19 related disinformation may increase as Europe is undergoing new lockdowns.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) documented[17](opens in a new tab) the strategical use and rapid, international spread of disinformation during the pandemic. A completely fabricated report of fatal US COVID-19 vaccine trials was circulated via the website of the so-called “Luhansk People’s Republic” in the non-government-controlled areas, and “achieved widespread dissemination in multiple languages and across multiple communities” from the US to Australia – despite fact checks by multiple organisations across Europe. The press release was published the day after Russia announced plans to mass-produce its own vaccine in a matter of weeks[18](opens in a new tab).

Since the last reporting period (23<sup>rd</sup> April – 18<sup>th</sup> May), over 100 new examples of pro-Kremlin linked disinformation about COVID-19 have been added to the EUvsDisinfo public database. Articles containing these examples of disinformation received over 230 thousand likes, shares, comments on social media. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, EUvsDisinfo has collected over 640 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation related to COVID-19. According to our findings, currently the volume of pro-Kremlin disinformation surrounding the pandemic is smaller compared to spring (likely due to other events presenting fertile ground for disinformation campaigns, including Navalny poisoning, protests in Belarus, etc.).

An analysis across more than 9000 fact checks by the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) underlined that false claims, disinformation and conspiracies also follow in magnitude and focus on the informational needs of users[19](opens in a new tab). First Draft explained this trend with information vacuums (“data deficits”[20](opens in a new tab)), where high levels of demand for information only meet low supply of available authoritative information. Overall, Google Trends data offers indicators that online public interest in COVID-19 related information appears to be substantially lower compared to the beginning of the pandemic.[21](opens in a new tab) With the Middle-East and North-Africa (MENA) region potentially experiencing a delayed second COVID-19 wave compared to Europe, it is likely to assume a similarly delayed resurgence of disinformation and a prevalence of vaccines-related disinformation narratives, if any.

In Syria, the regime continues to leverage COVID-19 to advance its political goals. In line with a recurring narrative, the **regime’s representative to the UN**(opens in a new tab) blamed the EU and the US for allegedly hindering through their sanctions the medical assistance to Syrians in the COVID-19 context as well as the reconstruction process and the returns of refugees.[22](opens in a new tab)

A variety of false information and misleading narratives on COVID-19 have been circulating in the Western Balkans media environment since mid-March. Local independent fact-checkers confirmed a multitude of cases of misinformation, including in relation to vaccines<sup>[23]</sup> and health advice. Many of these included a supportive narrative focused on children and the need to protect them, targeting family audiences.<sup>[23]</sup> Across the region, claims that COVID-19 is a 'fraud' and that face masks are 'harmful' were shared widely on platforms such as Facebook, often in the form of sweeping statements based on 'twisted' statistical data.<sup>[24]</sup> Debunking efforts were undertaken by fact-checking organisations<sup>[25]</sup> and, occasionally, also by traditional news outlets<sup>[26]</sup>.

Since spring 2020, the fact-checking community in Turkey stepped up its efforts<sup>[27]</sup> to debunk COVID-19-related misinformation. In autumn, the number of COVID-19 related debunks was lower. In this period, claims about the ineffectiveness or risk<sup>[28]</sup> of wearing masks, different 'natural methods' to prevent or test for<sup>[29]</sup> COVID-19 and some conspiracy narratives (like masks carrying tracking chips<sup>[30]</sup>) were debunked. Occasionally these debunks were vaccine-related.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has utilised the pandemic to positively influence its image abroad, both by highlighting its efforts in countering COVID-19 and/or attacking and casting doubt<sup>[31]</sup> on any criticism towards it. Assertions that the virus did not originate from China still appear in state-controlled media<sup>[32]</sup> as of November 2020<sup>[33]</sup>, which has also highlighted the "imported"<sup>[34]</sup> nature of new cases.

Generally, the communication strategy appears to be two-fold: blaming others<sup>[35]</sup> and emphasising own successes.

The current trend marks the continuation of the "mask diplomacy" now focusing on vaccines and correspondingly dubbed "vaccine diplomacy"<sup>[36]</sup>. China's "vaccine diplomacy" is well-advanced and promoted in state-controlled media: China is promising preferential access to its COVID-19 vaccines<sup>[37]</sup> to developing countries across Asia<sup>[38]</sup>, Africa<sup>[39]</sup> and Latin America<sup>[40]</sup>. According to large-scale surveys<sup>[41]</sup> by Pew Research Center<sup>[41]</sup> and YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project<sup>[42]</sup> (called an "illustration of Western brainwashing"<sup>[43]</sup> in the CCP-owned *Global Times*), China's image abroad has suffered over the handling of the COVID-19 crisis and "vaccine diplomacy" is seen as a way to bolster diplomatic ties<sup>[44]</sup>.

Chinese media and officials on Twitter have criticized the US handling of the crisis<sup>[45]</sup> and their withdrawal from multilateral initiatives<sup>[46]</sup> while reinforcing China's commitment to the United Nations system. In parallel, some media and officials have dismissed the US' advances on vaccine<sup>[47]</sup> and accused it in pursuing a "new cold war"

[new tab](#)). Chinese officials have also publicly[\[49\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) pointed at Australia's call for an independent investigation on the origin of the virus as one reason for strained relations between the countries. Australia's trade with China has been affected[\[50\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) as a result.

Narratives shared by Chinese state-controlled media, but also by Chinese officials on Twitter notably[\[51\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) emphasize China's response to COVID-19 as a deep commitment to multilateralism. Domestic success stories on rapid and large-scale testing (like in Qingdao[\[52\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) and Kashgar[\[53\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#)), reopening[\[54\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) of the country and the economy[\[55\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) are being promoted outside the country. In official diplomatic channels, it translates into the promotion of China's commitment to COVAX[\[56\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) as a sign of mutual support and justifies cooperation (like with Finland[\[57\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#), Morocco[\[58\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) and other African countries[\[59\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#)). Externally, emphasis on multilateralism is tied to objectives like building a "global community of health"[\[60\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) and China's recovering economy is depicted as exceptional and beneficial<sup>[61]</sup>[\(opens in a new tab\)](#) to the post-pandemic world.

#### Social Media Platforms

The European Commission's most recent assessment of reports[\[62\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) provided by the signatories of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, which highlight the actions taken to limit disinformation on COVID-19 on signatories' respective platforms, presents the efforts to address disinformation around COVID-19. Actions by signatories range from the promotion of authoritative information sources to limiting the appearance of content containing false or misleading information, cooperation with fact-checkers as well as review of rules regarding online advertisement. Platforms also established dedicated portals to update users on their actions to better protect users during the pandemic[\[63\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#).

Despite these continuous efforts, academic research showed that mis- and disinformation continue to thrive online. The Oxford Internet Institute found and analysed over 8000 COVID-related videos containing misinformation and conspiracies that were "shared almost 20 million times on social media, which is more than the shares gathered by the five largest English-language news sources on YouTube combined".[\[64\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) A study published in Nature Magazine shows that the situation could be worse on less compliant and emerging social media platforms.[\[65\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#)

The same study highlights that cross-platform traffic undermines individual platforms' actions, which suggests a need for closer cooperation between them to effectively curb the dissemination and spread of potentially harmful material. The need for better access to platform data to estimate impact, spread and trends of misinformation narratives remains largely unaddressed, despite privacy compliant proposals like the creation of a "Google Trends" for social media platforms[\[66\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#). August 2020 study[\[67\]\(opens in a new tab\)](#) from non-profit organisation Avaaz estimated that "[g]lobal health misinformation spreading networks spanning at least five countries generated an estimated 3.8 billion views on Facebook in the last year." Peaking in April 2020, "[h]ealth misinformation spreading

websites at the heart of the networks received up to 460 million views on Facebook.” Avaaz concluded that Facebook is “failing to keep people safe and informed during the pandemic”, but could “provide all users who have seen misinformation with independently fact-checked corrections” and downgrade misinformation systematically in users’ news feeds to address the problem.

Research[68](opens in a new tab) by threat intelligence company CounterAction highlighted that over two million Germans are part of Facebook groups where COVID-19 related mis- and disinformation is circulating and amplified. According to the research, half of the analysed posts include language that incites people to harmful behaviour, mostly concerning the vaccine. Data showed that engagement with misinformation is not limited to political fringes, but spans party affiliation and geography.

The economic incentives are an important driver for the spread of mis-and disinformation and remain strong. Brussels-based NGO EU Disinfo Lab found[69](opens in a new tab) that “[i]t is possible to monetise disinformation or conspiratorial narratives on crowdfunding platforms both indirectly and directly” and that while “[s]ome crowdfunding platforms have taken action against instances of monetisation attempts connected to COVID-19 disinformation and scams [...] these actions seem incoherent and are not regularly enforced.” These monetisation streams continued even when the content in question has been demonetised or removed on other social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube.

The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) found[70](opens in a new tab) that over one-third (about 200) of English language websites publishing high volumes of divisive and polarising content on inter alia COVID-19 carry advertisement which generates an estimated US\$350 000 in monthly income for these websites. “Google, as the market leader, is the ad exchange most commonly found on these worst offender sites.” In the short term, GDI proposes advertisers use available information on worst offending sites to assess the overlap between their online marketing practices with their brand identity and adjust their ads targeting in cases of a mismatch. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

### (U) Week of 11/23

(U) **In Race for COVID-19 Vaccine, Russia Turns to Disinformation:** When two COVID-19 vaccines were announced within a week of each other, everyone cheered that the end to the global pandemic was now in sight.

Everyone, that is, except Russia.

Since the summer, Moscow has conducted a global disinformation campaign aimed at both undermining vaccines produced in the West and promoting its own rival product, particularly to countries across the developing world, according to interviews with four national and European Union disinformation experts and a review of Kremlin-backed media outlets by POLITICO.



The tactics — including [articles](#) attacking senior executives at Pfizer, the U.S. pharmaceutical giant behind one of the vaccines — have become more intense since two treatments were announced earlier this month, and [represent the latest chapter](#) in a widespread disinformation operation that has portrayed the West's response to the coronavirus crisis as behind that of Russia.

"The goal has been to denigrate vaccines from the West," said Bret Schafer, a media and digital disinformation fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States' Alliance for Securing Democracy, a think tank in Washington. "It's a strategic attempt to sow doubt for Moscow's own geopolitical interests."

In state-backed media articles in multiple languages, the Kremlin has pushed claims that Western vaccines are experimental, unsafe and will likely fail. That message has specifically targeted countries within Central and Eastern Europe, a region that remains ground zero for an ongoing digital disinformation battle between Western powers and Russia, according to two national disinformation officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

"Western vaccine manufacturers rely on experimental, little studied and not proven in the long-term technologies, encountering obstacles in their clinical trials," said Kirill Dmitriev, chief executive of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, which is financing the Kremlin's vaccine, known as Sputnik V, in [multiple state-backed outlets](#) from Lithuania to Moldova.

The strategy has fallen into two camps, based on POLITICO's review of Kremlin-backed media, as well as discussions with national and EU disinformation officials.

### Undermine trust

In Europe and the United States, Moscow has highlighted the potentially harmful side-effects of vaccines created in the West — sometimes [drawing rebukes](#) from senior military and government leaders for this portrayal.

That includes [one article](#), citing a [survey in the Mirror, a British newspaper](#), that said one of these treatments left patients with headaches and fever. Another [reported](#) Western pharmaceutical executives selling shares on the back of the vaccine announcements to profit from the pandemic. ([Western outlets also covered that story](#), Pfizer said the shares were sold because they hit a predetermined price as part of a plan approved by the company's chief executive in August.) Moscow has also pushed conspiracy theories that companies waited until after the U.S. election to make their findings public to undermine Donald Trump in the eyes of American voters.

Many of these articles have been shared widely among anti-vaccine groups on Facebook, based on POLITICO's review of data from CrowdTangle, a social media analytics firm owned by Facebook, while others have garnered significant interactions through resharing and likes on Twitter.

In other parts of the world, particularly in Eastern European countries with historic ties to Russia, [Latin America](#), [India](#) and the Middle East, Kremlin-backed media outlets have been more aggressive in promoting conspiracy theories, according to two other national disinformation officials.

In Ukraine, articles [accusing](#) "American vaccine tests" of harming locals were shared across social media, while in Georgia, Moscow [pushed](#) claims that the West was seeking to undermine global trust in COVID-19 vaccines.

"If people think that the U.S. vaccines don't work, this is what Russia wants to achieve on a strategic basis," said [Jakub Kalenský](#), a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which tracks misinformation. "The goal is to make people doubt and distrust legitimate sources of information."

### Commercial stakes

The Kremlin's tactics, in part, are also commercial.

Only days after Pfizer and BioNTech announced the world's first COVID-19 vaccine, Russia [followed suit](#) with its own competitor, funded by the country's sovereign wealth fund. While independent scientists welcomed the news, several called for caution because of the small sample size from which Moscow based its analysis, as well as a lack of data made available to outside scientists to check the results.

"These interim results appear to be encouraging," Gillies O'Bryan-Tear, chair of policy and communications at the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine, a British trade group, [said in a statement](#). "Only 20 cases of COVID illness were the subject of this interim analysis, in contrast to the 94 cases which were reported by Pfizer."

That did not stop state-backed media and the country's sovereign wealth fund from promoting the Russian vaccine in more than 30 languages. The government also [suggested](#), based on a YouGov poll from across emerging economies, that people were more likely to take Russia's vaccine compared to other available drugs. On Saturday, Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, [told G20 leaders](#) that his country was prepared to offer its vaccine to other countries in need.

On RT Arabic, a Kremlin-backed outlet, [reports](#) circulated about how many countries had already signed up for the vaccine. On its English-language counterpart, praise from Xi Jinping, China's premier, for Russia's vaccine [garnered](#) extensive coverage. On Russia's Spanish outlets — some of the most-read media organizations in Latin America, based on data from CrowdTangle — coverage [highlighted](#) how many of the region's governments were leaning toward the Russian vaccine.

"It makes perfect sense to push the commercial aspect," said Kalenský from the Atlantic Council. "But that's not the primary motive. Spreading confusion is more important for the Russian government."

(Source: Politico)

(U) **China and Russia Are Using COVID-19 Vaccines to Expand Their Influence. The U.S. is on the**

**Sidelines:** In the new frontier of vaccine diplomacy, there are two paths: stockpile or share.

The first way is unfolding in the United States — with two promising **coronavirus** vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna on the cusp of approval — as the Trump administration focuses on domestic distribution from private labs.

The European Union and other wealthy democracies have bought up much of what's left of the initial doses, but they also will lend support to a World Health Organization-linked effort to eventually expand supplies to countries in need.

The other approach comes from China and Russia, which have rushed to share their own state-backed vaccines with nations scrambling for supply, positioning themselves to possibly expand their political and economic interests in the process.

The contrast goes well beyond the crisis of the pandemic, reflecting how the post-World War II world order is challenged by the rise of authoritarian powers and the retreat of the United States during the outgoing Trump administration.

"Global health and pharmaceutical interventions are getting sucked into balance-of-power politics," said David Fidler, senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations. "For the U.S., this creates geopolitical nightmares, because we are not in the game."

### **China's vaccine roadshow**

China has **five vaccine candidates** in the final stages of trials, which have taken place in regions of strategic importance to Beijing. Testing is underway in more than a dozen countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Brazil.

In the United Arab Emirates, where Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Maktoum, is among those to receive a vaccine, China's Sinopharm received emergency-use approval months ago.

Beijing has offered \$1 billion in loans to countries that would otherwise struggle to pay to buy its vaccine, **according** to the Mexican Foreign Ministry.

But perhaps the biggest advantages for Beijing could be won in Southeast Asia, where China and the United States compete for strategic and cultural influence.

China has signed agreements with Malaysia and Indonesia for priority access to the Sinovac Biotech vaccine, moving in swiftly with trials earlier this year as cases mounted in the two nations and economies faltered.

Beijing has said it won't use the vaccine for diplomatic leverage. But in public remarks, Chinese officials have linked the vaccine to greater cooperation and outreach — echoing China's foreign policy strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to build transport and commercial links across Asia and beyond.

There are questions about what depending on China for doses could mean for countries in Southeast Asia, particularly as they push back against Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, for instance.

Sebastian Strangio, author of a [recent book](#) on Beijing's relationship with Southeast Asia, said China's vaccine strategy is part of a broader campaign to cast itself as a "helpful, understanding regional partner — and an inevitable one."

Strangio predicted that Beijing's use of leverage will generally be "subtle" rather than a straightforward quid pro quo, such as China's request to the Malaysian government to release dozens of Chinese fishermen held for [illegally entering Malaysia's waters](#) last month. The appeal came during the same meetings as negotiations on a vaccine. The men remain jailed, and a news portal, Malaysiakini, [published letters](#) from Malaysians about the case, including one saying Malaysia will not be "held to ransom" by the Chinese vaccine.

China is "going to be smart about it," Strangio said. "It is going to be a lot of small concessions that add up over the long term."

### **Russia's Sputnik gambit**

Russia's vaccine diplomacy is part of a broader push by President Vladimir Putin to reassert the country's status as a global power. Even the name it chose for its first covid-19 vaccine — Sputnik V — evokes the 1950s Cold War space race.

Russian officials claim to have provisional orders from some 50 countries for 1.2 billion doses of Sputnik V in the next year and say they have negotiated deals with firms in South Korea, India, China, Kazakhstan and E.U.-member Hungary, led by nationalist President Viktor Orban.

Trials are underway or planned in India, the U.A.E., Brazil, Venezuela and longtime Russian ally Belarus.

The rush to roll out the vaccine before Phase 3 trials has raised questions about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.

Sputnik V's developers, the Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), say the vaccine is 92 percent effective. A second Russian vaccine has been registered and a third is in development.

Kirill Dmitriev, head of the RDIF, declined an interview request but has portrayed criticism of Sputnik V as a Western effort to undermine the project.

The Kremlin, too, is hailing Sputnik V in its diplomatic outreach. "Nowadays, the issue appears on the agenda of Putin's discussions with all of his foreign colleagues," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a recent interview with journalists.

Russia has always tried to project soft power by emphasizing its technological achievements, said Grigory Golosov, political analyst at the European University at St. Petersburg. "This only adds one more topic to this more or less continuous flow of propaganda," he said.

But the international push is also aimed at building support for the Russian vaccine at home, he added. An August poll in Russia by the Levada Center found that 54 percent of those surveyed would not take the vaccine even if it was free because of distrust and fear.

And then there is the question of capacity.

Speaking at an investment forum last month, Putin conceded that Russia faces problems in swiftly ramping up production because it lacks the equipment. Russia has been forced to slash its overly optimistic plans to make 30 million doses this year; it now estimates it will produce roughly 2 million.

The vaccine race has already started, and analysts say China and Russia are likely to take every advantage they can before a Biden administration gets into gear or private Western companies look to markets further afield.

"There's a strategic game going on, but the U.S. is not playing," said Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Facebook, Twitter, and Google are Uniting to Stop Vaccine Misinformation From Spreading Online:** Canada and the UK will work with Facebook, Google, and Twitter on ways to stop misinformation about the coronavirus vaccine from spreading online.

British fact checking charity [Full Fact](#) will coordinate the effort. Fact checking websites based in India, Argentina, and Spain will convene alongside the tech companies and federal representatives from the UK and Canada.

Facebook will fund the effort until the group launches an initial framework in January 2021, which will "set out standards of accountability" for stopping misinformation, and come up with ways to respond to "bad information" online.

Scientists around the world are trying to speed the development of a COVID-19 vaccine as the disease continues to spread. The US recorded a **250,000 deaths from COVID-19**, and many parts of Europe are **under lockdown**. (Source: Business Insider)

(U) **Coronavirus Vaccines Face Trust Gap in Black and Latino Communities, Study Finds:** If offered a coronavirus vaccine free of charge, fewer than half of Black people and 66 percent of Latino people said they would definitely or probably take it, according to a survey-based study that underscores the challenge of getting vaccines to communities hit hard by the pandemic.

The **survey released Monday** is one of the largest and most rigorous to date. Other recent studies have also pointed to vaccine hesitancy in communities of color, but Monday's survey delved deeper into the reasons, polling respondents on a spectrum of questions to get at the roots of their distrust.

Perhaps its most sobering findings: 14 percent of Black people trust that a vaccine will be safe, and 18 percent trust that it will be effective in shielding them from the coronavirus. Among Latinos, 34 percent trust its safety, and 40 percent trust its effectiveness.

The survey was conducted Sept. 1 through 15, before interim analyses were released showing that three experimental vaccines had achieved high levels of protection against the coronavirus and appeared largely safe.

The study's authors said trust in vaccine safety is especially critical and was found in subsequent questions to be by far the strongest predictor of whether people are willing to take the vaccine. Vaccinating a large share of the U.S. population will prove pivotal to establishing national immunity to the novel coronavirus and slowing the spread of the pathogen, infectious-disease specialists say. To reach the threshold necessary to establish herd immunity, a majority of Americans will likely need to be vaccinated in coming years.

But even as pharmaceutical companies release encouraging data on three experimental vaccines and officials throughout the country build a complex infrastructure of distribution chains and ultracold freezers, it is becoming increasingly clear the country will face profound challenges in trust and uptake of the vaccine.

"It's not having a vaccine that saves lives, it's people actually getting vaccinated," said Michelle A. Williams, dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who co-founded the COVID Collaborative, the nonprofit that commissioned the study. "For that to happen, we need to understand why so many are hesitant and help overcome that."

Getting coronavirus vaccines to communities of color is especially important because those communities have disproportionately borne the burden of the pandemic.

Black participation in covid-19 vaccine trials is key to Black economic recovery

Nearly nine months after the virus exploded in the United States, Black, Asian, Native American and Hispanic patients still die far more frequently than White patients, even as death rates have plummeted for all races and age groups, The Washington Post found, after analyzing the records of 5.8 million people who tested positive for the virus from early March through mid-October.

Officials are wrestling with how to ensure that vulnerable populations receive the vaccine. Almost certainly at the top of the list: about 21 million front-line health-care workers. But after them will probably be other essential workers, many of whom come from Black, Latino and Asian communities. Many can't work from home, don't have transportation and live in crowded housing.

For many Black people, the lack of trust in the coronavirus vaccine is rooted in history, some experts said.

"On one hand in this country, you have the anti-vaxxers and the unfounded disinformation they push," said Alexandre White, an expert at Johns Hopkins University who studies the sociology and history of epidemic response. "But what you see from minorities is a hesitancy that is quite rooted in historical reality."

The bodies of Black people who were enslaved were used by medical schools for anatomy dissections. Black women were used for gynecologic research, experimentation and sterilization, White noted. At a meeting last month of Food and Drug Administration officials and vaccine experts, the worries of several people of color were read aloud from a recent focus group on vaccines:

"I firmly believe that this is another Tuskegee experiment."

"I would not be first in line and I would want to see some data."

"We are not going to be guinea pigs again."

For many in the Black community, the Tuskegee syphilis study — a secret experiment conducted by the U.S. government to study the deadly venereal disease without treatment — looms especially large in the collective memory, experts said.

Monday's survey — which found 48 percent of African Americans said they would definitely or probably get the vaccine — found that knowledge of the Tuskegee study was among the predictors for whether a Black respondent would be willing to take the vaccine. Other factors included strength of their racial identity, previous flu vaccine experience, partisanship, sex, age and education.

For Latino people, similar factors were the main predictors in vaccine acceptance. But also included was their level of trust in the government to look out for the best interests of Latino people and whether the individual lived in the suburbs.

The survey was conducted by Langer Research, a New York-based survey research firm that collaborates with The Washington Post on its joint ABC-Post polls.

A similar survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Undeclared last month similarly found that 49 percent of African Americans said they would not take a vaccine even if scientists deemed it safe and made it free to anyone who wants it.

That hesitancy comes despite people in communities of color being much more likely to know someone who has suffered from covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus.

In Monday's survey, 55 percent of Black people said they knew someone diagnosed with covid-19, and 48 percent knew someone who had been hospitalized with or died from covid-19. The numbers were even higher among Latinos, with 73 percent knowing someone diagnosed and 52 percent knowing someone who had been hospitalized or died from covid-19.

Howard University President Wayne A.J. Frederick, a physician, said Black health-care providers need to stress the importance of vaccinations in their communities so they feel confident about receiving them. "The average African American cannot give you details of Tuskegee. Their mistrust is of institutions, of government institutions, of law enforcement, and that mistrust spreads across our community," Frederick said. He was one of several leading Black medical experts who have united to form the Black Coalition Against COVID-19 and held a news conference last week.

The study found that African Americans were twice as likely to trust a messenger from their own racial group compared with a White counterpart.

"The best messengers are going to be influencers from within their own communities," said Williams, from Harvard. "And very clearly, personal physicians from minority communities are going to be very important in this effort." (Source: Washington Post)

#### **(U) Week of 11/16**

**(U) The Next Big Disinformation Fight is Coming – Over Coronavirus Vaccines:** As false claims continue to fly about the 2020 election, officials and experts are already preparing for the next big disinformation fight over [coronavirus](#) vaccines.

Phony claims about the effectiveness or side effects of vaccines could prolong the virus's impact and further damage an already staggering economy. But such claims are already swirling online about promising vaccines from [Moderna](#) and [Pfizer](#) that could be available on a limited basis before the end of the year, experts who track disinformation campaigns told me.



They include unfounded claims the vaccines aren't sufficiently tested, that they'll produce damaging side effects and that they're being secretly funded by billionaires such as George Soros and Bill Gates.

**"The disinformation war is about to shift from targeting voters to targeting vaccines and the stakes will be lives,"** Peter Singer, a fellow at the New America think tank who has written extensively about information warfare, told me.

**But such disinformation could be amplified by Russia and other U.S. adversaries.**

"The longer we struggle with covid, the less trust our allies have in us, the more chaos they can sow. That's pain they can inflict on us," Clint Watts, a distinguished research fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute who tracks Russian influence operations, told me.

The groups knocking back these phony claims will be doing so in an environment that's already toxic because of false election claims.

Social media companies have faced criticism for [fact checking and labeling](#) the president's unfounded claims about election fraud — both before and after the voting concluded. That has burned through much of the good will those companies might have hoped for in the vaccine disinformation fight.

"We need authority figures and people who enjoy public trust to step in and create content around this just to make sure they don't cede the ground to people with bad intentions," DiResta said. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Are We Ready for the Next Wave of Misinformation About a COVID-19 Vaccine?** Pfizer's announcement this week that it had a 90% effective vaccine against COVID-19 provided a glimpse of the wave of mis- and disinformation that could engulf any effort to bring about broad distribution — and acceptance — of such a vaccine.

The announcement itself was the subject of a conspiracy theory: that it came out after the election so that voters couldn't give the Trump administration credit for it.

But there might be a silver lining here. An effort by Trump to take credit for development of the vaccine could be interpreted as an endorsement of it, and thus offset the anti-vaccination misinformation circulating in the online circles that many of his followers inhabit.

That is important because of the growing online intersection of vaccine hesitancy and anti-government conspiracy theories. As First Draft's Claire Wardle [told The Daily Beast's Kelly Weill](#) this week, new research by the nonprofit organization showed that vaccine disinformation "was no longer limited to hardcore anti-vaxxers, but had spread through a constellation of right-wing movements."

In another report from the London-based Center for Countering Digital Hate, which argued that social media companies had not done enough to combat anti-vaxxers, an accompanying poll of U.S. voters found a “major gap” in vaccine hesitancy between those who voted in 2016 for Hillary Clinton (29%) and those for Trump (55%).

“This suggests a push by the President and his party to persuade their base could be valuable,” wrote the report’s author, Imran Ahmed, the center’s CEO.

To be sure, anti-vaxxers are motivated by a number of different factors, not just their partisan preferences. But at a politically polarized time that seems to demand sides-taking, the worst outcome would be for one “side” or the other to align itself with misinformation about a COVID-19 vaccine that has the scientific community behind it.

In that sense, the development of a vaccine in the politically brackish waters of a lame-duck presidency and Congress – and efforts by politicians who have a following to take credit for it – might not be the worst thing. (Source: Poynter)

(U) **The Drip, Drip, Drip of Misinformation on COVID-19 Vaccine:** Misinformation fuels mistrust, whether or not it directly causes it. Indeed, Pfizer made their announcements to a world that has grown more and more suspicious of all vaccines, let alone one for COVID-19. In America, only half the population says they would be willing to take a COVID-19 vaccine, severely hampering efforts to fight the virus, which has killed nearly 1.3 million people worldwide.

So while many may have logged on to social media this week to find posts from excited friends planning their next vacation or celebrating the end of lockdowns in the near future, on the social media spaces I monitor as a misinformation researcher, I saw post after post from people spreading rumors about a COVID-19 vaccine and saying they would refuse to take one.

Between June and September, researchers at my organization, First Draft, gathered every tweet, Facebook post, and Instagram post they could that included the keywords “vaccine” or “vaccination.” To glimpse a snapshot of the global landscape, we looked at posts in three languages — English, Spanish, and French — that spanned 41 countries. In all, we retrieved more than 14 million posts (caveat: there were many more, but the platforms don’t make gathering posts easy). We then culled the 1,200 posts that users had engaged with the most as measured by likes, shares, comments, and retweets. What we learned will be crucial as the world prepares to roll out a COVID-19 vaccine.

Some of these posts were outright falsehoods, some distorted the truth, and some were designed to trigger emotional responses such as fear or anger. But these posts cannot be understood in isolation. They work together across social media sites to form larger narratives. A meme about hydroxychloroquine, a post about GMOs, and a false news piece about people dying from vaccinations work collectively to tell a larger story about how vaccines aren’t safe.

Despite the media's focus on anti-vax communities and the tired **myth that vaccines cause autism**, the narratives we observed did not just challenge the safety and efficacy of vaccines. They also questioned the motives behind them, claiming that Biden wants to mandate vaccines or that Bill Gates is using vaccines to microchip and track populations. Cultural context was also key. Despite the supposedly borderless Web, some narratives were confined to particular languages. Posts in English decried the threat to civil liberties posed by quarantines and lockdowns, while posts in Spanish trumpeted religious faith as the only true way to stop the virus.

So what needs to be done? First, the government needs to pay more attention to misinformation about vaccines. This could start at Biden's coronavirus task force, as **others** have **argued**.

Additionally, everyone who takes misinformation seriously — policy makers, staff at the social media platforms, journalists, and researchers — needs to take narratives seriously. Too often their focus is on individual posts and whether they should be taken down, demoted, debunked, or labeled. Yet their myopia leads to ineffectual policies.

When measles broke out in Brooklyn, in 2019, many platforms (first Pinterest, and then Facebook and Twitter) took the uncharacteristic step of removing vaccine misinformation. But because they removed only demonstrably false information, they ignored posts that challenged the value of widespread immunization, memes that demonized Gates and his vaccination programs, and videos that falsely implied that vaccinated children suffered from terrible side effects. All of these contributed to a wider narrative.

Narratives, however, cannot simply be debunked or labeled. As posts pile up in a daily drip, drip, drip of content, they slowly shape the way we make sense of new information. Unlike a single post, a larger narrative can undermine trust not just in vaccines, but also the very **institutions** of **science**. Luckily, we are starting to understand where narratives thrive.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the public's demand for reliable information has far outstripped the supply, in what we call "**data deficits**." False narratives rush in to fill the vacuum. On the other hand, when there's too much information, even reliable information, most people stop listening. They opt for the simplicity of false narratives over the complexity of the truth. As people have clamored for simple explanations to make sense of the pandemic, **disparate fringe groups have allied into united blocs**. Members of QAnon, anti-vaxxers, New Age communities, and Second Amendment enthusiasts are coming together in social media groups. They agree that quarantines and lockdowns are threats to what they consider to be their liberty and freedom, albeit for different reasons.

We may be sleep-walking into a situation that will be impossible to reverse, no matter how safe the eventual COVID-19 vaccine is. No matter how many scientists support widespread immunization programs that could allow people to move freely again, to hug their families, to travel across borders, and to get back to work to allow economies to recover, this daily deluge of low-level misinformation will have created narrative frames that are incredibly difficult to counter. (Source: Boston Globe)

(U) **'We're In a Crisis': Salt Lake County Working to Target COVID-19 Misinformation:** Stephanie Deer watched in horror as a doctor tearfully told her they were unable to help her sister who had suffered a heart attack.

With 206 COVID-19 patients hospitalized statewide at the time, the doctor said they were unable to give her sister the timely care she needed. It was three hours before the 47-year-old was admitted to a critical care unit. She later died.

"My sister did not have COVID and her death, in large part, was caused by COVID," Deer said Thursday. "And she didn't have the infection."

"When a doctor looks you in the face and they're in tears telling you that they can't get critical care for your family member — I feel like people need to know that," she added. "I don't want anyone to go through what my family's going through — what (my sister's) 9-year-old son is going through." Deer's story is just one of many involved in a new informational [COVID-19 campaign launched this week](#) by Salt Lake County in an effort to educate the community on the [serious impact](#) the virus has had on people in the area.

About 10% of the budget is being used to make materials dedicated specifically to Salt Lake's Spanish-speaking communities. Advertisements will be put on buses, billboards and stories will run on the radio as well.

"We are not trying to scare anyone here, but we want people to understand the gravity of the situation," spokesperson Nicholas Rupp said at a Thursday news conference announcing the campaign. "If someone needs hospital care they need to seek it out. Hopefully, it will be available. Hopefully, everyone will be doing their part enough that our hospital system can handle the surge." [As of Thursday](#), there were 468 people currently hospitalized with COVID-19 as the state reported a record-breaking single-day increase of 3,919 new cases.

New [guidelines](#) went into effect Monday, implementing a statewide mask mandate indefinitely and asking residents to only gather with those inside their households for two weeks. The rules are largely unenforceable and rely heavily on an honor standard that asks Utahns to obey the mandates as a social responsibility. (Source: KSL)

(U) **Are You An Infodemiologist? Here Are 7 Tips on How to Spot False Information About the Pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a wave of unreliable information about the virus. So how do we know who and what to believe?

“Infodemiology” – studying the flood of information about the pandemic and how to manage it – is something the World Health Organization wants us all to become well-versed in. And it has devised some simple tips to help us decide what we can and can't trust.

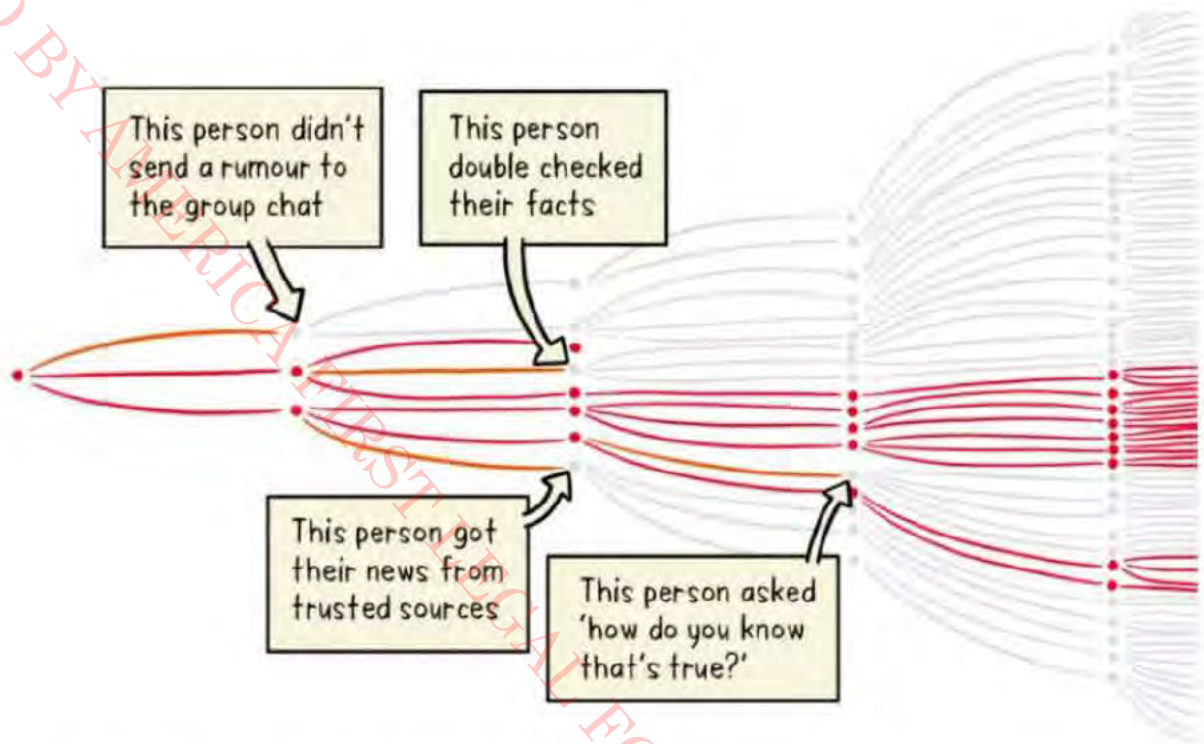


Image: WHO

The WHO says false information spreads like a virus, resulting in potentially harmful or dangerous information taking over many people's newsfeeds.

Since the start of the pandemic there's been a surge in false information, exploiting people's fears and anxieties about COVID-19, according to research by PwC. This ranges from false cures to conspiracy theories about the virus.

So to help halt the “infodemic”, the WHO suggests applying these tests to any information you hear about COVID-19.

### 1. Assess the source

Who passed on the information and where did they get it from? Always vet their source yourself; don't take their word for it, even if they are family or friends. Check how long social media profiles have been active, their number of followers and their most recent posts. For websites, search for background information and legitimate contact details. Other signs that an online source is unreliable include spelling mistakes, too many capital letters and exclamation marks.

### 2. Go beyond headlines

Don't be influenced by just the headlines – read the entire story and use non-social media sources like newspapers, podcasts and news sites to check the veracity of a headline. “Diversifying your sources allows you to get a better picture of what is trustworthy,” says the WHO.

### **3. Identify the author**

Search the author's name online to see if they are real or credible. If they claim to be a professional person, check for their profile on LinkedIn. If they say they are an academic, look on the website of the institution to which they say they belong.

### **4. Check the date**

The WHO says you should always ask these questions when you come across information: Is this a recent story? Is it up to date and relevant to current events? Does it have a headline, image or statistic that has been used out of context?

### **5. Examine the supporting evidence**

Credible stories source their facts by including quotes from experts or links to statistics or studies. Verify that experts are reliable by searching for them online and follow links to check they really do back up the story.

### **6. Check your biases**

Our personal biases shape how we see the world. Ask yourself why you have been drawn to a particular headline or story. How did you react to the story and why?

### **7. Turn to fact-checkers**

There are [more than 300 fact checking organisations in 84 countries](#), according to research by Duke University, many of which are members of the [International Fact-Checking Network](#). Global news outlets which employ fact-checkers include [the Associated Press](#) and [Reuters](#). (Source: World Economic Forum)



Tips for handling the infodemic. Image: WHO

(U) **When False Information Goes Viral, COVID-19 Patient Groups Fight Back:** For decades, people struggling with illnesses of all kinds have sought help in online support groups. This year, such groups have been in high demand for COVID-19 patients, who often must recover in isolation.

But the fear and uncertainty regarding the coronavirus have made online groups targets for the spread of false information. And to help fellow patients, some of these groups are making it a mission to stamp out misinformation.

With the support groups came misinformation. Group members reported taking massive amounts of vitamins — including vitamin D, which can be harmful in excess — or trying other home remedies not backed by science.

Experts warned that such false or unverified information spread on online support groups can not only mislead patients, but also potentially undermine trust in science and medicine in general.

“Even if we’re not actively seeking information, we encounter these kinds of messages on social media, and because of this repeated exposure, there’s more likelihood that it’s going to seep into our thinking and perhaps even change the way that we view certain issues, even if there’s no real merit or credibility,” said [Elizabeth Glowacki](#), a health communication researcher at Northeastern University.

The worldwide group has more than 30,000 members and has recently been buzzing with reports from India about treating COVID-19 with a common tapeworm medication (it’s **not FDA-approved** and there’s little evidence it works) — as well as speculation about President Donald Trump’s recent diagnosis.

Other troubling posts include people pushing hydroxychloroquine, which has not been proved effective in treating COVID-19, and sharing the viral video "America's Frontline Doctors," which promotes other unproven treatments and spreads conspiracy theories.

To keep the group evidence-based, it has built up a 17-person fact-checking team, which includes two nurses and a biologist. Someone on the team reviews every post that goes up.

However, many online COVID-19 groups don't have the resources or strategy to address misinformation.

Facebook and Twitter have made changes in their approaches toward COVID-19 misinformation, including additional fact-checking, removing posts that contain falsehoods and removing users or groups that spread them.

However, critics say more changes are needed.

Fadi Quran, director of campaigns for Avaaz, a human rights group that focuses on disinformation campaigns, said Facebook needs to revise the way it prioritizes content.

"Facebook's algorithm prefers misinformation, prefers the sensational stuff that's going to get clicks and likes and make people angry," Quran said. "And so the misinformation actors, because of Facebook, will always have the upper hand."

A study by Avaaz showed that misinformation and disinformation had been viewed on Facebook four times as often as information from official health groups, like the World Health Organization. (Source: Kaiser Health News)

**(U) Misinformation Could Prompt People to Turn Against COVID-19 Vaccines – Study:** Conspiracy theories and misinformation fuel mistrust in vaccines and could push levels that potential COVID-19 vaccines are taken in the United States and Britain below the rates needed to protect communities against the disease, a study found on Thursday.

The study of 8,000 people in the two countries found that fewer people would "definitely" take a COVID-19 vaccine than the 55% of the population scientists estimate is needed to provide so-called "herd immunity".

"Vaccines only work if people take them. Misinformation plays into existing anxieties and uncertainty around new (COVID)vaccines, as well as the new platforms that are being used to develop them," said Heidi Larson, a professor at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, who co-led the study. "This threatens to undermine the levels of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance," added Larson, who is also director of the international Vaccine Confidence Project.

The study comes as one of the major vaccine efforts showed promising results this week. Pfizer Inc said on Monday its experimental COVID-19 vaccine is more than 90% effective based on interim data from



late stage trials. The data were seen as a crucial step in the battle to contain a pandemic that has killed more than a million people.

In the misinformation study, 3,000 respondents in each country were exposed between June and August to widely circulating misinformation on social media about a COVID-19 vaccine. The remaining 1,000 in each country, acting as a control group, were shown factual information about COVID-19 vaccines. Before being exposed to misinformation, 54% of those in the UK said they would "definitely" accept a vaccine, as did 41.2% in the United States. But after being shown the online misinformation, that number fell by 6.4 percentage points in the UK group, and by 2.4 percentage points in the United States. In both countries, people without a college degree, those in low-income groups and non-whites are more likely to reject a COVID-19 vaccine, the study found.

Women were more likely than men to refuse a COVID-19 vaccine, but more respondents in both countries said they would accept a vaccine if it meant protecting family, friends, or at-risk groups. (Source: Reuters)

**(U) Global Fact-Checkers Find Strength in Numbers Amid Dual Challenges of Politics and COVID-19:**

Fact-checking is a form of journalism, and journalism is, at heart, a competitive sport. But when faced with this year's dual fire hoses of political and COVID-19 misinformation, fact-checkers have had little choice but to work together.

The [Paris Peace Forum](#), a yearly gathering of world leaders and nongovernmental organizations working to solve global problems, highlighted this fact when recognizing the work of the [CoronaVirusFacts Alliance](#) in the fight against COVID-19 misinformation.

"Fake news kills, so the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance is providing one of the remedies to that," said Justin Vaïsse, the forum's director general, during the forum's closing ceremony.

The alliance, a collection of more than 100 fact-checking organizations from more than 70 countries who so far have produced over 9,000 fact-checks about COVID-19, will receive [ongoing mentorship](#) from the forum to help it expand and scale up over the next year. (Source: Poynter)

**(U) YouTube to Add Link on COVID-19 Vaccines to Combat Misinformation:** Alphabet Inc's YouTube said on Tuesday it is adding a link to provide information on the development of COVID-19 vaccines to the coronavirus panel on its site, expanding its efforts to combat misinformation related to the pandemic.

The link will send users directly to authoritative COVID-19 vaccine information from a third-party source like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the World Health Organization (WHO), the company said in a statement.

Conspiracy theories and misinformation about the new coronavirus vaccines have proliferated on social media, including through anti-vaccine personalities on YouTube and viral videos shared across multiple platforms.

Last week, a study conducted in the United States and Britain found conspiracy theories and misinformation fuel mistrust in vaccines and could push levels that potential COVID-19 vaccines are taken below the rates needed to protect communities against the disease.

In October, the video platform said it would remove videos containing misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, and ban any content with claims that contradict consensus from local health authorities or the WHO. (Source: Reuters)

#### **(U) Week of 10/26**

**(U) U.S. Election: How COVID-19 Misinformation is Being Weaponized in Politics:** Social media platforms are being used to downplay the threat of the [coronavirus](#) and push back on [COVID-19](#) restrictions in the leadup to the [2020 U.S. election](#).

In a global pandemic, inaccurate information not only misleads but could also be a matter of life and death if people start taking unproven drugs, ignoring public health advice or refusing a coronavirus vaccine when one becomes available.

“A very dangerous element of all of this misinformation is distrust in institutions, in media and in democracy,” said Luca Nicotra, a disinformation researcher with non-profit research and activism foundation Avaaz.

“And this has very clear effects, for instance on vaccination rates. We have already seen how Facebook and other social media have promoted the rise of the anti-vaccination movement all around the world.”

A [study by his organization](#) found that content from the top 10 websites spreading health misinformation had almost four times as many views on Facebook than websites providing evidence-based information, like public health institutions such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nicotra says this has a lot to do with Facebook’s business model.

“Facebook is not a neutral platform. So basically, every time a user logs in, its algorithm decides what you see from the thousands of posts of all the pages you like or the friends you have. It selects the one that it believes will keep you in the platform the most,” he said.

“And what Facebook knows, (CEO Mark) Zuckerberg himself has said that they [know that its algorithm](#), if left unchecked, will promote in a user’s timeline, divisive, sensationalist content and disinformation.”

And misinformation is increasingly moving offline and spilling over into the streets in the form of [protests](#) or sometimes aggressive refusals to follow social distancing restrictions.

And with Facebook's algorithm trying to keep people on its platform for as long as possible, it's no surprise that what keeps people engaged are sensational posts often full of false information.

"So Facebook's responsibility then comes from the inaction on not constraining the algorithm (from going into) these black holes," Nicotra said. "That, really, in the best case, radicalizes people.

In the worst case, during a global pandemic like the one we are in the middle of, really, it puts people's lives in danger."

One idea set forth by Nicotra's foundation is that when Facebook deems a post false or dangerous, it should not only add a warning on the initial post but also when someone shares it, sending them notifications that what they have shared is untrue.

There's also a push to downgrade the algorithm, says Nicotra, so that when a post is verified false, its reach is automatically decreased.

And as we get closer and closer to the U.S. election and important COVID-19 regulations are debated, access to fact- and science-based information is more important now than ever. (Source: Global News)

**(U) A Guide to Overcoming COVID-19 Misinformation:** If any group understands the toll misinformation can take on the public understanding of science, it's climate scientists. For years, they have been trying to convey the findings from a ceaseless stream of studies showing the world is warming, while combating misinterpretations and outright fake news. A similar infodemic—a surplus of information both legitimate and misinformed—now plagues the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the internet era, when research papers are readily available, everyone can become an expert on COVID-19 or climate change. But pundits can also cherry-pick the data that matches their beliefs and seem to speak with authority. These types of personalities appear in traditional media such as television, but their work truly thrives on [social](#) and [video-streaming](#) platforms. Part of the reason is social media remains largely unregulated, and the attention—the "likes" and engagement—we receive on a post can incentivize us to share.

"It feels like we've been living in a world of misinformation for a few decades, but the amplification and reach is out of this world with new platforms," says [Sarah Evanega](#), the director of Cornell University's [Alliance for Science](#), an organization dedicated to correcting misconceptions.

And this is also a time of intense partisanship, when people tend to look to their political leaders to help them decide how to think about issues, including science. This reliance on political leanings can make people susceptible to unscientific arguments.

“People say, Well, Europe is opening schools, so why aren’t we opening schools?” or they compare COVID-19 to the flu, says John Cook, a communications expert at George Mason University who studies climate change misinformation. “Those kinds of analogies are very simplistic and misleading.”

For many people, climate change and COVID-19 feel remote, so these seemingly invisible threats create a psychological distance. This can cause people to undervalue the potential danger and make the solutions seem worse than the problem itself.

“We’re told the solutions are worse than the impacts: ‘Destroy the economy, turn the country socialist,’” says Katharine Hayhoe, a climate scientist at Texas Tech University. “These are the things people say to avoid climate action, and of course that’s not true at all.”

Misinformation may feel overwhelming, but there are ways to fight it, say those who study its pervasive reach. By recognizing what it looks like and where it comes from, experts say we can help set the facts straight.

### Setting the stage

Worldwide, scientists have published tens of thousands of studies on COVID-19 this year at a breakneck pace. While not experiencing as dramatic an uptick, studies of climate change increased exponentially from 1951 until the end of the millennium, doubling in number every 11 years. This pattern has accelerated this century as the dangers from climate disasters become more apparent.

But to disseminate information about COVID-19 to public authorities as rapidly as possible, scientific journals are under pressure to rush the careful vetting normally required to publish new science.

“We have published [studies] within a week of submission,” says Jennifer Zeis, the director of communications at the *New England Journal of Medicine*. “This is unusual—we’re not a breaking news organization, and this is a big stretch for our resources.”

Under COVID-19, this push for life-saving information also led to a flurry of articles appearing on what are known as preprint servers. These online platforms allow researchers to share their work almost as soon as the experiments are done, unlike academic publications that are more exclusive and require a time-consuming review process from a would-be author’s scientific peers.

“A tremendous amount of important science [on COVID-19] has appeared. It has been quite unprecedented,” says John Inglis, cofounder of medRxiv, the largest medical preprint server. “Obviously, some of it is wrong.”

### A path forward

To combat scientific misinformation, Cook recently developed the prototype for a game that explains different misinformation tactics. By exposing players to what misinformation looks like, they’re taught to think critically and can better identify misinformation later on.

This strategy works in a lab, he says, but he's unconvinced that misinformation can be combated on a global scale.

"I'm a bit of a pessimistic person by nature, but having worked in climate denial for 15 years now and seen and heard horrible things, I'm seeing those same dynamics play in with COVID in 2020," he says. "COVID denial is climate denial on fast forward."

Hayhoe is slightly more optimistic and continues to actively communicate her climate research at talks and on social media. In 2018, she gave a [TED Talk](#)—that's now been viewed 3.6 million times—about communicating climate science to people who are skeptical of science. She believes productive conversations are possible.

First and foremost, she says, "there has to be mutual respect." Both sides must find common ground—"something we can agree on"—that [helps move toward a positive solution](#).

"The COVID-19 pandemic is a real dire demonstration of how misinformation has real world and immediate consequences on public health," Evanega adds. "It really is a matter of life and death." (Source: National Geographic)

(U) **How COVID-19 Infected the World with Lies:** How fast does a lie travel? Cordell Hull, the longest-serving US Secretary of State and "father of the United Nations," thought he'd worked it out. "A lie will gallop halfway round the world," he proclaimed in 1948, "before the truth has time to pull its breeches on."

Hull shared his adage in a time before social media, before satellites and smartphones. There were no tweets. No Facebook posts. He couldn't have known the rise of the internet and a worldwide pandemic would expose a critical flaw in his aphorism some 70 years later.

In 2020, a lie circles the world countless times before the truth has a chance to hit "Post." At no time has that been more obvious than during coronavirus pandemic. Since it emerged in December 2019, COVID-19 has infected 33 million people and killed more than 1 million. It's also revealed significant failures in the way we consume and share information. At the center of this fight: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube -- the most popular digital platforms in the world. "There's been this explosion of mis- and disinformation spreading via social media," says Axel Bruns, a digital media researcher at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia.

On one front, we've battled a virus. On the other, we've battled misinformation. Technology enables the spread of misinformation in a way that wasn't possible before.

Efforts by social media giants to manage the deluge of misinformation have largely fallen short. Coronavirus conspiracy theories infect every corner of the web, driven by frenzied Facebook posts and fatalistic tweets. YouTube has struggled to contain the spread of misleading videos about vaccination,

microchips and Bill Gates. The science we rely on to inform the pandemic response has, at times, been distorted by rushed reporting. Incremental updates to public health information have muddied messaging across all of the biggest social networks.

Science is self-correcting, slow and methodical. Studies are repeated multiple times before they're accepted as fact. Accumulated evidence leads to widely accepted conclusions. That process worked with the HIV study, but it also exposed a significant blindspot: Social media could send shoddy research viral before researchers can adequately review it.

The rapid sharing of COVID-19 study results, preprints, news reports and press releases has enabled preliminary research to spread further than ever before, even when it's misleading or overtly false. This kind of science is "simply not ready for prime-time consumption," according to Gary Schwitzer, a health journalist and founder of medical consumer watchdog site HealthNewsReview.

Science isn't failing, but **scientists are "drowning" in COVID-19 papers**, making it difficult to dedicate time to adequately examine new research and counter false claims. **Over 30 studies related to COVID-19** have been retracted in the past 10 months. Preprints, like the HIV study, make up 11 of those retractions. Other controversial studies, some of which **include questionable data** and have informed public health decisions in the pandemic, have not been withdrawn.

When slipshod claims spread on social media, they get distorted further, making it "harder for scientists to control their messages," says Naomi Oreskes, a science historian at Harvard University. The HIV study has been scrubbed from the academic literature, but six months later it still gets shared on Twitter and Facebook as if it appeared yesterday.

Sometimes, a lie can start a fire.

Fears about phone radiation **date back to early rollouts of wireless technology** at the turn of the century. When wireless carriers announced the next-gen mobile technology 5G, **panic over the potential health concerns** reignited. But the coronavirus pandemic helped 5G fears mutate into something more sinister. The convergence of two confusing, unknown entities -- a new virus and a new technology -- created a new myth. "There was already a distrust of the technology and, as COVID-19 emerged, social media users slowly started to link the two together," says Wasim Ahmed, a social media researcher at Newcastle University in the UK.

Some falsely claimed 5G was weakening people's immune systems. Others suggested lockdowns were a cover for the installation of 5G towers, allowing governments to wirelessly control the public's minds. Ahmed, and other researchers, found that every time you cut one head off the conspiracy Hydra, two more grew back.

The 5G conspiracy resulted in the deliberate destruction of mobile towers across the globe. **Telco workers were subject to verbal and physical abuse** by those who viewed them as complicit in 5G's

spread. In Birmingham, England, one of the 5G masts providing services to a COVID-19 hospital was ruined, preventing communication between the sick and their family members.

It's impossible to single out one aspect of the pandemic as the root cause for our disordered relationship with truth. Traditional media has helped propagate some of the most outrageous conspiracy theories, extreme outlets polarize the public discourse and President Trump himself has been blamed as the major cause of health misinformation during the pandemic.

But in all of the examples above, and dozens more, social media is a pervasive thread, the horse that gallops lies around the world before truth has time to pull its breeches on.

This isn't a revelatory conclusion. The 2016 US presidential election demonstrated how social networks could be used to deliver hoaxes and falsehoods to potentially millions of people at the click of a mouse. Platforms like Facebook and Google said they'd clamp down on misinformation, but it's only gotten worse.

"Technology enables the spread of misinformation in a way that wasn't possible before," says Sander van der Linden, a social psychologist at the University of Cambridge. News doesn't come from a TV station or a local paper anymore -- now it comes from your ill-informed uncle.

On July 30, the Pew Research Center suggested US adults who get their news via social media are less likely than other news consumers to follow major news stories. They also are more exposed to unproven claims and conspiracies and less likely to get the facts right about the coronavirus. That's concerning when you look at other Pew research showing that 26% of US adults consider YouTube an important source of news. It becomes problematic when we decide to share information without adequately vetting it.

"There have been some experiments to show that as the rate of information we are exposed to increases, the likelihood that we will share low credibility information also increases," says Adam Dunn, head of biomedical informatics and digital health at the University of Sydney.

The major platforms have tried to keep misinformation at bay, particularly in regard to conspiracy theories. Reddit removed subreddits related to the QAnon conspiracy theory in 2018. Facebook has taken extensive action recently, and Twitter banned 150,000 accounts related to QAnon in July. But there has been a reluctance to remove misinformation outright, with the likes of Facebook falling back on the "free speech excuse" to eschew responsibility.

Bruns says controlling misinformation can only occur by "getting a greater number of people to be far more cautious about the information they encounter and pass on." He suggests we must build a greater awareness of where news is coming from so when we see misinformation shared by our friends, we aren't so prone to spreading it further.

"Stop seeing this as a technological problem that has technological solutions, and start treating it as a social and societal problem," he says.

In late July, Margaret Sullivan at the Washington Post suggested [America had lost the war against misinformation](#). It's true the scale of our misinformation problem is immense. It extends far beyond the pandemic, but we can't concede defeat. This is a critical juncture in the battle. The patchwork solutions provided by our social media overlords have clearly been insufficient. (Source: MSN)

**(U) The Worst Part About Finding Facebook Disinformation is Finding it Again:** When Facebook said in August it had removed a network of fake accounts that had been trying to amplify criticism of President Donald Trump, it gave some external researchers a sense of déjà vu.

After all, Facebook had taken intermittent action against accounts, pages and groups that were misrepresenting themselves to promote China's Communist Party, including specific removals of a campaign known as Spamouflage Dragon. The Spamouflage campaign apparently [began in the summer of 2019](#) as a scheme to denounce pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, eventually shifting to demonize critics of Beijing and to praise China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

By August 2020, Facebook, like Twitter and YouTube, was still [removing Spamouflage-affiliated accounts](#) that bashed Trump's inaction on the coronavirus and U.S. scrutiny of TikTok under its "coordinated inauthentic behavior" policy. Other networks of accounts also have managed to return to Facebook after they were detected and previously removed, resulting in frustration for outside disinformation specialists who spend resources catching propaganda and reporting their findings to Facebook, only to do it all over again.

"We're seeing specific actors who are coming offline, and then they make their way back on," said one researcher granted the condition of anonymity. "It gives me a sense of why we're playing catch up. And it's really f\*\*king frustrating."

It's an issue that demonstrates how social media companies, U.S. law enforcement and other entities have failed to effectively disincentivize attackers from using American platforms to try to influence public opinion, both at home and abroad. While Facebook says it's made progress against information operations — artificial intelligence software removed 6.6 billion fake accounts in 2019, [the company boasted](#) — attackers, spammers and spies continue to return to the site after they are blacklisted. Facebook employees also have spoken internally about a failure to remove accounts quickly, a problem that politicians in Honduras, Azerbaijan and elsewhere have exploited to affect political outcomes, according to a whistleblower complaint [obtained by BuzzFeed News](#).

Under its coordinated inauthentic behavior policy (CIB), Facebook scrubs accounts, pages and groups based on their actions, such as whether an account in fact belongs to who it appears. (Spamouflage accounts, for instance, would use fabricated names and images generated by artificial intelligence to denigrate Trump.)



Often, when Facebook removes a network of inauthentic accounts, the company adds data about the malicious activity to an automated recidivism tool that aims to block the same efforts in the future.

Other times, a group will entirely abandon the techniques that caught Facebook's attention, such as bots or artificial engagement tactics, only to "step back, build a new infrastructure or really try to hide themselves better," said Nathaniel Gleicher, head of cybersecurity policy at [Facebook](#).

"We've learned that, particularly for CIB actors, preventing them from doing what they want to do doesn't mean they're going to give up," he said. "They don't say, 'Oh, you got me. It's too hard.' No, they keep coming back."

It's normal for social media firms to expose and remove a network, only for researchers to find more connections between still-active accounts or for the group to try to reassert itself with new techniques, said Graham Brookie, director and managing editor of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. It's one of the problems that makes manufactured social media activity [such a difficult](#) national security challenge. (Source: CyberScoop)

**(U) Banned Conspiracy Channels are Suing YouTube Over its Anti-QAnon Moderation Push:** YouTube is facing a lawsuit from a group of channel owners who say their rights were violated by the platform's recent moderation actions against QAnon accounts. The users, many of whom boasted hundreds of thousands of followers on the platform, are seeking a temporary restraining order to restore their accounts.

"YouTube's massive de-platforming, which occurred just three weeks before the 2020 Presidential election, worked to the severe detriment of both conservative content creators and American voters who seek out their content," [the complaint alleges](#). "YouTube took this draconian action so swiftly that the Plaintiffs... received no advance notice and were not able to download their own content."

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act typically protects platforms from lawsuits over moderation actions, and the law is likely to be a pillar of YouTube's legal defense. Republicans have proposed [adding a "duty of faith" clause](#) to Section 230, which would make it easier for lawsuits of this nature to succeed. But none of those efforts have made it into law. As a result, the lawsuit's legal merit remains uncertain.

Reached for comment, Google emphasized its commitment to even-handed moderation. "We cannot comment on pending litigation, but our policies are updated regularly to meet new challenges, like harmful conspiracies that have been used to justify real-world violence," a company representative said. "We have a dedicated policy team that works to review our policies and adjust them as needed. We apply our policies consistently regardless of who owns the channel." (Source: The Verge)

**(U) Week of 10/19**

(U) **Russia State-Backed Media Continues to Spread COVID Vaccine Disinformation:** As COVID-19 cases skyrocket across Europe, so does disinformation on the pandemic. Take, for example, a story claiming that Ukraine will buy a Russian vaccine and that the purchase will be made via European Union Member States. In reality, experts fear the approval of the Russian vaccine was premature. According to the Lancet, one of the world's best-known medical journals, at that time the vaccine had not even started phase 3 trials. Another difficulty with this claim is the fact that none of the Member States had announced their intention to buy it.

The story is part of a broader narrative asserting that Russia fights the pandemic more effectively than Western democracies, boosting the credibility of a Russian vaccine and undermining that of other (Western) vaccines.

How do you erode the credibility of Western vaccines?

An old trick is to administer a lie packed in a larger truth.

Successful campaigns often “shield a forgery under the armour of a larger truth”, explains disinfo scholar Thomas Rid. His acclaimed book, *Active Measures*, showcases a spectacular example of World War II, the forged Tanaka Memorial. This document (allegedly from 1927) was instrumental in convincing many states that Japan elaborated a military strategy to achieve world domination. It was not authentic though.

Why was this false narrative so effective? Because it was rooted in Japan's actual assertive foreign policy of that time.

How do you apply this larger-truth method to Western vaccines?

To undermine the credibility of these vaccines, the pro-Kremlin media took part of the truth (the Oxford vaccine is developed using chimpanzee viral vector) to rebrand it as “the monkey vaccine”. This enables the pro-Kremlin media to suggest that the British vaccine will turn people into monkeys and also tap into criticism of animal rights supporters and anti-vaxxers.

However, a point of no small irony: the principles behind the Sputnik V vaccine are, in most respects, the same as Oxford's. Monkey see, monkey do?

The monkey narrative tries to erode the credibility of the Western vaccines. Despite all this ambitious monkey business, one should remember a good old Jamaican proverb: the higher a monkey climbs, the more exposed he is. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Facebook to Ban Ads Discouraging Vaccines:** Facebook Inc. said it would ban ads that discourage immunization, part of a broader effort to combat misinformation about health vaccinations in the coronavirus pandemic.

The tech giant has previously faced criticism from health professionals and users that it failed to curb the spread of false claims about the safety and importance of vaccines on its platforms. (Source: The Wall Street Journal)

(U) **TikTok Is Banning Accounts That Spread QAnon Theories And Disinformation:** In an election cycle that has seen major social media firms seek to stop the spread of QAnon that has grown in popularity across the different platforms, TikTok is ramping up its existing restrictions and is banning content and accounts that spread the sprawling and unfounded conspiracy theory, NPR [reports](#).

“Content and accounts that promote QAnon violate our disinformation policy and we remove them from our platform,” TikTok confirmed to *Forbes* in a statement.

The company added that it took “significant steps” to make QAnon content and hashtags harder to find, with the platform redirecting related terms to their community guidelines.

NPR [reports](#) that accounts sharing content related to the pro-Trump conspiracy theory, which has exploded in popularity in recent years, will be deleted.

TikTok told *Forbes* that the policy had been in place “for a while”, however, the move appears to have been “quietly” confirmed to Media Matters earlier this month, before being confirmed to NPR on Sunday.

#### **BIG NUMBER**

**488 million.** That’s how many combined views were racked up across 14 QAnon-related hashtags on TikTok as of June this year, according to Media Matters. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **QAnon-Conspiracy Forum 8kun Back Online With Help From Russian Internet Firm:** 8kun — the controversial online imageboard originally known as 8chan— which has been linked to the QAnon movement and multiple mass shootings, came back online on Monday following a brief disruption during the weekend, with help from a Russian internet firm called ‘ddos-guard’.

The platform was knocked offline on Sunday evening after the owner of Oregon-based CNServers which helped host 8kun found out that his company was helping keep QAnon online, cybersecurity journalist Brian Krebs [reported](#).

CNServers helped prevent 8kun from being hit with distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, a type of cyber attack that seeks to overwhelm a website’s servers taking it down in the process.

After 8kun was briefly knocked offline, the imageboard switched over to using St. Petersburg, Russia-based ddos-guard.net to protect itself from cyber-attacks. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **QAnon Conspiracy Theory Explodes Ahead of the Election:** What began as a single conspiracy theory linking Hillary Clinton to child trafficking four years ago is now part of a convoluted web of falsehoods being spread to undermine Joe Biden.

The big picture: In a year of unrest and expected election turmoil, experts are concerned that belief in QAnon could be another instigator of violence in some communities if Trump loses in November.

- "That's the question that keeps me up at night," said Bryce Webster-Jacobsen of the cyber threat intelligence firm GroupSense, which specializes in disinformation.
- Tracking these kind of local, potentially militant groups is difficult, he said, because recruitment is often both online — where most of the QAnon community lives — and offline.

By the numbers: [New polling](#) provided exclusively to Axios by [HOPE not hate](#), a U.K.-based anti-extremism nonprofit, found more than a third of Americans saying that they believe it's at least probably true that elites "are secretly engaging in large scale child trafficking and abuse."

- 10% said they are at least "soft" supporters of QAnon, specifically.
- The QAnon theory is based on a sprawling online network that analyzes cryptic messages in remote online forums by an anonymous figure "Q," who claims, without evidence, to be a Trump administration official with high-level clearance.

Driving the news: Recent reports about what was purported to be Hunter Biden's computer hard drive have sparked renewed activity from Q, with more concrete ideas to latch onto.

- On the day the [New York Post reported](#) on the alleged hard drive, Q posted 16 times, per GroupSense.

The backstory: In 2016, the [Pizzagate conspiracy](#) theory claimed that elites and Hillary Clinton's campaign manager were involved in a child sex trafficking ring being operated out of a popular pizza place. It was a niche conspiracy theory, but it led someone to show up to a pizzeria in Washington DC [with guns](#). (Source: Axios)

### (U) Week of 10/12

(U) **Russians Spread Disinformation on Oxford COVID Vaccine:** A Russian disinformation campaign designed to undermine and spread fear about the Oxford University coronavirus vaccine has been exposed by a *Times* investigation.

Pictures, memes and video clips depicting the British-made vaccine as dangerous have been devised in Russia and middlemen are now seeking to "seed" the images on social media networks around the world.

The crude theme of the distorted images is that the vaccine, millions of doses of which will be manufactured by the pharmaceutical giant Astrazeneca, could turn people into monkeys because it uses

a chimpanzee virus as a vector. The campaign is being targeted at countries where Russia wants to sell its own **Sputnik V vaccine**, as well as western nations. (Source: The Times)

**(U) Fauci Says Social Media Fuels the Spread of Disinformation, Has Impacted Pandemic 'More Negatively Than Positively':** Anthony Fauci has said social media has impacted the COVID-19 pandemic more negatively than positively by fueling the spread of disinformation.

Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was interviewed by students at UC Berkeley on Thursday. He was asked how social media and other digital platforms have impacted the public's response to COVID-19, given the amount of misinformation about the disease that has spread online.

"It has impacted it, I think in some respects, more negatively than positively," the White House coronavirus task force member said. "Social media [...] is an extraordinary way to disseminate information quickly and widely. One of the problems is when disinformation gets in there, it has a way of self-propagating itself to the point where you don't know what's true and what's not true."

Fauci said that some conspiracy theories and misinformation get in the way of people following public health guidance. He pointed to individuals not wearing masks, believing they will not get infected in a crowd, or that if they do get infected it will be meaningless because it is a "trivial outbreak."

"How could it be a trivial outbreak if it has already killed 210,000 people in the United States, and a million people worldwide?" Fauci said. "But there are people out there that think all of this is a big conspiracy, that we've made it up." (Source: Newsweek)

**(U) Elections Officials Ask Voters to Stop Disinfecting Mail-In Ballots:** Sacramento County elections officials are asking people to stop disinfecting their mail-in ballots.

"Voters do not have to worry about contracting COVID from their mail-in ballots," said Courtney Bailey-Kanelos, Registrar of Voters in Sacramento County.

Officials said the ballots themselves were processed by machines weeks ago and are safe to handle. The registrar told KCRA 3 they have received at least 100 ballots damaged by disinfectant and alcohol spray. In one case, someone even microwaved their ballot in an attempt to get rid of any germs. (Source: NBC)

**(U) YouTube Bans Misleading Covid-19 Vaccine Videos:** It said any videos that contradict expert consensus from local health authorities, such as the NHS or World Health Organization, will be removed. It follows an announcement by Facebook that it would ban ads that discourage people from getting vaccinated.

However, that restriction will not apply to unpaid posts or comments.

YouTube had already **banned "medically unsubstantiated" claims** relating to coronavirus on its platform. But it is now explicitly expanding the policy to include content relating to vaccines. (Source: BBC)

(U) **QAnon: Facebook Crackdown on Works as Hundreds of Groups Suspended and Followers Scatter to Smaller Platforms:** Facebook has successfully undertaken a crack down of QAnon-affiliated groups hosted on its platform.

The immediate aftermath saw hundreds of pages disappear, with communities rushing to other, less-moderated, platforms in its wake.

Facebook has faced ongoing criticism for its slow response to the US-based far-right conspiracy theory, which has festered and thrived through private groups, and subsequently found roots in the UK. The site's delayed response is thought to have allowed the conspiracy theory to exponentially grow in the past year.

QAnon – which the FBI listed as a potential domestic terrorist threat in 2019 – first began on 4Chan in 2017. Believers think that President Donald Trump is secretly fighting members of the “deep state” – a cabal of satanic high-ranking elites and officials involved in a global paedophile ring.

Facebook's move was an escalation to prior commitments to remove or restrict groups and accounts sharing and promoting QAnon material. (Source: iNews)

(U) **Facebook Greatest Source of Covid-19 Disinformation, Journalists Say:** The majority of journalists covering the pandemic say **Facebook** is the biggest spreader of disinformation, outstripping elected officials who are also a top source, according to an international survey of journalism and Covid-19. The social media platform, which announced this week **it was updating its hate speech policy** to ban content that denies or distorts the **Holocaust**, was identified by 66% of journalists surveyed as the main source of “prolific disinformation”.

Despite 82% reporting the misinformation to Facebook, and its other platforms WhatsApp and Instagram, which also spread fake news, almost half said they were unhappy with the response.

Twitter, YouTube and Google Search also frequently spread disinformation about Covid-19, the survey conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University found.

The pandemic project was launched in April 2020 to study the impacts of the coronavirus crisis on journalism worldwide and to collect evidence-based suggestions to inform the recovery. (Source: The Guardian)

(U) **A Facebook Ban Won't Stop QAnon:** QANON, the conspiracy theory that claims [President Trump](#) is secretly battling a Hollywood-Jewish-Democrat-deep state-globalist cabal of Satanist-murderer-pedophile-human traffickers, is huge. In both the span of its reach and the depth of its ideas, the conspiracy has grown into a juggernaut of misinformation. (“We call it a superconspiracy,” says Antonis Papasavva, a data scientist at University College London. “Name any conspiracy theory—JFK, MK Ultra, Pizzagate—it’s in there.”) This week, [Facebook](#) vowed to remove any pages, groups, or Instagram accounts that represent [QAnon](#), which has gobbled up loads of engagement on the platform thanks to its something-for-everybody theories. Up until two months ago, Facebook didn’t really have any policies when it came to QAnon, and Tuesday’s ban marked a sharp escalation. Sharp, but also perhaps too late.

In August, after years of activists calling for Facebook to take a stronger stance against QAnon—which has promoted violence, anti-Semitism, racism, and Covid-19 misinformation on the platform—Facebook took a step forward. They announced that they would be restricting QAnon content by removing it from recommendation algorithms and taking down pages and accounts that discussed real-world violence. According to Facebook, the August crackdown led to the removal of more than 1,500 Facebook groups and pages, but QAnon has continued to flourish. Experts think it’ll go on flourishing, ban or no ban.

Facebook’s QAnon moratorium also has a cavernous loophole: It only targets entities that “represent” QAnon. “If I designate myself Queen of QAnon today, does that mean I’ll be removed?” asks Joan Donovan, research director at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, where she studies online extremism. “I can’t see a world in which anyone is considered a representative of a conspiracy theory other than Q.” According to Facebook, QAnon “representatives” would have the word QAnon in their handle and bio or title and About section, and share QAnon posts to a degree that crosses a threshold that they’re not divulging. Deciding who and what checks those boxes will be left to Facebook’s Dangerous Organizations Operations team, which handles terrorists and hate groups. “It’s content moderation by press release,” says Donovan. The announcement is strong, but it’s unclear how wide-ranging or enforceable the new policy really is.

If you think that it would now be pretty easy to camouflage an abiding QAnon passion as a passing or even accidental interest by changing some words in your bio, you’d be correct. Plus, extremist groups are experts at going underground to escape public scrutiny. “I’m skeptical that this ban will have any impact in the long run,” says Phyllis Gerstenfeld, who studies online extremism and criminology at Cal State University Stanislaus. “Extremists find new ways to repackage themselves.” QAnon adherents already demonstrated their ability to do this when they hijacked the hashtags [#SaveTheChildren](#) and [#SaveOurChildren](#) and used them to reach new audiences who would never have joined a QAnon group, but do care about kids.

As for hiding the actual QAnon label, that’s happening right now, this very minute. Even before the ban, QAnon groups were discussing alternate ways of identifying themselves to avoid detection and moderation. Tech-censorship doomsday strategizing is common to all online extremist groups, both because they constantly break terms of service and because it suits their paranoid worldview. In this case, people actually had orders to do so from on high: the user identifying themselves as Q told them

to “Drop all references re: ‘Q’ ‘Qanon’ etc. to avoid ban/termination.” Some groups have been using “17” as a replacement callsign, but it will be something new by morning.

When you start asking questions about how effective any Facebook ban would be in curbing the spread of an extremist ideology, you start getting a lot of coulds, maybes, and probablies. Compared to social media sites like Reddit and Twitter, Facebook is miserly with its data. “The data on any of these influence operations and network factions are firmly held within Facebook. We have to over rely on their assessment of risk and size to have these conversations at all,” Donovan says. To investigate the impact of Facebook policies on fringe groups, Blackburn has had to look through other platforms’ data on strategic dates to see if people migrated after being banned. “If Facebook made the entirety of their data available to scientists, it would make our job a lot easier.” Facebook is asking the public to trust them to handle the problem, but it’s not clear what the scope of the problem is or how effective their strategies have been at addressing similar issues in the past.

Also, Facebook is just one platform. Even if its ban works perfectly, it’ll be hard pressed to stop QAnon completely. At this point, maybe nothing can. “Aside from building a time machine? Marty McFly, is he available?” Donovan says. It’s easy to look back now and say that had social media platforms been a little more proactive in banning the groups, or had they taken stronger stances on QAnon activities like the harassment of public figures, maybe the conspiracy theory wouldn’t have grown to the presidentially-endorsed proportions it has now. “[QAnon has] cracked through to the mainstream, like conspiracy theories about the Moon landing,” Donovan says. “It’s probably here to stay, at least in the stories people tell themselves about the deep state and corruption in government.” You can’t undo Q, but better policies could mitigate what QAnon will do in the future. (Source: Wired)

**(U) Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic:** The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is the first pandemic in history in which technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, productive and connected. At the same time, the technology we rely on to keep connected and informed is enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardizes measures to control the pandemic.

An infodemic is an overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals. Mis- and disinformation can be harmful to people’s physical and mental health; increase stigmatization; threaten precious health gains; and lead to poor observance of public health measures, thus reducing their effectiveness and endangering countries’ ability to stop the pandemic.

Misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.



Furthermore, disinformation is polarizing public debate on topics related to COVID-19; amplifying hate speech; heightening the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations; and threatening long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights and social cohesion.

In this context, the UN Secretary-General launched the United Nations Communications Response initiative to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation in April 2020. The UN also issued a Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech (11 May 2020).

At the World Health Assembly in May 2020, WHO Member States passed Resolution WHA73.1 on the COVID-19 response. The Resolution recognizes that managing the infodemic is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic: it calls on Member States to provide reliable COVID-19 content, take measures to counter mis- and disinformation and leverage digital technologies across the response. The Resolution also calls on international organizations to address mis- and disinformation in the digital sphere, work to prevent harmful cyber activities undermining the health response and support the provision of science-based data to the public.

The UN system and civil society organizations are using their collective expertise and knowledge to respond to the infodemic. At the same time, as the pandemic continues to create uncertainty and anxiety, there is an urgent need for stronger action to manage the infodemic, and for a coordinated approach among states, multi-lateral organizations, civil society and all other actors who have a clear role and responsibility in combatting mis- and disinformation.

We call on Member States to develop and implement action plans to manage the infodemic by promoting the timely dissemination of accurate information, based on science and evidence, to all communities, and in particular high-risk groups; and preventing the spread, and combating, mis- and disinformation while respecting freedom of expression. (Source: WHO)

#### (U) Week of 10/5

**(U) Belief in Conspiracy Theories Is a Barrier to Controlling Spread of COVID-19:** Belief in conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic is not only persistent but also is associated with reluctance to accept a COVID-19 vaccine when one becomes available and to engage in behaviors such as mask-wearing that can prevent its spread, according to researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

In a new study, based on a two-wave national panel survey conducted in late March and mid-July, the researchers find that belief in conspiracy theories about the source and seriousness of the pandemic persisted across the four-month period. These beliefs in March were associated with increasing reluctance to adopt preventive behaviors in July, including actions such as mask-wearing and accepting a vaccine when one is available.

“Belief in pandemic conspiracy theories appears to be an obstacle to minimizing the spread of COVID-19,” said Dan Romer, [research director](#) of the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC) of the University of

Pennsylvania, who co-authored the study with APPC director [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#). “To control the pandemic we need high rates of mask-wearing, physical distancing, and hand-washing now – and of vaccination when a safe and effective vaccine is available.”

### Widespread belief in conspiracy theories

Researchers assessed belief in three COVID-19 conspiracy theories in March and July among 840 U.S. adults on a survey panel and found that high proportions believed in them at both times:

- More than 1 in 4 people (28%) in March reported believing that the Chinese government created the coronavirus as a bioweapon, a proportion that increased to 37% in July;
- Nearly 1 in 4 (24%) believed in March that some in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, are exaggerating the danger posed by the virus in order to damage Donald Trump’s presidency, which increased to 32% in July;
- Nearly 1 in 7 (15%) believed that the pharma industry created the virus to increase sales of drugs and vaccines, which edged up to 17% in July.

Heavy use of conservative media or social media was associated with a greater likelihood that people would report believing in these theories. This study extends prior APPC studies which found that [people who rely on social media](#) were more likely to be misinformed about vaccines and that people who used [conservative or social media](#) at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic were more likely to believe conspiracy theories about it and to be misinformed about how to prevent the virus.

“Conspiracy theories are difficult to displace because they provide explanations for events that are not fully understood, such as the current pandemic, play on people’s distrust of government and other powerful actors, and involve accusations that cannot be easily fact-checked,” Jamieson said.

In the study, the authors argue that counteracting the effects of conspiracy beliefs will require “continued messaging by public health authorities on mainstream media and in particular on politically conservative outlets that have supported COVID-related conspiracy theories.”

### Conspiracy theories and vaccination intentions

The researchers found that belief in conspiracy theories was inversely related to the perceived threat of the pandemic; taking of preventive actions, including wearing a face mask; and the intention to be vaccinated when there is a COVID-19 vaccine.

Assessing people’s COVID-19 vaccination plans, researchers found a widening gap over time between people who most strongly believed the COVID-19 conspiracies and those who did not believe them.

In March, those who did not believe the conspiracies were 2.2 times more likely to intend to be vaccinated than those who most strongly believed in the conspiracies – a ratio that had widened to 3.5 times in July:

- In March, 37% of people who most strongly believed in these three conspiracy theories reported that they intended to be vaccinated, compared with 81% of the people who did not believe in them.
- By July, the vaccination intention rates were 22% for those who most strongly believed in these conspiracies and 76% for those who did not believe in them.

Believers in the coronavirus conspiracies were also more likely to have doubts about the safety of the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (MMR), a concern that appeared to play a role in their heightened hesitancy to accept a vaccine for COVID-19.

#### Conspiracy theories and mask-wearing

The first wave of the survey was conducted before the CDC advised people in early April to wear nonsurgical masks as a preventive measure when they go out in public.

In July, among those who were most likely to believe in the COVID-19 conspiracies, 62% reported wearing a mask every day that they went outside of the home and had exposure to others – compared with 95% of those who did not believe in the conspiracies.

In other words, those who did not believe in the conspiracies were 1.5 times more likely to wear a mask every day outside of the home when they were in contact with others than the people who most strongly believed in the conspiracies.

#### Group differences and conspiracy beliefs

Members of historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups were more likely to believe the conspiracies, a finding which is rendered even more troubling because communities of color are disproportionately suffering the effects of COVID-19. However, older adults were less likely to believe the conspiracies, which is good news because they are more likely to suffer from the disease.

One positive note was that political ideology was not related to changes in vaccination intentions from March to July. This was in contrast to mask-wearing; the July survey found that liberals were more likely than conservatives to adopt mask-wearing. (Source: Annenberg Public Policy Center)

**(U) Do Twitter Bots Spread Vaccine Misinformation? Research Shows It's Not That Simple:** Discussion of online misinformation in politics and public health often focuses on the role of bots, organized disinformation campaigns and “fake news”. A closer look at what typical users see and engage with about vaccines reveals that for most Twitter users, bots and anti-vaccine content make up a tiny proportion of their information diet.

Having studied how [vaccine](#) information spreads on social media for several years, I think we should refocus our efforts on helping the consumers of misinformation rather than blaming the producers. The key to dealing with misinformation is to understand what makes it important in the communities where it is concentrated.

#### Vaccine-critical Twitter

In our latest study, [published in the American Journal of Public Health](#), we looked at how people see and engage with vaccine information on Twitter. We showed that while people often see vaccine content, not much of it is critical and almost none comes from bots.

While some other [research](#) has counted how much anti-vaccine content is posted on social media, we went a step further and estimated the composition of what people saw and measured what they

engaged with. To do this we monitored a set of 53,000 typical Twitter users from the [United States](#). Connecting lists of whom they follow with more than 20 million vaccine-related tweets posted from 2017 to 2019, we were able to track what they were likely to see and what they passed on.

In those three years, a typical Twitter user in the US may have seen 727 vaccine-related tweets. Just 26 of those tweets would have been critical of vaccines, and none would have come from a bot.

While it was relatively infrequent, nearly 37% of users posted or retweeted vaccine content at least once in the three years. Only 4.5% of users ever retweeted vaccine-critical content and 2.1% of users retweeted vaccine content posted by a bot.

For 5.8% of users in the study, vaccine-critical tweets made up most of the vaccine-related content they might have seen on Twitter in those three years. This group was more likely to engage with vaccine content in general and more likely to retweet vaccine-critical content. (Source: Micky; University of Sydney)

**(U) How Pinterest Beat Back Vaccine Misinformation:** The battle over misinformation amid the COVID-19 pandemic has pitted health experts, parts of the public, and the leaders of online platforms against one another.

So far, one social media giant seems to be winning the fight against falsehoods: Pinterest.

The company, which made a name for itself as an idea collection platform for everything from clothing trends to healthy recipes, has taken a hardline strategy against health misinformation, and in particular, vaccine falsehoods. Pinterest has a zero-tolerance vaccine misinformation policy, a team tasked with enforcing it, and a flexible approach that accounts for emerging intel from health authorities.

Pinterest's strategy appears to run in stark contrast to that of Facebook, which has seen misinformation run rampant. Facebook, which has frequently cited free speech as a reason for leaving potentially harmful posts untouched, has drawn criticism from health experts who say the social network hasn't done enough to combat it. Some experts say it could stand to take a page from Pinterest.

"Pinterest's results suggest that if Facebook scaled up its moderation, it might get further," said Neil Johnson, professor of physics and researcher at the Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics at George Washington University.

The crux of Pinterest's anti-misinformation arsenal is its mission statement: Inspire people to do the things they love. Unlike Facebook, which is centered around connection — negative or positive — Pinterest has a narrower, more positivity-minded focus. The company's emphasis on fostering inspiration carries over to its misinformation policies.

"There's nothing inspiring about harmful misinformation that might affect your health or your family's health or your community's health," said Sarah Bromma, the company's head of policy.

The strategy isn't perfect, of course. There's still an abundance of "pin" collections that encourage non-evidence-based treatments for issues like anxiety and weight loss. Yet overall, the approach has

produced some positive outcomes, especially when it comes to vaccine misinformation, which was once common on Pinterest. (Source: PBS)

**(U) The U.S. Exported QAnon to Australia and New Zealand. Now It's Creeping Into COVID-19**

**Lockdown Protests:** For a conspiracy theory with origins in American politics, QAnon is proving remarkably malleable for export outside the U.S., fueled by growing frustration over COVID-19 restrictions around the world. In [Australia and New Zealand](#), especially, it has taken on a life of its own—with followers adapting QAnon to incorporate local politicians and causes.

As in the United States, QAnon in Australia and New Zealand has mixed with other global conspiracy theories, including false beliefs that [5G towers are spreading coronavirus](#), unfounded claims that COVID-19 was either pre-planned or is a hoax and baseless theories about public [vaccination programs](#). That turgid brew of misinformation is increasingly moving offline and spilling over into the streets in the form of protests or sometimes aggressive refusals to follow social distancing restrictions.

“We have seen the emergence of transnational, amorphous conspiracy-theory based movements,” says Joshua Roose, a senior research fellow at Deakin University in Australia. “All share a strong distrust in government and state institutions.”

**QAnon spills over into the streets**

The local strain of QAnon appears to be spurred by anger at COVID-19 restrictions: A resurgence of COVID in [July](#) forced the Australian state of Victoria—where Melbourne is located—into one of the most restrictive lockdowns in the world for weeks. In New Zealand, a small coronavirus outbreak in August also forced the government to reimpose restrictions in Auckland, the largest city.

Lockdown measures have eased in both countries, but supporters of QAnon continue to spread their conspiracy theories online—and, increasingly, offline. QAnon signs cropped up at “Freedom Day” anti-lockdown protests across Australia on Sept. 5, as well as at [similar protests](#) in Auckland.

**A local twist on a conspiracy theory**

QAnon may center around an American conspiracy theory, but that hasn't stopped supporters in Australia and New Zealand from adding their own local flavors.

One twist involves the hundred miles of [storm drain tunnels](#) running beneath Melbourne. Some Australian QAnon posts claim that Melbourne's coronavirus lockdown was meant to keep the streets clear for an operation to rescue child sex-trafficking victims in the tunnels. (There is no evidence of this.) The conspiracy theory also predicts the arrest of high-level officials for sex trafficking crimes. Again, resourceful Australian QAnon followers have adapted that narrative for their home turf. One Facebook post seen by TIME (falsely) alleged that Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been under house arrest since January. The evidence? Blurry, close-up photos of Morrison wearing long pants, which

appear to have either bunched up or been folded at the ankle and supposedly prove the Australian leader is wearing an ankle monitor.

At a rally in New Zealand in early September, protesters referenced multiple COVID-19 conspiracy theories, according to local reports. But demonstrators have also woven in local causes. Some protesters were seen holding signs calling to “ban 1080,” a reference to the government’s use of poison to control populations of invasive rodents (the cause has been supported by some mainstream groups in recent years, but has been fodder for conspiracy theorists.) At least one protester was spotted with a sign that depicted Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern as Adolf Hitler.

Despite its presence at protests, QAnon really thrives online, and it gained a substantial foothold in Australia and New Zealand during COVID-19 lockdowns. One Facebook group started in Australia, comprising a mix of people denying the existence of the coronavirus, anti-vaxxers, so-called sovereign citizens and QAnon supporters, had more than 65,000 members before it was removed by the social media giant.

“You put marginalized people under pressure and fear and they look for non-mainstream and unorthodox theories to regain their sense of control and agency,” says Michael Grimshaw, of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

The conspiracy theories—and opposition to coronavirus restrictions in general—remain at the fringes in both nations. A recent Pew poll shows that 94% of Australians think the country did a good job handling the pandemic (the same poll reported that only 47% of Americans felt the same way). An August poll found that public confidence in health officials in New Zealand was above 80%.

But misinformation is increasingly bleeding over into the mainstream. Australian television chef Pete Evans—who has 275,000 Instagram followers—has posted QAnon-related content on Instagram in recent months. In New Zealand, a lifestyle influencer with more than 60,000 followers posted in support of QAnon claims in her Instagram story. “There’s soooooo much I want and need to address on here. But I’m going to start slowly and it will start with Hollywood, Cabal and Human Trafficking,” she said in one Instagram story. “People may think why? That’s America it has nothing to do with us. In the big scheme of things it has EVERYTHING to do with us. All you need to do is research Jacinda Ardern and her ties with Bill Gates...”

Both Facebook and Twitter say they’re taking action against QAnon-related content. Twitter announced in late July a stronger approach to dealing with QAnon, including permanently suspending accounts that violate its policies, banning URLs associated with QAnon from being shared on the site, limiting content from its trends and recommendations and not highlighting it in searches.

Facebook said in August it had removed 790 groups, 100 pages and 1,500 ads tied to QAnon and other groups it said support violence and blocked more than 300 hashtags across Facebook and Instagram worldwide. The company says that QAnon pages, groups and accounts will be removed when they

violate Facebook's community standards, including inciting violence. The company also said it will limit some content from recommendations and the ranking of this content will be lower in News Feed.

Despite their efforts to reduce the accessibility of QAnon content, a quick search shows Australia and New Zealand-specific QAnon conspiracy theories are widely available on both platforms. TIME found at least three separate Twitter accounts, with thousands of followers each, that used Australian QAnon hashtags in their profiles. TIME also found public Facebook groups specific to Australia and New Zealand that hosted QAnon posts, each with hundreds of members.

Increasingly, ordinary Internet users are spreading QAnon-related memes and theories. Lydia Khalil, a research fellow at the Sydney-based think-tank the Lowy Institute, says some conspiracy theories have spread via mommy blogs, and fitness and wellness influencers, who have latched on to the child-sex trafficking and anti-vaccine elements of these theories.

"Not all of the people spreading this stuff are hard-core conspiracy theorists or extremists, they're picking up on hashtags or more nebulous elements of this and then pushing it out without really understanding who's behind it and where it's coming from," she says.

But leaders in Australia and New Zealand have been forced to publicly address some of the conspiracy theories because they became so prevalent. Australian officials have been forced to publicly refute the link between 5G and coronavirus, and on a television program on Aug. 5, [Prime Minister Scott Morrison](#) told people identifying as "sovereign citizens" and anti-maskers intentionally defying coronavirus restrictions to "get real." (Source: Time)

**(U) Russia is Spreading Lies About Covid Vaccines, Says UK Military Chief:** Russia is seeking to destabilise countries around the world by sowing disinformation about coronavirus vaccines that is shared rapidly across social media, the head of the armed forces has warned.

Gen Sir Nick Carter, the chief of defence staff, said the propaganda tactic reflected a strategy of "political warfare" aggressively undertaken by Beijing as well as Moscow "designed to undermine cohesion" across the west.

The senior general accused "autocratic rivals" of "manipulating the information environment" to exploit the Covid-19 crisis for strategic gain – including "pro-Russian vaccine politics" – in a speech [at the Policy Exchange thinktank](#).

Their "disinformation narratives" were designed to permeate anti-vaccination social media groups, Carter added, [pointing to an example uncovered earlier this summer by Australian researchers](#) that spread rapidly from Ukraine.

In July, a fake press release was posted to websites of the pro-Russian self-declared state in Luhansk, eastern Ukraine. It falsely claimed that the US had conducted vaccine trials on Ukrainian volunteers, some of whom had died.

The trials never happened but the misleading narrative spread in several languages, including on a [prominent Australian anti-vaccination Facebook group](#), despite multiple attempts to fact-check and [debunk it](#).

Carter said it was an example of “digital authoritarianism” alongside well-known Kremlin cyber and hacking attacks, in a rare policy speech delivered with the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, sitting alongside him.

A similar approach was adopted by China, he added, where “the Chinese Communist party is forging a future of mass surveillance” and ranking and monitoring of individuals based on how they behave online.

The speech comes in the run-up to a five-year integrated review of defence and foreign policy that is expected to see the UK seek to invest more heavily in cyber and covert capabilities, reflecting a belief that Britain is already engaged in a persistent low-level conflict with authoritarian rivals. (Source: The Guardian)

**(U) Twitter Bans Chinese Virologist Claiming that Coronavirus was Made in a Lab:** Twitter has suspended the account of a Chinese virologist who has been posting unsubstantiated claims that the coronavirus originated in a Wuhan lab.

The account of Dr. Li-Meng Yan went dark amid her claims, published online in a preprint report written with three colleagues, that the virus shows telltale signs of not having evolved naturally.

Twitter has been labeling and slapping warning labels to tag troublesome posts that appear to spread misinformation about coronavirus or incite violence, the [company announced in May](#). (Source: Daily News)

**(U) Facebook Imposes Major New Restrictions on QAnon, Stepping Up Enforcement Against the Conspiracy Theory:** Facebook imposed sweeping new sanctions on the QAnon conspiracy theory on Tuesday, expanding its policy to remove all affiliated groups and pages — and all accounts on the Facebook subsidiary Instagram — even if they don’t violate other policies by inciting violence or trafficking in hate speech.

The move significantly expands an [enforcement action in August](#) that targeted more than 3,000 pages and groups but stopped short of a full ban. But the content morphed almost instantaneously, prompting Tuesday’s more sweeping action, the company said in an unsigned blog post Tuesday afternoon.



"QAnon messaging changes very quickly and we see networks of supporters build an audience with one message and then quickly pivot to another. We aim to combat this more effectively with this update that strengthens and expands our enforcement against the conspiracy theory movement," the company said in its blog post.

The ban encompasses all Facebook pages and groups devoted to QAnon, as well as Instagram accounts that have names representing the deluded philosophy. It does not reach individual Facebook profiles or posts, meaning conversation about QAnon will hardly be forbidden on the platform.

This action comes after more than two years of [mounting evidence](#) that the QAnon conspiracy is rife with violent, hateful themes that regularly violated policies across Silicon Valley and also inspired numerous real-world crimes. (Source: Washington Post)

### (U) Week of 9/14

(U) **Combatting COVID-19 Misinformation with Machine Learning:** Misinformation around COVID-19 is driving human behavior across the world. Here in the information age, sensationalized clickbait headlines are crowding out actual fact-based content, and, as a result [misinformation spreads virally](#). Conversations within small communities become the epicenter of false information, and that misinformation spreads as people talk, both online and off. As the number of misinformed people grow, this "infodemic" grows.

The spread of misinformation around COVID-19 is especially problematic, because it could overshadow the key messaging around safety measures from public health and government officials.

In an effort to counter misinformed narratives in central and west Africa, Novetta Mission Analytics (NMA) is working with Africa CDC (Center for Disease Control) to discover and identify narratives and behavior patterns around the disease, says David Cyprian, product owner at Novetta. And machine learning is key.

They supply data that measures the acceptability, impact, and effectiveness of public health and social measures. In turn, the Africa CDC analysis of the data enables them to [generate tailored guidelines](#) for each country.

"With all these different narratives out there, we can use machine learning to quantify which ones are really affecting the largest population," Cyprian explains. "We uncover how quickly these things are spreading, how many people are talking about the issues, and whether anyone is actually criticizing the misinformation itself."

NMA uncovered trending phrases that indicate worry around the disease, mistrust about official messaging, and criticisms of local measures to combat the disease. They found that herbal remedies are becoming popular, as is the idea of herd immunity.

"We know all of these different narratives are changing behavior," Cyprian says. "They're causing people to make decisions that make it more difficult for the COVID-19 response community to be effective and implement countermeasures that are going to mitigate the effects of the virus."

To identify these narrative threads, Novetta ingests publicly-available social media at scale and pairs it with a collection of domestic and international news media. They process and analyze that raw social and traditional media content in their ML platform built on AWS to identify where people are talking about these things, and where events are happening that drive the conversations. They also use natural language processing for directed sentiment analysis to discover whether narratives are being driven by mistrust of a local government entity, the west, or international organizations, as well as identifying influencers that are engendering a lot of positive sentiment among users and building trust.

Pieces of content are tagged as positive or negative to local and global pandemic measures and public entities, creating small human-labeled data sets about specific micronarratives for specific populations that might be trading in misinformation.

By fusing rapid ingestion with a human labeling process of just a few hundred artifacts, they're able to kick off machine learning and apply it to the scale of social media. This allows them to have more than one learning model that is used for all the problem sets. (Source: Venture Beat)

(U) **QAnon Spreads Across Globe, Shadowing COVID-19:** The QAnon movement is spreading around the world, turning an outlandish conspiracy theory revolving around President Trump into one of the nation's most dangerous exports.

Flags and banners brandishing one of the conspiracy's mottos — "WWG1WGA," an acronym for "where we go one, we go all" — dotted the crowd at a rally against lockdowns in Germany last month.

And when Trump visited Japan in 2019, he was greeted by cardboard cutouts of the letter Q.

These aren't just isolated instances either. Researchers have found large QAnon communities in more than 70 countries.

The original conspiracy theory was tightly focused on an alleged cabal of deep state figures and Hollywood elites running child trafficking rings that Trump was working with the military to expose. But it has since evolved into a meta-conspiracy theory that pushes its anti-institution and anti-Semitic strains more explicitly.

Experts who spoke with The Hill about the theory's spread said it has become worse because of the coronavirus, which itself is the subject of many conspiracy theories. This helped create a perfect storm fostering distrust in established government and public health institutions.

"Pandemics fuel a lot of questions and make people very skeptical, especially in cases when what we would consider to be credible and trustworthy institutions all of a sudden themselves don't seem to have the right answers or are not aligned on how to manage the situation," Anna-Sophie Harling, head of media evaluation startup NewsGuard's Europe team, said in an interview.

"Conspiracies are rooted in the idea that we're all being lied to by some greater authority or voice and QAnon perfectly ties into that."

The hyper-viral short documentary "Out of the Shadows" fueled baseless theories linking the coronavirus's origins to Bill Gates, 5G towers and the World Health Organization, Alex Newhouse, digital research lead at the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute, told The Hill.

And as institutional distrust grew, QAnon, which pushed a lot of the disinformation in the first place, was able to grab a foothold.

Another way that the pandemic has contributed to the international spread of QAnon is by isolating people and leaving them with little to do but go online.

"As a consequence of people not working as much, people are spending a lot more time online and they started going down these rabbit holes," said Travis View, co-host of the "QAnon Anonymous" podcast.

Social media has been the biggest vector for QAnon's international growth.

In a report released last month, NewsGuard found QAnon Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages with thousands of followers emerging across Europe. Many of these hubs for the QAnon community used the COVID-19 pandemic to expand their reach and tie the virus to the "deep state," one of the theory's primary enemies.

QAnon's presence online has also been seen in Australia, Russia, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela. Followers have also spread in other communities distrustful of the government, from anti-vaccinations groups to people who oppose wearing masks that help limit COVID-19's spread.

The proselytizing for QAnon can be subtle. A post this week in a British anti-mask group that celebrated not wearing masks in stores was met by a long comment in agreement that ended with "I am declaring that Jesus is my Lord and not Satan," a nod toward QAnon's Satanic panic messaging.

"Mommy bloggers" and Instagram influencers have also started parroting QAnon talking points alongside their normal meditation or spiritual energy posts, according to View.

Many social media platforms have taken some steps to slow this spread.

Twitter in July banned thousands of accounts affiliated with QAnon and instituted policies meant to limit its spread. Facebook last month removed 900 groups and pages from its platform in a crackdown on QAnon and expanded its policy on violent extremism.

These efforts have fallen short, however. A cursory search for terms associated with QAnon on either platform yields hundreds of results. The challenge of identifying and taking down these groups is made even harder when they're international, given the comparatively limited number of content moderators that social media companies employ with native languages other than English.

Other social media platforms, like the messaging app Telegram, that spread QAnon content abroad have done little to rein it in.

"Telegram is much more popular in certain countries in Europe, especially around the post-Soviet world ... it's a little bit more lax in terms of content moderation," Zarine Kharazian, assistant editor at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, told The Hill.

It's difficult to know just how many QAnon adherents there are abroad, or in the U.S. for that matter. The size of foreign Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages identified by experts and The Hill give enough evidence to suggest the number is likely in the tens of thousands.

The versions of QAnon abroad are fairly similar to the theory in the U.S. It is deeply anti-Semitic, casting Jewish Holocaust survivor George Soros as the puppeteer behind politicians and clearly takes inspiration

for its “global cabal” from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fake document historically used to smear the Jewish community.

The international spread of QAnon has also started to manifest itself physically.

In addition to the presence of QAnon signs and supporters at anti-lockdown protests, experts believe the community was also a driving force behind the “Save the Children” rallies that have occurred all over the world. QAnon adherents flooded social media for weeks with posts about child trafficking, a legitimate concern that deserves attention.

QAnon supporters, however, used that real problem as a way to suck people into their conspiracy while doing little to address trafficking and often obfuscating actual solutions. (Source: The Hill)

**(U) Florida Latinos Swamped by Wild Conspiracy Theories:** Wild disinformation is inundating Spanish-speaking residents of South Florida ahead of Election Day, clogging their WhatsApp chats, Facebook feeds and even radio airwaves at a saturation level that threatens to shape the outcome in the nation’s biggest and most closely contested swing state

“I’ve never seen this level of disinformation, conspiracy theories and lies,” Pérez-Verdía, who is of Colombian descent, said. “It looks as if it has to be coordinated.”

Shared content has included a translated clip of Christian conservative pastor John MacArthur claiming there is no pandemic and coronavirus death numbers have been wildly exaggerated.

Then, on Friday, the editor of the Spanish-language sister paper of The Miami Herald, El Nuevo Herald, publicly [apologized](#) for its own paid-media scandal after running a publication called “Libre” as a newspaper insert that attacked Black Lives Matter and trafficked in anti-Semitic views.

“What kind of people are these Jews? They’re always talking about the Holocaust, but have they already forgotten Kristallnacht, when Nazi thugs rampaged through Jewish shops all over Germany? So do the BLM and Antifa, only the Nazis didn’t steal; they only destroyed,” the ad [insert said](#).

The publication said it’s suspending its relationship with Libre.

Conspiracy theories — especially revolving around QAnon, which posits that Trump is fighting a global cabal of satanic pedophiles — are spreading across Spanish-language radio in Miami as well, said Roberto Tejera, a political independent who has a show on Actualidad Radio. Tejera said QAnon is a constant on another station, La Poderosa, whose station management also did not respond to messages seeking comment.

“It’s not right wing. I don’t have a problem with right-wing stuff. It’s QAnon stuff. This is conspiracy theory. This goes beyond. This is new. This is a new phenomenon in Spanish speaking radio. We Cubans are not normal,” Tejera laughed, “but this is new. This is crazy. This is f---ing crazy.” (Source: Politico)

**Analyst Comment:** QAnon networks have proliferated online during the pandemic and have been highly active in spreading COVID-19 misinformation, including anti-vaccination and anti-mask wearing misinformation. The increased spread of QAnon related misinformation networks and narratives in Florida increases the risk of negative impact to the state’s pandemic response.

(U) **QAnon Traffic Declined After Facebook Cracked Down:** In the weeks after Facebook announced it removed thousands of QAnon-linked groups and pages, the platform — and its partner, Instagram — saw a noticeable decline in traffic of QAnon hashtags and phrases, a sign social media companies can play a large role in limiting conspiracy theories.

#### Key Facts

Traffic for QAnon phrases and hashtags declined after Facebook announced its crackdown on August 19, according to data gathered using the Facebook-owned CrowdTangle search tool.

Interactions on Facebook for the QAnon rallying cry acronym, #wwg1wga (which stands for “Where we go one, we go all”), declined from 20,500 in the week before Facebook announced its restrictions, to 8,100 in the first week of September; on Instagram, interactions for the #wwg1wga phrase fell from 1.5 million to 960,000 during the same period.

Traffic for the phrase “The Storm,” another popular QAnon rallying cry, also declined during the same period on Facebook and Instagram.

Interactions for the phrase “QAnon” have increased on Facebook since mid-August, but most of the top posts are by prominent, verified accounts debunking it, or reporting on President Trump’s embrace of it (mentions on Instagram fell from 1.55 million to 962,000).

Facebook’s restrictions — along with those of other social media platforms, such as Twitter — may have also contributed to the decline in web traffic to one of the most prominent QAnon sites, QMap, according to data cited by the Canadian Broadcasting Group.

After first popping up on the fringe of the internet in 2017, interest in the QAnon theory has exploded this year amid the pandemic. In August — after years of taking a hands off approach to managing misinformation and conspiracy theories — Facebook followed Twitter in cracking down on the theory, after an internal probe showed the theory had spread like wildfire on the platform. The social media platform announced on August 19 it removed 790 groups, 100 pages and 1,500 ads connected to QAnon on the social media platform and restricted over 10,000 accounts on Instagram. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **EU Lawmakers Say its Time to Go Further on Tackling Disinformation:** A major European Commission review of a [Code of Practice](#) aimed at combating the spread of disinformation online has concluded the self-regulatory instrument is failing to deliver enough transparency or accountability from the tech platforms and advertisers signed up to it.

EU lawmakers suggested today that a swathe of shortcomings identified with the current approach won’t be fixed without legally binding rules.

Although how exactly they will seek to tackle disinformation in forthcoming legislative packages, such as the Digital Services Act or the European Democracy Action Plan, remains to be seen.

Signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation include: Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Mozilla, [TikTok](#) and Twitter, along with the trade association representing online platforms (EDIMA).

A number of trade associations representing the advertising industry and advertisers are also signed up (namely: the European Association of Communications Agencies and the French, Czech, Polish and

Danish national associations affiliated with it; the IAB Europe; and the World Federation of Advertisers plus its Belgian national association, the Union of Belgian Advertisers).

"The Code of Practice has shown that online platforms and the advertising sector can do a lot to counter disinformation when they are put under public scrutiny. But platforms need to be more accountable and responsible; they need to become more transparent. The time has come to go beyond self-regulatory measures. Europe is best placed to lead the way and propose instruments for more resilient and fair democracy in an increasingly digital world," said Věra Jourová, VP for values and transparency, commenting on the assessment of the code in a statement. (Source: Tech Crunch)

(U) **Gen Z is Eroding the power of Misinformation:** Gen Z may be more immune to the lure of misinformation because younger people apply more context, nuance and skepticism to their online information consumption, experts and new polling suggests.

Why it matters: An innate understanding of social media influence, virality and algorithms among Gen Z — defined by Pew as the cohort born between 1997 and 2012 — could disarm the misinformation and disinformation racking the U.S.

Driving the news: 83% of Gen Z college students said they get the majority of their news from social media or online news sites, according to a new survey from polling firm College Reaction of 868 students provided exclusively to Axios.

- Despite it being their go-to source for news, young people are skeptical of social media. Just 7% said they found it to be the most trustworthy news platform.
- More than half said online newspapers or media sites were the most trustworthy, and 16% chose physical newspapers.

Younger people are confident in their ability to detect false information, but have little faith in older generations.

- 69% of Gen Z students said it is somewhat or very easy for them to distinguish real news from misinformation. Half said they think it is "very difficult" for older generations.
- [Studies](#) have found the youngest American adults are far less likely to share misinformation online than are older Americans.
- "Young people are internet locals," College Reaction founder Cyrus Beschloss told Axios. "Because they swim through so much content, they're wildly savvy at spotting bogus content."

How it works: As the first generation to grow up with social media, Gen Z has an innate understanding of how to create and move online content, which makes them less susceptible to misinformation.

- Nearly half (46%) of college students said that they intentionally like, comment on or share content to train the algorithms to give them similar information and media.
- Most older generations — even millennials — don't always understand online influencer culture, the utility of hashtags or how to intentionally curate their feed.

The big picture: Misinformation and fake news won't go away with the next generation, experts said. But it will be far better understood.

- Most misinformation is just "influence and agenda-driven communications that older generations don't understand," Jonathon Morgan, CEO of AI software company Yonder, told Axios.
- Boomers, Gen Xers and even some millennials often don't know how this kind of information gets into their feeds. "They feel duped," Morgan said, "And because they feel duped, they label it as misinformation and disinformation." (Source: Axios)

**(U) COVID-19 Fuels Voting Misinformation in Kentucky, adding to Logistical Nightmare for Election Officials**

Election officials in Kentucky are already warning voters about misinformation as the state's mail-in voting process kicks off this week.

But minimizing confusion around the mailers and text messages sent with incorrect voter registration information is even more difficult as state officials grapple with uncertainties from the [coronavirus](#) pandemic. The state's second-most populous county closed its election office for two weeks after a positive coronavirus case. Other counties also reported confirmed coronavirus cases among employees in their county election and clerk's offices.

**Kentucky's struggles show how the general-election voting season is off to a bumpy start.**

By this weekend, at least six states will have started some form of in-person early voting. Nearly 20 states will have started mailing out ballots requested by voters. And at least eight states will be able to start processing mail ballots once they're returned. (My colleague Elise Viebeck is keeping track of this data, and she and our graphics team have compiled a handy "[How to Vote guide](#)" to help you figure out requirements and timelines in your state.)

Across the country, states have expanded voters' access to mail voting and early in-person voting in response to the pandemic — as well as unease among voters about sending their ballots through the mail. Officials are trying to provide as many voting options as possible so voters can choose the one that makes them feel most comfortable.

**The focus on starting voting earlier this year has contributed to a torrent of misinformation.**

For example, one of the concerns Kentucky officials raised this week had to do with letters from a group called Center for Voter Information, a voter registration group with a history of sending mailers that are filled with errors. This group's mailers have sown confusion in several states, [including in Virginia](#).

The group's latest mailer to Kentuckians encourages people to [register to vote](#) — yet the mailer is being sent to voters who have already registered, thus confusing voters and disrupting the work of Kentucky election officials.

"I condemn this shady out-of-state group and their efforts to tamper with our elections," Kentucky Secretary of State Michael Adams said in a statement. "They mislead voters, who then drive unnecessary call volume to our overworked election officials around the state."

Officials also flagged a different text message scam from a local area code that directed voters to a fake voter registration website that no longer appeared active as of Wednesday.

State officials called attention to both efforts this week because county clerks were reporting a large number of calls about them, the secretary of state's office said.

Making matters even more complicated, election employees in Fayette County, home to Lexington, will be self-isolating for at least two weeks because of a positive coronavirus case in the office. Officials are hoping to reopen the department on Sept. 28, according to an announcement by the county clerk's office. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Week of 9/7**

**(U) COVID-19 Precipitated a Deluge of Conspiracy Theories That Are Shaping the 2020 Election—and Shaking the Foundation of American Democracy:** There are thousands of QAnon groups and pages on Facebook, with millions of members, according to an internal company document reviewed by NBC News.

In more than seven dozen interviews conducted in Wisconsin in early September, from the suburbs around Milwaukee to the scarred streets of Kenosha in the aftermath of the Jacob Blake shooting, about 1 in 5 voters volunteered ideas that veered into the realm of conspiracy theory, ranging from QAnon to the notion that [COVID-19 is a hoax](#). Two women in Ozaukee County calmly informed me that an evil cabal operates tunnels under the U.S. in order to rape and torture children and drink their blood. A Joe Biden supporter near a Kenosha church told me votes don't matter, because "the elites" will decide the outcome of the election anyway. A woman on a Kenosha street corner explained that Democrats were planning to bring in U.N. troops before the election to prevent a Trump win.

It's hard to know exactly why people believe what they believe. Some had clearly been exposed to QAnon conspiracy theorists online. Others seemed to be repeating false ideas espoused in Plandemic, a pair of conspiracy videos featuring a discredited former medical researcher that went viral, spreading the notion that COVID-19 is a hoax across social media. (COVID-19 is not a hoax.) When asked where they found their information, almost all these voters were cryptic: "Go online," one woman said. "Dig deep," added another. They seemed to share a collective disdain for the mainstream media—a skepticism that has only gotten stronger and deeper since 2016. The truth wasn't reported, they said, and what was reported wasn't true.

This matters not just because of what these voters believe but also because of what they don't. The facts that should anchor a sense of shared reality are meaningless to them; the news developments that might ordinarily inform their vote fall on deaf ears. They will not be swayed by [data on coronavirus deaths](#), they won't be persuaded by [job losses](#) or stock market gains, and they won't care if Trump called [America's fallen soldiers](#) "losers" or "suckers," [as the Atlantic reported](#), because they won't believe it. They are impervious to messaging, advertising or data. They aren't just infected with conspiracy; they appear to be inoculated against reality.



Democracy relies on an informed and engaged public responding in rational ways to the real-life facts and challenges before us. But a growing number of Americans are untethered from that. “They’re not on the same epistemological grounding, they’re not living in the same worlds,” says Whitney Phillips, a professor at Syracuse who studies online disinformation. “You cannot have a functioning democracy when people are not at the very least occupying the same solar system.”

The paranoia is no longer relegated to the margins of society. According to the Pew Research Center, 25% of Americans say there is some truth to the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic was intentionally planned.

Experts who follow disinformation say nothing will change until Facebook and YouTube shift their business model away from the algorithms that reward conspiracies. “We are not anywhere near peak crazy,” says Mele. Phillips, the professor from Syracuse, agrees that things will get weirder. “We’re in trouble,” she adds. “Words sort of fail to capture what a nightmare scenario this is.” (Source: Time)

**(U) How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic:** Although China once shied away from the aggressive, conspiratorial type of disinformation favored by Russia, it has increasingly turned to this approach during the coronavirus pandemic. Beijing is both manipulating factual information and spreading disinformation—or willfully false information—to distract from the origins of the virus, highlight the failures of the United States, and promote China as a global leader.

*Highlighting and misrepresenting democracies’ failures:* Messaging from China, along with Iran and Russia, suggests that democratic countries’ responses to the spread of the COVID-19 disease have been disastrous and that autocratic states have managed their outbreaks well. (In reality, Iran mismanaged its horrendously, while China initially failed to notify its citizens and international health bodies of a worsening outbreak there.)

Some Chinese information has suggested, correctly, that the United States has not had an effective response. But Beijing also reportedly claimed that health-care workers in Europe **left sick people to die** and that President Donald J. Trump **planned to lock down** the entire United States, among other falsehoods. Moreover, diverting attention from COVID-19, Beijing has abused information and spread disinformation about issues unrelated to China, including promoting skewed stories about the U.S. protests over racial injustice.

*Disputing the virus’s origins:* Beijing has **cast doubt** on whether the virus actually came from China, suggesting without evidence that it could have come from the U.S. military.

*Attacking specific countries and leaders.* Chinese information and disinformation campaigns have targeted many countries, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom. Matt Schrader, in a **report** for the Alliance for Securing Democracy, noted that the Chinese Communist Party has “attempted to tailor its messages while still promoting Beijing as a global leader—a message that will come through even more strongly if China produces the first effective COVID-19 vaccine.”

**How do Chinese messaging campaigns work?**

Beijing uses large numbers of fake social media accounts to push its messages. It has increasingly relied on the types of trolls and bots Russia has utilized. Chinese diplomats amplify spin and outright false messages, and big Chinese [state media outlets](#) push the government's stories.

U.S. intelligence sources reportedly [have found](#) that Chinese intelligence agents, or people linked to them, appear to use text messaging and messaging apps to sow panic in the United States about COVID-19. U.S. officials had not previously noticed Chinese intelligence agents trying to spread disinformation by texting citizens' mobile phones, a strategy that requires significant knowledge of U.S. infrastructure. Meanwhile, Google [has revealed](#) it caught Chinese hackers trying to get access to email accounts from the presidential campaign of former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, possibly to influence the 2020 election.

**Has China's messaging on COVID-19 been effective?**

For now, its efforts on COVID-19 remain only modestly effective. Beijing has spread some COVID-19 rumors, but Chinese leaders appear wary of fully following Moscow's path of outright trolling. Doing so could undermine China's simultaneous efforts to [portray itself](#) as a responsible global leader.

China's stepped-up efforts around COVID-19 are angering many countries. A recent [Pew Research Center poll](#) of Americans, for instance, found that unfavorable views of China have reached a historic high, possibly in part due to China's COVID-19 messaging. Chinese disinformation still seems [more simplistic](#) than Russia's. Chinese fake social media accounts spreading disinformation about COVID-19 often appear shoddier than Russian ones and thus easier to expose.

Still, some of Beijing's disinformation punches are landing. And as China and Russia [increase their cooperation](#) on information and disinformation tools—they are sharing knowledge [through exchanges](#) and in other ways—more dangerous messaging almost surely will increase. (Source: The Council on Foreign Relations)

**(U) Unlike Covid-19 Misinformation, Facebook Won't Takedown Anti-Vaxxer Posts, Zuckerberg Says:**

Facebook will not act against anti-vaxxer posts from its platform the way [did](#) against Covid-19 related misinformation, Mark Zuckerberg [told Axios on HBO](#) in an interview in which he defended the social media platforms against allegations of right-wing bias.

**Key Facts**

- Zuckerberg said, "If someone is pointing out a case where a vaccine caused harm or that they're worried about it — you know, that's a difficult thing to say from my perspective that you shouldn't be allowed to express at all,"
- Zuckerberg, however, said that Facebook will work with health authorities to try to provide reputable information about the Covid-19 vaccine, although it is unclear how this will impact anti-vaxxer content shared on the platform.

- Last month a report **published** by global activist group Avaaz found that websites spreading health-related misinformation generated over 3.8 billion views on Facebook over the last year, with numbers peaking at 460 million views in April.
- The report also found that pages from the top 10 sites spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about health received almost four times as many views on Facebook as the top 10 reputable sites for health information.
- Last month, Facebook said it had **taken down** 7 million posts pushing misinformation regarding Covid-19 from its flagship platform and Instagram between April and June.
- When asked about conservative voices making up the platform's most engaged content, Zuckerberg told *Axios*, "It's true that partisan content often has kind of a higher percent of people ... engaging with it, commenting on it, liking it. But I think it's important to differentiate that from, broadly, what people are seeing and reading and learning about on our service." (Source: Forbes)

(U) **COVID-19 Vaccine Won't Alter Your DNA: Widely Shared Misinformation is Not True:** The Associated Press checks out some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. This one is bogus, even though it was shared widely on social media.

Here are the facts:

**FALSE CLAIM:** The new vaccine for COVID-19 will be the first of its kind ever. It will be an "mRNA vaccine" which will literally alter your DNA. It will wrap itself into your system. You will essentially become a genetically modified human being.

**THE FACTS:** Experts say mRNA vaccines do not alter your DNA.

As researchers work to test vaccines to stop the spread of COVID-19, social media posts are sharing misinformation to sow doubt even before they become available to the public. The posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram suggest that a new coronavirus mRNA vaccine will genetically modify humans.

(U) **A New Front in Coronavirus Disinformation: Wall Street Research:** **Coronavirus misinformation** is infecting the unlikeliest of places: Wall Street research that investors rely on to trade in the financial markets.

In an early August note to clients, an analyst at a research firm called Fundstrat Global Advisors, which distributes widely-read reports and analysis to investors, cited a series of tweets by **an ophthalmologist named James Todaro** who painted a rosy picture of the US population's potential for **developing herd immunity to coronavirus**.

In a research note sent to clients on August 11th, Fundstrat co-founder Thomas J. Lee included four tweets Todaro sent the previous day. One of Todaro's tweets cited "growing evidence that T cell immunity allows populations to reach herd immunity once 10-20% are infected with SARS CoV-2," the coronavirus that causes Covid-19.

Todaro's claim is not supported by credible scientific research. In fact, Shane Crotty, an immunologist at the Center for Infectious Disease and Vaccine Research at the La Jolla Institute for Immunology, told CNN Business that Todaro's tweets are "dangerous" to public health.

The presence of Todaro's tweets in a Wall Street research note suggests the campaign to downplay the virus is gaining traction. Todaro is one of the people who appeared in a viral video in July promoting hydroxychloroquine that Facebook and YouTube later removed because they said it was promoting misinformation.

While [coronavirus misinformation is ubiquitous on social media](#), there's an expectation that Wall Street research is more reliable than the kind of information that winds up in most people's Facebook feeds. Analysts funnel research into a private pipeline that influences whether paying clients feel bullish or bearish about the economy, corporate profits and, more recently, the trajectory of the coronavirus.

"There should be a difference between Wall Street research and what's available on the internet. It's just that simple," said one hedge fund manager, who insists that clients who pay for information and analysis expect it to be well vetted and researched. This person isn't a Fundstrat client but was reacting to the Todaro tweets that Lee included in his note.

In his note, Lee cautioned that Todaro's assertion on T cells was "not proven," and said that "we are not healthcare experts, so take our commentary with a grain of salt." But Lee elevated Todaro's interpretation of science without mentioning Todaro's lack of expertise in immunology or epidemiology.

When misinformation winds up in Wall Street research notes, it influences the way investors think, according to Cembalest. "It's like defense attorneys who can say something that gets stricken from the record, but it gets retained in the minds of the jurors," Cembalest said. (Source: CNN)

(U) **COVID-19 Revealing the Impact of Disinformation on Society:** The COVID-19 pandemic has provided new evidence of the impact of disinformation on people's behavior, according to a [new report](#) by researchers in the [Department of War Studies, King's College London](#). They also argue there has been too much focus on blaming social media for spreading false content, whilst neglecting the spread of misleading content in traditional media by domestic political actors.

Disinformation is widely perceived as a significant threat to liberal democracies, with commentators blaming it for the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, the rejection of climate science and the rise of anti-vaxxers. As part of a U.K. government research project with Ipsos MORI, Dr. Thomas Colley led a team of researchers to look at the societal impact of disinformation in the U.K. Using insights from the project, they conducted new analysis examining disinformation's impact during the 2019 general election and the COVID-19 crisis.

Normally, it is difficult to prove the effect of a given message on an individual's behavior, but according to the researchers the pandemic has provided clearer measures of the impact of disinformation - the

deliberate spread of false or misleading information, and misinformation - when false or misleading information is spread unintentionally.

The World Health Organization early on declared that an “infodemic” was taking place alongside the pandemic, following tragedies such as the 700 people in Iran who reportedly died of methanol poisoning because of misinformation that it could cure the virus. In the U.K. dozens of 5G phone masts were vandalized, after they were linked the spread of the virus. Ibuprofen sales declined and paracetamol sales increased after experts publicly questioned whether Ibuprofen was safe to treat symptoms. Studying these examples, researchers are able to draw greater conclusions about the ways in which disinformation spreads through society. They argue that whether information even registers with people is mediated by their interest in it and trust in the source. Because of this, some disinformation may be better ignored, rather than amplifying its reach through additional media coverage.

Blaming social media ignores the importance of disinformation spread by domestic political actors and traditional media. Political leaders and even scientists in some countries have made misleading claims about supposed cures for Covid-19. The selective use of statistics – be it economic projections or illness and death rates – can mislead citizens too.

As Dr. Colley explains in [an op-ed in the Independent](#), “Disinformation spreads through the interaction of many different information sources, not just social media. For British people, disinformation on social media may not even be the biggest issue. They overwhelmingly distrust social media news and rarely share it. Research shows they see disinformation from politicians and traditional media as more common and concerning.” (Source: Homeland Security Newswire; King’s College London)

#### (U) Week of 8/31

**(U) The Risks of Misinformation and Vaccine Hesitancy within the Covid-19 Crisis:** Combating misinformation about Covid-19 and strengthening the U.S. population’s confidence in vaccines, particularly once a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine becomes available, is an urgent national security matter. A prolonged Covid-19 outbreak, with recurring cycles of lockdown and reopening, threatens millions of American lives; U.S. economic competitiveness, research, and innovation capabilities; and the health security of the nation. It is increasingly clear that ill-intentioned political elements are also disseminating misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines to foment discord and exacerbate political divisions within U.S. society. Amid persistent Covid-19 transmission in the United States, with more than **6 million** Americans infected and 180,000 dead, the protection of U.S. national interests requires addressing the circulation of misinformation about the pandemic—far more systematically and effectively than is the case today—to interrupt the erosion of confidence in vaccines.

In the United States, recent [polls](#) have shown that just 50 percent of respondents plan to get a Covid-19 vaccine, assuming one becomes available. Statements by President Donald Trump that a vaccine will be available by the end of 2020, backed by [nearly \\$11 billion](#) in investments in select industry partners’ vaccine candidates, have stirred online rumors over the safety of any product developed as rapidly as

“Operation Warp Speed” aspires to. Older narratives that vaccines can be used to sterilize young women have resurfaced alongside messaging that claims that the motives of those who invest in new vaccine research include inserting **microchips** into people’s bodies to control their behavior.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccine hesitancy had led to decreased immunization coverage in the United States—and in other parts of the world—across several vaccine-preventable diseases, including measles, polio, and diphtheria. The United States eliminated measles in 2000, but in 2019 more than **1,280 cases** were reported in 31 states, concentrated in communities where immunization coverage had been persistently low or had declined in recent years. Within the context of the coronavirus pandemic, stay-at-home orders have further led to parents’ reluctance to take children to the pediatrician for routine immunizations and contributing to even greater declines in coverage overall. In one recent **study** of data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, fewer than 50 percent of children were up to date on required immunizations this past May, a drop from the 66 percent who were up to date at the same time during the previous four years.

Given that the prospect of returning to a stable economic and social life in the United States rests, to a great extent, on the successful introduction and dissemination of a Covid-19 vaccine(s), the connection between vaccines and U.S. national security has never been so starkly revealed.

In the age of Covid-19, the interconnection between vaccines and U.S. national security plays out along four critical dimensions:

**First, at a time when jobless numbers are at a historic high and economic growth for 2020 is expected to remain negative, Covid-19 disproportionately impacts Blacks, Latinos, and immigrants**, including workers in the “gig” economy—both in terms of the risk of falling ill and dying and of experiencing negative economic impacts. That has immediate destabilizing consequences. It aggravates deep preexisting social inequities and amplifies a larger set of political tensions around racial justice, manifested most recently in the cycle of protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in late May and fueled by other episodes of violence and conflicts over police funding since then.

**Second, a wave of vaccine-preventable disease, combined with an uncontrolled pandemic across much of the country, is undermining U.S. competitiveness and the ability to conduct foreign policy.** As the countries within the European Union began reopening to air travel and tourism on July 1, the European Union barred travelers from the United States due to the lack of control over the outbreak within the nation’s borders. Should such limits on the ability of U.S. citizens remain in the medium term, this will seriously erode effective engagement in trade, security, humanitarian, and diplomatic missions.

**Third, the longer the outbreak persists, and schools and universities remain closed (or partially closed, or in an on-again/off-again cycle), the greater the damage to U.S.-based education, cutting-edge research, and innovation. The United States** is falling behind those advanced economies that have mounted a more effective outbreak response, setting the stage for the long-term erosion of U.S. economic competitiveness and emergency preparedness.

**Last, the risk of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease increases** when coverage drops for highly infectious diseases like measles. At the same time, many children—and adults—who become seriously ill with a vaccine-preventable disease face challenges getting care, as clinics and hospitals in many states remain overwhelmed by Covid-19 and as health resources continue to be diverted for Covid-19 response. Nationwide economic contractions are hitting state and local governments especially hard, driving up the cost of all health services, including immunizations. These stresses are compounded by the rising demand for additional protective gear, handwashing stations, and distancing requirements in doctors' offices and health clinics. The net result is that communities at all levels are left ill-equipped to deal with new infections.

Vaccine hesitancy is not a new phenomenon, nor is it confined to the United States. It is a phenomenon that is steadily globalizing, accelerating through rapidly evolving technological changes. Concerns about immunizations surfaced soon after the first smallpox vaccines were introduced in the eighteenth century. But these concerns have intensified over the period during which global immunization programs have expanded, particularly in the last 25 years. The factors associated with vaccine hesitancy are highly context-specific. In places where vaccine-preventable diseases are no longer common, some individuals and health care providers have become complacent about the need for vaccination, leading to lower coverage. There is also a newer dynamic in which **immunization efforts are disrupted by "digital wildfires"—social media assaults that occur at moments of high political tension** or the start of national vaccination campaigns.

While vaccine hesitancy may manifest in context-specific ways, there are common overarching themes that drive it. **One set of perceptions focuses on the science of immunization, itself, given its language being deemed as elite and inaccessible**, hiding truths around the real safety risks of vaccines and provoking public concerns that the real risks of vaccines outweigh their benefits. The rush to introduce a vaccine for [swine flu](#) in 1976 backfired when more than 400 people became ill with Guillain-Barré syndrome after being vaccinated, leading to decades of concerns about immunization safety. A 1998 *Lancet* article suggesting that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine led to higher rates of developmental disorders in young children triggered a significant wave of vaccine hesitancy that persists, even though the research was afterward discredited and the article [retracted](#).

**A second set of issues relates to the compulsory nature of immunization policies**, with some parents rejecting government or school requirements that they have their children vaccinated or rejecting the idea of a vaccine schedule. In the United States, a campaign in the state of Maine to repeal laws requiring school-aged children to be immunized gained traction, under the slogan "[Reject Big Pharma](#)," suggesting that popular concerns over profits accruing to vaccine manufacturers also play a role in undermining vaccine confidence.

Some new research also suggests that digital misinformation campaigns around vaccines are initiated by **divisive political actors** motivated more by the goal of exacerbating social divisions and encouraging mistrust of government than by health or vaccine concerns.

Amid persistent Covid-19 transmission in the United States, the protection of U.S. national interests requires addressing—far more systematically and more effectively than is true today—the circulation of misinformation about the pandemic and the erosion of confidence in vaccines.

- **We need to confront the reality that vaccine hesitancy—and social media misinformation campaigns about vaccines—are urgent national security matters.** Yet they are most frequently understood as predominantly health issues. That narrow interpretation is a mistake. The drivers and consequences of misinformation campaigns about vaccines, specifically; the erosion of confidence in science and medicine, more generally; and the politicized, polarizing, and anti-government sentiments driving some of the misinformation have grave security implications that reach far beyond the health sector. The challenge is to look beyond a narrow public health perspective to understand what those security risks are and how to mitigate those risks with concrete policies and actions.
- **Vaccine hesitancy and misinformation in health serve the broader interests of actors seeking to stoke discord in U.S. society.** The universe of people transmitting—and receptive to—misinformation about vaccines within social media channels is complex and diverse. While some groups seek to protect the health of their children, others have historic reasons to mistrust government. Others are skeptical of the motives of pharmaceutical companies, reject Western biomedical approaches, or are advocates of natural health. At the same time, there is evidence that many impactful efforts to amplify misinformation about vaccines are networked with domestic and international groups seeking to undermine confidence and take advantage of fears to deepen social divisions and fuel discord and **political polarization**.
- **The public health world is losing the battle against far more sophisticated and nimble actors.** Social media misinformation campaigns related to vaccines and vaccine safety make highly skilled use of social media tools to reach and amplify their messages to large populations. Public health is an important voice in responding to, and in countering, these messages, but the health sector is relying largely on old, often centralized, and sluggish approaches that are not very effective within the new digital communications environment. New innovative approaches and new expertise that draws on the fields of behavioral and social science, anthropology, psychology, intelligence, polling, communications and messaging, cybersecurity, and digital media analytics are needed. There is a historic tension between the health and security sectors, yet in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and misinformation, the two fields are inextricably linked. It is fruitless to relitigate the debate over the “securitization” of global health when it comes to vaccines for such a debilitating and disruptive pandemic.

Most experts agree that success in returning to some form of normal economic and social life depends to a high degree, though not exclusively, on the introduction and dissemination of a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine, or more likely, a combination of vaccines. Making that strategic goal possible does not rest simply on field trials and the financing, manufacturing, and distribution of vaccines. It will rely on mobilizing expertise from diverse disciplines, including but also outside of public health, that are essential to understanding and combating misinformation and restoring public trust and confidence. It requires understanding the deep national security implications of misinformation and declining popular confidence and mapping out a coherent, innovative national action plan. (Source: CSIS)



(U//FOUO) **Network of Inauthentic Pro-PRC Accounts Promotes Content Pertaining to 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, Including Content Critical of U.S. President Trump**

(U//FOUO) **Executive Summary**

- In August 2020, Mandiant Threat Intelligence observed a network of suspected inauthentic social media accounts that we have been tracking since June 2019 and judged to be operating in support of the political interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC) promote messaging pertaining to the upcoming U.S. presidential election, including messaging critical of U.S. President Donald Trump and actions taken by his administration that the network portrayed as intended to bolster his reelection campaign.
- We also observed the network promote narratives highly critical of the Trump administration's recent actions toward Chinese technology companies, including TikTok and WeChat.
- While we have previously observed limited indications of English-language content (including voice and text) by accounts within the network, the recently observed emphasis on English-language voiceovers and the focus on election-related themes suggest the network may have attempted to target a U.S. audience.

(U//FOUO) **Background**

Since June 2019, Mandiant Threat Intelligence has been tracking a network of suspected inauthentic accounts spanning multiple Western social media platforms that we judge are operating in a coordinated, inauthentic manner in support of the political interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The network, which appears to have insignificant reach, leverages poorly curated accounts on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to amplify pro-PRC narratives, primarily by engaging in the systematic posting, liking, sharing, and commenting of political content. Clusters we have identified consistently leverage the same tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to seed and disseminate content across platforms.

We first observed this activity set primarily focused on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in mid-2019 but have since observed multiple shifts in messaging to incorporate wide-ranging narratives, including multiple narratives related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, typically lauding Beijing's response to and containment of the virus while simultaneously criticizing the U.S. response or casting doubt on the origination of the virus itself, narratives pertaining to the adoption of a controversial national security law that increased Beijing's control over Hong Kong, and narratives related to the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following the murder of George Floyd. Interspersed among these themes, we have observed consistent targeting of oppositional figures, typically vocal critics of Beijing, including Chinese dissident Guo Wengui (aka Miles Kwok) and Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong.

Most recently we have observed the network, including previously identified and additional newly identified accounts, promote messaging critical of U.S. President Donald Trump and recent actions taken by his administration, which have been portrayed as intended to bolster his 2020 reelection campaign. We have also observed the network promote narratives highly critical of the Trump administration's recent actions toward Chinese technology companies, including TikTok and WeChat. Additionally, we continue to see assets we have attributed to this network promote messaging revolving around the U.S. response to COVID-19 and ongoing civil unrest in the U.S.

**(U//FOUO) Continued Promotion of Narratives Related to COVID-19, Civil Unrest in the U.S., and Beijing Opposition Targets**

In addition to the previously referenced themes, we continue to observe the network promote messaging regarding COVID-19, including some newly observed narratives, the ongoing anti-racism protests in the U.S., and attacks on Chinese political opposition targets.

We observed the promotion of new content related to both the U.S. and Beijing's response to COVID-19, a now-recurring theme consistently promoted by this network.

We observed one video claiming that "netizens" believe that Trump's brother died of COVID-19 and that they hope Trump will "learn a lesson" from his death (Figure 3).

- At least one video claims that Trump has opposed the advice of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases director Dr. Anthony Fauci.
- Another video features footage of Western scientists lauding China's efforts in containing COVID-19.
- At least one video shows Trump's "report card to the American people," which documented perceived failures by him to contain COVID-19 (Figure 3). The same video provided third-party statistics on the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the U.S.
- Additionally, we observed continued efforts to portray the ongoing BLM protests in the U.S. as chaotic.
- At least one video highlights alleged footage portraying U.S. protests as chaotic and claims that Portland, OR, has become one of the "leading region[s]" for BLM asserting that Mayor Ted Wheeler is "together with the protesters" against Trump. (Source: FireEye)

**(U) Facebook Takes Down Russian Operation that Recruited U.S. Journalists, Amid Rising Concerns About Election Misinformation:** Facebook removed a network of fake accounts and pages created by Russian operatives who had recruited U.S. journalists to write articles critical of Presidential candidates, in an apparent bid to undermine their support, and to amplify COVID-19 disinformation.

Facebook said it caught the network of 13 fake accounts and two pages early, before it had a chance to build a large audience — an action that the company said was evidence of its growing effectiveness at targeting foreign disinformation operations ahead of the 2020 election. The takedown emerged as a

result of a tip from the FBI and was one of a dozen operations tied to the Russian [Internet Research Agency](#) or individuals affiliated with it that Facebook has disrupted since the last presidential election, when IRA-backed pages amassed millions of views on the platform. The pages had about 14,000 followers.

"They've gotten better at hiding who they are, but their impact has gotten smaller and smaller," Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of security policy, said of the foreign operations.

In the case of the Russian disinformation network, Facebook said the operatives created fictitious personas on Facebook to direct people to a new site called Peace Data, which billed itself as a "global news organization" whose goal was "to shed light on the global issues and raise awareness about corruption, environmental crisis, abuse of power, armed conflicts, activism, and human rights."

One of the journalists who wrote columns for Peace Data, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect his career, said that an editor reached out to him through a direct message on Twitter in July offering \$200 per article.

He said he pursued the opportunity in part because he had lost his job in the pandemic. He wrote articles about the conspiracy-theory movement QAnon, the [coronavirus](#), and U.S. militarism's role in climate change. (Source: Washington Post)

**(U) How WeChat Censored the Coronavirus Pandemic:** When the novel [coronavirus](#) was first discovered in China last winter, the country responded aggressively, placing tens of millions of people into strict lockdown. As Covid-19 spread from Wuhan to the rest of the world, the Chinese government was [just as forceful](#) in controlling how the health crisis was portrayed and discussed among its own people.

Politically sensitive material, like references to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, have long been forbidden on China's [highly censored](#) internet, but researchers at the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab say these efforts reached a new level during the pandemic. "The blunt range of censored content goes beyond what we expected, including general health information such as the fact [that] the virus spreads from human contact," says Masashi Crete-Nishihata, the associate director of Citizen Lab, a research group that focuses on technology and human rights.

Citizen Lab's latest [report](#), published earlier this week, finds that between January and May this year, more than 2,000 keywords related to the pandemic were suppressed on the Chinese messaging platform WeChat, which has more than 1 billion users in the country. Many of the censored terms referenced events and organizations in the United States. (Source: Wired)

**(U) Pandemic Concerns and 2020 Election: Concerns Vary by Race, Education, Party Affiliation:** Although most voters say they believe that voting will be safe and that their ballot will be counted despite the coronavirus pandemic, those who question election safety and some who question election integrity appear less likely to vote, according to a new RAND Corporation [survey](#).

In addition, people who identify as Republicans are more likely to express concerns about the integrity of the 2020 elections, while Democrats are more likely to be concerned about safety—underscoring the need for election officials to communicate to the public about both issues.

Researchers found that Black and Hispanic respondents tended to be less likely than white respondents to expect their vote to be counted accurately given the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic. Hispanic respondents also were less likely to report confidence in the preparedness of local officials. Despite misgivings among some groups, the survey found that for most people there is no major change in their intention to vote in November. However, a smaller group of respondents reported that they were less likely to vote—these same people are more likely to be those with safety concerns and in some cases integrity concerns.

Researchers say that policymakers who are interested in ensuring that pandemic-related concerns do not deter people from voting should prioritize safety and election integrity equally and clearly communicate with constituents about the steps being taken. (Source: Homeland Security Newswire)

#### (U) Week of 8/24

#### **(U) Russia Amplifies QAnon Conspiracy Networks Spreading COVID-19 Disinformation**

Among a set of actors, QAnon has been particularly successful in leveraging existing mistrust of health misinformation movements to further politicize the handling of Covid-19. This trend has grown evermore concerning as QAnon supporters continue to spin public health information to suit its theories.

Recent work from Graphika explored how and when communities, including distinct conspiratorial communities like QAnon and anti-vaxx, converged throughout the pandemic. Overall, the findings indicate the pandemic catalyzed the spread of the QAnon ideology to other communities and the QAnon topic aided in the convergence of other conspiratorial groups.

Three of Graphika's network maps that monitor Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation show a high number of accounts in common with the QAnon map. This means that there is now significant overlap between the QAnon network and health misinformation communities, including those dedicated to anti-vaccination. This confluence of narratives around related Covid-19 topics like mask-wearing and hydroxychloroquine has been noted by many reporters and researchers.

The consequences of this manipulation of narratives around Covid-19 were particularly obvious in the early days of the pandemic with conspiracies around the use of the two US Navy hospital ships, USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy. Just days after the ships had moored in New York and Los Angeles, respectively, to provide extra healthcare capacity for the cities, an engineer intentionally derailed a freight train near the USNS Mercy. Prosecutors said that the engineer believed that the ship 'had an alternate purpose related

to COVID-19 or a government takeover.’ The derailing incident occurred just three days after two ‘Qdrops’ posted to 8kun questioned the purpose of the USNS Comfort.

Later in the same month, an Illinois woman was arrested near the USNS Comfort in New York City after being found with eighteen knives in her vehicle. Jessica Prim, who used Facebook Live to broadcast her arrest in New York City, stated that she was planning to kill Joe Biden. Prim had shared QAnon conspiracy theories on Facebook in the days and hours leading up to the incident. While the wavering trust in public health institutions and information is of most pressing concern in terms of the potential to cause real-world harm, these incidents provide a more immediate indication of the threat posed by QAnon-backed Covid-19 disinformation.

*Moscow Amplifies QAnon Conspiracies*

Twitter’s publicly available datasets of assets used in state-backed information operations indicate that Russia may have taken a concerted interest in QAnon between December 2017 and April 2018 (shown below). One particular set of assets, removed in January 2019, was responsible for the majority of this interest. A search for tweets containing either #QAnon or #WWG1WGA revealed over 17,000 tweets produced by 3 unique users. These three users were all removed from the Twitter platform due to their suspected involvement in Kremlin-backed information operations. There was also some engagement with the hashtag #pizzagate from a different set of Russian Twitter accounts that were attributed to the Internet Research Agency and removed from the platform in October 2018, indicating that Russian state assets made early attempts to engage with one of the principal tenets of the QAnon theory.



Twitter’s public [information operations archive](#) indicates Russian assets were using QAnon hashtags (#QAnon, #WWG1WGA) from December 2017 to July 2018

An analysis of references to QAnon in articles on RT.com over the past year also suggests that Russian state-sponsored media may look to indirectly pay homage to central tenets of QAnon theory without

explicitly aligning itself with the community. Graphika has noted a convergence of interests between these two support communities on an increasingly frequent basis over the past two months, with Kremlin-aligned sources giving increasing airtime to topics that are near and dear to the QAnon community.

Data from Graphika's most recent mapping of the QAnon network also demonstrates that Russian interest in QAnon has become increasingly reciprocated over time. In Graphika's map of the QAnon community from 2018, the RT website was only the 70th most shared domain. However, in Graphika's 2020 map of the QAnon network, RT rose to be the 23rd most shared domain, with 2,728 posts sharing an RT article between February 2nd to March 3rd of this year. Between July 19th and August 20th, rt.com once again rose the ranks to be the 12th most shared domain among QAnon accounts in Graphika's live map.

The QAnon community provides a convenient target for foreign actors wishing to influence US political discourse ahead of the election; given the volume of accounts in question and their existing presence in a host of online conversations, this would require little effort. Aside from occasionally reinforcing and exacerbating certain aspects of QAnon theories, there is likely very little that foreign actors would need to do that is not already being done by the movement. (Source: Graphika)

**(U) Florida Man Says Wife Died of COVID-19 After Ignoring Health Guidance Because of Misinformation on Facebook:** A Florida man is mourning his wife after the couple ignored public health guidance and believed misinformation shared online about the new coronavirus.

A Florida man and his wife both contracted COVID-19 in May, leading to complications resulting in the wife's death earlier this month, [the BBC reported](#) on Monday. The man said that he and his wife were confused by misinformation and conspiracy theories they read on Facebook, leading them to avoid taking precautions to curb their chances of getting sick.

His wife suffered from asthma, a pre-existing health condition that is believed to exacerbate the impact of the virus. She died of heart complications related to COVID-19.

In May, the man wrote a long post on Facebook explaining how he and his wife had been confused about the pandemic. He told the BBC that they had at some point believed that it was being spread by 5G—a [conspiracy theory](#) that has been completely debunked—but that it was simply a hoax. (Source: Newsweek)

**(U) YouTube Claims "Plandemic" Sequel Violates its Rules but Has Still Allowed it to Get More Than 100,000 Views:** YouTube has allowed multiple uploads of a sequel to a coronavirus conspiracy theory film to rack up well over 100,000 combined views, even though the platform claimed it would take down copies of the film for violating its coronavirus misinformation rules.

On August 18, the makers of the viral conspiracy theory video *Plandemic* released a follow-up video called *Plandemic: Indoctrination*. Like with the [original Plandemic video](#), *Indoctrination* is full of [misinformation](#): among other things, it falsely claims the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention somehow patented the virus and pushes a false conspiracy theory about Microsoft co-founder [Bill Gates](#), [the virus](#), and [microchips](#). The video's launch was announced in advance, and a few social media platforms [took some action](#), cracking down on the video the day it was posted. YouTube [even](#)

took down some uploads with fewer views that day, telling The Verge that it "is removing full uploads as it sees them for violating its policies around COVID misinformation."

But uploads of the video are still up, and they've drawn thousands of views. A review by Media Matters of YouTube videos with "plandemic" in the title and with more than 10,000 views in the past week on the tracking tool BuzzSumo found that while the sequel was not viewed nearly as many times on YouTube as the original *Plandemic* video (which received at least 9 million views), it still earned a significant number of views. Despite YouTube's pledge, at least three full uploads of the video have earned a combined total of about 120,000 views so far.

Additionally, the upload with the most views, currently more than 50,000, appears to be from an account supporting the QAnon conspiracy theory.

YouTube's difficulties containing the spread of the video despite promising to take it down for violating its rules come as the platform has repeatedly struggled to deal with coronavirus misinformation on its platform. (Source: Media Matters)

(U) **COVID-19 Misinformation Blamed for Texans Drinking Bleach:** Almost 50 North Texans drank bleach this month, according to the North Texas Poison Center, which blamed "misleading and inaccurate information circulating online about how to prevent the spread of Covid-19," for the rise in poisonings. (Source: The Week)

(U) **YouTube Video Removals Doubled During Lockdown:** YouTube removed more videos than ever during the lockdown period, the company says.

The second quarter of the year saw more than 11 million videos taken down, up from six million at the start of the year.

YouTube said that it had opted for "over-enforcement" in its automatic systems when it was short-staffed during lockdown.

But that also meant that more videos were taken down in error.

Normally, "harmful content" would be sent to human reviewers, it said, but due to Covid-19 there were fewer reviewers working.

"One option was to dial back our technology and limit our enforcement to only what could be handled with our diminished review capacity," the company said in a blog post.

The other option was "to cast a wider net so that the most content that could potentially harm the community would be quickly removed" - and it chose to go down that path.

The downside, however, was that some videos that did not violate policies were mistakenly removed by the system.

YouTube said it has seen a jump in appeals being made by video creators - from 165,941 to 325,439.

The result was not unexpected - YouTube had said in March that creators "may see increased video removals".

Normally, it only reinstates about 25% of videos that were taken down automatically following a human review. That had now jumped to 50% of videos being reinstated on appeal, it said.

YouTube also put in place stricter automatic rules in areas such as "violent extremism" and "child safety" - leading to a three-fold increase in video removals.

Child safety overtook spam as the top reason for removal as a result. (Source: BBC)

#### (U) Week of 8/17

##### **(U) Repeating Misinformation Doesn't Make It True, But Does Make It More Likely To Be Believed:**

One of the most frustrating aspects of the coronavirus pandemic is seeing all of the false information circulating around social media. I was inspired to write this article after reading unfortunate (and inaccurate) comments on a local Georgia school district's Facebook page after they announced that three of its high schools were transitioning back to digital learning. It was breathtaking to see so many inaccurate claims about efficacy of face masks, fatality rates, or comparisons to the flu. My *Forbes* contributions are typically about weather and climate, but I am often inspired to make connections with other aspects of science too. There are striking similarities between repetitive false information about coronavirus and misinformation that I witness with weather and climate. I decided to explore something called the "illusory truth effect."

According to a 2015 study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, the *illusory truth effect* is the notion that repeated statements are perceived to be more truthful than new statements. This effect is clearly something that marketing professionals, cult leaders, and politicians understand. In other words, you say something enough times, and people start to believe it. Temple University psychologist Dr. Lynn Hasher and colleagues published the first major study of the illusory truth effect. Some other interesting characteristics of the illusory truth effect detailed in *Psychology Today* by Dr. Joe Pierre include:

- If repeated enough times, the information may be perceived to be true even if sources are not credible.
- The illusory truth effect is very evident on subject matter people perceive themselves to know about.
- The effect can happen even if someone had previous knowledge that the information was false.

People often suffer from lapses in critical thinking, biases because of personal needs or desires (motivated reasoning), and psychological reactance (regaining control after a feeling that it has been lost). When you couple these things with confirmation biases (consuming information from sources aligning with one's beliefs) or political tribalism, you get repeated statements like these:

- The science is unproven on the effectiveness of masks.
- Only a small percentage of people are dying from COVID-19 so what's the big deal.
- The flu kills more people every year.
- The media is hyping the pandemic.

(Source: Forbes)



(U) **Coronavirus Doctors Battle Another Scourge: Misinformation:** An emergency room doctor in Illinois was accused in April of profiting from naming coronavirus as the cause of a patient's death, a rumor spreading online.

An internist in New York treated a vomiting patient in May who drank a bleach mixture as part of a fake virus cure found on YouTube.

And in June a paramedic in Britain aided a clearly sick man who had refused to go to a hospital after reading misleading warnings about poor coronavirus treatment on social media.

Doctors on the front lines of the global pandemic say they are fighting not just the coronavirus, but also increasingly combating a never-ending scourge of **misinformation about the disease** that is hurting patients.

Before the pandemic, medical professionals had grown accustomed to dealing with patients misled by online information, a phenomenon they called Dr. Google. But in interviews, more than a dozen doctors and misinformation researchers in the United States and Europe said the volume related to the virus was like nothing they had seen before. They blamed leaders for amplifying fringe theories, the social media platforms for not doing enough to stamp out false information and individuals for being too quick to believe what they see online.

Last week, researchers said that at least 800 people worldwide died in the first three months of the year, and thousands more were hospitalized, from unfounded claims online that ingesting highly concentrated alcohol would kill the virus. Their findings, based on studying rumors circulating on the web, were **published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene**.

Doctors' frustrations fill Facebook groups and online forums. The American Medical Association and other groups representing doctors say the false information spreading online is harming the public health response to the disease. The World Health Organization is developing methods to measure the harm of virus-related misinformation online, and over two weeks in July the group hosted **an online conference** with doctors, public health experts and internet researchers about how to address the problem.

Doctors say patients regularly resist their counsel, more inclined to believe what they read on Facebook than what a medical professional tells them. The falsehoods, they say, have undermined efforts to get people to wear masks and fueled a belief that the seriousness of the disease is overblown. Some doctors say they face abuse when they participate in online discussions to correct the record.

"This is no longer just an anecdotal observation that some individual doctors have made," said Daniel Allington, a senior lecturer at King's College London and **co-author of a recent study** that found people who obtained their news online, instead from radio or television, were more likely to believe in

conspiracy theories and not follow public health guidelines. "This is a statistically significant pattern that we can observe in a large survey."

A growing fear is that vaccine conspiracy theories could undermine eventual vaccination efforts, said Dr. John Wright from the Bradford Institute for Health Research in England.

Dr. Wright recalled that Congolese immigrants believed a social media rumor that Covid-19 was a government trick to deport them, and that others, from the Indian community, cited posts about doctors intentionally infecting patients. A nurse at the hospital complained to Facebook about people posting names and pictures of health workers accusing them of leaving patients to die. (Source: NY Times)

**(U) Russian State-Backed Media COVID-19 Vaccine Coverage:**

**Overview**

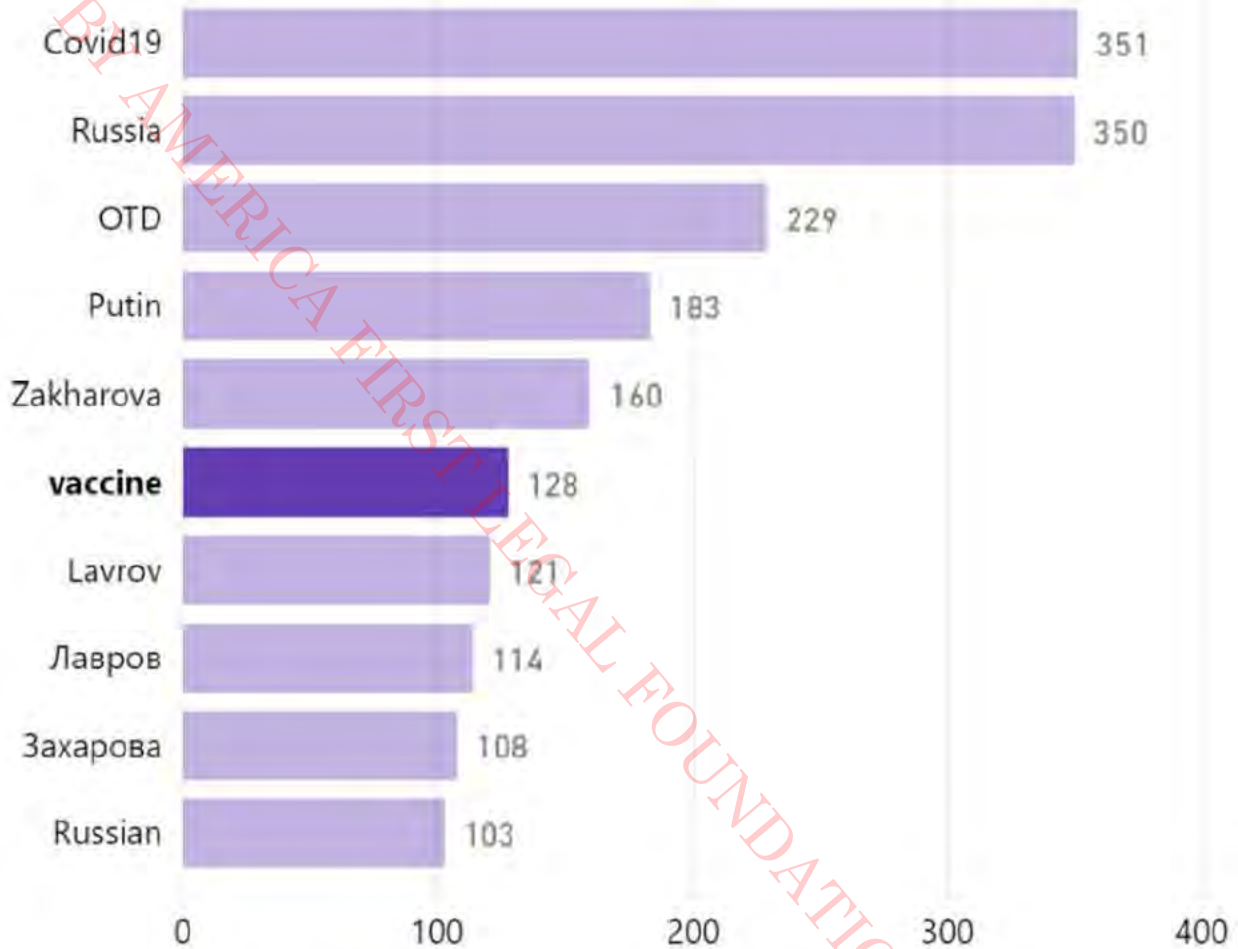
On August 11, 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia had approved the world's first coronavirus vaccine, which it dubbed Sputnik V in reference to the Soviet Union's famous orbital satellite—the world's first in 1957. Russian state media and government officials touted this "breakthrough," emphasizing positive claims about the vaccine's safety and efficacy, as well as international demand for the vaccine. Moscow also pushed back against international criticism of the vaccine's lax safety testing, accusing critics of Russophobia and withholding of information, while portraying itself as the benevolent leader in the fight against the virus.

**By the Numbers**

Between August 8 and August 14, #vaccine was the sixth most-used hashtag by the Russian government and diplomatic accounts monitored on Hamilton 2.0. In total, close to 1,200 tweets from monitored accounts mentioned "vaccine" during the same period.

### Top 10 Hashtags

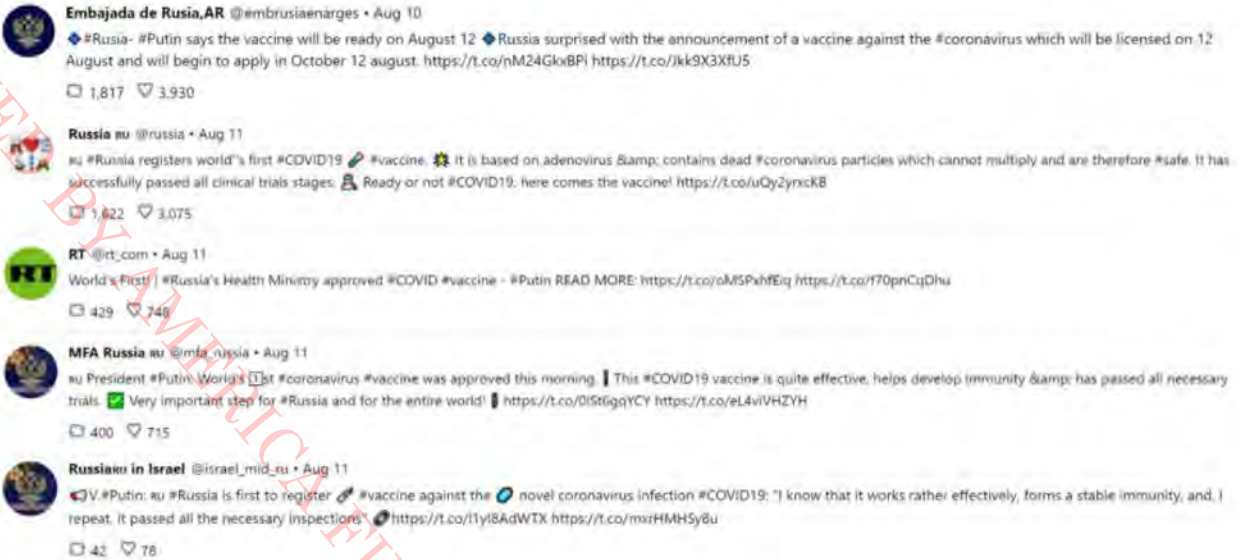
(government/diplomatic accounts)



Top 10 hashtags used by Russian diplomatic/government accounts monitored on Hamilton 2.0 (August 8-August 14, 2020)

#### What We're Seeing on Hamilton 2.0

Accompanying the August 11 announcement, Russian state media and government officials celebrated being the first country to register a coronavirus vaccine, portraying Russia as the global leader in the race for a coronavirus cure. Russian patriotism was evident in much of the messaging, as diplomatic and state media accounts touted the development as not only a win for public health but also for the Russian state. Russia Beyond, for instance, **capitalized** FIRST in its headline, adding the tagline "made in Russia."



TASS in particular emphasized international interest in purchasing the vaccine. It identified more than 20 countries and published individual articles on at least six that indicated interest. RT also reported on Russia's UN envoy Vasily Nebenzya's statement portraying Russia as a global benefactor "ready for international cooperation" on vaccine research and production.

In response to international criticism, Russian diplomats and state media decried what they deemed a "politicized" and Russophobic response to the Russian vaccine in Western media. Some even alleged a coordinated smear campaign against the Russian vaccine:

- Dmitry Polyanskiy** @dpol\_un • Aug 11  
That smear campaign is predictable! Don't worry, we don't impose our #vaccine on anyone. It's surely dangerous for Russophobes - might cure them of #Russophobia! 😊 Get your own one, we sincerely wish you luck! #RussianVaccine <https://t.co/tQImTegA6>
- 95 ❤️ 248
- Russia in Canada** @russianembassy • Aug 11  
First they say "Russia stole our #vaccine" (BTW, where is it?) Next "RussianVaccine is useless" What else? Buy only western-made vaccine/cure because it contains "antibodies of freedom" from virus?! It would be fun if people weren't dying around the world of #COVID19 <https://t.co/7CcoXUc6a>
- 80 ❤️ 153
- Russia in RSA** ru @embassyofrussia • Aug 14  
"Sputnik Crisis" – this is what the period of fear in the West about technological gap between US & USSR is called. It was caused by USSR's launch of "Sputnik 1" in 1957. 63 years later Russia's #SputnikV #vaccine causes similar hysteria in Western media. Some things never change <https://t.co/nZM5VUYouO>
- 173 ❤️ 322
- Russia in RSA** ru @embassyofrussia • Aug 13  
Russian Health Minister Mikhail #Murashko on #vaccine vs #Covid\_19: "Our foreign colleagues are trying to express scepticism regarding the Russian #vaccine, while sensing, apparently, its competitive advantages. We find such scepticism groundless" #SputnikV #RussianVaccine <https://t.co/kEVigbmSH2>
- 8 ❤️ 22
- Russia in Canada** @russianembassy • Aug 11  
With anti-Covid #RussianVaccine now officially registered, Big Pharma & its MSM mouthpieces are smearing Russian achievement of global importance. Dangerous & irresponsible behaviour (akin to #vaccinehacking fake) amidst deadly #pandemic <https://t.co/eU9HwEB1>
- 63 ❤️ 139
- Russia in Canada** @russianembassy • Aug 11  
Markets are smarter than #BlameRussia hoaxers. #RussianVaccine can provide solution not only for the ultra-rich, but for general public, including populous developing countries. Some estimates say it would cost only 3 USD/dose <https://t.co/D35SXa9t>
- 50 ❤️ 105
- RT en Español** @actualidadrt • Aug 14  
If you were told that in Russia they are going to inject a vaccine to 145 million people without having checked before whether it works or is safe, maybe they haven't told you everything. If you have a few minutes, we do it in this video. 📺 @inafinogenova <https://t.co/68XQmhrEQN>
- 847 ❤️ 1,106

**"Why 'Sputnik Moment' of Russia's First COVID Vaccine Triggered 'Sour Grapes' Reaction in Western MSM,"** Opinion, *Sputnik News*, August 11, 2020.

*"On 11 August, Russia announced the world's first vaccine for COVID-19, named 'Sputnik V', in a bid to curb the pandemic that has currently killed over 737,000 globally. International observers detail why the breakthrough development has been met with either silence or rejection from the Western press."*

**"'Safe & effective' over 'first': US throws shade at Russia's first-to-market Covid-19 vaccine,"** RT, August 11, 2020.

*"Top US health officials insist they're holding out for a "safe and effective" Covid-19 vaccine, hinting that Russia's shot is anything but – or even that it's a plot to 'goad the US into forcing early action on our vaccines.' . . . ]. The Trump administration's own vaccine development program, called Operation Warp Speed, has been criticized even by the country's most fervent vaccine boosters for its "unsafe" timeline, which has contracted from an ambitious 18-month projected schedule to "maybe before the election."*

**"First registered COVID-19 vaccine worldwide is named Sputnik V,"** TASS, August 11, 2020.

The article describes the vaccine's official website, which claims to have been created "to fight the disinformation campaign about the vaccine launched by several international news outlets."

**“Russian vaccine against COVID-19 subject to coordinated information attacks — developer,”** TASS, August 11, 2020.

*“The Russian vaccine against COVID-19 has become subject to coordinated information attacks, Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), told an online conference on Tuesday. ‘Coordinated and carefully prepared information attacks on the Russian vaccine are trying to discredit and hide the correctness of the Russian approach to drug development,’ he said. According to Dmitriev, ‘a politicized approach to the Russian vaccine on the part of a number of Western countries endangers the lives of their citizens.’”*

The head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Kirill Dmitriev, also published an **op-ed** in Sputnik, which emphasized Russia’s desire for international cooperation and argued that “politics again stand in the way of the Russian technology, which can save lives around the world.” The outlet dramatically described the piece as “forbidden” after it was supposedly “rejected by all leading Western media” due to an alleged “blockade imposed on positive information about the Russian COVID-19 vaccine.”

An RT America **segment** devoted to the topic took a similar approach, suggesting that the world had missed an opportunity to unite around the vaccine, that the West is jealous of Russia’s progress, and that approved British or U.S. vaccines would have been rushed to market for monetary reasons, rather than Russia’s supposedly benevolent motives.

### Why It Matters

As the coronavirus pandemic rages on globally, progress in treatment and vaccine development has commanded a massive degree of public attention and funding, and the first effective vaccine would represent a major milestone in this fight—as well as global influence for the first mover. It is not surprising that Russia, or any country, would seek to promote such progress. However, while Russia’s overt channels tout its accomplishment, promote an image of Russia as a benevolent savior, and decry the West’s Russophobia and alleged withholding of information, more covert Kremlin-linked websites have **pushed** false reports about deaths caused by a U.S.-made vaccine. This is consistent with Russian messaging around other public health and technology related developments, where narratives around Western advancements often stress (or manufacture) public health concerns while Russia’s efforts are deemed “safe” (see **5G coverage**). (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **How WhatsApp Became the Tool of Choice for WHO's COVID-19 Messaging:** The **World Health Organization** launched its **WHO Health Alert** service on messaging platform **WhatsApp** as a way to reach people where they are with up-to-date information on **COVID-19**.

Many organizations try to share content by drawing people into their channels, said Andy Pattison, manager of digital solutions at WHO. Pattison’s strategy, meanwhile, is to get WHO content onto platforms people are already using.

This is part of the reason WHO turned to WhatsApp, which has 2 billion active users. Users can text "hi" in a range of languages to +41 79 893 1892, and the chatbot replies with a menu of options, including the latest numbers of new cases and deaths, myths versus facts, where to donate, and more.

WHO is one of a growing number of governments, NGOs, and international agencies that are using WhatsApp as a way to automate one-on-one interactions at scale.

Because of its massive user base and end-to-end encryption, Facebook-owned WhatsApp emerged as the best option for WHO to broadcast COVID-19 information, but a number of challenges stand in the way of it being the perfect solution to keep people informed. (Source: Devex)

(U) **The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism:** While government leaders are focused on fighting COVID-19, the threat of terrorism has not gone away. In fact, homeland security experts **have warned** that violent extremists may seek to take advantage of the fear and disruption around the pandemic to further their agenda and recruit new members.

Gary Ackerman, an associate professor in the **College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity** (CEHC), who specializes in terrorist ideology, recently teamed up with CEHC graduate student Hayley Peterson to explore both the challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis presents for terrorist organizations.

Their observational report was published in last month's edition of *Perspectives on Terrorism*. "During times of crisis, we often see terrorists exploit the situation and use it for propaganda," said Ackerman. "This is particularly true amongst anti-government groups on both the far-right and far-left. They take advantage of widespread anxiety and distrust in leadership to promote radicalization and violence."

"Lots of people do not realize that many extreme groups reside, or at least operate, in our societies," added Peterson, who earned a dual undergraduate degree in **Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity** (EHC) and **Human Biology** in May. "Recent lockdowns, social distancing and other disruptions to daily life due to COVID-19 have presented an interesting case study to analyze how terrorists respond to a global crisis."

Albany **says** that the 15-page report introduces and discusses a "top 10" list of COVID-19's most significant current and potential impacts on terrorist activity. The list ranges from terrorists leveraging an increased susceptibility to radicalization and inciting a rise in anti-government attitudes to engaging in pro-social activities and even reconsidering the utility of bioterrorism.

Although there could (and likely will) be short- and medium-term impacts, Ackerman and Peterson argue the pandemic's long-term economic damage is more likely to create the heightened psychological stress and anger against the government that could lead to radicalization at dangerous levels.

“The greatest danger from terrorists utilizing COVID-19 itself as a weapon will arise after the first wave is over, but before a vaccine is available,” said Ackerman. “More importantly, it is during the years following the end of the pandemic, which many project will be a lengthy economic stagnation and recovery period, that the gains made through current terrorist efforts to radicalize, recruit and engage in pro-social activities are likely to bear fruit.” (Source: Homeland Security Newswire)

(U) **Russia’s COVID-19 Disinformation as Storytelling:** The first case in the EUvsDisinfo Disinformation Database on the coronavirus, [22 January 2020](#), already painted a clear picture: the virus was manufactured in NATO laboratories. NATO is the villain in more than 10 percent of all cases in the database, [paying Belarusian](#) opposition to spread the virus, [massing up](#) military on Russia’s borders, [preparing for an invasion](#), [performing tests](#) on humans... NATO is a threat to the countries’ [sovereignty](#), it transforms member states into [vassals](#) of the United States.

NATO is a well-known bogeyman, a comfortable “dragon” for the Kremlin story. Generations of former Soviet citizens grew up during the Cold War and are familiar with this story. Pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets eagerly employ conspiracy theories to back their narratives. When you can’t use existing parties as villains in a conspiracy, fantasy villains work just as well. One very popular villain is [The Deep State](#).

The concept of The Deep State implies an existence of rulers behind the scenes. We might elect presidents and parliamentarians, but the real power lies somewhere else; in the [bureaucracy](#), in the [military](#), with the [bankers](#) and [industrialists](#). There are, according to the pro-Kremlin media, [secret](#), [global elites](#) that rule in the shadows. The EUvsDisinfo has written about the [conspiracy theory](#) as a comfortable instrument for disinformation.

#### *The Shadow Rulers*

The great thing with a conspiracy theory is that it can be reused with suitable villains to reach various audiences. The [Vatican](#), [The Liberals](#), [The Rothschilds](#), [George Soros](#), [The British Empire](#), [The Zionists](#)... these are a few of the Dragons in the Kremlin fairy tale. Any kind of dissent in Russia is described as [tools of malign forces](#) abroad.

Occasionally, pro-Kremlin outlets descends into anti-Semitism. One notable offender is the US-based Russia Insider website. The site launched a full-fledged anti-Semitic campaign in January 2018 and has since become a vocal voice for [white supremacy](#) in the United States, praising [Hitler](#) and [Putin](#) with similar passion. Anti-Semitic content can also be found in Russian state-owned and/or oligarch controlled media. Russia’s largest daily, the Komsomolskaya Pravda, refers to the “[Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#)” (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) **America vs. Russian Disinformation: How Societal Cohesion and Empowered Institutions can Win the War against Fake News:** The power of disinformation lies in its psychological strength. On one hand, it can be easily disregarded, due to its seemingly outlandish claims, especially when it appears



haphazard and clumsy. But on the other hand, disinformation efforts can be remarkably effective, in part because they can be executed stealthily via the internet, relying on the fact that any information—no matter how implausible—still resonates in our fragmented culture’s susceptibility to conspiracy theory. In 2014, while serving at the US embassy in Kyiv, I was the subject of a targeted disinformation attack. I became aware of this when I started receiving hate mail from conspiracy theorists, sent to my work email address. Unbeknownst to me, Russian trolls, under the guise of independent “truth-exposing” hackers, had **falsified a letter under my name**, claiming that I was part of a false-flag operation in eastern Ukraine against Russia. Our embassy response to this claim was quite simple: “Absurd.” Fortunately for me, this report never gained traction. But it raises a broader question: Do we ignore these claims or respond to them? One’s gut reaction when confronted with falsehood is to push back, citing facts and debunking the falsehoods through careful research and investigations. But an enduring way to diminish this threat is to focus on the intended audience and build resiliency to withstand those attacks.

### Seeing Ourselves

It is prudent to ask why deliberately disseminated falsehoods resonate with citizens, and how to strengthen our resolve in the face of disinformation attacks. Nina Jankowicz, a scholar at the Kennan Institute who researches disinformation, observes that **more focus should be directed** to those “who are targets of Russian disinformation, why its narratives find fertile ground among them and what can be done to change that.” Not only does Russian disinformation aim to not only create confusion and sow general discord, but it is also targeted; narratives **take special aim** at known divisions in society. Here in the United States, for example, disinformation seeks to erode the trust that citizens have in their governmental institutions.

Russia perceives that this relationship between US citizens and the government, often tense, is one of America’s greatest vulnerabilities, and that it increases political polarization. A healthy distrust of big government has been woven into the fabric of the American people. But when does this distrustful relationship turn *unhealthy*? Numerous surveys have pointed to the low level of trust that citizens have in their government. Only **17 percent of Americans** trust their government to do the right thing either always or most of the time. Making matters worse, the exponential expansion of media outlets, combined with rise of the mobile device, has exacerbated these trends. Although the federal workforce as a percentage of the total American population **has shrunk over the last fifty years**, as one example, some media reports fuel the opposite perception. To curb attempts to sow division in our society by spreading false information and disrupt our efforts abroad, the United States can improve its security by investing in its own democracy without mirror-imaging our adversary by creating outlets like Russia’s—RT and Sputnik, for example—which serve Kremlin interests rather than the truth.

### Reacting Without Being Reactive

Some efforts are already underway. Recently, the US government has created entities to share information, analyze trends, and inform a response to disinformation campaigns. Legislation in 2017 created the Global Engagement Center (GEC), based out of the State Department. The **GEC’s mission** is

to “lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining U.S. national security interests.” The Department of Defense has also been examining the structure and authorities of its institutions that involve the cyber domain. DoD is currently **wrestling with the roles and responsibilities of Cyber Command**, and whether this entity should assume expanded authorities over broader information warfare globally. While the effort to define roles and responsibilities is laudable, it could be a mistake to consolidate all information-related activities into one functional command, neglecting the expertise and agility of regional commands—and their interagency partners—to respond when necessary. While the conversations between State and DoD need to continue, the arguments over structure miss the larger issue. How do we amplify our message?

The US Agency for Global Media (USAGM)—until recently known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors—is responsible for advancing principles dedicated to freedom of information and expression as well as communicating American values abroad. It does so **primarily via five networks**: Voice of America communicates news from the United States; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting focus on news catered to their regional audiences; and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks focuses on a wide array of international and local news to reach Arabic audiences. USAGM adheres to the legislative “firewall” between these networks and the US government: the latter cannot tell the former what to say. This firewall is critical and adheres to US principles of a free and independent press, as Thomas Kent, the former head of RFE/RL explained to me. Some discount the USAGM’s impact as a messaging tool because of this firewall, but the opposite is true: by deliberately protecting the content of the networks from US government influence, we increase American credibility as an honest broker of information and engender trust in those we aim to reach. More resources should be dedicated to this valuable tool, yet **USAGM’s FY20 budget** is likely to be lower than previous years. If the United States is serious about retaining its influence abroad to advance American interests, Congress should appropriate more money to the five networks. While we may never match Russian efforts to fund information activities around the world, we can do more to amplify the effect of our federally funded—but independent—networks.

#### Education to Strengthen Resilience

At home, introducing modest advancements in our education curriculum to promote media literacy, digital competencies, and civics for all citizens will strengthen our resilience to withstand disinformation attacks. An increased awareness to the risks of our digital world is warranted. Almost all Americans—96 percent—own some sort of mobile device, with 81 percent owning a smartphone. Congress should encourage the improvement of media literacy and the building of greater digital awareness in middle and high schools. Other countries subject to contested information environments, such as Estonia, have already introduced this in their secondary schools. Estonia promotes “**digital competence**” as one of the eight core competencies that inform school curricula. But we should not confine improving digital competency to younger populations, already perceptive to the risks associated with the cyber domain. Increasingly, older generations demonstrate a susceptibility to disinformation. Encouraging and

incentivizing civil society organizations at the community level to engage in this outreach would be the most beneficial way to help all adult age groups better understand various sources of information. To complement these initiatives and to strengthen our citizens' ability to identify disinformation, it would be sensible to find common ground and promote civics education in our schools. Several states, notably Massachusetts and Illinois, have made great strides in elevating civics curriculum standards. CivXNow, a project of the nonprofit enterprise iCivics, has formed a bipartisan coalition of numerous philanthropic organizations, learning providers, and other stakeholders to promote "civic knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for informed and authentic civic engagement." Recent studies have pointed to the abysmally low level of knowledge of government among US citizens. By some accounts, approximately 75 percent of Americans cannot name all three branches of government. Increasing general civic knowledge among our populace could certainly act as one more tool to inoculate against disinformation and elevate the public discourse. Framing these initiatives as part of the larger national-security equation might garner more interest in Congress, and possibly lead to increased federal education standards for the nation.

#### Moving to a Culture of Public Service

Finally, to build more resilience at home, it is time to incentivize public and national service, with the aim of connecting more Americans to their governing institutions, whether they be local, state, or federal. Currently, only 6 percent of the federal workforce is under the age of thirty, while 30 percent of this same workforce will be eligible to retire in five years. Established in 2017, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service set out to "examine and recommend ways to increase participation in military, national, and public service as a means to strengthen our nation." The commission's interim report contains helpful recommendations that could add resiliency to our nation's ability to withstand disinformation. (Source: Modern War Institute)

**(U) Report: 'Superspreaders' of Bogus Health News Racked up Billions of Views on Facebook:** Groups and pages that spread misleading health news attracted an estimated 3.8 billion views on Facebook in the past year, an activist group said in a report Wednesday — adding that those networks pushing bogus claims drew far more traffic than authoritative sources on topics like Covid-19.

The report, published by the nonprofit activist group Avaaz, drew immediate scrutiny from Democratic lawmakers about the tech giant's efforts to combat phony coronavirus news.

**What the study found:** Websites disseminating false or misleading health news generated nearly half a billion views on the social media platform in April alone, Avaaz said, with the trend peaking just as states across the U.S. expanded lockdowns due to the pandemic.

And the report found that 10 "superspreaders" of health misinformation racked up four times as many views as the top 10 leading global health agencies that same month, even as Facebook took new steps to show users information from authoritative health sources. Because Facebook discloses the number of

interactions but not views for certain types of posts, Avaaz extrapolated estimated views by multiplying the number of interactions posts received.

The full report, which covers a year of posts ending in May, also calls into question how effective Facebook has been at alerting users when they are seeing phony health news. Avaaz found that only 16 percent of the content it identified as health misinformation was labeled as such by Facebook, with the rest remaining online without any warnings.

**(U) Facebook Blocks Users from Linking to New Plandemic Hoax Video:** Social media sites are trying to stop the spread of *Plandemic: Indoctrination*, a follow-up to the *Plandemic* conspiracy video about the novel coronavirus. As *NBC News* reporter Brandy Zadrozny noted, Facebook blocks users from reposting a link to the new video, which was uploaded to an external site earlier today. Twitter doesn't block the video link, but it sends users who click it to a warning screen, saying that the link is "potentially spammy or unsafe."

Twitter confirmed to *The Verge* that it's warning people rather than blocking the link; the company will evaluate any short clips that are directly uploaded on a case-by-case basis and may remove any that it deems dangerous misinformation. Streaming channel London Real, which posted the video, reported that it was suspended by LinkedIn before its premiere. According to CrowdTangle, London Real's original post linking to the video has about 53,000 interactions on Facebook. A reposted version of the video can be found on YouTube, but it currently has under 200 views.

Initially posted in May, the 26-minute *Plandemic* documentary was a hit on social media and promoted a number of false claims about the coronavirus pandemic, including the (completely incorrect) assertion that wearing a mask can "activate" the coronavirus. Companies initially **hesitated to remove it**, and it racked up millions of views and **a created high online profile** for its star, **discredited researcher** Judy Mikovits.

As described **in a thread** by *New York Times* reporter Davey Alba, *Plandemic: Indoctrination* expands on the themes of the first film, claiming that a shadowy conspiracy, including Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus pandemic.

**A New York Times analysis** determined that *Plandemic* was promoted heavily by adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory — which claims that the Trump administration is fighting a secret war against celebrity satanist pedophiles — as well as the anti-pandemic-mitigation "reopen" movement and individuals like celebrity doctor Christiane Northrup. It's not clear how much of it was driven by social media recommendation systems, which are frequently blamed for spreading misinformation. However, Facebook initially took the milder step of reducing *Plandemic's* reach rather than removing it, giving it a greater chance to spread. That doesn't appear to be happening with *Indoctrination*. (Source: The Verge)

**(U) Anti-Vaccination Group Sues Facebook Over Fact-Checking Program:** Children's Health Defense, a group founded by anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is **suing Facebook** and its fact-checking

partners for rejecting ads and labeling debunked claims about vaccines and 5G networks. The complaint against Facebook, its CEO Mark Zuckerberg, and the fact-checking organizations PolitiFact, Science Feedback, and Poynter Institute is legally shaky. But it marks an escalation of attacks on Facebook for policing pseudoscience.

Kennedy was one of the leading purveyors of anti-vaccine advertising on Facebook before the platform cracked down on spurious vaccine ads and promised to stop recommending anti-vax pages. As part of that effort, Facebook topped the CHD's page with a label noting that "this page posts about vaccines" and a link to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website, and it disabled the organization's ability to fundraise. The lawsuit notes that fact-checkers also added warnings to some content that they labeled false — "drastically reduc[ing] by 95 percent" the traffic to CHD's own site from these posts. CHD alleges that this all results in a "falsely disparaging" impression of the organization, implying that Kennedy's organization is "not reliable" and promotes incorrect scientific claims. (Vaccines are typically safe, effective, and extremely beneficial.) It also claims Facebook is a government actor that should be barred from limiting users' speech, apparently in part because Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) asked the company to take action on misinformation.

This case doesn't have a clear precedent for success. Judges have dismissed the argument that social media platforms are public spaces bound by the First Amendment, and much of the lawsuit simply contradicts Facebook fact-checkers' claims, rather than establishing why the fact-checking would be illegal. (It accuses the companies of racketeering, a claim that is very rarely deployed correctly.) (Source: The Verge)

#### (U) Africa Check Sees Huge Growth in its WhatsApp Podcast Debunking Widely Circulated

**Misinformation:** "What's Crap on WhatsApp," a voice note podcast produced by fact-checking organization Africa Check and podcast company Volume, has gained a dedicated following during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the first six months of 2020, subscriptions to the service sent directly to users through WhatsApp grew by 215%, from 1,718 in January to 5,413 in June. That's almost 10 times the 22% growth from the previous six-month period.

The five-to-seven-minute podcast sent on directly to subscribers on WhatsApp summarizes the latest viral rumors submitted to Africa Check for evaluation. Twice a month Africa Check's chief deputy editor Kate Wilkinson and Volume CEO Paul McNally break down each rumor and let their listeners know what's crap and what isn't.

"'What's Crap' gives us a lot more freedom and listeners to the show will know that it's a lot more fun. It's a lot more relaxed," Wilkinson said.

In June 2019, as part of the Fact Forward Innovation Fund, the International Fact-Checking Network awarded Africa Check a \$50,000 grant to develop the podcast. In addition to a report detailing the successes of the podcast during the one-year grant period, Africa Check produced a handbook in English, French, and Spanish to help other fact-checking organizations create similar voice note podcasts.

"The beauty of the idea of What's Crap on WhatsApp is that it's incredibly easy for anyone to do. It's 100% manual, it pretty much is a staff member with a phone and a laptop, adding people, logging submissions, chatting," Wilkinson said. "You can start doing this in an hour if you want to."

Wilkinson acknowledged the show's popularity has had some drawbacks. During the peak of the pandemic, the dedicated phone used to distribute the program received almost 2,000 subscription requests per month, and 800 messages from listeners per day. Because of South Africa's stay-at-home-order during the pandemic, this all had to be managed by a single staff member. (Source: Poytner)

(U) **How Pro-Mask Posts Boost the Anti-Mask Movement:** When masks became mandatory in a number of countries in July, it sparked a lively conversation online. Videos of furious individuals hurling abuse at mask-wearing shop assistants went viral and anti-mask protests were covered in nightly TV news bulletins. A cursory look at social media and much of the coverage might make it seem that there was a sizable movement opposed to mask wearing, locked in furious debate with those criticizing or mocking them.

"#NoMasks ..... Now our high streets and shops will be dehumanising, dystopian hell-holes," one UK user wrote after a [government announcement](#) making face coverings compulsory in shops. "Why is everyone losing their shit about having to cover their faces to protect vulnerable people? Those saying #NoMasks need to stop being selfish," posted another.

Yet on closer examination, it becomes clear that what looks like a two-sided debate is in many countries a small minority provoking a backlash that ends up amplifying their messaging, raising their profiles and possibly introducing more people to a range of conspiracy theories.

There is undoubtedly a small and vocal community of people opposed to mask-wearing, often spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories related to face coverings and the pandemic. But the structures of social media, and the focus on these online movements by the media, means these stances have been given an inflated weight. First Draft research has found that while the anti-mask movement is loud, those who broadly support mask-wearing and reject the misinformed narratives appear to outnumber those who challenge mandatory mask orders.

This dynamic became clear in the UK on July 14 when the hashtag #NoMasks, used by accounts opposed to mask wearing, trended on Twitter, creating the impression that there was a groundswell of opposition to mandatory masks.

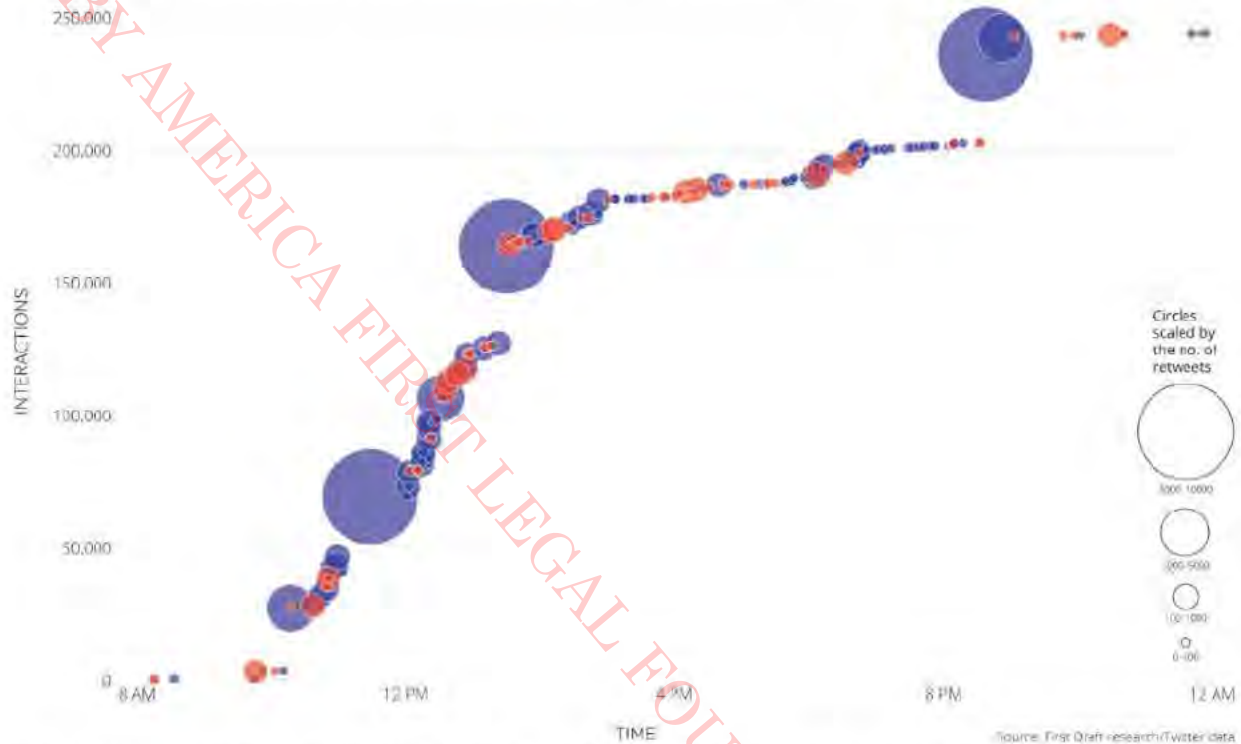
First Draft analysis of more than 8,000 Twitter accounts posting the hashtag found the majority of people using it on the day were in fact promoting the use of face masks, with pro-mask messages far more common than anti-mask ones.

Surveys of the public from the UK Office for National Statistics [suggest that](#) 96 per cent of people in the country are wearing masks in shops, with adherence increasing weekly. Yet a glance at Twitter's trending topics in mid-July seemed to suggest a surge of activity opposing masks.

“If someone’s on Twitter they could think this means lots of people are against masks,” said Jonathan Bright, a senior research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute.

### How pro-mask posts helped make #NoMasks trend on Twitter in the UK

Pro-mask messages attracted more retweets than anti-mask messages as the hashtag gained traction on July 14



The snapshot from the UK reflects what First Draft has seen in other countries, where a noisy online minority opposed to wearing masks provokes a majority who are angry about the refusal to follow protective rules and guidelines. Wearing a face covering has become a potent political symbol, marking a divide between very different attitudes to the pandemic and measures introduced to control it. (Source: First Draft News)

#### (U) Week of 08/10

(U) **Pro-Russia Vaccine Misinfo Finds Home in US Facebook Groups:** A false report claiming five Ukrainians had died after taking an American-made coronavirus vaccine spread in just a matter of days from a small Kremlin-friendly website to an audience of thousands in U.S.-based Facebook groups. Russian media outlets picked up the claim, and soon social media users in the U.S. were sharing screenshots and links to those articles — all as 30,000 Americans were preparing to roll up their sleeves for shots of an experimental COVID-19 vaccine late last month.

The fast dissemination of a single report from an obscure Ukrainian website to crowds of Facebook users highlights the ease with which pro-Russian websites can feed misinformation into American internet circles. In fact, one of the websites that picked up the report was identified by the U.S. State

Department this week as being part of a network of proxy misinformation websites being used by the Russian government.

As various countries race to produce a successful coronavirus vaccine, disinformation experts are bracing for a steady drum of misleading claims and propaganda aimed at undermining competing countries' efforts to develop an antidote. Misinformation could raise distrust and fear around a vaccine, threatening government leaders' hopes of ending the pandemic. And the U.S., which is readying plans to deliver 300 million doses to Americans starting next year, if a successful vaccine is identified, could be a prime target.

The falsehood around the U.S. vaccine fits into a longstanding, pro-Kremlin misinformation strategy, said Bret Schafer, a disinformation fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

"Anytime it appears the West has taken the lead in something they're going to try to do damage," Schafer said. "As they're close to coming to market with their own vaccine, or start running trials, you create doubt about what everyone else is doing in the hopes that your own citizens look to you for the answers."

Russia is boasting that it will soon become the first country to approve a COVID-19 vaccine. But scientists are raising serious doubts the country's plans to start mass vaccinations as soon as October. The unsupported claim that five out of 15 Ukrainians had died during a trial of the U.S. coronavirus vaccine was first published in July on the Lugansk Media Centre, a website affiliated with the separatist rebels in Ukraine's Luhansk region, who are backed by Russia. The false report said eight others also were hospitalized. The vaccine, however, is not currently being tested in Ukraine, according to a global database of vaccine trials kept by both the World Health Organization and U.S. National Institutes of Health.

The report was picked up by Russian-friendly site NewsFront and was shared more than 20,000 times in public Facebook groups and pages, including several with large anti-vaccination followings in the U.S. NewsFront was identified as a "proxy website" for the Russian government in a State Department's report this week that detailed Russia's apparatus of state-funded media, social media accounts and English-language websites used to spread disinformation.

"Vaccines are never safe!" one Facebook user wrote, sharing the NewsFront article in a Florida-based Facebook group called Vaxxed Vaccine Information.

The claim also gained traction in U.S. and French-speaking QAnon Facebook groups, which promote the conspiracy theory that President Donald Trump is waging a secret campaign against enemies in the "deep state" and a child sex trafficking ring.

And it appears to have inspired a new wave of memes aimed at sowing doubt about the vaccine. "Just curious. Would you take a vaccine with a 33% death rate to feel safe from a virus with a .06% death rate?" asks one meme that has been shared 14,000 times in a single Facebook post. (Source: ABC)



**(U) Facebook Says it Has Taken Down 7 Million Posts for Spreading Coronavirus Misinformation:**

Facebook said Tuesday that it took down 7 million posts pushing covid-19 misinformation from its main social media site and Instagram between April and June as the company tried to combat the rapid spread of dangerous information about the novel coronavirus.

The company also put warning notes on 98 million covid-19 misinformation posts on Facebook during that period — labeling posts that were misleading but not deemed harmful enough to remove.

Facebook and fellow big social media sites Twitter and YouTube have been scrambling to keep up with the flood of posts promoting fake cures or harmful speculation about the spread of the coronavirus since early this spring. Facebook put policies in place to try to regulate covid-19 posts, but their moderation teams that monitor such posts have also been disrupted as offices remain closed.

**(U) COVID-19 Fuels QAnons 2020 Resurgence:** The strange realities of 2020 have perfectly played to the kind of fear QAnon thrives on, driving record online interest in the conspiracy theory.

**Why it matters:** QAnon is not just one fringe conspiracy theory — it's a sprawling network of falsehoods that's seeping into the mainstream. Its growing influence is sowing fear and confusion around some of today's most important issues, such as election integrity and the coronavirus pandemic.

**Catch up quick:** QAnon is a far-right conspiracy theory that alleges the "deep state" is engaged in a global fight to take down President Trump.

- QAnon rose out of the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory and has grown into a decentralized network that analyzes cryptic prophecies dropped in remote online forums by "Q," who claims, without ever offering evidence, to be a Trump administration official with high-level clearance.
- Q maintains President Trump is secretly fighting a child-selling cabal in the U.S., though the conspiracy has spiraled to cover a vast array of claims, from JFK Jr. having faked his death to help Trump behind the scenes to the coronavirus being a hoax or a biological weapon engineered in either case by sinister elites.

**By the numbers:** Conspiracy theories tied to QAnon are growing more popular.

- **There was more than 10 times** as much Google search interest in QAnon in mid-July than in mid-January, according to Google Trends data.
- **QAnon pages and groups on Facebook had nearly 10 times** more likes at the end of last month than they did last July, according to data tracked by the Atlantic Council and shared with Axios.
- **There has been a 190% increase** in the daily average number of tweets with popular QAnon hashtags since March as compared to the seven months prior, according to data from GroupSense provided to Axios.

**Between the lines:** For all its twisty logic and branching details, Qanon is premised on a simple narrative of the good working to vanquish the evil, who are responsible for all the world's ills. There are very real concerns that may be driving more people to that narrative.

- **2020's battered economy** has spurred wide-ranging anxiety and uncertainty.

- **Child trafficking**, central to QAnon, has seen greater visibility, with the Jeffrey Epstein saga working as "gasoline poured onto QAnon embers, springing the theory back to life at a moment when some believers were suffering doubts," said Ethan Zuckerman, director of MIT's Center for Civic Media.
- **Coronavirus** has funneled what might otherwise be disparate conspiracy theories about cover-ups and global vaccine schemes into the grand unified theory offered by QAnon.

**QAnon could pose real-world danger** as it grows, scholars and analysts worry.

- Experts are particularly concerned it could undermine faith in democracy, with recent Q posts questioning vote-by-mail and election integrity.
- The web of misinformation expanding from within QAnon "definitely has real teeth," said Bryce Webster-Jacobsen of cyber intelligence firm GroupSense.

**What to watch:** Tech giants are starting to crack down on QAnon, but policies around it are inconsistent and may in some cases be easily dodged.

- **Twitter recently shut down 7,000 Q-related accounts.** It expects broader policy changes to limit the reach of another 150,000 accounts, per [NBC News](#).
- **Facebook removed** five pages, 20 accounts, and six groups associated with QAnon [for violating its content manipulation policies](#) in May.
- **TikTok blocked several hashtags** related to QAnon last month [from its search results](#), although some of the videos that originally had the hashtags may still be available on the platform.

**Yes, but:** [Studies have shown](#) that users are more likely to seek out bad information when a Big Tech platform [flags it as false](#).

- "There's sort of this censorship backfire that happens, and people start becoming outraged that [a video is] being taken down and then sharing it more and more and more," said Zarine Kharazian, assistant editor at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

**Meanwhile:** New platforms such as Parler and TheDonald.win are giving the conspiracy theory places to spread unchecked.

- On Parler, Webster-Jacobsen said there are 10,000 to 15,000 new posts every day with the hashtags #QAnon or #WWG1WGA — which stands for the Q catchphrase "where we go one, we go all."

**The bottom line:** Trust in U.S. institutions is dangerously low, which creates a ripe environment for big-tent conspiracies such as QAnon.

- "In some senses, the QAnon conspiracy is a deeply comfortable one: the idea that pedophile alien lizard people led by Hillary Clinton are running everything is more comfortable than the truth that no one has their hand firmly on the tiller," Zuckerman says. (Source: Axios)

**(U) People Who Engage with False news are Hyper-Concerned About Truth:** But They Think it's Being Hidden: When we think about disinformation, we tend to focus on narratives.

5G causes coronavirus. Bill Gates is trying to depopulate the planet. We're being controlled by lizards. But while narratives are concerning and compelling, there is another way of thinking about online disinformation. All narratives, no matter how bizarre, are an expression of something that underlies them: a way of knowing the world.

Contrary to claims that we live in a post-truth era, research suggests that people engaging with disinformation care deeply about the truth. [William Dance](#), a disinformation researcher who specializes in linguistics, has found that people engaging with disinformation are more likely to use words related to the truth — “disingenuous,” “nonsense,” “false,” “charade,” “deception,” “concealed,” “disguised,” “hiding,” “show,” “find,” “reveals,” “exposes,” “uncovers.”

People engaging with false news stories are not disinterested in truth, but are hyper-concerned with it — especially the idea that it’s being hidden.

Because they can seem bizarre, misinformed narratives can sometimes lead others to assume their proponents are simply irrational or disinterested in truth. It can also distract from the ways of knowing that lead people to conspiracy narratives. Not everyone is interested in accounts of the world based on institutionalized processes and the perspectives of experts.

Some people may value different methods, rely on different evidence, value different qualifications, speak in different vernaculars, pursue different logics, and meet different needs. [In the words of tech journalist and author Cory Doctorow](#), “We’re not living through a crisis about what is true, we’re living through a crisis about how we know whether something is true.” Part of that crisis stems from not understanding other ways that people know, and why.

The challenge we face is that we won’t know if trends exist, or if vulnerabilities are growing, unless we ask the right questions. What are the different ways people seek knowledge online? What assumptions underpin them? How are they changing? Are they being manipulated?

We also need to find out how to answer these questions. We need to find a route from the abstract questions of knowledge to the measurable traces of online behaviors.

During the pandemic, we’ve been experimenting with ways to do exactly that. In the midst of the pandemic, we looked at search-engine results using different keywords related to knowing about coronavirus: “facts” and “truth.”

On Google, searching for “coronavirus facts” gives you a full overview of official statistics and visualizations. That’s not the case for “coronavirus truth.” There you’ll get results referring to cover-ups and reports that China has questions to answer about the Wuhan lab — one of the major early conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus.

These results offer a glimpse into different ways of knowing online, and how platforms are responding with algorithms’ understanding (and production) of the different connotations of “facts” and “truth.” Even though “facts” and “truth” might feel the same, they appear to engage with different ideas about information: for example, what we know versus what they’re not telling us; official statistics versus unofficial discovery.

When we've applied this same principle to the emerging threat of vaccine hesitancy, we see a similar pattern. "Vaccine facts" leads to official sources promoting pro-vaccine messages, while "vaccine truth" leads to anti-vaccination books and resources.

These results are snapshots of different knowledge-seeking behaviors, which consider a single entry point — "facts" and "truth." But as this and other research suggests, there is much more to examine about ways of knowing, and how this plays into disinformation.

What might a framework of digital ways of knowing look like? Using facts and truth as illustrative concepts, we've proposed several dimensions (scale, process, causal logic, qualifications, method, tone and vernacular) as a starting point for considering different assumptions about what "knowing" might involve and to what narratives it might lead. Such an approach is designed to avoid the judgmental framing that conspiracy theories easily fall into. It is intended to show that certain ways of knowing, like lived experience, have their own validity that **might not be recognized** by the paradigm of fact checks.

	FACTS	TRUTH
<b>SCALE</b>	Granular <i>X claim is not true</i>	Systemic <i>X explains global events and dynamics</i>
<b>PROCESS</b>	Iterative and modular <i>X is possible, but there is insufficient evidence</i>	Qualitative leaps <i>If X used to be employed at Y, this must mean Z</i>
<b>CASUAL LOGIC</b>	Low intentionality <i>X is a common occurrence</i>	High intentionality <i>"Coincidence???"</i>
<b>QUALIFICATIONS</b>	Institutional expertise <i>Head of X unit at Y Institution</i>	Lived experience <i>X happened to me</i>
<b>METHOD</b>	Verification and falsification <i>Statistical analysis; written explanation</i>	Visual evidence <i>Mobile phone footage; visual webs of connection</i>
<b>TONE</b>	Repressive, moderate <i>"No, X didn't do Y"</i>	Liberatory, exclamatory <i>"We reveal the TRUTH behind X"</i>
<b>VERNACULAR</b>	Descriptive, technical, skeptical <i>manipulated, edited, doctored, credible, responsible, misinformation, disinformation</i>	Explanatory, colloquial, suspicious <i>concealed, disguised, hiding, secret, lies, naive, deception, misleading, exposes, reveals, uncovers</i>

*An illustrative framework for considering different ways of knowing*

Attention to ways of knowing as well as narratives can help us to ask different kinds of questions. How are ways of knowing changing? How might they be manipulated? How should reporters, educators and platforms respond?

If we fail to ask these questions, there is a risk that we won't account for — or respect — the different assumptions people make when seeking knowledge. We may fail to speak across divides and ignore how other people's needs from information can differ from our own.

We might also fail to understand how certain ways of knowing, [such as media literacy](#), can be manipulated and weaponized. We know that some people are more likely to seek alternative, all-explaining narratives — those with [low social status](#), [victims of discrimination](#), or [people who feel politically powerless](#). As well as witnessing the [rise in 5G conspiracy theories](#), we may also be experiencing the rise of certain ways of knowing and their manipulation, especially in the context of a resistance to institutions and elites. (Source: Nieman Lab)

(U) **Google, Facebook and Others Broaden Group to Secure U.S. Election:** Facebook, Google and other major tech companies said on Wednesday that they had added new partners and met with government agencies in their efforts to secure the November election.

The group, which is seeking to prevent the kind of online meddling and foreign interference that sullied the 2016 presidential election, previously consisted of some of the large social media firms, including Twitter and Microsoft in addition to Facebook and Google. Among the new participants is the Wikimedia Foundation.

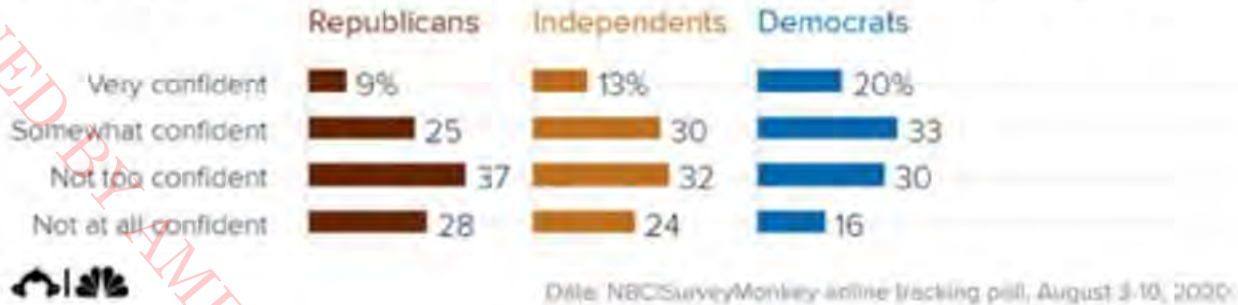
The group met on Wednesday with representatives from agencies like the F.B.I., the Office of the director of National Intelligence and the Department of Homeland Security to share insights about disinformation campaigns and emerging deceptive behavior across their services.

Discussions between the tech companies and government agencies have occurred periodically over the past four years. While some of the companies have made a practice of sharing leads about disinformation campaigns and other election threats, the efforts have been haphazard. The effort has broadened as the November election approaches, and the tech companies and agencies have tried to coordinate more frequently. (Source: NY Times)

(U) **Poll: Most Americans Are Not Confident the 2020 Election Will Be Conducted Fairly:** A majority of American adults say they are not confident that the November elections will be conducted in a fair and equal way, according to new data from the [NBC | SurveyMonkey Weekly Tracking Poll](#).

Fifty-five percent of adults overall say they are either “not too confident” or “not at all confident” about the fairness of the election, just 14 percent say they are “very confident” in the election and 29 percent said they are somewhat confident. (Source: NBC)

## How confident are you that the election will be held fairly?



(U) **States Struggle To Accommodate COVID-19 Positive Voters:** With few signs the coronavirus is fading, election officials face an increasingly urgent question: how to accommodate voters who become infected in the days leading up to the election.

In Texas — a state that fought expanding mail-in ballot access all the way up to the Supreme Court — COVID-19 positive voters can be put in the position of choosing between their right to vote and the public's health.

Vote-by-mail is only available to people who are over 65, who are not present in the state on election day, or who have a disability. And you have to register almost two weeks before the election to vote by mail.

COVID-19 cases in Texas grew by 100,000 between the deadline to apply for a mail in ballot and the July election day. COVID-19 cases have been growing in dozens of states since June. If it persists, thousands could be in the same predicament as Harrison come November.

"If we want voter confidence, we can't make them choose between exercising their right to vote and their health," said Kathleen Hale, director of the Elections Administration Initiative at Auburn University.

Hale said there is so much uncertainty around COVID-19 and the next election and voters need to educate themselves on their state's rules now. (Source: NPR)

(U) **Facebook Removes One of Largest QAnon Conspiracy Groups After False Posts:** Facebook said on Thursday it had removed one of the largest public groups devoted to the QAnon web of conspiracy theories after repeated violations of the company's policies.

The group, called Official Q/Qanon and with nearly 200,000 members, had been deleted after multiple individual postings were removed for crossing the lines on bullying and harassment, hate speech, and false information that could lead to harm, a Facebook spokeswoman said.

The spokeswoman, who declined to be identified, said Facebook took the action on Tuesday and was monitoring other QAnon groups as it strengthens enforcement in the area.

In recent months, the pandemic has provided ample fodder for QAnon groups, most of it centered around various conspiracy theories. Common theories are that the pandemic is a hoax or that it is a biological weapon deployed by various enemies of America. Other recent events, like the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing BLM protests have led to widespread speculation that the Black Lives Matter movement is paid for by outside actors like Soros, China or the Democrats.

For example, the 29,000-member group "Official Q / QAnon Public Group" regularly features problematic posts, such as this post making a "joke" about cars running into protesters, which has happened. (Source: Reuters; Homeland Security News Wire)

**(U) Covid-19 Misinformation is Spreading in 25 Different Languages, Leading to Deaths and Injuries, Study Finds:** Covid-19 rumors, stigma and conspiracy theories have been circulating in 25 different languages across at least 87 countries -- including the United States -- and this spread of misinformation has led to deaths and injuries, according to a new study.

The study, published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene on Monday, involved analyzing coronavirus-related rumors, stigma and conspiracy theories that were posted to social media platforms, online newspapers and other websites between December 31 and April 5.

The researchers -- from various institutions in Bangladesh, Australia, Thailand and Japan -- defined a "rumor" as any unverified information that can be found to be true, fabricated, or entirely false after verification. "Stigma" related to discrimination or devaluation of a group and "conspiracy theory" was defined as beliefs about an individual or group of people working in secret to reaching malicious goals.

The researchers identified 2,311 reports related to possible Covid-19 misinformation in 25 languages from 87 countries -- and of those reports, 89% were classified as rumors; 7.8% were conspiracy theories; and 3.5% were stigma.

The study included some examples: "Poultry eggs are contaminated with coronavirus" and "Drinking bleach may kill the virus" were rumors; "Every disease has ever come from China" was stigma; and "It's a bio-weapon funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation to further vaccine sales" was a conspiracy theory.

Most of the rumors, stigma and conspiracy theories were identified from India, the United States, China, Spain, Indonesia and Brazil, the researchers found.

"Rumors can mask themselves as credible infection prevention and control strategies and have potentially serious implications if prioritized over evidence-based guidelines. For example, a popular



myth that consumption of highly concentrated alcohol could disinfect the body and kill the virus was circulating in different parts of the world," the researchers wrote.

"Following this misinformation, approximately 800 people have died, whereas 5,876 have been hospitalized and 60 have developed complete blindness after drinking methanol as a cure of coronavirus." (Source: CNN)

An internal investigation by Facebook has uncovered thousands of groups and pages, with millions of members and followers, that support the QAnon conspiracy theory, according to internal company documents reviewed by NBC News.

**(U) QAnon Groups Have Millions of Members on Facebook, Documents Show:** The investigation's preliminary results, which were provided to NBC News by a Facebook employee, shed new light on the scope of activity and content from the QAnon community on Facebook, a scale previously undisclosed by Facebook and unreported by the news media, because most of the groups are private.

The top 10 groups identified in the investigation collectively contain more than 1 million members, with totals from more top groups and pages pushing the number of members and followers past 3 million. It is not clear how much overlap there is among the groups.

The investigation will likely inform what, if any, action Facebook decides to take against its QAnon community, according to the documents and two current Facebook employees who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. The company is considering an option similar to its handling of anti-vaccination content, which is to reject advertising and exclude QAnon groups and pages from search results and recommendations, an action that would reduce the community's visibility.

An announcement about Facebook's ultimate decision is also expected to target members of "militias and other violent social movements," according to the documents and Facebook employees.

There are tens of millions of active groups, a Facebook spokesperson told NBC News in 2019, a number that has probably grown since the company began serving up group posts in users' main feeds. While most groups are dedicated to innocuous content, extremists, from QAnon conspiracy theorists to anti-vaccination activists, have also used the groups feature [to grow their audiences](#) and spread misinformation. Facebook [aided that growth with its recommendations](#) feature, powered by a secret algorithm that suggests groups to users seemingly based on interests and existing group membership. (Source: NBC)

**(U) Chinese Disinformation is Ascendant. Taiwan Shows How Can Defeat It:** The U.S. military [brought](#) covid-19 to Wuhan, China. At the same time, the world does not truly know where the coronavirus [originated](#). These conflicting stories are just two examples of disinformation packages that the Chinese government has been spreading since the pandemic began. In June, Twitter [removed 170,000 accounts](#)

ties to Chinese state propaganda campaigns, including disinformation efforts surrounding covid-19 and the Hong Kong protests. These efforts extend well beyond China's borders.

As we approach the U.S. elections in November, Beijing, like Moscow, has shown that it will not shy from disrupting America's democracy using its cyber capabilities. Just two months ago, Google found that [Chinese hackers](#) were seeking to access the personal email accounts of presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden's campaign staffers.

So how should America respond to Chinese offenses and ensure its electoral integrity? Taiwan, one of the countries [ranked](#) most inundated with foreign disinformation, offers a few lessons.

In January, Taiwan successfully fought off information attacks on its national elections from China — an adversary [larger](#) by a factor of 23 in gross domestic product, 60 in population size, and 267 in landmass. According to interviews I conducted for my [master's thesis](#) with more than 30 Taiwanese officials, politicians, journalists, academics, civil society leaders and social media representatives, Taiwan countered these attacks through three main approaches.

First, the Taiwanese government monitored media platforms around-the-clock and effectively debunked false news with the potential to gain traction. The government often used [memes](#) to disseminate the correct information publicly, recognizing that online viral content tends to be short, funny, and easy to understand and share.

The government also timed its debunking with the news cycles, releasing correct the information well in advance of nightly news, so that traditional media would help spread it. The idea behind this is to ensure that clarifications spread faster and further than false news — so that facts dominate the information space before falsehoods do. Thus, during the election season, Taiwanese journalists told me that they generally did not hear about a fake news story until they saw the government's response. Facebook also told me that the government's clarifications traveled more broadly than false news did on its platform.

Second, in addition to reactively countering fake news, the central government raised public awareness of both general and Chinese propaganda and disinformation through a public health lens. It sought to build the public mind-set that fake news is like a virus. Because anyone can catch and spread the virus, everyone should work together to detect and prevent its spread. This framing removed the good-bad binary from false news and thereby curbed its ability to polarize the body politic.

The government then focused on education. For example, it drove media-literacy trucks to rural areas to conduct fake news identification workshops for citizens with less media experience (for example, older people). To specifically address Chinese disinformation, the ruling political party [passed an anti-infiltration act](#) before its elections in January primarily to warn the public about malicious foreign activities.

Third, the Taiwanese government used legal means to rein in Chinese propaganda. The [anti-infiltration law](#) was also adopted to deter Chinese interference in the elections and frame them as a referendum on Chinese penetration into Taiwan. The law states that any person or entity receiving support from “overseas hostile forces” in donations, in an election or referendum, in lobbying, and in disrupting assembly will face imprisonment of up to [five years](#) and fines of up to \$335,000 (10 million NTD).

So far, it appears to be having an effect. Master Chain, the only Taiwanese media outlet that had an office in China, immediately criticized the law, [closed](#) its Taiwan operations and relocated to Beijing. Separately, Taiwan’s National Communications Commission more strictly enforced the island’s factual and balanced reporting regulation for television and radio. For example, CTi TV, a prominent television channel suspected to be under Chinese influence, was [fined](#) more than \$186,000 (5.63 million NTD) in 2019 mostly for broadcasting and disseminating falsehoods. Combined with public criticism of their biases, this seems to have pushed outlets with suspected Chinese ties to become relatively more factual and balanced in their reporting, according to Taiwanese journalists I interviewed. (Source: Washington Post)

**(U) 2020 is Misinformation’s Tipping Point:** Millions of Americans who already struggle to keep pace with the daily barrage of news are now becoming accustomed to another challenge that’s only becoming more complicated: weaponized misinformation.

Misinformation, which has existed for centuries, has emerged as a major theme of the current moment, though, as conspiracy theories, propaganda and disinformation, or the intentional spread of deceptive material, thrive on social media.

Now, as Americans contend with fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and growing suspicion in societal institutions, false and fabricated narratives have become attached to essentially every major news story. It’s part of the new reality, complicated by the fact that users on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere re-post sensational material, believing they’re acting in good faith.

Thirty-five percent of Americans said they believe that misleading information is the biggest threat to election security, more than voter fraud, voter suppression and foreign interference, [according to a January NPR/PBS/Marist poll](#). Meanwhile, 59% of Americans said they were “not confident” in the honesty of U.S. elections, according to a 2019 Gallup poll. The number of U.S. adults who said mainstream news outlets were credible also has dropped nine points, to 51%, in the past four years, [Morning Consult determined](#).

It’s a vicious cycle, where a lack of faith in civic infrastructure helps disinformation, resulting in higher levels of distrust.

“When there are pre-existing social problems like lack of trust and political isolation and people feel like these institutions aren’t looking for them, conspiracies tend to thrive,” said Alyssa Kann, a researcher at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab.

Fallout from the coronavirus pandemic has exposed these societal divisions in particularly stark terms. Foreign groups quickly seized on COVID-19 as a news item to point a finger at other countries. Suspected Russian operatives [accused Western troops](#) of spreading the virus through Eastern Europe, while Chinese state-run media outlets [praised Beijing's response](#) to the virus and President Trump has sought to distract from the [high number of American deaths](#) by calling COVID-19 the "China Virus."

Domestic misinformation aimed at U.S. audiences has cost lives, suggested Joan Donovan, a researcher director at the Harvard Kennedy School, and Claire Wardle, U.S. director at the nonprofit First Draft, in an [editorial published Thursday](#) by the Social Science Research Council.

The "Plandemic" video, which broadcast the unfounded claim that 5G cellular networks played a role in the spread of the virus, reached a reported 8 million people before technology companies took action. Then right-wing news site Breitbart News published a video, "America's Frontline Doctors," in which people claiming to be doctors stand in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building to allege "you don't need masks" to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube removed the video, though only after it went viral with help from a presidential retweet.

Likely contributing to the sudden growth, researchers said, was the shelter-in-place orders implemented through much of the country in response to COVID-19, and the ensuing economic fallout. A sudden inability to congregate with real-world friends and family members, combined with frustration over the situation, could contribute to a willingness to join a sympathetic community online, like the QAnon conspiracy movement.

The way that fabricated storylines have become such a part of the mainstream news cycle, though, also highlights how internal divisions in the U.S. ensure the country is still susceptible to the kind of deceptive social media activity that helped Russian intelligence agencies interfere in the last presidential election.

"As the last few years have shown, we're woefully unprepared for the tactic that Russia used in 2016 to be picked up by domestic groups and domestic networks," said Alex Newhouse, digital research lead at the Center on Terrorism, Extremism and Counterterrorism at Middlebury Institute. "There's a new willingness in society to believe in these things in a way almost like a religious structure, and everything that comes along with that." (Source: Cyberscoop)

**(U) Facebook's Boogaloo Problem: A Record of Failure:** Facebook has announced multiple crackdowns on anti-government extremists. But the company's slow and ineffective response has allowed the movement to persist on its platform.

Facebook has repeatedly failed to remove "boogaloo" extremists who are using the platform to plan for a militant uprising—an alarming illustration of the company's broader problems dealing with dangerous content, according to a Tech Transparency Project (TTP) review.

TTP first **warned** about private Facebook boogaloo groups in April, documenting how members were using them to organize for a coming civil war and share tactics on things like explosives and flame throwers. Following TTP's report, Facebook **said** it had taken down groups and pages that use "boogaloo" and related terms and would "enforce against any violations."

But in the months that followed, as reports emerged of Facebook boogaloo group members plotting or engaging in real-world violence, it became clear that Facebook had not adequately addressed the problem. The company scrambled a series of announcements in June, **pledging** to make it harder to find boogaloo groups and pages on Facebook and **banning** what it called a "violent" boogaloo network. Despite those measures, TTP found that Facebook has consistently failed to spot boogaloo activity and missed boogaloo groups' simple name changes designed to evade detection. Facebook's spotty track record in removing these extremists, despite intense media attention on the issue and pressure from lawmakers, provides a window into Facebook's deeper dysfunction policing its platform for things like hate speech and misinformation.

Here are some of the highlights from TTP's review:

- TTP identified 110 Facebook boogaloo groups that were created since June 30, when Facebook announced it was banning a "violent" boogaloo network. At least 18 of the groups were created on the same day as Facebook's announcement.
- Many boogaloo groups have easily evaded Facebook's crackdown by rebranding themselves, often co-opting the names of children's movies, news organizations and even Mark Zuckerberg. Some of the newer groups already have more than 1,000 members.
- Material on bomb-making and other violent activity is continuing to circulate across boogaloo groups on Facebook. The content includes a Google Drive folder that contains dozens of instruction manuals for bomb making, kidnapping, and murder.
- Despite Facebook's promise to stop recommending boogaloo groups to users, the company's algorithms continue to suggest boogaloo-related groups and pages, even when they don't use the word "boogaloo" in their names.
- Facebook has sought to justify its selective approach to removing boogaloo groups by arguing that some parts of the movement are not violent—even though the term "boogaloo" is synonymous with civil war.

Boogaloo groups proliferated online in response to state COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. (Source: Tech Transparency Project)

(U) **Facebook Will Now Show a Warning Before You Share Articles About COVID-19:** Facebook's latest attempt to help combat the spread of potentially harmful COVID-19 misinformation involves a **new notification screen** that will provide more context about an article or other link, like when it was first shared and its source.

The goal, Facebook says, is to "help people understand the recency and source of the content before they share it" and to direct "people to our COVID-19 Information Center to ensure people have access to

credible information about COVID-19 from global health authorities.” It builds on the platform’s existing recency notifications, which it launched in June to help cut down on the spread of older links that routinely resurface in ways that can misrepresent current events.

This new notification screen is part of an ongoing series of measures Facebook has been employing since March to try to prevent its platform from becoming a conduit for dangerous coronavirus-related conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation. At the onset of the pandemic, the company began **putting vetted coronavirus information from trusted health and medical authorities** at the top of the News Feed, as well as the above-mentioned COVID-19 information hub. (Source: The Verge)

(U) **'Hundreds Dead' Because of Covid-19 Misinformation:** At least 800 people may have died around the world because of coronavirus-related misinformation in the first three months of this year, researchers say.

A study published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene also estimates that about 5,800 people were admitted to hospital as a result of false information on social media.

Many died from drinking methanol or alcohol-based cleaning products.

They wrongly believed the products to be a cure for the virus.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has previously said that the "infodemic" surrounding Covid-19 spread just as quickly as the virus itself, with conspiracy theories, rumours and cultural stigma all contributing to deaths and injuries. (Source: BBC)

(U) **Fact check: Healthy People Can Catch Viruses; Masks and Medication Don't Make People More Vulnerable:** Hundreds of social media users are sharing a post whose primary claims are that healthy people cannot become ill from a virus, and that those who wear masks, take medication and are influenced by mainstream media are more vulnerable to viruses. These claims are false. Information published by authoritative sources including the World Health Organization shows that anyone can catch the novel coronavirus and that there is no evidence to suggest the groups listed are more likely to suffer from COVID-19.

The post ( here ) reads: “A virus cannot survive a healthy host. It is toxic to a healthy host, it gets recognised, gets labelled, gets obliterated. [...] Medications weaken the host, they deplete nutrients, they stress the detox system (aka side effects), they are props when used long term. [...] What is a vulnerable [sic] host? [...] - one that wears a mask but at the same time has just walked out of a fast food joint where the food is not food but full of chemicals to make it more palatable [...] A dynamic, healthy asymptomatic carrier, that is not a hostage to the virus is one that is not influenced by the main stream media...”

The primary claim of the post is that if you are healthy a virus cannot make you ill. This unscientific claim is contradicted by sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Britain’s National Health Service (NHS). (Source: Reuters)

(U) **Someone Duped Twitter Verification to Spread Racist Disinformation on US Coronavirus Vaccine, Resembles Previous Iranian-Backed Disinformation Campaigns:** A verified Twitter account impersonating a top World Health Organization official recently alleged that the Trump administration

was going to test a coronavirus vaccine on Black Americans without their knowledge or informed consent.

The disinformation scheme originated in May with an account masquerading as Dr. Jaouad Mahjour, assistant director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), in the latest example of attackers trying to inflame existing tension in the U.S. over issues like vaccines and racism. Tweets included racist tropes against Black Americans, and implied that the U.S. had lobbied WHO to test its vaccines on prisoners, immigrants, and Black Americans.

Twitter has since suspended the account, after WHO representatives told reporters that the account in question didn't belong to Mahjour. News of the disinformation was first reported by The Daily Beast. Neither Twitter nor the World Health Organization provided comment for this article by press time.

The impersonation appeared to be aimed at eroding trust in a U.S. coronavirus vaccine at a time when the country leads the world in COVID-19 cases. It's the kind of attack that also appeared to be aimed at amplifying racial divides in the U.S. By alleging a vaccine for a virus that disproportionately affects Black Americans would not obtain informed consent, the campaign plays up America's racist track record in medical research. In the Tuskegee Study, for instance, the U.S. government observed Black men with syphilis for four decades while withholding treatments and diagnoses without informed consent.

The attack also comes as Twitter and other social media firms have struggled to stop disinformation and account takeovers on their platforms. The attacker who posed as Mahjour apparently was able to dupe Twitter into providing him a blue checkmark, designed to denote that a user is who they claim, raising questions about whether the system — designed to create trust — is totally reliable.

The account and its vaccine conspiracy story were fakes. According to Twitter, they were verified thanks to a mistake by a partner organization. Experts say the hoax bears a strong resemblance to tactics used by an "Iran-aligned network of inauthentic websites and online personas," known as Endless Mayfly. And the WHO stunt isn't the only content that appears to connect to Endless Mayfly. At least one account linked to a similar hoax attacked Hisham al-Hashimi, an Iraqi expert on militant groups, a few days before he was assassinated. (Source: Cyberscoop; The Daily Beast)

#### **(U) Week of 08/03**

**(U) Anatomy of the Infodemic:** Clear distribution of accurate information is among the most important defenses against an epidemic's spread. And yet the largely unregulated, social-media-based communications infrastructure of the 21st century almost ensures that misinformation will proliferate fast. "In every outbreak throughout the existence of social media, from Zika to Ebola, conspiratorial communities immediately spread their content about how it's all caused by some government or pharmaceutical company or Bill Gates," says Renée DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory, who studies the flow of online information. When COVID-19 arrived, "there was no doubt in my mind that it was coming."

Beginning on April 16, DiResta's team noticed growing online chatter about Judy Mikovits, a discredited researcher turned anti-vaccination champion. Posts and videos cast Mikovits as a whistleblower who claimed that the new coronavirus was made in a lab and described Anthony Fauci of the White House's

coronavirus task force as her nemesis. Ironically, this conspiracy theory was nested inside a larger conspiracy—part of an orchestrated PR campaign by an anti-vaxxer and QAnon fan with the explicit goal to “take down Anthony Fauci.” It culminated in a slickly produced video called Plandemic, which was released on May 4. More than 8 million people watched it in a week.

Doctors and journalists tried to debunk Plandemic’s many misleading claims, but these efforts spread less successfully than the video itself. Like pandemics, infodemics quickly become uncontrollable unless caught early. But while health organizations recognize the need to surveil for emerging diseases, they are woefully unprepared to do the same for emerging conspiracies. In 2016, when DiResta spoke with a CDC team about the threat of misinformation, “their response was: ‘That’s interesting, but that’s just stuff that happens on the internet.’”

From the June 2020 issue: Adrienne LaFrance on how QAnon is more important than you think Rather than countering misinformation during the pandemic’s early stages, trusted sources often made things worse. Many health experts and government officials downplayed the threat of the virus in January and February, assuring the public that it posed a low risk to the U.S. and drawing comparisons to the ostensibly greater threat of the flu. The WHO, the CDC, and the U.S. surgeon general urged people not to wear masks, hoping to preserve the limited stocks for health-care workers. These messages were offered without nuance or acknowledgement of uncertainty, so when they were reversed—the virus is worse than the flu; wear masks—the changes seemed like befuddling flip-flops. The media added to the confusion. Drawn to novelty, journalists gave oxygen to fringe anti-lockdown protests while most Americans quietly stayed home. They wrote up every incremental scientific claim, even those that hadn’t been verified or peer-reviewed.

There were many such claims to choose from. By tying career advancement to the publishing of papers, academia already creates incentives for scientists to do attention-grabbing but irreproducible work. The pandemic strengthened those incentives by prompting a rush of panicked research and promising ambitious scientists global attention. (Source: The Atlantic)

(U) **How 5G Could Change Government’s Pandemic Response:** Local governments are struggling to respond to the current pandemic, and many technologists believe the massive connectivity, edge compute and ultra-low latency capability of 5G could help. Many people think of 5G as the next generation of cellular network technology only. This is in part because telecom companies have been rolling out 5G test markets and touting the upgraded network’s benefits. As *The New Yorker* summarized, “5G ... is expected to be up to a **hundred times faster**” than 4G.

But the technologies framed within the 5G network architecture are intended to provide capability far beyond improved speed and lower latency to your phone and streaming services. 5G will enable ultra-reliable communications and computing capabilities at the edge. Edge computing brings compute, storage and networking closer to applications, devices and users.



Pandemics and public health emergencies present a need for widespread data, monitoring and reliable wireless networking. The way to enable front-line pandemic fighters (like medical personnel and first responders) is with an upgraded network providing time-sensitive operation, a range of low to high data transmit capacity and cellular network small cell densification.

#### *How 5G Enables Emergency Preparedness*

5G and the internet of things are adding newer applications that need connectivity not just between people but between devices. The main benefit of 5G, especially for public sector applications, is the enablement of machine-to-machine communications. This means devices communicate directly with one another without any human intervention, as promised by the ever-growing internet of things. 5G also enables massive machine type computations, which lead to the low-latency computing required of real-time applications.

These advances represent the backbone of autonomous vehicles, smart cities and drones—many of which could transform how the public sector reacts to a pandemic like COVID-19 in the future. Currently, there is much debate about when and how to “reopen” the economy—and significant variance across jurisdictions. Some health officials and technology experts have advocated for increased information sharing about people’s health and activities to help contain the potential spread of a virus.

5G network technology could support additional sensors to better track people’s health, enabling robust digital profiles that could include health statistics, where we’ve been and who we’ve been with, and body temperature, for example. With 5G, such digital profiles could be readily accessible to health care professionals and first responders leading to improved contact tracing and infection hotspot identification. (Source: Next Gov)

**(U) There Have Been 38 Statewide Elections During The Pandemic. Here’s How They Went:** In mid-March, as businesses shuttered, hospitals filled up and Americans hunkered down at home, election officials faced a difficult question: Was it even possible to hold safe and accessible elections in the age of COVID-19? More than four months later, we’re not that much closer to answering that question.

Since the World Health Organization [declared an official pandemic](#) on March 11, 37 states plus Washington, D.C., have held statewide primaries<sup>1</sup> for president or state-level office. And while those that have [gone poorly](#) have tended to [grab the headlines](#), there have been [success stories](#) too. Ultimately, it’s been hard to assess how well our democracy has adapted to the pandemic. So here’s a snapshot of all 38 statewide elections since the pandemic started and what macro trends we’ve been able to observe so far.

First, most states — and almost all those that actually made an effort to do so — were wildly successful at getting people to vote by mail (or at least vote before election day). In 24 out of 35 states for which we have this data, a majority of ballots were cast absentee.<sup>2</sup> In addition, every state but one<sup>3</sup> made more use of absentee ballots than it did in the equivalent election in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Considering what a

**logistical undertaking** it is to switch to a predominantly mail election, this is an impressive achievement by election officials. (Of course, as we'll cover below, it didn't always go off without a hitch.)

Unsurprisingly, states that mailed every voter a ballot saw the highest share of their votes cast absentee, although it's hard to definitively say that was the reason, as these states also offered few polling places — or, in Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, Utah and Wyoming, no polling places at all.

However, other ways of encouraging mail voting had more mixed results. For instance, in the states that just mailed voters absentee-ballot applications or instructions for how to apply for an absentee ballot, there was anywhere from 45 percent absentee participation in Delaware to 84 percent in Nebraska. (But don't read too much into the 100 percent absentee rates in **Idaho** and **North Dakota** — they, too, eliminated in-person voting.)

What we do know is the states that did not mail voters *anything* to nudge them toward voting absentee (such as Illinois, with 9 percent absentee participation, and Oklahoma, with 14 percent absentee participation) tended to have the lowest shares of absentee voters, and the smallest increases from 2016. The same was true of states like Louisiana and Texas, which still required voters to provide an excuse to vote absentee. A notable exception was Wisconsin, where 75 percent of votes were cast absentee despite nothing being mailed to them. Most likely, the **intense news coverage** predicting doom and gloom for Wisconsin's primary caused Wisconsinites to **heed the state government's advice** and request absentee ballots; both Joe Biden's and Bernie Sanders's campaigns also **encouraged their supporters to vote by mail**.

Of course, just because a state conducted its primary predominantly by mail does not mean it will be able to turn the same trick in November. For starters, as the next table makes clear, most of these elections were low-turnout affairs: Anywhere from 3 percent to 46 percent of the **voting eligible population** turned out to vote in them, while presidential general elections have VEP turnout rates around 60 percent. (And, needless to say, processing mail ballots for 60 percent of the population is a lot more challenging than processing mail ballots for 20 or 30 percent.) But the good news is that the coronavirus doesn't seem to be putting a dent in turnout rates. Just as **turnout in the presidential primaries before the pandemic hit** was a bit above 2016 levels, 22 of the 34 elections for which we have the relevant data actually saw their VEP turnout rate *increase* over the equivalent election in 2016.

The coronavirus has put American democracy to the test — and by our reckoning, election officials have made big strides in a short period of time. But a lot of work must still be done.

Some states, like Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota and South Dakota, have risen to the challenge, greatly expanding their use of absentee voting and reporting few problems at the polls. These states also saw increases in turnout relative to the equivalent election in 2016. However, it may be hard to replicate their success nationally, as they all are mostly rural and sparsely populated, so their task may be easier than a state like New York or Michigan. Similarly, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Oregon and Utah also scored highly because they already conduct their elections mostly via absentee ballot and thus were able to avoid major problems.

On the other hand, states like Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin bungled the execution of their primaries. They did little to expand mail voting (although many voters cast absentee ballots anyway), and their turnout fell (which may or may not be related to the first two points). Georgia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., are also guilty of ineptitude that surely disenfranchised some voters, although their turnout rates didn't reflect it — perhaps because their efforts to expand mail voting also brought new people into the electorate.

So where does this leave us headed into November? It's hard to say. On the one hand, it is worth keeping in mind how states handled their primaries. But on the other hand, don't assume a state that performed competently in the primary will do so in the general, or the inverse. They may, but the general election is also a very different beast — and, with that higher turnout, one that is much more difficult to tame. States may also learn from a bad experience during the primary and resolve to do things differently in the fall; they may have more or less funding available for November than they did for the primary, and they may tweak rules surrounding absentee-ballot or in-person voting access. Unfortunately, nobody really knows what the 2020 general election will look like — and how each state will fare. (Source: FiveThirtyEight)

**(U) WhatsApp Adds Search Feature to Fact-Check Messages:** WhatsApp on Monday added a new feature to make fact-checking a message a little easier. The Facebook-owned app added a magnifying glass button to the chat that allows you to [search the web](#) for answers on questionable forwarded information.

By tapping the magnifying glass button, the forwarded message is uploaded to your browser, where you can see if the information in it is accurate. The search feature doesn't reveal the content of the message to WhatsApp, the company said.

The feature is rolling out in Brazil, Italy, Ireland, Mexico, Spain, UK and the US on Android, iOS and WhatsApp Web.

WhatsApp has taken other steps to stop the spread of misinformation. In April, the app [limited how messages can be shared](#) in an effort to control the spread of misinformation about the [coronavirus](#) pandemic. The app also marks high forwarded messages with a double arrow to let you know the message didn't originate from a close contact. (Source: CNet)

**(U) Google Announces Measures To Crack Down On Misinformation Ahead Of Presidential Election:** Days after Congress [grilled top tech CEOs](#) over antitrust allegations and a broader concern over the amount of power and influence the tech giants wield in the political sphere, Google announced on Friday it would [crack down on deception campaigns](#) as social media platforms bolster defenses before November's presidential election.

- Google said starting September 1 it would ban websites that distribute hacked material and advertisers who operate coordinated misinformation campaigns.

- The policies stop advertisers from directly distributing hacked material, though links to sites that store hacked material, like Wikileaks, for example, are still allowed.
- While Google already requires advertisers to prove their identity, the new policy allows the company to shut down networks of linked accounts who work in tandem to hide their identity and present misleading information.
- In May, Twitter began to [label misleading and potentially inflammatory tweets](#)—including several tweets by President Trump— in what the company calls an effort to “provide context” as opposed to “fact-check.”
- Facebook, which has come under fire for allowing hate speech and misinformation to proliferate on its platform, said in July it may [ban political ads](#) across its network before the November election.

**(U) A Former KGB Officer Talks Disinformation Tactics and the 2020 Election:** Feeding incendiary documents to news outlets. Infiltrating activist groups. Sowing division and confusion. It might sound like a recap of Russia's efforts to [meddle in the 2016 US election](#), but some of these same tactics were laid bare in a CNN television report on Soviet disinformation efforts back in 1983.

The report detailed how Russia was suspected of using forgeries and planted stories to wreak havoc in the West during the Cold War through influence operations rather than with military might. And these tactics didn't stop with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In fact, social media and the cloak of online anonymity it provides have only made it easier and potentially more effective for governments and bad actors to engage in a similar playbook of dirty tricks — ranging from disseminating forged or hacked documents online to creating fake reporters to promote them.

It's this modern-day digital disinformation playbook that US intelligence agencies will almost certainly be watching out for ahead of November's presidential election -- especially after [Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 election](#) caught the country off guard. But to fully understand Russia's use of tactics like false news stories and leaked materials, it's useful to examine the country's long history of painstaking influence operations dating back to an analog era.

The KGB would take great care to furnish a convincing forgery of a US government document, often with the goal of implicating the US in something tawdry and designed to appear to confirm an existing conspiracy theory. That forgery would then be given to a sympathetic, unwitting reporter, sometimes from an obscure outlet in a far-flung corner of the world. It would be printed as news, and if the Soviets were lucky, it might eventually get picked up by more established outlets.

In the decades since, our lives have largely moved online — and so have Russia's attempts at disinformation and meddling in US affairs.

In groundbreaking work from the [Atlantic Council](#) and the online investigations company [Graphika](#), researchers showed how a suspected Russian group has been distributing forged documents online over

the past few years. These efforts included a fake letter purporting to be from a US senator and another letter designed to look like it came from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

The same Russian group is believed to have been behind a [fake tweet from Sen. Marco Rubio](#) claiming that a purported British spy agency planned to derail the campaigns of Republican candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. The fake tweet was picked up and falsely reported as real by RT, a Russian state-controlled news outlet. There's no evidence of coordination between RT and the Russian group that promoted the fake tweet but RT did not issue a correction.

The internet hasn't just made it easier for Russia to create forgeries, it's also helped in their ability to distribute documents, forged or stolen.

Brush, floss, rinse, repeat. This playbook is not one that is particularly difficult to emulate — and other groups are trying. (Source: CNN)

**(U) How Much Does Fake Coronavirus News Affect People's Real-Life Health Behavior?** In a [working paper](#) (not yet peer-reviewed) by [Ciara M. Greene](#) and [Gillian Murphy](#) of Ireland's University College Dublin and University College Cork find that, in some cases, exposure to false information about the pandemic can change people's actions — but the size of the effect is small, at least in Ireland. From the paper:

"In this study, we exposed participants to fake news stories suggesting, for example, that certain foods might help protect against Covid-19, or that a forthcoming vaccine might not be safe. We observed only very small effects on intentions to engage in the behaviors targeted by the stories, suggesting that the behavioral effects of one-off fake news exposure might be weaker than previously believed. We also examined whether providing a warning about fake news might reduce susceptibility, but found no effects. This suggests that, if fake news does affect real-world health behavior, generic warnings such as those used by governments and social media companies are unlikely to be ineffective."

Greene and Murphy recruited the 3,746 participants for their study [via a call-out in TheJournal.ie](#). They note that "the majority of participants were well-educated, with 2,395 participants (64%) having earned at least an undergraduate degree."

Participants were shown public health and misinformation warning posters "designed to mimic the format and style of government-issued public health messages relating to Covid-19 in the Republic of Ireland"; they were also shown four fake stories and four real stories. During the study, they weren't told that some of the stories were fake. (They were debriefed afterward.)

"We report some evidence that exposure to fake news may 'nudge' behavior, however the observed effects were very small," the researchers note. However, they raise the question of what happens when people are exposed to a fake story multiple times, over time:

“We certainly don’t want to state categorically that fake news is not dangerous, but we suspect that real-world behavioral effects will mostly emerge in contexts where individuals seek out many stories all advocating the same position, and which are congenial to the individual’s existing views; anti-vax or climate change denial networks would be a good example of this. What our research strongly suggests is that casual exposure to a novel fake news story is likely to have negligible effects on future behavior.”

(Source: Niemanlab)

**(U) TruNews Using Facebook to Disseminate, Amplify Anti-Semitism, Conspiracies:** TruNews, the fundamentalist Christian video streaming site which disseminates anti-Semitic, anti-Israel, and Islamophobic propaganda, also posts and livestreams extremist content on social media platforms. Rick Wiles, the site’s founder, and his fellow hosts often combine their hate speech with extreme conspiracy theories. Among the conspiracy theories: the U.S. government spread the Ebola virus on U.S. soil; the U.S. and Israel created ISIS, and that Jews were responsibility for COVID-19.

In early 2020, ADL [published](#) a profile about TruNews and its host and founder, Rick Wiles, detailing the fundamentalist Christian video streaming site’s consistent use of anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist, anti-LGBTQ+, Islamophobic rhetoric. That content remains readily available on Facebook, despite clearly violating the platform’s [community standards](#).

While TruNews has its own website showing its news segments, the organization also posts and livestreams content on social media platforms. In February, YouTube [banned](#) TruNews from the platform, apparently for terms of service violations. This removal followed PayPal’s and donor management companies Bloomerang’s and Spreadly’s January 2020 decisions to stop processing TruNews’ donations.

Facebook, despite clear evidence of TruNews’ hate speech wrapped in conspiracy theories, continues to host the outlet’s livestreamed news segments and pre-recorded videos — along with the vitriol-filled comments — to more than 140,000 followers, without limitation.

Wiles and his fellow hosts often combine their hate speech with extreme conspiracy theories. In the past, they have alleged that the U.S. government [planned](#) to spread the Ebola virus on U.S. soil, and that the U.S. and Israel [created](#) ISIS. More recently, the videos on their Facebook page focus on a supposed Zionist plot for global takeover and Jews’ [responsibility](#) for COVID-19 (thanks to not following Jesus), as well as for the impeachment of President Trump. In a Facebook discussion, Wiles [suggested](#), “We could sell Jew Coup t-shirts, Jew Coup hats, all that kind of stuff. We’d make a fortune.” He continued, “The reason that [the Jew Coup regalia] came to my mind is that the Lefties and the Zionists are all worked up — They want the White House to ban us forever from attending any event [as press].”

TruNews’ Facebook livestreams and videos—filled with [age-old antisemitic tropes](#) and hate speech—are often viewed tens of thousands of times, attracting hundreds of likes and comments. In a May 11, 2020 [video](#) viewed 60,200 times as of this posting, and with 1,600 shares and 2,800 comments, Wiles said, “They’re called Zionists. They’re called the synagogue of Satan. Let’s get real about what’s going on

here, folks. This is a global takeover.” He claimed that the Federal reserve, IRS, and income tax were all “Zionist operations” in order to “suck money out of the American middle class.” In a July 7, 2020 Facebook [livestream](#), Wiles’ cohost expressed concern over “the looming crisis of homosexuals, mis-gendered individuals coming in and getting a job in your organization.” (Source: Anti-Defamation League)

(U) **Facebook Will Prepare Users for Mail-In Voting for 2020 Election Amid Pandemic:** Facebook is preparing for the United States to rely on mail-in voting for the 2020 presidential election and will educate users on the process, in an effort to get ahead of potential disinformation.

The social media platform has planned a curriculum around “getting people ready for the fact that there’s a high likelihood that it takes days or weeks to count this — and there’s nothing wrong or illegitimate about that,” CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a [New York Times interview](#).

Facebook could also implement new rules around premature claims of victory or other results, he added.

Dozens of states have [expanded vote-by-mail access](#), as [the coronavirus](#) continues to spread in the U.S. Vote by mail will give people a safe way to cast a ballot in November. But, it will take much longer for results to be tallied than on a typical Election Day. (Source: NBC)

(U) **Silicon Valley is Losing the Battle Against Election Misinformation:** Videos peddling false claims about voter fraud and Covid-19 cures draw millions of views on YouTube. Partisan activist groups pretending to be online news sites set up shop on Facebook. Foreign trolls masquerade as U.S. activists on Instagram to sow divisions around the Black Lives Matter protests.

Four years after an election in which Russia and some far-right groups unleashed a wave of false, misleading and divisive online messages, Silicon Valley is losing the battle to eliminate online misinformation that could sway the vote in November.

Social media companies are struggling with an onslaught of deceptive and divisive messaging from political parties, foreign governments and hate groups as the months tick down to this year’s presidential election, according to more than two dozen national security policymakers, misinformation experts, hate speech researchers, fact-checking groups and tech executives, as well as a review of thousands of social media posts by POLITICO.

The tactics, many aimed at deepening divisions among Americans already traumatized by a deadly pandemic and record job losses, echo [the Russian government’s years-long efforts to stoke confusion](#) before the U.S. 2016 presidential election, according to experts who study the spread of harmful content. But the attacks this time around are far more insidious and sophisticated — with harder-to-detect fakes, more countries pushing covert agendas and a flood American groups copying their methods.

And some of the deceptive messages have been amplified by mainstream news outlets and major U.S. political figures — including President Donald Trump. In **one instance from last week**, he used his large social media following to say, without evidence, that mail-in votes would create “the most inaccurate and fraudulent election in history.”

Silicon Valley’s efforts to contain the new forms of fakery have so far fallen short, researchers and some lawmakers say. And the challenges are only increasing.

“November is going to be like the Super Bowl of misinformation tactics,” said Graham Brookie, director of the D.C.-based Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab, which tracks online falsehoods. “You name it, the U.S. election is going to have it.”

Anger at the social media giants’ inability to win the game of Whac-A-Mole against false information was a recurring theme at last week’s congressional hearing with big tech CEOs, where Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg attempted to bat down complaints that his company is profiting from disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic. A prime example, House antitrust chair David Cicilline (D-R.I.) said, was the five hours it took for Facebook to remove a Breitbart video falsely calling hydroxychloroquine a cure for Covid-19.

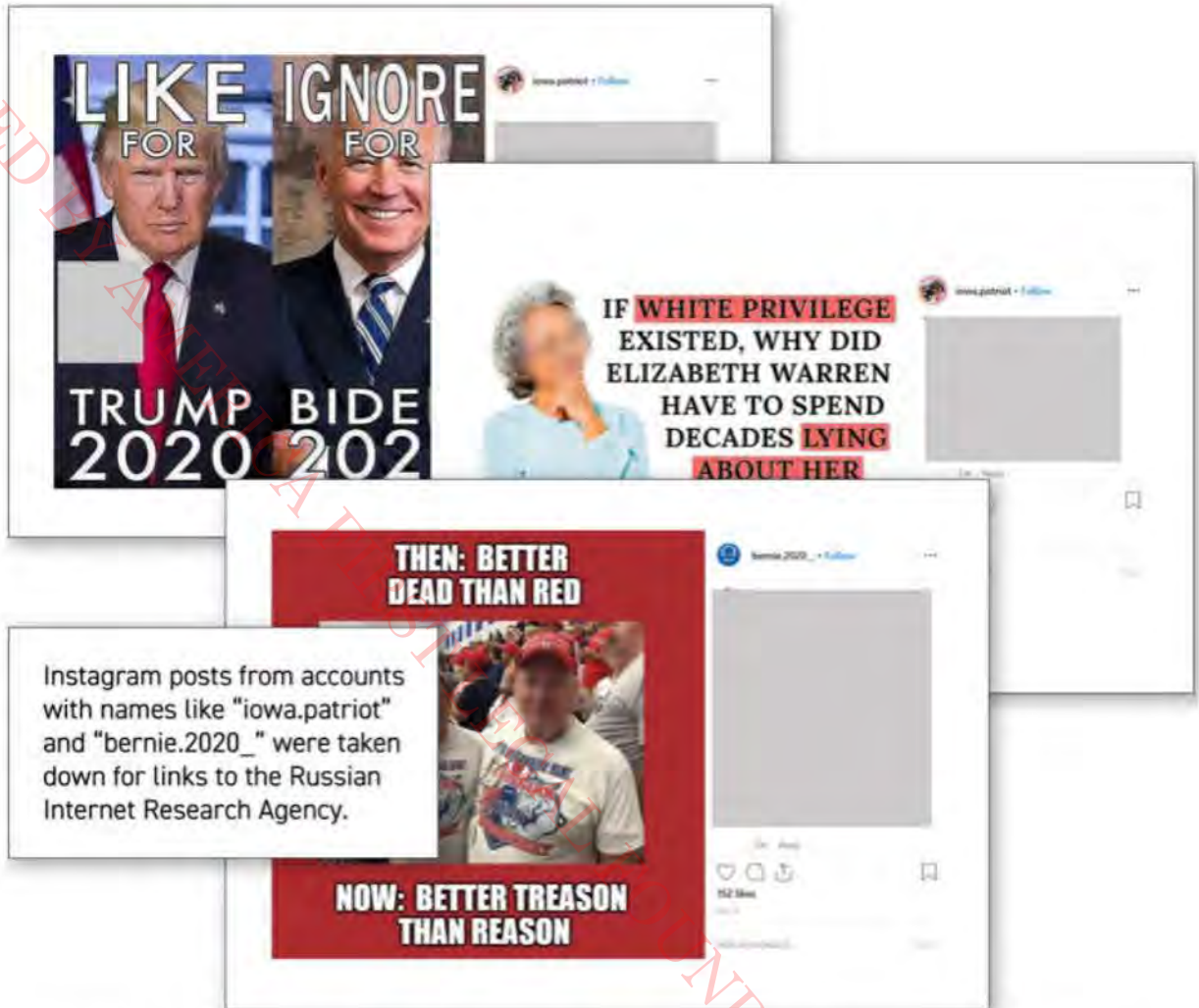
The post was viewed 20 million times and received more than 100,000 comments before it was taken down, Cicilline noted.

Since the 2016 election Facebook, Twitter and Google have collectively spent tens of millions of dollars on new technology and personnel to track online falsehoods and stop them from spreading. They’ve issued policies against political ads that masquerade as regular content, updated internal rules on hate speech and removed millions of extremist and false posts so far this year. In July, Twitter banned thousands of accounts linked to the fringe QAnon conspiracy theory in the most sweeping action yet to stem its spread.

Google announced **yet another effort Friday**, saying it will begin penalizing websites on Sept. 1 that distribute hacked materials and advertisers who take part in coordinated misinformation campaigns. Had those policies been in place in 2016, advertisers wouldn’t have been able to post screenshots of the stolen emails that Russian hackers had swiped from Hillary Clinton’s campaign.

But despite being some of the world’s wealthiest companies, the internet giants still cannot monitor everything that is posted on their global networks. The companies also disagree on the scope of the problem and how to fix it, giving the peddlers of misinformation an opportunity to poke for weaknesses in each platform’s safeguards.





All images are from Instagram (September 2019). The posts and identified accounts were later taken down by the company for links to the Internet Research Agency. The identities of non-IRA parties including domestic political groups' logos, the faces of ordinary citizens, and comments by non-IRA users are redacted.

National flashpoints like the Covid-19 health crisis and Black Lives Matter movement have also given the disinformation artists more targets for sowing divisions.

The difficulties are substantial: foreign interference campaigns have evolved, domestic groups are copycatting those techniques and political campaigns have adapted their strategies.

Researchers say it's impossible to know how comprehensive the companies have been in removing bogus content because the platforms often put conditions on access to their data. Academics have had to sign non-disclosure agreements promising not to criticize the companies to gain access to that information, according to people who signed the documents and others who refused to do so.

Experts and policymakers warn the tactics will likely become even more advanced over the next few months, including the possible use of so-called deepfakes, or false videos created through artificial intelligence, to create realistic-looking footage that undermines the opposing side.

### ***Foreign interference campaigns evolve***

Researcher Young Mie Kim was scrolling through Instagram in September when she came across a strangely familiar pattern of partisan posts across dozens of social media accounts.

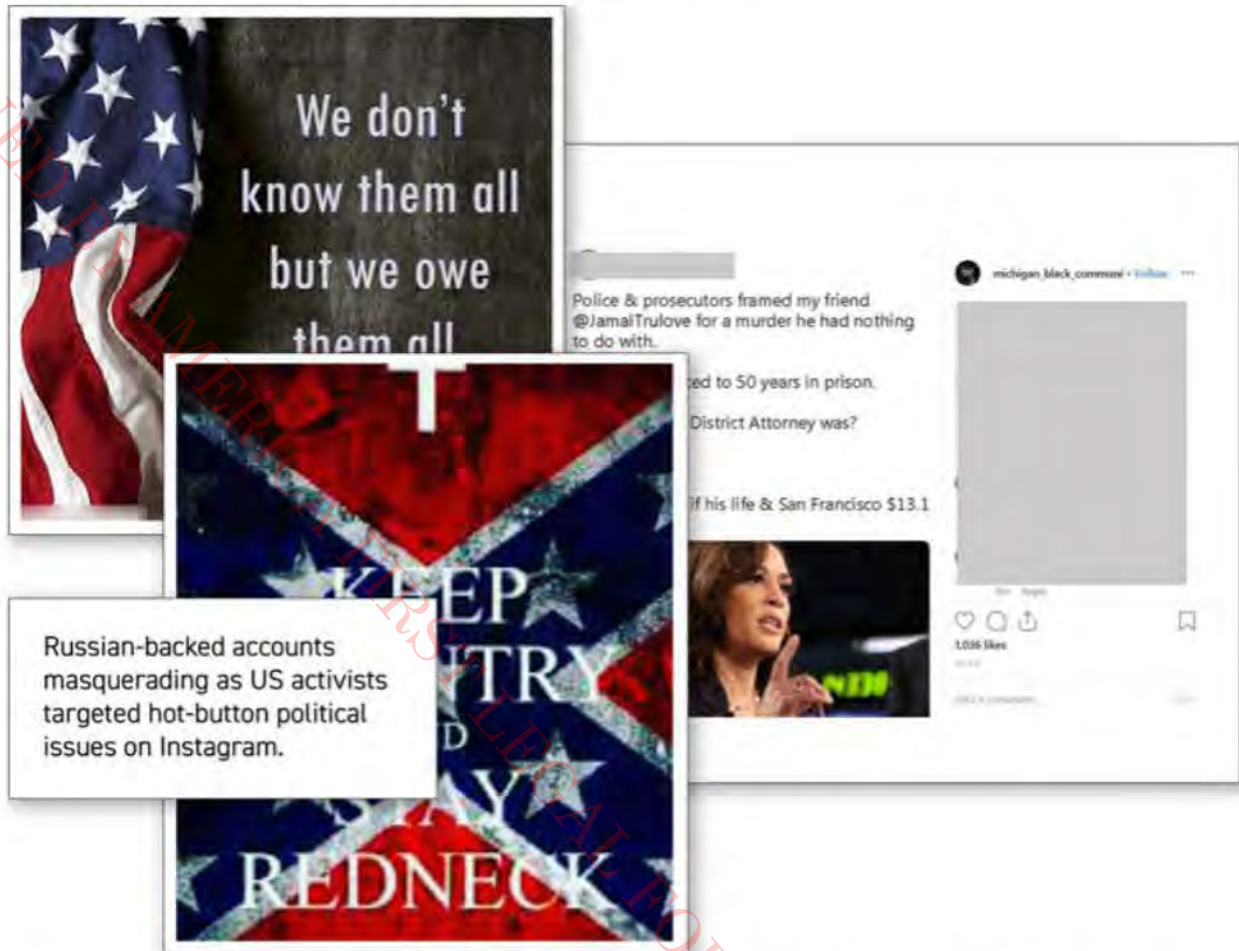
Kim, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison specializing in political communication on social media, noticed a number of the seemingly unrelated accounts using tactics favored by the Russia-linked Internet Research Agency, a group that U.S. national security agencies say carried out a multiyear misinformation effort aimed at disrupting the 2016 election — in part by stoking existing partisan hatred.

The new accounts, for example, pretended to be local activists or politicians and targeted their highly partisan messages at battleground states. One account, called “iowa.patriot,” attacked Elizabeth Warren. Another, “bernie.2020\_,” accused Trump supporters of treason.

The social networking giant has taken action on at least some of these covert campaigns. A few weeks after Kim found the posts, Facebook [removed 50 IRA-run Instagram accounts](#) with a total of nearly 250,000 online followers — including many of those she had spotted, according to Graphika.

Since October, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have removed at least 10 campaigns promoting false information involving accounts linked to authoritarian countries like Russia, Iran and China that had targeted people in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere, according to company statements.

But Kim said that Russia’s tactics in the U.S. are evolving more quickly than social media sites can identify and take down accounts. Facebook alone has 2.6 billion users — a gigantic universe for bad actors to hide in.



All images are from Instagram (September 2019). The posts and identified accounts were later taken down by the company for links to the Internet Research Agency. The identities of non-IRA parties including domestic political groups' logos, the faces of ordinary citizens, and comments by non-IRA users are

In 2016, the IRA's tactics were often unsophisticated, like buying Facebook ads in Russian rubles or producing crude, easily identifiable fakes of campaign logos.

This time, Kim said, the group's accounts are operating at a higher level: they have become better at impersonating both candidates and parties; they've moved from creating fake advocacy groups to impersonating actual organizations; and they're using more seemingly nonpolitical and commercial accounts to broaden their appeal online without raising red flags to the platforms.

The Kremlin has already honed these new approaches abroad. In a spate of European votes — most notably last year's European Parliament election and the 2017 Catalan independence referendum — Russian groups tried out new disinformation tactics that are now being deployed ahead of November, according to three policymakers from the EU and NATO who were involved in those analyses. Kim said one likely reason for foreign governments to impersonate legitimate U.S. groups is that the social media companies are reluctant to police domestic political activism. While foreign interference in

elections is illegal under U.S. law, the companies are on shakier ground if they take down posts or accounts put up by Americans.

Russia has also become more brazen in how it uses state-backed media outlets — as has China, whose presence on Western social media has skyrocketed since last year's Hong Kong protests. Both Russia's RT and China's CGTN television operations have made use of their large social media followings to spread false information and divisive messages.

Moscow- and Beijing-backed media have piggybacked on hashtags related to the Covid-19 pandemic and recent Black Lives Matter protests to flood Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with content stoking racial and political divisions.

Facebook began adding labels to posts created by some state-backed media outlets in June to let users know who is behind the content, though does not add similar disclaimers when users themselves post links to the same state-backed content.

China has been particularly aggressive, with high-profile officials and ambassadorial accounts promoting conspiracy theories, mostly on Twitter, that the U.S. had created the coronavirus as a secret bioweapon.

Other countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, similarly have upped their misinformation activity aimed at the U.S. over the last six months, according to two national security policy makers and a misinformation analyst, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of their work.

#### ***Domestic extremist groups copycatting***

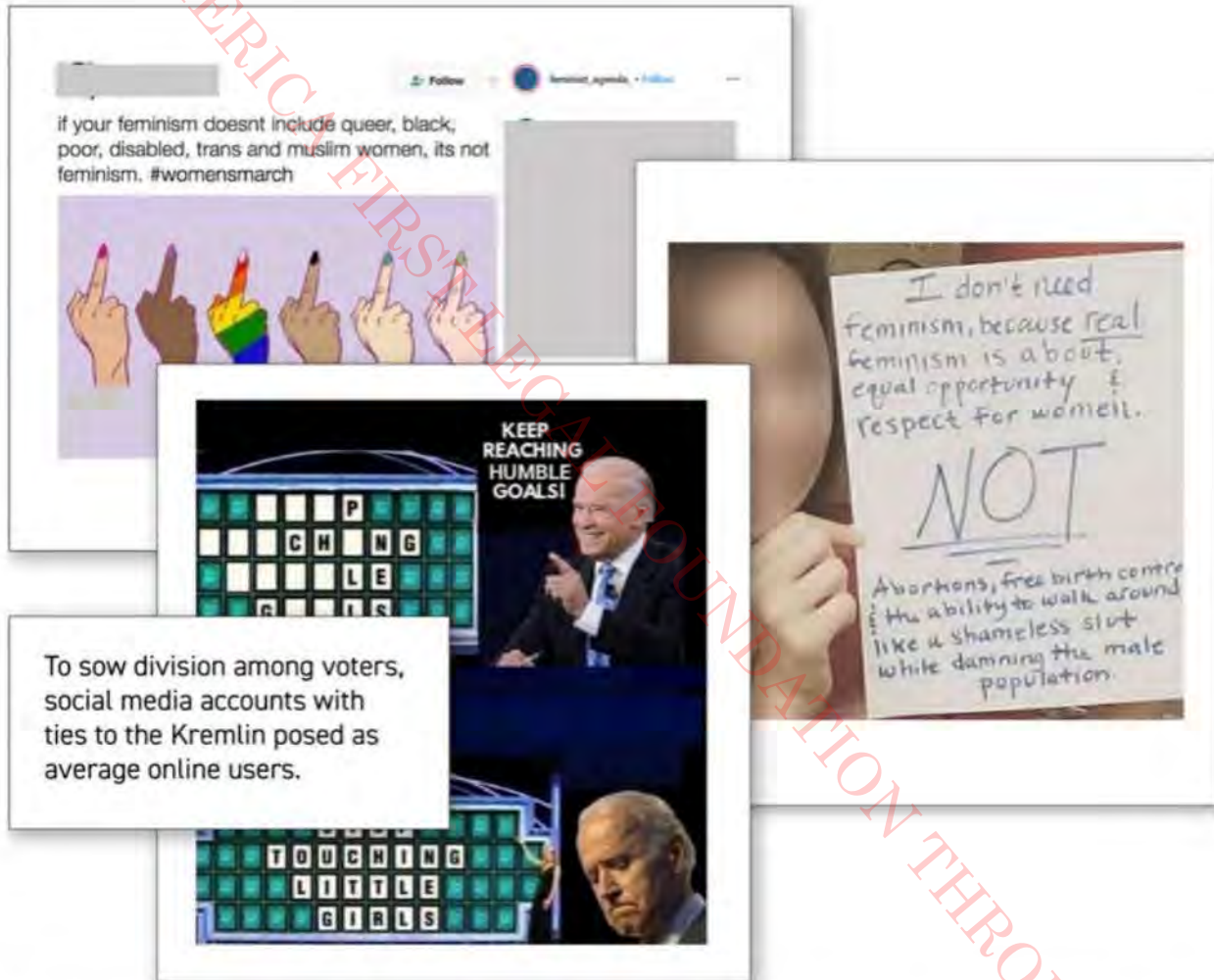
U.S. groups have watched the foreign actors succeed in peddling falsehoods online, and followed suit. Misinformation experts say that since 2016, far-right and white supremacist activists have begun to mimic the Kremlin's strategies as they stoke division and push political messages to millions of social media users.

"By volume and engagement, domestic misinformation is the more widespread phenomenon. It's not close," said Emerson Brooking, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. Early this year, for instance, posts from "Western News Today" — a Facebook page portraying itself as a media outlet — started sharing racist links to content from VDARE, a website that the Southern Poverty Law Center had defined as promoting anti-immigration hate speech.

Other accounts followed within minutes, posting the same racist content and linking to VDARE and other far-right groups across multiple pages — a coordinated action that Graphika said mimicked the tactics of Russia's IRA.

Previously, many of these hate groups had shared posts directly from their own social media accounts but received little, if any traction. Now, by impersonating others, they could spread their messages beyond their far-right online bubbles, said Chloe Colliver, head of the digital research unit at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that tracks online hate speech.

And by pretending to be different online groups with little if any connection to each other, the groups posting VDARE messages appeared to avoid getting flagged as a coordinated campaign, according to Graphika.



All images are from Instagram (September 2019). The posts and identified accounts were later taken down by the company for links to the Internet Research Agency. The identities of non-IRA parties including domestic political groups' logos, the faces of ordinary citizens, and comments by non-IRA users are redacted.

With Washington split on how to handle the problem — and both foreign and domestic groups gearing up for November's vote — misinformation experts are left wondering how bad, and widespread, the online trickery will be later this year.

"I didn't see a meaningful drop in misinformation between 2016 and 2018," said Laura Edelson, a researcher at NYU who has tracked the spread of paid-for political messages across social networks during recent electoral cycles. "The next trial will be the 2020 election, and I'm not optimistic." (Source: Politico)

**(U) YouTube Bans Thousands of Accounts to Combat Coordinated Chinese Influence Operation:**

**YouTube** has banned a large number of Chinese accounts it said were engaging in "coordinated influence operations" on political issues, the company announced today; 2,596 accounts from China alone were taken down from April to June, compared with 277 in the **first three months of 2020**. "These channels mostly uploaded spammy, non-political content, but a small subset posted political content primarily in Chinese similar to the findings in a recent Graphika report, including content related to the U.S. response to COVID-19," **Google posted in its Threat Analysis Group bulletin for Q2**.

The Graphika report, entitled "Return of the (Spamouflage) Dragon: Pro Chinese Spam Network Tries Again," **can be read here**. It details a large set of accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media that began to be activated early this year that appeared to be part of a global propaganda push:

"The network made heavy use of video footage taken from pro-Chinese government channels, together with memes and lengthy texts in both Chinese and English. It interspersed its political content with spam posts, typically of scenery, basketball, models, and TikTok videos. These appeared designed to camouflage the operation's political content, hence the name."

It's the "return" of this particular spam dragon because it showed up last fall in a similar form, and whoever is pulling the strings appears undeterred by detection. New, sleeper and stolen accounts were amassed again and deployed for similar purposes, though now — as **Google** notes — with a COVID-19 twist.

When June rolled around, content was also being pushed related to the ongoing protests regarding the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and other racial justice matters.

The Google post notes that the Chinese campaign, as well as others from Russia and Iran, were multi-platform, as similar findings were reported by Facebook, Twitter and cybersecurity outfits like FireEye. Having taken down 186 channels in April, 1,098 in May and 1,312 in June, we may be in for a bumper crop in the summer as well. Watch with care. (Source: Tech Crunch)

**(U) Facebook Removes Troll Farm Posing as African-Americans:** Facebook removed hundreds of accounts on Thursday from a foreign troll farm posing as African-Americans in support of Donald Trump and QAnon supporters. It also removed hundreds of fake accounts linked to media outlet The Epoch Times that pushed conspiracy theories about coronavirus and protests in the U.S.

Facebook took down the accounts as part of its **enforcement against coordinated inauthentic behavior**, which is the use of fake accounts to inflate the reach of content or products on social media.

The foreign pro-Trump troll farm was based in Romania and pushed content on Instagram under names like "BlackPeopleVoteForTrump" and on Facebook under "We Love Our President."

The accounts posted about "ongoing U.S. protests and conspiracy theories about who is behind them," Gleicher said. Some accounts pushed health misinformation about COVID-19, which led to their ban from their services before this month's takedown. (Source: NBC)

(U) **Facebook's Dilemma: How to Police Claims About Unproven COVID-19 Vaccines:** In most instances, Facebook does not remove misinformation about the new COVID-19 vaccines that are still under development, according to the company's vaccine policy lead Jason Hirsch, on the grounds that such claims do not meet its imminent harm threshold. Hirsch told Reuters the company is "grappling" with the dilemma of how to police claims about new vaccines that are as yet unproven.

"There's a ceiling to how much we can do until the facts on the ground become more concrete," Hirsch said in an interview with Reuters, talking publicly for the first time about how the company is trying to approach the coronavirus vaccine issue.

Tom Phillips, editor at one of Facebook's fact-checking partners Full Fact, sees the conundrum this way: "How do you fact check about a vaccine that does not exist yet?"

For now, misinformation ranging from unfounded claims to complex conspiracy theories about the developmental vaccines is proliferating on a platform with more than 2.6 billion monthly active users, a review of posts by Reuters, Facebook fact-checkers and other researchers found.

The worry, public health experts told Reuters, is that the spread of misinformation on social media could discourage people from eventually taking the vaccine, seen as the best chance to stem a pandemic that has infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands worldwide, including 158,000 people in the United States alone.

At the same time, free speech advocates fret about increased censorship during a time of uncertainty and the lasting repercussions long after the virus is tamed.

Drawing the line between true and false is also more complex for the new COVID-19 vaccines, fact-checkers told Reuters, than with content about vaccines with an established safety record.

Facebook representatives said the company has been consulting with about 50 experts in public health, vaccines, and free expression on how to shape its response to claims about the new COVID-19 vaccines. Even though the first vaccines aren't expected to go to market for months, polls show that many Americans are already concerned about taking a new COVID-19 vaccine, which is being developed at a record pace. Some 28% of Americans say they are not interested in getting the vaccine, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted between July 15-21. Among them, more than 50% said they were nervous about the speed of development. More than a third said they did not trust the people behind the vaccine's development.

The U.K.-based non-profit Center for Countering Digital Hate reported in July that anti-vaccination content is flourishing on social media sites. Facebook groups and pages accounted for more than half of the total anti-vaccine following across all the social media platforms studied by the CCDH. (Source: Reuters)

### (U) 7/30 Reporting

**(U) Unknown Actors Leverage Website Compromises and Fabricated Content to Push Narratives Aligned with Russian Security Interests:** Mandiant Threat Intelligence has tied together several information operations that we assess with moderate confidence comprise part of a broader influence campaign, ongoing since at least March 2017, aligned with Russian security interests. The operations have primarily targeted audiences in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland with narratives critical of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) presence in Eastern Europe, occasionally leveraging other themes such as anti-U.S. and COVID-19-related narratives as part of this broader anti-NATO agenda.

We have dubbed this campaign "Ghostwriter," based on its use of inauthentic personas posing as locals, journalists, and analysts within the target countries to post articles and op-eds referencing the fabrications as source material to a core set of third-party websites that publish user-generated content.

Promoted Ghostwriter narratives have aligned with Russian security interests, primarily seeking to foment distrust of U.S. and NATO troops in Europe by portraying their presence as aggressive and dangerous to local populations and to undermine military relations between NATO members. The narratives have focused heavily on NATO military exercises in the region, including Saber Strike 2018, ANAKONDA 2018, DEFENDER-Europe 20, and Iron Wolf 2019. For example, recent Ghostwriter incidents have included allegations that U.S. and NATO forces are contributing to the spread of COVID-19 in Europe. Our analysis of articles published this year by suspected Ghostwriter personas on TheDuran.com, one of the thirdparty websites frequently leveraged in the campaign, identified the most prevalent themes to be the impact of COVID-19 on U.S. and NATO forces, general attempts to discredit the U.S. and NATO, and strategic discussion favoring Russia over other world powers. On several occasions, news outlets and government agencies in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland have issued public statements declaring content and narratives promoted as part of what we identify as Ghostwriter to be untrue and have labeled them to be "disinformation" or "fake news."

On the surface, some aspects of Ghostwriter operations, notably their occasional use of fabricated official documents and correspondences, bear resemblance to aspects of the ongoing suspected Russian influence campaign referred to as "Secondary Infektion," which was first publicly exposed by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab<sup>1</sup> and which we have investigated and reported on extensively. However, we treat Ghostwriter and Secondary Infektion as two distinct activity sets given notable differences in observed behaviors and tactics between the two:

- Many Ghostwriter operations have leveraged compromised websites, including legitimate news websites, to publish fabricated content, or used spoofed email accounts to engage in direct



outreach and dissemination of content to NATO itself and national organizations and media outlets in the target countries. We have not, at this time, observed the use of traditional cyber threat activity in support of Secondary Infektion operations.

- Multiple Ghostwriter operations have involved the dissemination of articles and narratives by multi-use inauthentic personas with developed histories, or single use personas impersonating real individuals or behind which at least some effort has been made to make them appear authentic, on a specific set of core platforms. By contrast, single-use burner accounts are almost exclusively used to post Secondary Infektion content across a variety of blogs, forums, and self-publishing sites, with little effort put into making the accounts appear authentic.

#### *Tactics*

- Fabricated quotes have formed the basis of false narratives pushed by Ghostwriter. For example, a quote falsely attributed to the commander of the NATO eFP Battle Group was used to push a narrative that Canadian soldiers stationed in Latvia had been diagnosed with COVID-19, stating “Yes, 21 soldiers have tested positive for the virus. We have taken the necessary security measures, but not everyone has the same immunity. All necessary measures are being taken. The soldiers are isolated.”
- Fabricated documents, including falsified official correspondence, have been used as source material for Ghostwriter narratives. For example, a fabricated letter presented as having been authored by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was disseminated by Ghostwriter personas to bolster a narrative suggesting that NATO was planning to withdraw from Lithuania in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Articles promoting Ghostwriter narratives have also been posted to various blogs and pages on Wix, Blogspot, and Wordpress that we suspect to be Ghostwriter-controlled. For example, an article published on WordPress promoted a false claim that a U.S. Army officer serving in Lithuania had contracted COVID-19 and then interacted with the local population.
- In some instances, we have observed further amplification of fabricated Ghostwriter articles on social media by suspected inauthentic personas, though this is not a primary vector of dissemination in the campaign.
- Altered images have been used as evidence to support Ghostwriter narratives. For example, one incident involved the use of a photoshopped image of a Jewish cemetery that was purported to have been desecrated by German soldiers
- Multiple Ghostwriter operations appear to have leveraged compromised websites, predominantly those of news outlets, to post fabricated news articles or documentation. Mandiant Threat Intelligence has not independently confirmed these compromises and is relying on reporting by government entities and media outlets in the target countries. In some cases, only the purported victim entity itself has publicly claimed to have been compromised. However, in many cases we also located archived copies of Ghostwriter articles posted to the suspected compromised sites (Table 1). Public reporting suggests that in at least some of these cases, the fabricated articles were published using the sites’ content management systems

(CMS) after obtaining user credentials.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it appears that rather than creating new CMS entries, the actors may have replaced existing legitimate articles on the sites with the fabrications

One or more dissemination phases then occur, whereby varying combinations and orders of tactics are used to spread the false narratives, including placing articles and any supporting fabricated documentation onto compromised legitimate websites, using inauthentic personas to post “news” articles and op-eds on regularly leveraged third-party sites that appear to accept usersubmitted content, posting articles and content to blog pages we suspect are directly affiliated with Ghostwriter, and direct email dissemination of content and articles, including to legitimate media outlets and government officials. (Source: FireEye)

(U) **Local U.S. Election Officials Fight Disinformation ‘Virus:’** As the clock ticks toward the U.S. presidential election in November, state election officials are devoting more time - and money - to educating voters about the dangers of disinformation while reassuring them that the system is fundamentally sound.

On a recent Zoom call, Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, the state’s top election official, ran through slides showing altered Facebook photographs, misleading tweets from the last presidential election and photographs of Russian hackers.

“Disinformation spreads like a virus,” the presentation warned its audience of Black pastors, minority leaders, and civil rights campaigners, detailing how Moscow carried out “an all-out assault on African-American voters using social media.”

It was an eye-opener, one attendee said.

“We had not had this kind of training or dialogue that I know of in the 20 years that I have been in Ohio,” said Andre Washington, who leads the state chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, an African-American trade union organization.

LaRose’s sessions are one in a series of initiatives being rolled out by the state and other local officials who run elections across the country to help head off a repeat of 2016, when hackers and trolls pumped stolen emails and propaganda into U.S. public forums. It remains unclear if - or how - it affected the outcome of the vote.

Senior intelligence officials predict that Russia - along with China and Iran - will attempt to influence the 2020 election as well.

The process this year will be even more fraught due to the coronavirus pandemic, which will compel many Americans to use unfamiliar new forms of voting, including drive-throughs, drop-off boxes, or mail-in ballots.

Surveys suggest Americans were already worried about the integrity of U.S. elections before the coronavirus. A Gallup poll conducted in 2019 said 59 percent of Americans are “not confident” in the honesty of U.S. elections. And a Marist Poll from January said those polled believed “misleading information” represented the biggest threat facing the vote.

Wyman and LaRose are part of a cadre of election officials who are trying new tactics to inoculate voters against false claims.

That includes developing and expanding local government social media accounts to counter misinformation, hiring advertising firms to design communications strategies, and offering pre-recorded virtual tours of voting facilities, educational television broadcasts and election classes for local journalists.

Public outreach in past years tended to feature generic get-out-the-vote literature; this year’s ads are aimed at reassuring constituents that their vote will be properly tallied. (Source: Associated Press)

**(U) Misinformation on Coronavirus is Proving Highly Contagious:** As the world races to find a vaccine and a treatment for COVID-19, there is seemingly no antidote in sight for the burgeoning outbreak of coronavirus conspiracy theories, hoaxes, anti-mask myths and sham cures.

Experts worry the torrent of bad information is dangerously undermining efforts to slow the virus, whose death toll in the U.S. hit 150,000 Wednesday, by far the highest in the world, according to the tally kept by Johns Hopkins University. Over a half-million people have died in the rest of the world.

“It is a real challenge in terms of trying to get the message to the public about what they can really do to protect themselves and what the facts are behind the problem,” said Michael Osterholm, head of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.

He said the fear is that “people are putting themselves in harm’s way because they don’t believe the virus is something they have to deal with.”

Rather than fade away in the face of new evidence, the claims have flourished, fed by mixed messages from officials, transmitted by social media, amplified by leaders like Trump and mutating when confronted with contradictory facts.

“You don’t need masks. There is a cure,” Dr. Stella Immanuel promised in a video that promoted hydroxychloroquine. “You don’t need people to be locked down.”

The truth: Federal regulators last month revoked their authorization of the drug as an emergency treatment amid growing evidence it doesn’t work and can have deadly side effects. Even if it were effective, it wouldn’t negate the need for masks and other measures to contain the outbreak.

Other baseless theories and hoaxes have alleged that the virus isn't real or that it's a bioweapon created by the U.S. or its adversaries. One [hoax](#) from the outbreak's early months claimed new 5G towers were spreading the virus through microwaves. Another popular story held that Microsoft founder Bill Gates plans to use COVID-19 vaccines to implant [microchips](#) in all 7 billion people on the planet.

Social media has amplified the claims and helped believers find each other. The flood of misinformation has posed a challenge for Facebook, Twitter and other platforms, which have found themselves accused of censorship for taking down virus misinformation. (Source: Associated Press)

**(U) Russia Rejects Accusations of Spreading Coronavirus Disinformation:** U.S. officials say Russian intelligence officers are spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic through English-language websites, trying to exploit a crisis that America is struggling to contain before the presidential election in November.

Two Russians who have held senior roles in Moscow's military intelligence service known as the GRU have been identified as responsible for a disinformation effort meant to reach Western audiences, according to U.S. government officials. They were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and [spoke on condition of anonymity](#) Tuesday.

Russian officials on Wednesday rejected the accusations as "conspiracy theories" and a "persistent phobia." One of the sites singled out by the U.S. posted a response denouncing as "categorically false" the American assertions that it was linked to the Russian military intelligence service or was involved in propaganda.

The information had previously been classified, but U.S. officials said it had been downgraded so they could more freely discuss it. Officials said they were doing so now to sound the alarm about the particular websites and to expose what they say is a clear link between the sites and Russian intelligence.

Between late May and early July, one of the officials said, the websites published about 150 articles about the pandemic response, including coverage aimed either at propping up Russia or denigrating the U.S. Among the headlines that caught the attention of U.S. officials were "Russia's Counter COVID-19 Aid to America Advances Case for Détente," which suggested that Russia had given urgent and substantial aid to the U.S. to fight the pandemic, and "Beijing Believes COVID-19 is a Biological Weapon," which amplified statements by the Chinese.

The spread of disinformation, including by Russia, is an urgent concern heading into the November vote. U.S. officials want to avoid a repeat of [the 2016 contest](#), when a Russian troll farm launched a covert social media campaign to divide American public opinion and to favor then-GOP candidate Donald Trump over Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The U.S. government's chief counterintelligence executive warned in a rare public statement Friday about Russia's continued use of internet trolls to advance their goals. (Source: LA Times)

**(U) 7/29 Reporting**

**(U) US officials: Russia Behind Spread of Virus Disinformation:** Russian intelligence services are using a trio of English-language websites to spread disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, seeking to exploit a crisis that America is struggling to contain ahead of the presidential election in November, U.S. officials said Tuesday.

Two Russians who have held senior roles in Moscow's military intelligence service known as the GRU have been identified as responsible for a disinformation effort meant to reach American and Western audiences, U.S. government officials said. They spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

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The disclosure comes as the spread of disinformation, including by Russia, is an urgent concern heading into November's presidential election as U.S. officials look to avoid a repeat of the 2016 contest, when a Russian troll farm launched a covert social media campaign to divide American public opinion and to favor then-candidate Donald Trump over Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. The U.S. government's chief counterintelligence executive warned in a rare public statement Friday about Russia's continued use of internet trolls to advance their goals.

Officials described the Russian disinformation as part of an ongoing and persistent effort to advance false narratives and cause confusion. (Source: AP)

**(U) Russian Intelligence Agencies Push Disinformation on Pandemic:** Russian intelligence services have been spreading disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, according to newly declassified intelligence, material that demonstrates how Moscow is continuing to try to influence Americans as the election draws closer.

Russian military intelligence, known as the G.R.U., has used its ties with a Russian government information center, InfoRos, and other websites to push out English-language disinformation and propaganda about the pandemic, such as amplifying false Chinese arguments that the virus was created

by the United States military and articles that said Russia's medical assistance could bring a new détente with Washington.

The disinformation efforts are a refinement of what Russia tried to do in 2016. The fake social media accounts and bots used by the Internet Research Agency and other Russia-backed groups to amplify false articles have proved relatively easy to stamp out. But it is far more difficult to stop the dissemination of such articles that appear on websites that seem legitimate, according to outside experts.

The disinformation efforts are a refinement of what Russia tried to do in 2016. The fake social media accounts and bots used by the Internet Research Agency and other Russia-backed groups to amplify false articles have proved relatively easy to stamp out. But it is far more difficult to stop the dissemination of such articles that appear on websites that seem legitimate, according to outside experts.

"Russian intelligence agencies are taking a more central role in disinformation efforts that Russia is pushing now," said Laura Rosenberger, the director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy. "It is not the blunt force" of the operations mounted by the Internet Research Agency.

Two American officials described the newly declassified intelligence but would not provide the underlying reports about the activities of the G.R.U. and the S.V.R., Moscow's equivalent of the C.I.A. They discussed the information on the condition of anonymity.

While the disinformation efforts outlined on Tuesday by American officials were focused on the pandemic, security researchers said Russia continued to push disinformation on a variety of topics. The government's accusations came as Mandiant Threat Intelligence, part of the FireEye cybersecurity firm, reported that it had detected a parallel influence campaign in Eastern Europe intended to discredit the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, including disinformation about the coronavirus. While the Mandiant report did not specifically name Russia and its intelligence agencies, it noted that the campaign was "aligned with Russian security interests" in an effort to undermine NATO activities. Facebook has begun labeling stories that appear on state-sponsored news sites like RT and Sputnik. But it is harder for the social media companies to identify and label news articles that are posted on conspiracy-minded sites, according to experts.

Many of the pieces created by Russian intelligence were published on InfoRos, a site controlled by the Russian government, and OneWorld.Press, a nominally independent site that United States officials said had ties to the G.R.U. American officials said other sites, such as GlobalResearch.ca, regularly amplify G.R.U. propaganda, but officials have not directly linked it to Russian intelligence. (Source: NY Times)

(U) **Analyst Comment:** The 28 July media reporting referenced above further indicates ongoing Russian disinformation trends previously identified by CISA's open source analysis of Russian proxy sites. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Russia has leveraged the full spectrum of its disinformation apparatus with the goal of undermining the U.S. pandemic response, eroding public faith in American

institutions, and increasing polarization. Proxy sites are meant to hide Russia's hand in COVID-19 disinformation.

(U) Russia's COVID-19 disinformation efforts are likely to continue for as long as the pandemic dominates the news cycle. Moscow may potentially pivot its COVID-19 disinformation networks to more election-focused narratives as the 2020 Presidential election approaches. Russian proxy site narratives are typically amplified by overt Russian-backed state media outlets.

(U) **Russian State-Backed Disinformation Proxy Website: "Russian MoD Says COVID-19 Vaccine Ready, Queue Accusations It Was Stolen From 'The West'":** Russian state-backed disinformation website Southfront.org hailed Russian vaccine development efforts, while simultaneously casting doubt on recent accusations that China and Russia are seeking to intellectual property from U.S. and European-based scientists. The article indicates an increased willingness of Russian disinformation outlets to integrate vaccine development initiatives into its global propaganda strategy. Southfront has been deplatformed by many social media sites for spreading COVID-19 disinformation.

The article claims, "The Defense Ministry reported on July 20<sup>th</sup> that jointly with the Gamaleya National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology it had successfully completed clinical trials of the coronavirus vaccine on volunteers on the basis of the Burdenko Main Military Hospital. Separately, a coronavirus vaccine developed by the University of Oxford appears safe and triggers an immune response.

"Notably, however, Russia was accused of allegedly sending out its hackers to steal information from the UK, US and Canada on their vaccine data, and now that Moscow reportedly has success in its trials, a new row of accusations should be expected and is quite likely." (Source: Southfront)

(U) **Facebook, Twitter and YouTube Pull "False" Coronavirus Video After It Goes Viral:** A controversial video containing misleading information on the coronavirus was allowed to clock up millions of views before it was pulled from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

The video was created by right-wing media outlet Breitbart. It depicts a group of people dressed in white lab coats — who call themselves "America's Frontline Doctors" — staging a press conference outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. Those in the video claim that the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine is "a cure for Covid" and "you don't need a mask" to slow the spread of coronavirus.

"This virus has a cure, it's called hydroxychloroquine, zinc, and Zithromax," one of the women in the video claims. "You don't need masks, there is a cure."

The claims are in contrast to the advice from public health officials to prevent the spread of the virus.

Last month, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced that it had ended the emergency use authorization of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, saying the drugs were “unlikely to be effective in treating Covid-19.”

By late Monday night, the video had racked up 20 million views on Facebook, according to NBC News reporter Brandy Zadrozny. The video was shared widely in anti-vaccination, anti-mask, and reopen Facebook groups, according to NBC news.

Although the tech firms said they had removed the video, there were still clips of it circulating on WhatsApp and other social media platforms on Tuesday morning. (Source: CNBC)

(U) **Why We Hate Being Told What To Do: Psychologists Explain the Battle Over Masks:** Wearing a [face mask in public](#) seems like a small step to take to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19, yet many people have been angered to the point of blind rage when asked to do it.

In Florida, a shopper was recorded [shoving a Walmart employee](#). In New Jersey, a man was [charged with making terroristic threats](#) when he allegedly became combative after being asked to leave a store. In Texas, a woman started [flinging groceries](#) from her cart after reportedly refusing to keep her mask on.

In California, two locations of a taco shop [had to close](#) after customers kept berating employees over the restaurant's new mask policy.

“They want to do what they want to do,” said Mark Leary, a social and personality psychologist and professor emeritus of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

A threat to a person’s freedom to behave as he or she wishes leads to “[psychological reactance](#),” or the instant desire to regain that freedom, he noted.

Reactance is often accompanied by anger, though basic differences in people’s personalities and beliefs about the mask issue mean some sullenly comply, others protest then comply, some get angry then leave “and others have full-blown meltdowns that get posted on YouTube,” Leary said.

Humans don’t like to feel discomfort or inconvenience, so on a basic level, that’s what’s driving some people to skip the masks, Klapow said.

There’s also been lots of conflicting information about the issue, with many health experts, including U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams, initially [discouraging the general public from wearing face coverings](#), calling them ineffective. He’s since become a vocal advocate for masks.

Anti-mask online misinformation has proliferated during the pandemic. (Source: Today)



**(U) 7/27 Reporting****(U) Facebook and YouTube are Letting Anti-Vaccine Figure Del Bigtree Push Deadly Coronavirus**

**Misinformation:** Facebook and YouTube have given prominent anti-vaccine figure Del Bigtree near-impunity to spread dangerous medical misinformation about the novel coronavirus and the development of a vaccine for the COVID-19 disease on their platforms.

During broadcasts of his online show *The HighWire*, which are available for live streaming and playback at Facebook and YouTube, Bigtree has:

- falsely characterized COVID-19 as a common cold and labeled it “one of the most mild illnesses there is” ;
- repeatedly falsely claimed wearing a mask poses a serious health hazard;
- repeatedly suggested that people intentionally expose themselves to the coronavirus in order to build herd immunity;
- hosted guests who advised viewers who think they have the coronavirus to take vitamin C until they have diarrhea and then to take more vitamin C; and
- declared the coronavirus outbreak is over on March 27 and encouraged people to go outside to celebrate (more than 140,000 Americans have died of the disease since that date).

Viewers who listen to Bigtree's advice could easily contract COVID-19 and suffer serious medical consequences, including death.

Bigtree is a conspiracy theorist who has alleged the coronavirus outbreak may have started because of a vaccine development accident and that the U.S. coronavirus death toll is artificially inflated. He has made numerous unfounded attacks to warn people off a forthcoming coronavirus vaccine, including telling Black Americans that getting the vaccine would be like forced participation in the infamous Tuskegee study. He has also attempted to convince people not to get flu shots, falsely claiming the shots contain the coronavirus and that people who have received flu shots are more susceptible to developing severe COVID-19 symptoms.

Bigtree has now turned his attention to the novel coronavirus outbreak, and he is deploying similar tactics -- primarily through *The HighWire* program he hosts -- which aim to downplay the seriousness of the disease to support his argument against the development of a vaccine. Medical experts, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, **have warned** that widespread rejection of the coronavirus vaccine could destroy efforts to get the disease under control in the U.S. and that attitudes toward a potential vaccine are already souring. This warning comes as **anti-vaccine misinformation runs rampant** on social media platforms, including on Facebook where anti-vaccination figures reportedly have a following of more than 58 million people.

Bigtree's YouTube channel for *The HighWire*, which was created in 2017, **has grown** from around 60,000 subscribers at the beginning of 2020 to more than 200,000 subscribers, according to social media analytics website Social Blade. The channel has **more than 15.1 million views**, and Social Blade indicates view counts have spiked in recent months. *The HighWire* has **nearly 320,000 followers** on Facebook,

where full programs and clips are also available for viewing. *The HighWire* also maintains an account on [Instagram](#), which is owned by Facebook, with 155,000 followers.

While [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#) theoretically have policies to remove dangerous misinformation about the coronavirus from their platforms, the spotty enforcement of those rules is highlighted by how Bigtree has been able to use both platforms to spread potentially deadly medical misinformation with little impediment. (Source: Media Matters)

(U) **Hitting COVID-19 Disinfo Websites Where It Hurts: Their Wallets:** The European Union's most recent response to disinformation contains one measure that deserves particular attention: a proposal to limit advertising placements on social media for third-party websites that profit off of COVID-19 disinformation.

This proposal is significant because it makes the act of disseminating disinformation more costly for those doing it. Imposing significant costs on bad actors in the form of lost revenue is one potential way to deter future aggression.

There have been similar measures in previous EU documents. In a 2018 document titled "[Tackling online disinformation](#)," the European Commission stated that online platforms and the advertising industry should "significantly improve the scrutiny of advertisement placements, notably in order to reduce revenues for purveyors of disinformation, and restrict targeting options for political advertising." This concept was also reiterated also in the aforementioned Code of Practice.

But the measures undertaken by the private sector so far cannot be considered a success yet. As the EU [stated](#) in 2019, "The aggregated reporting from associations in the advertising sector does not provide clarity on the extent to which brand safety practices are evolving to encompass the control of placements of advertising next to disinformation content."

Independent initiatives have also highlighted the persistent problem of advertising being used to monetize disinformation-spreading websites. According to an estimate by the [Global Disinformation Index](#), advertisers will unwittingly provide \$25 million "to nearly 500 English-language coronavirus disinformation sites in 2020." According to a [previous estimate by GDI](#), disinformation news sites as a whole take in more than \$76 million each year in revenues generated by allowing online advertising on their sites.

There are a few civil society initiatives that try to hit disinformers where it hurts by cutting off their ability to monetize disinformation. One of the first appeared [in 2016 in Slovakia](#); earlier this year, there was a [similar project](#) announced in the Czech Republic. Meanwhile, a coalition of digital justice organizations are currently spearheading the [Stop Hate For Profit](#) campaign, which is founded on a similar principle: social media companies should not accept ad revenue from organizations that promote online hate.

But no matter how well-organized these civil society initiatives are, pressure from governments and intergovernmental organizations is likely to achieve quicker — and more decisive — results. Should the European Union — one of the largest economies in the world — decide to press for greater transparency in online advertising and limit the avenues for profit for disinformation websites, it could significantly hamper the ability of these websites to operate. If applied effectively, these steps could signal that the act of spreading disinformation does not come without a cost. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) YouTube Says it is Actively Working on Removing Misinformation from Platform:** YouTube on Friday said consumption of videos - recommended by the platform - containing misinformation is significantly below one per cent, and it is working on strengthening its systems to further reduce such instances to ensure that creators and users are protected.

YouTube Chief Product Officer Neal Mohan said the company has been actively working on removing misinformation, especially amid COVID-19 pandemic and has seen consumption of videos from "authoritative sources" grow 110 per cent in India during January-March 2020.

Mohan added that its work has focused on four pillars - removing violative content, raising up authoritative content, reducing the spread of borderline content and rewarding trusted creators - the 4Rs of responsibility.

Last year, YouTube had launched Fact Check information panels in India, the first country where such a feature was launched. These 'information panels' flag misinformation and offer correct insights with the fact checks being done by fact checking organizations.

Raising authoritative information and giving the proper context to users helps reduce and remove content that is violative of YouTube's policies, Mohan said.

Since launch, there have been over 300 billion impressions on its information panels globally. "We also updated our policies to remove egregious medical misinformation about COVID. We're consulting with global and local health authorities as we develop these policies and we've been updating them on an ongoing basis to stay current with the science -10 updates in the past two months alone," he said.

These policies prohibit things like saying the virus is a hoax or promoting medically unsubstantiated cures in place of seeking treatment and YouTube has removed thousands of videos under these policies. (Source: CNBC)

**(U) 7/23 Reporting**

(U) **Facebook Suspends Anti-Mask Group for Spreading COVID-19 Misinformation:** Facebook has removed one of the largest anti-mask groups on its platform for violating its policies against spreading misinformation about COVID-19.

The About section of the public group Unmasking America! — which had more than 9,600 members — described it as “here to spread the TRUTH about masks!” It made several claims which have been **widely debunked** about masks obstructing oxygen flow and having a negative psychological impact.

“It is a psychological anchor for suppression, enslavement and cognitive obedience. When you wear a mask you are complicit in declaring all humans as dangerous, infectious and threats,” the post stated. It is one of dozens of such groups easily found in a search for “unmasking” on Facebook. Some of the groups are private, meaning a group admin has to approve new members before they can join. But the theme is the same: the groups oppose the public health intervention championed by medical experts. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends people wear masks in all public areas, which should **limit the spread of the virus**. These Facebook groups are for people who don’t want to wear masks, and there are a lot of them.

According to Facebook’s rules, if a group shares false news repeatedly, the platform will show the group’s content lower in users’ News Feeds and stop suggesting people join the group to reduce its growth.



Some of the anti-mask groups on Facebook

(Image Unclassified; Source: The Verge)

An image of a “Face Mask Exempt Card” issued by the “Freedom to Breathe Agency” was linked to prominently; one poster advised others to “print it, laminate it and use it. The number is legit.” No such government agency exists and law enforcement officials have warned that such cards — which use a version of the justice department’s eagle logo — “do not carry the force of law,” [The New York Times reported](#).

Among the private groups are the “Million Unmasked March” group, which has more than 7,800 members. “Parents are powerful! We are a group of moms, dads, grandparents, uncles, aunts, teachers, friends, nurses and anyone who is concerned with our children wearing masks to school in fall,” the group’s “about” section reads. “We believe that our children wearing masks to school is physically and psychologically damaging. Join us in saying NO MORE MASKS!” And the “Unmasking Fear” group, which has about 400 members, is promoting an August 1st event “rallying against mandatory masks.” (Source: The Verge)

(U) **Nearly A Third Of Americans Believe Covid-19 Death Toll Conspiracy Theory:** Even as cases of Covid-19 and hospitalizations surge across the U.S. a growing number of Americans are buying into a narrative pushed by conservative media and disputed by health experts that suggests the official death count from the coronavirus is inflated, an Axios/Ipsos [poll](#) released Tuesday found.

#### KEY FACTS

- 31% of Americans believe that the Covid-19 death toll is less than officially reported—up from 23% in early May—while 34% believe the actual death toll is higher than the official number.
- The number of Americans who believe the death toll is inflated is highest among those who get their news from Fox News (61%) and Republicans (59%), while only 9% of Democrats and 7% of those getting their news from CNN and MSNBC believe the same.
- The idea that the official coronavirus death toll has been inflated has been pushed most heavily by [conservative media](#)—which [argue](#) that Democrats are inflating the number to weaponize the death count against Trump—and Axios [reported](#) in May that Trump and some of his aides also believe the theory.
- A [study](#) published July 1 by Virginia Commonwealth University and Yale University researchers in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that coronavirus deaths are actually undercounted, reflecting a [common view](#) held by public health experts and epidemiologists.
- The Axios/Ipsos [poll](#) also found that respondents are losing trust in the government’s coronavirus response: Trust in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state governments both dropped by 15% from April (to 70% and 57%, respectively), while only 35% of Americans trust the federal government and 31% trust the White House.
- Respondents blame their fellow Americans for worsening the pandemic, with 74% of Americans believing their fellow citizens are “behaving in ways that are making the country’s recovery from the pandemic somewhat or much worse.” (Source: Forbes, Axios/Ipsos)

(U) **Twitter Crackdown on Conspiracy Theories Could Set Agenda for Other Social Media:** Twitter’s [broad and continuing crackdown](#) against hundreds of thousands of QAnon-related accounts is evidence of a newfound aggressiveness on the part of social media companies in cracking down on conspiracy theories — some of which have gained traction with the president.

Influential posts linked to the movement, which emerged from the fringes of the Internet a few years ago, have touted conspiracy theories about the pandemic and other public events and have been promoted online by President Trump.

Other Silicon Valley companies, including Facebook and YouTube, said they were also considering crackdowns on the movement, some of whom are the president’s most extreme supporters.

Twitter said late Tuesday that it had banned 7,000 QAnon accounts for violating its policies, including by organizing harassment of other users or trying to get around an earlier suspension. The social media company has also limited the reach of QAnon-related accounts by no longer surfacing the accounts as

recommendations, not highlighting them in search and blocking QAnon-related URLs from being shared. The action against QAnon, which will affect about 150,000 accounts, means Twitter will de-emphasize the group as a whole as the company works to cut off the rampant spread of conspiracy theories on its site.

Twitter, along with other social media sites, has become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Supporters spread misinformation, coordinate harassment against public figures, and organize real-life protests. Their activity reached a fever pitch during the first months of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic when some protests [calling for businesses to reopen](#) were tied to members of darker Internet subcultures, including QAnon believers.

A flood of misinformation about the novel coronavirus pushed Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to institute new policies and refer people searching for information to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But they've struggled to keep up with groups like QAnon.

For example, in May the QAnon-focused groups on Facebook [were influential](#) in spreading the "[Plandemic](#)" documentary that falsely claimed billionaires intentionally helped spread coronavirus, according to social media researcher Erin Gallagher. The video was [viewed by millions of people](#) before the companies cut it off.

QAnon accounts have become even more prominent in spreading Twitter misinformation during the pandemic, University of Washington professor Kate Starbird said about the crackdown.

The impact of Twitter's decision will likely be somewhat mixed, she said. It might fuel the conspiracy theory followers to rally together and cry censorship, but it will also mean that the harmful and misleading content will be harder to find, making it tougher to recruit new members.

"Removing some of the inorganic activity and just dampening, limiting the visibility of their activity, can perhaps make a dent in some of the misinformation flows we've been seeing," Starbird said. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Tracking Misinformation Campaigns in Real-Time is Possible, Study Shows:** A research team has developed a technique for tracking online foreign misinformation campaigns in real time, which could help mitigate outside interference in the 2020 American election.

The researchers developed a method for using machine learning to identify malicious Internet accounts, or trolls, based on their past behavior. Appearing in *Science Advances*, the model investigated past misinformation campaigns from China, Russia, and Venezuela that were waged against the United States before and after the 2016 election.

The team, which included researchers from New York University, Princeton University, and New Jersey Institute of Technology, identified the patterns these campaigns followed by analyzing posts to Twitter

and Reddit and the hyperlinks or URLs they included. After running a series of tests, they found their model was effective in identifying posts and accounts that were part of a foreign influence campaign, including those by accounts that had never been used before.

They hope that software engineers will be able to build on their work to create a real-time monitoring system for exposing foreign influence in American politics.

“What our research means is that you could estimate in real time how much of it is out there and what they’re talking about,” says [Jacob N. Shapiro](#), professor of politics and international affairs at the [Princeton School of Public and International Affairs](#). “It’s not perfect, but it would force these actors to get more creative and possibly stop their efforts. You can only imagine how much better this could be if someone puts in the engineering efforts to optimize it.”

While the research shows there is no stable set of characteristics that will find influence efforts, it also shows that troll content will almost always be different in detectable ways. In one set of tests, the authors show the method can find never-before-used accounts that are part of an ongoing campaign. And while social media platforms regularly delete accounts associated with foreign disinformation campaigns, the team’s findings could lead to a more effective solution.

“When the platforms ban these accounts, it not only makes it hard to collect data to find similar accounts in the future, but it signals to the disinformation actor that they should avoid the behavior that led to deletion,” says Buntain. “This mechanism allows [the platform] to identify these accounts, silo them away from the rest of Twitter, and make it appear to these actors as though they are continuing to share their disinformation material.”

The method is no panacea, the researchers cautioned. It requires that someone has already identified recent influence campaign activity to learn from. And how the different features combine to indicate questionable content changes over time and between campaigns. (Source: NYU)

**(U) The Misinformation Age Has Exacerbated—And Been Exacerbated By—the Coronavirus Pandemic:** If you’re looking for solid information on [COVID-19](#), the Internet is not always your best bet—equal parts encyclopedia and junkyard, solid science on the one hand and rubbish, rumors and fabulism on the other. Distinguishing between the two is not always easy, and with so much of the time we spend online devoted either to sharing links or reading ones that have been shared with us, not only does the junk get believed, it also gets widely disseminated, creating a ripple effect of falsehoods that can misinform people and even endanger lives.

“At its worst, misinformation of this sort may cause people to turn to ineffective (and potentially harmful) remedies,” write the authors of [a new paper in \*Psychological Science\*](#), “as well as to overreact (hoarding goods) or, more dangerously, to underreact (engaging in risky behavior and inadvertently spreading the virus).”

It’s well-nigh impossible to keep the Internet entirely free of such trash, but in theory it ought not be quite as hard to confine it to the fever swamps where it originates and prevent it from spreading. The



new study explores not only why people believe Internet falsehoods, but how to help them become more discerning and less reckless about what they share.

One of the leading reasons misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic gains traction is that it's a topic that scares the daylight out of us. The more emotional valence something we read online has, the likelier we are to pass it on—either to share the joy if it's something good or unburden ourselves if it's bad.

"Our research has shown that emotion makes people less discerning," says David Rand, associate professor at the MIT School of Management and a co-author of the new study. "When it comes to COVID-19, people who are closer to the epicenter of the disease are likelier to share information online, whether it's true or false."

That's in keeping with earlier research out of MIT, [published in 2018](#) showing that fake news spreads faster on Twitter than does the truth. The reason, the researchers in that study wrote, was that the lies "were more novel than true news ... [eliciting] fear, disgust and surprise in replies," just the things that provide the zing to sharing in the first place.

Political leanings also influence what's shared and not shared. A [2019 Science](#) study, from researchers at Northeastern, Harvard, and SUNY-Buffalo, showed that neither the left nor the right has a monopoly on sharing fake news or real news, with both ends more or less equally mixing fact and fiction. Just which fact and just which fiction they chose, however, was typically consistent with just which stories fit more comfortably with their own ideologies.

The researchers believe there are easy, real world applications that platforms like Facebook and Twitter could use to provide people the same kind of occasional cognitive poke they did in their study. "One idea we like is to crowd-source fact-checking out to users," Pennycook says. "Ask people if [some] headlines are accurate or not; the platforms themselves could learn a lot from this too."

Rand cautions against anything that could seem patronizing to readers—leaving them feeling like they're being quizzed by some social media giant. Instead, he recommends a little bit of humility. "You could stick little pop-ups into newsfeeds that say, 'Help us improve our algorithms. Are these stories accurate?'" he recommends.

In no event is the Internet going to be scrubbed of all rubbish. For plenty of hucksters, politicians and conspiracy-mongers, the Internet's hospitality to inaccuracies is a feature, not a bug, and there is little way to purge them entirely. But small interventions can clearly make a difference. And when it comes to information about the pandemic—on which life and death decisions may be made—the stakes for trying could not be higher. (Source: Time)

(U) **Young Voters May Be Better Prepared For Misinformation Campaigns On Social Media:** It would be wrong to suggest that 2020 is the year of social media's influence on elections. It was used successfully

by then candidate Barrack Obama in 2008 and even more so by then candidate Donald J. Trump in 2016. It will likely be used by both President Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden – as well as candidates in races at all levels – this year.

However, the social media platforms have been more tarnished because of the spread of misinformation and even disinformation.

Such factors could even limit the power of social media this election cycle.

One advantage however is that generation Z isn't trusting of everything they may read.

"As digital natives, young people are incredibly savvy when it comes to using social media and vetting sources online," DeWitt added. "This is why trusted messengers, like Rock the Vote, are more important than ever. Followers want vetted and accurate information that they can rely on and share with their friends and family. This election cycle we launched our ambassador and volunteer program that trains and organizes young people to mobilize their peers through social media, and other digital platforms in an effort to arm them with the facts and prepare them to participate in the November election. The threat misinformation information on social media poses to our democracy is real." (Source: Forbes)

#### (U) 7/21 Reporting

**(U//FOUO) Critical Coverage of U.S. Efforts and Positive Amplification of China's COVID-19 Vaccine Development Make Information Environment Vulnerable to CCP Narrative Control:** Between 1 June and 12 July 2020, several narratives emerged that disparaged U.S. vaccine creation efforts, the most prominent being that U.S. pharmaceutical companies have hijacked these efforts. In contrast, China's efforts were generally received more favorably, with narratives centered on successful trial results and the promise that vaccines would be accessible to developing countries and the rest of the world. Proliferation of the narrative that greedy American companies would put profit over public health may pave the way for China to further amplify the claim that its vaccine will be more widely available.

The GEC observed these narratives being amplified by Russian-affiliated accounts, an observation that aligns with a broader trend in convergence between Russian and Chinese actors as demonstrated in recent GEC analysis. Specifically, two clusters of coordinated activity were identified. The first cluster contained multiple pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) vaccine messages, as well as posts critical of the United States. There is evidence of amplification of pro-CCP messages by suspected CCP-aligned accounts, as well as accounts that message on pro-Russian, pro-Iran, and anti-U.S. topics. We assess that this may be evidence of convergence among pro-CCP and pro-Russian COVID-19 vaccine messaging. The second cluster consisted of accounts that appeared to inorganically amplify Russian propaganda media RT and other Spanish-language news outlets. As a result, RT's favorable coverage of China's successes in vaccine development was amplified among Spanish-speaking audiences.

Key findings by region are included below.

- Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA): Chinese diplomatic accounts retweeted posts from Brazilian media on Chinese vaccine trials in the country, likely increasing the credibility of the narrative by linking to local sources. High profile non-Chinese actors also authored original content celebrating Chinese vaccine development efforts.
- European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR): Narratives across the region were often critical of U.S. vaccine development efforts, with the most popular social media posts in the region highlighting alleged greed and corruption of U.S. pharmaceutical companies engaged in vaccine and treatment development.
- East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP): Posts observed in the region that accused the U.S. of hoarding potentially effective vaccines fed into the narrative pushed by Chinese officials and state media that Chinese-developed vaccines would be accessible to countries across the globe.
- South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA): As heightened tensions between China and India over the recent border conflict continue, a significant portion of the tweets originating in India expressed cynicism towards vaccine development efforts in China. Posts from Chinese media outlets showcasing China's vaccine development advancements were retweeted multiple times in Pakistan despite garnering minimal retweet activity in other countries.
- Near Eastern Affairs (NEA): The volume of posts mentioning positive vaccine developments in China trumped those highlighting efforts by U.S. pharmaceutical companies across the region, with posts from a Saudi News outlet reporting on Chinese advancements gaining particularly high retweet volumes.
- African Affairs (AF): In contrast to the emphasis by accounts in this region on the high cost of vaccines produced by U.S. pharmaceutical companies, narratives focused on China, often referenced the benefits Chinese vaccine development would have globally and towards African countries in particular. (Source: State Department, Global Engagement Center)

**(U//FOUO) Evidence of Likely Convergence Between Russian-Linked Actors and Global Amplification of Pro-CCP Narratives on COVID-19 Vaccine Development:**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: We identified two clusters of coordinated activity within Twitter conversations about U.S. and Chinese COVID-19 treatments and vaccine development between early June and mid-July 2020. The first cluster contained multiple pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) vaccine messages, as well as posts critical of the United States. While the total volume of posts from official CCP accounts regarding this narrative was relatively low compared to the entire Twitter conversation on COVID-19 vaccines, there was evidence of amplification of pro-CCP messages by suspected CCP-aligned accounts, as well as accounts that message on pro-Russian, pro-Iran, and anti-U.S. topics. We assess that this may be evidence of convergence among pro-CCP and pro-Russian COVID-19 vaccine messaging. The second cluster consisted of accounts that appeared to inorganically amplify RT *Actualidad* and other Spanish-

language news outlets. As a result, RT's favorable coverage of China's alleged successes in vaccine development was amplified among Spanish-speaking audiences.

#### *Coordinated Community Analysis*

Using keywords in eight languages, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) collected 166,422 Twitter posts published globally between 1 June and 12 July that mentioned both COVID-19 treatments or vaccines, and either China or the United States. Posts authored by accounts located in the United States were excluded from review. Through our analysis, we identified two clusters of coordinated activity. The first shared explicitly pro-CCP narratives regarding COVID-19 vaccine development, while the second used methods such as co-tweeting and co-retweeting to inorganically amplify RT's positive Spanish-language coverage of China's progress towards developing a COVID-19 vaccine.

#### *Cluster One - Friends of China*

In the first cluster, we observed accounts that messaged solely on pro-CCP narratives, as well as accounts that messaged on anti-U.S., pro-Russian, and pro-Iranian topics. We assess that this may be evidence that pro-CCP and pro-Russia accounts are converging when messaging about Chinese vaccine development. Within this cluster, broad pro-CCP narratives regarding vaccines included: refuting claims by a U.S. Senator that China was sabotaging vaccine development in the West; announcements of milestones in China's vaccine development; and China's plan to make its vaccine accessible globally—possibly for African countries first. A prominent anti-U.S. narrative within this cluster focused on U.S. hoarding of Remdesivir and alleged corporate greed of its producer, pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences.

Within cluster one, the most active accounts heavily retweeted either official CCP accounts or a combination of pro-CCP, pro-Russian, and pro-Iranian accounts—possibly indicating a mechanism to promote shared propaganda among these three threat actors. We observed 10 accounts that exhibited characteristics of being CCP-aligned, as they frequently retweeted official CCP news outlets and had a high daily tweet volume. We also observed three accounts that promoted messaging from CCP, Russian, and Iranian state-news outlets, with high daily tweet rates as well.<sup>5</sup> Two of these accounts had bios that explicitly expressed support of communism, and retweeted French and Russian, as well as CCP sources.<sup>6</sup> In addition to official CCP accounts, accounts in this cluster often retweeted non-official accounts that promoted pro-CCP, pro-Russia, and anti-U.S. content. One of these accounts, @Gpovanman has a link to *Global Research* in his bio—a known Kremlin-friendly media outlet. Several of the accounts identified in this cluster have been observed in previous GEC reporting.

#### *Cluster Two – Amplification of RT Actualidad's Spanish-Language News*

In the cluster two, we identified 17 accounts that appear to be coordinating the promotion of RT Actualidad's Spanish-language news articles. We observed over 20 instances of news accounts co-

tweeting and co-retweeting the same articles within seconds of each other—suggesting that these accounts may be co-managed. Other personal accounts appeared to exclusively retweet *RT Actualidad* content, while at least three accounts would copy *RT Actualidad* headlines into a new post. At first glance, such tweets appear to be original content, as the post and hyperlink do not indicate that the source is *RT Actualidad*. As a result of these activities, *RT Actualidad*'s recent favorable coverage of China's progress on vaccine development was amplified. hoarding of the drug. These accounts also amplified other Spanish-language publications, which published articles on U.S. Remdesivir and Russia's progress with vaccine development.



Nine of the 17 accounts claimed to be Peruvian news accounts, with near identical bios, similar profile pictures, and high daily tweet rates.<sup>13</sup> Given their patterns of tweeting and retweeting news content, we assess that these news accounts are likely to be co-managed. Eight of the 17 accounts appeared to be personal accounts that almost exclusively amplified content from *RT Actualidad* and other Spanish-language news outlets, possibly suggesting evidence of a broader amplification mechanism promoting pro-Russian narratives. These personal accounts also had unusually high daily tweet rates, with one account tweeting on average 790 times per day. While most of the personal accounts were not overtly pro-CCP, one account was named “Venezuelans in China” and retweeted *RT Actualidad* and other Spanish-language articles on Chinese-Latin American relations. (Source: State Department, Global Engagement Center)

(U) **Fact Check: Document Does Not Show Official CDC Guidance on Face Masks:** Social media posts show a photograph of a document carrying the logo of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that does not recommend the use of face masks. The document has not been released by the CDC and contains misleading information about the effectiveness of masks in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Posts sharing the document can be seen [here](#) and [here](#). The document features a CDC letterhead and text that claims N95 masks, surgical masks and cloth masks are either dangerous or do not prevent the spread of COVID-19.

When asked if the document was authentic, the CDC told Reuters that it does not typically issue guidance or recommendations to the public in such a format.

The agency said its guidance and recommendations are distributed on the agency's website ([www.cdc.gov/](http://www.cdc.gov/)), official social media accounts and through news media.

In the first paragraph, the document states that the CDC does not recommend that the public uses N95 masks. While this is true, the CDC explains that this is because critical supplies should be reserved for healthcare workers and other first responders, not because the masks are ineffective as the document suggests ([here](#)).

The document goes on to say that the N95 masks are designed to not filter exhaled breath because they are designed for contaminated environments.

This is true (see 3M's FAQ [here](#)) but only for respirators fitted with valves, which open to release exhaled breath and close to filter inhaled breath. CDC guidelines explain that a N95 respirator with a valve provides "the same level of protection to the wearer as one that does not have a valve". Because of this, the agency advises that respirator with a valve should not be used in situations where a sterile environment must be maintained, such as an operating room, because the valve allows "unfiltered exhaled air to escape into the sterile field" ([here](#)).

The second part of the document claims that "particles and contaminants" in the environment can clog surgical masks, rendering them useless. "If you come in contact with COVID, your mask TRAPS IT, YOU become a walking virus dispenser", it reads.

According to the CDC, surgical masks protect against "large-particle droplets splashes", while also protecting others from the wearer's respiratory emissions([here](#)).

Finally, the document argues that cloth masks are a health risk because they trap CO2, and that the moisture trapped in the masks can make them "mildew ridden" in 30 minutes.

The Reuters Fact Check team previously debunked the claim that masks cause the wearer to breath in dangerous amounts of CO2 ([here](#)). (Source: Reuters)

### **(U) 7/20 Reporting**

#### **(U//FOUO) Critical Coverage of U.S. Efforts and Positive Amplification of China's COVID-19 Vaccine Development Make Information Environment Vulnerable to CCP Narrative Control**

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:* Between 1 June and 12 July 2020, several narratives emerged that disparaged U.S. vaccine creation efforts, the most prominent being that U.S. pharmaceutical companies have

hijacked these efforts. In contrast, China's efforts were generally received more favorably, with narratives centered on successful trial results and the promise that vaccines would be accessible to developing countries and the rest of the world. Proliferation of the narrative that greedy American companies would put profit over public health may pave the way for China to further amplify the claim that its vaccine will be more widely available. In select instances, the GEC observed these narratives being amplified by Russian-affiliated accounts, an observation that aligns with a broader trend in convergence between Russian and Chinese actors as demonstrated in recent GEC analysis. (Source: State Department, Global Engagement Center)

**(U//FOUO) Evidence of Likely Convergence Between Russian-Linked Actors and Global Amplification of Pro-CCP Narratives on COVID-19 Vaccine Development**

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:* We identified two clusters of coordinated activity within Twitter conversations about U.S. and Chinese COVID-19 treatments and vaccine development between early June and mid-July 2020. The first cluster contained multiple pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) vaccine messages, as well as posts critical of the United States. While the total volume of posts from official CCP accounts regarding this narrative was relatively low compared to the entire Twitter conversation on COVID-19 vaccines, there was evidence of amplification of pro-CCP messages by suspected CCP-aligned accounts, as well as accounts that message on pro-Russian, pro-Iran, and anti-U.S. topics. We assess that this may be evidence of convergence among pro-CCP and pro-Russian COVID-19 vaccine messaging. The second cluster consisted of accounts that appeared to inorganically amplify *Actualidad RT* and other Spanish-language news outlets. As a result, *RT's* favorable coverage of China's alleged successes in vaccine development was amplified among Spanish-speaking audiences. (Source: State Department, Global Engagement Center)

**(U) Google Bans Ads on Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Content:** Alphabet Inc's Google said on Friday it would prohibit websites and apps that use its advertising technology from running ads on "dangerous content" that goes against scientific consensus during the coronavirus pandemic. The world's largest search engine updated its policy as the health crisis has continued to rage throughout the United States, and digital advertising giants like Google and Facebook Inc have faced calls to do more to clamp down on misinformation.

Content not allowed to make money from ads include debunked conspiracy theories, such as the notion that the novel coronavirus was created in a Chinese lab as a bioweapon, that it was created by Microsoft Corp founder Bill Gates, or that the virus is a hoax, Google said in a statement.

Google already bars ads with harmful content like "miracle" health cures or which promote the anti-vaccination movement. It also prevents ads from running on publisher content that encourages those topics.

Google's new policy will also bar advertisers from creating their own ads that promote coronavirus conspiracy theories.

Google allows only certain institutions to run ads about the coronavirus pandemic, including government organizations and healthcare providers, to prevent activities like price-gouging on medical supplies. (Source: Reuters)

(U) **“Outright lies”: Voting Misinformation Flourishes on Facebook During Pandemic:** Facebook's [community standards](#) ban "misrepresentation of who can vote, qualifications for voting, whether a vote will be counted, and what information and/or materials must be provided in order to vote." But an analysis by ProPublica and [First Draft](#), a global nonprofit that researches misinformation, shows that Facebook is rife with false or misleading claims about voting, particularly regarding voting by mail, which is the safest way of casting a ballot during the pandemic. Many of these falsehoods appear to violate Facebook's standards yet have not been taken down or labeled as inaccurate. Some of them, generalizing from one or two cases, portrayed people of color as the face of voter fraud.

The false claims, including conspiracy theories about stolen elections or outright misrepresentations about voting by mail by Trump and prominent conservative outlets, are often among the most popular posts about voting on Facebook, according to a review of engagement data from CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned analytics tool.

On Facebook, interactions — the number of comments, likes, reactions and shares that a post attracts — are a proxy for popularity. Of the top 50 posts, ranked by total interactions, that mentioned voting by mail since April 1, 22 contained false or substantially misleading claims about voting, particularly about mail-in ballots. (Source: Slate)

(U) **TikTok Says it Has Removed 29,000 Coronavirus Videos in Europe:** TikTok said late Thursday it has deleted roughly 29,000 coronavirus-related videos in Europe for breaking its rules.

The Chinese-owned app, which allows users to post short video clips, says it does not allow misinformation that could harm people's health to be shared on its platform.

Approximately 3,000 of the clips contained medical misinformation, TikTok said.

TikTok shows a banner with the words "Learn the facts about Covid-19" on videos that contain words, hashtags or music related to coronavirus. The banner redirects users to verifiable, trusted sources of information. The company said the banner had been displayed on over 7 million videos in Europe. (Source: CNBC)

(U) **TikTok has a Misinformation Problem—And is Turning to Popular Creators for Help:** TikTok videos are quick bursts of comedy, home-made ingenuity, dancing, weirdness, and personality that make user-created content look like a really good idea again. But the medium's best traits may also help spread falsehoods and propaganda.



You don't have to look far to find various forms of misinformation on TikTok, from anti-vaxxers to people selling the flatly false claim that [5G networks cause coronavirus symptoms](#). You can also find plenty of pro-Trump accounts featuring the president spouting half-truths.

Now, TikTok is debuting a new set of videos on the platform that aim to educate its users on how to recognize misinformation posted by other users, then refrain from sharing it. The campaign, called "Be Informed," features a number of TikTok's most popular video makers, who address topics such as how to scrutinize the credibility of the sources of TikTok videos and how to distinguish fact from opinion.

TikTok is right to be nervous about the threat of misinformation on its platform. With the coronavirus surging, the economy struggling, and a major election looming, the short-form video platform can't afford [any big scandals](#). It's already facing [the real possibility of a U.S. ban](#), as both legitimate security concerns and [more abstract worries](#) over TikTok's China connections have grown (its parent company, ByteDance, is Chinese). (Source: Fast Company)

### (U) 7/16 Reporting

**(U) Twitter Breach is Another Warning Shot for Election Security:** This time, the massive Twitter hack yesterday was seemingly just a petty scam to raise bitcoin — at least based on what's known so far. But next time, it could be far more serious.

The unknown hackers held the Twittersphere in thrall last night as they seized control of high-profile accounts and sent phony tweets from Joe Biden, Barack Obama and a who's who of top companies and business and entertainment leaders. It took Twitter hours of work and an unprecedented shutdown of all verified accounts to halt the operation, [as Rachel Lerman, Cat Zakrzewski and I report](#).

U.S. adversaries that gained that sort of power could sow mass chaos on Election Day by tweeting out phony information about voter fraud or polling locations shut down by the coronavirus or terrorist attacks. And because the breach targeted Twitter controls, over which campaigns are powerless, they might have no power to stop the stream of phony tweets from flowing.

If Twitter once again shut down verified accounts' ability to tweet while it investigated a breach, that would also cut off a key avenue for campaigns, government officials and law enforcement to correct misinformation.

Such an attack could be particularly disastrous during a close election if people don't vote because of the confusion.

"Russia's most dangerous play is how do you inflict the maximum amount of chaos on Election Day," Clint Watts, a distinguished research fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute who tracks Russian influence operations, told me. "They want to further erode confidence in democracy, and this is emblematic of a way they can do that."

Rachel Tobac, chief executive of SocialProof Security, called the breach very concerning. "We are extremely lucky that these attackers are monetarily motivated and not sowing mass chaos all over the world," she said.

The breach underscores the vast array of avenues hackers could take to undermine the election. It also provides a window into the long list of possible attacks the Biden and Trump campaigns need to be planning for as November approaches.

In the case of an Election Day version of the Twitter breach, campaigns should be gaming out how to correct misinformation through traditional media and through other social media that isn't compromised, Mick Baccio, a security adviser at Splunk, told me. Baccio ran cybersecurity for former South Bend, Ind., mayor Pete Buttigieg's presidential primary campaign but left shortly before the Iowa caucuses.

"You have to plan for all these horrible scenarios and you have to have the principals in the room to figure out, 'What will you do if this happens? What's the incident response?'" he said. Campaigns should also try to establish strong relationships in advance with the people they'll need in those situations, such as Twitter's cybersecurity executives, Baccio said.

"You have to know what's inside your scope and what's not and having contacts at those places is invaluable," he said. (Source: The Washington Post)

(U) **Facebook Will Launch a New Section to Debunk Coronavirus Myths:** Facebook on Wednesday announced it will launch a new section of its social network dedicated to dispel inaccurate myths about Covid-19. It's the company's latest effort to stop the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus, following notifications encouraging everybody to wear a mask, and efforts to mark misleading posts as false.

The company, which has nearly 3 billion monthly active users across its services, will have a new "Facts About Covid-19" section within its app and website where it will "debunk common myths about the pandemic," Facebook said in a tweet.

The sample screen shown in the tweet suggests that Facebook will use the World Health Organization as a trusted source, and will include simple statements of fact like "Hydroxychloroquine hasn't been proven to cure, treat, or prevent it."

Facebook has previously said social networks **should not be the arbiters of truth**, and has refused to ban misleading political advertisements.

In the same string of tweets, the company also announced that CEO Mark Zuckerberg will interview Dr. Anthony Fauci about the pandemic and the government's response to it at 2pm PT on Thursday.

Fauci, who is the the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been a leading government voice on the pandemic and responses to it, but has recently drawn criticism from some in the Trump administration. On Tuesday, presidential trade advisor Peter Navarro criticized Fauci in an [op-ed](#), saying he was “wrong about everything I have interacted with him on,” but the White House [said on Wednesday](#) that the op-ed did not go through “normal White House clearance processes.” (Source: CNBC)

**(U) Fact Check: Coronavirus Tests Do Not Cause Brain Damage or Plant Substances on the Brain:** Social media users have been sharing posts which claim that deep nasal swabs used to test for COVID-19 take samples from the cribriform plate (the roof of the nasal cavity), and can therefore be used to plant chips, viruses or chemicals on the brain and cause brain damage. This claim is false. Nasopharyngeal swabs do not contain chips or viruses and in any case they collect samples from the nasopharynx (just above the soft palate), from where it’s not anatomically possible for them to plant anything onto the brain.

The post makes several claims about the nasal swabs: “The Coronavirus test is not credible and likely to be for clandestine brain access. [...] Folks, the coronavirus tests themselves, in many cases, (there are probably different types) but in many cases they are obviously what is causing the brain damage. Easily explained: *Many of the tests, (all of them that use the incredibly long “swab”) take their samples from the cribriform plate.*

*“[...] If you wanted to sabotage someone by planting a clandestine brain virus, nano tech, or plant a chip in someone, this would be the place to do it [...] It would be literally right on the brain when placed, and go right in.*

*“[...] Something is screwy with these tests. They have GOT TO be fake, (or at least the ones that literally swab the brain are) No wonder why they hurt for days.”*

The long swab described is a nasopharyngeal swab, which is one of the COVID-19 testing methods recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the U.S. ([here](#)). In the UK, nasopharyngeal swabs are also used to diagnose COVID-19 ([tinyurl.com/ybfnrauc](https://tinyurl.com/ybfnrauc)), although less deep nasal swabs are also used to take samples from the upper respiratory tract ([here](#)).

Nasopharyngeal swabs used to test for COVID-19 are inserted parallel to the nasal floor to take samples from the nasopharynx, which is found between the base of the skull and the soft palate ([here](#)), as shown in this video ([here](#)). As such, the swabs do not take samples from the cribriform plate, which forms the roof of the nasal cavity ([here](#)). (Source: Reuters)

### **(U) 7/15 Reporting**

**(U) China State-Backed Media Toplines:** China’s messengers continued their months-long criticism of the Trump administration’s response to the coronavirus (which included a renewed effort to promote a

conspiracy theory related to the origins of the virus), while also attacking Canada, Australia, and the U.K. for “interfering” in their domestic affairs after the three countries criticized Hong Kong’s new national security law.

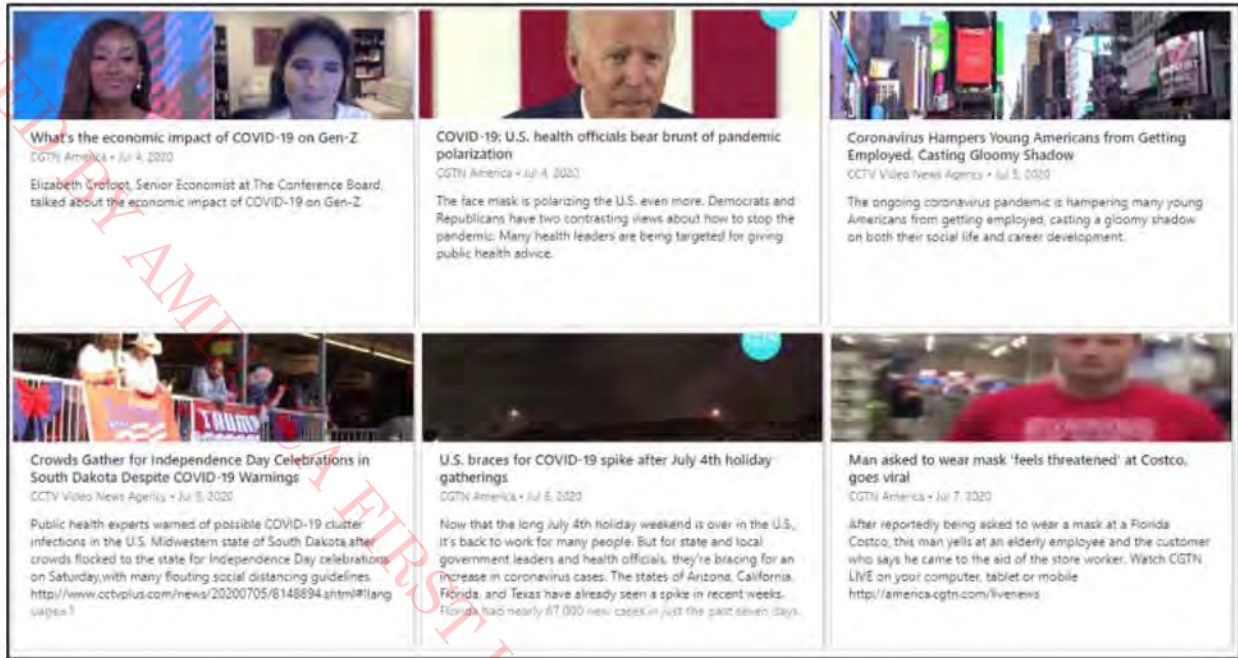
After White House adviser Peter Navarro accused Beijing of “[spawning] the virus” on MSNBC, deputy spokesperson at the Chinese Foreign Ministry Zhao Lijian counterattacked by rehashing an earlier [conspiracy theory](#) surrounding the Fort Detrick laboratory in the United States:



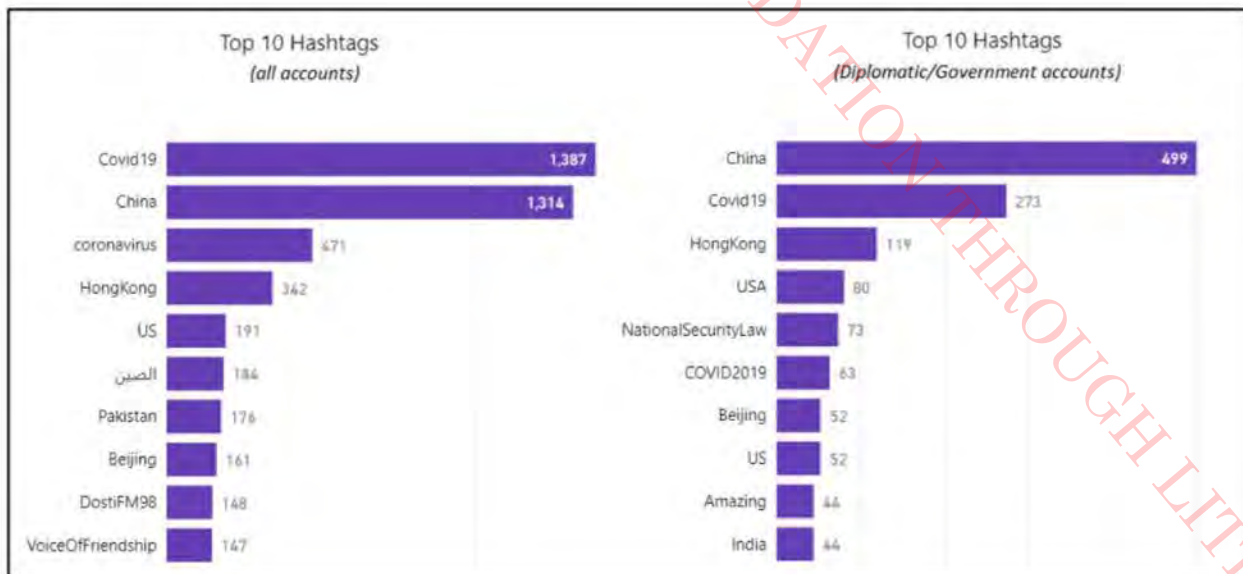
The next day, spokesperson Hua Chunying weighed in on the issue by sharing a screenshot of a viral tweet from American author Stephen King:



Accompanying the abrasive rhetoric out of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, state media ran several video segments last week highlighting the negative consequences of the coronavirus crisis in the United States, from economic hardship to various instances of uncivility related to the use of face masks:



Related to the health crisis, Chinese state media criticized the United States' decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization. People's Daily and Xinhua highlighted the country's isolation: "U.S. withdrawal from WHO: a globally "unsupported" decision" and "Roundup: U.S. decision to quit WHO sparks outrage among experts worldwide." CGTN, meanwhile, took aim at U.S. leadership: "Trump's WHO withdrawal sacrifices national interests for self-gains." (Source: Atlantic Council, Alliance for Securing Democracy)



(U) **False Conspiracies Swirl as Wisconsin Contact Tracers Battle COVID-19:** Having posed a series of increasingly paranoid-sounding questions about the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Appleton, Wisconsin City Council member William Siebers cleared his throat, preparing for the most outlandish yet.

“I’ve got to be serious,” he said. “Are there going to be any cameras situated in the city of Appleton that (are) going to supervise anybody who is quarantined or isolated in their homes, to make sure they don’t leave their homes?”

Siebers’ question was designed to prompt a city staffer to explain that, despite what residents may have heard, Appleton was not planning to adopt an official Big Brother policy.

Conspiracy-tinged rumors swirled around Appleton ahead of the council’s June 17 online meeting. Council members received an email in May from somebody who claimed to have witnessed city employees installing surveillance cameras in parts of town that still lack cameras, Alderwoman Katie Van Zeeland said.

Appleton isn’t the only place in Wisconsin where coronavirus skeptics are making themselves known. Employees of the Washington Ozaukee Public Health Department have reported receiving verbal harassment and threatening emails, and being followed while driving health department vehicles. The department’s logo has since been removed from the vehicles, the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) reported.

Conspiracy theories about contact tracing have percolated on social media since early May, after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [published guidelines](#) on how state health authorities should implement this “core disease control measure” to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, which has killed at least [130,000 Americans](#) — including about [800 Wisconsinites](#), according to government estimates.

The unsupported theories go well beyond a national grid of surveillance. Some suggest that Gov. Tony Evers has been selling the information gathered by contact tracers, while others say the tracers are “communist soldiers.”

Among the more bizarre: that contact tracers are tracking people by requiring a Wisconsin ID to get a haircut. And many posit that tracers work in conjunction with Child Protective Services to remove children from the homes of high-risk medical professionals — a popular theme of disinformation surrounding the issue, according to analysis by First Draft researcher Keenan Chen.

“While forced removal did happen in China and perhaps in some other countries, there has not been any indication or report that (U.S.) law enforcement agencies have used such a tactic,” he said. (Source: Post Crescent)



Wisconsinites Against Excessive

Quarantine

17 hrs · 🌐

URGENT ACTION NEEDED if you know people who think like we do and live in Appleton, bad stuff is about to happen at the council meeting tonight. I copied this from someone else. They apparently really want to push this through. 😞

For those living in Appleton the city council is voting TONIGHT (Wednesday the 17th) whether or not to approve 1.2M in gov. funding for contact tracing, isolation measures for those with or suspected COVID, etc. All cities are being faced with this decision per Evers. There are now cameras set up all over for surveillance. Please call or email the 15 members of city council. See page 6 of 8 then open the pdf. Share the link and copy paste this post please

<https://cityofappleton.legistar.com/View.ashx...>

Also I'm hearing there's a county wide meeting in outagamie cty next week 22 or 23. If anyone has info please share it with all on here. And looking for brown county info as well. Thanks I'm advance

🙄 😱 👍 386

231 Comments

Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine is among the groups that drummed up opposition to Appleton's plans to ask for state reimbursement for contacting tracing, falsely telling followers that the city planned to install surveillance cameras. "Somebody is doing some fear mongering," says Appleton City Council member Katie Van Zeeland. The name and photo of the person sending the Facebook post was covered by Wisconsin Watch to obscure the person's identity. Screenshot From Facebook

[Redacted] · May 20  
So I have to give my ID to get a haircut for contact tracing yet I don't have to give it to vote? IDEA: Let's make contact tracers take ID at the polls 🤔

1 2 7

[Redacted] · May 20  
ID for a haircut? Is that for real?

3

[Redacted]  
Replying to [Redacted]

They don't blatantly say it, but how do you think the contact tracers will be tracing you... Might be then worse then ID, with the phone.... They have 7000 data points on you, they don't care about your name. You're a # to these people

10:33 AM · May 20, 2020 · Twitter for Android

Among the bizarre rumors swirling in Wisconsin about contact tracing: that health departments require people getting haircuts to produce identification so they can be tracked. There are no such requirements. The Twitter handles and photos of the people in this thread were covered by Wisconsin Watch to obscure their identity. Screenshot From Twitter

(U) 7/14 Reporting

~~(U//FOUO)~~ **China Seeking to Shape Global Perceptions of Its Vaccine Effort:** As Western and Chinese companies work to develop a COVID-19 vaccine, there is increasing evidence to suggest that China's information ecosystem is aggressively attempting to shape global perceptions about its vaccine efforts for political benefit.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ In addition to amplifying reports of domestic vaccine development milestones, the Chinese government censored references to the potential effectiveness of Gilead's antiviral drug Remdesivir. However, the Chinese government did not censor posts made by groups of accounts likely to have been artificially created that deliberately spread false narratives about Gilead.



(U//FOUO) **Globally:** Chinese state actors continue to amplify narratives centered on the allegedly successful steps in COVID-19 vaccine development achieved by both PRC government actors and pharmaceutical companies. These narratives are consistent with the PRC's previous efforts to emphasize the PRC as a global health steward often placed in contrast to a narrative of the U.S. as failing in that role and their supposed efforts to spread the benefits of vaccine development to other countries. Please note this is not an official GEC analysis but rather a snapshot based on preliminary data. As COVID-19 vaccine-related propaganda and disinformation becomes salient in the information environment, the GEC will continue to monitor and assess the situation.

#### *Inside of the Great Firewall*

(U//FOUO) The CCP is likely using amplification and suppression tactics on domestic social media platforms like Weibo in order to highlight domestic vaccine developments and censor foreign efforts. Furthermore, the Chinese government is not only amplifying reports of domestic vaccine development milestones, but it also appears to be specifically highlighting the role of government entities in joint efforts with Chinese pharmaceutical companies—seemingly suggesting that the Chinese government is predominantly responsible for success thus far. Chinese state media and official accounts also amplified the effectiveness of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in combating COVID-19. While the Chinese government censored references to the potential effectiveness of Gilead's antiviral drug Remdesivir, it did not censor posts made by accounts that may have been artificially created that spread the false narrative that Gilead developed the virus in the first place so that it could profit from treatment development and administration.

#### *For Global Audiences*

(U//FOUO) There is no evidence that Chinese state actors are deliberately spreading disinformation on foreign social media platforms (as of 10 July). Instead, Chinese state actors appear to be focused on amplifying mostly factual narratives that highlight domestic vaccine development successes. At the same time, official accounts are promoting the narrative that China is a global health steward and is not only focused on scientific success, but also on developing the production capacity and supply chains needed to distribute a vaccine to all countries in need.

(U//FOUO) There have been instances of accounts that frequently share content from Chinese state media and propaganda outlets spreading deliberate falsehoods that ultimately benefit CCP messaging. One of the most prominent disinformation narratives was that the U.S. government was colluding with Gilead to sabotage hydroxychloroquine and bulk-purchase Remdesivir to make a profit. China-affiliated actors were observed linking to accounts and sources like that have previously been identified as being active in Russian disinformation networks.

(U//FOUO) **Assessment:** China's shift in adopting Russian-style disinformation tactics at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is well documented. This involved official Chinese accounts, such as

Ambassadors and Spokespersons, pushing disinformation narratives. Since then, Chinese state-media and official CCP social media accounts have largely reverted back to amplifying propaganda that promotes the country's image abroad. However, as development of a COVID-19 vaccine continues to progress, it may be the case that China's information ecosystem separates its tactics: official CCP state media and diplomatic accounts continue to amplify positive messaging about China's successes, which tacitly imply the West's supposed failures, whereas CCP-affiliated or aligned networks, which have inherent plausibly deniability, take a more aggressive stance to smear the United States' and our partners' vaccine efforts. The GEC urges interagency and foreign partners to identify, track, and assess this issue in the coming months, and collaborate on findings so that our respective missions can be well postured to counter Chinese propaganda and disinformation. (Source: State Department, Global Engagement Center)

**(U) The Secret Labs Conspiracy: A Converging Narrative:** Some observers have recently argued about a convergence of narratives between pro-Kremlin and Chinese disinformation networks. We have taken a closer look at the "clandestine US biolabs" conspiracy theory.

"The United States has deployed more than 200 military biological laboratories across the world. Among them, more than 30 have been exposed. The rest are hidden in unknown places. They may be right beside you", an alarming message warned YouTube users in a video shared on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May. The creators of the video claimed that "the biological laboratories of the United States give us the creeps" and sincerely invited the "netizens from all over the world to look for more than 200 mysterious biological laboratories of the United States".

Just a few weeks later, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June, the "netizens", as active participants of online communities are called, delivered. Another YouTube video presented "continuous revelations from the netizens", cataloguing a "growing list" of exposed laboratories in the United States, Europe, the Caucasus and Asia. "The US military has set up over 200 bio-security labs in 25 countries for research and development of biological weapons such as dangerous bacteria", the video said and appealed, on behalf of the global netizens, for international organizations to investigate the US biological laboratories.

At a glance, the videos would resemble an already familiar conspiracy theory sowing doubt about the origins of the coronavirus, were it not for several telling details. The videos were shared in five languages from the YouTube accounts of the [China Global Television Network \(CGTN\)](#). CGTN is the international division of the CCTV, or China Central Television – the [state-controlled TV network of the People's Republic of China](#). Earlier this year, the British media watchdog Ofcom formally [sanctioned CGTN](#) for biased coverage of the Hong Kong protests. Even more surprisingly, the "continuous revelations of netizens" almost verbatim coincided with "revelations" previously made by the pro-Kremlin media and the Russian officials.



A screenshot of a video urging the netizens to provide clues about US biological laboratories. Retrieved from <https://espanol.cgtn.com>

#### *The revival of the "secret labs"*

The disinformation trope of secret US military bio-labs on Russia's borders has been making rounds in the pro-Kremlin media for years, in particular targeting the Lugar lab in Georgia. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic gave a new impetus to these efforts, with the pro-Kremlin media building and expanding on the already existing "secret lab" disinformation template. Multiple pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets claimed not only that the novel coronavirus was an [American biological weapon against China](#) manufactured in [NATO](#) and [Pentagon-funded](#) laboratories, but also that clandestine US laboratories were operating [around the world, surrounding Russia, China and Iran](#).

In a remarkable example of interaction in disinformation realm, Chinese state-controlled media and officials echoed the unfounded claims about the "US secret labs", coined by pro-Kremlin sources. In late April, a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [voiced](#) "concerns of the local people" over the function, purpose and safety of US biological labs in former Soviet Union countries, making a [direct reference](#) to the earlier claims made by the [Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). The accompanying calls to the US to "[address the concerns of the international community](#)" were covered widely in Chinese state-controlled media.

Subsequently, the Russian edition of RT published an [article](#) highlighting Chinese concerns over the "US biolabs" on Russia's borders, thus completing the disinformation cycle. In less than two weeks the US biolabs conspiracy travelled from the Kremlin to Beijing and back, gaining legitimacy and international

prominence along the way. And in Chinese state media, the theory became part of a wider range of accusations about allegedly suspicious behaviour by the US around the virus.

#### *The overlap of disinformation narratives*

The YouTube videos about “secret American bio-laboratories” were shared in English, Russian, French, Spanish and Arabic – all the broadcasting languages of the CGTN. They were viewed cumulatively only over forty thousand times, but they illustrate an overlap in pro-Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) disinformation narratives.

The videos pack a number of disinformation messages that have been circulated by the pro-Kremlin media. They include claims about secret labs for “lethal bacteria” in Ukraine; development of offensive biological weapons, including blood-sucking insects, in the Lugar lab; the treatment of people in Kazakhstan and other nations as “material” for biological research. Many of these claims have been previously debunked by diplomats, international media, and independent fact-checkers after appearing in pro-Kremlin sources, but that did not seem to deter the so-called “netizens” and Chinese state media from repeating them.

#### *Disinfo benefits*

This is not the first instance when Chinese authorities have benefitted from pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns. In late April, Russian state-controlled Rossiya 24 TV channel lashed out against the US, defending Chinese authorities against criticism for their handling of the COVID-19 outbreak. The EU-sanctioned TV host Dmitry Kiselyov compared criticism of the Chinese government to Russia being held responsible for the chemical attack in Salisbury and meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections – using two prominent pro-Kremlin disinformation tropes.

And it is also not the first time that Chinese officials and state media have been engaging with conspiracy theories: in March, one of the spokespeople of the Chinese MFA tweeted conspiracy theories which alleged that it was the US military that brought COVID-19 to China. That claim has appeared in the pro-Kremlin media as well.

In 2019, amidst the Hong Kong protests, an outlet linked to the Chinese Communist Party called the unrest a “US colour revolution”, an old darling of the pro-Kremlin disinformation. Given the so-far sporadic interaction between these actors in the realm of disinformation, it remains unclear whether and how such activities are coordinated. But according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), “there is much to suggest that the CCP’s (China Communist Party’s) propaganda apparatus has been learning from the strategies and effects of Russian disinformation campaigns”. Indeed, earlier in June, Twitter said it had removed thousands of accounts linked to China that were engaged in a manipulative and coordinated campaign to spread disinformation about the protests in Hong Kong and China’s response to coronavirus – behavior not unlike that of the infamous St.Petersburg

**Troll Factory.** This was the second takedown of a Chinese-linked disinformation network in less than a year, [the previous one happening last August](#). (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) **Hateful Extremists Have Been Exploiting the Current Pandemic:** The UK's [Commission for Countering Extremism \(CCE\)](#) published a report on July 9 looking at the way in which extremists have sought to exploit the current pandemic. Through the use of conspiracy theories and fake news, the Commission has found that hateful extremists have used divisive, xenophobic and racist narratives to sow division and undermine the social fabric of our country.

"We have heard reports of British Far Right activists and Neo-Nazi groups promoting anti-minority narratives by encouraging users to deliberately infect groups, including Jewish communities," the report warned.

One conspiracy theory detailed in the report claims the virus is fake and part of a "Jewish plot" to mislead the public while another falsely claims that Muslims are responsible for the spread of the contagion by keeping mosques open during lockdown.

Far-right politicians and news outlets have also played a role in normalizing hatred against religious and ethnic groups by "push[ing] forward their anti-immigrant and populist message," the report said. The U.K. report follows [State Department findings](#) last month warning the threat of racially and ethnically motivated terrorism from white supremacists is "on the rise and spreading geographically" across the country and world.

"We have already seen how extremists discussed the 5G conspiracy theory on fringe social media platforms such as Telegram."

Conspiracies falsely linking the virus to the mobile network have led to 50 incidents this April in the UK where residents either burned down or otherwise vandalized 5G masts, according to the report. The false conspiracy theory about the connection between 5G and the coronavirus was aggressively promoted on social media by Russian government's disinformation specialists at the GRU (Russia's military intelligence branch) and the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency – the same propaganda and misinformation outfits which led the effective Kremlin-orchestrated campaign to help Donald Trump win the 2016 election.

The CCE warns that investing in counter extremism work and urgently publishing a new strategy is critical as extremists will seek to capitalize on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 to cause further long-term instability, fear and division in Britain. (Source: Homeland Security News Wire)

#### **(U) 7/10 Reporting**

(U) **Covid-19 Pandemic is Stoking Extremist Flames Worldwide, Analysts Warn:** In India, mobs smashed stores and beat up shopkeepers in some town or village every week in June. The victims were mostly Muslims whom the rioters falsely accused of spreading the virus that causes covid-19.

During the same month in Nigeria, Islamist militants took advantage of a police force weakened by the novel coronavirus to rampage through the country's northern Borno province, slaughtering 81 people in a single day. In the United States, police investigated dozens of death threats against elected and public health officials, including an emailed vow to "put a bullet" through the brain of Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D).

Across the globe, violence has emerged a major and persistent side effect of the pandemic that has stricken 12 million people and killed more than 550,000. Even as it overwhelms hospitals, covid-19 is also straining security forces in scores of countries, exacerbating long-standing conflicts while fueling grievances and spurring the growth of extremist groups, security officials and analysts say in a series of new studies and interviews.

The pandemic is creating new opportunities for the Islamic State and other militants in the Middle East and Africa, where hard-hit local governments are being forced to redeploy security forces to battle the disease, the analyses show. In the United States and other Western countries, meanwhile, far-right extremist groups are building entire propaganda campaigns around it, stoking resentments against an array of supposed villains, from immigrants and ethnic minorities to politicians and health officials. Just as climate change spawns bigger and stronger storms, the pandemic threatens to make nearly every existing security problem even more dangerous, the officials and experts said.

"It is an adverse-force multiplier," said Ben West, a global analyst for Stratfor, a private intelligence firm that advises governments and corporations on security threats. "If you have a crisis, this is pushing it, making it worse."

In Europe and North America, law enforcement officials and security experts say the pandemic is energizing far-right groups, including some that are openly advocating anti-government and anti-immigrant violence. Since the start of the outbreak, such groups have been able to connect with a large and rapidly growing audience: the legions of the anxious and unemployed, many of whom are confined to their houses with near-limitless time to spend on social media.

A recent analysis prepared by a panel of U.S. and British security experts warned of a growing risk of political violence tied to upcoming elections, fueled by pandemic-linked "grievances, conspiracies and narratives" and amplified in some cases by foreign governments.

"This environment has exacerbated the enabling conditions that foster mobilization to violence," said the report by London-based CHC Global, a private consulting firm, and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism in College Park, Md. "We are already seeing the system straining in some jurisdictions to keep unrest at bay."

*Retooling propaganda*

While the staggeringly [high rates of infection](#) and death have commanded most of the attention, the coronavirus has been steadily racking up other kinds of casualties as well.

Since January, thousands of civil disturbances directly related to the virus have been reported, including nearly 1,800 violent incidents, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. The Wisconsin-based nonprofit has kept a running list of events as part of a project called the [Covid-19 Disorder Tracker](#).

The data records hundreds of attacks against health workers, government officials and minority groups, as well as official violence by police and paramilitary forces against peaceful protesters. Some conflicts that quieted in the early months of the outbreak have come roaring back, said Roudabeh Kishi, research director. "The health crisis has only served to further exacerbate many of the original grievances," Kishi said.

Fear of the coronavirus and anger over government-imposed restrictions have sparked riots in cities from the Middle East to central Africa to South Asia. In Pakistan's Fakhra Province, nearly two dozen attacks on hospital workers were recorded, as well as riots over the lack of access to coronavirus tests. In countries already plagued by conflict, covid-19 appears to be partly to blame for an upsurge in violence in recent months. [In Iraq](#), the Islamic State carried out 566 bombings, shootings and assassinations in the first three months of 2020, nearly twice as many as in the same period last year.

The terrorist group has routinely cited the pandemic — which it describes as "divine punishment" against Islam's enemies — in calling on followers to take advantage of a weakened security environment to carry out such attacks.

Western countries also are explicitly mentioned among the group's intended targets. In postings to social media sites in recent weeks, Islamic State leaders have predicted the imminent collapse of the United States, crediting covid-19 for helping to achieve a goal set by terrorist leaders decades ago: the draining of resources from the U.S. treasury until Washington is bankrupt and no longer capable of intervening in Middle Eastern affairs.

"This will be an exhausting factor to the unbeliever countries, which could reduce their interest in what is happening in Muslim countries and weakening their ability in fighting them," the Islamic State's official newsletter al-Naba said in a June 4 editorial.

Other Islamist groups have highlighted the West's failures in dealing with the virus as evidence of a greater moral decay. Al-Qaeda's media arm al-Sahab last month accused U.S. and European governments of abandoning and abusing their elderly, citing the high mortality rates at nursing homes. The article called the deaths of older adults a "shocking" reflection of the "savage reality of Western materialism."

The postings exemplify what analysts described as a striking shift that has occurred since early spring: Islamists and other extremists have rapidly retooled their online campaigns to incorporate the coronavirus in their core messaging, from recruitment videos to official statements and propaganda. Each group promotes its own conspiracy theories, but nearly all now use the outbreak to vilify enemies, attract recruits and rile up followers, said Ali Soufan, a former FBI counterterrorism agent and now chairman of the Soufan Group, a New York consultancy.

"It's a buffet of crazy conspiracy theories out there," Soufan said. "They're all jumping onto the bandwagon because covid-19 is the big thing now. If you want to get attention, you don't go to your usual ideological narrative. You go to covid, and you include your ideological narrative within covid."

#### *Inspiring violence*

The propaganda tidal wave is cresting at a moment when the audience is vastly larger than at any point in history. The quarantining of hundreds of millions of people — most of them with smartphones and Internet connections — ensures that some of the messages will fall on fertile ground.

A U.N. [report last month](#) estimated that over 1 billion children and young adults were confined to their houses after the pandemic closed their schools and universities, and many of them were spending more time online. "The increase in the number of young people engaging in unsupervised Internet usage — particularly on gaming platforms — offers terrorist groups an opportunity to expose a great number of people to their ideas," according to the U.N. report.

The Islamic State has long specialized in crafting videos that are designed to resemble popular computer games. But given the sheer size of the audience, extremists of every ideological stripe can find ways to connect with the vulnerable, said Nicholas Rasmussen, former director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center.

"The quarantine lockdown means that everybody is spending a whole lot more time in front of their computers, and that includes young people who constitute a pool of potential targets for radicalization," said Rasmussen, now the executive director of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, an independent organization that works with social media giants such as Twitter and Facebook on keeping extremist content off their pages. Extremists are seizing the opportunity, while also recognizing that a global pandemic "can be used almost without limits to bolster their narrative," he said. Inevitably, the messages have inspired some individuals to commit acts of violence, including in the United States.

In March, FBI agents thwarted a plot by a 36-year-old Missouri man to firebomb a hospital where covid-19 patients were being treated. The man, who later was killed in a shootout with federal agents, was described as a "potentially violent extremist" who harbored racist and anti-government views and had also contemplated attacks on a mosque, a synagogue and a majority-black school.



William Braniff, a University of Maryland counterterrorism expert and a co-author of the U.S.-U.K. report on the pandemic's global security impact, said the Missouri incident exemplified a kind "vigilantism" adopted by some extremists in reaction to pandemic-related restrictions, or as a backlash to the Black Lives Matter protests.

Braniff said the potential for violence in the United States has gradually increased over a series of distinct phases since the start of the coronavirus outbreak. The first stage was typified by the series of large demonstrations by heavily armed protesters who briefly occupied government buildings in several state capitals over the spring to express opposition to virus-related restrictions.

The protesters' core complaint — the "idea that government overreach was stripping us of our freedoms," Braniff said — was overlaid in some cases by conspiracy theories that blamed an array of different actors and groups, from Chinese communists, to the so-called deep state, to billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates.

Braniff said he is increasingly worried that polarization over the government's covid-19 response could lead to politically-inspired violence during an emotionally charged election season.

"All of this has created an energy, and I don't think that energy has been released yet," Braniff said. "Add the fallout from high unemployment and the re-closing of states and businesses that had been reopening — all within this political pressure-cooker — and you have the potential for serious partisan-inspired violence, both before and after the election." (Source: The Washington Post)

(U) **CT 2020 Trends Alert Examining 'Right-Wing' Extremists' Response to COVID-19:** On 6 July, the UN's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) published an update to the April 2020 Trends Alert examining how extreme "right-wing" groups have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the report, the multiplicity of conspiracy theories generated and disseminated by extreme "right-wing" groups can act as a unifying and mobilizing force for groups or individuals seeking to incite hate and violence.

(U) Extreme "right-wing" terrorist groups and individuals in a number of States have sought to exploit COVID-19-related anxieties and grievances, using conspiracy theories to advance their existing narratives, increase and diversify their support base, and build bridges to other groups.

(U) According to the report, researchers warned that terrorists are adjusting their approach and appeal to try to radicalize and recruit individuals to terrorism and incite violence.

(U) Extreme "right-wing" groups have reframed a long-standing racial and misogynistic narrative—the perceived threat of cultural annihilation and the elimination of the ethno-cultural identities of European people—in light of COVID-19. Anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist, and xenophobic tropes have been at the forefront of COVID-19-related conspiracies, including one which maintains that the pandemic has been used to manipulate the stock market, and another that claims "infected" immigrants were "imported" to decimate white populations.

(U) Extreme “right-wing” proponents of accelerationism—the desire to hasten the collapse of Governments and social structures by sowing chaos and creating political tension—have welcomed the impact of the pandemic. High COVID-19 death tolls and fears of economic collapse have fed this theory, while some individuals have called for the “Boogaloo”, an online meme that encourages impending civil war. (Source: UN; NCTC)

(U) **Anti-mask Facebook Groups are Rife with Dangerous Misinformation About the Spread and Prevention of Coronavirus:** As the number of new coronavirus cases **surges** across the country and mitigation strategies such as wearing masks are recommended or required in some areas for public health, Facebook groups with thousands of members are dedicated to promoting harmful misinformation about wearing masks.

As the **spread** of misinformation **online** continues to **hamstring** efforts to **contain** the coronavirus pandemic, **Facebook claimed** it would “remove COVID-19 related misinformation that could contribute to imminent physical harm.” Facebook has previously **removed videos** that falsely suggest that wearing a mask can make people sick, **acknowledging** that such claims violate its policies -- but only after the misleading videos had already received millions of engagements on the platform. Facebook has **struggled** to contain the spread of coronavirus misinformation, particularly **videos**, and the platform **remains** a hotbed for coronavirus misinformation, from **viral anti-mask Facebook posts** to scammers promoting **bogus coronavirus cures**.

Media Matters found at least 55 Facebook groups dedicated to opposing the use of masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19. These groups have a total of over 57,000 members, with more than 10 groups that have over 1,000 members and one group with over 20,000 members. Although some groups were created as far back as April, the majority of them have been created since June 17, with eight such groups created in the first week of July. One Georgia-based **anti-mask group**, which was created on July 3, already has over 600 members.

With more Facebook groups against masks being created and membership in these groups growing, misinformation about masks can quickly spread on the social media platform. And as nearly 70% of the groups identified by Media Matters are private, it will likely be more difficult for Facebook to **review harmful content**. For example, one viral post filled with misinformation about masks has been posted in at least seven Facebook groups.



Facebook posts with identical text that contain misinformation and were posted in seven groups

Media Matters reviewed posts in some of the Facebook groups and found that many of these groups are filled with harmful medical misinformation about masks. In addition to this harmful misinformation, there are also members sharing conspiracy theories about masks being a form of government control, repeating misinformation from President Donald Trump, promoting in-person rallies, encouraging others not to wear masks, and organizing lawsuits against mask mandates.



Three event pages on Facebook for protests against the use of masks

(Source: Media Matters)

**(U) The Most Notorious Anti-Vax Groups Use Facebook to Lay the Groundwork Against the Novel COVID-19 Vaccine:**

**Key takeaways:**

- The three most prominent U.S. anti-vaccination organizations -- National Vaccine Information Center, Children's Health Defense, and Informed Consent Action Network -- are using Facebook and other major social media platforms to lay the groundwork for widespread coronavirus vaccine rejection.
- Facebook allows these groups to identify their organizations with descriptors like "Educational Research Center" and "Medical & Health" organization.
- Facebook's current policies surrounding vaccine misinformation include de-ranking accounts and posting "educational units" to some anti-vaccine misinformation. But the Facebook pages

for NVIC, CHD, and ICAN and those groups' leaders do not contain any warnings from Facebook about the organization's purposes.

- The groups' pages are rife with vaccine conspiracy theories and other coronavirus misinformation. For example, NVIC has promoted conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and vaccine development, CHD has promoted the falsehood that wearing masks does not reduce the likelihood of coronavirus spread, and ICAN's leader has claimed even the "biggest vaccine advocates in the country" are "sounding the alarm" on coronavirus vaccine development.
- Facebook pages for NVIC, CHD, ICAN and their associated leaders and media projects have a combined more than 950,000 followers. This represents the tip of the iceberg; according to a recent report, anti-vaxxers have a combined Facebook following of 58 million people.
- Academic research on approaches similar to Facebook's to counter anti-vaccine misinformation suggests Facebook's current policies will not be effective in countering coronavirus vaccine misinformation.
- A growing share of Americans say they will refuse to receive a coronavirus vaccine, which could greatly harm efforts to get the disease under control in the U.S.

As novel coronavirus cases spike in the U.S. and numerous efforts are underway to develop a vaccine, the most prominent U.S. anti-vaccination organizations are using Facebook and other social media platforms to poison the well against a potential vaccine -- even though the consequence of widespread vaccination rejection in the U.S. would be an additional public health disaster.

In March 2019, Facebook said it "implemented new policies to de-rank accounts spreading vaccine misinformation in their search results," according to [ABC News](#). Later that year, Facebook and Instagram (which Facebook owns) announced they had partnered with the WHO and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to "start posting educational units about vaccines on 'vaccine-related searches on Facebook, Facebook Groups and Pages that discuss vaccines, and Invitations to join Facebook Groups that discuss vaccines.'" In theory, Facebook bans ads that include vaccine misinformation, but enforcement [has been spotty](#). Anti-vaccine content on Facebook [may be fact-checked](#) by Facebook's third-party fact-checking program. Additionally, Facebook has a policy to take action against coronavirus misinformation, though the methods Facebook uses have been [criticized](#) as ineffective and [scattershot](#) in their application. After BuzzFeed News identified anti-vaccine ads in January, a Facebook spokesperson paradoxically responded, "Facebook does not have a policy that bans advertising on the basis that it expresses opposition to vaccines. Our policy is to ban ads containing vaccine misinformation."

There's evidence that even brief exposure to anti-vaccination information changes attitudes. According to a 2010 [study](#) published in *Health Psychology*, "Accessing vaccine-critical websites for five to 10 minutes increases the perception of risk of vaccinating and decreases the perception of risk of omitting vaccinations as well as the intentions to vaccinate." The phenomenon [does not appear](#) to work in reverse: A study that attempted to change attitudes with "direct pro-vaccination messages" found that those messages actually reinforced misguided beliefs. In fact, common ways that anti-vaccine information is countered are typically ineffective. (Source: Media Matters)

(U) **Our Itch to Share Helps Spread Covid-19 Misinformation:** To stay current about the Covid-19 pandemic, people need to process health information when they read the news. Inevitably, that means people will be exposed to health misinformation, too, in the form of false content, often found online, about the illness.

Now a study co-authored by MIT scholars contains bad news and good news about Covid-19 misinformation — and a new insight that may help reduce the problem.

The bad news is that when people are consuming news on social media, their inclination to share that news with others interferes with their ability to assess its accuracy. The study presented the same false news headlines about Covid-19 to two groups of people: One group was asked if they would share those stories on social media, and the other evaluated their accuracy. The participants were 32.4 percent more likely to say they would share the headlines than they were to say those headlines were accurate. “There does appear to be a disconnect between accuracy judgments and sharing intentions,” says MIT professor David Rand, co-author of a new paper detailing the findings. “People are much more discerning when you ask them to judge the accuracy, compared to when you ask them whether they would share something or not.”

The good news: A little bit of reflection can go a long way. Participants who were more likely to think critically, or who had more scientific knowledge, were less likely to share misinformation. And when asked directly about accuracy, most participants did reasonably well at telling true news headlines from false ones.

Moreover, the study offers a solution for over-sharing: When participants were asked to rate the accuracy of a single non-Covid-19 story at the start of their news-viewing sessions, the quality of the Covid-19 news they shared increased significantly.

“The idea is, if you nudge them about accuracy at the outset, people are more likely to be thinking about the concept of accuracy when they later choose what to share. So then they take accuracy into account more when they make their sharing decisions,” explains Rand, who is the Erwin H. Schell Associate Professor with joint appointments at the MIT Sloan School of Management and the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences. (Source: MIT News)

### (U) 7/9 Reporting

(U) **Drivers Are Hitting Protesters as Memes of Car Attacks Spread:** The driver of a red Toyota first stopped, then unexpectedly accelerated into a crowd of dispersing demonstrators in Bloomington, Ind., on Monday night, injuring two of them in the latest of a disturbing rash of vehicular attacks targeting protesters.

The demonstration, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, had sent several hundred people marching through the college town, demanding the arrest of a small group of men who had threatened a Black civil rights activist.

Dramatic video footage of the attack showed a woman clinging to the car's hood and a man clutching the driver's door handle as the vehicle zoomed forward. The police were still searching for the hit-and-run driver on Tuesday.

Dozens of similar incidents have occurred across the United States in recent weeks, although it is difficult to assess which attacks are premeditated and which are prompted by rage when drivers find their route blocked by crowds. The tactic has previously been mostly used by extremist jihadist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda, as well as Palestinian militants.

"It is not just an extremist thing here, but there are social media circles online where people are sharing these and joking about them because they disagree with the protests and their methods," said Ari E. Weil, the deputy research director at the Chicago Project on Security and Threats of the University of Chicago. "Sharing memes and joking about running over people can lead to real danger."

Supporters of far-right organizations — as well as the occasional government official or law enforcement officer — have been circulating memes and slogans online encouraging such attacks.

In Richmond, Va., a driver sought to intimidate protesters with his truck and hit one demonstrator's bicycle in early June, prosecutors said. The driver, who was charged with assault, told the police he was a high-ranking Ku Klux Klan official, court documents said.

In Seattle, the King County Sheriff's Office announced that one officer had been placed on administrative leave after posting a picture of a vehicle hitting someone under the commonly shared phrase "All Lives Splatter" and another line about moving off the road.

Vehicular attacks have proliferated in recent weeks. Experts believe it is because of the combination of widespread protests across the country and the circulation of dangerous memes among extremist groups about running over pedestrians.

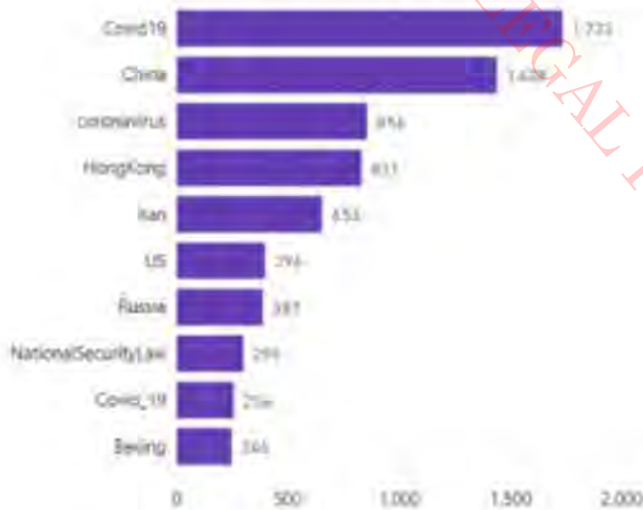
"There has been an increasing amount of propaganda online calling for vehicular attacks on protesters, targeting the Black Lives Matter movement in particular," said Josh Lipowsky, a senior researcher at the Counter Extremism Project. "It is being used as a form of intimidation against them to get them to halt their protests." (Source: New York Times)

#### **(U) COVID-19 Russia, China, Iran State Media Weekly Overview:**

Summary: Russia, China, and Iran-backed media continue to pivot to issues of local geopolitical importance. Hashtags of #Russia, #China, #Iran outpaced #COVID-19 for first time during the pandemic 27 June-3 July.

## Discussion

- **Russia State-Media Trends:** Overall COVID-19 related coverage continued to decrease during the week of 27 June-3 July, as Russian-backed media largely focused on discrediting reports of Russian bounties on U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Russia also continued to amplify conspiracy theories on COVID-19 vaccines. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)
- **China State-Media Trends:** While China's state-backed media continued to focus on COVID-19, Beijing pivoted heavily to coverage of its new state security law for Hong Kong. Beijing's coverage of COVID-19 continues to strike a contrast between Beijing's "helping hand" and the U.S.'s supposed malicious intentions. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)
- **Iran State-Media Trends:** Iranian government-linked media continued to decrease overall coverage of COVID-19. Instead, Tehran focused on perceived American domestic and international injustice, and the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)
  - **Analyst Comment:** Although foreign adversaries' COVID-19 related coverage continued to decrease, Russia, China, and Iran continue to spread conspiracy theories on the virus and amplify COVID-19 disinformation from U.S.-based actors.



(U) **Facebook Removes Inauthentic Network Linked to Bolsonaro Allies:** Facebook [announced](#) on July 8, 2020, that it removed a network of accounts, pages, and one group closely connected to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and the party that propelled him into office, the right-wing Social Liberal Party (PSL).

Facebook [announced](#) on July 8, 2020, that it removed a network of accounts, pages, and one group closely connected to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and the party that propelled him into office, the right-wing Social Liberal Party (PSL).

The content was misleading in many cases, employing a mix of half-truths to arrive at false conclusions. The account claimed that the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic was exaggerated, and that hydroxychloroquine, a drug heavily [promoted](#) by Bolsonaro as a coronavirus cure, could kill the virus. To



support these claims, the accounts cited the World Health Organization's initial statement that asymptomatic spread of COVID-19 was "very rare" without including its subsequent clarification [that scientists have yet to determine](#) the frequency of asymptomatic transmission. The page also highlighted the [retraction](#) of a major *Lancet* study that raised safety and efficacy concerns about the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19, but it did not explain that there is still no conclusive scientific evidence that the drug is an effective or safe treatment for the virus. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) House Democrats Press Twitter, Facebook, Google for Reports on COVID-19 Disinformation:**

Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee are pressuring Twitter, Facebook and Google to be more transparent about COVID-19 disinformation on their platforms, asking the tech giants to produce monthly reports on the issue.

In [letters to the companies](#) sent Wednesday, House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. (D-N.J.) and subcommittee leaders Reps. [Diana DeGette](#) (D-Colo.), [Mike Doyle](#) (D-Penn.), and [Jan Schakowsky](#) (D-Ill.) detailed concerns that the "rise of false or misleading information" around the coronavirus could lead to real-world consequences.

"This disinformation has ranged from false statements about certain groups being immune from contracting the virus to unsubstantiated assertions about masks and vaccines," the Democrats wrote. "This type of disinformation is dangerous and can affect the health and well-being of people who use this false information to make critical health decisions during this pandemic."

The European Union last month requested that Twitter, Google and Facebook produce monthly reports on disinformation seen around COVID-19 and how they were combatting this issue. The three companies told [The Verge](#) that they planned to comply with the request. (Source: The Hill)

**(U) Fighting the COVID-19 Infodemic:** An "infodemic" of misinformation and disinformation has helped cripple the response to the novel coronavirus.

**Why it matters:** High-powered social media accelerates the spread of lies and political polarization that motivates people to believe them. Unless the public health sphere can effectively counter misinformation, not even an effective vaccine may be enough to end the pandemic.

**Driving the news:** This month the WHO is running the first "infodemiology" conference, to study the infodemic of misinformation and disinformation around the coronavirus.

**What they're saying:** While fake news is anything but new, the difference is the infodemic "can kill people if they don't understand what precautions to take," says Phil Howard, director of the Oxford Internet Institute and author of the new book "[Lie Machines](#)."

- Beyond its effect on individuals, the infodemic erodes trust in government and science at the moment when that trust is most needed.
- A [study by the Reuters Institute](#) found 39% of English-language misinformation assessed between January and March included false claims about the actions or policies of authorities.

**By the numbers:** The infodemic has spread nearly as widely as the pandemic itself in the U.S.

- As early as March, [about half of surveyed Americans](#) reported they had encountered at least some completely made-up news about the pandemic.

- 38% of Americans surveyed by Pew in June said that compared to the first couple of weeks of the pandemic, they found it harder to identify what was true and what was false about the virus.
- In that same survey, roughly a third of Americans exposed to a conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 outbreak was intentionally unleashed by people in power said that they saw some truth in it.

**How it works:** Misinformation and disinformation have always been a destabilizing feature of infectious disease outbreaks. But several factors have made the situation worse with COVID-19.

1. **An evolving outbreak:** COVID-19 is new, and as scientists have learned more about the virus, they've had to change recommendations. That's how science works, but "if you're distrustful of authorities, an expert taking a position different than it was three days ago just confirms your bias," says Joe Smyser, CEO of the Public Good Projects.
2. **Social media:** While experts give some credit to companies like Facebook and Twitter for their efforts to stem the spread of coronavirus misinformation, the reality is that platforms built on engagement will often end up as conduits of conspiracy content, which Howard notes tends to be unusually "sticky." A review by the Reuters Institute of 225 pieces of misinformation spread by political figures and celebrities made up only 20% of the sample but accounted for 69% of engagement.
3. **Disinformation warfare:** In June, the European Commission issued a joint communication blaming Russia and China for "targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU." And those campaigns are effective — in a recent study, Howard found disinformation from Russian and Chinese state sources often reached a bigger audience on social media in Europe than reporting by major domestic outlets.
4. **Political and media polarization:** "In our hyper-polarized and politicized climate, many folks just inherently mistrust advice or evidence that comes from an opposing political party," notes Alison Buttenheim of the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. Conservatives are particularly vulnerable — an April study found Americans who relied on conservative media were more likely to believe conspiracy theories and rumors about the coronavirus.

**Public health experts** must take an active role in combatting the infodemic, says Timothy Caulfield, research director of the University of Alberta's Health Law Institute.

- One example is the "Nerdy Girls," an all-female team of experts who spread accurate information about the pandemic on social media in a way that aims to "engender trust," says Buttenheim, one of the group's members.
- Individuals can do their part by practicing information distancing as well as social distancing. "If you can just nudge people to pause before they share on social media, you can actually decrease the spread of misinformation," says Caulfield.

**What to watch:** Whether the infodemic causes a significant chunk of the U.S. public to opt-out of a future COVID-19 vaccine.

- In a [CNN poll in May](#), a third of Americans said they would not try to get vaccinated against COVID-19. If that proportion holds or rises, a vaccine would be "unlikely" to provide herd immunity, [warns](#) Anthony Fauci.
- The highly-organized and internet-savvy anti-vaxxer community is already targeting a potential COVID-19 vaccine. That includes attending Black Lives Matter events to convince protesters that "vaccines are part of structural racism," says Smyser.

**The bottom line:** While the pandemic wasn't human-made, the infodemic surely is. But that means public health experts and the public itself can put a halt to it with the right strategy. (Source: Axios)

### (U) 7/8 Reporting

**(U) Google And Amazon Are Inadvertently Funding Covid Conspiracy Sites To The Tune Of \$25 Million:** Tech giants including Google and Amazon will unwittingly direct some \$25 million to websites spreading Covid-19 misinformation this year through their digital advertising platforms, a [study](#) by the Global Disinformation Index has found.

Here's how it breaks down: Google will funnel the bulk of the millions - around \$19.2 million— to misinformation sites, while Amazon will provide \$1.7 million in advertising revenue to the sites, the GDI estimates.

- Google provides \$3 out of every \$4 in ad revenue earned by misinformation sites, according to the GDI data.
- Advertising tech firm Open X accounts for \$2.6 million—10%—of ad revenues to the sites.
- The research shows ads from organizations including Merck, L'Oréal, Canon and the British Medical Association, a trade union for U.K. doctors, appeared on pages featuring conspiracy theory content.
- "Based on our findings, ads for big brands have been found funding stories that tout debunked and dangerous cures, undercut government lock-down measures, equate track-and-trace apps with state surveillance, and traffic in theories that the Chinese government and the global elite should be blamed for the virus' spread," the GDI said.

The study was based on the GDI's analysis of 480 English language sites between January and June this year, whose content was dominated by coronavirus misinformation, and which also carried adverts. The GDI made conservative estimates, and warned that their figures are likely to be "the tip of the iceberg." They also estimate that ad revenue may have been skewed by a spike in overall web traffic sparked by more people being at home and searching for news online, as well as a decline in ad spend due to the pandemic. (Source: Forbes; GDI)

**(U) COVID-19 Meets Election 2020: The Perfect Storm for Misinformation:** When a mysterious virus began racing around the globe early this year, scientists at the University of Washington's newly created Center for an Informed Public described it as the perfect storm for bogus information, both innocent and malicious.

So what's the situation six months later, now that the coronavirus pandemic is playing out in tandem with a passionate push for racial justice and the opening volleys of the presidential race? The perfect superstorm?

Pretty much, says Kate Starbird, a co-founder of the center.

"As time goes on, what we're seeing is the convergence between COVID-19 and election 2020," she said. And that means the flood of half-truths, distortions and flat-out lies the World Health Organization calls an "infodemic" is only going to intensify. "Things are becoming more politicized," Starbird said.

A lot of coronavirus misinformation began as honest attempts to share knowledge and help others, Starbird said. When emotions and uncertainty are high, people are particularly vulnerable to seizing on simple solutions like home remedies or the oft-repeated, but baseless, claim that it's possible to diagnose yourself by holding your breath. One widely shared tweet, purportedly from a scientist, falsely warned that hand sanitizer can't kill viruses. In the Black community, rumors spread that dark skin [protects people](#) from infection.

While the emergence of a new virus was a surprise, the proliferation of misinformation wasn't. It happens during every crisis, as people desperate to figure out what's going on share rumors and scraps of information — some useful, some dangerously wrong, Starbird said.

In most crises, like earthquakes or hurricanes, the period of uncertainty — when people engage in what's called "collective [sense-making](#)" — is short. But a pandemic is a slow-moving process with high stakes. And because this pathogen is new, even basic information, like how people become infected, was initially unknown. With our understanding changing so quickly, what seemed true yesterday may not hold up tomorrow.

Social media is the perfect platform for lightning-fast communication — and manipulation by people seeking to profit, sow discord or promote a political agenda. Factor in society's preexisting fault lines, and you've got those "perfect storm," conditions. (Source: Seattle Times)

**(U) YouTube Videos Falsely Claiming That Masks are Harmful Have Gotten Hundreds of Thousands of Views:** YouTube has allowed videos falsely stating that wearing a mask is harmful to rack up at least hundreds of thousands of views (and even be monetized in at least one case), even though YouTube's policies prohibit it. Previously, the platform was forced to take down a viral conspiracy theory video titled *Plandemic* pushing that same claim. The videos in turn have been shared on Facebook, accumulating hundreds of thousands of engagements, even though Facebook's policies also seem to prohibit it.

As the novel coronavirus pandemic has [worsened in recent weeks](#) in the United States, both [public officials](#) and [health experts](#) have urged people to wear masks to [decrease the spread](#) of the coronavirus.

But YouTube has hosted multiple videos falsely telling viewers that wearing a mask is harmful to their health, according to a review by Media Matters of English-language YouTube videos since early June featuring "mask" or "masks" in their titles on the tracking tool BuzzSumo. As of July 6, these videos have

received a combined total of at least 700,000 views. The videos have also been shared on Facebook, getting a combined total of more than 400,000 engagements as of July 6.

YouTube and Facebook struggled with the spread of the same misinformation when the coronavirus conspiracy theory video *Plandemic* went viral on social media in May, although both platforms attempted to remove instances of the video specifically because it falsely suggested that wearing a mask can make people sick or lead to imminent harm. YouTube also has specific rules prohibiting “content about COVID-19 that poses a serious risk of egregious harm” and “medical misinformation that contradicts the World Health Organization (WHO) or local health authorities’ medical information about COVID-19.”

The new videos pushing the false claim against masks include a few featuring Peggy Hall, an activist opposing masks who recently started a lifestyle website. In those videos, which received over 200,000 combined views, Hall falsely claimed that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) announced that wearing a mask lowers a person’s oxygen levels and urged people to not wear them, claiming masks cause an “increasing ... risk of infection.” Those videos in turn received nearly 200,000 Facebook engagements combined. (Source: Media Matters)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Public concern continues to increase significantly amid news of record-breaking new case counts. Many express anger and frustration at those not taking social distancing and protective measures such as masks seriously during reopenings.
- A smaller group are expressing optimism that people will begin to take mitigation measures more seriously as mask use is being more strongly encouraged by public officials and figures. As many state and local officials announce changes to reopening plans, many blame those not taking the pandemic seriously.
- Over the last couple days, traditional media discussion about COVID-19 has sharply increased, driven by states scaling back reopening phases, spikes in daily case numbers and hospitalizations and renewed demands for PPE. Mask ordinances have increasingly made newspaper front-page headlines as the week has progressed.
- Federal officials’ White House press briefing and congressional committee testimonies have drawn additional attention regarding vaccine procurement and accessibility as well as the economic recovery. There has been limited coverage of Project Airbridge’s phase-out and criticism toward FEMA and the federal response, following concerns from Congress, hospitals, and medical equipment distributors that not enough PPE is available to handle recent infection rises.

#### (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- There is ongoing concern that young people are not taking the risks associated with COVID-19 seriously. People are increasingly pleading with loved ones on social media to stay home and avoid going to bars and restaurants or large gatherings. Reports that college students in

Alabama have been holding COVID-19 parties to intentionally infect one another have sparked outrage and concern.

- There are mixed reactions from the general public regarding the latest job numbers released this week:
  - A large amount of people are expressing optimism about the nation's economy as unemployment rates have continued to fall consistently and 4.8 million jobs have been recovered.
  - Many however are wary about the nation returning to work amid a rise in COVID-19 cases. They feel this poses not only a public health risk but could result in a future shutdown as well.
- Masks remain a hot topic of discussion. While they appear to be an ever polarizing issue among the public, there has been an increase throughout the week of notable public figures encouraging mask use to contain COVID-19 from spreading.

#### **(U) 7/7 Reporting**

**(U) COVID-19 Pandemic Has Unleashed a Wave of Anti-Semitism:** The coronavirus epidemic has been accompanied by what the WHO described as "infodemic" – an avalanche of conspiracy theories and disinformation which has spread on social networks. As is often the case, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are prominent in this infodemic, and a new report offers an analysis of the phenomenon.

The [Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry](#) at Tel Aviv University, published a special report, a summary of worldwide anti-Semitic phenomena associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The report relies on hundreds of accounts from different locations around the globe from March-June. The report's highlights:

- The new wave of anti-Semitism includes a range of libels that have one common element: The Jews, the Zionists and/or the State of Israel are to blame for the pandemic and/or stand to gain from it.
- The anti-Semitism generated by the coronavirus is intensive and fierce, has continued unremittingly for several months and reflects a high level of anxiety and fear in many populations.
- Coronavirus-related anti-Semitism is manifested throughout Europe, in the Americas and in the Muslim world. This new type of anti-Semitism, which partly reiterates classic anti-Semitic themes, includes conspiracy theories alongside medieval blood libels, now renewed in a 21st century format.
- Coronavirus-related anti-Semitism is propagated mostly by right-wing extremists, ultra-conservative Christians and Islamists, through their own media in various languages.
- Islamists describe Israel as the COVID-19 virus — after the year in which the Jewish state was established, declaring that this is the most dangerous virus of all.
- Activists in movements for delegitimizing Israel use the same argument. In addition, they accuse Israel of using the coronavirus as ammunition against the Palestinians.

An Oxford University study revealed that 19.1% of the British public believes that the Jews caused the pandemic. (Source: Homeland Security Wire)

(U) **Research Shows How To Spot Fake News About Coronavirus:** Misinformation on social media is not a new problem, but we may never have felt its impact so strongly as in 2020. That's because this year misinformation has contributed to the death of thousands from coronavirus. The problem of combating incorrect health advice has seemed insurmountable. But now new research suggests that there may be a way to help people read what they see more critically.

At a time where wearing masks and social distancing has profound power to slow or even stop the coronavirus outbreak, many Americans are choosing not to do it. Why has it been so hard to get people to adopt these simple measures? There are many reasons, including that people have a hard time understanding exponential spread or the way our brain has a hard time noticing consequences that happen three weeks later.

But the impact of misinformation on social media cannot be minimized. What we choose to post on social media has literally become a matter of life and death, because it influence decisions people make.

According to a new report in the journal *Psychological Science*, priming people to think about accuracy can make them more careful about what they later post on social media.

"People often assume that misinformation and fake news is shared online because people are incapable of distinguishing between what is true and what is false," said lead author Gordon Pennycook of the University of Regina, Canada in a [press release](#). "Our research reveals that is not necessarily the case. Instead, we find that people tend to share false information about COVID-19 on social media because they simply fail to think about accuracy when making decisions about what to share with others."

The research team ran two studies, enlisting 1700 adults. In one study they collected 15 false and 15 true headlines about Covid-19. The team ran the headlines through a rigorous fact checking process to determine their truthfulness. Sources included reliable sites like [mayoclinic.com](#) and [livescience.com](#), and mythbusters like [snopes.com](#).

Researchers then presented the headlines to study participants as Facebook posts. The participants then told them whether they thought the posts were accurate and if they would share them. That's when researchers found that people are more likely to share misleading information if they relied on intuition. They also found that, generally speaking, people didn't think a lot about accuracy when they looked at these posts.

*Considering accuracy helps people spot fake news.*

But that changed in the second study, when the researchers primed participants to consider accuracy when looking at the social media posts. How did they prime them? They did it indirectly by having participants rate the accuracy of one COVID-19 related headline before showing them others. That was enough to double how discerning they were in sharing on social media later in the study.

The results are in line with previous research on political fake news. And that means there is a growing body of evidence that we can help people interact with social media differently. The researchers suggested that social media platforms start including “subtle accuracy nudges” to help people think more critically. (Source: Forbes)

**(U) African COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Reignite Hostile Narratives Against World Health**

**Organization:** In May 2020, false information began spreading in several African countries that implied the World Health Organization (WHO) had mixed poison into “Covid-Organics,” an unproven herbal tonic touted across Africa as a cure for COVID-19, in an attempt to kill Africans. These false reports claimed that the Madagascan President, Andry Rajoelina, was offered \$20 million by WHO to poison supplies of the tonic, which was created by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research and has been endorsed by Rajoelina as COVID-19 cure. The narratives contributed to a [conspiracy ecosystem of anti-vaxxers](#) who frequently attack global public health efforts.

The false narrative gave fuel to the ongoing conspiracy fire, resonating because it targeted an international organization — in this case, WHO — that is a common target for conspiracies. The DFRLab has [previously reported](#) on the targeting of tech mogul Bill Gates by anti-vaxxers, which resulted in his name trending on Twitter in South Africa. Misinformation about vaccinations is not new, and vaccine hesitancy is [one of the top health problems](#) on the African continent, according to the Council on Foreign Relations’ *Think Global Health* website.

WHO has not endorsed Covid-Organics as effective against COVID-19. President Rajoelina, in a [tweet](#), stated that WHO “will sign a confidentiality clause on the formulation of the #CovidOrganics and will support the clinical observation process.” WHO has made no official statements on the president’s claims about a confidentiality clause, though the organization is working with research institutes to select [traditional medicines](#) to be tested for COVID-19 treatments. The Twitter account of WHO African Region also [posted a tweet](#) saying the organization supported Madagascar and other African countries in their search for evidence of traditional medicines as possible COVID-19 treatments.

Ultimately, the notion that WHO is a Western puppet intent on destroying African countries has dire public health consequences. On May 14, ahead of the country’s elections, Burundi formally [expelled](#) WHO officials. A month later, the country was reeling from the news that President Pierre Nkurunziza, who had not taken the coronavirus threat seriously, had likely [died from complications](#) relating to COVID-19.

As the medical research community conducts testing and clinical trials for numerous possible COVID-19, the existing misinformation ecosystem around vaccines in general has intensified the “vaccines-as-poison” narratives. The example of Covid-Organics as a potential cure — and subsequent false claims suggesting WHO wants to use it to poison Africans — is yet another case of how complicated the competition for medically accurate COVID-19 information has become. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) 7/6 Reporting**



(U) **RT and Sputnik COVID-19 Content Received 16 Times More Engagement on Twitter and Facebook Than Reliable Media:** On social media, coronavirus-related content published by RT and Sputnik in France, Germany and Spain can achieve higher average engagement per article than reputable media outlets, a recent study by the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) found.

For example, RT and Sputnik content in Spanish at times reached up to 16 times greater engagement on Twitter and Facebook than major outlets, such as El Pais and El Mundo. Some RT and Sputnik articles in French reached up to 5 times more engagement compared to content produced by Le Monde and Le Figaro; in German, nearly 2 times, compared to Der Siegel and Tagesschau.

Over the course of three weeks in May and June, the researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute monitored the Spanish, French and German-language distribution of COVID-19 news from Russian, Chinese, Iranian and Turkish state-backed outlets. The researchers found that while state-backed outlets from Russia, China, Iran and Turkey have smaller distribution networks compared to the major news outlets and could not match their overall volume of engagement, they managed to attract significant median engagement per article rivaling established media.

This illustrates how foreign state-backed media is able to polarise debates on social media networks — which, ironically, are forbidden in [China and Iran](#).

#### *Supporting conspiracy theories*

According to the Oxford Internet Institute, the most engaging coronavirus-related reporting distributed by state-backed media outlets presented a combination of both reputable and false or misleading information that attempted to undermine Western democracies, bolster their own success, and fuel conspiracy theories.

For example, the German edition of Russian state-controlled Sputnik published an article suggesting that the US was conducting “dangerous epidemiology” in the post-Soviet space. EUvsDisinfo has previously reported [numerous instances](#) of this narrative circulating across pro-Kremlin media, targeting Ukraine, Georgia and other EU Eastern Partnership countries. The Oxford Internet Institute notes that in particular Chinese, but also Iranian outlets were also linking the coronavirus to alleged US biological warfare laboratories.

Russian state-backed media also engaged in more subtle tactics to amplify popular conspiracy theories. It has reprinted claims that [Bill Gates](#) has been working on depopulation policies under the guise of vaccination campaigns. Although the German edition of RT mocked these allegations and mentioned that Bill Gates has been a target of erroneous hypotheses, it nonetheless [described them in detail](#) without adequately challenging them.

It also used a [typical technique of pro-Kremlin disinformation](#), where a clear disinformation message is legitimized as “opinion” without making it clear that the statement is untrue. (Source: Eu vs Disinfo)

(U) **The Growing Scene of Lithuanian 5G Conspiracy Groups on Facebook:** Since the outbreak of coronavirus in Lithuania, domestic 5G conspiracy Facebook groups have started pushing COVID-19 conspiracies — and they have gained an audience in doing so.

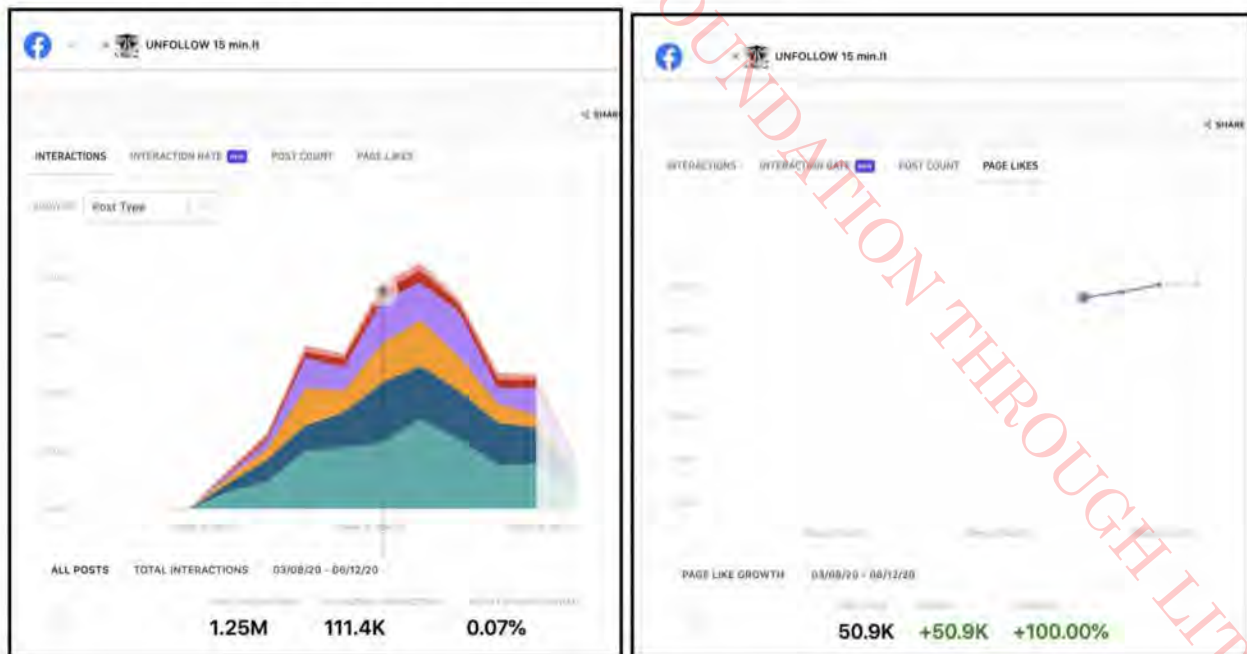
There are a number of active 5G conspiracy Facebook groups in Lithuania, as there are in many countries. Amid the pandemic, several of them have gained a significant number of followers. These Facebook groups do not receive a lot of attention from Lithuanian media, as they either go unnoticed or are not considered enough of a problem to warrant mainstream coverage. Nonetheless, some of these groups have managed to double, and in some cases, triple, in size since the beginning of the lockdown.

Last month, the DFRLab [analyzed](#) Georgian 5G conspiracy groups on social media, and found similar trends. Some researchers [have argued](#) that the design features of Facebook groups and similar online communities — particularly their emphasis on privacy and community — also makes them vectors for the spread of dangerous misinformation and disinformation.

### Connections

On March 22, 2020, [conspiracy theorists staged a protest](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania. The organizers [claimed](#) that the protest was against the establishment of 5G mobile networks in Lithuania, but the crowd also carried signs attacking the LGBT community, vaccines, Bill Gates, and the “biased mainstream media” — all common conspiracy scapegoats. The protest managed to gather only a few dozen people, as the country was still under lockdown.

The Facebook page dedicated to the protest [claimed](#) that it was organized by a group called “Unfollow 15 min.lt” and a user named Vlad Green, who had no personal information on his profile. This Facebook group was created as a safe haven for Facebook users who think that *15min.lt*, a Lithuanian mainstream media outlet, is censored or biased. This group managed to gather 50,000 followers in the first month of its existence and quickly turned into a platform for fringe conspiracies.



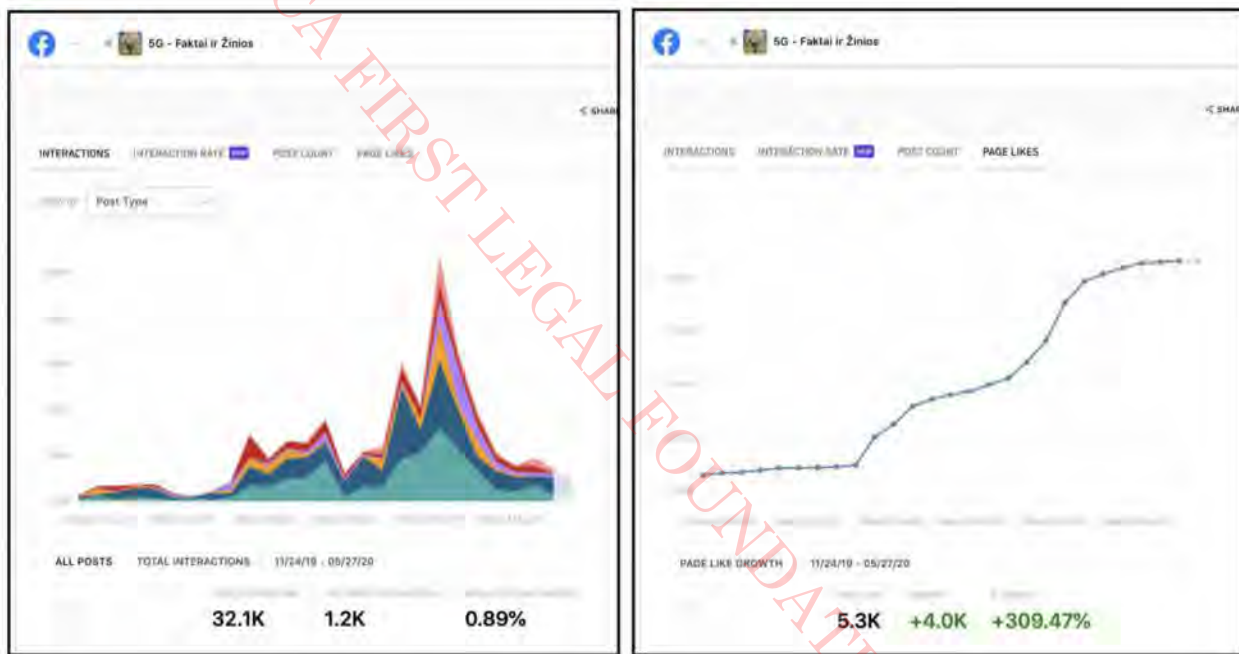
A CrowdTangle analysis of the “Unfollow 15 min.lt” Facebook group’s expansion and interactions. (Source: @LAndriukaitis/DFRLab via CrowdTangle)

*Exponential growth*

Initially small Facebook groups dedicated to 5G conspiracies have witnessed exponential growth since the start of the pandemic. Groups that started with hundreds of members now have several thousand, and their relatively high rate of activity makes them particularly noticeable for a small country like Lithuania. For comparison, [the most popular Facebook group](#) in the country providing verified COVID-19 information has 38,000 followers.

The DFRLab identified three 5G conspiracy groups that experienced the fastest growth over the course of the pandemic.

“5G — Faktai ir Žinios” (5G — Facts and News) — grew by nearly 310 percent, with much of the membership growth occurring in mid-February. The group reached a peak in interactions in mid-April, after which growth plateaued.



A CrowdTangle analysis of the “5G — Faktai ir Žinios” Facebook group’s membership growth and interactions.  
(Source: @LAndriukaitis/DFRLab via CrowdTangle)

(Source: Atlantic Council DFR Lab)

**(U) Most COVID-19 Misinformation Originates on Facebook, Research Suggests:** Misinformation about COVID-19 is more likely to be sourced from Facebook compared to Twitter or YouTube, research suggests.

Analysis of a dataset containing thousands of claims determined to be misleading or false by a global collective of fact-checkers indicates the Mark Zuckerberg-led social network was the source of more misleading content than rival platforms.

The research, [conducted by Press Gazette](#), found that 4,094 of 7,295 misleading claims about the coronavirus originated on Facebook. In comparison, 1,066 false claims were traced to Twitter, 999 on WhatsApp, 265 on YouTube and 90 on Instagram.

The team's stats were gleaned from the [Coronavirus Facts database](#), a project being led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute.

According to Press Gazette, the data suggests Facebook is lagging behind rivals when it comes to combating false information about the disease, which has been linked to more than 500,000 deaths globally and is still spreading rapidly in the U.S. (Source: Newsweek)

(U) **How Facebook Let the “Boogaloo” Movement Grow:** For months, in private and public Facebook groups, young American men have discussed killing federal agents and how to prepare for a coming civil war.

They have shared carefully posed photographs of their guns and body armor and posted tributes to people they see as martyrs to government oppression.

This anti-government “boogaloo” rhetoric has already been publicly linked to at least 15 arrests and five deaths, including the murder of a federal security guard and a sheriff’s deputy in California, according to media reports and analysts who track extremists.

Facebook, the primary social media platform for boogaloo discussions, [announced on Tuesday](#) that it was banning a network of violent “boogaloo” groups, and designating them as a dangerous organization similar to the Islamic State group and white supremacists. Researchers who have followed the growth of Boogaloo on the platform say the move was “too little, too late”.

Boogaloo content has proliferated online during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. (Source: The Guardian)

(U) **How Many Americans Believe In Conspiracy Theories?** Spreading almost as fast as the virus itself, especially on social media. In order to find out more about the dissemination and acceptance of such conspiracy theories, opinion researchers at Germany’s Allensbach Institute surveyed 1,000 representative citizens in each of the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany in June 2020. Almost a third of Americans (32%) say flat out that most conspiracy theorists are “crackpots,” but as many as 22% believe that when it comes to so-called conspiracy theories, “there is more to them than the official accounts of the events.” One in four Americans also believes that the mainstream media “are not telling the truth about corona” and therefore prefers to obtain information from independent sources.

In the United States, the survey finds that Bill Gates is more frequently criticized by younger than by older Americans. In response to one of the survey’s items, “Bill Gates, one of the richest men in the world, is actually to blame for the corona crisis. He is using the crisis to set up a new world order,” one in eight Americans under the age of 30 agrees, compared with only one in twenty-five Americans over the age of 60.

On average, just 7% of the American population as a whole share the fringe opinion that Bill Gates is the culprit behind the Covid-19 pandemic and believe that he is exploiting the crisis to establish a “new world order.” This compares with 4% of the populations of Great Britain and France and 5% in Germany.

The survey data also reveals that one in five younger Americans – but only one in ten older Americans – has also heard of plans to implant microchips in people to make them easier to control. In truth, no such plans exist, although conspiracy theorists have taken a statement by Bill Gates out of context and claim that this is precisely what he is planning to do. (Source: Forbes)

### (U) 6/30 Reporting

(U) **QAnon's Coronavirus-Fueled Boom Is A Warning Of What's To Come:** The COVID-19 emergency has turbocharged QAnon's ability to spread tactical disinformation and attract new followers. As the movement seizes on public anxiety surrounding the virus to lure more people into its conspiratorial web, new data compiled by HuffPost reveals shocking spikes in traffic for dozens of the most influential QAnon accounts across social media. Many have more than tripled in size amid the crisis.

With just months until the polls open in November's presidential election, QAnon has gained a massive new audience for its unhinged propaganda.

"It's very concerning," said Alex Kaplan, a senior researcher at [Media Matters](#) who studies online extremism. "Whenever a conspiracy theory or falsehood is circulating on social media, you can usually track it to a QAnon figure playing a role in spreading it."

#### *Skyrocketing Online Interest*

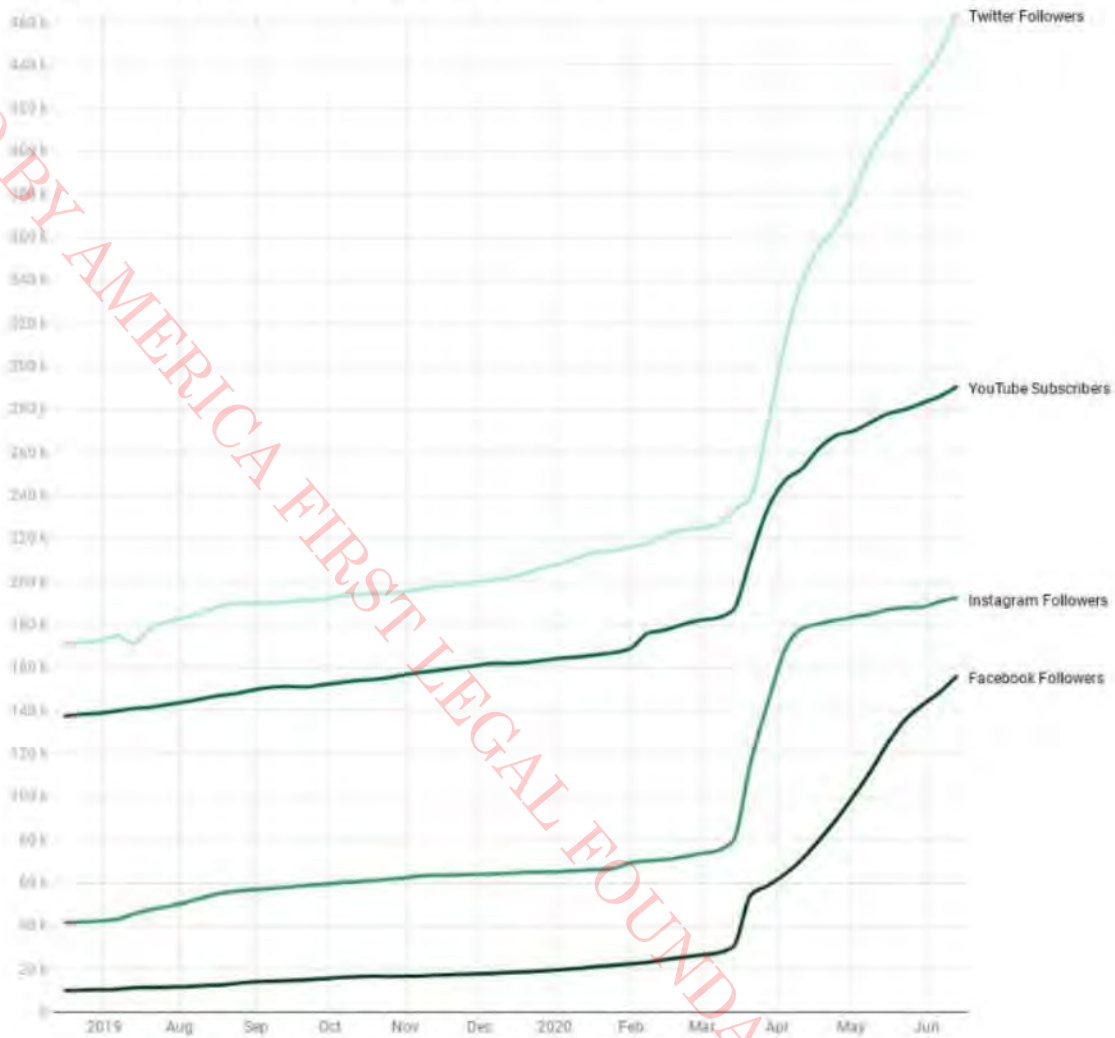
QAnon's ostensible leader is "Q," an anonymous online poster who adherents believe is a top government insider leaking coded intel to the public. Q posts cryptic messages to the forum 8kun, which [replaced the now-shuttered](#) website [8chan](#) last fall. There's no clear indication of how many subscribers QAnon has amassed since its origins in 2017, although researchers estimate that its base could comprise hundreds of thousands of people or more — including [at least 57](#) current and former congressional candidates. Some QAnon followers have even been inspired [to commit violent crimes](#).

Rather than getting their supposed intel directly from Q on 8kun, which can be difficult to navigate, many QAnon supporters rely on a network of so-called "decoders," or proxy figures, who decipher and extrapolate on Q's posts on their various social media channels. Whenever QAnon content scores a prominent new endorser, a trending hashtag, an affirming feature on Fox News or a presidential retweet, for example, decoders' Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook pages tend to light up with curious new followers seeking information about the movement.

That's been happening a lot lately, particularly as people search for answers about a global health emergency that's unprecedented in most living memories. QAnon has played a major role in amplifying COVID-19 conspiracy theories into virality — many stemming from the baseless claim that the virus is a state-engineered bioweapon — while attracting hordes of new adherents in the process.

HuffPost analyzed the growth of dozens of the largest QAnon decoder accounts on social media, using the analytics tools Social Blade and CrowdTangle. The data showed explosive spikes in followers and subscribers starting in mid-March, just as the outbreak reached official pandemic status and as much of the world awoke to its severity. Most accounts' followings have grown at least threefold since March 11, with one QAnon-centric Facebook group's membership skyrocketing by more than 5,000%.

### Growth Across Major QAnon 'Decoder' Accounts



Source: CrowsTangle and Social Blade. • Created with Datawrapper

This graph charts the growth of four of the largest QAnon "decoder" accounts on social media. Each started spiking in followers or subscribers in mid-March — a trend reflected across dozens of other decoder accounts HuffPost analyzed.

HUFFPOST/DATAWRAPPER

Google searches for "QAnon" also began to soar in mid-March, as [Mother Jones](#) reported, along with searches for "deep state"; "Fall of the Cabal," a popular QAnon video explainer series; and "WWG1WGA," the movement's slogan, meaning "Where We Go One, We Go All." The number of visits to qmap.pub, a website that catalogs Q's posts, has likewise erupted during the pandemic. The page had more than 10.5 million hits in May, compared to 4.1 million in January, according to the analytics tool [SimilarWeb](#).

This surge in traffic appears to represent a staggering wave of new interest in QAnon. Although it may seem like a bizarre, low-level threat given its [#PizzaGate](#)-style theories, QAnon has an outsize real-world

impact. As it has bubbled up from the paranoid cesspools, it has shown time and again its insidious ability to disseminate disinformation to the masses — including, recently, [anti-vaccine propaganda](#), the promotion of [bleach as a COVID-19 cure](#), and [hoaxes targeting front-line health care workers](#).

Even before the virus took its toll, QAnon had staked its territory in the political realm. Time magazine [listed Q](#) among the most influential people on the internet in 2018. A 2019 [Civiqs poll](#) of 1,543 registered U.S. voters found that 17% considered QAnon's theory "about a conspiracy among deep state elites" to be "mostly true." Last spring, following a [deadly shooting](#) and other violent incidents involving self-proclaimed QAnon believers, the FBI labeled the movement a [potential domestic terrorism threat](#).

The pandemic has provided the ideal conditions for QAnon to gain critical mass. Fear and desperation abound in times of crisis, and rapidly changing information — such as the [shifting advice](#) regarding face masks early on — can rattle people's confidence in authoritative news sources, rendering them especially vulnerable to conspiracy theories.

QAnon has helped blast out a litany of other terrifying falsehoods tied to COVID-19, including the widespread assertion that the vaccine, when it arrives, will be used for mind control.

The amplification and reach of these theories has impeded the work of public health officials tackling the worst pandemic in a century.

On March 23, Q [posted a message to 8kun](#) suggesting that the coronavirus was a bioweapon unleashed to hurt Trump's re-election chances. Days later, the hashtag #FilmYourHospital started trending on Twitter. Launched [by a QAnon supporter](#), it urged people to show up at health care facilities with cameras in an attempt to expose the media for supposedly exaggerating the extent of the crisis. (More than 125,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 so far.) Former congressional candidate DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero, a notorious QAnon promoter, tweeted the #FilmYourHospital challenge to her more than 300,000 followers. (Source: Huffington Post)

**(U) The Imagined Threats of 5G Conspiracy Theorists Are Causing Real-World Harm:** Just before 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning last month, police in the British town of Derby [were called](#) to a 5G cellular network tower. The country was under lockdown to combat the coronavirus pandemic; even [criminals stayed home](#). But someone had set the newly installed tower ablaze. All over the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe, 5G towers are being targeted in a bizarre crime spree. The perpetrators? People who—having consumed disinformation spread on YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter by celebrities, other users, and [even the pro-Kremlin Russian channel RT](#)—have convinced themselves that 5G causes COVID-19 and other maladies. The attacks are giving cities cold feet as to whether they should even host 5G antennas. Disinformation is no longer a mere inconvenience; it's having real-life impact.

After the Derby attack, a town councilor [told](#) the local newspaper that "whatever reason people have to burn a phone mast, they must really look in the mirror and think, was it worth it? Putting people's lives at risk, whether the first responders or innocent people locally. It's simply not acceptable in civil society to do such a thing." The local official was right, of course—but his commonsense argument is unlikely to impress the arsonists. That's because the 5G arsonists are acting on highly compelling disinformation. So

compelling, in fact, that it has inspired citizens all around Europe to attack 5G masts and the workers installing or repairing them.

According to the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO) and the GSMA, the global association of mobile network operators, between January and early June this year there had been 87 arson attacks in the U.K., 30 arson attacks in the Netherlands, harassment of Dutch telecoms engineers, threats to industry and government representatives in Sweden and the Netherlands, three arson attacks in Ireland, two in Sweden, and further attacks in France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Cyprus.

Coronavirus-5G conspiracy theories generally promote one of the following arguments: 5G weakens the immune system and therefore leads to COVID-19, the droplets by which the coronavirus travels are spread by 5G airwaves, or the coronavirus pandemic is a cover for the effects of 5G exposure. While none of the theories is true, that hasn't stopped celebrities including the American actor [Woody Harrelson](#) from spreading them.

In fact, according to an [April report](#) by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, celebrities, politicians, and other public figures account for 20 percent of all disinformation about 5G and coronavirus. While relatively few celebrities spread such coronavirus falsehoods, their posts unsurprisingly have enormous impact. Social media is full of the stuff (including people filming themselves attacking 5G masts). Even TikTok, the video-snippet service popular with teenagers, has featured challenges encouraging users to film themselves committing 5G sabotage. (Source: Foreign Policy)

**(U) Twitter Promises to Fine-Tune its 5G COVID-19 Labeling After Unrelated Tweets Were Flagged:**

Twitter says it's working on improving how it labels tweets with problematic 5G or coronavirus content, after users reported their tweets were being mislabeled with a COVID-19 fact-check.

Twitter began fact-checking [tweets that linked](#) 5G and the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this month, by adding the label that reads "get the facts about COVID-19" which links to a [Twitter moment](#) with "No, 5G isn't causing coronavirus" as its title. Part of a [conspiracy theory that has been widely debunked](#) suggested that the spread of the coronavirus was somehow linked to the installation of new 5G mobile networks.

The fact-check label is part of the social media company's wider effort to attach [warning labels to provide context](#) for tweets with misleading COVID-19 information. In April, the company went so far as to [remove misleading COVID-19-related tweets](#) that it viewed as inciting people to engage in "harmful activity."

But the system that determines which tweets get flagged is apparently a little over-eager. It seems tweets including the words "oxygen" and "frequency" were being tagged with the fact-check label. [The Week posits that "oxygen" and "frequency"](#) may be keywords that trigger the label, since part of the conspiracy theory suggests that the 5G "frequency" is harmful to the point that it "sucks the oxygen out of the atmosphere." (Source: The Verge)



## (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Across the country, there has been a drastic increase in mask orders and regulations over the past several days, however in some areas enforcement is becoming an issue. Businesses are growing weary of asking customers to follow mask guidance after a sharp increase in angry and at times violent outbursts.
- Discussion of sharp increases in daily positive cases and hospitalizations cross-country has dominated most of traditional and social media coverage of COVID-19. Texas, California, Florida, and Arizona are focal areas as people question if enough is being done to contain the virus.
- Headlines following today's two congressional hearings with public health and fiscal/monetary policy officials underscore uncertainty about the containment and recovery timeline. Compared to last week, traditional news interest in contact tracing staffing and strategy has increased, as states attempt to limit infection rates and halt reopening phases.

## (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- The mask debate is continuous and ongoing across the nation. A growing number of states, counties and cities are requiring masks, which is largely viewed as a step in the right direction. However, enforcement is becoming more difficult as businesses attempting to enforce regulations are increasingly being met with **angry and sometimes violent outbursts**.
  - Areas that do not have current mask orders are receiving more pressure to **put regulations** in place as residents seek more uniform policy.
  - In some areas, local lawmakers or law enforcement are at odds with standing mask orders and are publicly stating they will **not** enforce the orders.
- There is widespread debate regarding how businesses and public services should resume or continue operating amid a surge in COVID-19 cases. Some states have already began pausing current reopening plans, while many others are contemplating doing the same. Other states are choosing to re-close businesses.
  - Some business owners are frustrated with the possibility of re-closing and worry about the financial impact it may have. There are reports of some business owners suing their local or state government for shutting down again.
  - Most however, **agree with local and state government decisions to re-close** certain businesses, understanding the need to try to better contain the virus.
  - Cities are starting to contemplate **how to go about the upcoming July 4 holiday weekend** as well, leading to debate about whether or not iconic places should remain open or close.
- Affordability of care and treatment is resurfacing as a hot issue following the announcement Monday from Gilead Sciences of the pricing schedule for remdesivir. The company said it would be \$3,120 for patients with private insurance and \$2,340 for patients covered by government health programs.
  - This has drawn criticism from health advocates, who are saying that the treatment is not as accessible as it was originally promised.
  - Multiple people have reported paying nearly \$2,000 or more for COVID-19 tests.

- As confirmed cases continue to climb, many of the country's top health officials are issuing serious warnings that the country still has a long way to go in this battle.
  - Yesterday, June 29, CDC Principal Deputy Director Dr. Schuchat indicated that COVID-19 spread in the U.S. is 'too rapid,' which is limiting the U.S.' ability to bring it under control.
  - CDC Director Dr. Redfield expressed concern about the upcoming flu season, noting 'the real risk is that we're going to have two circulating respiratory pathogens at the same time.'
  - Sunday, June 28, Dr. Anthony Fauci stated that it is "unlikely" the U.S. will achieve herd immunity to the novel coronavirus if 25% of the population refuses to get a coronavirus vaccine.

### **(U) 6/29 Reporting**

**(U) Russian State-Backed Media Coverage of COVID-19:** While the pandemic is no longer the focal point it was in March and April, the pro-Kremlin media is still indulging in conspiracy theories and disinformation about COVID-19. Most egregiously, there are continued attempts to spread **anti-vaccine messages** and promote **fake cures**. Pro-Kremlin outlets also continue pushing disinformation about the coronavirus being **manmade**, and about **nefarious US biolabs** orchestrating the outbreak and planning to **attack Russia**. Efforts to stoke discord between European countries persist as well, for example with claims that **Italy received no aid** from the EU and that the coronavirus **destroyed European unity**.

One case especially gave us a good laugh: according to RT, the World Health Organisation apparently had **"no right"** to classify COVID-19 as a pandemic. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

**(U) Study Links Belief in 5G COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories to Violence:** Psychologists at Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK, have provided the first scientific evidence of the link between violent behaviour towards the telecommunications sector staff and 5G COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs.

Telecoms companies, police officials, and media outlets worldwide have suggested that 5G coronavirus conspiracies have sparked a flurry of attacks on telecoms workers and infrastructure since the start of the pandemic.

Arson attacks and cases of criminal damage to masts, cabling and other telecoms equipment have been reported in more than a dozen countries across the globe, in Europe, Canada, the USA, and New Zealand.

In April, Britain's BBC Newsbeat radio programme reported on accounts of harassment and violence, even murder threats, towards telecoms engineers in the UK, due to false theories suggesting that the emergence of the virus is connected to 5G.

Previous research has shown that conspiracy theories may be linked with violent intentions. Until now, however, there have been no studies about why and when conspiracy beliefs may ignite – violence. Now, new research from the Department of Psychology at Northumbria University has addressed these gaps. The researchers concluded that,

“Amid increased acts of violence against telecommunication engineers and property, this pre-registered study ( $N = 601$  Britons) investigated the association between beliefs in 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theories and the justification and willingness to use violence. Findings revealed that belief in 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theories was positively correlated with state anger, which in turn, was associated with a greater justification of real-life and hypothetical violence in response to an alleged link between 5G mobile technology and COVID-19, alongside a greater intent to engage in similar behaviours in the future. Moreover, these associations were strongest for those highest in paranoia. Furthermore, we show that these patterns are not specific to 5G conspiratorial beliefs: General conspiracy mentality was positively associated with justification and willingness for general violence, an effect mediated by heightened state anger, especially for those most paranoid in the case of justification of violence. Such research provides novel evidence on why and when conspiracy beliefs may justify the use of violence.” (Source: Northumbria University)

**(U) Finding Links between Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Political Engagement:** A belief in the existence of conspiracies — particularly among followers of extremist movements — seems to go hand-in-hand with the assumption that political violence is an acceptable option. However, the role that a belief in conspiracies actually plays in political extremism and the willingness to use physical force has to date been disputed by psychologists.

Some political movements, particularly those extremist in nature, are associated with belief in conspiracy theories. Anti-Semitic demagogues, for example, have long referred to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to support their cause, in effect using for their purposes a conspiracy theory that is still widely believed although it has long been known that the text itself is a literary forgery. However, the role that a belief in conspiracies actually plays in political extremism and the willingness to use physical force has to date been disputed by psychologists. Researchers at [Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz \(JGU\)](#) have now investigated the possible link on the basis of two studies undertaken in Germany and the United States. The study subjects were asked to assume that the world is controlled by powerful secret societies. Faced with the prospect that practically all areas of society are dominated by such conspiratorial groups, the subjects declared themselves less willing to become involved in lawful political activities. Instead, they would resort to illegal, violent means.

**(U) Contradictory Data on the Political Outlook of Adherents of Conspiracy Theories:** Universitaet Mainz [says](#) that researchers at the [JGU Institute of Psychology](#) had noticed that the views expressed by the specialists in this field differ widely on the relation between conspiracy beliefs and political engagement. On the one hand, it is postulated that conspiracy-based views could have a motivating influence and that the corresponding adherents are more likely to become actively involved in politics in order to bring about change. On the other hand, however, others propose that a belief in conspiracies tends to lead to disaffection and even withdrawal from politics.

The evaluation of the study's results showed how the apparent contradictions outlined above can be explained: There is a connection between the - in this case hypothetical - belief in conspiracy theories and the individual's political outlook, which when expressed in graph form produces an inverted U shape. This means that the willingness to engage in political activity reaches its peak among the mid-level adherents of conspiracy theories. Thereafter, the interest decreases again, especially when it

comes to becoming actively engaged in legal means of political expression. Where there is an increasing conviction of being betrayed by the government, the tendency to resort to illegal, violent means increases. These tendencies were apparent in Germany as well as in the United States, although somewhat weaker in the U.S.

*Acceptance of an Option Will Not Necessarily Result in Concrete Action*

“We are by no means saying that belief in conspiracies leads to violent extremism,” emphasized Professor Roland Imhoff. “Rather, what we are saying is that you might consider such an attitude acceptable even if as an outsider you put yourself in this world of thought.” This is the first time that an experimental investigation has shown that political extremism and violence could be an almost logical conclusion if one is convinced that secret conspiratorial powers control the world. (Source: Homeland Security News Wire)

(U) **Taiwan’s Battle Against COVID-19 Disinformation:** Since COVID-19 broke out in Taiwan in late January, a surge of disinformation has emerged surrounding the current status of the outbreak and the government’s management of it. Social media posts and messages have spread claims that the Taiwanese government is covering up the number of coronavirus infections in the country. The number of purported cases in these posts range from a daily increase of a couple of hundred to several thousand. According to [latest statistics](#) from Taiwan’s Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as of June 22, 2020, there have been 446 confirmed infections and seven deaths.

While Taiwan is not a rookie in combating different forms of disinformation, the severity of COVID-related disinformation has prompted the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau (MJIB) to publicly address the matter.

In a [Feb. 29 press release](#), the MJIB stated that an investigation had determined that most of the COVID-19 disinformation relating to Taiwan originating from social media platforms in China — mainly on Weibo and Di Bar — which was then reposted to Facebook pages through fake accounts. The bureau said the surge in disinformation appeared to stem from resentment toward Taiwan for its ban on the export of facial masks. The MJIB added that Chinese Internet users have been editing images of official notices issued by the Taiwanese government and inserting disinformation. These, it said, constitute attempts to discredit government notices and undermine their reliability.

Local authorities and NGOs are also putting in efforts to ensure that correct information is being circulated among the Taiwanese public. The [Central Epidemic Command Center \(CECC\)](#) has held at least one press briefing nearly every day to keep the public informed on the current developments of COVID-19 in Taiwan. Over 100 digital maps have been created to provide real-time information on the pharmacies that carry facial masks and the number of masks left in stock. Taiwan’s Minister without Portfolio Audrey Tang has also worked with civic organizations and the National Health Insurance Administration to compile all the digital maps on [one website](#) for users to choose from.

Another counter-disinformation strategy the Taiwan government has implemented is “humor over rumor,” as Minister Tang has coined in interviews and presentations.

An example that Minister Tang often gives is the panic-buying of tissue paper in early February. This was due to disinformation about tissue paper and medical masks being made from the same raw material, and the high demand in medical masks affecting the produce of tissue paper. In response, Taiwan Premier Su Tseng-Chang posted a meme on social media of himself wiggling his buttocks and the text, "We only have one pair of buttocks," hinting that the tissue paper panic was unnecessary. The image also included a chart showing the raw materials of tissue paper and medical masks were different and imported from different countries. The panic died down in the next few days, and the source of the disinformation was later found to be a tissue paper reseller. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) Facebook Will Show Users a Pop-Up Warning Before They Share an Outdated Story:** Facebook announced Thursday that it would introduce a notification screen warning users if they try to share content that's more than 90 days old. They'll be given the choice to "go back" or to click through if they'd still like to share the story knowing that it isn't fresh.

Facebook acknowledged that old stories shared out of their original context play a role in spreading misinformation. The social media company said "news publishers in particular" have expressed concern about old stories being recirculated as though they're breaking news.

The notification screen is an outgrowth of other kinds of notifications the company has experimented with recently. Last year, Instagram introduced a pop-up notification to discourage its users from sharing offensive or abusive comments with a similar set of options, allowing them to click through or go back. The company said that its initial results with the experiment showed promise in shaping users toward better behavior.

In a blog post announcing the new feature, Facebook said that it is now considering other kinds of notification screens to reduce misinformation, including pop-ups for posts about COVID-19 that would provide context about source links and steer users toward public health resources. (Source: TechCrunch)

**(U) Facebook's War Against One of the Internet's Worst Conspiracy Sites:** It's been a year since Facebook deleted the page for Natural News for violating the company's rules about spam. This was a big deal for Natural News, a conspiracy site that had attracted nearly 3 million followers on its Facebook page. Then in May, Facebook took further action by banning the Natural News domain so that any link to the site would be blocked, along with some pages that frequently shared its content. Still, Natural News content has found ways to stick around.

As one of the internet's oldest and most prolific sources of health misinformation and conspiracy theories, Natural News is a hub for climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers. While it poses as a news outlet, Natural News is actually a network of sites filled with bylined articles and flanked by ads for survivalist gear and dodgy health cures. The internet trust tool NewsGuard reports that Natural News "severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency." Various fact-checking organizations have repeatedly flagged Natural News content as false.

A new investigation from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a think tank that focuses on countering extremism, finds that there are hundreds of active and inactive domains that point to websites associated with Natural News. It's through some of these domains that Natural News content can still

end up being shared on Facebook, the researchers found. Facebook, meanwhile, has said that Natural News was banned “for spammy and abusive behavior, not the content they posted.” Most recently, Facebook said its pages had used abusive audience-building tactics, including posting frequently and trying to evade the company’s rate limits.

That hasn’t stopped Natural News from crying censorship and urging readers to [appeal to Facebook](#) and even the federal government over the bans. Meanwhile, researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue say that it flagged several pages and groups that have frequently shared Natural News content to Facebook, but those pages and groups remain up.

Some Facebook users have realized that Natural News content is still accessible on another domains.  
*Facebook*

The persistence of misinformation is not so surprising. The 2016 presidential campaign highlighted the extent to which fake news, extremist content, and conspiracy theories pervaded Facebook. Since then, the company [has ramped up its fight](#) against the most prominent sources of false information when it removes their pages and content. But it’s typical for Facebook to ban these sources for specific policy violations, not the spreading of misinformation.

That a network like Natural News can continue to spread misinformation on Facebook shouldn’t be surprising. Years after learning about the dangers and pervasiveness of fake news and conspiracy theories on its platform, the most powerful tool Facebook is using against these outlets appears to be booting their pages or banning specific domains for spam or other violations, not specifically for spreading misinformation. As he [has expressed multiple times](#), Mark Zuckerberg does not want Facebook to appear as an arbiter of truth. (Source: Vox)

**(U) Anti-5G Groups Step Up Protests Against Phone Masts in UK and Ireland:** Anti-5G campaigners are supporting local protests against a planned phone mast in south Dublin.

Three Ireland has lodged a planning application to erect a 24-metre mast in Greenhills, Tallaght to serve the local area. The mast will be used for 2G, 3G and 4G services, but not 5G.

Some people in the area have staged protests about the height of the tower, which have been supported by local politicians including Paul Murphy, the Rise TD.

Despite the fact that the proposed tower will not provide 5G, two activist groups — Mast Watch Ireland and 5G Awareness Ireland — have encouraged locals and others to object to the planning application.

Some opponents of 5G claim that the higher frequencies and mast concentrations associated with the technology (Source: The Times UK)

**(U) Ex-Soviet Bioweapons Labs Are Fighting COVID-19. Moscow Doesn’t Like It:** One of the greatest achievements of U.S. foreign policy has been targeted by a vicious disinformation campaign. A network of Soviet-era laboratories once used to track plague outbreaks and develop bioweapons during the Cold War is at the front line of the fight against the coronavirus pandemic in Central Asia and the Caucasus. That hasn’t stopped Russia from instigating a propaganda and disinformation campaign against these

labs, which were modernized and converted to civilian purposes long ago. That's because these disease-control labs, located in former fiefs of the Soviet empire, are a legacy of one of the most successful and benevolent foreign-policy programs the United States has ever undertaken.

The Russian government has repeatedly asked for and **received** information about the laboratories, and Russian media have been **given access** to them. (That hasn't prevented a **diplomatic dispute** from **brewing** between Russia and Armenia over the latter's lab.) The labs also work with the **World Health Organization**, the **World Organization for Animal Health**, and other bodies—a clear indication they are open and have nothing to hide. They use the **Electronic Integrated Disease Surveillance System** to **share real-time data** among themselves and with other foreign counterparts.

None of this has stopped Russian **disinformation** about the **labs'** alleged sinister activities. In 2019, a prominent Russian television talk-show host called on the Russian military to launch **airstrikes** on the Kazakhstan facility. In January, Russian television began insinuating that **Georgia's** lab was somehow involved in the creation of the coronavirus, while Russian trolls have peddled similarly false stories on social media that the Kazakh lab also **leaked** the virus. In June, a Russian newspaper attacked the Uzbek Institute of Virology with wildly false claims that American and British researchers at the facility leaked **brucellosis** into the general population. Beijing has now joined the mix by pushing similar **conspiracy theories** about the U.S.-linked labs. These disinformation campaigns have prompted harsh rebukes from governments of the region. (Source: Foreign Policy)

**(U) COVID-19 Pandemic Has Strengthened Russian, Iranian, and Chinese State Disinformation**

**Campaigns That Undermine Democracy:** The coronavirus pandemic has strengthened Russian, Iranian, and Chinese disinformation campaigns that undermine American democracy. Despite their diverging foreign policy interests, these three countries' anti-U.S. media narratives are "mutually reinforcing," strengthening one another's messages against the U.S. in a formidable "social media war." Chinese diplomats' use of Western social media platforms to disseminate information has increased 300% percent since April 2019. Meanwhile suspended Twitter accounts, likely connected to the Chinese state, focused on Hong Kong, COVID-19, Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, and Taiwan; the network of accounts which retweeted and amplified those messages were not suspended. Domestically, a study has found that misinformation increases trust in political institutions for moderates and conservatives, because their party is in power, but decreases trust among strong liberals. Following George Floyd's murder, far-right activists have begun a disinformation campaign to discredit the protesters, while a sharp increase in Russian, Chinese, and Farsi articles about the protests has also been noted: in the week following George Floyd's murder, approximately 27,000 articles were published in Russian, Chinese, and Farsi about protests in the U.S. In Counterterrorism Communications, success was found in presenting potential recruits with a small amount of terrorist propaganda, thereby "vaccinating" them, while messaging from the U.S. government and religious messaging from any source did not reduce ISIS sympathy for either vulnerable individuals or the general population.

Chinese diplomats' use of Western social media platforms to disseminate information has increased 300% percent since April 2019. Despite their diverging foreign policy interests, these three countries' anti-U.S. media narratives are "mutually reinforcing," strengthening one another's messages against the U.S. in a formidable "social media war." Iran and Russia actively promote Chinese social media

conspiracies, especially those blaming the U.S. for the pandemic or accusing the U.S. of releasing the virus as a bioweapon. Authoritarian governments have been more consistent about COVID-19 communications than the U.S. has, which presents an opportunity for these states to successfully promote an alternative history of the crisis. The U.S. and other democracies must take the lead by supporting science-backed policies, funding organizations such as the World Health Organization, cooperating to delegitimize state-sponsored sources of disinformation, and develop strong counter-narratives to undermine authoritarian governments' coronavirus responses. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

**(U) Best Practices in Combating Disinformation Require the Separation of Strategic (Political)**

**Communications from the Straightforward Transmission of Factual Statements:** Particularly when combatting disinformation around COVID-19, to preserve public trust, public authorities must maintain a neutral position while authoritatively communicating facts. The EU's "Joint Communication on Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation" is an example of how conflation of factual statements on disinformation and politically charged statements can reduce public trust and increase susceptibility to disinformation. Fact-checking and countering misinformation should primarily be the responsibility of independent media and researchers through a decentralized structure, rather than a centralized effort spearheaded by public authorities. Public authorities should, however, fund a decentralized framework to combat disinformation, involving journalists and other members of civil society. (Source: EU Disinfo Lab)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- Due to spikes in COVID-19 cases across the U.S., both traditional news coverage and social media discussion are strongly focused on the rising infection rate in certain sections of the country and whether state governors should mandate wearing masks in public.
- Additionally, there is growing concern from the public about the country's COVID-19 response. People are debating about whether states should re-enforce stay-at-home restrictions. Some individuals feel there is mixed messaging from the government at all levels on what residents should be doing to stay safe and are frustrated about testing site closures. There is also concern from state, local and public health officials about hospitals becoming overwhelmed and testing sites either being closed or losing federal funding as some states pause re-openings or increase restrictions.
- FEMA mentions on both social and traditional media are becoming more focused on national hospital capacity following the release of an internal document on national hospital service capacity. On social media, people are beginning to ask if FEMA will stand up field hospitals again.
- In other traditional news coverage, there has been frequent coverage of the announcement that three northeastern states have agreed to a 14-day quarantine order for incoming visitors. Florida, Texas, and California have received greatest national attention as daily case increases have surpassed 5,000 each.
- Local news media continues to amplify concerns about how much of a budget deficit states will face in the coming months. Reports that federal support for the remaining 13 federal testing



sites will end by the end of June have generated higher discussion and negative feedback from reporters and Texas public officials.

*(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment*

- The general public is becoming increasingly alarmed by spiking COVID-19 cases across the country. Reports that the U.S. broke the record for the most COVID-19 cases recorded in a single day, have many wondering if the country is still on the right track to addressing and containing the pandemic.
  - o There is frustration over what many feel is mixed messages coming from federal, state and local officials.
  - o There is ongoing debate over whether the resurgence in cases is due to increased testing. There has been an increasing amount of concern among the general public about testing availability in states with rising cases.
  - o Some public health experts argue that the increasing COVID-19 case numbers outstrip the increase in testing numbers.
- Many citizens are expressing to concern over recent announcements that the federal government will halt funding for community-based testing sites across the country as cases resurge in certain states. (example 1, example 2, example 3)
  - o Much of this discussion is becoming increasingly political as people take partisan sides in debating this development. Those who are voicing concern, worry that decreased testing will result in poor data and an inability to manage resources and response efforts.
- There is growing debate over whether states and cities should re-enforce stay-at-home orders in an effort to curb the surge in cases. While there is a large amount of support for this idea, many remain concerned about the economic impact of further shutdowns.

**(U) 6/25 Reporting**

**(U) Unfounded claim that 50 million Americans would die from COVID-19 Vaccine Circulates on Social Media:** Several social media users are sharing a two-minute video featuring an interview with Judy Mikovits in which she alleges that “at least 50 million Americans would die, probably from the first dose” if a COVID-19 vaccine was mandated for the whole population. This claim is unfounded.

Different iterations of the video have at least 130,000 views on YouTube and over 6,000 shares on Facebook as of June 22, 2020. Examples of the posts are visible [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) .

Mikovits recently gained attention via Plandemic, a viral video that was removed from several social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube because it contained potentially harmful medical misinformation ( [here](#) ). Reuters Fact Check debunked a series of false claims made by Mikovits in Plandemic [here](#)

In this new claim, Mikovits attributes her argument to “the retroviruses we discovered that are coming through vaccines in a contaminated blood supply”.

Mikovits first came to public attention in 2009 for work involving a retrovirus. In a research paper, she and other scientists claimed to have found a type of retrovirus that played a role in chronic fatigue syndrome ( [here](#) ). The paper also raised concerns that this virus might spread via blood supply.

Two years later, the paper was fully retracted by Science Magazine, the official publication of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science ( [here](#) ). (Source: Reuters)

(U) **Facebook Struggles to Keep Violent “Boogaloo” Content Off Its Platform:** Content from the extremist anti-government “boogaloo” movement is thriving on Facebook, outside researchers and a review by The Washington Post found. The persistence of the content highlights Facebook’s ongoing struggle to keep domestic extremists from using its platform for recruitment and propaganda.

Researchers at the global nonprofit group Avaaz found nearly two dozen Facebook pages affiliated with the “boogaloo” movement, a generally anti-government and anti-law enforcement ideology. Despite the amorphous nature of the online movement, members [have become a notable physical](#) presence at both rallies against pandemic shutdowns and more recently Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality.

Posts on pages flagged by Avaaz between May 28 and June 18 included explicit calls for armed violence as well as more borderline content such as anti-government memes employing euphemisms for violence. Some pages also shared misinformation about the protests, such as memes claiming police were placing bricks to cause riots and conspiracy theories about [Bill Gates](#) and George Soros. The majority of the pages were created within the past six months and had a collective following of tens of thousands of users.

Facebook changed its community standards in May to ban pages and groups using “boogaloo” and affiliated terminology including “Big igloo and “Big Luau,” when accompanied by images of armed violence. And earlier this month, Facebook said it would stop recommending other boogaloo content to members of boogaloo groups, [Reuters reported](#).

The Washington Post sent Facebook 15 different posts from 12 of the groups flagged by Avaaz appearing to endorse violence in some form. Five of the pages had some version of “boog” in their names.



Commissar

June 9 at 11:36 PM · 🌐

Peaceful protest= they ignore you and pass unconstitutional bans anyway.  
Burn down the city= they give you everything you want in a week.  
On that note.. isn't there supposed to be an armed march on the VA Capitol on July 4th in defiance of all the gun control they passed anyway?



20,000 peaceful, armed protestors and the Governor still passed anti-gun laws

Minneapolis  
10:42 PM CT

Minneapolis Precinct 4 building was set ablaze and the police were voted to be disbanded

Don't tell me that rioting doesn't work.

BREAKING NEWS

MINNEAPOLIS POLICE PRECINCT ON FIRE AS PROTESTS GROW

LIVE



PHOTO WITH INTERVIEW COMPANY SAYS ABOUT 70% OF THE TEMPORARY EMPLOYEES CNN TONIGHT

As of press time, Facebook had removed 11 of the 12 flagged pages. Seven of the pages were removed for multiple pieces of content violating Facebook's [policy against violence](#) and two were removed because accounts administering the pages violated site policies (the accounts have also been removed). One page was still being reviewed. Facebook removes content in violation of its community standards after it is reviewed by a moderator.

*But other content recommended to visitors of boogalo-related Facebook pages is also problematic.*

The Post was easily able to find multiple instances on Facebook where boogaloo-themed pages and private groups featured a sidebar of suggested other boogaloo content. Facebook uses these suggestion tools to drive users to other content on the platform, but the feature [has been criticized by researchers](#) for directing users toward extremist information.

"We continue to remove content using boogaloo and related terms when accompanied by statements and images depicting armed violence," Facebook spokeswoman Sarah Pollack said in a statement. "We are also preventing these Pages and groups from being recommended on Facebook."

Facebook could not offer numbers on how many boogaloo pages and groups have been removed since it introduced new policies regarding the movement.

*The boogaloo movement is hard to define — which makes it difficult to moderate.*

Members are strong opponents of anything they perceive to infringe on the Second Amendment. Many of the memes on the Facebook pages express disdain for both President Trump and presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden. Some accounts and memes express support for Libertarian presidential candidate Jo Jorgensen. Some pages reference her in their name.

Some posts on both public Facebook pages and in private groups reflect the movement's anti-government views and calls for armed rebellion. For instance, two pages reviewed by The Post featured posts that gave recipes for molotov cocktails, including one featuring Mickey Mouse calling them a "surprise tool."



A post from one group flagged by the Avaaz researchers that Facebook has removed. (Facebook)

A post from one group flagged by the Avaaz researchers that Facebook has removed. (Facebook)

"It's like Jell-O. It just keeps changing and moving," Megan Squire, a professor of computer science at Elon University who studies online extremism, said of the movement. "That makes it concerning because really bad people are taking advantage of that and moving their ideas in."

For instance, while some pages have recently publicly disavowed white supremacy, the movement has still attracted members who believe in the ideology, Squire and other researchers have found.

The language and imagery used by the movement is constantly evolving, making it difficult to track, as well, Squire says. Facebook account administrators often share "backup pages" to divert users if Facebook bans the original ones. After Facebook banned several high-follower pages earlier this month, they popped up under new names using phrases such as "Liberty" or "REDACTED."

"At least from what we can see there really isn't much more action beyond the kind of whack-a-mole effect. The backups aren't removed," says Katie Paul, director at the Tech Transparency Project. "Or only one of the dozen groups that a particular page moderates is removed."

Paul says it's similar to Facebook's ongoing struggle to keep white supremacists off the platform.

Even after Facebook [banned white-nationalist content](#) in 2019, groups and pages representing the ideology have continued to surface on the platform under other names, [BuzzFeed](#), [the Guardian](#) and numerous other media outlets have found.

Just last week [Facebook removed](#) an additional 900 social media accounts linked to white-supremacist groups that discussed bringing weapons to police brutality protests. The removals show that even after banning certain kinds of content, keeping it off the site has proved difficult for the billion-dollar company.

*There's a connection between the movement and recent real-life incidents of violence.*

Federal prosecutors in California, Texas, Nevada and Colorado [have issued](#) a series of criminal charges against self-described boogaloo supporters. The movement and its follower have also sparked concern from the intelligence community, which warned last week that adherents of the ideology could target Washington, D.C., "due to the significant presence of U.S. law enforcement entities, and the wide range of First Amendment-Protected events hosted here," [Natasha Bertrand at Politico reported](#).

*There's a connection between the movement and recent real-life incidents of violence.*

Researchers say public Facebook pages like those flagged by Avaaz are often the first step to users finding private Facebook groups and links to other platforms where more explicit content, including militia guides and manifestos, and plans for real-life meetups, are found.

Three suspects [arrested earlier this month](#) on terrorism-related charges were members of private "boogaloo" groups [first flagged in April](#) by the Tech Transparency Project.

Facebook only removed two of the groups after those arrests; the company removed a third after another self-identified “boogaloo boy” Steven Carrillo **was charged** with killing two Oakland police officers.

One of the groups is still active on Facebook, Paul says. Two of the Facebook groups were managed by the same users who still run multiple accounts and have created an intelligence-sharing group to replace the one that no longer exists.

Manifestos and tactical manuals shared in the removed groups are still circulating in the new private groups, Paul says. And so is praise for Carrillo.

**Boogaloo Side Quest**  
May 5 · 🌐

**Boogaloo sidequest #1754: Last of the Mohicans**

Kill 1 loyalist with a musket, Kill or mame 4 loyalist with the gunstock or tomahawk. Finally challange 1 loyalist to hand to hand combat, slit his throat with your knife, and kick his body off a cliff.



**Reward: Daniel Day-Lewis hair +50 melee +5 scalps**

**Achievement unlocked: Going Colonial**

👍👎🔥 577

40 Comments 286 Shares



*While researchers acknowledge that moderating boogaloo groups presents a significant challenge, they still say Facebook isn't doing enough.*

"This movement lives online," Paul says. "Many of these guys are not based in the same location. If Facebook deplatformed these groups, it would make it much more difficult for them to connect with one another."

Squire says that Facebook's recent moderation push has caused "confusion" but that boogaloo followers are using other channels such as the messaging app Discord to regroup. Both researchers noted it's unlikely the movement would entirely give up Facebook because its tools and recommendation algorithms make it easier to find new members than other social media platforms.

*Some researchers are worried the movement could cause chaos in the 2020 elections.*

Quran, who has also studied how just a handful of high-follower accounts and pages are behind most coronavirus misinformation, expressed concerns the massive followings of Facebook boogaloo pages and groups could be weaponized to spread election disinformation or spark violent protests.

"The scale and danger of what Facebook is doing to the societies ahead of this election cannot be magnified enough," Quran says. "Boogaloo is just one piece of a puzzle of a much more complex system, but they're a piece of the puzzle that can be extremely disruptive." (Source: The Washington Post)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Due to spikes in COVID-19 cases across the U.S., both traditional news coverage and social media discussion are strongly focused on the rising infection rate in certain sections of the country and whether state governors should mandate wearing masks in public.
- Additionally, there is growing concern from the public about the country's COVID-19 response. People are debating about whether states should re-enforce stay-at-home restrictions. Some individuals feel there is mixed messaging from the government at all levels on what residents should be doing to stay safe and are frustrated about testing site closures. There is also concern from state, local and public health officials about hospitals becoming overwhelmed and testing sites either being closed or losing federal funding as some states pause re-openings or increase restrictions.
- FEMA mentions on both social and traditional media are becoming more focused on national hospital capacity following the release of an internal document on national hospital service capacity. On social media, people are beginning to ask if FEMA will stand up field hospitals again.
- In other traditional news coverage, there has been frequent coverage of the announcement that three northeastern states have agreed to a 14-day quarantine order for incoming visitors. Florida, Texas, and California have received greatest national attention as daily case increases have surpassed 5,000 each.
- Local news media continues to amplify concerns about how much of a budget deficit states will face in the coming months. Reports that federal support for the remaining 13 federal testing sites will end by the end of June have generated higher discussion and negative feedback from reporters and Texas public officials.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- The general public is becoming increasingly alarmed by spiking COVID-19 cases across the country. Reports that the U.S. broke the record for the **most COVID-19 cases recorded in a single day**, have many wondering if the country is still on the right track to addressing and containing the pandemic. o There is frustration over what many feel is mixed messages coming from federal, state and local officials.
- There is ongoing debate over whether the resurgence in cases is due to increased testing. There has been an increasing amount of concern among the general public about **testing availability** in states with rising cases.
- Some public health experts argue that the **increasing COVID-19 case numbers outstrip the increase in testing numbers**.
- Many citizens are expressing to concern over recent announcements that the federal government will halt funding for community-based testing sites across the country as cases resurge in certain states. (**example 1, example 2, example 3**)
- Much of this discussion is becoming increasingly political as people take partisan sides in debating this development. Those who are voicing concern, worry that decreased testing will result in poor data and an inability to manage resources and response efforts.
- There is growing debate over whether states and cities should **re-enforce stay-at-home orders** in an effort to curb the surge in cases. While there is a large amount of support for this idea, many remain concerned about the economic impact of further shutdowns.

(U) **Social Media Platforms Claim Moderation Will Reduce Harassment, Disinformation and**

**Conspiracies. It Won't:** If the United States wants to protect democracy and public health, it must acknowledge that **internet platforms are causing great harm** and accept that executives like Mark Zuckerberg are not sincere in their promises to do better. The “solutions” Facebook and others have proposed will not work. They are meant to distract us.

The news in the last weeks highlighted both the good and bad of platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The good: Graphic videos of police brutality from multiple cities **transformed public sentiment about race**, creating a potential movement for addressing an issue that has plagued the country since its founding. **Peaceful protesters** leveraged social platforms to get their message across, outcompeting the minority that advocated for violent tactics. The bad: waves of disinformation from politicians, police departments, Fox News, and others denied the reality of police brutality, overstated the role of looters in protests, and warned of busloads of antifa radicals. Only a month ago, critics exposed the role of internet platforms in undermining the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic by amplifying health disinformation. That disinformation **convinced millions that face masks** and social distancing were culture war issues, rather than public health guidance that would enable the economy to reopen safely.

The internet platforms have worked hard to minimize the perception of harm from their business. When faced with a challenge that they cannot deny or deflect, their response is always an apology and a

promise to do better. In the case of Facebook, University of North Carolina Scholar [Zeynep Tufekci](#) coined the term “Zuckerberg’s 14-year apology tour.” If challenged to offer a roadmap, tech CEOs leverage the opaque nature of their platforms to create the illusion of progress, while minimizing the impact of the proposed solution on business practices. Despite many disclosures of harm, beginning with their role in [undermining the integrity of the 2016 election](#), these platforms continue to be successful at framing the issues in a favorable light.

When pressured to reduce targeted harassment, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, the platforms frame the solution in terms of content moderation, implying there are no other options. Despite several waves of loudly promoted investments in artificial intelligence and human moderators, no platform has been successful at limiting the harm from third party content. When faced with public pressure to remove harmful content, internet platforms refuse to address root causes, which means old problems never go away, even as new ones develop. For example, banning Alex Jones removed conspiracy theories from the major sites, but did nothing to stop the flood of similar content from other people. (Source: Time)

#### **(U) 6/24 Reporting**

(U) **“Boogaloo” and its advocates: Breaking Down the Origins and Ethos of the Terminology:** In recent weeks, the term “Boogaloo” has gone more mainstream after months of growing popularity in online anti-government communities. Generally, Boogaloo supporters are not part of a defined group but identify with a concept. Most ascribe to anti-government, anti-police, anti-authority, and are against groups that disagree with their political views. Since the nationwide backlash against COVID-19 lockdowns and the beginning of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, terrorism experts and researchers have also seen Boogaloo supporters disrupted for suspected violent extremist activity in Las Vegas and Texas and at least two deaths allegedly attributed to a Boogaloo supporter in California.

Understanding the background of this emerging terminology is critical for first responders, who are a preferred target for this movement’s violent adherents.

*So, what is it?*

Generally, Boogaloo supporters are not part of a defined group but identify with a concept. According to Mark Pitcavage, Senior Research Fellow at the Center on Extremism, most ascribe to anti-government and anti-police ideologies, and are against groups that disagree with their political views. For example, in response to perceived government overreach, most Boogaloo supporters anticipate and prepare for, and in some cases hope for or seek, a future civil war. Some Boogaloo adherents support the current BLM protests and try to make common cause with others they perceive as angry at police. A minority faction of Boogaloo supporters are white supremacists, but that minority often defines Boogaloo as a race war, which the majority of supporters do not.

*Background*

(U) The Boogaloo meme that has crystallized as an “irl” (in real life) movement of heavily armed protesters started with the phrase, “Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo”, patterned on the title of the 1984 sequel to the breakdance film, “Breakin’.” Internet users for some time used “Electric Boogaloo” as a humorous appendage in various contexts and memes, and—in some subcultures—in discussions about the possibility of civil war. The 4chan image board platform, /k/, devoted to weapons helped popularize the latter usage of the term, which followers are now leveraging via Facebook and other popular platforms. Third party Internet archives show the phrase “Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo” was in use on /k/ as early as 2012 although there was scattered use of the phrase in unrelated contexts online before this date. Since 2018, the frequency of the use of the phrase has increased. According to researchers at Bellingcat, some posters on /k/ have suggested that Boogaloo-related memes were co-opted by more mainstream segments of the Internet, including Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook users.

Research by the Tech Transparency Project shows that there were at least 125 Facebook groups devoted to the Boogaloo by late April 2020. The real number has increased significantly since then, although determining an exact number is difficult due to the rapid evolution of the subculture. One example of this is how “Boogaloo,” itself a euphemism, has been further disguised with the use of soundalike terms like “big luau,” “big igloo,” and “icehouse.” For example, playing off the “big luau” term, Hawaiian shirts became a way for individuals to signify their anticipation of the alleged “coming civil war.”

#### *Currently*

Some fringe Boogaloo supporters, including one pictured below, have appeared at rallies wearing skull-print balaclavas, traditionally associated with “siege culture” influenced by the American author of *Siege*, an anthology or compilation of newsletters published in book form in 1982 and which is often cited by anti-government or racially/ ethnically-motivated violent extremists. For example, an individual at a 15 April Lansing, Michigan protest was photographed wearing a Hawaiian shirt which typically references “the boog” and a skull mask referencing siege culture. The clown nose signifies the belief that there is no political solution to what many accelerationist groups see as the perpetual decline of western democracies. The nose was very likely a nod to the “clown world” meme signaling the idea that pluralistic, multicultural liberal democracies are both inherently ridiculous and doomed to failure.

(U) According to recent press reporting and researchers, white supremacist elements were attempting to co-opt the anti-lockdown protests as well as the broader Boogaloo movement. According to researchers, Boogaloo-focused Facebook groups regularly discuss perceived tyrannical gun control legislation as an acceptable pretext to violent resistance. Boogaloo supporters view the government’s reaction to BLM protests as an expression of government tyranny. However, the same researchers have identified that there appears to be an active struggle within some parts of this movement as to, whether or not, their aspirational uprising will or should be based in bigotry.



(U) Fringe Boogaloo Supporter (**BELLINGCAT**)

*Finding Common Cause*

(U) Bellingcat researchers revealed their analysis of Boogaloo-themed Facebook groups showed the common thread uniting the Facebook groups was their alleged “desire to fight it out with the government. More specifically, members envision violent confrontations with local police and the “alphabet bois” in federal law enforcement agencies.” Red Flag laws—state laws that authorize courts to issue a special type of protection order, allowing the police to temporarily confiscate firearms from people who are deemed by a judge to be a danger to themselves or to others—and gun confiscation are

frequently cited as grounds for a hypothetical insurrection. For example, in April, Boogaloo supporter USPERAaron Swenson\*, 36, was arrested by Texarkana, Texas police for having livestreamed threats to execute police and was later indicted for several felonies including attempted capital murder of a peace officer. On 1 May, USPERBradley Bunn\*, 53, in Loveland, Colorado was arrested for allegedly possessing pipe bombs. One Boogaloo Facebook user posted, "It begins", likely referring to confiscations. On 30 May, three men who self-identified as being part of the Boogaloo movement were arrested and later charged and indicted for conspiracy to cause destruction during protests in Las Vegas, and possession of an unregistered destructive device. Also on 30 May, two alleged Boogaloo supporters were charged with inciting a riot by throwing a water bottle at law enforcement officers at a George Floyd protest that day in Columbia, South Carolina. As of 13 June, a Boogaloo movement supporter from Lancaster, Texas, was arrested on drug charges. The criminal complaint noted he also used his social media accounts to advocate vigilante "guerrilla warfare" against the National Guardsman patrolling BLM protests, claimed to be "hunting Antifa," and threatened to "kill" looters. On 16 June, DOJ charged USPERSteven Carrillo\*, 32, with murder and attempted murder charges for his alleged shooting death of a Protective Service Officer and the injury of his partner at a federal building and US courthouse in Oakland, CA, on 29 May. On 6 June, Carrillo also allegedly killed one Santa Cruz County deputy sheriff, and injured another before he was apprehended. USPERRobert Alvin Justus\*, 30, faces aiding and abetting charges for both murder and attempted murder, stemming from the 29 May incident involving Carrillo. According to a criminal complaint, both Carrillo and Justus were Supporters of the Boogaloo movement.

#### *Technology Sector Response*

On 1 May, Facebook and Instagram both updated their "violence and incitement" policies to ban the use of "boogaloo terms" when they occur alongside images or statements depicting or urging armed violence. On 4 June USPERFacebook noted it would make it more difficult for its users to find groups associated with the term "Boogaloo". Facebook also advised it would no longer recommend such groups to members of similar associations. Following Facebook's announcement, many Boogaloo pages changed their names to variants likely in an attempt to circumvent the new policies.

#### **(U) 6/23 Reporting**

**(U) Facebook Groups Are Destroying America:** The Covid-19 "infodemic" has laid bare how vulnerable the United States is to disinformation. The country is less than five months away from the 2020 presidential election, and Americans by the thousands are buying into conspiracy theories about vaccines containing microchips and wondering about the healing powers of hair dryers. Where does all this come from? Let's not be too distracted by a fear of rumormonger bots on the rampage or divisive ads purchased with Russian rubles. As two of the leading researchers in this field, we're much more worried about Facebook groups pumping out vast amounts of false information to like-minded members.

For the past several years, Facebook users have been seeing more content from "friends and family" and less from brands and media outlets. As part of the platform's "pivot to privacy" after the 2016 election, groups have been promoted as trusted spaces that create communities around shared interests. "Many people prefer the intimacy of communicating one-on-one or with just a few friends,"

explained Mark Zuckerberg in a 2019 blog post. “People are more cautious of having a permanent record of what they've shared.”

But according to research from the Wilson Center and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, those same features—privacy and community—are often exploited by bad actors, foreign and domestic, to spread false information and conspiracies. Dynamics in groups often mirror those of peer-to-peer messaging apps: People share, spread, and receive information directly to and from their closest contacts, whom they typically see as reliable sources. To make things easier for those looking to stoke political division, groups provide a menu of potential targets organized by issue and even location; bad actors can create fake profiles or personas tailored to the interests of the audiences they intend to infiltrate. This allows them to seed their own content in a group and also to repurpose its content for use on other platforms.

Groups continue to be used for political disinformation. The “Obamagate” conspiracy theory has yet to be defined in clear terms, even by its own adherents, and yet our analysis of Facebook groups shows that the false narrative that the Obama administration illegally spied against people associated with the Trump campaign is being fueled and nurtured there. Related memes and links to fringe right-wing websites have been shared millions of times on Facebook in the past few months. Users coordinating their activities across networks of groups and pages managed by a small handful of people boost these narratives. At least nine coordinated pages and two groups—with more than 3 million likes and 71,000 members, respectively—are set up to drive traffic to five “news” websites that promote right-wing clickbait and conspiracy theories. The revolving door of disinformation continues to spin.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* investigation revealed that Facebook was aware of groups’ polarizing tendencies from 2016. And despite the company’s recent efforts to crack down on misinformation related to Covid-19, the Groups feature continues to serve as a vector for lies. As we wrote this story, if you were to join the Alternative Health Science News group, for example, Facebook would then recommend, based on your interests, that you join a group called Sheep No More, which uses [Pepe the Frog](#), a white supremacist symbol, in its header, as well as Q-Anon Patriots, a forum for believers in the crackpot QAnon conspiracy theory. As protests in response to the death of George Floyd spread across the country, members of these groups claimed that Floyd and the police involved were “crisis actors” following a script. In recent days, Facebook stopped providing suggestions on the landing pages of certain groups, but they still populate the Discover tab, where Facebook recommends content to users based on their recent engagement and activity.

To mitigate these problems, Facebook should radically increase transparency around the ownership, management, and membership of groups. Yes, privacy was the point, but users need the tools to understand the provenance of the information they consume. First, Facebook needs to vet more carefully how groups and pages are categorized on the site, ensuring that their labels accurately reflect the content shared in that community. In the current system, a page owner chooses its category—Cuisine, Just for Fun, and so forth—which then shows up in that community’s search results and on its front page. Most groups, meanwhile, are categorized as General, which assists neither users nor Facebook’s threat investigation teams in understanding each one’s purpose. In both cases, owners can be misleading: A large page that shares exclusively divisive or political content might be categorized as a

Personal Blog, so as to escape the added scrutiny that might come with a more explicitly political tag. Such descriptors should be more specific and be applied more consistently. That's especially important for groups or pages with tens of thousands of members or followers. Facebook should also make it easier to spot when multiple groups and pages are managed by the same accounts. That way the average user can easily identify concerted efforts to flood the platform with particular content. (Source: Wired)

(U) **Seeing Isn't Always Believing: Google Starts Fact-Checking Images:** Photos aren't always quite what they seem, and Google is trying to make it easier for people to identify phony or manipulated pictures online.

Google said Monday that it will start **identifying some misleading photos** in its specific search tool for images with a fact-check label, expanding that function beyond its standard non-image searches and videos, as misinformation is rampant online. The fact-check label will appear on any image that is included in an article that fact-checks a photo or another claim. A larger preview of the photo will show a short summary of the fact-check and direct users to its source.

The Mountain View, Calif.-based company has used these fact-checking labels for years in its main search results and on video-streaming site YouTube. In December, Google said fact checks appear more than 11 million times each day in search results. (Source: The Washington Post)

(U) **TikTok Formally Signs Up to EU Code of Practice on Disinformation:** TikTok formally signed up to the European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation, which trade organization EDiMA handles communications for.

EDiMA director general Siada El Ramly, who also serves as the spokesperson of the Code of Practice's Working Group of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Disinformation, said at a conference hosted by the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services Monday that EDiMA was formally notified of TikTok's signature Monday morning.

El Ramly said at the event, "TikTok signing up to the Code of Practice on Disinformation is great news, as it widens the breadth of online platforms stepping up the fight against disinformation online. It shows that the Code of Practice on Disinformation is an effective means to ensure that companies do more to effectively fight disinformation online. Today's announcement shows once again that internet companies take their responsibility seriously and are ready to play their part." (Source: Ad Week)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- COVID-19 discussion on social media is becoming increasingly polarized and politically charged as people question the Administration's commitment and response to the pandemic. There continues to be widespread debate over the best way to move forward as case counts and hospitalizations continue to rise in many areas.
- Discussion regarding masks is becoming more urgent as local governments are being pressured by residents to make masks required, often resulting in heated debates.



- FEMA conversation as it relates to COVID-19 continues to primarily focus on the Fillakit contract and comments made over the weekend that the White House asked for testing to be slowed.
- Over the last couple days, daily infection rates continue to gain substantial traditional media news coverage, causing renewed concern on whether states should slow down their phased reopenings and how the public can avoid community spread. Other national-level subjects of media discussion include today's congressional hearing with federal health officials, supply chain concerns amid a resurgence in cases, and public health precautions expected during U.S. president's visit to Arizona, which is among states seeing an uptick in positive cases.
- Over the last couple days, newspaper front-page headlines highlight rising uncertainty regarding state budgets and furloughs amid growing infection rates.

*(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment*

- Though traditional media coverage of the Fillakit contract has slowed, there continue to be people sharing news stories and opinions about the subject on social media.
- There is lingering discussion primarily on Twitter from elected officials who question if they were unable to get access to FEMA testing sites due to interference from the White House, following comments from the President in which he said he ordered testing to be slowed.
- There is limited local discussion of the announcement of public assistance programs including crisis counseling and meal delivery in various states.

**(U) 6/22 Reporting**

**(U) Russian Info Ops Putting US Police in Their Crosshairs:** Russia appears to be intensifying its focus on police enforcement issues in the United States, using popular reactions to protests that have gripped the nation as part of a larger propaganda campaign to divide Americans ahead of the U.S. presidential election in November.

The death of African American George Floyd in police custody and the ensuing U.S. protests have for weeks dominated media coverage from Russian state-sponsored outlets like RT and Sputnik.

Only now, it seems that Russia, through the English-language RT in particular, is reaching out to U.S. police officers and union officials, in what some U.S. officials and lawmakers say is an effort to further

inflame tensions.

"It is critical that Americans remain wary of state-sponsored and state-directed media platforms such as RT and Sputnik," Senate Intelligence Committee Acting Chairman Republican Marco Rubio told VOA.

"Russia wants nothing more than to exploit our own divisions in an effort to exacerbate existing societal tensions," Rubio added, confirming lawmakers are worried about Russian efforts to use or influence police officers and their supporters.

Law enforcement officers and organizations who spoke with VOA about their interactions with RT described being caught off guard.

"We had no idea about the ties they have," a representative for lawofficer.com, a website catering to law enforcement officers, told VOA about being approached by the Russian television news channel. "They actually told us they were out of Britain."

RT contacted lawofficer.com seeking permission to republish an essay by Tulsa, Oklahoma Police Major Travis Yates about the frustration he and many of his police colleagues have been feeling as a result of the protests of police practices, titled, "[America, We Are Leaving](#)."

RT also booked Yates for an on-air interview through its London bureau.

"If I had any idea whatsoever, I obviously never would have done it," Yates told VOA when asked if he knew about RT's Russian connection.

### *Russian disinformation campaigns*

This is not the first time Russian-linked entities have tried to use U.S. law enforcement in their efforts to divide the country.

In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, a report by Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project and the network analysis firm Graphika found Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) [heavily targeted the African American community](#), using issues like "police violence, poverty and disproportionate levels of incarceration," to convince voters to stay home.

At the same time, the IRA's most viewed ad before the 2016 election was for a Facebook page called "Back the Badge," which described itself as a "Community of people who support our brave Police Officers."

According to data compiled by Facebook and released in 2018 by the House Intelligence Committee, the

"Back the Badge" ad was seen more than 1.3 million times, getting more than 73,000 clicks.

That type of success is what the Kremlin may be looking to replicate with Russian media's outreach to U.S. police officers, who are now under greater scrutiny amid calls for reform. (Source: Voice of America)

(U) **Twitter, Facebook See New Tactics in Foreign Disinformation Efforts:** Officials from Twitter and Facebook said Thursday that while they have not seen any "coordinated" efforts by malicious foreign groups to spread disinformation around the 2020 elections, the groups' tactics are changing and evolving.

"We have seen a change in tactics, and this in part is because of the success that we've had in clamping down on the inauthentic platform manipulations," Nick Pickles, the director of global public policy strategy and development at Twitter, testified during a House Intelligence Committee virtual hearing.

Pickles gave the example of online Chinese actors unfavorably comparing the heavy U.S. police response to recent protests over the death of George Floyd to crackdowns on protesters in Hong Kong.

"That shift, from platform manipulation to overt state assets, is something that we have observed, and it reminds us we have to be vigilant that the challenges we faced in 2016 aren't constant, and that this remains an evolving security challenge," Pickles testified.

Nathaniel Gleicher, the head of security policy at Facebook, testified that his team was seeing "inauthentic behavior" around the COVID-19 pandemic and in connection to recent protests over the death of George Floyd.

"We definitely see the tactics in this space evolving, and we see the threat actors trying new efforts to get around the controls that are put in place," Gleicher said.

He emphasized that while Facebook has not seen any "coordinated inauthentic behavior" from foreign nations targeting voting or voting systems, it was "definitely something we are monitoring."

Facebook has seen other coordinated foreign activity that it has removed this year. Gleicher testified that Facebook had removed 18 inauthentic networks this year including three based in Russia, two from Iran, and two based in the United States. He also said Facebook removed around 1.7 billion fake accounts from its platform between January and March. (Source: The Hill)

(U) **Stanford Internet Observatory's Analysis of Recent Twitter Takedown:** On June 12, [Twitter announced](#) that it had taken down 32,242 accounts connected to three distinct state-linked information operations. In our [previous post on the topic](#), we provided in depth analysis on two of those operations. The third operations included 1,152 accounts that Twitter attributed to *Current Policy*, "a media website engaging in state-backed political propaganda within Russia." These accounts came down because they violated Twitter's policy on platform manipulation, not because they espoused any particular political viewpoint. However, it is clear that there was a subset of accounts that had specific political aims, as well as subsets with commercial and PR interests. In this white paper, we look further into these groups of accounts and their apparent aims.

## Key Takeaways

- Twitter attributed this takedown of 1,152 accounts and 3,434,792 tweets to actors affiliated with *Current Policy*. The *Current Policy* Twitter account (@Current\_policy) began tweeting in early 2013 and tweeted almost 58,000 times, gaining over 150,000 followers before it was [taken down in November 2019](#).
- The politically engaged accounts in the network focused on amplifying pro-government activity and cheerleading for President Vladimir Putin and his party, United Russia. Several of the accounts purported to represent official government offices, such as the Moscow Construction Bureau and the Voronezh branch of the United Russia party. Others purported to represent United Russia politicians, including members of the State Duma and the Moscow City Duma.
- Accounts purported to be the official Twitter accounts for Federal initiatives such as “Leaders of Russia,” a contest intended to identify “future leaders” and reinvigorate various branches of government, and Open Innovations Startup Tour, a nationwide “project aimed at developing technological entrepreneurship and discovering promising innovative projects.” [Subsequent reporting](#) and investigation has confirmed that many of these were official accounts.
- Anti-opposition activity was additionally present in the form of caricature accounts, attacks on Navalny and the Anti-Corruption Foundation, and amplification of allegations that the opposition cheated in last year’s contentious Moscow City Duma elections. One of the accounts posed as a polling company “independently studying Russian public opinion” and used leading questions to elicit pro-government and anti-opposition responses.
- One small cluster of accounts, which periodically retweeted influencer accounts from within the data set, additionally amplified content related to geopolitical topics of interest created by likely persona accounts on social media sites including Quora, LiveJournal, Facebook, and others. The topics these persona accounts focused on and wrote about included Ukraine, Armenia, NATO, Skripal, and MH-17, among others.
- Another group of accounts was tied to a network of news sites aimed at several Russian cities: Ufa, Voronezh, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Arkhangelsk. This network is owned and operated by the media conglomerate Hearst Shkulev Media; while some of the affiliated Twitter accounts for sites in this network were included in the takedown, others were not, and the connection between Hearst Shkulev Media and the actors behind Current Policy is presently unclear.
- Finally, many of the most popular accounts were involved in a commercial operation called twishop that sold retweets and tweeted links. These accounts ranged from humor accounts to photography accounts and were typically not politically engaged. (Source: Stanford Internet Observatory)

**(U) Some Facebook Groups Created to Protest Lockdowns Are Now Hotbeds for Misinformation:**

Earlier this spring, as some Americans increasingly tired of stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, groups began cropping up on Facebook demanding that state officials reopen the economy. Some of

these groups, which researchers say total in the hundreds on Facebook, echoed rhetoric by President Donald Trump and quickly gained a [massive following](#), in some cases adding thousands of members a day.

But even after [all 50 states](#) have moved to reopen their economies in recent weeks, engagement within these Facebook groups remains high. Now, instead of focusing on calls to end the lockdowns, many of these groups are increasingly becoming hotbeds of conspiracy theories and misinformation for other issues, according to researchers who track their activities.

Much of the recent activity, researchers say, has focused on the nationwide protests against police brutality in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd. "George Floyd is NOT DEAD afterall?!" one video falsely claimed in a Facebook group researchers said was dedicated to reopening Washington state. Last week, a Texas-based group discussed claims the FBI had "hunted down" and arrested members of the loosely organized anti-fascist protest movement Antifa, the same researchers said. Only a handful of them have alleged ties to any extremist group, including Antifa, CNN has [reported](#).

"What we see is that in many groups there's been increasing discussion of conspiracies," said Karen Kornbluh, who leads the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a policy think-tank. Kornbluh's team has been tracking more than 35 public and private Facebook groups originally dedicated to the reopening.

Some of the groups' rapid shift from a stated focus on fighting lockdowns to a haven for a wide range of misinformation highlights the broader problem confronting Facebook as it struggles to moderate its platform.

Facebook has tried to promote Groups as a digital tool for building communities, likening them to both [town squares and living rooms](#), but they're also potentially venues for harmful content to circulate. Groups can often evade effective oversight due to privacy settings, and even when a group is public, Facebook risks creating a backlash if it cracks down — particularly if a group portrays itself as a good-faith participant in a matter of public debate, such as whether to reopen the economy.

The spread of misinformation within these groups also illustrates the way conspiracy theorists exploit Facebook to lure new audiences to their ideas. By offering claims that validate users' other ideological leanings about the pandemic, the groups may have served as a gateway to ever more fringe views.

(Source: CNN)

**(U) Facebook Vowed to Investigate Horrific Abuse by Anti-Vaxxers. Nine Months Later, No One Was Penalized:** Nine months after Facebook vowed to investigate abuse by anti-vaxxers, no users have been penalized.

As detailed in a [CNN report last year](#), anti-vaxxers have posted violent, horrific comments and death threats to vaccine advocates -- including mothers who've lost their children -- calling them the c-word and telling them they deserved to have their children die.

In the spring of 2019, vaccine advocates, including Hughes, sent CNN comments from 67 Facebook users that they felt were abusive. CNN sent those to Facebook, which said that 39 of those users had violated

their community standards with these comments. They removed one of those users in September and then vowed to conduct a "thorough investigation" into the others. But now, nearly a year later, none of the other 38 users has been punished, according to Facebook. (Source: CNN)

**(U) 6/18 Reporting**

(U) **U.S. Was the Subject of Approximately 50 Percent of Negative Content on RT English:** The [Stanford Internet Observatory](#) analysed RT's English-language coronavirus-related content and found that US was the subject of approximately 50% of clearly "negative content".

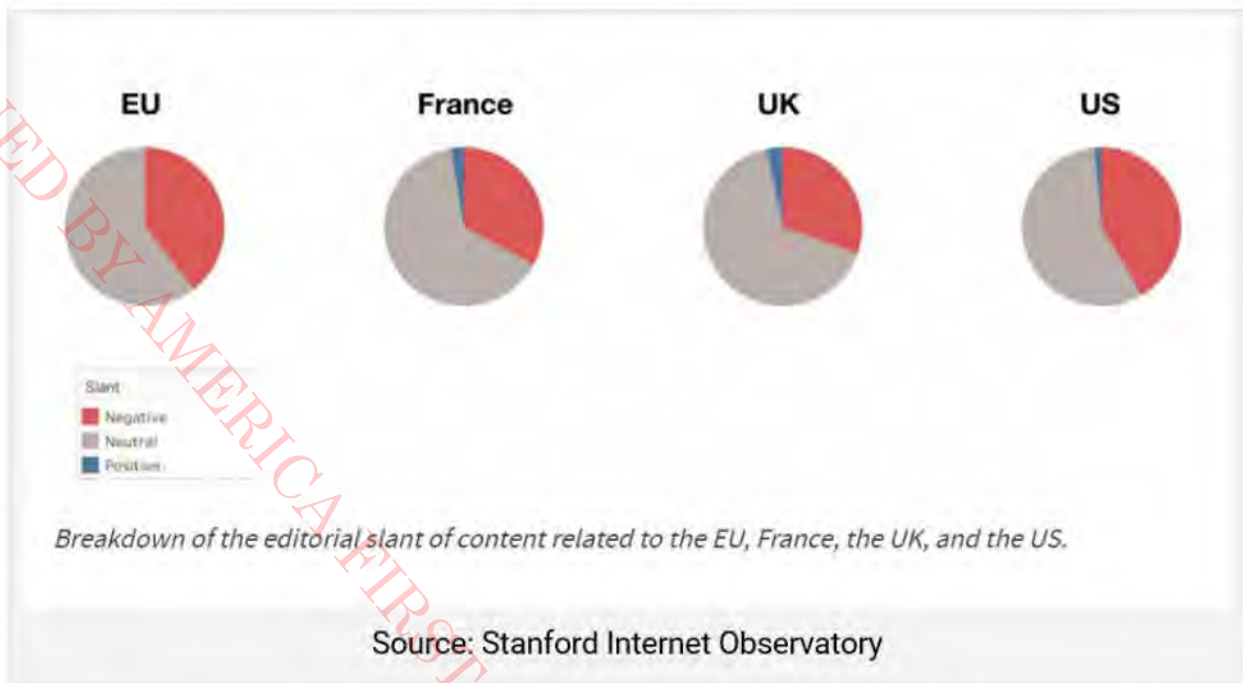
As for topics, it turned out that "negative" content highlighted political dysfunction, diplomatic conflicts and conspiracy theories in the US, the UK, France, and the EU.

The analysis looked at approximately 1,900 posts that contained coronavirus-related terms and appeared on RT's English-language Facebook Page from January 1 to June 1, 2020. The content was then coded to establish editorial slant, the country mentioned, addressed themes, and genre.

Over half of this content was dedicated to four themes: the spread of the virus, lockdowns, political responses to the pandemic, and human-interest stories.

"While approximately 68% of this content was editorially neutral — that is, it did not exhibit a clear editorial stance disparaging or praising the subject of the content, almost 80% of opinion pieces appearing on RT's English-language were obviously negative in tone, and only 3% were positive," the report says.

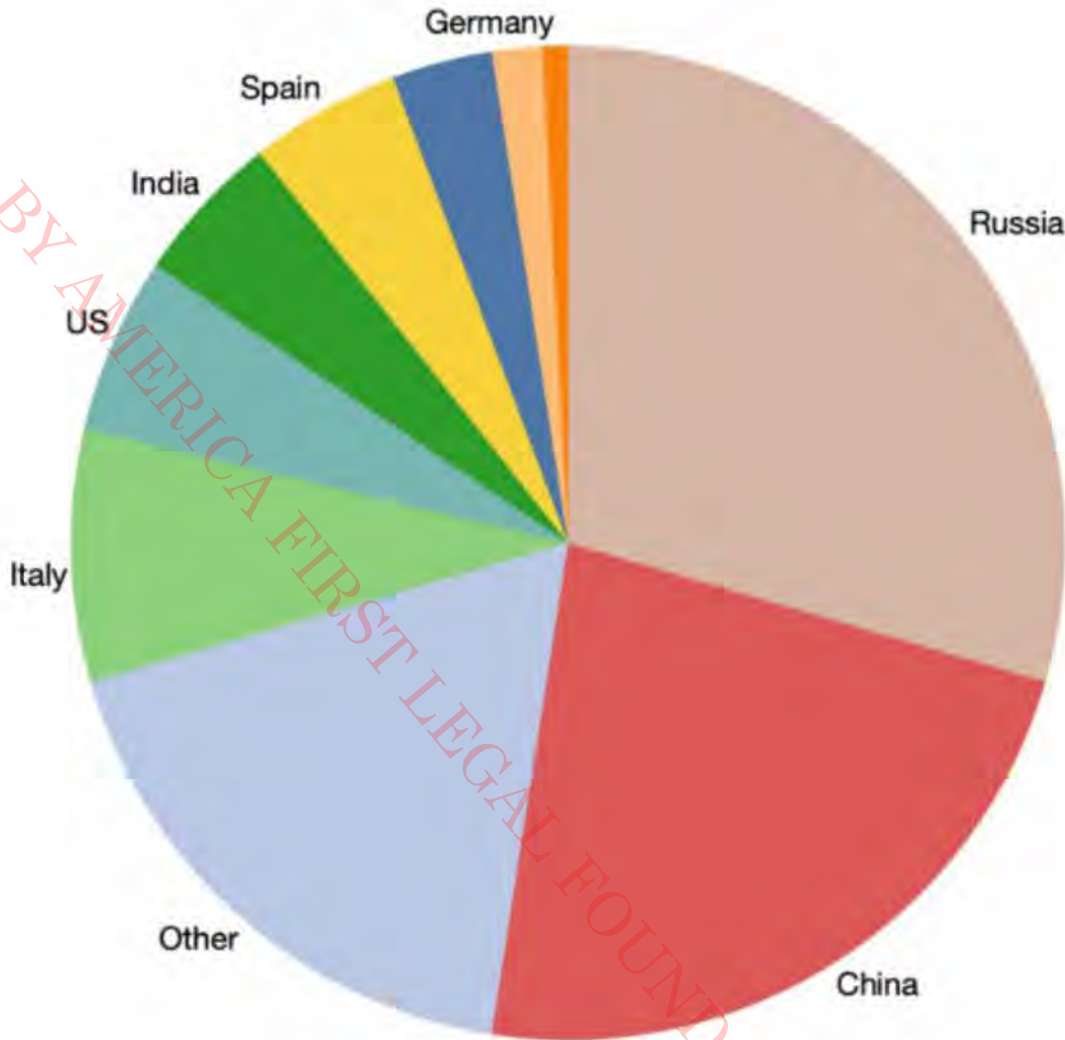
As for the main target of content with negative sentiment, US was in the lead with 50%, followed by UK (10%), France (6%), Italy (2%), and Germany (2%). Despite the majority of content being neutral, the negative content clearly outweighs the positive, as shown by the visual below. It should also be noted that in many cases the negative sentiment was addressed towards The West, not a specific country.



"If we filter content according to the most prevalent "negative" themes — politics, unrest, media, panic, overreaction and diplomacy — it is clear that they are correlated with just a few countries and one bloc: the US, the UK, France and the EU," the [Stanford Internet Observatory](#) report says.

RT also claims that the reaction of these Western countries to the pandemic was excessive, despite many other countries using similar approaches. The researchers also noticed that RT praised Russia and China for the very same measures.

A comparison of how different countries were covered shows that Russia and China were well in with RT, while other countries received relatively little positive sentiment.



Breakdown of "positive" content across RT's coronavirus-related content by country concerned.

Source: Stanford Internet Observatory

The key takeaway from this report would be that RT's content showed political dysfunction, growing unrest and creeping authoritarianism in the US, UK and EU countries. As for Russia and China, the content mainly revolved around the spread of the virus, equipment, lock-down and human interest topics. As already mentioned, Russia and China also received most of positive sentiment and [Stanford Internet Observatory](#) also points out that this positive content generated more social media engagement as negative content. (Source: EU vs. Dinsinfo; Stanford Internet Observatory)

(U) **Social Media Users More Likely to Believe COVID-19 Conspiracies:** Now, research indicates that people who get their news from social media are more likely to believe in such theories - and also more likely to break lockdown rules.



Researchers from King's College London and Ipsos Mori found that some conspiracy theories were believed by quite a high proportion of the population.

In an online survey of over 2,000 people carried out in late May, 30% thought that the coronavirus was created in a lab, up from 25% in April. A similar proportion thought the true death toll from Covid-19 was being hidden by the authorities.

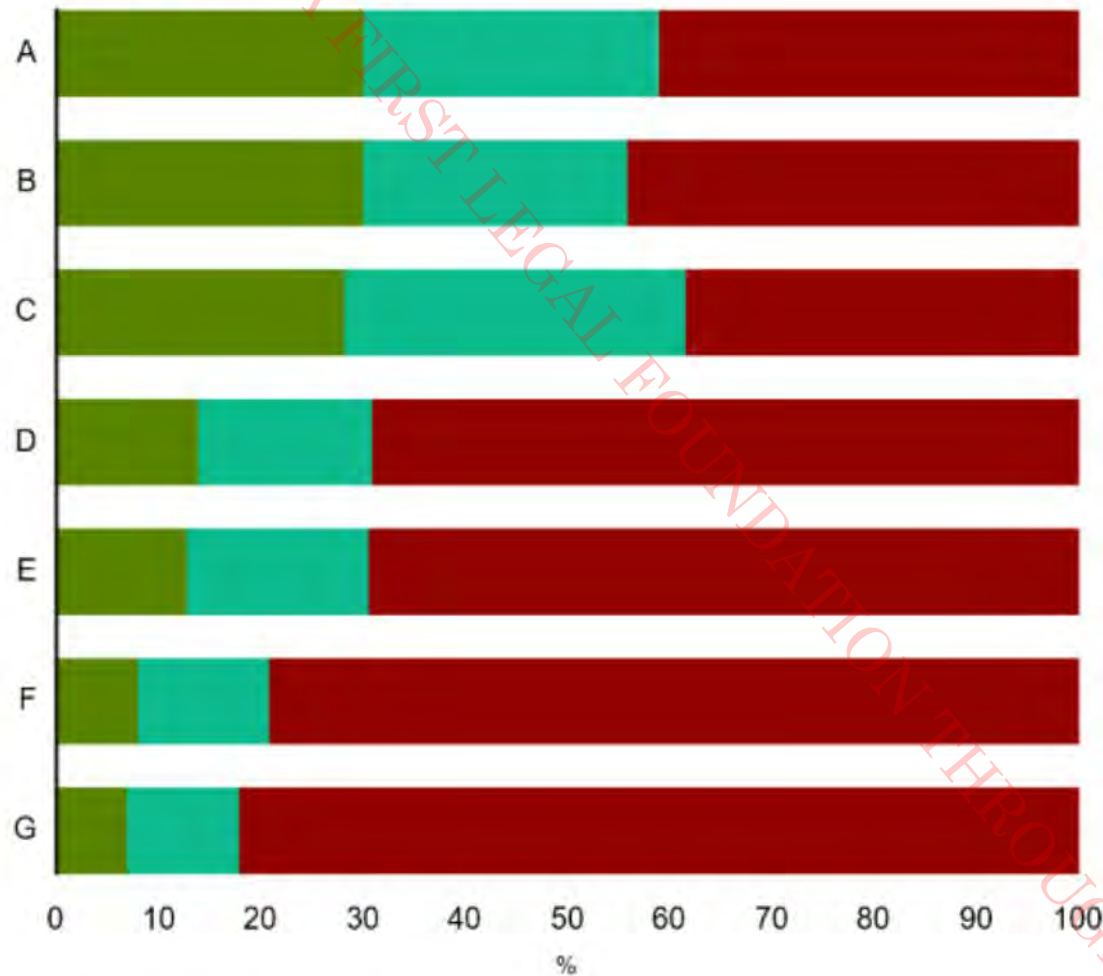
About 13% believed the pandemic was part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated, and 8% believed there was some connection between symptoms and radiation from 5G phone masts.

## Are these statements true or false?

Relating to the coronavirus pandemic

- A - Coronavirus was probably made in a lab
- B - Authorities deliberately reduce or hide death toll
- C - Most people have already had it without realising
- D - Authorities deliberately exaggerate the death toll
- E - Pandemic is part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated
- F - Symptoms appear to be linked to 5G network radiation
- G - There is no hard evidence that it really exists

■ True ■ Don't know ■ False



Based on 2,254 UK residents 16-75

Source: Kings College London



In an article in the journal Psychological Medicine, the researchers from King's College described how people who believed in conspiracy theories tended to be more dependent on social media for information and were less likely to follow official health advice.

Some 60% of those who believe that Covid-19 symptoms were linked to 5G radiation said that much of their information on the virus came from YouTube - while of those who believed that was false, just 14% said they depended on the site.

People who had ignored official advice and gone outside despite having symptoms of the virus were also far more likely to have relied on YouTube for information.

Some of the more extreme conspiracy theorists have found themselves banned from a number of the platforms, but search for "5G coronavirus" on any of the big social media sites and you will still find a wealth of conspiratorial material.

This report suggests that this tide of rumour and misinformation continues to provide a challenge for a government trying to persuade people to limit risky behaviour and control the spread of the virus.

(Source: BBC)

**(U) An Officer Was Gunned Down. The Killer Was a 'Boogaloo Boy' Using Nearby Peaceful Protests as Cover, Feds Say:** As protests gripped Oakland on May 29, a white van pulled up outside a federal courthouse. A door slid open, and a man peppered the Federal Protective Service outside with bullets, killing one and wounding the other.

For a little over a week, the crime was a mystery. Was it tied to the protests just blocks away? Even after the suspected killer was dramatically caught in the nearby mountains eight days later, his motive was murky.

Now, federal authorities say the man, identified as Air Force Staff Sgt. Steven Carrillo, 32, was an adherent of the "boogaloo boys," a growing online extremist movement that has sought to use peaceful protests against police brutality to spread fringe views and ignite a race war. Federal investigators allege that's exactly what Carrillo was trying to do last month.

Federal prosecutors on Tuesday charged Carrillo with murder and attempted murder, and leveled aiding and abetting charges against Robert Alvin Justus Jr., who has admitted to serving as a getaway driver during the courthouse ambush, [according to the FBI](#). Protective Security Officer David Patrick Underwood was killed and a second officer, whom officials have not named, was critically wounded in the ambush. Inside the three vehicles Carrillo used, police found a boogaloo patch, ammunition, firearms, bombmaking equipment and three messages scrawled in blood: "[I became unreasonable](#)," "Boog" and "Stop the duopoly."

The newly detailed alleged motive behind the attack at the Oakland courthouse comes as concerns rise about right-wing violence at Black Lives Matter protests. On Monday, a counterdemonstrator [shot a protester](#) during a scuffle in Albuquerque, after a militia group in military-style garb and armed with semiautomatic rifles stood menacingly in the crowd throughout the afternoon. Other boogaloo boys have been [charged recently](#) with fomenting violence at other protests.

Boogaloo content has proliferated online in response to COVID-19 related lockdowns. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Facebook Shuts Down Groups Where Boogaloo Suspects Posted Before Attacks:** Facebook said it will continue to review groups on its platform associated with the extremist [Boogaloo movement](#) after it emerged that suspects in the shooting deaths of two law enforcement officers in California had posted on Facebook prior to the attacks.

[Steven Carrillo](#), 32, faces a federal murder charge in the May 29 drive-by shooting of David Patrick Underwood, a federal protective services officer, in Oakland. Carrillo is also a suspect in the June 6 murder of a Santa Cruz sheriff's deputy, authorities said. At the time of the attacks Carrillo was an active-duty staff sergeant stationed at Travis Air Force Base.

A second man, Robert Alvin Justus, Jr., is alleged to have driven the van used in the Oakland shooting.

The FBI believes both men are associated with the [Boogaloo movement](#), which federal officials say is not a defined group, but rather the ideology of heavily armed extremists who want to fight back against perceived government tyranny.

"It's on our coast now, this needs to be nationwide. It's a great opportunity to target the specialty soup bois," Carrillo said in Facebook group message on May 28, an FBI special agent wrote in a [federal criminal complaint filed Tuesday](#).

"Soup bois" is an apparent reference to federal law enforcement officers. Federal agencies, many known by their acronyms like "FBI," are sometimes called "alphabet agencies." The "soup boi" term is an apparently related reference to alphabet soup.

The post was followed by two fire emojis and a link to a YouTube video "showing a large crowd violently attacking two California Highway Patrol vehicles," according to the compliant.

"Let's boogie," Justus responded, according to the complaint.

"I believe that Justus' response 'let's boogie' is a statement of agreement and affirmation to engage in attacks on law enforcement personnel in accordance with Boogaloo ideology," an FBI special agent wrote.

Facebook has banned the use of the term "Boogaloo" and approximately 50 other derivatives of the term when they are accompanied by images or statements depicting armed violence, a spokesperson told CNN Business Wednesday. (Source: CNN)

(U) **Protest Misinformation is Riding on the Success of Pandemic Hoaxes:** After months spent battling covid-19, the US is now gripped by a different fever. As the video of George Floyd being murdered by Derek Chauvin circulated across social media, the streets around America—and then the world—have filled with protesters. Floyd's name has become a public symbol of injustice in a spiraling web of interlaced atrocities endured by Black people, including [Breonna Taylor](#), who was shot in her home by police during a misdirected no-knock raid, and [Ahmaud Arbery](#), who was murdered by a group of white vigilantes.

Meanwhile, on the digital streets, a battle over the narrative of protest is playing out in separate worlds, where truth and disinformation run parallel.

In one version, tens of thousands of protesters are marching to force accountability on the US justice system, shining a light on policing policies that protect white lives and property above anything else—and are **being met with the same brutality and indifference they are protesting against**. In the other, driven by Donald Trump, US attorney general Bill Barr, and the MAGA coalition, an alternative narrative contends that **anti-fascist protesters** are traveling by bus and plane to remote cities and towns to wreak havoc. This notion is inspiring **roving gangs of mostly white vigilantes** to take up arms.

These armed activists are demographically very similar to those who spread misinformation and confusion about the pandemic; the same Facebook groups have spread hoaxes about both; it's the **same older Republican base** that shares most fake news.

The fact that those who accept protest misinformation also rose up to challenge stay-at-home orders through “reopen” rallies is no coincidence: these audiences have been primed by years of political misinformation and then **driven to a frenzy** by months of **pandemic conspiracy theories**. The **infodemic** helped reinforce routes for spreading false stories and rumors; it's been the perfect breeding ground for misinformation.

When covid-19 hit like a slow-moving hurricane, most people took shelter and waited for government agencies to create a plan for handling the disease. But as the weeks turned into months, and the US still struggled to provide comprehensive testing, some began to agitate. Small groups, heavily armed with rifles and misinformation, held “reopen” rallies that were controversial for many reasons. They often relied on claims that the pandemic was a hoax perpetrated by the Democratic Party, which was colluding with the billionaire donor class and the World Health Organization. The reopen message was amplified by the anti-vaccination movement, which **exploited the desire for attention among online influencers** and circulated **rampant misinformation** suggesting that a potential coronavirus vaccine was part of a conspiracy in which Bill Gates planned to implant **microchips** in recipients.

several Twitter accounts outed themselves as influence operations bent on **calling for violence** and **collecting information about anti-fascists**. Twitter, too, confirmed that an “Antifa” account, running for three years, was tied to a now-defunct white nationalist organization that had helped plan the Unite the Right rally that killed Heather Heyer and injured hundreds more. Yet the “alt-right” and other armed militia groups that planned this gruesome event in Charlottesville have not drawn this level of concern from federal authorities.

Disinformation stating that the protests were being inflamed by Antifa quickly traveled up the chain from impostor Twitter accounts and throughout the right-wing media ecosystem, where it still circulates among calls for an armed response. This disinformation, coupled with widespread racism, is why **armed groups of white vigilantes** are lining the streets in **different cities and towns**. Simply put, when disinformation mobilizes, it endangers the public.

As researchers of disinformation, we have seen **this type of attack play out before**. It's called “**source hacking**”: a set of tactics where media manipulators mimic the patterns of their opponents, try to

obfuscate the sources of their information, and then slowly become more and more dangerous in their rhetoric. (Source: MIT Technology Review)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening**

- The majority of the COVID-19 discussion is regarding reopening as there are growing disagreements at the state, local and tribal level on COVID-19 response and many states continue to report increasing numbers. While some states move forward with starting various phases, a few are beginning to look at scaling back openings as a measure to manage growing numbers. Many officials have opposing views on whether face mask usage should be mandatory.
- News of a FEMA-awarded contract to Fillakit for unusable test tubes is gaining attention on both traditional and social media. There is heavy criticism over why the contract was awarded and the supplies that were delivered across the nation.
- There is increasing discussion about the US government and state governments now facing a surplus of hydroxychloroquine after the FDA revoked emergency use authorization.
- Since Tuesday afternoon, traditional media news coverage has consistently focused on growing infection rates and hospitalizations, suggesting uncertainty the virus is contained. States of concern include Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and California. Print and broadcast outlets continue to debate whether the cause is the public not adhering social safety guidelines or states testing individuals more frequently.
- The President's upcoming visit to Oklahoma is also drawing high media coverage as outlets debate attendees' personal risk for infection.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- As numbers continue to increase in some areas of the country there is increasing tension between state and local officials over how to manage the surging case counts. This is causing public confusion as some states attempt to continue to move ahead with plans to reopen.
  - Masks are at the center of much of this debate as some states are encouraging all residents to wear masks, while other states are penalizing localities that pass mask ordinances.
  - Although there may be a lack of agreement among officials, the majority of people are pushing for masks to be mandatory in public spaces.
- There is a growing volume of discussion around unconfirmed reports that the White House may be seeking to include \$40 billion in defense spending in forthcoming COVID-19 related rescue bills. Individuals and advocacy groups have responded with anger and believe the administration is not making individual citizens a priority in the COVID-19 response.

**(U) 6/17 Reporting**

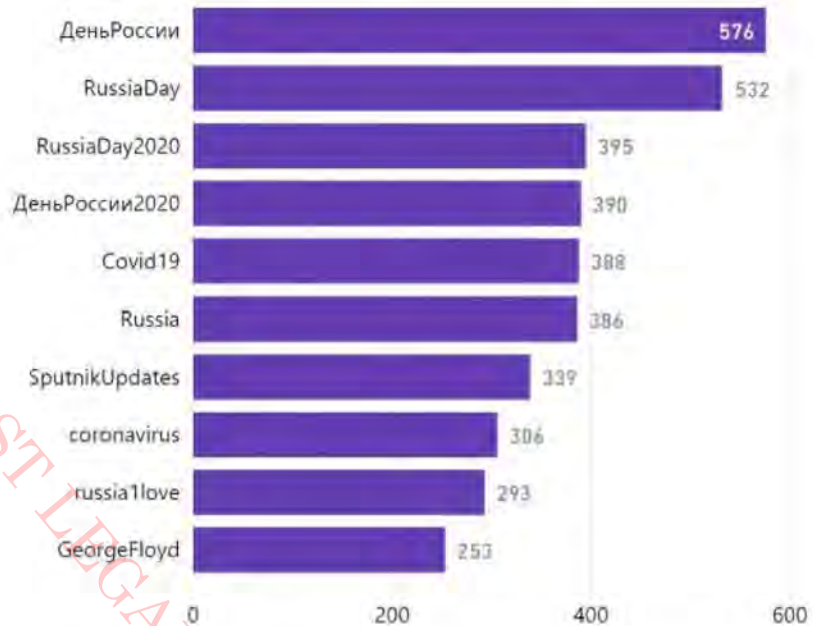
**(U) Russia, China, Iran State-Media Toplines Overview:** As with the past four months, the coronavirus was yet again the primary topic discussed by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian messengers, though the specific narratives differed depending on the country. China's diplomats and state media, for example, attacked a Harvard report suggesting that the coronavirus first appeared in Wuhan as early as August 2019, Russian messengers touted advances from Russian scientists in the development of a coronavirus vaccine, and Iranian state media promoted its humanitarian aid to Venezuela in defiance of U.S. sanction. In addition to coronavirus coverage, protests in the United States and other democratic countries were again a focus, though the volume of coverage dropped significantly (note: this report covers a date range before the shooting of Rayshard Brooks and subsequent protests in Atlanta). Across the three dashboards, uses of the hashtag #GeorgeFloyd declined by nearly 63 percent (though it remained the seventh most used hashtag overall), with #BlackLivesMatter and #GeorgeFloydProtests dropping out the top ten most used hashtags. At the same time, all three countries continued to use anti-racism protests in democratic countries as an opportunity to push their messaging hobby-horses, from historical revisionism narratives in the case of Russia to criticism of U.S. sanctions and "interference" in the cases of Iran and China. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

**(U) Russia State-Backed Media Toplines:** Both the coronavirus and the global anti-racism protests touched off by the killing of George Floyd were prominent topics for the Russian media ecosystem last week. Amid broader protest coverage, Russian media weighed in on various sides of the debate over the removal of monuments to historical figures involved in slavery, colonialism, and similar activities with lasting impacts on systemic discrimination. They largely highlighted the spectacle of statue removal and related claims about whether or not doing so constitutes historical revisionism. Russian diplomats on Twitter also marked Russian Language Day and Russia Day with a spate of messaging, some of which emphasized Russia's multiculturalism and unity.

## Twitter

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — June 6-12:



From June 6 to June 12, the dashboard collected about 18,000 tweets from tracked accounts, which is slightly up from the previous week. About 10 percent of collected tweets mentioned “virus,” “covid,” “outbreak,” or any combination of those terms, which was about the same proportion as the previous week. Meanwhile, about 7 percent referenced George Floyd specifically or used the word protest (or both), which was about half as much as the previous week. As normal, coronavirus coverage focused primarily on basic news, including reports of progress made on a potential treatment in Russia. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **China-State Backed Media Toplines:** With Beijing’s interest in the protests in the United States fading, last week marked a return of coronavirus-related stories at the top of Hamilton’s charts. In particular, a Harvard study using satellite imagery to suggest that the virus had appeared in Wuhan as early as August 2019 provoked a strong reaction from the Chinese government and media accounts monitored on the dashboard. In addition, a string of stories last week on Australia, Taiwan, and Xi Jinping’s visit to Ningxia province suggests that Beijing may be refocusing its attention on issues closer to home.

While Beijing remains interested anti-racism protests in the United States, the issue has fallen down its list of messaging priorities. After peaking as the third most-used hashtag by the network of Chinese accounts monitored on Hamilton two weeks ago, #GeorgeFloyd dropped to the sixth spot last week. In addition, the number of tweets per day that included the hashtag steadily declined in the latter half of the week.



That said, the Chinese propaganda apparatus still produced a steady stream of content covering the ongoing demonstrations in the United States:

#### *Coronavirus Stories Back at the Top*

Somewhat eclipsed in recent weeks by coverage of Beijing's national security law for Hong Kong and then by anti-racism protests in the United States, coronavirus was once again the focus of most of last week's top tweets. Hua Chunying, the spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry known for a couple of [highly controversial tweets](#) surrounding the killing of George Floyd, promoted an official report on China's supposedly exemplary containment of the outbreak.

On Facebook, coronavirus was the subject of the four most shared Chinese state media stories last week. The most shared story, "[China makes nucleic acid tests mandatory for eight groups of people](#)," was a very brief travel advisory, warning anyone traveling to China that they would be subjected to compulsory coronavirus testing upon arrival in the country.

Like two weeks ago, several stories combined coronavirus coverage with anti-racism protests in the United States. For instance, Xinhua's "[U.S.-style human rights' crisis magnified by COVID-19](#)" opens with the American government's poor response to the outbreak before seamlessly transitioning to issues of racial and economic inequalities in the country. A couple of video segments posted by CGTN contained similar narratives.

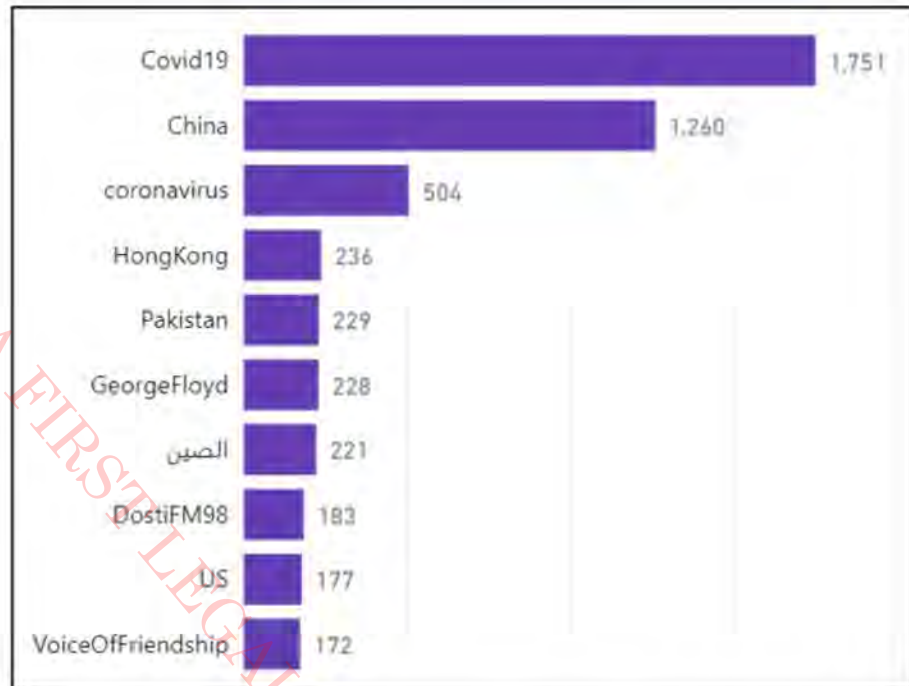
However, the coronavirus-related story that drew the most attention was the release of a Harvard study claiming that China had coronavirus cases as early as August 2019. Nationalist tabloid *Global Times* and its firebrand editor Hu Xijin led the countercharge against the university:

While the majority of coronavirus-related content published by state media covered basic news updates, a small percentage continued to push unfounded conspiracy theories. For instance, on June 12, *China Daily* posted an infographic about the "[Dark history of Fort Detrick biological warfare lab](#)." In this infographic, the reader can learn about the CIA's "mind control project" or about "secret psychochemical experiments on human subjects." The infographic strongly implies that the facility was behind the outbreak of coronavirus. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

## Twitter

Chinese state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags – June 6-June 12:



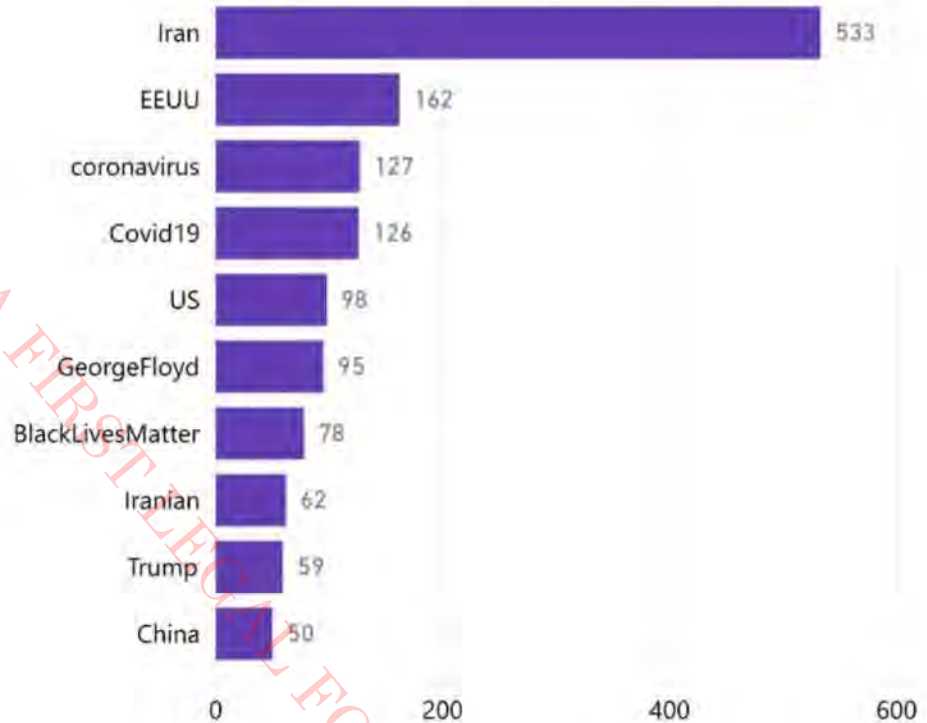
The Hamilton dashboard collected approximately 16,000 tweets from monitored Twitter accounts between June 6 and June 12, which was a slight decline from the past two weeks. The number of tweets containing the hashtags #GeorgeFloyd, #US, and #HongKong were down by more than 50 percent from the previous week, while uses of #Covid19 increased by more than 15 percent. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Iran-State Backed Media Toplines:** Iranian state-controlled media divided its focus this week between covering turmoil in the United States (both the coronavirus pandemic and ongoing protests against racism and police violence) and attacking American foreign policy for disregarding international laws and norms. These threads were occasionally woven together, as when President Hassan Rouhani declared that the United States has had its knee on the neck of Iran for years—a thinly veiled reference to the killing of George Floyd. A third minor thread in the narratives trumpeted achievements in furthering Iranian cooperation with Venezuela, casting the two countries as a bulwark against American pressure.

Twitter

Iranian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — June 6-June 12:



(Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **What to Do When Your Family Spreads COVID-19 Misinformation?** One morning in April, I woke up to 77 alerts from my family WhatsApp group. Usually, that many messages mean only one of two things: Either it's someone's birthday or someone has posted a video of their child singing a classical Indian song. This time, though, my family was talking about the coronavirus: One relative had sent a chart ranking the virus as less lethal than a dozen other diseases, and implying that it wasn't a global pandemic. Another had posted a video of a Gujarati-speaking man in scrubs telling people that a reliable, free coronavirus test involved holding one's breath. "If you don't cough after [the first] three seconds, you don't have coronavirus," he said. An aunt sent a message suggesting that everyone build immunity by drinking warm turmeric-infused water with ginger.

Psychologists have found that people are quicker to share unverified information with those closest to them, and they are more likely to believe fake news when it is sent by friends and family. These factors can turn family group chats into dangerous platforms for the spread of misinformation. Before the coronavirus commandeered our thoughts, careers, and freedom of movement, my family was just a scattered group of people popping in and out of one another's lives. We rarely discussed politics or climate change, and the most intense arguments occurred when parents attempted to outdo one

another with pictures of their children skiing in Tahoe or running a half marathon in Switzerland. Now coronavirus misinformation has poisoned the usually mundane feed, as it has many family conversations worldwide.

In times of crisis, people **derive** a sense of comfort from passing along information to their family members. During periods of high uncertainty, group discussion can give people the feeling that they have a sense of what's going on. In an interview with *Science* magazine, the sociologist Emma Spiro said that this process helps assuage people's anxieties, because it makes them feel as if they are making decisions "based on some communal group-level understanding of what is currently happening." But when the purpose of a conversation is to comfort, people become much more likely to send information that appeals to them rather than information grounded in facts.

Compounding this problem is people's increased tendency to believe misinformation when it comes from those with whom they have close ties, Cailin O'Connor, an associate professor of philosophy at UC Irvine, told me. Many people assess information they're receiving based on not just the quality of the information itself, but the degree to which they see themselves as socially and culturally similar to the person relaying it. "The closer you perceive yourself to [be to] someone ... the more you trust the information they're sharing," O'Connor said. "With families I would think, a lot of the time, that kind of closeness would be in place."

Family group chats are also likely to include people less familiar with social media and less used to filtering out the waves of misinformation on its platforms. My 80-year-old grandmother, for example, who lives in an Indian temple in Amish country, has an iPhone just for our weekly Google Hangouts. Once she's asked everyone whether they're okay, she hangs up on us mid-conversation. A 2019 **study** in *Science Advances* found that people from older generations tend to **share misinformation nearly seven times more** frequently than younger family members, even when factors such as education and partisan affiliation were taken into account.

To squelch the spread of misinformation, family members will have to be proactive in flagging fake news in group chats, even if it leads to uncomfortable conversations with loved ones. (Source: The Atlantic)

**(U) Australia Accuses China and Russia of Virus Disinformation:** China and Russia have used the anxiety around the coronavirus pandemic to undermine Western democracies by spreading disinformation online, Australia's foreign minister said.

The disinformation contributed to a "climate of fear and division" when the world needed cooperation and understanding, Foreign Minister Marise Payne said in a speech at Australian National University, a text of which was released by her office late Tuesday.

"Concerningly, we have seen disinformation pushed and promoted around the coronavirus pandemic and around some of the social pressures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic," Payne said.

"It is troubling that some countries are using the pandemic to undermine liberal democracy to promote their own more authoritarian models," she added.

Payne referred to a European Union commission report last week that said “foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China,” are flooding Europe with “targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns.” It cited dangerous misinformation like claims that drinking bleach can cure the disease and that washing hands does not help prevent its spread.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian rejected Payne’s accusations and said that China had “never used disinformation to improve our image, and there is no need for us to do so, either.” (Source: Seattle Times)

### (U) 6/16 Reporting

(U) **How Instagram Wellness Became a Gateway Drug for Conspiracy Theories:** Tab Sejoie first followed wellness influencer Pete Evans on Instagram for his recipes. A survivor of breast cancer, she has a long interest in the idea of food as medicine.

And for the most part, when he posted about his personal life or politics, the Melbourne-based designer and student ignored it and scrolled by.

But then there was what she saw as an “escalation” in cryptic posts. The coronavirus conspiracy theories, for example.

And when Mr Evans shared a meme that suggested the Black Lives Matter movement was part of a divisive plot, she couldn't ignore it any longer.

“It baffled me,” she said. “I rarely comment on a damn thing. I was so angry.”

Mr Evans' account is part of Instagram's lifestyle and wellness community — an influential network with a large audience, all sharing some commitment to the basic tenets of contemporary wellbeing: healthy body, healthy mind, and hopefully, healthy wallet.

But then there was a pandemic. Rarely has the highly curated, vitamin-based aesthetic of mostly white Instagram influencers clashed so starkly with the complexities of life under COVID-19: financial precarity, home schooling and stress.

Australian model and wellness entrepreneur Miranda Kerr [was called out in the New York Times](#) for posting a “virus protection” guide from a “medical medium”. [Celebrities were credited with helping push bogus claims](#) about 5G and coronavirus into the mainstream.

[A study of COVID-19 misinformation](#) from Oxford University found that while “top-down misinformation” from politicians, celebrities and public figures made up just 20 per cent of the claims in its sample, they accounted for 69 per cent of total social media engagement. (Source: ABC Science)

(U) **We Can’t Blame Covid-19 Misinformation on Bots:** It’s been a big summer for misinformation online. Reports circulated that Antifa members were leaving bricks on

every city corner to abet looters (they weren't), and that authorities had cut cellphone communication to thwart the protests (they hadn't). And then there was this alarming statistic out of Carnegie Mellon University: More than half of all coronavirus content on Twitter comes from bots.

About a dozen news outlets published the finding, based on a press release last month. According to Trendsmap.com, which analyzes Twitter data, those articles were tweeted and retweeted hundreds of thousands of times—including by Hillary Clinton, with a tweet that got more than 50,000 interactions. The only problem is that it's not quite true.

The figure was attributed to Carnegie Mellon computer science professor Kathleen Carley, who found that 62% of the top 1,000 retweeters on coronavirus information were bots. But Carley recently clarified to my colleague Alyza Sebenius that this finding was limited to the universe of "bots retweeting tweets posted by state-sponsored media accounts that are talking about the pandemic."

The actual finding, then, reflected the much narrower subset of Twitter users spreading government-issued virus information. Since the initial report from Carnegie Mellon, the school revised the press release to offer some nuance, but still made no mention of state-sponsored media.

The summary of Carley's findings is a preview of a yet-to-be-published study. Editing and peer-review could yield more clarity. "There are lots of findings we have that are not in the press release," Carley said. In the meantime, the grim reality is that on social media—particularly when it comes to misinformation—real-live humans are often just as bad, or worse, than robots.

Actual people on social media in 2020 are playing a greater role curating and disseminating misinformation than they were in 2015 and 2016, when bots influenced our feeds leading up to and through the presidential election, according to interviews with researchers at Clemson and Stanford Universities and a report published by Indiana University. Bots are playing a role in Covid-related information, but "the majority of volume is generated by likely humans," wrote the authors of the Indiana University paper. (Source: Bloomberg)

**(U) Australian Media Is Giving Anti-Vaxxers Nine Times More Coverage Than Usual. That's Bad for Everyone:** Australian media coverage of "anti-vax" issues has seen a major spike in recent months, with researchers worried the country is now seeing a potentially correlated drop in vaccinations.

Reporting of anti-vaccination activity increased ninefold in Australia in May while the number of people getting routine vaccinations dipped, according to Fairfax. And although both of these things can likely be chalked up to coronavirus—the ongoing race for a vaccine in the former case; social distancing and a lack of access to healthcare in the latter—experts fear the pandemic could also be emboldening anti-vaxxers and fuelling their campaign against vaccination science.

"COVID-19 has really rallied—and provided almost the perfect storm for—anti-vaccination activity," Associate Professor Margie Danchin, a paediatrician and vaccination expert at the University of Melbourne, the Royal Children's Hospital, and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, told Fairfax. "They are using strong language and playing on emotion and fear in the middle of a pandemic when people are concerned, frightened, and know there are no cures."

Dr Jessica Kaufman, a senior researcher who is working alongside Associate Professor Danchin, confirmed in an email to VICE that it was indeed the pandemic that's likely fueled interest in anti-vaxxer ideologies.

"The uncertain and rapidly-evolving nature of the pandemic means that conspiracy theories and misinformation about vaccination are spreading more quickly and more widely than usual, especially online," she wrote.

By "online", Dr Kaufman mostly means social media. But traditional media mastheads also have a responsibility to not give too many column inches to conspiracy theorists and truthers, lest they themselves become complicit in the spread of misinformation. While the topic of "whacky anti-vaxxers" has clearly piqued the interest of media outlets around the world—see the recent tabloid obsession with Australian celebrity chef Pete Evans as a case in point—those outlets need to strike the balance between calling out misinformation on the one hand, and amplifying transgressive and potentially dangerous voices on the other.

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Online conversation about COVID-19 has been mostly about rising case numbers in specific states. Many debate whether this is due to increased testing as White House officials have said, or due to protests and the easing of social distancing regulations.
- Some states continue pressing forward with their reopening plans as their case numbers remain low, while others have been forced to pause their progress.
- News of a new experimental COVID-19 treatment, reported to be effective and economic, is producing positive reactions among many.
- Traditional media coverage is increasingly focused on the reasons behind rising infection rates. Broadcast media has frequently focused on Texas and Florida's hospital capacities as their infection rates have reportedly surged in recent days.
- Other relevant subjects include the Federal Reserve chairman's testimony on fiscal and monetary policy before a U.S. Senate committee, and how the virus may more negatively affect underserved and minority communities nationwide as states try to fully reopen.

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- The majority of the discussion continues to be focused on growing case numbers and hospitalization rates across the country. Residents are beginning to question the strategy for reopening the country while others feel if we step back now we

will never reopen. o Research suggests positive COVID-19 cases are growing in areas where there is a strong partisan split in attitudes towards the pandemic. Areas and groups that have been more skeptical are now also seeing an increase in numbers.

- There is frustration among the media and public health experts over what many perceive as a push to decrease testing in an attempt to decrease COVID-19 numbers. Many feel recent statements by the Administration make it appear testing is not a high priority as cases begin to surge.
- People are questioning how campaigning for the 2020 Presidential race should proceed in the face of COVID-19. There is concern regarding an upcoming campaign rally that could result in large crowds.
- There is continued concern over conditions at nursing homes across the country. Following reports that many nursing homes have not been inspected for procedures to stop the spread of COVID-19, many are questioning if enough is being done to support and protect older Americans.

#### U) 6/15 Reporting

**(U) Malicious State Actors Likely to Leverage COVID-19 Pandemic in Run Up to 2020 Election:** In the lead-up to the U.S.' 2020 Presidential Election, authoritarian actors, such as Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela, are expected to leverage the COVID-19 pandemic in their malign influence and disinformation campaigns to politically divide the American public. For example, experts predict authoritarian actors to scaremonger on if vote-by-mail is safe and legitimate. In similar research, the forthcoming U.S. presidential election is also magnifying concerns over the possible infiltration of Chinese propaganda through TikTok, while the Kremlin is using the technique of "pre-propaganda" to lay the groundwork for more overt messaging to American audiences through audience-building and myth-making. Simultaneously, false and misleading claims about COVID-19 continue to proliferate rapidly online, jeopardizing public health due to information volatility. In Eastern and Central Europe, Russia and China have been able to exploit Eastern and Central European fears that the EU and NATO have not been responsive enough to the challenges they face amid the pandemic. Also, the perception that the media environment predominantly presents disinformation about COVID-19 can reduce individuals' willingness to comply with official public health guidance (Source: Council on Foreign Relations)

**(U) The Perception That the Media Environment Predominantly Presents Disinformation About COVID-19 Can Reduce Individuals' Willingness to Comply with Official Public Health Guidance:** An examination of whether Dutch, German, American, and British citizens perceived their media environment as generally containing information regarding COVID-19 that was erroneous or inaccurate due to honest mistakes (misinformation) or intentionally misleading (disinformation) found that respondents had stronger perceptions of misinformation, rather than disinformation, in their media environment. While individuals perceiving a predominance of misinformation were more likely to comply with official guidelines and seek out trustworthy information, those perceiving disinformation were less likely to comply and decreased their consumption of media focused on COVID-19. Increasing



public trust in official sources of information and government's intentions to truthfully inform citizens is critical in promoting adherence to public health guidelines. (Source: HKS Misinformation Review)

**(U) Strategically Created, Framed, and Marketed, Misinformation is Typically Only Spread in Niche Communities, but Echo-Chambers Can Also Reach More Mainstream Audiences:** Typically, when people search for information regarding COVID-19, they also come across misinformation, creating an opportunity for propagators of misinformation to strategically create content that is easy to spread. In the case of the studied "Plandemic" video, its polished editing and mainstream-friendly presentation contributed to its overall virality. To reduce the spread of viral misinformation, social media sites should reduce the publicity of information on platform recommendations and search algorithms while being fact-checked, annotate videos under fact-check, and downrank or eliminate re-post of information that is deemed misinformation. (Source: Stanford Internet Observatory)

**(U) Misinformation is Dangerous to Public Health and Difficult to Combat Due to Information Volatility:** Subject matter, culture, and network dynamics influence how public health misinformation is spread and proliferated. Moreover, some groups and individuals are more susceptible to related misinformation depending on how they seek information. In the case of COVID-19, misinformation is typically centered around the topics of disease transmission, treatments, and vaccinations. However, because new information and findings surrounding COVID-19 are constantly emerging, it is difficult to identify and correct misinformation about the disease. Effective information monitoring and quantifying tools, public information verifications, and increased public understanding vis-a-vis digital education curriculums can help address the aforementioned issues. (Source: Harvard Kennedy School)

**(U) Twitter Busts China's Info War Campaign Against Hong Kong, Pandemic:** Twitter has helped take down what has been called the Wu Mao army, or the 50-Cent Army of pro-China, anti-Trump, anti-Hong Kong protester Twitter accounts that made Russia's 2016 influence campaign on Facebook look like child's play.

The "50 Cent Army" is a group of state-backed internet commenters whose numbers have reportedly ranged from 500,000 to two million, the U.S. government funded Voice of America [wrote](#) in October 2016. The root of the nickname - the idea that the government pays 0.50 renminbi per pro-China post - was debunked as conspiracy.

Wu Mao is considered a common online insult in China's social media lexicon, but they're real and they got revealed by Twitter on Friday

On Friday, Twitter said it found 32,242 accounts and listed them as foreign state-linked information operations. The account sets [we're publishing to the archive](#) on Friday, the only archive of foreign agents on social media.

All the accounts were linked to China, Russia, and Turkey. And all of them were permanently removed from Twitter.

Accounts were suspended for various violations of their [platform manipulation](#) policies.

Twitter said it found 23,750 accounts that comprise the core of the China network, those who were most active in posting.

Around 150,000 other accounts were set up to boost those 23,000, serving as amplifiers of the message.

The main messenger accounts — the 23,750 Twitter users — were caught early and “failed to achieve considerable traction on the service, typically holding low follower accounts and low engagement,” Twitter said.

In regards to the amplifier accounts, the majority had little to no followers and were set up to inflate impression metrics and engage with the core messengers.

Twitter said that the network was “involved in a range of manipulative and coordinated activities.” They were Tweeting predominantly in Chinese languages and spreading geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party of China.

The main messenger accounts sent out a total of 348,608 tweets. (Source: Forbes)

**(U) Pandemic And Conspiracy Theories Delay 5G At Retail:** One of the unsung casualties of the pandemic for retailers may be 5G technology and its rollout. Its proponents had Christmas visions of dressing room tech, augmented reality (AR) experiences and even supply chain efficiencies that grow from the increased bandwidth that the technology can deliver. But a funny thing happened on the way to 5G’s coming out party. Even more bizarre than the pandemic itself was a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus was caused by 5G towers.

For example, a specific conspiracy theory is that 5G radiation is lowering human immune defenses, making people more vulnerable to the virus — a theory that **Dr. Simon Clarke**, associate professor in cellular microbiology at the University of Reading, has called “complete rubbish,” according to the **BBC**. These theories have consequences. By May, there were a reported 77 attacks on U.K. phone masts and cell tower employees, **RCR Wireless reported**, with more in other countries like **the Netherlands** and the U.S. The conspiracy theories are so prevalent that Twitter has announced it will be adding fact-checking labels to tweets that suggest a link between 5G mobile networks and the coronavirus.

5G’s upside is undeniable. The question is when it will be rolled out. Apple did not mention 5G on its most recent earnings call. Verizon, AT&T and T-Mobile are currently locked in a race to align their brands with the technology via devices, marketing and installations. On Wednesday (June 10) Verizon **announced** it has brought 5G to Detroit. Later this month customers in parts of Indianapolis and Los Angeles will have access to enhanced 5G Home service, and by the end of 2020, 5G Home Internet will be available in 10 cities nationwide. (Source: PYMNTS)

**(U) EU: China, Russia Waging Broad Pandemic Disinformation Campaign to Deepen Crisis:** The European Union, in an unusually blunt language, has **accused** Russia and China of a running a broad, sustained, and “targeted” disinformation campaign inside the European Union, aiming to deepen and lengthen the coronavirus pandemic crisis and its negative medical, economic, and social effects.

The two countries' sophisticated disinformation and propaganda machineries have been aiming to increase confusion and anxiety by spreading conspiracy theories; promoting fake medications and treatments; and spreading lies about governments' policies and approaches in order to increase people's mistrust in scientists and medical experts, and in the EU governments and medical establishments.

The European commission said Russia and China were running "targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighborhood, and globally." The EU said it was setting out a plan to tackle a "huge wave" of false facts and hoaxes about the coronavirus pandemic spread by the two countries.

The EU has singled out Russia in the past for its aggressive disinformation campaigns across the continent –campaigns carried out by the GRU, Russia's military intelligence branch, and the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA). These are the same outfits which, in 2016, helped Donald Trump win the U.S. presidential election, and which have continued an active social media disinformation campaign in the United States since then. The Russian disinformation specialists are currently engaged in spreading falsehoods about the Floyd protests, and using fake social media account to encourage violence.

The direct accusation of China, however, is a first for the EU, and a break from its approach to China so far. (Source: Homeland Security Wire)

### **(U) 6/11 Reporting**

**(U) Pro-Kremlin Media Re-Pivots to COVID-19 After Two Weeks of Decreased Coverage:** While concerns persist about a potential second wave of COVID-19 as countries relax restrictions, the pro-Kremlin media is showing renewed appetite for coronavirus-related disinformation. Indeed, the involvement of foreign actors like Russia and China in spreading disinformation and amplifying conspiracy theories about COVID-19 has been highlighted in a new Communication by European Commission Vice President Věra Jourová and High Representative Josep Borrell, [presented](#) on Wednesday.

The cases we saw this week were mostly rote repetition of the narratives recorded previously. The coronavirus has [destroyed the European Union](#) and [proved NATO worthless](#). Bill Gates is [behind the virus](#) and plans to use vaccines to [cull the world population](#). The West has responded to the pandemic by [sacrificing the sick and elderly](#), but at the same time exaggerated the threat [thanks to "matriarchal hysteria"](#).

Claims that the coronavirus [came from a laboratory](#) and is [artificially made](#) remain especially common. These also feed into another common trope in pro-Kremlin disinformation, for which the pandemic provides especially fertile soil: that the US is operating biolabs around the world and [creating ethnic weapons](#). For example, we saw claims that [US laboratories in Ukraine](#) are [testing bioweapons on Slav](#)

populations, and that people of Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan are “biomaterial” for the Pentagon. In these scenarios, Russia is of course portrayed as the ultimate victim of US aggression.

So what’s this week’s takeaway? Never let a good crisis go to waste – that is the unspoken motto of certain pro-Kremlin media. The tragedy and suffering of others often makes the best fuel for the disinformation fire. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

**(U) Coronavirus Contact Tracers Are Facing Death Threats And Comparisons To Nazis On Facebook And YouTube:** In reality, contact tracers carrying out the essential work of tracking the spread of the novel coronavirus are key public health responders to the pandemic. But online, they are being compared to the German secret police and facing death threats, according to a new report shared exclusively with BuzzFeed News.

The [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), a London-based think tank researching online disinformation, has found dozens of Facebook posts and YouTube videos spreading hoaxes and lies about contact tracers have received hundreds of thousands of views since the beginning of the pandemic.

And it's worried that the posts present a danger to public health.

“We very quickly started to see a pretty concerted effort to direct existing conspiracy theories and disinformation tropes toward the contact tracing narrative,” Chloe Colliver, head of digital analysis and policy at ISD, told BuzzFeed News.

The new ISD report showed four types of activity around contact tracing falsehoods: claims about “FEMA internment camps,” big tech involvement, global elites, and the 2020 US elections. Although contact tracing has spawned fears of increased surveillance worldwide, it has also been essential in tracking and slowing the spread of the virus.

Thirteen hours after this article was published, Facebook said the company removed examples sent by BuzzFeed News but did not address larger issues of threats against contact tracers on the platform.

According to YouTube, several of the videos highlighted in the report did not break the company’s policy, but the social media network said it was removing comments that did not adhere to its harassment policies. (Source: Buzzfeed News)

**(U) Google, Facebook, and Twitter to Produce Regular Reports on COVID-19 Disinformation for the EU:** The EU is stepping up efforts to combat online disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, requesting that US tech giants produce monthly reports containing “detailed data” on how they are combatting fake news about COVID-19 on their platforms.

Google, Facebook, and Twitter are the prime targets of this campaign, and the three companies told *The Verge* they would be complying with the EU’s requests. Exactly what steps they will take, though, and when they might start producing reports is unknown.

The EU is worried that misinformation surrounding the coronavirus could prolong the effects of the pandemic. This is a particular problem with the anti-vaccine movement, which has an outsized influence online and will likely rally against any future COVID-19 vaccine. Scientist say a vaccine is necessary for

countries around the world to return to normal, but many nations are easing lockdown measures anyway, inviting a second wave of infections.

While additional information on COVID-19 misinformation could help coordinate responses across the tech industry, it's not clear if the EU's request will produce that useful data.

For a start, tech giants are not legally required to produce these new monthly reports. There's also no guidance on exactly what the reports should contain, and companies *The Verge* spoke to said they were still working out what information to include.

The request is also not part of the EU's voluntary [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), which requires signatories like Google, Facebook, and Twitter to "report on a monthly basis on their actions undertaken to improve the scrutiny of ad placements, ensure transparency of political and issue-based advertising and to tackle fake accounts and malicious use of bots."

Spokespersons for Google, Facebook, and Twitter, told *The Verge* they supported the EU's efforts and had already stepped up plans to combat misinformation about the pandemic on their platforms. Facebook and Google said they were committed to producing new monthly reports, while Twitter said it was still considering how to present this information, but that it would be adding regular updates to its coronavirus misinformation [blog](#). (Source: The Verge)

(U) **Fact check: Google is not pushing a COVID-19 tracing app onto Android phones:** Posts circulating on Facebook are warning Android phone users that they are being signed up for a COVID-19 tracing app by Google without their knowledge. This claim is incorrect.

Various posts shared hundreds of times ([here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) ) advise people with an Android device to go to Google Services in their phone settings, look for COVID-19 Exposure Notifications on top of the list and turn them off by going to Usage & Diagnostics.

"Android users BEWARE, Google automatically signed you up to COVID-19 tracing app" reads a claim on the top of the post.

The claim is incorrect. A Google spokeswoman told Reuters that the COVID-19 Exposure Notifications do not indicate that a tracing app has been installed without the user's consent. The new feature, when turned on, enables contact tracing apps to send the user a notification if they have likely been exposed to COVID-19, but it only works after an app has already been installed. (Source: Reuters)

(U) **Facebook Now Allows Ads for Some Face Masks:** Facebook [announced](#) Wednesday that it will lift the blanket ban on advertisements for face masks, which it introduced in the early weeks of the pandemic to help combat price gouging and medical supply shortages.

Now the ban will only apply to medical-grade masks, or ads that make dubious claims about certain masks offering protection from the virus to profit from the pandemic.

But ads for masks -- with and without medical claims -- [continued to pop up](#) all over the platform, including from big-name brands, up until the ban was lifted on Wednesday. (Source: CNN)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- The majority of discussion on both traditional and social media today focused on rising case counts across the country. There is debate about whether numbers are growing due to increased testing or increased exposure as more states move forward with reopening their economies.
- As confirmed cases grow, so do the number of hospitalizations in many areas causing increased concern over hospital bed and resource availability. Some states are beginning to discuss contingency plans for how to scale back reopening plans if needed.
- FEMA conversation as it relates to COVID-19 has been fairly low today and is mostly focused on traditional media stories regarding issues with PPE shipments to nursing homes, and documents that show deaths per day increasing.
- In addition to the spike in cases in about half the states dominating COVID-19 news in the traditional media today, there was additional concern regarding fatality projection models expected to reach 170,000 and reports of faulty PPE being delivered to nursing homes. News stories attribute new infections and hospitalizations to increased testing capacity, not wearing facemasks and higher community spread as state reopen. Focal areas are Alaska, Arizona, Tennessee, Utah and Texas.

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- Some news outlets have officially declared that a second wave of COVID-19 has arrived as numbers continue to rise in several states. ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)) o Much of the general public are challenging this declaration, saying an increase in numbers is to be expected due to expanded testing and increased social and economic activity.
  - o There is an ongoing sense of mistrust towards traditional media regarding COVID-19 reporting with many accusing the media of fear-mongering.
- Public health officials are pushing back on the concept that case numbers are increasing [due to more widespread testing](#). They want the general public to understand numbers are not increasing just because we weren't able to track them as well prior to increased testing. They want there to be an understanding that numbers are increasing because the number of people contracting COVID-19 is increasing.

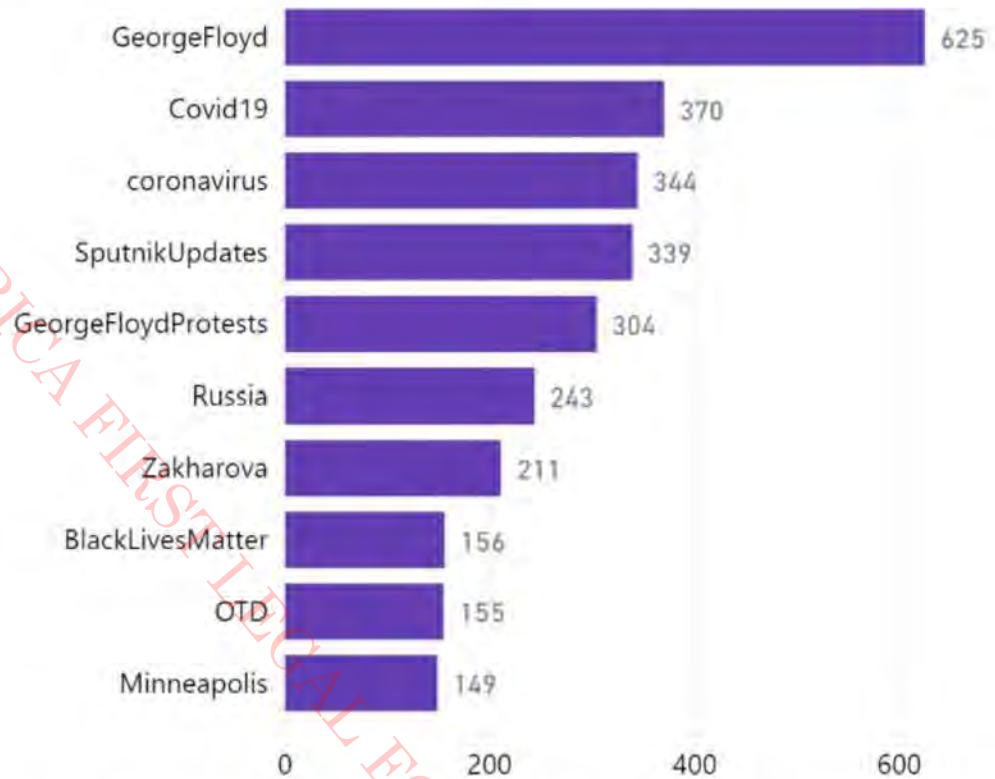
**(U) 6/10 Reporting**

(U) **Russia and China-State Media Weekly Trends:** Russian and Chinese government officials and state media continued to use the ongoing protests and unrest following the killing of George Floyd to portray the United States as a country that is at once repressive and lawless. Beyond highlighting incidents of looting and police brutality (particularly against foreign journalists), both countries also sought to cast the U.S. response to protestors as hypocritical in light of past and present criticisms of human rights abuses in other countries. In the past week, “hypocrisy,” “double standard,” and related search terms appeared in nearly 200 tweets and 20 articles across the two dashboards. Analysis of those tweets and articles revealed nearly identical talking points, though China framed its “whataboutism” narratives in the context of U.S. support for protesters in Hong Kong, while Russia focused on alleged U.S. hypocrisy around the globe. These messages targeted both U.S. and global audiences, as evidenced by the fact that George Floyd was a top topic and hashtag from accounts as diverse as RT Deutsche and CGTN Africa. While both Chinese and Russian messengers posted or promoted content that was occasionally hyperbolic, often provocative, and almost universally full of schadenfreude, there was scant evidence of the distribution or amplification of false or misleading information. As with the previous week, the goal appeared to be damaging the appeal of western democracy at home and undermining U.S. credibility abroad, rather than influencing or radicalizing protestors in the United States.

(U) **Russian State-Media Toplines:** Like the previous week, coverage of the George Floyd protests and related developments dominated the Russian media ecosystem last week. Prominent themes associated with this topic included commentary on the impact of systemic racism and police brutality in the United States on the country’s global standing, emphasis on scenes of chaos and destruction, and incidents of violence against journalists covering the demonstrations. A small amount of content also pushed back on the idea of Russian involvement in the protests, recycling the standard argument that Russia is used as a scapegoat for domestic problems in the West – a position that Russia takes whenever any such claims are made. The coronavirus also remained an important topic, with pandemic coverage essentially sticking to basic news updates as the primary focus shifted to the demonstrations.

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags – May 30-June 5:



On Russian government-funded news websites, about 27 percent of output mentioned “protest” in the first 200 words, compared with 24 percent that mentioned “virus.” This marks another week of relative decline in pandemic-related content, which again mainly focused on straight news coverage. Notable among the top articles by Facebook shares about the coronavirus were articles on the Chinese lab origin theory, an op-ed critical of UK government messaging about the pandemic, and an op-ed blasting the alleged hypocrisy of those who abandoned previous calls for social distancing in light of the massive George Floyd protests:

[“Coronavirus was released from Chinese lab by ‘accident’, former MI6 chief claims, cites new study as proof,” RT, June 4, 2020.](#)

*“A new peer-reviewed study shows that the Covid-19 outbreak started as a faulty experiment in China, the ex-head of MI6 says. The paper he cited was reportedly “watered down” to remove accusations against Beijing.”*

[“Is public opinion on Covid-19 being shaped by facts – or ‘terrorized’ by propaganda?” Op-ed, RT, May 30, 2020.](#)

*“Have censorship of scientists, alarmist messaging and conspiracy theory smears all been used to reinforce the ‘official’ narrative on coronavirus? Can these distortions ever be justified? One of the*



*problems with researching and writing about propaganda is that so many people believe it is something alien to democratic states.”*

*“We were told for months we’d never gather in public again ‘because Covid-19.’ Where do the week’s riots leave ‘social distancing’?” Op-ed, RT, June 1, 2020.*

*“The same people who convinced Americans to lock themselves inside for months for fear of a killer virus have forsaken Covid-19 to urge us all to join nationwide protests. If anyone took them seriously before, those days are over. Media, politicians and celebrities who spent the past three months lecturing Americans about the importance of staying home and keeping at least six feet away from all other humans lest they catch or spread the deadly coronavirus have suddenly pivoted on a dime – seemingly as one – to cheering on those Americans defying their advice to pour into the streets and join nationwide protests against police brutality.”*

In website articles and opinion pieces on topics other than the George Floyd protests and coronavirus updates, both Sputnik and RT published pieces critical of the UK reversal of its previous decision to allow Huawei into its 5G infrastructure. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **China-State Media Toplines:** Chinese state media, as well as social media accounts from officials and diplomats, devoted a significant part of their attention to the protests and demonstrations that have taken place in cities across the United States and beyond in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. The salience of the topic was apparent in the coverage of recurring issues such as unrest in Hong Kong or COVID-19, which were frequently oriented so as to mention American protests. By shining a spotlight on discrimination in the United States and anti-racism reactions across the globe, Beijing portrayed its rival as completely isolated, even from its closest allies.

Beijing’s eagerness to portray the United States as isolated (a theme that began with COVID-19 messaging), was evidenced by Chinese state media coverage of Black Lives Matter and anti-racism demonstrations taking place around the world. Beijing’s coverage of President Trump’s announcement that the United States was exiting the WHO was also used to cast the country as selfish and isolated.



Cutting the lifeline #ChinaDailyCartoon #COVID\_19 #WHO

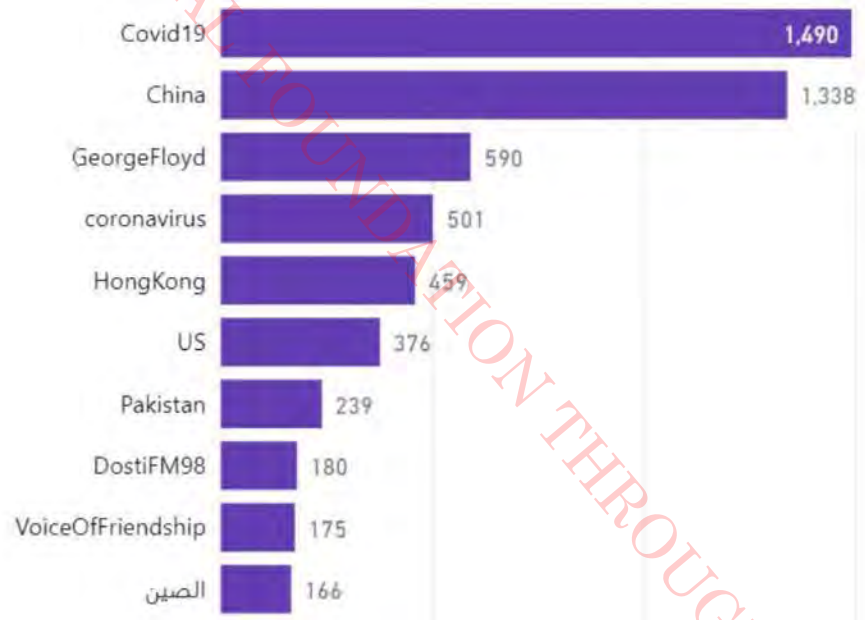


7:00 PM · Jun 1, 2020

Twitter:

Chinese state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags - May 30-June 5:



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 17,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts from May 30 to June 5, down slightly as compared to the previous week. While COVID-19 was still the most frequent hashtag in the network's communications, it was on a downward trend as compared to previous weeks. In addition, a portion of the tweets using virus-related hashtags were, in fact, focused on racism and protests in the United States.



Opinion 16:17, 30-May-2020

U.S. withdrawal from WHO would take a toll on the U.S. and the world

Yuan Sha



**(U) Disgraced Plandemic Star Judy Mikovits Defended a Bogus Bleach Product as a COVID-19**

**Treatment:** Judy Mikovits, the **discredited scientist** who stars in the lie-filled conspiracy theory film *Plandemic*, recently appeared on the podcast of a church that has sold a chlorine dioxide product as a coronavirus cure and defended the organization's promotion of the bogus and dangerous treatment. The Food and Drug Administration has **stated** that "chlorine dioxide products have not been shown to be safe and effective for any use, including COVID-19."

The **Genesis II Church of Health and Healing**, which is **led** by Mark Grenon, has **touted** supposed "protocols" and products related to Miracle Mineral Solution (MMS), a **bleach product** that the church **falsely claims** can cure a variety of ailments, including the coronavirus.

The Department of Justice has **gone after** the church for selling MMS, stating that it "is a chemical product which, when combined with the included activator, creates a powerful bleach product that the defendants market for oral ingestion. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has previously issued public warnings to consumers that MMS can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and symptoms of severe dehydration." In April, a U.S. district court **ordered** Genesis to stop selling the product.

In Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration has **fined** an **affiliate of the church** for pushing MMS. The Federal Court of Australia has also **ordered** the chapter to stop advertising and supplying the product.

Genesis **produces** the *G2Voice* podcast. Its May 31 episode featured a roughly hour-long interview with **Mikovits**, a **conspiracy theorist** who has recently **gained fame** after she wrote *Plague of Corruption* and starred in *Plandemic*. In that film, which has spread due to **social media**, **Mikovits pushes numerous false claims** related to the coronavirus. (Source: Media Matters)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- Debates over the need and efficacy of masks are ongoing. Many feel masks are no longer needed and are expressing anger and frustration over areas that are enforcing mandatory mask orders. There is some concern that as the weather gets hotter it will become more difficult for people to wear masks.
- A large number of states have released plans for the K-12 school systems. Plans vary in the amount of information and options provided to parents. Parents are in agreement that most plans seem unreasonable but are split over how best to move forward.
- Traditional news media is slowly, but increasingly reporting on upticks in infections and hospitalizations in different states echoing the growing concern online of another wave. Other topics of interest in traditional media include increasing testing efforts at prisons, nursing homes, and ICE detention facilities, followed by renewed questioning on how fast a vaccine can be developed, approved, and distributed.
- Yesterday's Senate hearing with FEMA's administrator received some follow-up online news coverage focused on an internal FEMA document on PPE reuse and limited supplies, which was questioned by one New Hampshire senator.

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- There is still intense debate over whether people should be required to wear masks in public places. A growing number of people are saying they do not see the need for them or that they choose to only wear them in certain places.
  - As it heats up outside, there is concern that warm temperatures could make wearing a mask more difficult for those with pre-existing health conditions.
  - Tensions are coming to a head in some areas where people are becoming threatening or aggressive towards those who encourage masks. In Orange County, California, the health officer resigned after she received threats due to her order that residents need to wear face coverings if they're near other people in public.
- There is increasing debate and criticism over plans for schools to reopen. Many parents feel the plans being released by states are unrealistic and will be too difficult to successfully execute. This leaves parents largely split between wanting to continue to homeschool or send children back with limited restrictions.

### (U) 6/9 Reporting

**(U) Confused About Screen Time and Disinformation? You Aren't Alone:** As the world careens from one crisis to another—as COVID-19 brings us closed schools and massive unemployment, as horrific videos of police brutality spark more than a week of nationwide protests—one thing has been constant and concerning: We are devouring digital media, seeking out information and scrolling for solace.

How were we supposed to know that a widely distributed [photo of the Washington Monument on fire during the protests was a total fake](#)? Where do we turn when someone makes [the false claim that masks are bad for our health](#)? We never got training on which plants are poison. Meanwhile, when we can pull ourselves away from our own on-screen odysseys, we are supposed to be helping teach our stuck-at-home kids, steering them away from toxic memes and violent media and toward the good stuff, when we have had little to no guidance on what the good stuff even looks like.

As the world careens from one crisis to another—as COVID-19 brings us closed schools and massive unemployment, as horrific videos of police brutality spark more than a week of nationwide protests—one thing has been constant and concerning: We are devouring digital media, seeking out information and scrolling for solace.

And, let's face it, we're seeking and scrolling *in the dark*. We're doing this literally, as we sit up at 2 a.m. in our bedrooms, scrolling and clicking and unable to sleep. And figuratively, clicking through mazes of media messages on social media, pushing through brush to find a trail. Most of us have had no guides to orient us in this streaming and screaming digital world.

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We need a hell of a lot more trail maps and flashlights. And we desperately need media mentors and trusted digital navigators—real people who can guide us through this churning media landscape. We need the librarians, educators, and local communication experts who know how to help students, parents, and members of the public gain a deeper understanding of how media is made, who is behind media messages and what their motivations may be, and how to become selective and discerning as we click and share. These are not people who wag fingers or make people feel ashamed about how they are using technology and media tools. Their job is to listen, respond, and create space for talking about media and what we want from it.

At the moment these mentors are rare. Our governments, education systems, and marketplaces have not invested in these kinds of people. School librarians, for example, are trained to provide this kind of guidance, yet they have been losing their jobs. (In California, for example, [according to School Library Journal](#), a \$6 billion cut to K–12 schools in 2009 led to more than half of school libraries across the state being without librarians; new money was supposed to arrive this year, but COVID-related closures are crippling state budgets.)

Most teachers have received little preparation on how to talk to their students about technology and media, let alone help them become savvier about using social media networks. Many educators feel overwhelmed by what they are already expected to teach their students, and they aren't given support to integrate digital media literacy into their classrooms. Large-scale research studies on how to effectively teach these skills do not exist. And parents have been misled into thinking their job is to track time spent on a screen, as if what matters most is tallying minutes instead of helping kids be responsible digital citizens and creators of positive change online.

But maybe you are one of the lucky ones who do happen to have media mentors. They are rare but not mythical. Right now, even during this wear-a-mask #StayAtHome saga, media literacy educators and information literacy specialists are finding ways to guide people through the wilderness. Julie Smith, an instructor of media communications at Webster University and author of [Master the Media](#), is fielding emails from her students and extended family about whether to believe rumors on social media about the novel coronavirus and answering questions on a local radio talk show. Renee Hobbs, professor of communication studies at University of Rhode Island and co-founder of the [Summer Institute on Digital Literacy](#), hosted Virtually Viral Hangouts as a daily online public forum for providing both emotional support and online learning during the first 12 weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 120 people participated in at least one session, and many of them were educators who created pieces of media together and gleaned ideas for teaching future classes.

And public libraries are playing a role too, through means such as hosting “Ask a Librarian” virtual office hours to answer questions on where to find e-books and troubleshoot tech problems. These efforts may not sound like they have any connection to the plague of disinformation, but they are laying a foundation for helping people to build skills in using—and becoming savvier about the use of—media and technology. To help those without good internet access, the Schaumburg Township District Library in Illinois has created a number for [Dial-a-Stories](#) to maintain a connection with community families, and, with each story told, young children gain a chance to learn to listen closely and think about what the author intended for them to hear. Claudia Haines—a co-author of [Becoming a Media Mentor](#), the

brains behind the [Never Shushed website](#), and a public librarian in Homer, Alaska—is broadcasting storytime on the local AM radio for her rural community of 6,000. She has become enough of a trusted guide that one mother emailed this week to ask for advice on which books on anti-racism to check out for her child. Haines sent her multiple options for curbside checkout.

There are also new websites, online courses, teaching tools, and videos designed to train us on how to find and share well-sourced information and avoid falling victim to the “infodemic” of disinformation spreading virally around the world. The National Association for Media Literacy Education has published [a growing list of tools, tips, articles, and online teaching resources](#) for avoiding and building critical thinking skills in the midst of the pandemic. IREX, known for its work on media literacy outside the U.S., has developed an English version of its online course, [Very Verified](#). The public station KQED is producing [Above the Noise](#), a YouTube series for teens, which includes [advice on spotting deepfakes](#). Crash Course has produced a series on [navigating online information](#). The News Literacy Project has developed infographics on how to [Sanitize Before You Share](#) to stop the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and more. Snopes has [special coverage debunking rumors](#) swirling around George Floyd’s killing. [@MediaWise](#) on Twitter, run by the Poynter Institute, gives daily reminders of how to avoid being duped.

And CIVIX, a Canadian nonprofit focused on civic education and combating information pollution, introduces its offerings by first showing [a video of Michael Caulfield](#), director of networked and blended learning at Washington State University–Vancouver. In the video, Caulfield (who has also created a blog, [Sifting Through the Pandemic](#)) introduces a source-checking technique based in part on “lateral reading,” an acclaimed concept rooted in [research from Stanford](#). (Instead of just checking a website for its “About” page, do what good fact-checkers do: Open a new tab on your web browser and conduct a simple keyword search to see what other sources have written on that topic.) As Caulfield says, “While getting to absolute certainty is a never-ending task, getting confident enough to make the sort of decisions that you need to make is within your grasp—and a skill you can learn in a short amount of time.”

It is great to see these tools, tutorials, and video messages emerging online. They are as essential as the orange blazes on the tree trunks, keeping us on track. But it seems likely that the people using these resources are already alert to disinformation and know they need help, or they are educators given enough leeway to teach these skills. What about the people not even aware there is a problem? A big challenge for media literacy proponents is to expand the circle of people who want to learn. That is why we need mentors in our communities who know the locals. They make themselves available for conversation and interaction. (They might start, for example, by offering workshops to help parents with worries about their kids’ media use, by launching a film club for older adults, or by starting a podcasting clinic for teens.) They listen to what their constituents need. And then they model what it looks like to inquire about, seek, create, and share the most credible information.

They understand that, ultimately, what they are helping people to develop is a critical form of literacy. Because just [putting a label on a tweet won’t be enough](#), and, as the Washington Post reported, [even Snopes can’t keep up with all the misinformation and rumors](#); we need to train our brains to sort information no matter what comes our way. (Source: Slate)

(U) **Facebook Needs 30,000 of Its Own Content Moderators, Says a New Report:** Imagine if Facebook stopped moderating its site right now. Anyone could post anything they wanted. Experience seems to suggest that it would quite quickly become a **hellish environment** overrun with spam, bullying, crime, terrorist beheadings, neo-Nazi texts, and images of child sexual abuse. In that scenario, vast swaths of its user base would probably leave, followed by the lucrative advertisers.

But if moderation is so important, it isn't treated as such. The overwhelming majority of the 15,000 people who spend all day deciding what can and can't be on Facebook don't even work for Facebook. The whole function of content moderation is farmed out to third-party vendors, who employ temporary workers **on precarious contracts** at over 20 sites worldwide. They have to review hundreds of posts a day, many of which are **deeply traumatizing**. Errors are **rife**, despite the company's adoption of **AI tools** to triage posts according to which require attention. Facebook has itself admitted to a 10% error rate, whether that's incorrectly flagging posts to be taken down that should be kept up or vice versa. Given that reviewers have to wade through three million posts per day, that equates to 300,000 mistakes daily. Some errors can have deadly effects. For example, members of Myanmar's military used Facebook **to incite genocide** against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority in 2016 and 2017. The company later admitted it **failed to enforce its own policies** banning hate speech and the incitement of violence.

If we want to improve how moderation is carried out, Facebook needs to bring content moderators in-house, make them full employees, and double their numbers, argues a **new report** from New York University's Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

Why is content moderation treated this way by Facebook's leaders? It comes at least partly down to cost, says report author Paul M. Barrett. His recommendations would be **very costly** for the company to enact—most likely in the tens of millions of dollars (though to put this into perspective, it makes **billions of dollars** of profit every year). But there's a second, more complex, reason. "The activity of content moderation just doesn't fit into Silicon Valley's self-image. Certain types of activities are very highly valued and glamorized—product innovation, clever marketing, engineering ... the nitty-gritty world of content moderation doesn't fit into that," he says.

The report makes eight recommendations for Facebook:

- Stop outsourcing content moderation and raise moderators' station in the workplace.
- Double the number of moderators to improve the quality of content review.
- Hire someone to oversee content and fact-checking who reports directly to the CEO or COO.
- Further expand moderation in at-risk countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere.
- Provide all moderators with top-quality, on-site medical care, including access to psychiatrists.
- Sponsor research into the health risks of content moderation, in particular PTSD.
- Explore narrowly tailored government regulation of harmful content.

- Significantly expand fact-checking to debunk false information. (Source: MIT Technology Review)

**(U) UK Conspiracy Theorists Are Hiding Razor Blades and Needles Behind Anti-5G Posters Put Up on Phone Masts in Bid to Stop Authorities Taking Them Down:** Conspiracy theorists are thought to be hiding razor blades and needles behind anti-5G posters put up on phone masts in a bid to stop the authorities taking them down.

Councils and engineering firms warned conspiracy theorists have concealed needles and sharp pieces of metal in their propaganda to stop them being removed.

The authority said some of these posters had blades placed behind them 'in a deliberate attempt to injure anyone who attempts to remove them'.

Openreach said employees have also seen posters booby-trapped with needles and razors.

A spokesman said: 'We've received reports from other telecommunications companies that anti-5G posters have started to appear on street equipment. (Source: The Daily Mail)

**(U) Bill Gates is Not Secretly Plotting Microchips in a Coronavirus Vaccine. Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous for Everyone:** While the United States spends billions in an all-out effort to develop a coronavirus vaccine, there's concern that when there finally is one, not enough people will take it to protect the population as a whole.

Even with a vaccine months and perhaps years away, misinformation and conspiracy theories about vaccines for COVID-19 are swirling online, potentially driving people away from getting vaccinated when one or more become available.

One of the wildest is a false story about a purported evil plan by Microsoft founder Bill Gates to use mass coronavirus vaccinations to implant microchips in billions of people to track their movements.

In a media call announcing \$1.6 billion in funding for immunization in poor countries, Gates said the misinformation about his work on vaccines was so weird he found it difficult to understand – and he categorically denied he's involved in any sort of microchipping conspiracy.

Health officials worry if too many Americans decline to get vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, the nation could find itself in a position where the disease continues to widely circulate despite a vaccine being available.

The goal is to create herd immunity, when enough people in the population have been infected and developed immunity to the virus that it can no longer spread freely. Scientists estimate 60 to 70% of the population needs to be immune to establish such immunity and stop the spread of COVID-19.

A Yahoo News/YouGov poll last month found that 19% of Americans said they won't get vaccinated when a vaccine is available and 26% weren't sure if they would. Public health officials hope when a vaccine is ready the lure of regaining normalcy will overcome such vaccine hesitancy. (Source: USA Today)



**(U) European Commission Wants Social Media to Report Monthly on Covid-19 Misinformation:**

Facebook, Google and Twitter will have to provide monthly updates on how they're tackling misinformation connected to COVID-19 under plans to be unveiled in the coming days by the European Commission, according to four officials and outside experts who have reviewed the proposals.

The latest push by Brussels to clamp down on rumors, bogus cures and state-backed disinformation linked to the global public health crisis will be published on Wednesday. It forms part of the Commission's wider efforts — to be published later this year — to overhaul how social media giants monitor and police online content.

As part of Wednesday's proposals, the Commission is expected to call for greater cooperation with international partners, including NATO and the G-7 group of the world's most wealthy nations, on combatting digital misinformation. Officials are also expected to call out both Russia and China for efforts to spread coronavirus disinformation aimed at undermining the West. (Source: Politico)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- Social media discussion continues to focus on states reopening. Concerns are growing as case counts begin to increase in a number of states leaving people questioning if our healthcare system is prepared for a potential second wave.
- There is a large amount of discussion on both social and traditional media about the recent announcement from WHO that COVID-19 rarely spreads through asymptomatic carriers. This is causing frustration and confusion among the general public who feel they have been receiving conflicting messages.
- There has been an increase in FEMA discussion throughout the day as local media focuses on funding that has been granted to several states and cities.
- Traditional media today focused much attention on the FEMA administrator's testimony to a Senate committee about the federal COVID-19 response and supplying of PPE. News reports are also noting record new infections now being reported in more than a dozen states, and record hospitalizations in Texas; stories tie the increases to public activity as states have reopened.

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- There is an increasing amount of anxiety over growing case counts following traditional news reports that numbers are spiking in states across the country. Many are reaching out to officials via social media to see if federal, state and local governments are prepared to handle and influx of cases – asking about the number of available hospital beds and access to PPE for frontline workers. o While this level of anxiety is growing, most people are accusing traditional media of trying to scare people particularly after reports that asymptomatic spread is rare.
- Intense debate continues to take place in social media over the World Health Organization's (WHO) statements about asymptomatic COVID-19 spreading being rare.
- This has led many to be confused over conflicting information which also states that nearly half of COVID-19 cases may be traced to asymptomatic spreaders. People in social media are questioning the validity of scientific findings about the virus.

- Public Health experts are also criticizing the WHO's messaging about COVID-19 as being unclear. (example 1, example 2)
- Following reports of recent Harvard Medical School research that suggests the COVID-19 outbreak may have started earlier than reported there is a growing conversation on Twitter about how long the U.S. government knew about the virus. o Some are saying this is not new news and that they already knew that Wuhan waited to inform other countries. Others are saying they feel the U.S. government knew long before it confirmed to the public and expressing their distrust in the government.

### (U) 6/8 Reporting

(U) **Facebook Slaps Label on "State Controlled" Media Outlets:** Facebook has begun labelling media outlets it has determined to be "state-controlled" based on multiple factors (e.g., government ownership or influence) and says it will also label advertisements from the same publishers later this year in an effort to provide greater transparency. According to reports, Facebook began its efforts to label media organizations (e.g., China's *Xinhua News* and Russia's *Sputnik*) that were "wholly or partially" under government editorial control on June 4, 2020. According to Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of cybersecurity policy, labelling state-controlled media outlets offers "greater transparency" to readers who have a right to know whether what they are reading may have been influenced by a foreign government. Gleicher added that labels will also be placed on ads from these outlets later this year. According to Facebook, the labels will be applied globally and placed on publications' Pages, Ad Library Pages, and Page Transparency sections. Gleicher added that later this year ads from these outlets will be blocked in the U.S. "to provide an extra layer or protection" from foreign influence during the November U.S. elections. Facebook adds that labels will not be added to U.S. news outlets, including those run by the U.S. government, because those outlets have "editorial independence." (Source: ZDNET)

(U) **Twitter Adds Fact-Checking Labels To Tweets Linking 5G To COVID-19:** Twitter has started displaying fact-checking labels on tweets that falsely link 5G connectivity to the spread COVID-19.

The label, which appears below tweets promoting 5G conspiracies, reads: "Get the facts on COVID-19". Clicking the label links through to a [thread](#) titled: "No, 5G isn't causing coronavirus," which links to news articles, tweets, and official sources that debunk the bogus theories.

In a statement, a Twitter spokesperson confirmed: "We're prioritising the removal of COVID-19 content when it has a call to action that could potentially cause harm. As we've said previously, we will not take enforcement action on every Tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about COVID-19.

The move comes after [the social media company in April pledged to clamp down on unverified claims](#) - such as "5G causes coronavirus! Go destroy the cell towers in your neighborhood!" - that cause "widespread panic" or encourage people to act on conspiracy theories.

In the U.K., for example, [protestors set alight to phone masts and attacked telecoms engineers](#) due to the spread of these fraudulent claims. One such theory, which has been spread primarily through social

media, falsely claimed that the COVID-19 outbreak began in Wuhan because the Chinese city had recently been rolling out 5G. (Source: Forbes)

**'It's Psychologically Easier': How Anti-Vaxxers Capitalized on Coronavirus Fears to Spread**

**Misinformation:** While teams around the world [race to create a vaccine](#) for Covid-19, the anti-vaxxers are racing to convince people that it will be dangerous.

Australia has an excellent record on immunization.

The [national coverage rates in children](#) are above 90%, on average, with some concerning pockets of lower coverage. But the adult rate is lower – [fewer than one in five got the swine flu vaccination in 2009](#) – and adults are more susceptible to this novel coronavirus.

So there is a genuine concern that if and when the vaccine “ticket out” is found, efforts to get people to take it will flounder.

While the pandemic that has [infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands](#) of people continues to rage, the anti-vaccination movement has capitalized on the fear and confusion created to spread viral propaganda.

Some of the widely discredited conspiracy theories to [reach the mainstream](#) include that Microsoft founder [Bill Gates is part of a global cabal](#), including the World Health Organization and big pharma, that started the coronavirus as a method of social control, and that 5G is responsible for Covid-19 – claims that have been comprehensively [debunked](#).

A film called [Plandemic featuring discredited scientist Judy Mikovits](#) wove together several anti-vaccination and far right conspiracy theories to claim that a group of elites was using Covid-19 and its potential vaccine to make a profit and control people. It spread around the world with alarming speed, [reaching 8 million people on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in just over a week](#).

But the vaccine could be the world’s ticket out. The ticket to rebooting the economy, to travel, and to hugs. What happens if not enough people get vaccinated, and that ticket becomes invalid?

Prof Stephan Lewandowsky is an Australian psychologist. Now at the University of Bristol, he recently released [The Conspiracy Theory Handbook](#) to help battle the “unhelpful surge of conspiracy theories circulating regarding Covid-19”.

He said it’s no surprise that the current pandemic has spawned conspiracy theories that will put some people off a vaccine [if and when it appears](#).

“Whenever people are scared and they have a sense of losing control, that’s when these things emerge because for some people belief in a conspiracy is giving them comfort. It’s psychologically easier.”

[More than 100 potential vaccines](#) are in development. At least 60% of people would need to take one up to reach a low level of “herd immunity” – a critical threshold needed to keep the virus at a [controllable number](#).

**Facebook Scrambles to Limit “Boogaloo” Groups:** Facebook Inc is making it harder to find user groups associated with the term “Boogaloo,” which refers to a potential U.S. civil war or the collapse of civilization, the company said on Thursday.

Facebook will no longer recommend such groups to members of similar associations, a spokeswoman for the world’s largest social media network said.

At least two of three men charged on Wednesday with plotting violence at a Las Vegas anti-racism protest participated in Boogaloo groups on Facebook, according to an FBI criminal complaint.

A series of reports this year by researchers and media have drawn attention to the loose movement and its propagation on social media. In April, an advocacy group called the Tech Transparency Project warned that Boogaloo followers were discussing taking up arms while promoting protests to “liberate” states from coronavirus restrictions.

On May 1, Facebook banned the use of Boogaloo and related terms when they accompany pictures of weapons and calls to action, such as preparing for conflict.

The specific terms Facebook is was acting against are evolving, it said on Thursday. To evade the scrutiny, many have switched to terms such as “Big Igloo” or “Big Luau” while maintaining the same discussions about weaponry, future wars and conspiracy theories.

Many Boogaloo participants identify with white nationalist groups or militias, researchers say, but others are gun-rights advocates or just anti-government overreach and even support Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality.

Facebook said the politics of Boogaloo members it looked into “ran the gamut” from right to left.

One of those charged Wednesday, Stephen Parshall, had publicly “liked” several Boogaloo-themed groups, his personal page showed until Facebook closed it after the case was filed. He had also posted a picture of a Confederate battle flag. (Source: The Mercury News)

**NYU study: Facebook’s Content Moderation Efforts Are “Grossly Inadequate:** In a scathing indictment of Facebook’s content moderation strategy, a new study identifies the company’s decision to outsource such work as a key reason its efforts are failing.

The [NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights released a report today](#) that calls on Facebook to end the outsourcing practice and commit to bringing the work in-house so moderation receives the resources and attention it deserves. The report also calls for a massive increase in the number of moderators, as well as improved working conditions that include better physical and mental health care for moderators who are subjected to disturbing content throughout the workday.

The report comes as Facebook’s reputation [continues to degrade](#) following years of controversy over its handling of disinformation, fake news, and other dangerous content on its platform. Such criticism has [intensified in recent days](#), with CEO Mark Zuckerberg [facing a backlash from employees](#) over his failure to censure tweets by President Trump that appear to violate the platform’s policies against inciting violence. (Source: Venture Beat)

(U) **Facebook Pulls Nearly 200 Accounts Connected to Hate Groups:** Facebook last week removed nearly 200 social media accounts linked to white supremacy groups that reportedly urged members to infiltrate Black Lives Matter protests, [according to the Associated Press](#). Some 190 accounts on Facebook and subsidiary Instagram were tied to hate groups Proud Boys and American Guard—already banned on the social media platforms.

A self-described "Constitutional Nationalist" community, the American Guard was founded by Brien James in 2016, and now boasts chapters across the US. Proud Boys—established the same year by Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInness—is a far-right neo-fascist association that admits only men and promotes political violence. Both groups have previously been barred from Facebook for violating rules prohibiting hate speech.

"We saw that these groups were planning to rally supporters and members to physically go to the protests and in some cases were preparing to go with weapons," Brian Fishman, Facebook's director of counterterrorism and dangerous organizations policy, said in a statement published by the AP.

No further details were released; the organizations' specific plans remain unclear. Facebook did not immediately respond to PCMag's request for comment. The social media giant last week announced plans to deactivate more white supremacist accounts and root out fake users manipulating voters in Africa and Iraq.

Extremist propaganda has proliferated on social media during the pandemic (Source: PC MaG)

**TikTok is Full of "Boogaloo" Videos Even Though it Prohibits Content From "Dangerous Individuals and Organizations":** Content that promotes the extremist "boogaloo" movement has proliferated on the social media platform TikTok, even though the company prohibits "dangerous individuals or organizations" from using the service to "cause harm."

The boogaloo movement, as described by [NBC News](#), is "an anti-government movement that advocates for a violent uprising" and "wants a second Civil War." The movement [has its roots](#) on the message board site 4chan, which is known for hosting [white nationalists](#), and the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL) has noted that "from militia groups to white supremacists, extremists on a range of online platforms talk about—and sometimes even anticipate—the 'boogaloo.'" Multiple supporters of the movement have been arrested for alleged acts of violence, such as [attempting to murder](#) a police officer and attempting to ["commit an act of terrorism"](#) during protests in Las Vegas, Nevada. Its supporters -- known for sometimes wearing Hawaiian shirts -- have also [been spotted](#) carrying guns at the protests around the country spurred by the police killing of George Floyd. An ADL researcher [told The Daily Beast](#) that boogaloo "is inherently a violent ideology."

In January, TikTok [expanded](#) its [community guidelines](#). One of the expanded sections is on "dangerous individuals and organizations," and it prohibits "dangerous individuals or organizations" from using TikTok to "promote terrorism, crime, or other types of behavior that could cause harm." The guidelines also prohibit content that "praises, glorifies, or supports dangerous individuals and/or organizations" and use of the platform by "non-state actors that use premeditated violence or threats of violence to

cause harm to non-combatant individuals, in order to intimidate or threaten a population, government, or international organization in the pursuit of political, religious, ethnic, or ideological objectives.”

Despite those rules, a review by Media Matters found many videos, mostly posted in the past three months, promoting, supporting, or mentioning the boogaloo movement, often encouraging people to be involved in the movement directly. Many of these also often displayed firearms, even though the platform’s community guidelines generally prohibit it. These videos, which have at least hundreds of thousands of views combined, have used hashtags -- which help people find videos about similar topics -- that would seem to affiliate themselves with boogaloo, such as “#boogalo,” “#bogaaloo,” and “#boog” (though not every video using those hashtags was clearly connected to boogaloo). There used to be a “#boogaloo” hashtag on TikTok, according to a [May Gizmodo report](#), but the page for that hashtag is no longer up. Media Matters’ review still found videos with that hashtag alongside the others.

In one video from March, which has more than 360,000 views, different images pop up calling for rebellion, including against “enemies” both “foreign and domestic,” with the text over the face of Virginia Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam.

Other videos on the platform with boogaloo-related hashtags -- and tens of thousands of combined views -- have featured similar language, telling people that it was “time to boog” and that it was “boogaloo time betch,” along with discussing “who will participate in the boog” and doing “boogaloo prepping.” One video even threatens “a boogaloo” on a transgender person who criticized white supremacy. Another video with more than 240,000 views shows military books about weapons and tactics.

The spread of boogaloo content on TikTok comes as the platform has repeatedly struggled to enforce its expanded content moderation policies. (Source: Media Matters)

**(U) Kids Now Spend Nearly as Much Time Watching TikTok as YouTube in US, UK and Spain:** A new study on kids’ app usage and habits indicates a major threat to YouTube’s dominance, as kids now split their time between Google’s online video platform and other apps, like TikTok, Netflix and mobile games like Roblox. Kids ages four to 15 now spend an average of 85 minutes per day watching YouTube videos, compared with 80 minutes per day spent on TikTok. The latter app also drove growth in kids’ social app use by 100% in 2019 and 200% in 2020, the report found.

The data in the annual report by digital safety app maker [Qustodio](#) was provided by 60,000 families with children ages four to 14 in the U.S., U.K. and Spain, so its data isn’t representative of global trends. The research encompasses children’s online habits from February 2019 to April 2020, takes into account the COVID-19 crisis and is specifically focused on four main categories of mobile applications: online video, social media, video games and education.

YouTube, not surprisingly, remains one of the most-used apps among children, the study found.

Kids are now watching twice as many videos per day as they did just four years ago. This is despite the fact that YouTube’s flagship app is meant for ages 13 and up — an age-gate that was never truly

enforced, leading to the FTC's historic \$170 million fine for the online video platform in 2019 for its noncompliance with U.S. children's privacy regulations.

The app today is used by 69% of U.S. kids, 74% of kids in the U.K. and 88% of kids in Spain. Its app for younger children, YouTube Kids, meanwhile, is only used by 7% of kids in the U.S., 10% of kids in the U.K. and wasn't even on the radar in Spain. Internet usage as a whole has increased alongside widespread stay-at-home orders (Source: Tech Crunch)

#### **(U) The Real Disinformation Crisis Behind Fake Images in Ecuador**

Among the most memorable images of the pandemic were those contained in video footage that showed bodies piling up in the streets of the Ecuadorian city of Guayaquil.

But now — even as we are finding out that Ecuador is indeed one of Latin America's worst-hit countries, and that Guayaquil was the epicenter of its pandemic — it has become clear that some of the images that circulated widely in April on social media and in the international press were, in fact, **fake**:

- Video presented in international news outlets as depicting the cremation of bodies in the streets actually showed burning tires
- Photographs claiming to show mass graves dug for coronavirus victims in the countryside were unrelated and taken before the pandemic. For context, mass graves are sadly not that uncommon in Latin America — one of the photographs was from Mexico, where **thousands of unmarked graves** have been found during the country's long drug war
- A video circulated on social media that supposedly showed that Ecuadorians were throwing their coronavirus dead into the sea was really filmed in 2014, and depicted migrants washing ashore on a beach in Libya

*What's behind it:* A flood of misinformation has been posted to social media by a network of trolls allegedly allied to former president Rafael Correa, who is living in Belgium in exile and is wanted in Ecuador on corruption charges. According to Arturo Torres of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Correa set up an online propaganda network while still in office, and now uses it to attack the government of his successor, Lenín Moreno.

*But this is where it gets really dirty:* What has received less attention is that Moreno's government stands accused of using Correa's apparent disinformation campaign to deflect criticism of its own mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis.

*Although some of the photographs from Guayaquil were fake, the situation there was dire.* Mortuary systems were overwhelmed for days, meaning that many bereaved families had nowhere to take their dead.

*Why this matters:* Moreno's regime has used the threat posed by fake news to justify heavy-handed actions like the **arrest** of a Guayaquil resident for making a video critical of the government's Covid-19 response. More recently, Ecuadorians have taken to the streets in their thousands to **protest** Moreno's cuts to public spending, which many argue **disproportionately target the poor**. Human Rights Watch

criticized the government for **beating and injuring protestors** at a demonstration last month. (Source: Coda)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- COVID-19 discussion remains lower in volume than previous weeks as traditional and social media conversation continues to be focused on other national stories. Much of the general public has begun to move-on COVID-19. Many feel the economy and society reopening is a sign life can return to normal.
- While the majority of states and cities continue to move forward with their reopening plans, several have had to delay their progress due to increases in case counts.
- Traditional news coverage is broad, focusing on if ongoing protests will cause a resurgence in cases New York City's entrance into Phase I of reopening, and public officials urging demonstrators to get tested. Multiple reports indicate social/business lockdowns have contained disease spread. PPE receives limited, but still relevant mention, as state officials express frustration about paperwork and procedures to receive critical supplies

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- There is ongoing discussion about whether a second wave will occur soon. Recent data show numbers increasing in up to 20 states. Public health officials are voicing concern that the general public appears to be largely disregarding the risk of COVID-19, failing to practice social distancing or wear masks.
  - People are anxious to see if there will be a spike associated with recent protests while others feel numbers are increasing in some areas due to an increase in testing.
  - Many feel the combination of large protests and businesses beginning to return to more normal operating procedures leave people feeling like the COVID-19 risk has subsided.
- As people continue to weigh the risks of COVID-19 many are beginning to wonder when they will be able to take part in more normal activities like giving a friend or loved one a hug. Many are sharing their experiences of feeling isolated and alone saying it has been months since they hugged or touched another human.

**(U) 6/4 Reporting**

**(U) Combat 5G COVID-19 Fake News, Urges Europe:** European Union (EU) nations banking on 5G to boost economic growth are eager to tackle conspiracy theories linking the wireless technology to the spread of the novel coronavirus that have seen masts torched in several places.



According to telecoms lobbying groups ETNO and GSMA, such false claims have resulted in over 140 arson attacks on infrastructure such as mobile phone masts in 10 European countries and assaults on scores of maintenance workers.

Britain has seen 87 arson attacks and the Netherlands 30, while cases have also been reported in France, Belgium, Italy and Germany.

According to an EU document seen by Reuters, member countries emphasized their concern at a video conference between themselves to discuss digital issues last Friday.

The Council of EU ministers “expresses the importance of fighting against the spread of misinformation related to 5G networks, with special regard to false claims that such networks constitute a health threat or are linked to COVID-19”, it said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has debunked the claims, saying that viruses cannot travel on radio waves or mobile networks, and that COVID-19 has also spread to countries without 5G mobile networks.

The European Commission, the EU executive, has also rejected such claims. The EU is looking to 5G to help it bounce back from the coronavirus and compete better with the United States and China. (Source: Reuters)

**(U) QAnon Supporters Twitter Spread Covid-19 Misinformation About China:** Nearly 30 groups of Twitter users who identified themselves as supporters of the conspiracy theory QAnon spread rumors that the coronavirus was a bioweapon created in China, according to new research.

An analysis of more than 2.6 million tweets over a 10-day period from late March found that 28 so-called Twitter clusters associated with conservative politicians or QAnon promoted the story about Covid-19's origins, according to academics from The Australia Institute's Center for Responsible Technology, a progressive think tank. The clusters are groups of Twitter accounts, many of them automated, that frequently shared posts.

Since early January, rumors have exploded on social media that various governments, including the U.S., created the coronavirus as part of military experiments — reports that have been debunked by the World Health Organization and multiple fact-checking groups. U.S. intelligence and health officials have likewise rejected the idea that the pathogen was manmade or genetically modified.

As of late March, the Australian researchers found that the conspiracy theory labeling Covid-19 a Chinese bioweapon had been shared on Twitter within these U.S. and QAnon groups almost 900 times. Those online messages were then retweeted 18,500 times, collectively garnering as many as 5 million views of the rumor across Twitter.

The academics could not determine who was behind the clusters. But they said the ability of these groups to promote coronavirus-related rumors on social media could have helped the reports gain traction with a wider audience online.

"The million dollar question is what impact will this activity have," said Timothy Graham, a co-author of the report who is a senior lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, in an interview. "This problematic content sets a foundation where you can have a tipping point when it really takes off, being amplified by the mainstream media and celebrities." (Source: Politico, Australian Institute's Center for Responsible Policy)

(U) **COVID-19 and Election Related Facts Checks Work:** Given the dangers misinformation poses to both democracy and public health, many believe social media platforms **have a responsibility** to monitor and correct misinformation before it spreads. But can corrections like this even work? And what role should social media platforms play in combating misinformation?

Well, it turns out there is evidence that fact checks *do* work. Numerous studies have demonstrated that when confronted with a correction, a significant share of people do, in fact, update their beliefs.

Political scientists Ethan Porter and Thomas J. Wood conducted an **exhaustive battery of surveys** on fact-checking, **across more than 10,000 participants and 13 studies** that covered a range of political, economic and scientific topics. They found that 60 percent of respondents gave accurate answers when presented with a correction, while just 32 percent of respondents who were not given a correction expressed accurate beliefs. That's pretty solid proof that fact-checking can work.

But Porter and Wood have found, alongside **many other fact-checking researchers**, some methods of fact-checking are more effective than others. Broadly speaking, the most effective fact checks have this in common:

1. They are from **highly credible** sources (with extra credit for those that are also **surprising**, like Republicans contradicting other Republicans or Democrats contradicting other Democrats).
2. They **offer a new frame** for thinking about the issue (that is, they don't simply dismiss a claim as "wrong" or "unsubstantiated").
3. They **don't directly challenge one's worldview and identity**.
4. They happen **early**, before a false narrative gains traction.

So despite a few studies suggesting that fact checks may make misinformation *more* prevalent (most prominently a **widely-cited paper** from political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler in 2010, which popularized the concept of the "**backfire effect**"), the overwhelming majority of studies have found that fact checks do work — or at the very least, do no harm. Still, some pieces of misinformation are harder to fight than others. (Source: FiveThirtyEight)

**Social Media Firms Fail to Act on Covid-19 Fake News:** Hundreds of posts spreading misinformation about Covid-19 are being left online, according to a report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate.

Some 649 posts were reported to Facebook and Twitter, including false cures, anti-vaccination propaganda and conspiracy theories around 5G.

90% remained visible online afterwards without any warnings attached, the report suggests.

Facebook said the sample was "not representative".

A spokesperson for Facebook said; "We are taking aggressive steps to remove harmful misinformation from our platforms and have removed hundreds of thousands of these posts, including claims about false cures.

"During March and April we placed warning labels on around 90 million pieces of content related to Covid-19 and these labels stopped people viewing the original content 95% of the time.

"We will notify anyone who has liked, shared or commented on posts related to Covid-19 that we've since removed."

Twitter said that it was prioritising the removal of Covid-19 content "when it has a call to action that could potentially cause harm".

"As we've said previously, we will not take enforcement action on every Tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about Covid-19. Since introducing these new policies on March 18 and as we've doubled down on tech, our automated systems have challenged more than 4.3 million accounts which were targeting discussions around Covid-19 with spammy or manipulative behaviours."

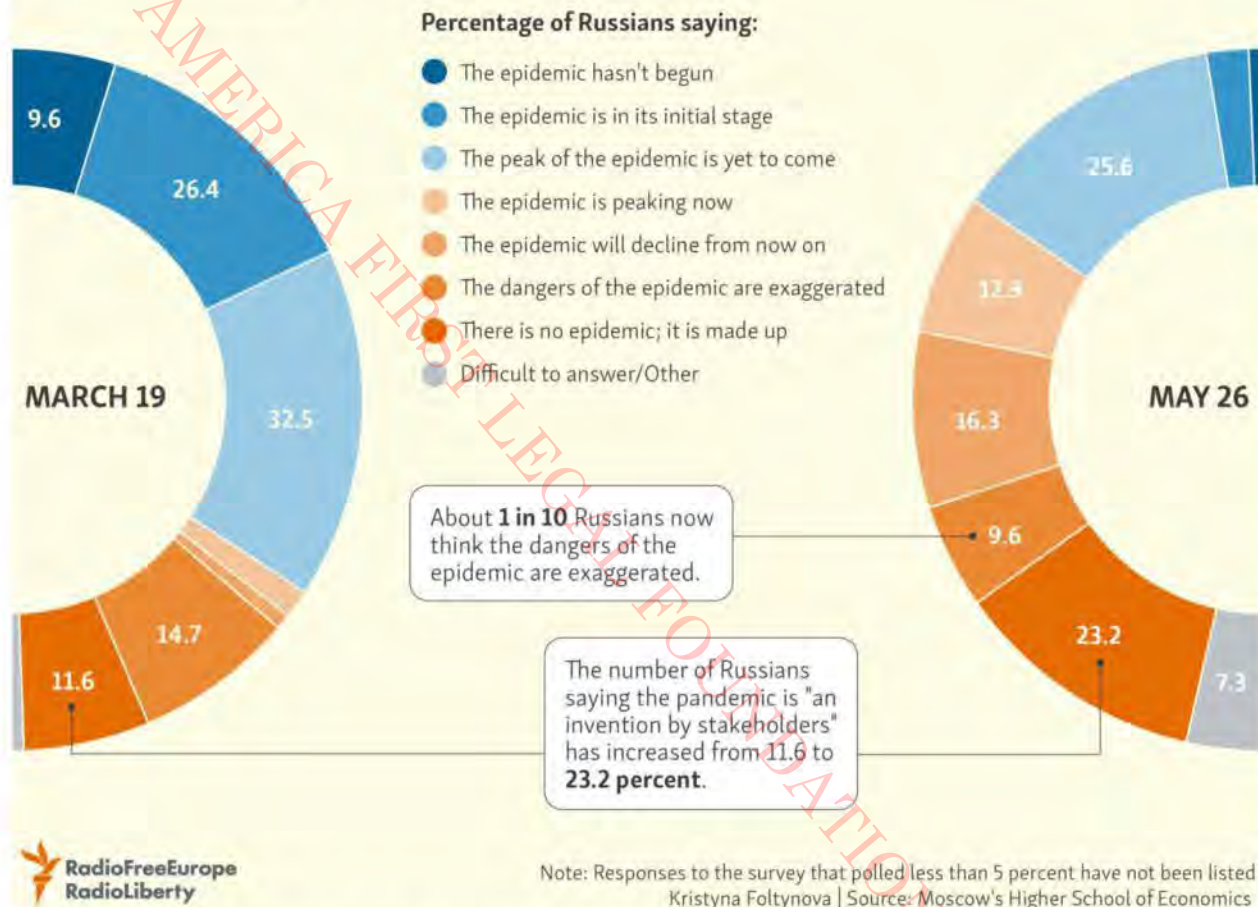
Imran Ahmed, chief executive of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, said the firms were "shirking their responsibilities".

"Their systems for reporting misinformation and dealing with it are simply not fit for purpose. (Source: BBC, Center for Countering Digital Hate)

**One In Four Russians Don't Believe The Pandemic Is Real:**

## One In Four Russians Don't Believe The Pandemic Is Real

According to a new survey by Moscow's Higher School of Economics, more than 23 percent of Russians say the coronavirus pandemic is made up and almost 26 percent think its peak is yet to come.



(Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- COVID-19 discussion continues to be lower than previous weeks with the majority of social media conversation remaining focused on other topics. Throughout the day, the main topic of discussion was various states moving into the next stages of reopening.
- As officials announce their next steps many people are growing increasingly anxious with the phased approach and are ready to return to a sense of normalcy.
- Many states and cities continue the push to increase their testing capacity, relaxing the criteria for getting a test and opening new testing facilities.
- Traditional news coverage of COVID-19 also continues to be overshadowed by ongoing public demonstrations nationwide, particularly on broadcast media. Fears of a resurgence continue to

cause international concern for public health officials as states as countries attempts to resume economic activity. News of the weekly increase in unemployment claims is emphasizing that the rate of new claims continues to slow.

- Discussion of Tropical Storm Cristobal as it relates to COVID-19 response is low in volume and focuses on select testing sites being temporarily suspended this weekend until after the storm passes

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There is a large amount of discussion about states moving into the next, or in some cases final phases of reopening. In areas that are still waiting to move forward, residents are growing increasingly anxious with more people beginning to [support the removal of restrictions](#).
  - The recent protests that have brought large groups of people together are causing some to question if it is worth continuing with existing restrictions.
- Public Health officials are becoming concerned by the lack of people wearing masks in public spaces. In response, the public is providing various reasons why they have been wearing masks less including a lack of trust in the government, the fact that the President does not wear one, and images showing both police and protesters without masks at recent protest events.
- There are several articles and many social media posts today sharing articles that say that a study found that Hydroxychloroquine doesn't prevent COVID-19 infection. This and other conflicting stories on the drug are causing many discussions sharing the conflicting information.

**(U) 6/3 Reporting**

(U) **Twitter Reacts as Misinformation Spreads During COVID-19 and Ongoing Protests:** A fake "Antifa" Twitter account was removed after a post broke the social media platform's rules against inciting violence.

"This account violated our platform manipulation and spam policy, specifically the creation of fake accounts," a Twitter spokesperson [told CNN](#). "We took action after the account sent a Tweet inciting violence and broke the Twitter Rules."

The fake account, @ANTIFA\_US, tweeted on May 31, "ALERT Tonight's the night, Comrades Tonight we say "F\*\*k The City" and we move into the residential areas... the white hoods.... and we take what's ours #BlacklivesMaters #F\*\*kAmerica."

"Antifa," an abbreviation for anti-facism, is a political protest movement composed of independent groups that are loosely affiliated by their belief in militant opposition to facism and other far right-wing ideologies. But Twitter said the account was actually linked to Identity Evropa, [a white power fraternity that dissolved](#) and reformed under the name the American Identitarian Movement in 2019.

Racial and ethnically motivated violent extremist propaganda has proliferated online since the COVID-19 outbreak, shifting recently to focus on ongoing protests. (Source: The Hill)

(U) **Technology Helps Address Coronavirus Misinformation Deluge:** As COVID-19 quickly spreads, so does fake news. From [conspiracy theories](#) to all sorts of wild speculation about government plans, and even possibly harmful unproven ‘cures’ — disinformation is flooding the internet and posing a serious threat to public health.

As a result, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that the world is facing a catastrophic epidemic of misinformation about COVID-19, calling it an [epidemic of misinformation](#). In a message posted on his Twitter account, Guterres said that “to overcome the coronavirus, we need to urgently promote facts & science, hope & solidarity over despair & division.”

In response to the evolving issue, the UN is advancing [communications efforts](#) to make sure people have the latest and most credible information about the virus. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) created a series of COVID-19 “[mythbusters](#)” and is working with search and media giants like Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and others to help counter the spread of rumors, which include misinformation like 5G mobile networks spread COVID-19, that the virus cannot survive in the hot weather, that drinking methanol, ethanol or bleach prevent or cure COVID-19, and that consuming spicy food, garlic and special herbs can prevent infection with the new virus.

To help address the flood of misinformation, the SAP innovation office in Asia stepped up during early stages of the pandemic. In only two weeks, the team developed a chatbot-based application using SAP and Qualtrics technology, with the goal of providing users with accurate real-time information on COVID-19 and personalized guidance on how to cope with the virus.

#### *New App Cuts Through Fake News with Real Time Facts on COVID-19*

The app, called [Bridge-IT](#), collates news from reliable sources including public health authorities like the World Health Organization (WHO), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and relevant government agencies at a global and local level.

An SAP customer, a global pharmaceuticals firm, has already rolled out the app for its staff. With access to bespoke data on the number of COVID-19 cases, searchable by hospital location, employees at the firm are now able to predict likely demand for medical supplies and respond accordingly.

“In times of crisis, effectiveness of communication and reliability of information become paramount”, said Scott Russell, President of SAP Asia Pacific Japan.

SAP will soon begin rolling out the app globally to SAP customers who have an SAP Cloud Platform Enterprise Agreement. It will run on the [SAP Cloud Platform](#) and be accessed as either a webpage, or as an Apple iOS application, free of charge. (Source: Forbes)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report

- COVID-19 conversation continues decreasing due to nationwide protests. Today it has mostly centered on mask use in public spaces. Many are debating the government’s ability to enforce their use and a very vocal group of people continue to speak out against mask use.

- A large number of states are beginning moving forward with their reopening plans, allowing additional forms of business to reopen and sharing plans for schools to reopen. A small number however have had to postpone their reopening plans due to spikes in cases.
- Traditional news media remained focused on social justice protests, with COVID-19 coverage increasingly in the background. Pandemic coverage includes nationwide discussion of a New York Times investigation into possible issues at the CDC. A growing number of news outlets have shared an Associated Press story about the virus spreading among protests and the potential for tear gas to exacerbate the issue. The Michigan governor's testimony to Congress questioning federal distribution of supplies received limited coverage.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- There has been a resurgence of debates over the use of masks and face coverings in public spaces following the announcement of several new mandates at the local level. The majority of people continue to support the use of masks and are often urging local officials to enact official policy in relation to them. A smaller, though vocal, group of people continue to feel the use of masks is an infringement of general rights and is upset by increasing mandates. o This pushback has been so strong in some areas that some businesses have chosen to revoke their mask policies. Many have said they will continue to wear masks in these cases but worry they will not be as effective if not everyone is wearing them.
- As multiple states continue to see increases in COVID-19 cases, there is growing concern over the added stress to local healthcare systems. There is a perception that many areas are at a crossroads as communities attempt to resume some sense of normalcy but continue to face growing case counts leaving people wondering what steps will be taken next.
- Many local health departments and representatives are encouraging protesters to get tested to prevent spreading COVID-19 in mass gatherings being held this week. (example 1, example 2) Leaders and health officials nationwide are concerned about potential spikes in COVID-19 cases following protests across the country
- FEMA conversation as it relates to COVID-19 remains relatively low. There continues to be a low volume of discussion about how FEMA will respond to hurricanes during a pandemic. This discussion is further fueled by people discussing preparations for Tropical Storm Cristobal in the Gulf. o Local officials are using this as a time to remind residents how they may need to adjust their preparations this hurricane season to account for COVID-19. Many are leaning on [FEMA and Ready messaging](#) to help educate residents.
- The mayor of New Orleans announced an [initiative with FEMA to launch a mass feeding program](#) with local restaurants. There has been some negative feedback regarding the program because restaurants have been asked to volunteer their services upfront and many restaurants do not feel they are in a financial position to support this.
- There continues to be a low level of discussion about cities [distributing face masks in partnership with FEMA](#).


**(U) 6/2 Reporting**

(U) **Russia and China State-Backed Media COVID-19 Overview:** The steady drumbeat of coronavirus coverage that has dominated Russian and Chinese messaging over the past four months gave way over the weekend to coverage of the George Floyd protests in the United States. Although most of the coverage occurred outside the timeline of this week's report, the focus on social, political, and racial unrest in the United States signifies a return to form for Russia and, perhaps, a tactical shift for China, whose government officials and state media have typically avoided or limited their coverage of issues that do not directly touch on China's core strategic interests. In the 48-hour period from Friday to Sunday night, #GeorgeFloyd was the most-used hashtag by Russian diplomatic and state media accounts, with #Minneapolis and #GeorgeFloydProtests also registering in the top five. Over the same time, #GeorgeFloyd was the third most-used hashtag by Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts, and, in a preview of the upcoming release of ASD's Iran dashboard, #BlackLivesMatter, #GeorgeFloyd, and #Racismo (Spanish for racism), were the second, fourth, and eighth most-used hashtag by Iranian government and state media accounts. To date, however, there is little evidence that any of the three countries have engaged in mis- or disinformation or attempted to promote violence. Instead, these efforts seemed targeted at undermining U.S. credibility, both at home and abroad. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Russia State-Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines:** The coronavirus continued to be an important topic for the Russian media ecosystem last week, though pandemic-related content declined overall, most notably on Twitter. Coverage of the killing of George Floyd in police custody and subsequent nationwide protests in the United States received increasing attention throughout the week, with the focus on systemic racism and police brutality—much like coverage in other foreign as well as domestic outlets. Russian state-backed media leaned particularly heavily on images of destruction and violent incidents during the demonstrations, while the Russian embassy in the United States posted a series of tweets condemning treatment of press covering the protests following an incident involving a Russian journalist in Minneapolis. Prior to these events, Russian diplomatic accounts on Twitter put out messaging for Africa Day emphasizing Soviet support for independence movements in Africa.

Russian state-funded media often feature heavy coverage of incidents related to racism and police brutality in the United States; this emphasis dates back to the early days of the Cold War. The killing of George Floyd and subsequent protests were no exception. Coverage early in the week focused on the facts surrounding the brutality of Floyd's death and its relation to systemic racism in the United States. Note that a small number of collected tweets used activist-associated hashtags like #ICantBreathe and #BlackLivesMatter in their coverage:



- 
**RT en Español** @actualidadrt • May 26  
 A Minneapolis police officer was caught pressing the neck of an African-American who lay handcuffed on the ground with his knee. The victim ended up losing consciousness and dying. <https://t.co/6ZlqLDjqH>  
 5,039 retweets 3,454 likes
- 
**redfish** @redfishstream • May 26  
 Dylan Roof: murders 9, calmly arrested Patrick Crusius: murders 23, calmly arrested Eric Garner: allegedly selling illegal cigarettes, choked to death by cops, shouts "I can't breathe" George Floyd: allegedly wrote bad check, choked to death by cops, shouts "I can't breathe" <https://t.co/GlPpngVGn>  
 1,760 retweets 2,914 likes
- 
**RT** @rt\_com • May 26  
 'I can't breathe' ... #Minneapolis police in hot water as suspect dies during brutal chokehold arrest MORE. <https://t.co/K0fB5YfGAX> #ICantBreathe #CantBreathe <https://t.co/HLFTFefWx>  
 605 retweets 644 likes

Over the weekend, the protests related to George Floyd's death dominated tracked accounts on Twitter, with #GeorgeFloyd the top overall hashtag for those two days, and with #Minneapolis and #GeorgeFloydProtests in the top five.

Top 10 Hashtags - May 30-31:



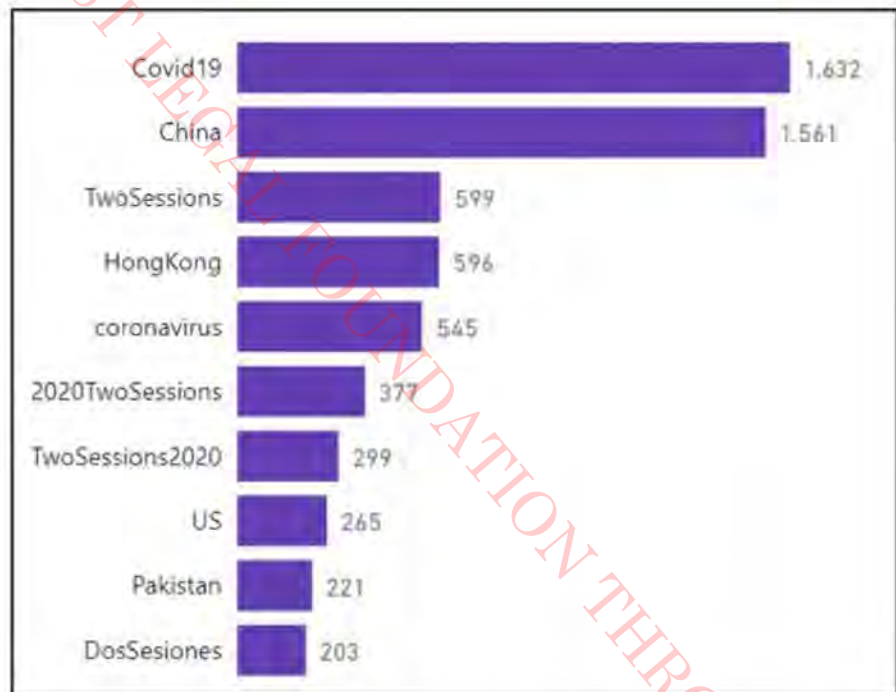
Other notable articles among the top ten by Facebook shares included an op-ed about not being able to trust coronavirus statistics, an article on the United States reportedly considering a nuclear test due to "a convenient allegation that Russia and China have resumed testing low-yield nuclear munitions," and an op-ed criticizing "America's global anti-China spin campaign." The latter narrative continues a trend of Russian state media carrying water for China, as noted in previous reports:

**"I've signed death certificates during Covid-19. Here's why you can't trust any of the statistics on the number of victims,"** Op-ed, RT, May 28, 2020.

*“As an NHS doctor, I’ve seen people die and be listed as a victim of coronavirus without ever being tested for it. But unless we have accurate data, we won’t know which has killed more: the disease or the lockdown?” (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)*

(U) **China State-Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines:** While the coronavirus remained at the top of the data charts last week, China’s official messengers slowly shifted their messaging away from the virus. The uptick in interest around Hong Kong that we noted in last week’s report continued, and even intensified, throughout last week. And while Chinese state media and diplomats were initially focused on defending Beijing’s new security law by portraying the city’s protesters as violent rioters, they progressively shifted their attention to the United States as the killing of George Floyd sparked protests throughout the country. By the end of last week, Chinese media and government officials focused less on defending Beijing’s national security law and more on highlighting factually accurate coverage of protests in the United States as a means of calling out the U.S.’ “hypocrisy” and “double standards.”

Top 10 Hashtags — May 23-29



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 18,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts from May 23-29, up 20 percent as compared to the previous week. While the coronavirus remained the most frequently used hashtag in the network’s communications, its use was down by more than 25 percent as compared to the previous week, with connected hashtags like #Covid\_19 dropping out of the top ten entirely. On the contrary, mentions of Hong Kong more than doubled and instances of #US were up by 33 percent.

On Facebook, the most shared Chinese state-media story this week was about the COVID-19 death toll in the United States.

**"NY Times marks grim U.S. virus milestone with front page victim list,"** CGTN, May 24, 2020.

*"The [New York Times] front page also became a hashtag on China's social platform Weibo, with many praying for the dead and criticizing politicians' ignorance of lives. 'We do not hope dreadful things happened on each common people,' said a blogger, which won more than 7,000 thumbs-up."*

Also among the most shared articles of the week was an opinion piece about China's reaction to the pandemic, which adopted a markedly different tone and generated only a fraction of the engagement.

**"Commentary: In COVID-19 response, China deserves credit in human rights protection,"** Xinhua, May 26, 2020.

*"Sparing no efforts to save lives from being ravaged by COVID-19, China has shown its steadfast commitment to protecting human rights. (...) As we speak, a few U.S. politicians are wielding the batons of bills, investigations or ludicrous lawsuits against China as if they valued lives more than others. (...) The glaring contrast between the two major countries makes people wonder: Who is the better upholder of human rights?"*

Still, the focus last week was on Hong Kong, with six of the ten most shared stories related to protests in the city and/or to Beijing's national security law. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

**(U) Troll Farms From North Macedonia and the Philippines Pushed Coronavirus Disinformation on**

**Facebook:** One of the largest publishers of coronavirus disinformation on Facebook has been banned from the platform for using content farms from North Macedonia and the Philippines, Facebook said on Friday.

The publisher, Natural News, was one of the most prolific pushers of the viral "Plandemic" conspiracy video, which falsely claimed that the coronavirus is part of an elaborate government plot to control the populace through vaccines, and erroneously claimed that wearing a mask increases the risk of catching the coronavirus.

Facebook said that it had found foreign trolls repeatedly posted content from Natural News, an anti-vaccination news site that frequently posts false coronavirus conspiracy theories about 5G towers and Bill Gates. They also posted content from Natural News' sister websites, NewsTarget and Brighteon, in an effort to artificially inflate their reach.

"We removed these Pages for spammy and abusive behavior, not the content they posted. They misled people about the popularity of their posts and relied on content farms in North Macedonia and the Philippines," Facebook said in a statement.

Facebook said the actions came as part of its routine enforcement against spam networks. Among other irregular behaviors, Natural News posted its content at an unusually high frequency, attempting to evade rate limits, which effectively tripped Facebook's spam alarms, the company said.

Natural News' official Facebook page was banned from Facebook last year, but the site evaded the ban by posting content on Natural News-branded disinformation groups titled "Amazing Cures" and "GMO Dangers," which had hundreds of thousands of followers.

After Facebook's discovery of foreign platform manipulation, the company banned all users from posting links to Natural News and its sister sites across the entirety of the site on May 19.

Natural News is a website owned and operated by Mike Adams, a dietary supplement purveyor who goes by the moniker "The Health Ranger." Adam's operation is by far the worst spreader of health misinformation online, according to [an NBC News analysis](#).

Last year, the website hosted the most engaged-with article about cancer on the internet. The April article, "Cancer industry not looking for a cure; they're too busy making money," which promoted the baseless conspiracy theory that "Big Pharma" is hiding a known cure for cancer to keep people sick, garnered 5.4 million shares, comments and reactions, mostly on Facebook, according to data compiled through BuzzSumo, a social media analytics company.

Over its 25 years of operation, Natural News has hosted thousands of articles that reject scientific consensus, promote fake cures and spread conspiracy theories. Its articles have also targeted scientists and doctors for harassment and violence. In April, the site had 3.5 million unique viewers, according to the internet analytics company SimilarWeb.

**(U) The Con Artists Profiting From 5G Conspiracy Theories:** When people are scared of something, there will always be a snake oil salesman on hand, and now there are products emerging to *protect* consumers from the dastardly 5G airwaves.

Despite there being mountains of evidence to the contrary, 5G conspiracy theories are continuing to influence behavior today. According to Mobile UK, the association representing UK mobile operators, there have been 87 incidents of 4G/5G towers being vandalized, and more than 200 engineers who have been verbally or physically abused. Numerous online 5G-related conspiracy theories have facilitated these attacks, including erroneous claims that 5G technology caused the pandemic.

And of course, when there is hysteria, confusion and fear, there will be the con artists who look to profit.

One company which has attracted attention this week is 5GBioShield. For a mere £283 you can purchase a USB stick with proprietary holographic nano-layer technology which will create a quantum biological shield around you and/or your home.

According to [PenTestPartners](#), the product is nothing more than a standard 128 MB USB memory stick with a sticker on it. Having broken down the product, there is literally nothing to distinguish it from a normal £5 memory stick, aside from a 1p sticker.

This is one company which has been attracting mainstream media attention, but anyone could do a quick Google and realise there are hundreds of companies out there looking to deceive the general public.

EMF Protection is one company which offers window protections, bed canopies and EMF radiation-protection paint. It is not entirely clear how the products actually work from consulting the website, and

once again EMF Protection Founder Glynn Hughes responded but was less than forthcoming with an explanation. However, there is an explanation for the paint.

Through a combination of carbon fiber and graphite particles, the paint is 99.99% effective at not only blocking 5G, but also 2G, 3G, 4G and wifi. On top of all this protection, it is easy to apply, and is water based.

And there are hundreds of these con artists, relying on fancy words with no scientific substance out there. (Source: Telecoms.com)

**(U) COVID-19 Infodemic: EU Grapples with Conspiracies:** Disinformation is on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect storm for conspiracy theorists as well as political extremists, who are exploiting the crisis to further their aims. The EU is fighting back, and tech companies are clamping down. But will moves to censor content just fuel the conspiratorial fire?

The spread of disinformation can be attributed to both foreign and domestic actors.

It has led to a spate of protests in countries like Spain and Germany, where a number of such "corona demonstrations" have turned rather violent.

The demonstrators are a motely crew. Some are simply protesting lockdown measures; others include anti-vaxxers and those blaming everything from 5G to Bill Gates for "inventing" coronavirus. In countries such as Italy, the pandemic is also being used to push Eurosceptic ideas.

But will moves to censor content just fuel the conspiratorial fire?

Mikuláš Peksa, a Czech MEP of the European Free Alliance and member of the European Pirate Party, believes so.

*"Well I'm very much in favour of freedom of speech. I think, rather than just trying to censor the content we do not like, we should try to provide better content that is effectively correcting, or debunking the hoaxes existing on the net."*

Peksa says educating people to fact-check is a more realistic solution.

*"People in their nature are not bad, they really strive for correct information, they want to spread correct information, should they have it. So, my idea would be to provide them with a true, realistic picture of the situation as a sort of "vaccination" against this pandemic of disinformation – that would be the solution."* (Source: Euranetplus.eu)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- As the protests around the country continue to be the top topics of conversation, there is increasing concern about how these events may affect public trust towards the state, local and federal government for the ongoing COVID-19 response.
- An increasing amount of people are worried about nursing home residents' mental health upon new guidance for nursing home visits, which suggests vulnerable citizens continue social distancing for more time.

- FEMA conversation related to COVID-19 was low today, centering on the testing Czar's demobilization from the agency within two weeks. The majority of conversation related to FEMA continues to be driven by the beginning of the hurricane season and the agency's hurricane response preparedness amidst the pandemic.
- Coverage of COVID-19 in traditional news media the past 24 hours has been overshadowed by the ongoing nationwide protests. There is heavy coverage of CMMS and CDC's report estimating 26,000 deaths in nursing homes, with limited suggestion that the number is above 40,000. Multiple outlets have reported on White House COVID-19 task force members' future roles and level of communication with administration officials.

(U//FOUO) **Public Sentiment**

- There is growing concern over how current events will impact public trust in the government's ability to respond to COVID-19. The Minnesota Public Safety Commissioner said they would begin "contact tracing" protesters for police investigations. The use of this term is causing confusion and frustration.
  - There is concern that the use of the term will cause people to be less likely to participate in contact tracing for COVID-19 purposes.
- Many are **worried about senior citizens living in nursing homes** upon new federal guidelines elongating visit restrictions due to safety hazards for the elderly.
  - A large volume of people are sharing that they miss their loved ones in nursing homes, saying their emotional wellbeing is being affected by strict lockdown measures put in place for their safety for such a prolonged period of time.
- The latest numbers from Johns Hopkins University show that 21,000 people were diagnosed with COVID-19 on Monday. This is leaving many pessimistic about the upcoming days and weeks on the heels of numerous large gatherings over the holiday weekend and large protests in various cities.
- There are varying opinions over the development of vaccines in the United States however polls appear to indicate an increasing number of people would get a vaccine when one becomes available. People are largely concerned with a vaccine being rushed and therefore being unsafe or not well tested.
- National poll shows that by a margins of about two to one, Americans worry the reopening is going to make the outbreak worse, rather than have no effect. They also mostly believe an economic recovery will be slow.

**(U) 6/1 Reporting**

**Russia-State Media Pivots From COVID-19 Back to Basics: Ukraine, Revisionism, and Russophobia:** As the world cautiously begins to adjust to the new realities of post-quarantine life, the pro-Kremlin media is adjusting as well – and returning to familiar territory.

That's not to say that we've seen the last of coronavirus-related disinformation – far from it. COVID-19 will continue to affect life around the world for the foreseeable future, with a potential second wave **anticipated** in the coming months. Scientists are still racing to **find a viable cure**. In this context, don't expect to see mis- or disinformation about the coronavirus disappear – it will simply fade into the background and become yet another persistent bug in our information landscape, like **climate change**

denialism and anti-migrant fearmongering. If past is any indication, the pro-Kremlin media will continue opportunistically exploiting conspiracy theories and other disinformation narratives around COVID-19, undermining the EU, attacking the US or “Western elites”, or fomenting public fear and distrust. Other disinformation cases this week foreshadow which narratives are likely to endure in the months ahead: namely George Soros and Bill Gates anti-vax conspiracy theories, claims that non-capitalist countries are better able to handle crises, and nonsensical obfuscation like that “Western elites” or a global “Deep State” are behind the pandemic, or that COVID-19 is a US bioweapon. Attacking Western media that report critically on the Kremlin’s handling of the pandemic is also a tactic that will likely persist. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)



**Increased Disinformation Challenges for Tech Companies Gets Tougher as COVID-19 Limits Human Content Moderation Teams:** Fewer moderators are working due to the privacy and mental-health concerns about people doing this sensitive work from home. YouTube tells me that is continuing to operate with a reduced human content moderator force.

Facebook says its moderators are getting back to work, after it warned it would be making content moderation mistakes during the pandemic because of an increased reliance on artificial intelligence.

“Over the last several months the majority of the reviewers employed by our partners have been successfully transitioned to work from home,” Facebook spokesman Andy Stone said.

Twitter’s content moderator staffing has returned to normal levels, according to the company. (Source: The Washington Post)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- The social media conversation about COVID is largely focused on issues related to the ongoing protests taking place across the country. There are many who are ignoring social distancing guidelines out of a desire to get involved in the protests, with many

responding negatively to COVID-19 related safety guidance feeling it is tone deaf to ask people to socially distance during the current state of the nation. There is also a growing concern of a surge of COVID-19 cases as people gather for protests, often without masks.

- The FEMA conversation on social media is largely comprised of individuals expressing confusion about FEMA's role in the ongoing civil unrest taking place throughout the country. Many are also discussing the agency's preparedness for hurricanes amid the official start of the hurricane season.
- Two themes dominate COVID-19 coverage in traditional media today. The first is concern that crowds of protestors could set off a new wave of disease outbreaks. The second is the challenge of continuing to respond to COVID-19 during an expectedly active hurricane season that begins today. PPE distribution remains salient with discussion of a rise in middlemen to procure supplies as well as Michigan's governor set to testify before U.S. Congress tomorrow.

*(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment*

- Many people are declaring COVID "over" as the general public has moved on to more urgent issues. People are questioning the ability to continue to practice safe COVID-19 precautions when people feel compelled to participate in protests to have their voices heard.
  - People are **responding negatively to COVID-19 safety messaging**, particularly about social distancing, feeling it does not acknowledge the current state of affairs.
- A growing number of individuals and media outlets are voicing serious concerns that the protests taking place throughout the country will contribute to a large increase in COVID-19 spread. Many point out that first responders and protestors are often seen not wearing masks and not practicing social distancing

**(U) 5/29 Reporting**

(U) **"We are pleased": ISIS Broadcast Says God Sent COVID-19 to Punish Its Foes:** Islamic State said the coronavirus pandemic was divine punishment for its enemies, according to an audio broadcast on Thursday, where the jihadists also vowed more attacks.

The person on the tape, which was posted on one of the militants' websites but could not be verified by Reuters, identified himself as ISIS spokesman Abu Hamzah al-Quraishi.

"God, by his will, sent a punishment to tyrants of this time and their followers ... which can't be seen by the naked eye," he said, in an allusion to the COVID-19 disease.

"Today we are pleased for this punishment of God for you."



It was the Sunni Muslim group's third such tape since appointing Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi as new leader following the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by U.S. special forces in northwestern Syria late last year.

Quraishi urged ISIL fighters "everywhere to prepare whatever strength they could and be as hard as they could on the enemies of God and to raid their places," according to the tape. "Don't let a single day pass without making their lives awful."

He gave no specific targets but mentioned countries where the group is active such as Syria and Iraq as well as western Africa. (Source: Reuters, Edmonton Journal)

(U) **The "Boogaloo" Movement Isn't What You Think It Is:** Like many other novel extremist movements, the loose network of pro-gun shitposters trace their origins to 4chan. What coherence the movement has comes from their reverence for their newly-minted martyrs and a constellation of in-jokes and memes

Above all, though, the movement has gained momentum over the last two years by organizing on the world's [most popular social network](#). At the time of writing, that network's parent company had [added just over \\$150 billion](#) to its market cap since Boogaloo-friendly anti-lockdown protests began organizing there in mid April. The valuation of the company at \$662.8 billion on May 26th beat out its previous high of \$620.8 billion, set on the same day, January 20th, that the Boogaloo movement made its high profile public debut at Second Amendment protests in Virginia.

For now, Facebook chooses to allow the Boogaloo movement to flourish on their platform.

Open source materials suggest that, for now, the apocalyptic, anti-government politics of the "Boogaloo Bois" are not monolithically racist/neo-Nazi. As we have observed, some members rail against police shootings of African Americans, and praise black nationalist self-defense groups.

But the materials also demonstrate that however irony-drenched it may appear to be, this is a movement actively preparing for armed confrontation with law enforcement, and anyone else who would restrict their expansive understanding of the right to bear arms. In a divided, destabilized post-coronavirus landscape, they could well contribute to widespread violence in the streets of American cities.

#### *Mainstreaming Civil War: From /k/ To Facebook*

The white supremacist upsurge in the last half-decade has been repeatedly linked (including in [Bellingcat analyses](#)) to the intensely racist, misogynist, and queerphobic culture that characterised /pol/ boards on 8chan and 4chan.

The Boogaloo subculture's origins also can be traced in part to 4chan, but to a different board, /k/, which is devoted to weapons.

Researchers have [repeatedly](#) drawn [attention](#) to [Facebook's role](#) in radicalizing extremist actors, and the consequences of allowing extremists to organize freely on the platform, to little practical avail. Recent reporting indicates that the company's senior management have [long understood](#) its role in promoting

extremism, but have elected not to act for fear of alienating conservative sensibilities, especially in the U.S.

Research by the [Tech Transparency Project](#) shows that there were at least 125 Facebook groups devoted to the boogaloo by April 22nd, 2020. The real number has increased significantly since then, although determining an exact number is all but impossible due to the rapid evolution of the subculture.

One example of this is how “Boogaloo,” itself a euphemism, has been further disguised with the use of soundalike terms like “big luau” and “big igloo”. We’ve traced back its earliest use to November of 2019, so far.

Recent reporting has touched on the fact that explicitly far-right and even neo-Nazi groups are attempting to co-opt both the anti-lockdown protests and the broader Boogaloo movement. On May 17, 2020, the Economist published an article about how the far right had been “energized” by these protests.

This analysis is not wholly inaccurate, but it too misses a critical dimension of what is happening in the movement’s hubs on Facebook. Weeks spent inside a network of Boogaloo Facebook groups have revealed a much more complex picture.

This screengrab is from the [Virginia Knights Facebook group](#), which has 5,874 followers and appears to be one of the larger Boogaloo-focused groups in that state:

May 1 at 9:24 PM •

If this picture makes you nervous, then you need to reexamine your patriotism.

"The right of the people [ALL PEOPLE] to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

America's 2nd Amendment and gun culture isnt just for "angry white male rednecks," as mainstream media likes to portray.



Virginia Knights  
May 11

The 2nd applies to all of us! Check out that trigger control 🇺🇸🔫🇺🇸

~VK

539 54 Comments 173 Shares

Like Comment Share

Most Relevant

This is about Americans and Americans have always been different colors - I, myself am red - Cherokee - what we are all fighting for is FREEDOM - we ALL have fought for freedom before - I believe we will ALL fight for freedom again - together Americans!!

Like Reply 2d

SUPPORT FROM CINCINNATI

We at Arm The Populace do not care about the color of your skin, nor who you choose to love, nor what invisible entity in the sky you pray to. Personal Defense is a basic right for everyone.

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Like Reply 2d

It's All About Personal Determination, Spiritual Determination, With Every Individual Necessarily Deciding For One-Self Whether To Invite Into Your Heart, Mind, Body, & Soul, What Satanic Spiritual Determination Will Certainly Lead To Your Ultimate Des... See More

Interestingly enough, that same page includes a mix of both racially inclusive and racist rhetoric. For example:

OBTAINED BY AMERICAN FREEDOM ACTION THROUGH LITIGATION



Virginia Knights

April 30 at 7:06 PM · 🌐

April 30th, 1992 Los Angeles Riots: Open gun battles were televised, including an incident in which Korean shopkeepers armed with M1 carbines, Ruger Mini-14s, pump-action shotguns, and handguns exchanged gunfire with a group of armed looters, and forced their retreat. #NeverForget #2A (This isn't a call to action, just a history lesson) -MP



“Vote from the rooftops” has become a general right wing meme for [resisting unwanted electoral results](#) by shooting people. The meme’s origin is footage of Korean-American shop owners who shot at alleged looters during the 1992 L.A. Riots.

Since 2011, when the L.A. Times ran a story focusing on these businesspeople, “roof Koreans” have been a favorite meme in pro-gun and far right circles. Their use of the footage foregrounds armed racial conflict — the people shot from the rooftops are assumed to be black. The comments on this post included yet more racism, in the form of a series of anti-Muslim memes all posted by the same user:

Reaction to these posts was not universal, with a fairly even mix of commenters opposing “Auburndale Red”’s racism. The point here is not that the Boogaloo movement is wholly or authentically anti-racist, but that there appears to be a very active struggle within some parts of this movement as to whether or not their dreamed-of uprising will be based in bigotry.

Some parts of this movement are not wholly comprised of avowed racists, but neo-Nazis clearly see the “Boogaloo Bois” as a fertile recruiting ground, and the broader movement has shown itself ill-equipped to drive out the Nazis.

If there is a single common thread that unites the galaxy of Boogaloo Facebook groups, it is a desire to fight it out with the government. More specifically, members envision violent confrontations with local police and the “alphabet bois” in federal law enforcement agencies.

Red Flag laws and gun confiscation are frequently cited as grounds for a hypothetical insurrection.

Bradley Bunn, 53, is a Loveland, Colorado man who previously attended a March 12th meeting of the Colorado House Judiciary Committee to speak in opposition to the state’s new Red Flag law. He told the committee: “Repeal this. It is treason to disarm the American populace. Repeal it, please. I’m asking nicely.”

They did not. Bradley Bunn then circulated a manifesto that called for “armed defiance against tyrants”. He also started producing pipe bombs, for which he was arrested by the FBI. Bunn’s manifesto went viral with his local militia community. In the wake of his arrest, members of the [Allegheny Rescue Co. Facebook group](#) (6,202 followers) began to brainstorm about how to stop future arrests.

The chief suggestion that evolves is to put as many armed civilians in between the police and their target as possible:

The messaging app Discord is suggested as an alternate place to gather and coordinate, as is the encrypted chat app, Signal. Members talk about forming “dedicated regiments” and “strike teams” for the future. This may all be hot air. When it comes to evaluating the danger of this movement, one of the chief difficulties is in determining how seriously to take the constant threats of violence. Some members of these groups seem to realize this:

**THEY AREN'T GOING TO  
DECLARE MARTIAL LAW AND ROUND  
EVERYONE UP IN ONE WEEK. THEY'RE  
SIMPLY MAKING A LIST OF WHO TO  
DISARM, ARREST AND SEND TO PRISON**

**THERE'S NEVER GOING TO  
BE SOME BIG TRIGGER EVENT,  
SOMETHING THAT KICKS OFF  
ANOTHER CIVIL WAR OR REVOLUTION...**

**THE TRUTH IS THE "SHIT WILL  
HIT THE FAN" ONE HOUSEHOLD AT A TIME.  
YOU'LL CERTAINLY KNOW WHEN IT HITS  
THE FAN FOR YOU. BUT YOU'LL BE ALONE**

imgflip.com

Extreme Liberty

Yesterday at 6:20 PM

Like Page

The idea that a single event will trigger the Boogaloo is a binding myth for this movement, but civil wars are often complicated and unpredictable. Nevertheless, many rallies and armed protests are scheduled for the summer. Familiar militia and Patriot Movement groups are likely to be joined by a new crop of heavily armed and colorfully dressed "Boogaloo Bois" who are convinced that civil war is a foregone conclusion, and who have been goading one another towards armed confrontations with law enforcement.

In a United States made even more unstable by a contentious presidential election season, and the social and epidemiological effects of COVID-19, every protest or street battle and its aftermath will carry the potential for serious acts of violence. As protests over the death of George Floyd heated up in Minneapolis on May 26th, members of Boogaloo groups across Facebook considered it a call to arms. Memes were churned up that day, adding George to the movement's list of martyrs.

One member of the Big Igloo Bois Facebook group showed up at the protests, bearing a Boogaloo flag and, he claimed 15 other bois. [Reports indicate](#) he was wounded with a rubber bullet during the protest.

Meanwhile, other Boogaloo supporters online expressed their desire to travel to Minneapolis and start the civil war now.

On May 1, 2020, Facebook and Instagram both updated their "violence and incitement" policy to ban the use of "boogaloo terms" when they occur alongside images or statements depicting or urging armed violence. Our research suggests that this policy has done virtually nothing to curb either the growth of this movement or reduce the violence of its rhetoric. Every new Boogaloo page and group we found led us to new related pages and "liked" pages, each either organizing people for direct armed action or agitating them to anticipate violence.

The world's largest social network remains a hospitable place for would-be insurrectionists. We now know that Facebook has buried evidence that its platform facilitates the growth of extremism, due to a fear that combatting this would be seen as anti-conservative bias. It is not yet possible to say if the movement that has been nurtured on that platform will ever play a part in an American civil war. But every day, tens of thousands of heavily armed people log on to repeat their hope that it will. (Source: [Bellingcat](#))

As Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms crack down on [coronavirus](#) disinformation, people spreading false information and conspiracy theories are turning to TikTok.

(U) **COVID-19 Conspiracy Theorists Have Found A New Home On TikTok:** A flashpoint in the spread of pandemic falsehoods is "[Plandemic](#)," a documentary-style video containing long-debunked conspiracies and disinformation about COVID-19. Other platforms have made moves to remove the video, but an analysis showed that clips have made their way to TikTok.

Data compiled by [First Draft](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to fact-checking worldwide, shows that snippets of the documentary as well as videos tagged #plandemic have surged on TikTok, recently peaking on May 12 with 62 new videos. They contain false conspiracies connecting COVID-19 to [Bill Gates](#) and the World Health Organization, as well as flat-out denial of the virus's existence.

"That will always happen. The moment the stuff gets crackdown in one place, they move to other platforms," Laura Garcia, the training and support manager at First Draft, told BuzzFeed News. First Draft is an organization that studies misinformation and disinformation online.

Its initial analysis scraped 326 TikTok videos with the #plandemic tag and found those videos produced 537,168 interactions. Of those, just 10 videos account for 210,433 of the interactions, which shows how wide of a reach a small number of videos can have on the platform. (Source: BuzzFeed News)

(U) **Facebook Will Start Verifying the Identities of Accounts That Keep Going Viral:** Facebook will now require people behind individual profiles with “high reach” to verify their identity, the [company announced today](#). Facebook hopes this will ensure users are seeing more authentic posts from people, instead of ones from bots or users concealing their identity. The change follows a similar move two years ago in which Facebook [required viral page owners to disclose their identities and locations](#), following numerous accounts of overseas content farms using partisan US politics to game Facebook’s algorithms, go viral, and cash in on ad revenue.

Accounts on the social network that exhibit “inauthentic behavior” that have posts continuously going viral in the US will need to provide a form of ID. Should the ID not match the identity of the account in question or if the user declines ID verification, Facebook will reduce the distribution of that account’s viral posts, which will reduce the number of people who see it pop up in their feed. If any one of these profiles deemed suspicious is also an admin for a Facebook page, the profile will be banned from using the page if they fail to identify themselves through Facebook’s [Page Publisher Authorization Process](#), which the company released back in 2018. (Source: The Verge)

(U) **Russian Disinformation Site Distorts U.S. Coronavirus Poll:** On May 21, the pro-Kremlin news site News Front covered a survey commissioned by [Reuters](#).

The News Front story, published in Russian, was headlined “Every fourth American is against taking anti-COVID-19 vaccine.”

The headline is false.

News Front downplayed findings showing support for a coronavirus vaccine in the survey, which polled 4,428 U.S. adults between May 13 and May 19.

The News Front [story](#) equated lack of interest in a vaccine with opposition. “While pharmaceutical corporations are involved in a race for the development of a vaccine against the coronavirus, it has transpired that the fourth of Americans are not interested in it,” it stated.

In fact, that characterization muddies the results as reported by Reuters, which said that 14% of those surveyed “said they were not at all interested in taking a vaccine, and 10% said they were not very interested. Another 11% were unsure.”

Being uninterested or uncertain does not necessarily indicate resistance. The survey showed majority support for a coronavirus vaccine and strong support for vaccinations that have worked against other diseases. (Source: Stopfake.org)

(U) **We Don’t Even Have a COVID-19 Vaccine, and Yet the Conspiracies Are Here:** In March, when a woman in Seattle volunteered for a COVID-19 vaccine trial, rumors immediately began circulating that she was a crisis actor who had received a fake vaccine. She is, in fact, real, and so is the prospective



vaccine she got, as the *Associated Press* asserted in a follow-up story. In Oxford, England, another volunteer for a separate COVID-19 vaccine trial became the subject of a fake news story that purported she had died after a shot. She too was forced to clarify the situation: *She is very much alive.*

There is no COVID-19 vaccine, but there are already COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies. Even as vaccines for the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 are being held up as the last hope for a return to normalcy, misinformation about them is spreading. A more fraught scenario for science communication is hard to imagine: a novel vaccine, probably fast-tracked, in the middle of a highly politicized and badly mishandled pandemic.

"I was initially optimistic that, when people felt the need for a COVID-19 vaccine, the anti-vaccination movement would undergo a period of retreat," says Peter Hotez, a vaccine scientist at Baylor College of Medicine, who has himself become a frequent target of vaccine skeptics. "It's actually had the effect of reinvigorating the anti-vaccine movement. (Source: The Atlantic)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- Social media conversation today varied greatly in regards to COVID-19. The reopening of the economy has resurfaced today as the main subject of online conversation as more states continue easing restrictions and an increasing amount of businesses are reopening, sometimes defying their government's mandates.
- There is a high level of discussion on traditional and social media about reports that the federal government mistakenly distributed shipments of remdesivir to the wrong hospitals.
- FEMA conversation continues to mostly be composed of the agency delivering PPE to nursing homes. This afternoon, conversation about FEMA turned more towards the agency's preparedness for the hurricane season amid the pandemic, much of this was driven by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security tweeting that the agency is more prepared than ever.
- Traditional media focused today on the U.S. exiting WHO, with lesser coverage on businesses reopening in many states and outbreaks in prisons, nursing homes, and meat processing plants. FEMA coverage relates the recently released hurricane season operational guidance factoring in COVID-19 and U.S House of Representatives lawmakers seeking details on Project Airbridge contracts.

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- Over the course of the day discussion of businesses reopening increased as multiple states and cities began progressing into new stages of the process. In areas where businesses and restaurants still have not reopened business owners are growing more anxious and worried about their finances. There has been an increase in reports of businesses choosing to ignore current reopening plans and instead opening early.
- Members of the general public are expressing concern over the possibility that the added federal unemployment benefits may not be extended in the next COVID-19 relief bill. Recent statements from Senate leadership make it seem like there is not support for extending the

benefits. This leaves many worried about [how they will pay bills](#) if they remain out of work in July.

- The debate on mask usage continues. People are expressing confusion after news media shared WHO guidance that was released in March, recommending healthy people, including those who don't exhibit COVID-19 symptoms, only wear masks when taking care of someone infected with the virus, which is a contradiction to U.S. public officials who recommend everyone wear a mask in public.

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- A growing number of individuals and media outlets are voicing serious concerns that the protests taking place throughout the country will contribute to a large increase in

~~COVID-19~~ spread. Many point out that first responders and protestors are often seen not wearing masks and not practicing social distancing

**(U) 5/28 Reporting**

(U) **DVEs' Explosives-Related Tactics Influenced by COVID-19 and Increasing Internationalization of TTPs and Networks:** Domestic Violent Extremists seeking to advance their causes by attacking COVID-19 related targets, and the increased internationalization of DVE ideology and tactics may reinforce each other, as many societies in the West are taking similar unprecedented steps to contain the COVID-19 virus, leading DVEs to believe that the time for violent action to achieve their desired ends has arrived. DVE groups and particularly "accelerationists" are saying the pandemic is a sign that it is the time to strike weakened or distracted governments, whose counterterrorism missions are diminished because of the pandemic. The types of biases and grievances prevalent among many DVEs may lead them to see the current extraordinary measures to fight the spread of COVID-19 as confirmation of conspiracy theories about government plans to take away their Constitutional rights and could lead to an acceleration of any plots under development.

(U//FOUO) FBI Director Wray has stated that the underlying drivers for many DVEs, including "perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions...and reactions to legislative actions," persist. Recent DVE plots and Telegram posts reflect similar trends.

(U) Posters on WSE Telegram channels argue that the pandemic has caused many to question the Federal Government's ability to steer the United States through such a crisis and support the accelerationist argument that modern society is headed toward collapse.

(U//FOUO) RMVE hospital plotter Timothy Wilson, who wanted to "kick start a revolution," explicitly tied his attack plans to fears of government overreach or conspiracy theories about links between the virus and alleged plans to institute martial law. He told an undercover FBI source that he wanted to "attack high value targets if the government issued martial law and quarantine orders as a result of COVID-19." Wilson also mentioned Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh as an inspiration, underscoring his anti-government sentiment.

(U//FOUO) A number of publications have noted the isolation mandated by the COVID-19 response may actually increase the consumption of conspiracy theories and extremist material online, as individuals are deprived of their usual social connections. A spike in interest in DVE Telegram channels followed the spread of pandemic-induced social distancing measures in the United States—channels associated with white supremacy and racism gained an additional 6,000 users in March 2020, and one WSE channel focused on messaging related to COVID-19 saw its user base jump from 300 to 2,700 users (an increase of 800 percent) in March alone. (Source: CISA, Extremist Threat Report)

**(U) Self-Described "Incel" Arizona Mall Shooter Claims COVID-19 Restrictions Pushed Him Over Edge:**

On 20 May, USPERArmando Hernandez, 20, who prosecutors claimed considered himself an incel, opened fire at the Westgate Entertainment District in Glendale, AZ, injuring three people. According to

the prosecutor at his initial hearing, Armando specifically targeted couples and told police he thought he would “gain respect” after the shooting.

According to prosecutors, Hernandez was frustrated about not being able to get a meal at a restaurant and that his friends did not call him back when he arrived at Westgate. He was allegedly set over the edge because he wanted to go to the movies but could not because of COVID-19. Hernandez then launched the attack and sent a livestream of it to a girl he was interested in.

Hernandez, who had been planning an attack at Westgate for at least three years, sought to harm 10 people and specifically targeted couples, according to prosecutors. Hernandez’s plan did not come to fruition due to a jam in his rifle. (Source: NCTC)

**(U) Conspiracy Beliefs Reduce the Following of Government Coronavirus Guidance:** A new study from the University of Oxford shows that people who hold coronavirus conspiracy beliefs are less likely to comply with social distancing guidelines or take-up future vaccines.

The research, led by clinical psychologists at the University of Oxford and published today in the journal Psychological Medicine, indicates that a disconcertingly high number of adults in England do not agree with the scientific and governmental consensus on the coronavirus pandemic. The findings indicated that:

- 60% of adults believe to some extent that the government is misleading the public about the cause of the virus
- 40% believe to some extent the spread of the virus is a deliberate attempt by powerful people to gain control
- 20% believe to some extent that the virus is a hoax

Guidelines are only effective if the majority of people use them. This pandemic requires a unified response. However the high prevalence of conspiracy beliefs, and low level of trust in institutions, may impede the response to this crisis. The figures suggest a breakdown of trust between political and scientific leadership and a significant proportion of the English population.

Other beliefs endorsed by a significant minority include (further examples available in the paper):

	Do not agree	Agree a little	Agree moderately	Agree a lot	Agree completely
Coronavirus is a bioweapon developed by China to destroy the West.	54.6%	20.2%	11.7%	8.0%	5.5%
Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain.	80.8%	5.3%	6.8%	4.6%	2.4%
Muslims are spreading the virus as an attack on Western values.	80.1%	5.9%	7.0%	4.6%	2.4%
Bill Gates has created the virus in order to reduce the world population.	79.0%	6.4%	6.6%	5.1%	3.0%
The WHO already has a vaccine and are withholding it.	70.9%	10.6%	9.3%	5.4%	3.8%
Celebrities are being paid to say they have coronavirus.	74.5%	8.5%	7.9%	5.6%	3.4%
Politicians (e.g. Boris Johnson) have faked having coronavirus.	73.5%	9.2%	8.1%	5.7%	3.6%

(Source: University of Oxford)

(U) **China Tailors Disinformation TTPs to COVID-19 Information Landscape:** Seven decades ago, Mao Zedong publicly embraced a benevolent view of propaganda, as if he were a latter-day prophet spreading the communist gospel: “We should carry on constant propaganda among the people on the facts of world progress and the bright future ahead so that they will build their confidence in victory,” he mused in 1945. Just a few months ago, Xi Jinping urged state journalists to spread “positive propaganda” for the “correct guidance of public opinion.” Indeed, Beijing’s global propaganda efforts in recent years have been more about promoting China’s virtues than about spreading acrimony and confusion, à la Russian information ops and election meddling. Moscow wants a weakened and divided West, one that leaves Russia free to dominate its self-appointed sphere of influence—but Russia in 2016 was also an economically sluggish, oil-dependent nation with an economy a tenth the size of America’s, and lacked the resources to remake the world in its image.

Beijing has a much bigger prize in mind and a much longer-term plan to get it: The contest isn’t about who gets to run the U.S. It’s about who deserves to run the world. And China, with its economy poised to overtake that of the United States, has already plowed billions into crafting an image as a responsible global leader, and billions more into cultivating global dependence on Chinese investments and Chinese markets.

The coronavirus outbreak and the global outcry against China’s failures of transparency and containment were not part of the plan. They sparked an international backlash that, by Beijing’s reported reckoning, was worse than anything it had faced since the Tiananmen Square massacre in

1989. So Beijing leaped to seize, or at least confuse, the global story of the virus and its cast of heroes and villains.

This has involved unleashing techniques Russia perfected during the U.S. presidential election in 2016. “We’ve seen China adopt Russian-style social media manipulation tactics like using bots and trolls to amplify disinformation on COVID-19,” Lea Gabrielle, the special envoy and coordinator for the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, wrote to me in an email. “Both countries repress information within their countries while taking advantage of the open and free information environments in democracies to push conspiracy theories that seek to undermine those environments.”

As the world realized the virus was spreading out of control, Chinese diplomats, official media, and Twitter influencers launched an aggressive frenzy of defense, scrambling to preserve the Chinese Communist Party’s cratering reputation at home and overseas. And then they went on offense, with an assist from [perhaps thousands of fake or hacked](#) Twitter accounts, according to the investigative site ProPublica. The result was a coordinated campaign of attacks on the United States, and the spread of disinformation and confusion about where the virus really came from and whose screwup it was, really, that led to so much death.

The longer-term implications stretch far beyond the immediate crisis, however. When it’s all over, China will have gained experience pushing its propaganda overseas at a volume and intensity it never had before. The CCP has succeeded at home, through rigorous information management, in controlling what Schrader, the former German Marshall Fund scholar, calls the “means of perception.” And the party is having some success extending those tools beyond its borders. “Controlling the means of perception is fundamental to power,” Schrader said. And the better China’s propaganda works, the more power it will have to shape the rest of the world. (Source: The Atlantic)

**(U) Empty Hospitals, Fake Burials and Chloroquine: Systemic Disinformation Downplays COVID-19 in Brazil:** As Brazil surged to [second](#) place in confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, internet users in the country have been constantly bombarded with messages downplaying the pandemic. These messages misleadingly suggested that hospitals were empty and coffins were buried with no corpses inside them, as well as that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine were proven cures to COVID-19.

Although it is not always possible to identify who created these narratives, it is clear that they reinforce the position of the country’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, who has dismissed COVID-19 as a “[little flu](#)” and said that strict social isolation measures would harm the country’s economy.

The DFRLab has already [reported](#) that articles profiling people that had recovered from COVID-19 were among the most popular in Brazil. These messages, despite not being false, were being pushed by pro-Bolsonaro groups on Facebook, reinforcing the false narrative that the novel coronavirus is not so serious.

Alongside these messages, disinformation is also circulating in Brazil. Claims about empty hospitals, for instance, started to circulate in April, after the president himself [claimed](#) he did not know of “any crowded hospitals” in the country and that the virus was not as bad as media portrayed it. While hospitals were still not crowded at that point in time, state governments were already building field

hospitals to deal with the expected increased demand. In his statement, Bolsonaro also mentioned one specific hospital and [incorrectly downplayed](#) how many patients were being treated there.

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- As more states and local areas reopen, the debate continues about whether face masks should be worn in public. Many schools are beginning to share their plans for resuming classes in the fall, following CDC releasing its guidance last week for schools reopening. Parents and teachers are voicing concerns about the proposals.
- There continues to be a high volume of discussion about the U.S. COVID-19 death toll and the potential of a second wave of infections. Some are sad about the high COVID-19 numbers, while others question the validity of the numbers.
- The majority of FEMA conversation is focused on the upcoming hurricane season following the hurricane briefing for the President and First Lady today. Additionally, the COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season continues to be shared at a low volume on social media.
- Traditional news coverage remains largely focused on the U.S. fatality toll increasing as questions loom around PPE shortages, antibody testing reliability and requirements to ensure employees' safe return to work. Other subjects receiving high coverage frequency include unemployment reaching about 25%, Congress asking for details on ventilators imported from Russia, and President Trump's pledge to extend National Guard deployments.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- [Debates about the use of masks](#) in areas that are reopening continue to be one of the top topics of discussion. An increasing number of people are saying they prefer not to wear masks because they feel the masks restrict their breathing or they cause heightened anxiety.
  - As an increasing number of school systems begin to release [plans for reopening](#), parents and teachers are sharing their thoughts on whether it is a good idea to move forward with in-person classes in the fall. Many feel it will be difficult to impossible to enforce social distancing among children and could impose more harm than good.
- The CDC shared their previously released [guidance for school and health officials](#) to help determine when schools may be ready to reopen.
  - Following news that the U.S. COVID-19 death toll has surpassed 100,000, many people are expressing sadness and frustration.
- Some people continue to question the validity of the numbers.
- Others share concern that the number is so high in less than three months or feel the U.S. has failed in its COVID-19 response and in particular highlight that nearly one-third of the deaths came from nursing homes.
  - There continues to be a high level of discussion about the potential for a second wave of infections. People are wondering if the country is preparing any differently for a second wave. There are questions regarding the ability to staff and supply hospitals as well as what would happen to the economy during a second wave.



**(U) 5/27 Reporting**

**(U) Social Media Usage Is At An All-Time High. That Could Mean A Nightmare For Democracy:** Four years after Russia's expansive influence operation, which touched the feeds of more than **100 million users** on Facebook alone, Americans' usage of social media has only increased — and drastically so, as a result of the pandemic.

More people are more online right now than at any point in human history, and experts say the Internet has gotten only more flooded since 2016 with bad information.

And in 2020, as in 2016, it's only a matter of time before the focus shifts back away from the coronavirus and to the presidential election.

One way that increased usage may be felt in the 2020 election isn't in just the amount of false information being seen and shared, Yildirim says — but in how polarized the American public is during the campaign cycle.

A **study from last year** found people's usage of Facebook correlated with how polarized they are and how open they are to understanding the views or ideas of the opposition party.

Facebook had internal research pointing to the same conclusion, according to a new **report from the Wall Street Journal**, but the company reportedly brushed it aside.

"Our algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness," said one slide, from a 2018 presentation.

More people spending more time on the platforms where this takes place likely will mean even more attempts at amplifying divisions and stoking discord. (Source: NPR)

**(U) How COVID-19 Misinformation Spreads Online:** Many of the falsehoods online don't have obvious sources or intentions. Rather, they often begin with niche groups mobilizing around their favoured agendas. Neil Johnson, a physicist at George Washington University in Washington DC, has reported **4** COVID-19 misinformation narratives taking shape among online communities of extremist and far-right 'hate' groups, which occupy largely unregulated platforms including VKontakte, Gab and 4Chan, as well as mainstream ones such as Facebook and Instagram.

The study says that a "hate multiverse" is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to spread racism and other malicious agendas, focusing an initially rather diverse and incoherent set of messages into a few dominant narratives, such as blaming Jews and immigrants for starting or spreading the virus, or asserting that it is a weapon being used by the "Deep State" to control population growth

An alarming feature of this network is its capacity to draw in outside users through what Johnson and his team call "wormhole" links. These are shortcuts from a network engaged with quite different issues. The hate multiverse, the researchers say, "acts like a global funnel that can suck individuals from a

mainstream cluster on a platform that invests significant resources in moderation, into less moderated platforms like 4Chan or Telegram". As a result, Johnson says, racist views are starting to appear in the anti-vaccine communities, too. "The rise of fear and misinformation around COVID-19 has allowed promoters of malicious matter and hate to engage with mainstream audiences around a common topic of interest, and potentially push them toward hateful views," his team says in the paper.

Communication scholar Scott Brennen at the Oxford Internet Institute, UK, and his co-workers have found that social-media companies have done a decent job of removing misleading posts, given the hard task. The team followed up 225 pieces of misinformation about the coronavirus that independent fact-checkers had collated in the IFCN or Google databases as false or misleading. In a 7 April report, the team found that by the end of March, only some 25% of these false claims remained in place without warning labels on YouTube and Facebook, although on Twitter that proportion was 59% (see [go.nature.com/2tvhu5](https://go.nature.com/2tvhu5)). And Ferrara says that about 5% of the 11 million Twitter users his team has studied so far in its COVID-19 database have been shut down for violating the platform's policies of use, and that these tended to be unusually active accounts.

But some creators of content have found ways to delay detection by social-media moderators, Donovan notes, in what she calls "hidden virality". One way is to post content in private groups on Facebook. Because the platform relies largely on its users to flag up bad information, shares of misleading posts in private communities are flagged less often because everyone in the group tends to agree with one another, she says. Donovan used to study white supremacy online, and says a lot of 'alt-right' content wasn't flagged until it leaked into public Facebook domains. Using CrowdTangle, a social-media-tracking tool owned by Facebook, Donovan found that more than 90% of the million or so interactions referring to the *New York Post* article about the Gates vaccine conspiracy were on private pages.

Another way in which manipulators slip past moderation is by sharing the same post from a new location online, says Donovan. For instance, when people on Facebook began sharing an article that alleged that 21 million people had died of COVID-19 in China, Facebook put a label on the article to indicate that it contained dubious information, and limited its ranking so that it wasn't prioritized in a search (China has confirmed many fewer deaths: 4,638). Immediately, however, people began posting a copy of the article that had been stored on the Internet Archive, a website that preserves content. This copy was shared 118,000 times before Facebook placed a warning on the link. Another post, on the website Medium, was removed by Medium because it falsely claimed that all biomedical information known about COVID-19 was wrong, and put forward a dubious theory. Before it was taken down, it garnered some shares. But a version on an archived site remains. It has garnered 1.6 million interactions and 310,000 shares on Facebook — numbers that are still climbing. (Source: Nature)

(U) **Fake CDC Guidelines on Virginia School Reopening Circulate Online:** You may have seen it circulating around social media over the past week: an image that claims to be a list of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s guidelines for schools reopening this fall.

Over the weekend, an email was sent out to parents from Rockingham County Public Schools in regards to posts sharing that list, which contains false information.

Dr. Oskar Scheikl, Rockingham County School Division Superintendent, said the posts may look like they contain information from the CDC, but are written in a way that are false. There are misspellings in the text that should give away from the beginning that the post's not from the CDC, including "guidelines" in the title shown in the image, he pointed out. (Source: ABC)

(U) **How Media Consumption Patterns Fuel Conspiratorial Thinking:** False news **travels faster than truth online**. Incubated in online communities, mis- and disinformation often coalesce into conspiratorial narratives that receive **higher, more sustained engagement** on social media. Viral conspiracies can motivate individuals to engage in targeted harassment and violence that—while often aimed at elites—disproportionately affects marginalized populations.

Who is more likely to interpret events conspiratorially? Conspiracy theories are stickiest when they satisfy an individual's underlying **needs**. Those with a strong need for closure or certainty, those facing threats to themselves or those close to them, and those seeking to maintain a positive image of themselves, their identity, or groups they belong to tend to gravitate toward conspiratorial interpretations. Previous research showed that highly **knowledgeable people who also lack trust** in governmental institutions are more prone to endorse political conspiracy theories, as are people **who have been on the losing side of an election** and are looking for a reason to keep holding onto their worldview.

Our new research, conducted with colleagues in the **Center for Communication and Civic Renewal team at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**, shows that how we approach our mediated world matters as well. We found that the way people do and don't search for news online greatly affects their propensity to believe that a group of secret, malevolent actors are controlling the world. In short, people who avoid following the news because they think they will hear about the important stuff eventually are among the most likely people to think conspiratorially.

People **encounter** the news in a variety of ways. While some people omnivorously devour all the news they can and others prefer news from their ideological side, a considerable number of people choose not to look for the news at all, confident they can stay informed because if it is important enough the news will work its way into their interpersonal networks or social media feeds. People exhibiting high levels of this "**news finds me**" perception tend to have lower political knowledge and interest than others, and tend to use social media more often. Since previous research shows that those who are highly knowledgeable about, and distrustful of, the government are more prone to conspiracism, we wondered whether these media-use patterns and orientations toward news consumption contributed to a conspiratorial mentality as well.

Does it? In a word, yes. We conducted a panel survey of adults in five 2020 presidential election swing states (Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and North Carolina), tapping people's social media use, political interest and knowledge, trust-in-government, racial resentment, and whether they held a "news finds me" perception. The top-left panel of the figure shows that people with a higher "news finds me" perspective are the most likely to exhibit conspiracism in their thinking.

**(U) China-, Iran-, Russia-, and Turkey-Backed English-Language Media Outlets Produce Highly Effective Content About the Coronavirus Pandemic That Reaches a Large Global Audience and Attracts Millions of Engagements:**

The prominent themes of content produced by these countries' state-backed media include criticism of the democratic response, praise for the country's own leadership, and conspiracies about the virus' origin. Russia's RT criticized the Western response as capitalistic opportunism, while China criticized President Trump for not taking the situation seriously. Russia's Sputnik, China's People's Daily, and Turkey's TRT World have emphasized their national success, while highlighting contributions to other countries' fight against the virus. Iran's PressTV is the most notable propagator of coronavirus conspiracies, claiming that the U.S. created the virus in a "biowarfare" lab, and some Chinese sources claimed that U.S. military personnel brought the virus to Wuhan. Though these state-backed sources produce less content than other global outlets, such as BBC, they can attract engagement that is as much as ten times more effective. (Source: Oxford Internet Institute)

**(U) Russia Seeks to Aggravate the Public Health Crisis in Western Countries by Spreading Disinformation:**

Russian narratives about COVID-19 fit into three categories. The first refers to the dissemination of anti-American sentiments to domestic Russian audiences. Such narratives claim the Western response is incompetent and contradicts the values the West purports to champion. The second category propagates conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origin and the Western response with "the main objective of confusing people and diminishing the levels of trust and credibility in Western political systems and institutions." The final group uses 'experts' to tout Russian global leadership and assert an American inability to continue as a great power, arguing the U.S. is impeding global efforts to contain the pandemic. (Source: University of Calgary)

**(U) How the Coronavirus Increases Terrorism Threats in the Developing World:** As the coronavirus reaches [developing countries in Africa and Asia](#), the pandemic will have effects beyond public health and economic activity. As the disease wreaks its havoc in areas poorly equipped to handle its spread, terrorism likely will increase there as well.

We are political scientists who study the [developing world](#) and [political conflict](#). Our recently [published research](#) identifies a potential link between the pandemic and an uptick in violence. We find that food insecurity – the lack of both financial and physical access to nutritious food, which leads to malnutrition and undernourishment in a population – makes citizens angry at their governments.

Citizens conclude that their political leaders are either unable or unwilling to ease their suffering. This anger gives terrorist groups opportunities to recruit new members by providing them a violent outlet for venting their frustrations. In many cases, terrorist organizations do what their governments can't or won't do: give people the food and money they badly need to survive. (Source: The Conversation)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- There has been a high volume of discussion on both traditional and social media regarding updated guidance provided by the CDC on antibody tests and the dangers of touching contaminated services. This has caused some skepticism among the general public who feel they have been receiving mixed messages.

- Masks continue to be an increasingly polarizing issue among the general public as people voice frustrations over mask mandates while others share that they feel masks are an essential part of public health safety at this time. The conversation is growing more political.
- FEMA conversation on social media has been steady over the course of the day with no major stories dominating the discussion. Instead, conversation has been largely driven by local media reports of PPE deliveries and congressional concerns over the potential deactivation of the National Guard.
- Traditional media has focused on multiple health news items, including health officials' belief that protective masks are critical to overcoming the virus until a vaccine is available. PPE is also generating national and local media interest, specifically expected deliveries to nursing homes and evaluating Project Airbridge's success. The U.S. fatality toll remains of high interest as it nears 100,000.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- The CDC's latest updated guidance on COVID-19 antibody tests (also known as serological tests) is producing wide conversation this afternoon.
  - Public Health experts share and emphasize from the CDC's report that serological testing should not determine immunity until durability and duration of immunity is established.
  - Many are skeptical at how the media is covering the news, saying headlines are misleading. Others express frustration at how the new information is confusing and different from what was originally thought.
- As the number of deaths in the United States inches closer to 100,000 there are a growing number of people questioning the validity of this number while others note that this number remains lower than some of the original projections.
  - A smaller number of people are expressing sadness and grief over the number of dead. Many feel not enough has been done to acknowledge the loss of life that has occurred over the past several months.
- There are ongoing discussions about how to capture the full financial and mental impacts of COVID-19 on the public, businesses and communities. Many continue to struggle emotionally and financially with social distancing and closures during the pandemic and it has been difficult to grasp the long term impacts these issues are having on people.
- As an increasing number of states and private businesses make masks a requirement, the employees who must enforce these rules and regulations are voicing concern over the potential for confrontations with those who do not want to comply.
- There continues to be widespread debate regarding the use of masks in public spaces. Public health officials contend there is clear evidence they protect against transmission, but feel they have become politically polarized, so whether they will help in the country's fight against the disease is still a question.
- Discussions of individuals expressing concerns about future COVID-19 vaccines have increased, with people discussing several different issues:

- Vaccine safety remains a top concern. A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research indicates that only half of Americans would get a COVID-19 vaccine. Among those who said they would not get vaccinated, 7 in 10 cited concerns about the safety of the vaccine.
- Bipartisan leadership from the House Energy and Commerce Committees have sent a letter to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, addressed to Dr. Birx, urging transparency in the development and release of the White House's national vaccine plan.
- There are growing mentions of HHS plans to modify the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP) by removing coverage under the program for Shoulder Injuries Related to Vaccine Administration (SIRVA). SIRVA is a common injury related to vaccine administration and accounts for 54% of all claims filed with VICP.

### **(U) 5/26 Reporting**

**(U) California Anti-Lockdown Protests Show Influence of Extremist Groups, Adaptability of COVID-19 Conspiracies to Include Other Issues:** In California and across the country, lockdown protests have drawn a melting pot of participants, including peaceful activists such as the DeBows and militias such as the Boogaloo Boys, who have credos that call for civil war, said Brian Levin, professor of criminal justice and director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at Cal State San Bernardino.

It's unclear how large a role extremist groups are playing in protests. The demonstrations have drawn people with a wide array of concerns, including those who feel it's wrong for the stay-at-home orders to cover religious institutions and libertarians who fear the rules are destroying the economy. Some people who oppose vaccines have also taken up the cause.

It's uncertain to what extent extremist groups are trying to recruit at the events. Saturday's Sacramento gathering, estimated by city police to be the largest yet, with 2,000 in attendance, resembled a family carnival, with an organic-gelato vendor, and music performances sprinkled among political speeches.

Still, Levin said he found the intermingling of hate groups with others to be concerning.

"Different people are showing up with different goals, but when they collect together, they influence each other," he said, creating a "petri dish for conspiracy theories and bad information, as well as aggressiveness."

That mishmash, Levin said, could make the events a "recruiting rabbit hole" for groups that struggle to find inroads with mainstream audiences.

Devin Burghart, a researcher with the nonprofit Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, has been monitoring reopening groups online and says he sees extremism and conspiracy theories gaining traction in thousands of internet postings that have sprung up in recent weeks.

"These groups, while initially established around reopening, are pivoting to a larger, far-right political project," Burghart said.

He said the number of people joining such groups and the speed with which they had grown was “unprecedented” in American social movements. In California, he has found more than 70 such Facebook groups with about 300,000 members, and more than 2 million participants nationwide.

Burghart said he had already seen a shift in talking points that he thought would move the focus of some groups from lockdowns to the upcoming election, and said many of those now online had both money and experience in organizing.

Conspiracy theories about the virus are rampant in reopen forums and at rallies. Those that have gained traction include the belief that a coronavirus vaccine will carry a microchip that allows the government to track citizens, or that the virus is a political hoax perpetrated by the Democratic Party to promote voter fraud with mail-in ballots.

The spread of such views, Levin said, has already led to some extreme reactions.

Levin pointed to armed protesters in Michigan and elsewhere, and the recent arrest of a Colorado protester for having a pipe bomb. In Fresno, shutdown protesters followed a City Council member home, leading to a scuffle that ended with misdemeanor charges against the politician.

Levin and Burghart said they believed there would be more such incidents. Hate crimes have increased since the pandemic began, Levin said.

“You see these different political strains gaining steam and also gaining new followers,” Burghart said. “I worry about acts of violence.”

Levin said that as the “initial grievance” of the stay-at-home order faded from view, he expected the groups to grow online and on the ground and to refocus on new shared concerns. (Source: LA Times)

**(U) Study: White Supremacist Groups Are ‘Thriving’ On Facebook, Despite Extremist Ban:** Dozens of white supremacist groups are operating freely on Facebook, allowing them to spread their message and recruit new members, according to a Tech Transparency Project (TTP) investigation, which found the activity is continuing despite years of promises by the social network that it bans hate organizations.

TTP recently documented how online extremists, including many with white supremacist views, are using Facebook to plan for a militant uprising dubbed the “boogaloo,” as they stoke fears that coronavirus lockdowns are a sign of rising government repression. But TTP’s latest investigation reveals Facebook’s broader problems with white supremacist groups, which are using the social network’s unmatched reach to build their movement.

With millions of people now quarantining at home and vulnerable to ideologies that seek to exploit people’s fears and resentments about Covid-19, Facebook’s failure to remove white supremacist groups could give these organizations fertile new ground to attract followers.

Facebook’s Community Standards prohibit hate speech based on race, ethnicity, and other factors because it “creates an environment of intimidation and exclusion and in some cases may promote real-world violence.” The company also bans hate organizations. Since the Charlottesville violence, Facebook

has announced the removal of specific hate groups and tightened restrictions on white extremist content on the platform.

To test those claims, TTP conducted searches on Facebook for the names of 221 white supremacist organizations that have been designated as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), two leading anti-hate organizations.

The analysis found:

- Of the 221 designated white supremacist organizations, more than half—51%, or 113 groups—had a presence on Facebook.
- Those organizations are associated with a total of 153 Facebook Pages and four Facebook Groups. Roughly one third of the organizations (34) had two or more Pages or Groups on Facebook. Some had Pages that have been active on the platform for a decade.
- Many of the white supremacist Pages identified by TTP were created by Facebook itself. Facebook auto-generated them as business pages when someone listed a white supremacist or neo-Nazi organization as their employer.
- Facebook’s “Related Pages” feature often directed users visiting white supremacist Pages to other extremist or content, raising concerns that the platform is contributing to radicalization.
- One of Facebook’s strategies for combatting extremism—redirecting users who search for terms associated with white supremacy or hate groups to the Page for “Life After Hate,” an organization that promotes tolerance—only worked in 6% (14) of the 221 searches for white supremacist organizations.
- In addition to the hate groups designated by SPLC and ADL, TTP found white supremacist organizations that Facebook had explicitly banned in the past. One known as “Right Wing Death Squad” had at least three Pages on Facebook, all created *prior* to Facebook’s ban.

Roughly 36% (52 Facebook Pages and four Facebook Groups) of the content identified was created by users. One user-generated Page for a group designated as white nationalist by SPLC had more than 42,000 “likes” on Facebook and has been active since 2010.

The remaining 64% of the white supremacy content identified by TTP involved Pages that had been auto-generated by Facebook. These Pages are automatically created by Facebook when a user lists a job in their profile that does not have an existing Page. When a user lists their work position as “Universal Aryan Brotherhood Movement,” for instance, Facebook generates a business page for that group.

The auto-generation problem has [existed for some time](#). In April 2019, an anonymous whistleblower filed a [Securities and Exchange Commission \(SEC\) petition](#) regarding extremism on the platform and Facebook’s practice of auto-generating business pages for terrorist and white supremacist groups. Some of these Facebook-generated Pages gained thousands of “likes,” giving a way for the groups to identify potential recruits, according to the whistleblower.



One of the auto-generated hate group Pages with the most “likes” in TTP’s analysis was for the Council of Conservative Citizens, an SPLC-designated white nationalist group. The group made headlines in 2015 after an online manifesto linked to white supremacist Dylann Roof [referenced the organization](#); Roof opened fire at a historically black church in South Carolina, killing nine people. Facebook’s auto-generated Page for the Council of Conservative Citizens included a description of the group’s white supremacist affiliations, complete with a direct link to their website.

*Related Pages: Facebook’s Extremist Echo Chamber*

The TTP review highlights flaws in Facebook’s content moderation system, which relies heavily on artificial intelligence (AI) and Facebook users to [report problematic content to human moderators for review](#).

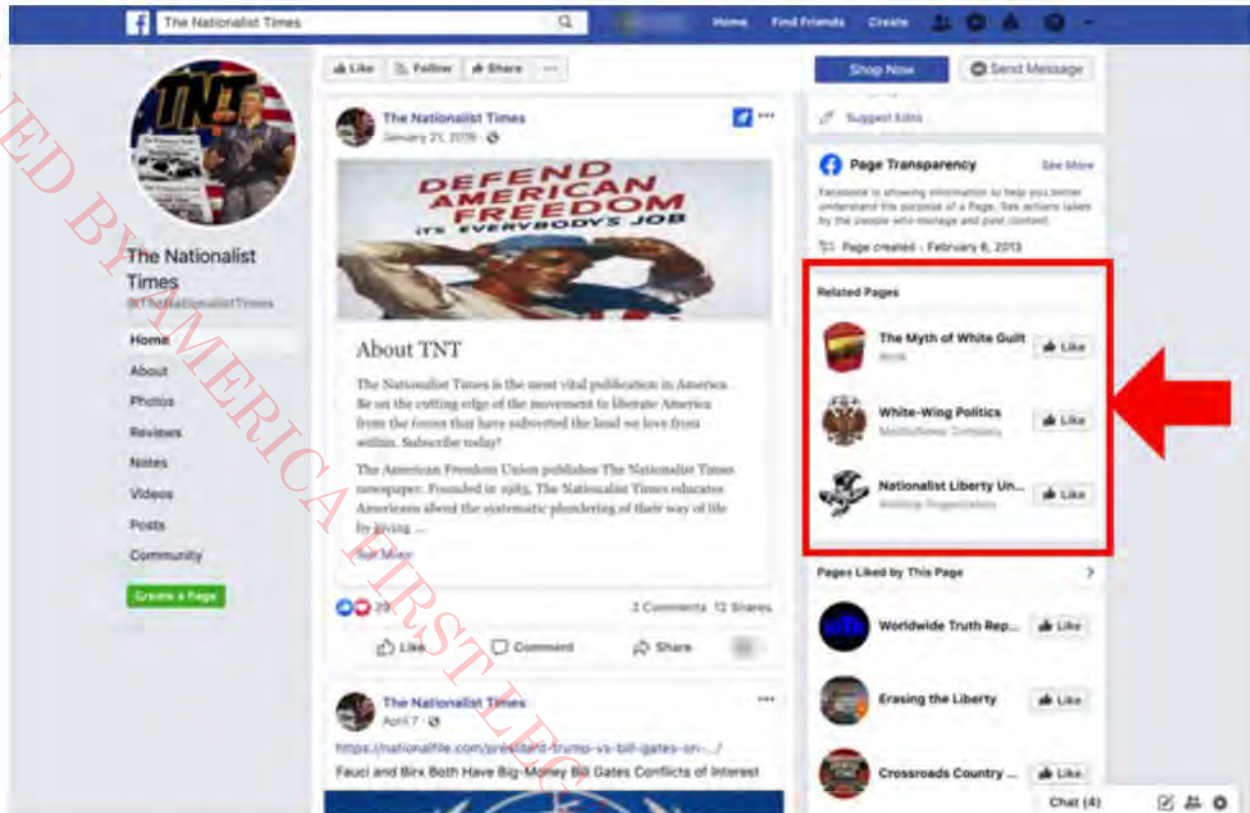
Relying on users to identify objectionable material doesn’t work well when the platform is designed to connect users with shared ideologies, experts have noted, since white supremacists are unlikely to object to racist content they see on Facebook. “A lot of Facebook’s moderation revolves around users flagging content. When you have this kind of vetting process, you don’t run the risk of getting thrown off Facebook,” [according to SPLC research analyst Keegan Hanks](#).

Artificial intelligence, which Facebook has touted for years as the solution to identifying and removing bad content, also has [limitations when it comes to hate speech](#). AI can miss deliberate misspellings; manipulation of words to include numbers, symbols, and emojis; and missing spaces in sentences. Neo-Nazis, for example, have managed to avoid detection through [simple measures like replacing “S” with “\\$.”](#)

At the same time, Facebook’s algorithms can create an echo chamber of white supremacy through its “Related Pages” feature, which suggests similar Pages to keep users engaged on a certain topic. TTP’s investigation found that among the 113 hate groups that had a Facebook presence, 77 of them had Pages that displayed Related Pages, often pointing people to other extremist or right-wing content. In some cases, the Related Pages directed users to additional SPLC- or ADL-designated hate groups.

For example, TTP found that the user-generated Page for Nazi Low Riders, an [ADL-listed hate group](#), showed Related Pages for other groups associated with white supremacy. The top recommendation was another user-generated Page called “Aryanbrotherhood.” (By omitting the space between the two words, the Page may have been trying to evade Facebook’s AI systems, as discussed above.) The Aryan Brotherhood is “the oldest and most notorious racist prison gang in the United States,” [according to ADL](#).

Facebook’s algorithms even pick up on links between organizations that may not be obvious to others. For example, the [auto-generated Page for Sacto Skins](#), a short form of the [SPLC-designated racist hate group Sacto Skinheads](#), included a Related Page recommendation for Embassy of Russia in the United States. A recent investigation by *The New York Times* found that [Russian intelligence services](#) are using Facebook and other social media to try to incite white supremacists ahead of the 2020 election. (Source: Tech Transparency Project)



(U) **Russia's Pushing a Quack COVID-19 Cure All Over Africa:** In Africa, news outlets and social media posts notorious for spreading Russian-created disinformation and conspiracy theories are leveling all sorts of allegations against the WHO, ranging from incompetence to fraud.

At the center of the attacks is what appears to be a coordinated campaign promoting an herbal concoction the Moscow-backed government of Madagascar claims will cure COVID-19.

The attacks on the WHO intensified when the agency released a statement on May 4 warning Africans against using untested remedies for treatment of the coronavirus after the Malagasy government began to extoll—and export in large quantities—an untested herbal infusion sometimes bottled like soda that's called Covid-Organics. The main component for the tonic is artemisia annua, known as sweet wormwood, which has been shown to have some therapeutic value against malaria.

The herbal remedy's biggest booster is Malagasy President Andry Rajoelina, a 45-year-old media entrepreneur elected in 2018 with help from Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose meddling, as detailed by the *New York Times*, was blatant even by Kremlin standards.

The focus of Russia's activities has been to drive a wedge between Africa and other international players, whether the U.S., European nations, or China. The Covid-Organics controversy is potentially just another tool to create resentment, as reflected in President Rajoelina's assertions that his country's "cure" for the pandemic is being ignored by the West because it is from Africa.

Much of the news that people in Madagascar see or listen to is content created by media outlets set up by the operations of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Putin who was indicted by Special Counsel Robert

Mueller for allegedly financing the Internet Research Agency that worked to influence the U.S. 2016 presidential election. (Source: MSN)

**Students on Lockdown Create a Global Guide to Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories, Fake Cures, and Other Whopping Lies:** Many of the student researchers attend Princeton. Others come from Bocconi University, The University of Chicago, and Columbia University. They've been updating a project spreadsheet—so far more than 800 entries long—that lists all of the disinformation narratives they've found spreading in countries around the world. Princeton Professor Jacob Shapiro, the co-director of Princeton's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, and Jan Oledan, a research specialist for the project, kicked off the disinformation tracking effort in March. "We weren't seeing any place where things from multiple countries were really pulled together," Shapiro said.

The researchers comb social media and the internet, including the fact-checking sites that have cropped up around the world, and use a coding manual to characterize the type of stories they find. An email circulating in the Czech Republic about how the United States supposedly "registered" the coronavirus in 2003 (it didn't) in order to attack China? According to the student researchers, that's a "weaponization or design" story. A chain message on the messaging platform Line falsely claiming that Japan would go into a nationwide lockdown on April 1? That one is labeled an "emergency response" narrative.

Looking at the team's data, a few storylines appear over and over again—like the false conspiracy theory that the disease is some kind of **weapon**. Frequently these tales take on a local flavor. In Syria, for instance, social media posts were circulating that claimed COVID-19 was the product of US **sarin gas** experimentation in Afghanistan. Given the many allegations of chemical-weapons use that have surfaced during the Syrian civil war, it's perhaps not surprising that sarin gas would factor in local conspiracy theories about COVID-19. In another narrative, a Facebook user alleged that European countries were spreading the virus to Egypt by exporting their "gently used" infected clothing. An overlay on the post indicated Facebook had flagged it as false.

COVID-19 disinformation often seems to target a country's foreign or **minority population**. The Princeton team reported that the influential Nepali journalist Rajendra Dahal speculated on Twitter last month about the "role of Muslims in spreading COVID-19" and about why they are "hiding" in mosques. Nepali media have reported on **rising Islamophobia** following several positive cases among Muslims in the country. Likewise, in Japan, social media users have pushed the false information that "one third or half of Japan's coronavirus cases are [among] non-citizens." (Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)

**(U) The Information Apocalypse Is Already Here, And Reality Is Losing:** We're now living in a version of that dystopian future, where people are struggling to distinguish fact from fiction and are resistant to information from credible sources. But it's not the result of new technology or sophisticated synthetic media. As it turns out, the tools needed to unmoor people from our shared reality already exist and are less technological than societal: a global pandemic that unleashes fear, uncertainty, and an economic catastrophe among a deeply polarized public; motivated and well-organized fringe and conspiracy groups eager to seize the moment to reach the mainstream; and seemingly authoritative sources and institutions that stoke that disagreement and fail to communicate effectively with the public.

In the end, the information apocalypse arrived a couple of weeks ago, ushered in not by some new reality-bending technology but by a disgraced scientist in a slick 26-minute video.

In its first few days of release, “The Plandemic” — a short film filled with so much coronavirus disinformation that it has since been banned by major tech platforms — racked up more than 8 million views across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, peddling outright falsehoods and conspiratorial claims about the origins of the current pandemic.

This wasn't so much the result of the film's promptly and widely debunked content as it was the professional credentials of its main character, Judy Mikovits — a [disgraced](#) research scientist with a PhD in biochemistry and a resume that includes 22 years working for the National Cancer Institute. Mikovits lent a seemingly authoritative voice to a slop bucket of virus disinformation that was already circulating. She offered a PhD endorsement of long-debunked falsehoods about the coronavirus. She was a reason to believe — so much so that she is now a bestselling author on Amazon.

“The Plandemic” had untethered viewers from our common reality and left them unable to distinguish fact from fiction. And it had done it entirely without technological wizardry. This was the future researchers and the media warned us about. And an avalanche of fake news hearings, news literacy efforts, and investments in fact-checking infrastructure since 2016 couldn't stop it.

As [Renee DiResta](#), a disinformation expert and the research manager of the Stanford Internet Observatory, explained, there's little need for deepfakes when you have a pandemic to exploit. “The additional layer of synthetic content — you don't need that in this case,” she told BuzzFeed News.

“There's enough to work with; there's enough fear, there's enough uncertainty.” [Nina Jankowicz](#), a disinformation specialist with the Wilson Center, a Washington think tank, agreed. “You cannot fact-check your way out of an emotional argument, particularly when it is slickly packaged and designed to appeal to those looking to fill a trust gap.”

As doomsday warnings about deepfakes captured the collective imagination, anti-vaccine activists, QAnon conspiracy devotees, and political extremists have used Facebook Groups, YouTube, and Twitter to form online communities, churn out memes and messaging to attract new followers, and mint “experts” like Mikovits to undermine scientific authorities.

The ultimate goal for anti-vaxxers is to convert more people to their worldview, which is something this community excels at, according to [a new paper](#) published in Nature by researchers at George Washington University and other institutions. They studied user behavior on Facebook and found that “anti-vaccination clusters manage to become highly entangled with undecided clusters in the main online network, whereas pro-vaccination clusters are more peripheral.”

While pro-vaccine communities on Facebook largely keep to themselves, anti-vaccine advocates often intermingle with people who are “undecided” about vaccines. A piece of content like “The Plandemic” is engineered to reach the undecided and fearful. The researchers suggested that, based on current growth trends, “anti-vaccination views will dominate in a decade” on Facebook.

The ultimate goal is likely to undermine confidence in a future vaccine and continue the assault against the medical community, the government, and related targets, ranging from Bill Gates to 5G technology. The creation of a COVID-19 vaccine will very likely **open a new front in the information wars** — one for which health authorities, social media platforms, and the public are not ready.

"The anti-vaccine activists who initially elevated Mikovits, and Plandemic, have been quite direct about the fact that they see the COVID-19 vaccine as an opportunity not only to erode confidence in *that* vaccine, but in the very concept of vaccination overall," DiResta said.

She predicts they will "begin to harass the individuals who are doing the work of vaccine development, and the people working on the public education campaigns to come, 'exposing' them as somehow ethically compromised, 'bought,' incompetent, etc, relying on discrediting tactics of the type commonly seen in political smear campaigns."

The battle over the coronavirus pandemic and a vaccine will reverberate beyond health communities, ultimately increasing the number of people "who are part of an organized and active community that has lost its ability to make sense of the world, and that might take actions that are severely harmful to themselves and others."

In the meantime, conspiracy theorists are preparing to release the second part of "The Plandemic."

**(U) Somehow This Wild Hoax Bill Gates Anti-Vaxx Video Doesn't Violate YouTube's Policies:** A bonkers hoax video about Bill Gates has been making the rounds on social media — and it's setting the anti-vaxx conspiracy world on fire.

The video claims to show Gates briefing the CIA in 2005 about a vaccine to immunize religious fanatics. The video, which is obviously faked, is getting gobbled up by online conspiracy theorists who've latched onto the Microsoft co-founder as the mastermind behind the coronavirus pandemic.

The video started circulating about a week ago and is now gaining steam on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter — despite those companies' repeated pledges to contain the spread of disinformation. One version of the video had amassed close to 37,000 views in just a few days.

A spokesperson for YouTube says they reviewed the video and it does not violate their policies against harmful misinformation related to COVID-19, nor does it violate their other community policies against hate speech, spam, or violence. (Source: Vice)

**(U) Canadian-Led NATO Battlegroup in Latvia Targeted by Pandemic Disinformation Campaign:**

The Canadian-led NATO battle group in Latvia was the target of a pandemic-related disinformation campaign that alliance commanders say they believe originated in Russia.

Reports circulated recently in some Baltic and Eastern European media outlets that suggested the contingent at Camp Adazi in Kadaga, outside the capital of Riga, had "a high number" of cases of the deadly virus.

"That was definitely not true," said Col. Eric Laforest, commander of Task Force Latvia.

When the reports first surfaced, ahead of a major exercise late last month, the Latvian defence ministry swung into action to counter the false information.

It's not the first time Russian-backed media outlets in the Baltic country have been accused of working to drive a wedge between the western military contingent and the Latvian public. Not long after the deployment began three years ago, reports emerged online that specifically smeared Canadian troops. (Source: CBC)

**(U) More Harm Than Good? Twitter Struggles to Label Misleading COVID-19 Tweets:** Automated technology that Twitter began using this month to label tweets containing coronavirus misinformation is making mistakes, raising concerns about the company's reliance on artificial intelligence to review content.

On May 11, Twitter started labeling tweets that spread a conspiracy theory about 5G causing the coronavirus. Authorities believe the false theory prompted some people to set fires to cell towers.

Twitter's technology, though, has made scores of mistakes, applying labels to tweets that refute the conspiracy theory and provide accurate information. Tweets that include links to news stories from Reuters, BBC, Wired and Voice of America about the 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory have been labeled. In one case, Twitter applied the label to tweets that shared a page the company itself had published titled "No, 5G isn't causing coronavirus." Tweets with words such as 5G, coronavirus, COVID-19 or hashtags #5Gcoronavirus have also been mistakenly labeled.

Experts say the mislabeled tweets could confuse users, especially if they don't click on the label. Since Twitter doesn't notify users when their tweets get labeled, they likely won't know their tweets have been flagged. Twitter also doesn't give users a way to appeal its evaluation of their posts.

"Arguably, labeling incorrectly does more harm than not labeling because then people come to rely on that and they come to trust it," said Hany Farid, a computer science professor at University of California, Berkeley. "Once you get it wrong, a couple hours go by and it's over."

#### **(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- Conversation today was relatively smaller than previous weeks and was mostly driven by coverage of large crowds defying social distancing practices this Memorial Day weekend. This has renewed and increased public discussion about the possibility of a second wave due to the timing of the holiday with the gradual reopening of businesses throughout the U.S.
- Virginia's new mandatory mask order also produced wide discussion today about mask use and its roll in containing the spread of COVID-19. Many continue to express skepticism toward mask use guidelines, perceiving it as an unnecessary and ineffective measure despite the government's messaging promoting their use.
- Many private hospital systems continue furloughing and laying off employees, as well as many retail businesses affected by the crisis. New studies showing that many people who became unemployed due to the pandemic might not find work again is producing growing levels of concern among the general public.

- Traditional news coverage has focused on the U.S. fatality toll approaching 100,000. Other stories marked the reopening of the New York Stock Exchange trading floor and examined the potentially unsafe crowds over the Memorial Day weekend. Several national and local outlets reported on news that the President has finished a two-week course of hydroxychloroquine.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There has been a high volume of discussion about mask mandates on the heels of Virginia's new mask requirement. There is increasing debate over whether businesses should be able to mandate that patrons wear masks or face coverings. The majority of people support businesses that choose to enforce a mask mandates. Those that do not support it say they will take their business elsewhere. (example 1, example 2, example 3)
- The majority of the conversation over the weekend focused on large groups of people gathering for the holiday while ignoring social distancing guidelines and not wearing masks as photos and reports of crowded beaches and venues are shared. People feel the next two weeks will be a critical time period to watch for new outbreaks as a result of these gatherings.
  - This is causing a large amount of discussion about when the "second peak" could happen as people question if it will be associated with the economy reopening or if it will be later in the fall.
  - Some feel if there are no major outbreaks this could be an indicator that the country is ready to begin a larger recovery effort.
  - Some people are expressing frustration that state and federal officials are not wearing masks when in public.

**(U) 5/21 Reporting**

**(U) EU Monitor Sees Drop In COVID-19 Disinformation, Urges Social Media To Take More Action:**

- In line with the previous EEAS Special Reports and based on publicly available information, this edition gives an overview of recent developments around COVID-19 related disinformation. The report focusses on foreign state and non-state actors trying to exploit the uncertainty in societies as well as people's fears and insecurities to advance their own agenda.
- While misinformation and disinformation<sup>[1]</sup> relating to issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to spread across the globe, the volume has – according to our findings – shown at least a temporary decrease during the period observed, alongside a general downward trend on COVID-19 related web searches<sup>[2]</sup>.
- There is a crystallizing and clustering around specific topics and narratives: alleged links between COVID-19 and 5G networks; COVID-19 restrictions as pretext establishing global domination of secretive elites; and attacks on individuals engaged in the development of vaccines, especially Bill Gates.

- External actors, notably pro-Kremlin sources, are still involved in spreading disinformation, including by amplifying existing conspiracy theories, which link the COVID-19 pandemic to biological warfare, 5G technology and fuel anti-vaccination sentiment.
- The efforts of state actors like China to deflect blame, to use the pandemic to promote their own governmental system and enhance their image abroad continue. The claim that there are clandestine US biological laboratories on the territory of “former Soviet republics”[3] has been spread both by pro-Kremlin outlets as well as Chinese officials and state media.
- Disinformation around COVID-19 has real world consequences. It has become clear that disinformation is not just a potential health risk when false cures are propagated. The spread of false information pertaining to the 5G network has also led to multiple arson attacks on telecommunication infrastructure across Europe.[4]
- In some regions and countries, the COVID-19 pandemic is used to restrict freedom of speech and freedom of the media. The EEAS has observed numerous cases in which governments or state officials have used the crisis to curtail media freedoms.
- The work of independent media and fact-checkers is crucial to deliver reliable and authoritative information about the pandemic. Continued threats and harassment against fact-checkers and fact-checking organizations are being observed.
- Social media companies continue to invest into detecting and countering misinformation and disinformation on their platforms. While the efforts are commendable, it is clear that much more needs to be done. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **494 Coronavirus-Related Cases Spreading Disinformation and Collected at EUvsDisinfo Database Received 1,152,270 Likes, Shares and Comments on Different Social Media Platforms:** As of 19 May, The EUvsDisinfo database has a total of 8508 disinformation cases, of which 494 are related to conspiracies and false information on the coronavirus. The coronavirus cases were based on 1608 URLs, which we traced and analysed using media analysis tool BuzzSumo.

The article with the most engagements was published on Sputnik Italian, receiving 112,800 likes, shares and comments on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit. It falsely claimed that Poland did **not allow Russian aircraft** carrying humanitarian aid and a team of medical experts to Italy into its airspace.

In second place, with 94,000 engagements, we find an article fuelled by conspiracy theories and published by orientalreview.org site in English. It falsely claims that the **coronavirus is a fake pandemic**; that Italy will leave the EU and that Trump and Putin have to stop the secret elites and bankers from dominating the world.

In third place with 68,800 engagements is an article published on Russian-language cont.ws claiming that the coronavirus was created artificially and is a **biological weapon**. This claim falls into the common



category of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives about biological weapons and alleged US laboratories in Russia's neighbourhood.

Fourth place belongs to Russian-language amediainfo.ru that was one of 18 outlets in our database which published an article claiming that a professor from Harvard University had been **arrested for creating the coronavirus**. In reality, the arrest had nothing to do with the coronavirus. The article received 57,400 engagements.

The last place in the top 5 belongs to RT Arabic for an article with 51,700 engagements spreading disinformation about the **US being behind the coronavirus**. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

**(U) Online Conspiracy Groups Advocate Claiming Disability to Avoid Wearing Masks in Public:** Shelly Lewis approached the **California supermarket** with a script in mind.

"Hi, I have a medical condition that I'm not allowed to wear a mask and I'm not required by HIPAA rules and regulations to disclose that," Lewis told a supermarket manager, who nonetheless explained that she would not be allowed inside without a protective face mask. "You're discriminating against me now, do you know that? You're discriminating against me."

Lewis, a prominent member of the Flat Earth movement, recently uploaded footage of the encounter online, where it went viral even after she deleted it. A re-upload on Twitter currently has 5.4 million views.

But across the internet, in circles decidedly less fringe than Flat Earth, Americans are spreading disinformation about medical laws that allegedly exempt them from wearing face masks amid a pandemic that has killed over 90,000 people in the United States. Earlier this month, a set of memes began instructing COVID-19 skeptics (many of them conspiracy theorists or **conservatives**) to lie about having a medical condition in order to avoid masking up. One meme, which was amplified by an **erstwhile Republican congressional candidate**, tells readers to cite laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) to essentially trick people who ask them to wear protective gear.

The memes aren't just annoying for frontline grocery-store workers who have to enforce masking rules. They undermine regulations written for people with legitimate disabilities, experts said. (Source: The Daily Beast)

**(U) Why the Debunked COVID-19 Conspiracy Video "Plandemic" Won't Go Away:** Despite efforts by major platforms to limit its spread, copies of the widely debunked conspiracy video "Plandemic" continued to multiply and spread largely through niche online conspiracy communities. Once Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube began **proactively removing** the video, users from groups like QAnon promoted it, hosting the video on "alt-tech" platforms that cast themselves as "pro-free speech" options, while continuing to share links to the video on Facebook and Twitter at a rapid rate.

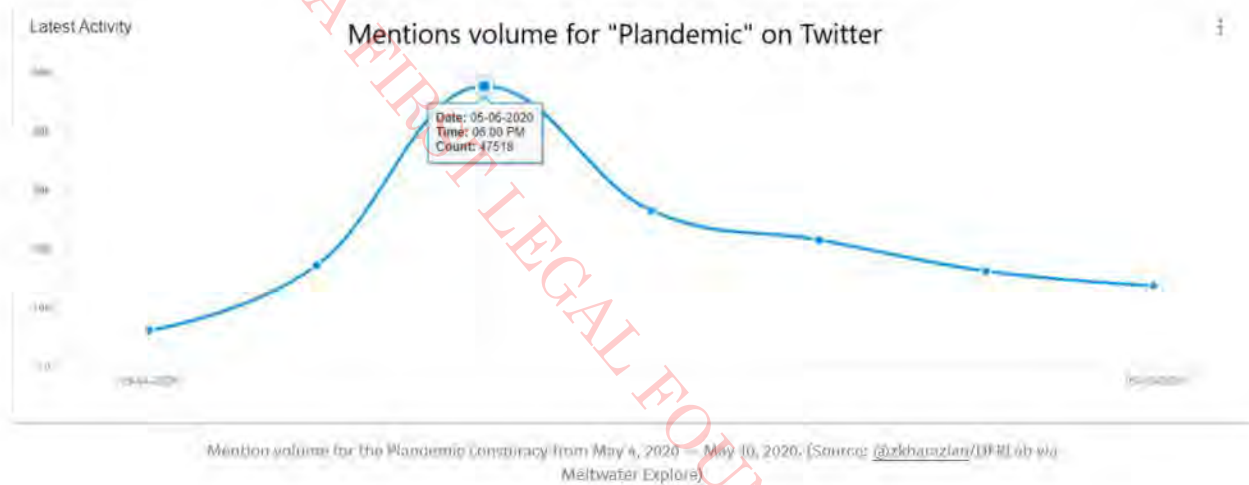
The video's **enduring online presence** in spite of major platforms' efforts to limit its spread demonstrates that the removal of the offending content does not prevent the spread of a conspiracy

once it has gone viral. In the case of “Plandemic,” the removal of the video seems to have triggered a form of the [Streisand Effect](#), in which attempts to suppress online content paradoxically fuel greater interest and seeking out of that content.

The discovery that the “Plandemic” video has migrated to various “alt-tech” video sharing sites, at times *in anticipation* of future removals, underscores the limits of content moderation on individual platforms. Faced with removal by major platforms, harmful content usually moves to find niche refuges on the internet in order to meet demand.

### *The Role of QAnon Groups*

A search on social media listening tool Meltwater Explore for mentions of the topic between May 4 and May 10, 2020 returned roughly 148,000 tweets, with a peak in volume on May 6.



Using the [rtweet](#) R package, the DFRLab collected 10,000 tweets that used the hashtag #plandemic for a network analysis. The data for the network analysis was pulled on May 7. As such, it should not be viewed as representative of all conversations on Twitter regarding the “Plandemic” conspiracy; but rather, a snapshot of a portion of the activity at a moment when the topic had just crested its peak. Even analysis of this limited dataset revealed discernible and consistent trends when compared with the overall traffic flow for the topic obtained through Meltwater Explore. Importantly, many of the accounts identified as key hubs for interactions related to the conspiracy in the sample also appeared as the most retweeted accounts in Meltwater.

The data was visualized as an [actor network](#) using the [vsonSML](#) R package, a suite of tools for social media network analysis, and [Gephi](#), a social network visualization software. After processing, the resulting graph file had 8,910 nodes and 8,826 edges. Each node represents an individual Twitter account, and the connections joining them — the edges — represent interactions between accounts in

the forms of retweets, quote tweets, replies, or mentions. Nodes were sized by *in-degree*, which is a measure of how many “inlinks” the account received from other accounts — in simple terms, how many other accounts retweeted, mentioned, replied to, or quote-tweeted the source account.

Conversations involving the conspiracy were clustered into “communities” arranged around a key discussion hub or influencer account that received high engagement from the other accounts in the cluster. Most of these communities consisted of accounts actively promoting QAnon conspiracies. Thus, while the accounts involved seemed to share a common interest in QAnon, the manner in which they engaged with one another about the conspiracy was highly multipolar — there was no central discussion hub with which the accounts interacted.

This may be a feature of QAnon Twitter networks. [Previous analysis](#) by researcher Erin Gallagher described QAnon networks as “dense and frenetic,” and noted how these accounts are known to congregate in “[Twitter rooms](#),” where they coordinate retweets of each other’s posts to artificially increase engagement.

(U) **Capitalizing on the Coronavirus Conspiracist Frenzy:** Under conditions of uncertainty – combining health anxiety about a novel disease, economic insecurity, social isolation, and exceptionally restrictive government measures – it is no surprise that mis- and disinformation flourish more vigorously than usual. Indeed, history shows that widespread disinformation is a [common feature](#) across pandemics – a phenomenon for which human psychology and cognition are [partly to blame](#). Uncertainty predisposes us to search for answers to help us make sense of what’s going on, which can enforce mental shortcuts and errors of logic that lead us to accept false conclusions. At the same time, the present [infodemic](#) is also exacerbated by the [flawed incentive structure](#) of the online environment and specifically social media – which favours cheap, low-quality information with strong emotional appeal over high-quality, rigorously-researched content. (To their credit, platforms are now taking steps to mitigate this problem, though with [limited success](#).)

It is therefore hardly surprising that the [coronavirus conspiracy boom](#) is a natural fit for the Kremlin’s disinformation machine, which has a long track record of promoting [conspiracy theories](#) on a wide array of topics (Soros, “global elites”, Western false flag operations...the list goes on). Regarding the coronavirus, pro-Kremlin media have also been spreading conspiracy theories since the very beginning of the outbreak: our first recorded case on the topic, from January 22nd, asserts that the coronavirus was “[likely elaborated in NATO biolabs](#)”. Notably, the origin of this conspiracy theory in the Kremlin-linked media sphere is confirmed by data analytics firm [Semantic Visions](#), which found that the [first ever reference](#) to COVID-19 being a US-made biological weapon came from tvzvezda.ru, a state-owned outlet operated by the Russian Ministry of Defence, on January 20th. This conspiracy theory was repeated yet again this week in various forms (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

This week, it was interesting to observe the pro-Kremlin media bandwagoning on other conspiracy theories about the coronavirus that have originated and spread via other channels. Bill Gates and his evil “vaccination microchip plot” were a leading target – see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Absurdly, Gates also stands accused of [paralysing 496,000 children in India with a polio vaccine](#) and seeking to [reduce the world’s population via vaccines for over 15 years](#). Gates has long warned about the dangers of being unprepared for a new global pandemic and has mobilised significant resources in the fight against the coronavirus, including for the development of a vaccine. As a result, he has become the [punching bag for anti-vax activists](#) – and the pro-Kremlin media appears more than happy to play along. (For more on Bill Gates and the Kremlin’s anti-vax disinformation campaign, see [here](#).)

Related to Gates, other cases invoked the conspiracist notion of “global elites” orchestrating the pandemic – a narrative largely in line with the “Plandemic” video referenced above. For example, we saw claims that the [WHO is part of the global government and the coronavirus is a pretext for a global colour revolution](#); that the [coronavirus is a game coordinated by the pharmaceutical and media industries](#); and that the [Freemasons have begun “chipping” Ukraine’s population](#). (No, no, and no.) One creative case also claimed that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the highly respected public face of the US government’s pandemic response, [threatened President Trump with a “major epidemic”](#) due to his personal sympathies for Hillary Clinton. Another alleged that [“diabolical Masters of Darkness”](#) manufactured the pandemic and are “committing mass genocide”.

A particularly disruptive variation of the conspiracy theory that the pandemic is a tool of mass control links the coronavirus with 5G technology – and in recent weeks, it has led to [arson and vandalism attacks against cell towers](#) in several European countries. But this naturally didn’t stop News Front from [falsely claiming](#) that the US Secretary of Defense admitted that 5G poses a threat to humans. (He didn’t, and it doesn’t.) Incidentally, News Front was included in Facebook’s latest [takedown](#) for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour – more on that [here](#).

Finally, to round out the list, other coronavirus conspiracy theories this week included claims that [the virus spreads on the basis of race](#); that [there is no pandemic and COVID-19 is just like the flu](#); and that [COVID-19 tests are likely infecting patients in Italy and Spain](#). (EU vs Disinfo)

**(U) Islamophobic Disinformation and Hate Speech Has Swamped Social Media During the Coronavirus Pandemic:** A series of Twitter hashtags falsely accusing Muslims around the world of deliberately spreading the novel coronavirus has pushed Islamophobic disinformation and hate speech to 170 million users since the outbreak of the pandemic, according to new research.

The report is published by Equality Labs, a New York-based South Asian community advocacy group. It shows that the hashtag #Coronajihad has run rampant on Twitter since late March. Posts featuring the hashtag and a range of anti-Muslim rhetoric have also been shared widely on platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

The organization calculates that more than 293,000 conversations pushing Islamophobic Covid-19 content have taken place on Twitter, where they have generated more than 700,000 points of

engagement, including likes, clicks, shares and comments. It has also found that the majority of users creating and sharing such content are young men between the ages of 18 and 34, based in India or the United States.

The report, which is due to be published tomorrow, notes that Islamophobic coronavirus-related hate speech and disinformation first appeared on Twitter as early as March 1, weeks before countries around the world began to enforce lockdowns.

In many cases, Islamophobic content blaming Muslims for the spread of the virus was first posted to Twitter by Indian Hindu nationalists, but was later amplified by global Islamophobic individuals and groups. Hate speech and disinformation tied to Covid-19 also emanated from Islamophobic social media accounts, pages and groups based in the West. (Source: CodaStory, Equality Labs)

**(U) Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Links COVID-19 to “Secret U.S. Labs”:** For years, pro-Kremlin disinformation sources have been exploiting the false trope of secret Western-sponsored military laboratories “in Russia’s neighbourhood”. Of these, the most significant is the case of the [Lugar lab](#) in Tbilisi, Georgia, which pro-Kremlin media have long sought to portray as a facility for US bioweapon development and other invented evils. When the coronavirus outbreak started, the Lugar lab served as a convenient disinformation template. Indeed, the very first example of pro-Kremlin disinformation about the coronavirus recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database, on 22 January 2020, deploys that same familiar narrative, telling Belarusian audiences that the new Chinese virus was likely [elaborated in NATO biolabs](#). Armenians also heard that [Pentagon-funded labs were involved in the creation of COVID-19](#).

Soon thereafter, multiple disinformation messages expanded on this narrative: REN TV, one of Russia’s largest TV stations, claimed that the coronavirus served US interests as [American laboratories were operating not only around Russia, but also in Asian countries](#). RT Arabic added that the US has [25 dangerous laboratories](#) surrounding Russia, China, and Iran. Within the span of a few short months, pro-Kremlin outlets saw secret laboratories pop up around the world: in the [Baltic States](#) and [Indonesia](#), and of course in the [EU’s Eastern neighbourhood](#).

Multiple pro-Kremlin outlets claimed that the [US was afraid of the leakage of infectious substances on its own territory](#), so it built clandestine military biological labs in “colonised countries”, i.e. Ukraine, Georgia, and also [Moldova](#). The insinuation behind these messages is that epidemics start “next to those facilities”, not excluding the possibility that [COVID-19 could have been manufactured in one of the labs in Ukraine](#). Such conspiracy theories got an additional boost after RT’s Russian edition quoted concerns by Chinese officials about allegedly secret activities by [US biological laboratories](#) in the former Soviet Republics.

The narrative of “secret labs” has proved to be a good vessel for distraction and disinformation. Encouraged by the apparent success of the pro-Kremlin media, [other actors](#) have begun using it as well, reinforcing each other and tying several disinformation strands in a neat conspiracy theory: the secret labs explain the outbreak of the coronavirus; the outbreak of the coronavirus proves the [existence of secret labs](#).

One of the main goals of pro-Kremlin disinformation in the region is to drive a wedge between the EU and its Eastern Neighborhood partners. In the context of COVID-19, such disinformation efforts take on a new appearance, where the EU is systematically portrayed as **unable** to respond to the outbreak itself, let alone help its neighbors. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

**(U) Italian MP Amplifies Debunked COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories on the Floor of Parliament:** On May 14, Italian MP Sara Cunial created a public stir across the country after giving a speech at the Chamber of Deputies riddled with COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Seeking to criticize the Italian government for its measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis, Cunial spent seven minutes amplifying some of the most popular conspiracy theories in Italy and around the world about COVID-19 and the so-called deep state. In doing so, Cunial's speech amplified conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives that have been circulating for years among fringe groups and anti-establishment communities online, which in turn have offered her their strong support on social media.

In her speech, Cunial accused Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, who is often placed at the center of many COVID-19 conspiracy theories, of a litany of wrongdoing, including planning to depopulate the world — even wishing for a genocide; creating a dictatorial monopoly over the global economy; causing a polio epidemic in India; and creating vaccines that “sterilized millions of women in Africa.” Along with Gates, Cunial also targeted the World Economic Forum in Davos, the World Health Organization, the global financial system, and an “Italian deep state” cabal involving the current and previous prime minister, the pharmaceutical industry and high-tech companies, for profiting from the COVID-19 pandemic at the expense of citizens. (Source: Atlantic Council)

**(U) Pro-Kremlin Outlets Distort Facts on Russian COVID-19 Relief Aid to Europe:** Following the Kremlin's shipments of COVID-19 aid to European countries, pro-Kremlin outlets **repeatedly** and falsely **alleged** that senior NATO countries had forbidden the European Union and fellow NATO members from accepting Russian help.

The Kremlin's initial shipment of aid **to Italy** and subsequent shipments throughout the West, including to the United States, have all the hallmarks of a publicity stunt. Pro-Kremlin media has portrayed Russia as a benevolent player on the world stage that is repeatedly willing to extend a helping hand to its adversaries in the midst of a global public health crisis. But while the Kremlin has been eager to cast its shipments of medical supplies as humanitarian aid, various sources — including **previous analysis** from the DFRLab — have reported that the “aid” comes with **strings attached**.

The stories circulated primarily in Russian and English in a variety of countries; the DFRLab identified three main narratives focused on Russia's aid shipments to Europe:

- Claim 1: The powerful “Big Brother” countries have forbidden E.U. and NATO members from accepting Russian help
- Claim 2: Help from Russia and China buried the “European dream of Serbia”
- Claim 3: Spain refused help from NATO (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Following the announcement of the most recent unemployment numbers there has been an increase in discussion about growing economic and financial concerns amid the pandemic.
- As states continue to move forward with plans to reopen there is increasing anxiety over the potential for a second wave of infections with many voicing concerns that people are not following social distancing guidelines properly.
- NOAA released its outlook for the 2020 hurricane season today which generated a high volume of discussion on both traditional and social media with many questioning how preparations will differ due to COVID-19. On traditional media, FEMA's operational guidance amid COVID-19 has generated nationwide media interest on the financial strain major storms could cause emergency management services.
- Besides coverage of how COVID-19 will affect hurricane season planning, traditional media also focuses on U.S. investment in a potential vaccine from AstraZeneca, nursing homes' vulnerabilities due to limited PPE supply, and increases/decreases in COVID-19 cases as states and countries try to reopen.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Public distrust of the overall government response (state/federal) continues. This is being driven by political debates over key decisions and alleged manipulation of case and test data in some states.
- There is wide social media discussion regarding the latest unemployment numbers almost reaching a total of 40 million, after 2.4 million Americans more filed for unemployment benefits last week. (example 1, example 2)
- Many are requesting the extension of benefits and better wages from their employers. Conversation is heavily political, many debate whether people are not working because they're better receiving unemployment benefits, and if unemployment benefits will continue amid the pandemic and the next month.
- College graduates are very concerned about finding employment in the summer and fall or facing a lasting recession with a significant lack of job opportunities.
- According to media, a survey showed that up to 20% of Americans may not be able to pay rent next month.
- Rural outbreaks are a growing concern among many, particularly in the rural south. Many are worried about limited healthcare infrastructure, high levels of poverty, reluctance to follow social distancing guidelines, and high rates of comorbidities in these communities.
- Many suggest churches may be a source for rural outbreaks. There is increasing frustration at the lack of CDC guidance for churches despite reports that the CDC has traced cases back to churches.
- Issues regarding differences of opinions on face mask usage are escalating as people defy store policies by not wearing masks and express aggressive behavior towards employees. (example 1,

o While some people feel it is their right to enter a store without a mask, many others feel that masks should be worn. (example 1, example 2, example 3)

- Many media outlets are sharing about federal and state officials who have chosen not to wear masks. (example 1, example 2)
- There is increasing concern regarding the safety of wildfire fighters. Following a relatively quiet 2019 fire season, experts are worried there will be a buildup of new growth to fuel fires. Wildfire fighters however, have not received standard guidance on how response operations may need to be adjusted to account for COVID-19.
- Recent polls show that approximately 25% of Americans are hesitant about COVID-19 vaccines, with many voicing concern that the fast-tracked development could compromise safety. Most expect the vaccine to be ready within a year.

#### (U) 5/20 Reporting

(U) **There Isn't a COVID-19 Vaccine Yet. But Some Are Already Skeptical About It:** Well-known antivaccine activists have been hard at work sowing doubt about the COVID-19 vaccine—a vaccine that **does not yet exist**, and likely will not exist for many months, if not longer. Yet their efforts seem to be working: approximately one in five Americans have already expressed unwillingness to get an eventual COVID-19 vaccine, **according** to an April 15 survey undertaken by Oklahoma State University.

So far, the digital misinformation campaign around COVID-19 has relied upon the techniques of the anti-vaccine movement, including discrediting public health officials, raising concerns about vaccine safety, and making claims that vaccination is primarily profit-driven. Some recent content spreads unsubstantiated claims about public health officials, like longtime National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases head Dr. Anthony Fauci, and philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates. Other material celebrates those advocating for a reopening, or hails people challenging the truth of the virus' origins. One notorious, widely-shared example: "Plandemic," a slickly-produced pseudo-documentary alleging without evidence that the COVID-19 outbreak was orchestrated by global elites; a book written by a discredited scientist featured in the video now ranks among Amazon's best-sellers.

"There seems to have been the explicit intent to make it go viral on [digital] platforms," says David Broniatowski, an associate professor in the Department of Engineering Management and Systems Engineering at George Washington University. "That both increases its reach, but also increases people's perception that it's somehow got some degree of legitimacy, because they're hearing it from a lot of different sources." (Source: Time)



(U) **Instagram and the New Wave of Viral Disinformation:** Despite Instagram's effort to minimize the spread of misinformation on their platform, conspiracy theories and fake news about the [vaccine continue to thrive](#) on the user's newsfeed.

Unfortunately, the problem escalated during the coronavirus pandemic has paved way for a new surge of viral disinformation – most of which has been promoted by the advocates of anti-vaccination. At the same time, Facebook's moderators have been unable to combat the situation and [review the 'rule-breaking' content](#) in an effective manner. Much of the disinformation has also been fueled by Instagram's recommendation algorithms.

Some U.S. officials are worried that foreign adversaries may be generating or amplifying COVID-19 misinformation, too. Russia, for instance, has been known to amplify "local voices that push conspiracy theories," said Lea Gabrielle, special envoy and coordinator of the Global Engagement Center for the U.S. Department of State, during a press briefing on May 6. "There's a high probability that the Russian disinformation ecosystem will act to undermine faith in a COVID vaccine when it becomes available," she added. She has raised concerns about similar potential Chinese efforts as well.

Experts say that 50% to 80% of the public will need immunity before COVID-19 is slowed enough to mostly resume our typical lives.

However, Instagram claims that it doesn't ban anti-vaccine content. But, yes, it does try to make it less visible on the platform – similar to its flagship social media channel, Facebook. According to Instagram, they block a few specific hashtags and tries to make anti-vaccine content harder to find in public areas of the app, like Explore.

Yet, such inaccurate information – specifically those related to the COVID-19 vaccine continues to dominate the app's search results.

For example, when one searches the word '[vaccine](#)' on Instagram, several recommendations of anti-vaccine account in top results. These include accounts with names like 'vaccines\_revealed,' 'vaccinesaregenocide,' 'vaccines\_kill,' and 'say\_no\_to\_bill\_gates\_vaccine.'

Most of these accounts have nearly 100,000 followers, while there are a few with a couple hundred. Nevertheless, Instagram's algorithm continues to recommend them, even though not one of them is related to a verified health organization. (Source: Digital Information World)

(U) **The Kremlin's Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing:** The coronavirus pandemic is laying bare a growing competition between democratic and authoritarian governments. As the U.S. and Europe struggle to contain the virus at home, Russia and China are seizing the moment to enhance their international influence through information operations. Moscow and Beijing have long aimed to weaken the United States, blunt the appeal of democratic institutions, and sow divisions across the West. Their goals in this crisis are no different.

China has benefitted from Russia's brazen disinformation campaigns in the West while itself deploying more subtle information manipulation strategies. But that might be changing. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, China has carried out a striking disinformation campaign of its own that borrows a few pages from the Kremlin's playbook.

According to U.S. officials, Chinese agents are creating fake social media accounts akin to Russia-backed trolls to push out false messages that are designed to create chaos in the United States. In mid-March, U.S. intelligence agencies asserted that Chinese operatives helped to push false messages that the Trump administration was planning to lock down the country. The rumors became so widespread that the National Security Council had to issue an [announcement](#) stating they were fake.

Chinese diplomats and embassies are also using Twitter, which is banned within China, to promote and amplify conspiracy theories about the virus's origin. Chinese diplomats and embassies now have more than 100 accounts on Twitter — a 300% increase since April of last year. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian promoted a conspiracy theory to his more than 300,000 Twitter followers that the U.S. military could have brought the coronavirus to China. [The tweet](#), which linked to the blog of a known pro-Kremlin outfit, was promptly retweeted by more than a dozen Chinese diplomats and embassies. China's state media then ran [multiple stories to amplify](#) the claim.

While China's overt assertiveness in this space might be new, its long-term goals are not. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long employed disinformation, censorship, and monitoring tools to suppress criticism at home and press on democracy's inherent weaknesses abroad. Its information operations are coupled with economic coercion and strategic investments to enhance Chinese ownership in key industries and sway other countries' policies. (Source: The Brookings Institution)

**(U) Misinformation About Coronavirus Finds New Avenues on Unexpected Sites:** Within days of social media companies taking down a viral video touting conspiracy theories about the novel [coronavirus](#), a clip popped up on YouTube telling viewers about another way they could still access the banned footage: through a link to the video on the file-sharing service Google Drive.

Google Drive is not a social media platform, nor is it set up to tackle the problems that social media companies face: the weaponization of their services to amplify dangerous content. But the use of the Drive link, to the trailer for a documentary called "Plandemic," reflects a wave of seemingly countless workarounds employed by people motivated to spread misinformation about the virus — efforts that continue to thwart social media companies' attempts at preventing hoaxes and conspiracy theories from spreading in the midst of the greatest public health crisis in decades.

Social media counter-COVID-19 misinformation efforts have prompted those spreading covid-19 misinformation to try new methods, including using social media services that have not historically been platforms for news, such as the short video app TikTok, and productivity tools such as Google Drive and Google Docs. They've even used digital library Internet Archive. These services have more limited systems for policing content compared with the major social media platforms, which have spent years investing in moderation efforts in response to criticism.

Borrowing techniques used by other illicit industries, including porn, many of the remaining posts about “Plandemic” on YouTube and Facebook have the most inflammatory content edited out to avoid detection. Instead, they direct people to a link where they can see the entire film.

Less than two weeks after the major social media company bans, however, researchers are finding that the video and references to it are resurfacing across social media, particularly on YouTube. At least 40 versions of the trailer were uploaded on YouTube over the past week and were easily found using a simple hashtag search, according to Eric Feinberg, vice president of content moderation at Coalition for a Safer Web, who shared his findings with The Washington Post. Some of them have more than 40,000 views and stayed up for days. (Source: The Washington Post)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- There continues to be a high volume of discussion about reopening concerns, particularly that the relaxation of restrictions could trigger a second wave of COVID-19 cases. Debate over when and how to reopen is ongoing and highly political in nature.
- Many are discussing the dam failures and subsequent flooding taking place in Midland County, Michigan. News outlets and individuals have voiced concerns about social distancing in shelters and protections for vulnerable survivors that have been displaced. The conversation has decreased throughout the day but remains high.
- Distrust of testing data and the overall pandemic response continue, as many share news of issues with case data reporting and worry that data is being manipulated. Additionally, the ongoing political debates about public health and economic decisions are generating a strong negative sentiment and low confidence in the federal response.
- Traditional news coverage broadly covers states’ ongoing reopening and federal response efforts. A new poll highlights public pessimism about incomes loss as well as fear of a new wave of infections as states resume business and social activity. National media also reports on discord between CDC and White House officials regarding most recent reopening guidance issued to states and general public.
- The Vice President’s delivery of PPE to an Orlando, Florida nursing home generated high local coverage from Florida broadcast and newspaper outlets, but less from national broadcast stations.

#### (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Public polls continue to show a high level of concern regarding the potential for a [second wave of COVID-19 infections](#). This is reinforcing opposition to reopening public places as state leaders move forwards with steps to return to normal life. Sentiment supporting public health restrictions however, has eroded due to partisanship.
- There is ongoing discussion about how states are choosing to use testing data to portray the current state of affairs in their area. Public health officials in several states have been accused of using data in a way that makes it appear the virus is [more under control than it is](#).
- There [continue to be individuals](#) who hope to avoid wearing a mask in required areas by claiming exemptions under ADA laws. Many feel these individuals are [exploiting a system](#) intended to protect and help individuals with disabilities.
- Some people are frustrated as they seek travel refunds from flights that were cancelled by airlines.

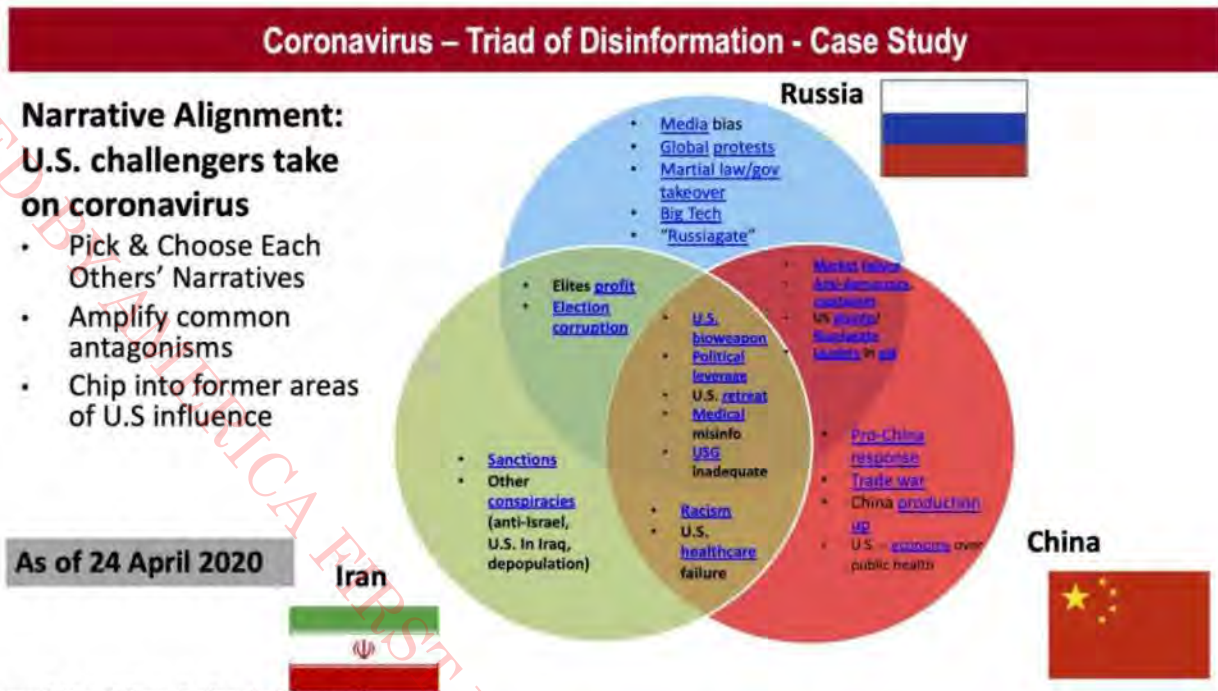
- Discussion of the dam failures and evacuations in Midland County, Michigan decreased throughout the day.
  - Many are sharing concerns about social distancing among evacuated survivors, particularly in shelters.
  - Some are worried that vulnerable people who were sheltering for COVID-19 will now be at risk of exposure. Public information released by local officials did not specify any precautions or guidance for vulnerable survivors and infection control.

#### **(U) 5/19 Reporting**

**(U) Triad of Disinformation: How Russia, Iran, & China Ally in a Messaging War against America:** When Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian began **tweeting** about the origins of the coronavirus in March, it marked a significant turning point in China's social media disinformation operations. While China has long deployed widespread censorship, propaganda, and information manipulation efforts within its borders, information operations directed at foreign audiences have generally focused on framing China in a positive way and casting doubt on events and narratives that reflect poorly on the party-state. In the past, this has included using state media as well as covert social media campaigns to promote, for example, stories alleging that the 2019 Hong Kong protests **may have been** connected to the CIA and that Uighur detention **amps do not** exist.

In the last two months, however, Beijing has conducted a much more **ambitious effort** not only to shape global perspectives about what's occurring inside China, but to influence public opinion about events outside its borders.

This new approach is exemplified by the dramatic uptick in the number of Chinese diplomats leveraging western social media platforms. On Twitter, there has been a more than 300 percent increase in accounts associated with Chinese embassies, ambassadors, and key government officials since April 2019. Borrowing a page from the Russian playbook, these accounts, with the assistance of state-controlled media outlets, have promoted multiple and at times conflicting conspiracy theories asserting U.S. responsibility for the pandemic. **Iran** and **Russia** have joined in with a concerted effort to **push Chinese social media conspiracies** to new heights. The United States now finds itself in a multi-front social media war against a triad of disinformation stretching from Moscow to Tehran and Beijing.



Since January 1, 2019, a team at the Foreign Policy Research Institute has analyzed more than 8,700 Russia Today, Sputnik News (Russia), PressTV (Iran) and Global Times (China) stories. Several patterns are apparent in this dataset. All three countries promote narratives that cast the United States as an aggressive, imperialist country seeking to dominate the world. The emphasis shifts, however, when the scope is limited to narratives conspicuously promoted by only two of the three regimes. Bilateral convergence between Russia and China arises in their denigration of American technology companies and of the relationship between Washington and Silicon Valley, as well as vocal support for Chinese tech companies like Huawei. Russian and Iranian efforts converge in opposition to U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, but also in other areas of overlapping interest like Latin America. Chinese and Iranian narratives focus on highlighting racial injustice in America, and casting it as a fundamentally racist country with no standing to promote democracy or human rights.

As pairs, the countries have come together in unsurprising ways to challenge the United States with manipulated information about coronavirus. China and Russia reinforce each other's claims that American democracy is central to the coronavirus challenge, and that U.S. policymakers are to blame. Russia and Iran have used coronavirus precautions and resulting delays in the voting process as evidence of electoral corruption, while also amplifying narratives of elite profiteering at the hands of the poor. China and Iran use coronavirus to level charges of racism, while highlighting inadequacies in the U.S. healthcare system.

At a time when the U.S. is taking a less active role in many international institutions, and relations with many key allies are fraught, China and Russia are engaged in a full-spectrum effort to shape the information environment. They have deployed a narrative that serves to undermine American credibility, while simultaneously reaching out to American allies like Italy with coronavirus aid and messages of goodwill and solidarity. Alongside the specific bogus claim of coronavirus being an

American bioweapon, these countries have also advanced swaths of medical **misinformation** that further confuses world audiences about the origin, advance, containment, and treatment of coronavirus.

### Triad of Disinformation – Authoritarian Info War Against The U.S.

#### Axis of Disinformation:

Russia, Iran & China

- Create some of their own anti-U.S. narratives
- Convergence
  - Selectively & opportunistically amplify each others' narratives
  - Amplify common antagonisms
- Divergence
  - Seek to bridge with & align with like-minded U.S. audiences to advance their positions & erode confidence in U.S. democracy
- Advance into former areas of U.S. influence



Source: C. Watts (Alliance For Securing Democracy)

#### What can the U.S. and the West do to counter authoritarian disinformation?

The United States presently faces a sustained effort, largely unfolding on social media platforms and websites hosted in the Western world, to undermine American legitimacy and subvert its democracy. This concerted effort may in the coming months convince many around the world of the falsehood that the United States created the coronavirus as a **bioweapon**. These disinformation peddlers stand poised to write an alternative history, in large part because authoritarians have been consistent, sustained, and disciplined in their messaging, while the United States has not.

The United States and allied democracies can counter authoritarian states by pursuing several efforts in tandem:

- Work with tech companies to downrank, demonetize, and de-platform authoritarian state-sponsored news outlets and social media accounts spreading manipulated information that threatens public safety and public health. Twitter has done this on several occasions in recent weeks, [removing fringe news sites](#) for coronavirus violations. While nefarious political influence and hate speech remain difficult to consistently police, threats to public safety, such as it relates to the coronavirus pandemic, are much easier to adjudicate. Broad systematic enforcement action on mainstream platforms could enforce a sizable reduction in authoritarian reach into Western audiences.

- Develop counter-messaging strategies designed to stress and undermine the credibility of authoritarian networks. For example, Russian propaganda appeals to white nationalists and orthodox Christian audiences to the exclusion of other minorities. Iranian propaganda focuses heavily on the persecution of racial and religious minorities. And both Iranian and Chinese officials use Western social media platforms that are banned domestically within their countries. The United States could seek to expose these contradictions amongst these authoritarian allies by strategically messaging in selected audience spaces. A nimble messaging campaign might be aimed at international discussions about the conflict in Syria, in which Iran and Russia are complicit with the Syrian government in the massacre of Muslim civilians perceived as disloyal.

Presently, the voices promoting discredited anti-American conspiracy theories are growing louder in the social media space. The United States and other democracies must move to rapidly rebut and repeatedly counter such narratives with facts and evidence. Further analysis of open source material must aim to evaluate the degree of cooperation on information manipulation taking place between and among authoritarian states. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Pro-Russia Media Toplines:** The coronavirus, while still the most prominent topic in the Russian media ecosystem last week, continued to decline in prominence for the third week in a row. At the same time, World War II Victory Day messaging predictably reached its zenith on the day itself (May 9). Like in previous years, it largely emphasized the Soviet Union's role in the war, general celebratory themes, and cooperation with Allied countries. However, accusations that the United States was rewriting history by downplaying the Soviet contribution trended—a familiar theme emanating from the highest levels of the Russian government. Finally, a small amount of coverage addressed the week's developments regarding former U.S. national security adviser Michael Flynn, playing up claims that cast doubt on the significance (or even existence) of Russian interference in 2016. This narrative resembles previous Russian state-sponsored media coverage of U.S. investigations into Russia's operation against the 2016 election.

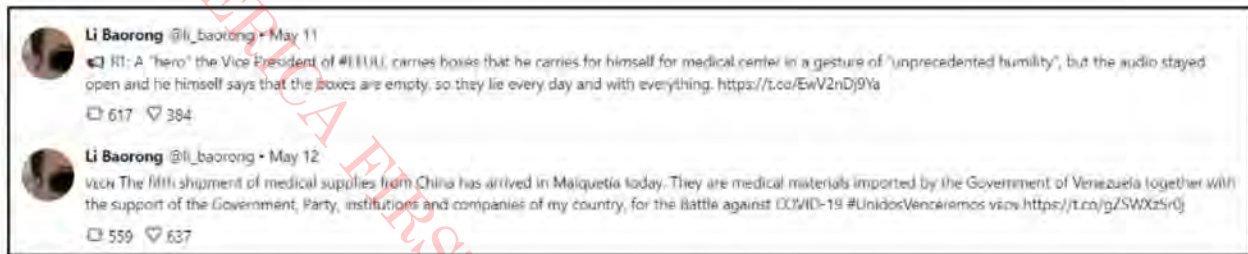
This week saw a particularly strong push to undermine the reliability and credibility of U.S. authorities. Many of the most engaged-with tweets painted the United States' response to coronavirus in hyperbolic terms and blasted the country's alleged hypocrisy and scapegoating of China. By contrast, Chinese efforts against the virus were portrayed in the usual upbeat and vaguely heroic tone. This messaging dynamic was particularly pronounced after American intelligence agencies announced that Chinese cyber attackers were trying to steal coronavirus research. Beijing portrayed the announcement as yet another dastardly plot by a former superpower gone rogue.

(U) **Pro-China Media Toplines:** This week saw a particularly strong push to undermine the reliability and credibility of U.S. authorities. Many of the most engaged-with tweets painted the United States' response to coronavirus in hyperbolic terms and blasted the country's alleged hypocrisy and scapegoating of China. By contrast, Chinese efforts against the virus were portrayed in the usual upbeat and vaguely heroic tone. This messaging dynamic was particularly pronounced after American intelligence agencies announced that Chinese cyber attackers were trying to steal coronavirus research. Beijing portrayed the announcement as yet another dastardly plot by a former superpower gone rogue.

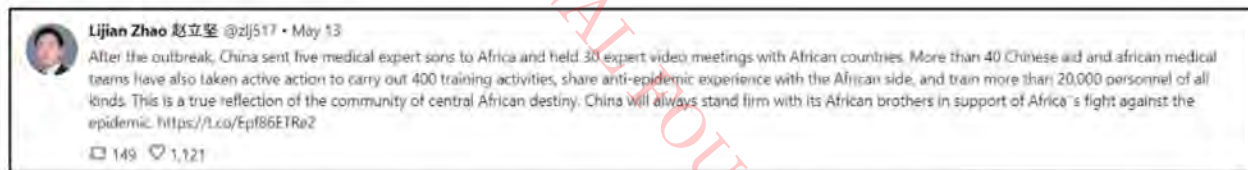
The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 9 and May 15 (figures as of 4pm on May 8), a noticeable

increase over the previous week and a break in the downward trend in overall Chinese activity on Twitter since mid-April. As in previous weeks, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic was the subject of almost all the top hashtags. China's diplomats continued to portray the U.S. response to the pandemic as feckless and hypocritical, while simultaneously highlighting China's humanitarian aid and supposed dependability as a global partner.

China's ambassador to Venezuela, Li Baorong, illustrated this juxtaposition in a pair of tweets, one of which slammed Vice President Mike Pence for transporting empty boxes of medical supplies to a hospital "for the cameras," while the other announced the arrival of Chinese medical supplies in Venezuela.



Highlighting China's humanitarian aid to virus-stricken parts of the world was a prominent theme with diplomats, as evidenced further by Deputy Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who emphasized Chinese aid to Africa.



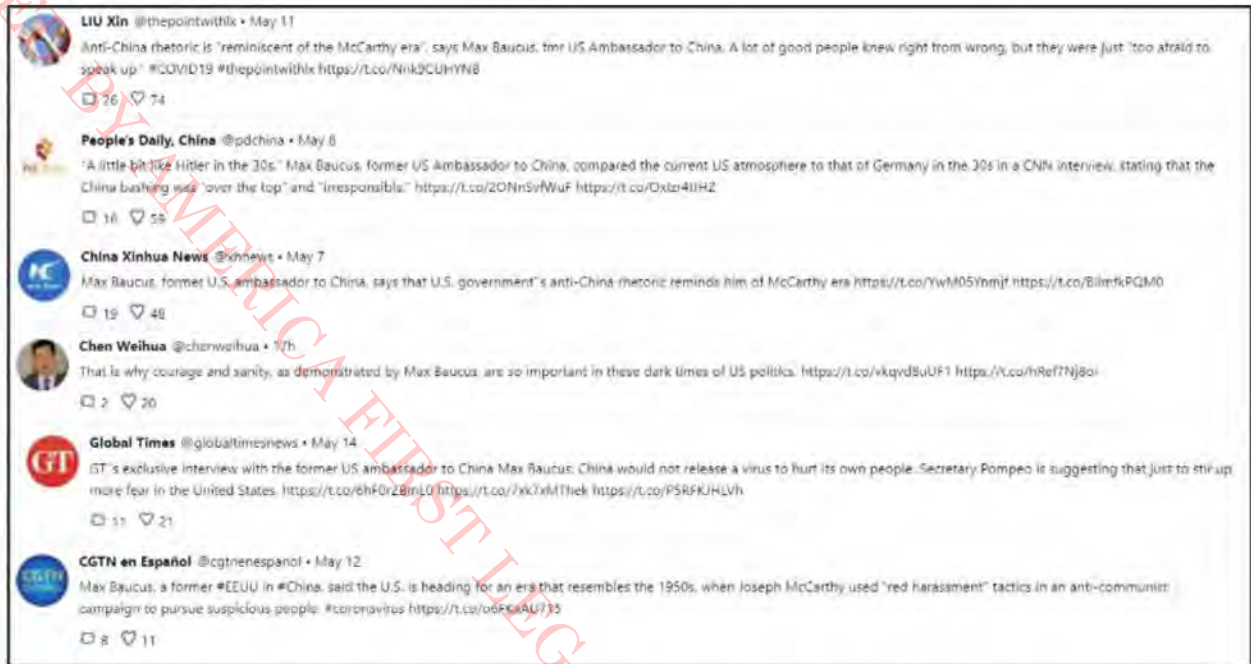
Contrasting the supposed failings of the United States with the effectiveness of China implicitly suggests that Beijing is now the world's most trustworthy superpower.

Reinforcing this message is the idea that the U.S. government is lying to the world. Hua Chunying, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, illustrated this message in a trio of tweets, one of which stated, "China won't be Iraq"—presumably a reference to the United States' use of faulty weapons of mass destruction intelligence.





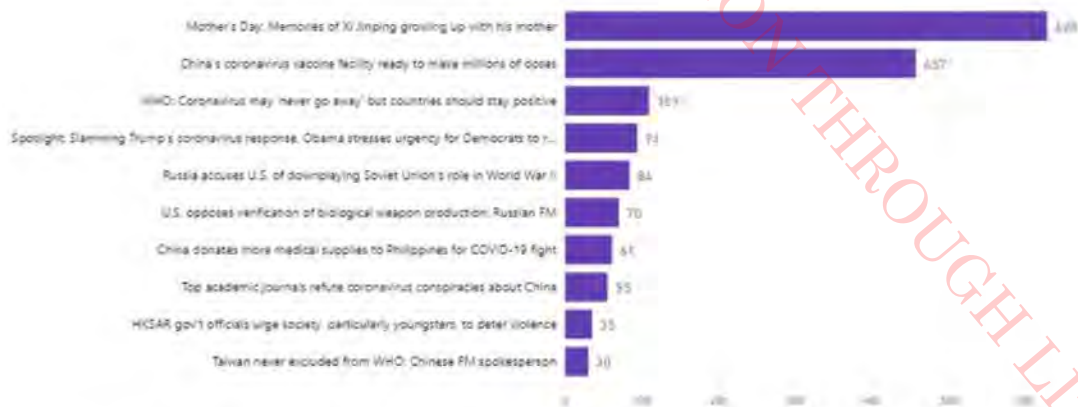
Finally, Chinese state-run media last week picked up and disseminated a CNN interview with former U.S. ambassador to China Max Baucus, who compared anti-China rhetoric from U.S. officials with McCarthyism.



By the end of the week, Ambassador Baucus was lauded as a lone American hero "in dark times."

Although a constant over the past several weeks, efforts to cast U.S. officials as untrustworthy were perhaps more pronounced in light of last week's announcement that Chinese cyber attackers were attempting to steal coronavirus vaccine research. Interestingly, while U.S. intelligence agencies only announced the hack on Wednesday, Chinese authorities and state media were already refuting accusations on Monday (based on a single *New York Times* article).

Chinese government-funded websites:



The top story published on Facebook by China's state media concerned Xi Jinping and his mother (who remains alive at the age of 93), reflecting state media's continuing effort to cast the country's paramount leader as a man of the people and a family man.

Other top stories saw China's state media boosting official Russian narratives. These included an accusation by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the United States refused to adopt an international protocol banning the use of biological weapons (echoing ongoing efforts by Chinese state media to sow suspicion that a U.S. biological weapons research lab was the true source of the coronavirus pandemic), and repeating Russian state media's allegation that the United States downplays Russia's role in World War II (a standard trope of Russian propaganda).

Other top stories boosted U.S. domestic criticism of President Donald Trump, elevated China's efforts to help other countries combat the coronavirus pandemic, and cited international praise of China's own domestic measures. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

**(U) To Ensure a Healthy Election in a Pandemic, First Prepare the Information Space:** New York democrats may not be casting a ballot in the presidential primary this June. That's because last month, New York became the first state to cancel its presidential primary over coronavirus concerns—a move that was **reversed** last week by a federal judge in a decision the State Board of Elections has since appealed. Not content to miss an opportunity to cry foul, Russia's propaganda apparatus seized on the move to highlight domestic "**outrage**" at the change and question whether it constituted a "**blatant coronation**" of Vice President Joe Biden at the expense of Senator Bernie Sanders. And it illustrates a challenge policymakers and election administrators will have to grapple with: changes to our voting processes—even reasonable ones—are potential fodder for the Kremlin's information operations.

Russia's efforts to shape the narrative around New York's decision is consistent with its efforts to amplify intra-party divisions and cast the primary process as "rigged." By deepening divides within the American public and diminishing its trust in institutions, the Kremlin hopes to weaken our democracy by making it harder to govern.

That's deeply concerning. To ensure that every American can vote safely in remaining primaries and in November, numerous changes to existing election processes will be necessary. Process changes can spark confusion. Voters are likely to have questions about new procedures. And as election administrators and poll workers adapt to new ways of working, mishaps and snafus could occur. Confusion, we know, generates demand for information—and that creates an environment ripe for disinformation.

We learned this lesson in February after the Iowa Caucus debacle. Then, the Kremlin's network of state media and sympathetic agitators sprung into action, highlighting conspiracy theories about murky ties between various candidates and the malfunctioning app that caused delays in the reporting of election results, and pressing the case that the primary had been rigged by the "corporate" media and party elites in order to deny Senator Sanders a clear win.

If confusion reigns in future elections, the Kremlin will be more than happy to stoke it. Frighteningly, in such a scenario, Russia and its proxies would not actually have to interfere in our election to cast doubt on its outcome. It could instead simply capitalize on confusion to claim that the results are illegitimate.

New York leaders face a difficult decision—one that requires weighing risks to public health and to public confidence in the voting process. Election administrators across the country will be forced to face similar fraught tradeoffs. It's up to federal, state and local leaders, in partnership with social media platforms, to prepare the information space in advance for the onslaught of disinformation that

epidemic-necessitated changes to the election process could generate. These steps should be easy, inexpensive, and non-controversial. Amidst a noisy conversation about how to vote safely in a pandemic, let's not lose sight of them. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **25 Percent of COVID-19 Related YouTube Videos Contain Misinformation:** More than one-quarter of the most viewed YouTube videos on COVID-19 contained misleading information, reaching millions of viewers worldwide. As the current COVID-19 pandemic worsens, public health agencies must better use YouTube to deliver timely and accurate information and to minimize the spread of misinformation. This may play a significant role in successfully managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Misinformation about COVID-19 is reaching more individuals than in past public health crises, as YouTube continues to grow as a source of health information. As the current COVID-19 pandemic worsens, public health agencies must better use YouTube to deliver quality content and minimize the spread of misinformation. (BMJ Global Health)

(U) **Nearly Half of Accounts Tweeting on COVID-19 Are Bots:** According to [David Caplan](#), the co-founder of TwitterAudit, "based on our data we would estimate that 40-60 percent of Twitter accounts represent real people." Separately, [new research](#) from Carnegie Mellon University reveals, "Nearly half the 'people' talking about the coronavirus pandemic on Twitter are not actually people, but bots."

Twitter is evidently becoming a proving ground for disinformation as data volumes are circulated by fake accounts. For example, recently, [Benjamin Strick](#), an open source investigator for BBC, identified an ongoing pro-Chinese government information operation aiming to skew narratives surrounding different topics.

A multitude of social analytics tools leverage Twitter data as their means of detecting emerging trends, their means of measuring the effectiveness of a marketing campaign or to use in the planning of information operations. Bots can skew assessments — through confirmation biases that are bolstered by amplified volumes of data disseminated by fictitious personas. It is an alarming problem that is both costly and potentially damaging for businesses, rendering ineffective the application of data in making strategic decisions.

(U) **China Is Using COVID-19 to Cozy Up to Europe:** As the world has grappled with COVID-19, China has sought to leverage the crisis for geopolitical advantage. To do so, China isn't relying on the traditional forms of statecraft, such as diplomacy. Instead, it is pairing highly publicized aid with public bullying, bombastic rhetoric and outright coercion.

We have spent the last month closely monitoring Chinese donations to European allies and the messages that have accompanied them. These cases—which involve at least 23 different countries in Europe—tell us a lot about China's bid for political influence and the malign behavior that comes with China's "leadership."

China's rationale for providing assistance to Europe is multifold. Given that the EU provided 56 tons of aid to China as it battled the virus and given China's excess supply of things like personal protective equipment and masks, it seemed logical that China would return the favor as the virus spread across

Europe. Unlike European contributions to China, though, which the Chinese government asked to keep quiet in order not to lose face, China has insisted on widely publicizing its aid to Europe.

The glitzy public relations campaigns surrounding the contributions serve three purposes. They portray China as an altruistic partner to the world, changing the story at a time when many are criticizing its initial handling of the virus; double down on Chinese government efforts to divide Europe from within and from the United States; and repair China's image in European countries where it has recently encountered friction. (Source: Newsweek)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Social media and traditional media discussion is primarily focused on the President's comments that he is taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventative measure against COVID-19. There also continues to be a large amount of discussion on social media about the President's letter to the World Health Organization, which mentions the possibility of permanently defunding the organization. The public reaction is varied on both topics.
- FEMA mentions are mostly in relation to increased media coverage about the thousands of National Guard members supporting the COVID-19 response whose deployments will be ending in June. People express frustration that the soldiers pulling out of the response means many will not qualify for federal benefits and that the support they are providing will leave a gap. Governors continue to push for FEMA aid in multiple areas, including approval of 100% cost share for COVID-19 expenses, supporting testing sites to ensure states can increase testing capacity, and forgiveness for the Community Disaster Loans program in the US Virgin Islands.
- Other subjects of national media interest include the \$19 billion in federal aid promised for farmers and agricultural industry, and President Trump's comments on Capitol Hill and during a White House meeting with cabinet secretaries. Today's U.S. Senate hearing on the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act generated news discussion on aid recipients and uneven distribution among affected individuals and businesses.

#### (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Throughout the day, COVID-19 discussion on social media remained focused on public reaction to comments made by the President last evening saying he is [currently taking hydroxychloroquine](#). At least one other lawmaker has come out saying he too is [taking the medication](#). Reaction from the general public is a mixture of concern and support:
  - Many supporters feel the medication is responsible for saving the lives of COVID-19 patients and [approve of this as a preventative measure](#).
  - Others are concerned that the medication [could pose a health risk](#), or that the statement could cause a shortage of the drug for those who currently take it for other reasons including lupus.
  - Most news outlets [highlighted research and advisories that show no conclusive evidence of medical benefits](#) to the drug and interviewed experts that cautioned against prophylactic use of the drug.
- There is a high level of discussion about a [letter](#) sent by the President to the head of the World Health Organization, demanding the organization make "major substantive improvements" within 30 days or risk permanent loss of funding.
  - Public reaction is mixed, many support the work of the WHO and think it is vital is coordinating the global response to COVID-19.

- Others feel the WHO contributed to the severity of the pandemic through what they feel was a mishandling of early phases of the response.

**(U) 5/18 Reporting**

(U) **Extremists Are Using Facebook to Organize for Civil War Amid Coronavirus:** Online extremists are using Facebook to plan and organize for a militant uprising in the United States as they cast coronavirus lockdowns as a sign of rising government suppression, according to a Tech Transparency Project investigation.

A review by TTP found 125 Facebook groups devoted to the “boogaloo,” the term that extremists use to describe a coming civil war. More than 60% of the groups were created in the last three months, as Covid-19 quarantines took hold in the U.S., and they attracted tens of thousands of members from March 22-April 22, the length of TTP’s study.

In several private boogaloo Facebook groups that TTP was able to access, members discussed tactical strategies, combat medicine, and various types of weapons, including how to develop explosives and the merits of using flame throwers.

The fact that Facebook is letting such activity proliferate, despite explicit threats of violence to government authorities, is another sign of the company’s inability to manage harmful content on its platform—even among groups that make no secret of their intentions.



Some boogaloo supporters see the public health lockdowns and other directives by states and cities across the country as a violation of their rights, and they're aiming to harness public frustration at such measures to rally and attract new followers to their cause.

The concept of the boogaloo has been gaining in popularity recently, and it's become a meme among a range of extremist groups. On public Facebook pages, supporters of the movement circulate satirical posts about the overthrow of government, painting the boogaloo as a viral online phenomenon rather than a real-world threat.

But communications of boogaloo supporters in private Facebook groups accessed by TTP tell a different story: extremists exchanging detailed information and tactics on how to organize and execute a revolt against American authorities. This activity is occurring without any apparent intervention by Facebook.

Of the 125 boogaloo-focused Facebook groups identified by TTP, 63% (79) were created between February and April of this year. The groups count 72,686 members, though it wasn't clear how many individuals may be members of more than one group. Nearly half of the members (36,117) have joined the groups within the past 30 days.

TTP identified the boogaloo groups based on their names, which often incorporated slang and other terms used by supporters to reference the coming civil war, such as "boog," "big igloo," and "boojihadeen." The majority of the groups—112, or roughly 89%—are **private**, which means Facebook users must request to join and be approved by moderators in order to view the discussions.

#### *Documents Detail Civil War Plan*

Boogaloo group members have used the Files function in Facebook groups to upload dozens of planning documents, including military manuals, CIA handbooks, and instructions on how to reuse N95 facemasks, among other material. Many of the files are digital versions of open source data and military operations information. One, called The Anarchist Cookbook, is notorious for its instructions on bomb making.

The most concerning document is one entitled Yeetalonians, a reference to the boogaloo. At over 133 pages, the document provides an in-depth look at preparing for the boogaloo and offers advice on what weapons should be used, what propaganda to distribute, and how to psychologically win over civilians to the cause.

The document mentions "target selection," noting that assassinations of figureheads are "overrated" but "some people have to go." It discusses how to disrupt U.S. government supply lines, noting that "national guard depots, police stations and factories that produce munitions are all very solid targets." On propaganda, meanwhile, the document notes that the most important job is "to make the enemy (government forces) see that they are not fighting terrorists, they are fighting their own countrymen who simply love liberty."

## BASIC BOOGALOO TACTICS: PART 10 - TARGET SELECTION

IG BLOODY.REVOLUTIONS

### FIGUREHEADS

THE PART I'M SURE MANY OF YOU ARE WAITING FOR: THE TRUTH IS, ASSASSINATIONS ARE OVERRATED. IT MIGHT SEND A MESSAGE BUT ONLY IF THAT PERSON HAS PROVEN THEMSELVES TO THE MASSES THEY ARE MONSTERS. MANY OF OUR PERSONAL CHOICES WOULD BE DIVISIVE IN THE EXTREME AND WOULD SERVE ONLY TO HELP DEMONISE THE MOVEMENT. WAR CRIMINALS CAN ANSWER FOR THEIR CRIMES AT A LATER DATE, MOVING A REVOLUTION FORWARD THAT NEEDS POPULAR SUPPORT REQUIRES MOVES THAT MAKE SENSE TO EVEN THE MOST UNINFORMED DURING IT'S INFANCY, AND EVEN DURING LATER STAGES, CONTROVERSIAL ACTIONS CAN KILL A MOVEMENT IN IT'S TRACKS IF ENOUGH BECOME DISILLUSIONED WITH THE END GOAL. SOME PEOPLE HAVE TO GO, THOSE THAT DIRECTLY AND VISIBLY HARM OTHERS ARE FAIR GAME, BUT THE PENCIL PUSHERS NEED THEIR CRIMES PROVEN TO THE PEOPLE BEFORE ANY EXAMPLE SHOULD BE MADE OF THEM.

A [Facebook profile](#) that appears to be a pseudonym for an Arkansas man named Aaron Swenson—who was [arrested](#) after live-streaming himself on Facebook looking for a police officer to kill, according to authorities—has liked more than a dozen pages that mention boogaloo in their names, including Thicc Boog Line.

Some Facebook users leaving comments on the profile on the night of the attempted attack endorsed the targeting of police officers, while others suggested calling 911 in response to the live broadcast. The two videos remain active on the Facebook page and have amassed over 1,500 and 3,400 views, respectively. (Source: Tech Transparency Project)

(U) **Nigerian Pastor Spreads COVID-19 Conspiracies and Disinformation:** Influential preacher Chris Oyakhilome [delivered a sermon](#) with over 12,000 views on YouTube in which he claimed that the introduction of 5G technology was responsible for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He also alleged that the administration of a COVID-19 vaccine will be used as a ruse to enthrone a “new world order” led by the anti-Christ.

The public health implication of peddling these conspiracy theories has great ramifications. Already, the Nigerian senate has [started an investigation](#) on the status of 5G and its potential health impact on citizens.



Oyakhilome is worth \$30–50 million United States dollars and his church has about 13 million members within and outside Nigeria. (Source: Global Voices)

**(U) RT Uses Bill Gates Investment in South Korean Telecom Firm to Amplify Conspiracy Theories:**

Russian-state backed media like RT have frequently amplified COVID-19 related disinformation and conspiracy theories, with Bill Gates serving as a particularly popular target. From a recent RT article,

“Is that Big Brother behind the medical mask? Bill Gates to co-fund South Korean research of next-gen quarantine methods?”

“South Korea’s biggest telecom firm is banding with Bill Gates to develop next-generation quarantine methods. The \$10-million project may stir uncomfortable thoughts in those who suspect the billionaire of having a sinister agenda . . .

“Some however can’t help but see sinister undertones beyond the philanthropy. Just last week an Italian MP delivered a fierce rant in parliament, calling for the arrest of Bill Gates. Sara Cunial accused the billionaire of masterminding “dictatorial control plans on global politics” and using the current situation to further them.” (Source: RT)

**(U) Senators Urge Facebook to Curb Coronavirus Misinformation in Other Languages:** A group of senators on Friday sent a letter to Facebook urging the company to take steps to curb coronavirus misinformation that is not in English.

The letters from Sens. [Bob Menendez](#) (D-N.J.), [Mazie Hirono](#) (D-Hawaii) and [Elizabeth Warren](#) (D-Mass.) notes that more than 60 million Americans speak another language and cites a study that Facebook fails to issue warning labels on content in those languages at a much higher rate.

The study cited by the lawmakers from nonprofit activism group Avaaz found that the social media giant failed to issue warning labels on 70 percent of Spanish-language content and 68 percent of Italian, compared to 29 percent of English. (Source: The Hill)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- A significant portion of the social media conversation remains focused on concerns related to reopening, specifically concerns that relaxed social distancing could lead to surges in cases. In some areas where reopening has begun, many are unsure if rising case counts can be attributed to increased testing or the loosening of restrictions.
- There is a high volume of conversation about testing and vaccine development. Many are optimistic about vaccine development following news of potential successes with the Moderna vaccine. The conversation about testing is much less optimistic, with many people expressing serious concerns about testing accuracy.
- Developments in reopening states and positive news about a vaccine trial led COVID-19 coverage in traditional news media today. Besides health concerns amid states reopening, other developments with significant coverage included PPE distribution, food security needs, and international demands that China submit to a probe into the virus’ origins.
- Late this afternoon, in his press conference, the President stated he has been taking hydroxychloroquine. This has been gaining an immense amount of traction on both traditional

and social media as people question either question the safety of these statements or support it.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- During his press conference this afternoon, the President stated [he has been taking hydroxychloroquine](#). This has been receiving a large amount of public response.
  - Some feel this could be a dangerous statement to make as it could cause a run on the medication and encourage people to take it without medical guidance or approval.
  - Other people approve of the statement feeling he is taking precautionary measures against COVID-19.
- The top topic of discussion remains re-openings, many are sharing news about the loosening restrictions in their communities. In communities that are reopening, there is growing concern about people and businesses that are not practicing social distancing and rising case counts.
- Many continue to voice concern about the rising case count in Texas, as the state reported an increase of at least 1,800 new cases on Saturday following their reopening.
  - As testing increases, many are confused whether rising case counts can be attributed to reopenings or expanded testing capacity.
- With many businesses and daily activities resuming, people are sharing their thoughts on how they will cope with activities that used to be common occurrences.
  - As pools and recreational areas reopen, people are concerned about the safety of pools and hot tubs. There is confusion about mask usage in relation to pools and a distrust of public health officials since CDC says it is safe to swim in chemically treated hot tubs and pools. There are concerns [that people will not wear masks on flights](#), although airlines have made it a requirement, after the news reports that about half of the passengers during a recent Southwest flight did not wear a covering.
- There is ongoing concern over the [reliability and accuracy of COVID-19 testing](#) across the U.S. Most recently, AdventHealth announced about 33,000 and 35,000 tests conducted in Florida had to be deemed unreliable because one of the processing labs was "unable to fulfill its obligation."
  - Similarly, businesses and consumers find antibody testing "[immunity passports](#)" appealing, but there is concern about their accuracy along with a lack of understanding regarding how much immunity antibodies confer or how long it lasts.
- Parents are increasingly discussing the long term impacts the pandemic is having on children. Many are reporting the desire to bring more structure and consistency to their children's days. Some are sharing their kids have been experiencing an increase in behavioral issues over the past months.
- There is an emerging trend of individuals claiming to have medical conditions which exempt them from following mask use guidelines. These individuals are claiming that the ADA and HIPAA protect them from any punishment for violating these regulations, that businesses must not interfere with them, and that HIPPA protects them from having to disclose their condition.
  - Individuals in the disabled community are raising concerns that abuse of the ADA by people faking disabilities could erode trust and rights of those with actual disabilities.
- A recent Gallup survey found that [Americans' emotional health is improving](#) as states move to reopen their economies following weeks of stay-at-home orders. The poll said just under half of those surveyed reported they spent time worrying the previous day. This number is down from 59% earlier in the pandemic.

**(U) 5/15 Reporting**

**The “Streisand Effect” as an Amplification Tactic for “Plandemic” Disinformation:** Biella Coleman documented this tactic in her study of [Anonymous trolling Scientology](#), where a video of Tom Cruise became the fodder in a war between the protest ensemble of Anonymous and the Church of Scientology. More than just riding a wave of media attention from a public takedown, though, Coleman describes “The Streisand Effect” as “a well-known Internet phenomenon wherein an attempt to censor a piece of information has the inverse effect: more people want to see it in order to understand the motivation for the censorship, and thus it spreads much more widely than it would have if left alone.” Distributed amplification relies on reactive updates to platforms’ terms of service, coupled with inadequate enforcement of policies against online harms. Ultimately, each attempt at content moderation risks becoming a new opportunity for media manipulators to hijack media attention.

While our team observed this behavior amongst white supremacists to spread their ideology, conspiracy theorists are also using it to expand their audiences, especially among the online communities supporting The Plandemic documentary. On The Plandemic documentary’s website, they include instructions for downloading and uploading the long clip, without any warning that distributing this content could result in a content takedown or your personal account getting banned. By participating in the process of uploading and receiving a warning or suspension by platform companies, it confirms the theory that “big tech” is suppressing speech. Rather, what is really happening is enforcement of their terms of service.

Platforms reactively intervene when problematic content has already spread, and media manipulators modify their tactics in innovative ways by putting to use distributed networks and loosely-aligned factions. Fringe influencers become crucial distribution nodes, and junk news helps create the impression of veracity. When journalists step in to cover content takedowns it can further exacerbate the issue, but nevertheless their coverage is crucial for countering the health misinformation contained in the video.

In this case, the makers of The Plandemic video capitalized on a pre-existing dystopian narrative already circulating in fringe communities, knowing that a content takedown would trigger the Streisand effect and allow them to set media agendas. This tactic of distributed amplification shows how human actors, rather than bots or other artificial forms of signal boosting, are integral to disinformation campaigns. (Source: Meme War Weekly, Harvard Kennedy School)

**(U) COVID-19 Disinformation Weaponizes the Internet’s Structural Weaknesses:** The coronavirus and the accompanying deluge of misinformation have laid bare a truth about the internet itself: The early notion that users could be both producers and consumers of information has turned platforms into information landfills, where people are forced to sift through increasingly dangerous garbage in the search for real information.

"Information is extremely cheap to produce," Joan Donovan of Harvard's Kennedy School said. "That's why misinformation is a problem, because you don't need any evidence, you don't need any investigation, you don't need any methods to produce it. Knowledge is incredibly expensive to produce. Experts are sought after, and they aren't going to work for free. So platform companies can't rely on the idea that the web is something we build together."

Donovan is watching coronavirus misinformation that goes unnoticed or undocumented because its virality is hidden — spread inside private messaging apps and within secret groups or by users who employ tactics to evade detection like web archivers.

The volume of misinformation and its potential for widespread harm is unprecedented, and the only real solution would have to be, too, Donovan said, suggesting that the platforms should move beyond moderation to a kind of curation.

"Believing that platform companies can clean this up is like believing that you're going to win the lottery," Donovan said. "They need to hire 10,000 librarians to get in there and to look at what's on the shelves, to sort, to document and to cull what is not viable, what is not useful, what is not serving the public's interest." (Source: NBC)

**(U) Virus Restrictions Fuel Anti-government 'Boogaloo' Movement:** The coronavirus pandemic has become a catalyst for the "boogaloo" movement because the stay-at-home orders have "put a stressor on a lot of very unhappy people," said J.J. MacNab, a fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. MacNab said their rhetoric goes beyond discussions about fighting virus restrictions — which many protesters brand as "tyranny" — to talking about killing FBI agents or police officers "to get the war going."

"They are far more graphic and far more specific in their threats than I've seen in a long time," she said.

The violent rhetoric is dramatic escalation for a online phenomenon with its roots in meme culture and steeped in dark humor. Its name comes from the panned 1984 movie "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo," which has become slang for any bad sequel. Another derivation of "boogaloo" is "big luau" — hence the Hawaiian garb donned by many adherents.

An April 22 report by the Tech Transparency Project, which tracks technology companies, found 125 Facebook "boogaloo"-related groups that had attracted tens of thousands of members in the previous 30 days. The project pointed to coronavirus crisis as a driving factor.

Facebook has since updated its policies to prohibit use of "boogaloo" and related terms "when accompanied by statements and images depicting armed violence," the company said in a statement.

In March, a Missouri man with ties to neo-Nazis was shot and killed when FBI agents tried to arrest him. Timothy Wilson, 36, was planning to bomb a hospital in the Kansas City area on the day that a COVID-19 stay-at-home order was scheduled to take effect, authorities said. Wilson told an undercover FBI agent that his goal was "to kick start a revolution" and referred to his plans as "operation boogaloo," according to an agent's affidavit. (Source: Voice of America)

(U) **Neo-Nazis, Qanon Conspiracy Theorists, and Hardcore Vegans Unite to Protest Germany's Lockdown:** Football hooligans and neo-Nazis were arrested, journalists beaten up and bottles thrown, while neighbors on the sidelines discussed how a Satan-worshipping clique of millionaires had planned the coronavirus pandemic, and how Germany was now a medical dictatorship.

These were some of the scenes at nationwide anti-lockdown demonstrations in Germany over the weekend, attended by an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people. Politically, it appeared a wild mash-up. But who exactly were these people?

Unlike in the U.S., where protests have mostly originated on one side of the political spectrum, the demonstrators' signs didn't offer many clues at first. One man held up a hand-written paper saying, "I'm not right wing, I'm not left wing, I am for free expression, constitutional rights and democracy." Another sign said, "Don't give [Bill] Gates a chance! No enforced vaccinations." Yet another wore a mask nearby decorated with the words "Merkel's muzzle," and there was at least one with a T-shirt reading, in English, all caps: **Q ANON - DO YOU BELIEVE IN COINCIDENCE?**

The demonstrators call themselves "the corona-rebels," or "alternative thinkers" or part of the Querfront, a venerable German political term that suggests different social and political subgroups drawn to one plan of action. In this case, they include anti-vaxxers, hard core vegans, neo-Nazis, members of the Reichburger sovereign citizen movement, which rejects the legitimacy of the modern German state, and politicians from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, plus a sprinkling of their sometime allies the Free Democrats.

Local experts talk about an emerging "hybrid ideology" because despite other political differences, there are a number of things that many of those protesting do have in common. It's not just opposition to anti-COVID measures, it is a fascination—for some a kind of enthrallment—with conspiracy theories, which meshes with their mistrust of established information sources such as the mainstream media or their government.

Certain social media channels and messaging groups, many of them private, have been seeing huge membership gains since the pandemic began, Dittrich added. He believes the pandemic makes locals more vulnerable to conspiracy theorists because they're stuck at home, most likely on their computers. (Source: The Daily Beast)

(U) **The Pandemic of Misinformation:** Nearly **two-thirds of Americans** said they have seen news and information about the disease that seemed completely made up, according to a recent Pew Research Center study.

What distinguishes the proliferation of bad information surrounding the current crisis, though, is social media. **Kasisomayajula "Vish" Viswanath**, Lee Kum Kee Professor of Health Communication at the **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**, said the popularity and ubiquity of the various platforms means the public is no longer merely passively consuming inaccuracies and falsehoods. It's disseminating and even creating them, which is a "very different" dynamic than what took place during prior pandemics MERS and H1N1.

The sheer volume of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation online is "crowding out" the accurate public health guidance, "making our work a bit more difficult," he said.

But turning around those who buy into false information is not as simple as piercing epistemic bubbles with facts, said [Christopher Robichaud](#), senior lecturer in ethics and public policy at Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) who teaches the Gen Ed course “Ignorance, Lies, Hogwash and Humbug: The Value of Truth and Knowledge in Democracies.”

Over time, bubble dwellers can become cocooned in a media echo chamber that not only feeds faulty information to audiences, but anticipates criticisms in order to “prebut” potential counterarguments that audience members may encounter from outsiders, much the way cult leaders do.

“It’s not enough to introduce new pieces of evidence. You have to break through their strategies to diminish that counterevidence, and that’s a much harder thing to do than merely exposing people to different perspectives,” he said. (Source: Harvard Gazette)

(U) **Why is Facebook So Afraid of Checking Facts?** A video laden with [falsehoods](#) about Covid-19 emerged on Facebook last week, and has now been viewed [many millions of times](#). The company has taken steps to minimize the video’s reach, but its fact-checks, in particular, appear to have been applied with a curious—if not dangerous—reticence. The reason for that reticence should alarm you: It seems that the biggest social network in the world is, at least in part, basing its response to pandemic-related misinformation on a misreading of the academic literature.

At issue is the company’s long-standing deference to the risk of so-called “backfire effects.” That is to say, Facebook worries that the mere act of trying to debunk a bogus claim may only help to make the lie grow stronger. CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg [expressed](#) this precise concern back in February 2017: “Research shows that some of the most obvious ideas, like showing people an article from the opposite perspective, actually deepen polarization,” he said. The company would later cite the same theory to explain why it had stopped applying “red flag” warnings to fallacious headlines: “Academic research on correcting misinformation,” a Facebook product manager [wrote](#), has shown that such warnings “may actually entrench deeply held beliefs.”

Facebook’s fear of backfire hasn’t abated in the midst of this pandemic, or the [infodemic](#) that came with it. On April 16, the company [announced](#) a plan to deal with rampant Covid-19 misinformation: In addition to putting warning labels on some specific content, it would show decidedly [nonspecific warnings](#) to those who’d interacted with a harmful post and nudge them toward more [authoritative sources](#). The vagueness of these latter warnings, Facebook told the website STAT, was meant to [minimize the risk of backfire](#).

But here’s the thing: Whatever Facebook says (or thinks) about the backfire effect, this phenomenon has not, in fact, been “shown” or demonstrated in any thorough way. Rather, it’s a bogeyman—a zombie theory from the research literature circa 2008 that has all but been abandoned since. More recent studies, encompassing a broad array of issues, find the opposite is true: On almost all possible topics, almost all of the time, the average person—Democrat or Republican, young or old, well-educated or not—responds to facts just the way you’d hope, by becoming *more* factually accurate.

All those Snopes.com articles, Politifact posts and CNN fact-checks you’ve read over the years? By and large, they do their job. By our count, across experiments involving more than 10,000 Americans, fact-checks increase the proportion of correct responses in follow-up testing by more than 28 percentage points. But it’s not just us: [Other researchers](#) have reached very similar conclusions. If backfire effects

exist at all, they're hard to find. Entrenchment in the face of new information is certainly not a general human tendency—not even when people are presented with corrective facts that cut against their deepest political commitments. (Source: Wired)

(U) **Pandemic Misinformation Throughout the Ages (it's not a new thing):** The **infodemic** of misinformation and disinformation around the coronavirus is a serious threat to understanding how to deal with the pandemic — but this is nothing new.

The big picture: Whether the Black Death, smallpox or COVID-19, deadly diseases strike fear into people and, as scientific understanding is still gathered, stories and theories can start percolating into more serious finger-pointing, xenophobia or even violence.

*The Parrot Pandemic:* The "parrot panic of 1930" is an interesting case of "an outbreak of hysteria" when somebody had a pet parrot that died and shortly after a few members of that family fell dangerously ill, says Lawrence Poos, a professor of history at the Catholic University of America.

A Washington Post headline, "'Parrot Disease' Baffles Experts," captured the attention of Americans and helped foment a mass culling of parrots everywhere, [per the New Yorker](#).

*The Black Death:* Because **no one in Europe knew the cause** of the black death and some thought Jewish communities didn't seem to be dying as fast as others, there was a belief it was all a "Jewish plot," leading to a **massacre of Jews**.

*Small Pox:* Immigrants in general have often been targets of finger-pointing while also facing disparities in health care systems.

This disparity combined with a general distrust in vaccinations in the German and Polish immigrant communities in Milwaukee, and an alderman who denounced health department efforts, led to **rioting in the streets** for a month. (Source: Axios)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Conversation shifted largely from testing to vaccines following the press conference on Operation Warp Speed - the general public feels the time frame being given for vaccine development is too optimistic.
- There is growing discussion about the inflammatory condition affecting children across the nation, now called Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C). The CDC issued an advisory today asking healthcare providers to help track cases. Parents are expressing concern over how little is known about the disease.
- As more states and cities begin to move forward with the reopening process there is increasing confusion among the general public. In some states residents feel they have not received clear guidance from their state government on how to proceed, while in other areas state guidance and local guidance contradict each other.
- On traditional media, FEMA's pen and pad call with national reporters is gaining nationwide attention focused on Project Airbridge winding down' and FEMA Administrator's characterization of PPE seizure allegations as 'absurd.' Some elected officials are quoted in their assessment of Airbridge's successes and shortcomings. Other high-profile news reports concern declining retail sector during April and the HEROES Act's unlikely passage and approval by U.S. Senate and White House.

- National broadcast media have been consistently opening hourly segments with the White House's announcement of the 'Operation Warp Speed' goal to get a vaccine before end of year, followed by discussion of the likelihood of a vaccine being available before 2021.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Over the course of the day there has been a high volume of discussion about vaccines following the President's press conference on Operation Warp Speed.
- The general public is largely concerned the timeframe being provided is overly optimistic and unobtainable.
  - There is increased discussion about the availability and accuracy of testing in the country.
- Many individuals continue to feel there is not enough testing available in the country – though states have been pushing messaging about how and where to get tested. A recent poll by ABC News/Ipsos found 3 out of 4 Americans feel the country is lagging in testing capacity.
- Following the announcement from the FDA that the Abbott ID NOW test is vulnerable to false negatives many feel they cannot trust the accuracy of test results or data. A small number of people are questioning if these are the tests being used in the White House and if this means the President is at greater risk.
  - Hospitals, health officials, and media outlets are expressing concern and confusion about remdesivir distribution and how the limited supply is being allocated. Many feel the drug is not going to places with the most need, and some report receiving less than expected.
- A member of Congress from Texas commented, "... distribution of remdesivir seems akin to winning the lottery — a random stroke of luck rather than a medically-informed decision,"
  - There is ongoing anxiety among the general public over the prospect of returning to work. For many the concern extends beyond worry for individual health, and more for the health of family members who live in the same household.
  - Many members of the general public are saying they are unsurprised to hear that recent studies showed droplets generated by people talking while infected with COVID-19 could linger in the air for several minutes. (example 1, example 2, example 3) Most felt this information would not change the current steps they are taking to avoid contracting COVID-19.
  - Many continue to observe reopenings taking place across the country and are concerned at scenes of large crowds of individuals not practicing social distancing. There is growing concern that reopenings will lead to increases in cases.

**(U) 5/14 Reporting**

**(U) New Study Shows Emerging Trend of COVID-19 Misinformation Embedded in Non-Public Health Related Online Groups:** Researchers who released a new study on COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook expected to see that, in the map of the online world, there will be a core of the central establishment, accepted medical science, government public health advice, surrounded maybe by some fringe kind of buzzing around. They found the opposite. The core of the whole online debate of - and discussion and battle over views is really dominated by this relatively small-size but very well-distributed

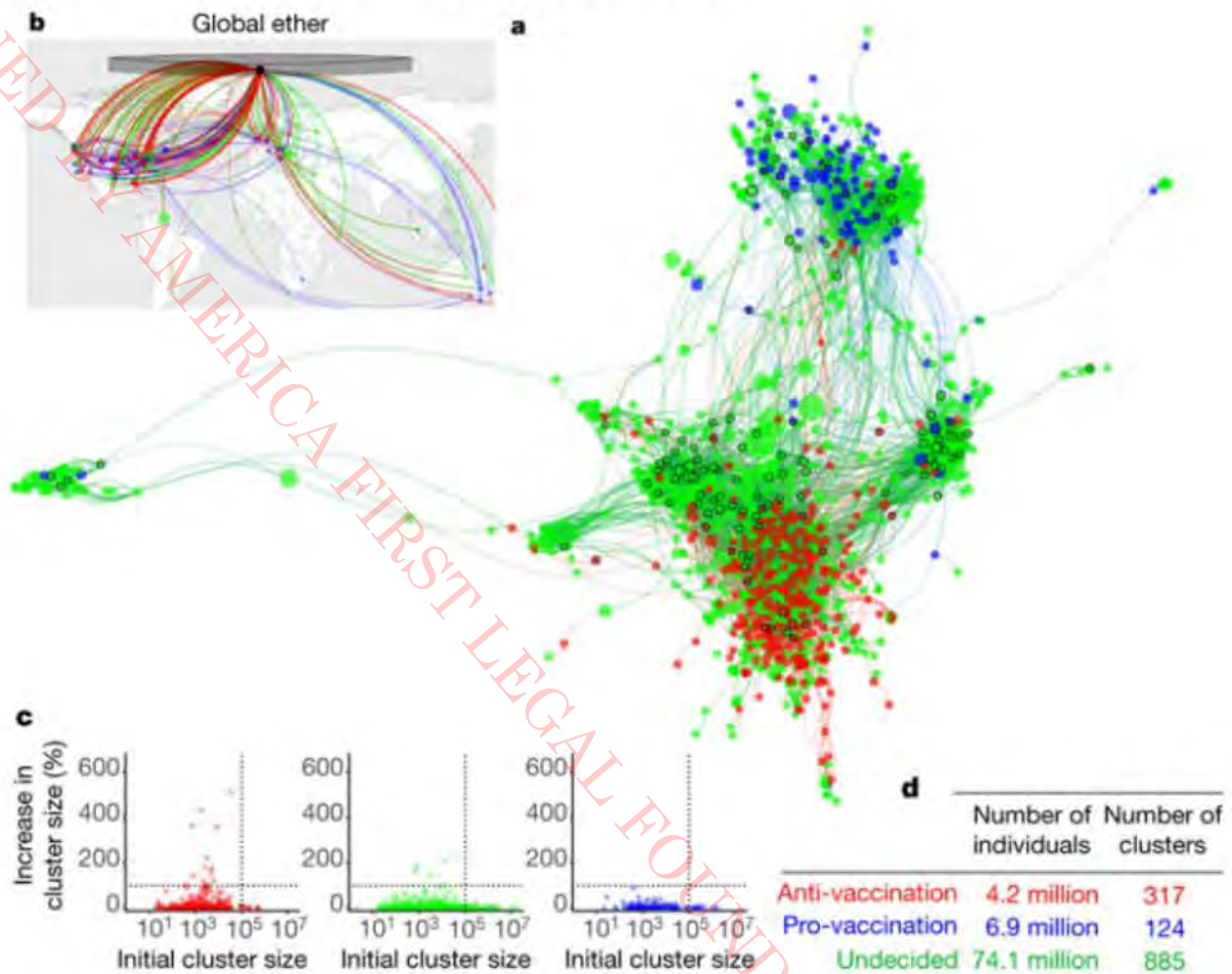


organized communities of distrust that have embedded themselves with everyday other communities, such as pet lovers or parents' associations. And the establishment communities are off to one side.

Researchers at the George Washington University found is that undecided people are getting exposed to anti-vaccination views not while visiting anti-vaccination Facebook groups, but just within other community groups that seem totally unrelated to vaccination, like the pet groups. Because of the way social media works, if communities are linked, then people in the pet lovers community can be exposed to information and rumors - false information - coming from these other communities - for example, that Bill Gates will eventually have a vaccine that injects semiconductor quantum dots into children to institute universal government monitoring.

The study, which mapped the vaccine conversation on Facebook during the 2019 measles outbreak, also found that there were nearly three times as many active anti-vaccination communities as pro-vaccination communities. In addition, they found that while pro-vaccine pages tended to have more followers, anti-vaccine pages were faster-growing.

The researchers found that Facebook pages pushing accurate pro-vaccine information were mostly clustered in an insular group, while the anti-vaccine pages treated vaccine resistance as a kind of political campaign, and used different messages to reach different types of undecided "voters." A page promoting holistic health remedies might start seeding doubts about vaccines among liberal yoga moms, while a page promoting resistance to government-mandated vaccines might appeal to conservatives and libertarians.

**Fig. 1: Online ecology of vaccine views.**

(Source: NPR, GWU)

(U) **Get Ready for a Vaccine Information War:** Social media is already filling up with misinformation about a Covid-19 vaccine, months or years before one even exists.

I've been following the anti-vaccine community on and off for years, watching its members operate in private Facebook groups and Instagram accounts, and have found that they are much more organized and strategic than many of their critics believe. They are savvy media manipulators, effective communicators and experienced at exploiting the weaknesses of social media platforms. (Just one example: Shortly after Facebook and YouTube began taking down copies of "Plandemic" for violating their rules, I saw people in anti-vaccine groups editing it in subtle ways to evade the platforms' automated enforcement software and reposting it.)

In short, the anti-vaxxers have been practicing for this. And I'm worried that they will be unusually effective in sowing doubts about a Covid-19 vaccine for several reasons.

First, because of the pandemic's urgency, any promising Covid-19 vaccine is likely to be fast-tracked through the testing and approval process. It may not go through years of clinical trials and careful studies of possible long-term side effects, the way other drugs do. That could create an opening for anti-vaccine activists to claim that it is untested and dangerous, and to spin reasonable concerns about the vaccine into widespread, unfounded fears about its safety.

Second, if a vaccine does emerge, there is a good chance that leading health organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the World Health Organization will have a hand in producing or distributing it. If that's the case, anti-vaccine activists, who have been crusading against these groups for years, will have plenty of material stockpiled to try to discredit them. They are already taking aim at Mr. Gates with baseless **conspiracy theories** claiming that he created and is trying to profit from the virus. These theories will be amplified, and the attempts to discredit leading virus research efforts will intensify as the vaccine nears.

Third, if and when a Covid-19 vaccine is approved for widespread use, people may be required to take it before being allowed to fly on certain airlines, attend certain schools or enter certain businesses. That's a good idea, public health-wise, but it would play into some of the worst fears of the anti-vaccine movement. (Source: New York Times)

**(U) False COVID- 19 Claims Viewed by Millions on YouTube:** More than a quarter of the most-viewed coronavirus videos on YouTube contain "misleading or inaccurate information", a recent study suggests.

In total, the misleading videos had been viewed more than 62 million times.

Among the false claims was the idea that pharmaceutical companies already have a coronavirus vaccine but are refusing to sell it.

Of the videos found to include inaccurate information,

- about a third came from entertainment news sources
- national news outlets accounted for about a quarter
- internet news sources also account for about a quarter
- 13% had been uploaded by independent video-makers

The report recommends that governments and health authorities should collaborate with entertainment news sources and social media influencers to make appealing, factual content that is more widely viewed. (Source: BBC)

**(U) Russia Spreading Coronavirus Disinformation in Netherlands, Minister Says:** Russia is spreading disinformation about the coronavirus in the Netherlands, Minister Kasja Ollongren of Home Affairs said in a letter to parliament. Intelligence service AIVD found "Russian narratives" about the virus being shared in a number of Dutch-language social media groups, she said.

These narratives emphasize "alleged European divisions and lack of mutual solidarity between countries in Western Europe in the field of Covid-19," Ollongren wrote. She added that outside the social media groups in which these messages were shared, their reach remained limited.

The Minister did not say in which social media groups the messages were shared, or what evidence the AIVD found of Russian interference. (Source: NL Times)

**(U) Russia Slams New York Times, Financial Times on Virus Deaths:** Russia's Foreign Ministry has criticized the Financial Times and The New York Times after they reported that Russia's **coronavirus** death toll could be much higher than government officials are saying.

The articles said that they were based on a spike in total mortality rates reported by officials in Moscow, who said the capital registered about 1,800 deaths more in April 2020 than the monthly average.

The New York Times reported that total is far higher than the official COVID-19 death count of 642, which the newspaper said was an indication of significant underreporting by the authorities. It quoted Tatiana N. Mikhailova, a senior researcher at the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow, as saying that the number who died from the virus is "possibly almost three times higher than the official toll."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova complained about what she called "disinformation" by the two newspapers and said letters demanding a retraction would be passed on to both on Thursday.

**(U) Conspiracy Theorists and Extremists Seize on Pandemic to Promote Disinformation:** As the world economy craters and the coronavirus' global death toll **ticks past 280,000 people**, extremist messages are finding fertile ground on fringe online platforms like 4chan, Telegram and a gamer hangout called Discord. From there, such harmful content can make its way to mainstream sites like Facebook and Google-owned YouTube — each boasting roughly 2 billion users apiece — despite the companies' attempts to weed out violent or dangerous content.

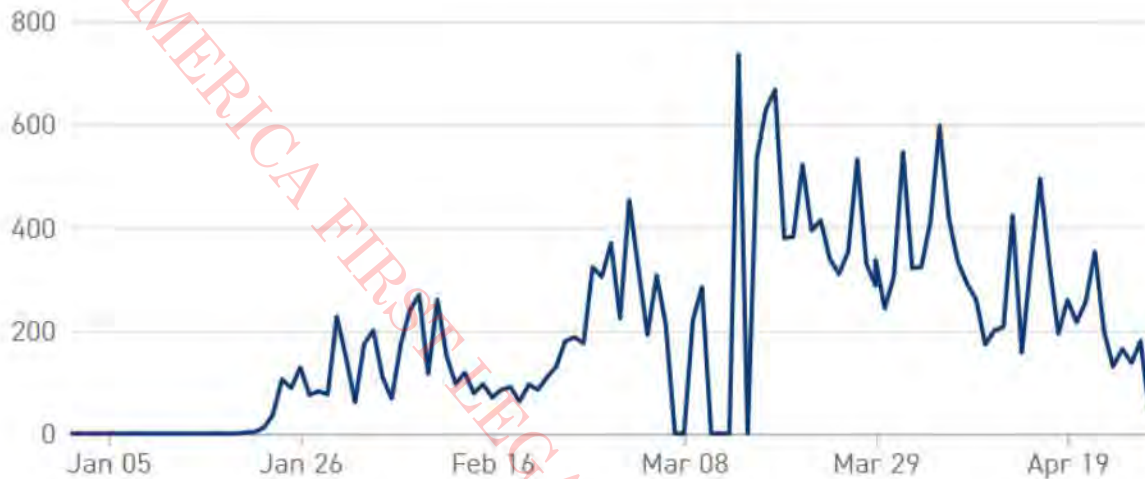
Facebook **said last week** that one collection of fake accounts and pages it removed in April — tied to two anti-immigrant websites in the U.S. — had drawn more than 200,000 followers with messages including the hashtag "#ChinaVirus" and a false claim that the coronavirus mainly kills white people. Twitter announced Monday that it would **begin more aggressively labeling tweets** that contain misleading or harmful coronavirus information.

One coronavirus-related term, "Coronachan," has also exploded on social media, first emerging in January and drawing more than 120,000 shares on Twitter in one week in late April, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that tracks extremist groups. (The term is a play on the name of 4chan, a message board that is a favorite gathering spot for the global far right.) In Germany, Telegram groups where influential extremists and far-right activists attack vulnerable groups have doubled their number of followers, to more than 100,000 participants since February, according to a review by POLITICO of those accounts.

## 'Coronachan' on Twitter

Mentions of the term, a play on the name of the fringe message board 4chan, exploded among people discussing the pandemic.

Tweets using the term\*



\*Figures don't include retweets.

Source: Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Mark Scott / POLITICO

The themes of far-right posts include long-standing grievances, including allegations that migrants spread disease, antagonism toward the EU or opposition to gun control. One online rumor, [accusing Microsoft founder Bill Gates](#) of creating the coronavirus, echoes centuries-old conspiracy theories and Anti-Semitic tropes about global elites pulling the world's strings. (Source: Politico, Institute for Strategic Dialogue)

**(U) Facebook Banned Mask Ads. They're Still Running:** Using misleading Facebook pages and deceptive ads, ZestAds sold coronavirus masks at wildly inflated prices.

Three weeks earlier, Facebook had [banned](#) ads for masks, over price gouging and first responder shortages. But when Michailow saw the video ad for the "MediCare Reusable Surgical Mask," it seemed legit — and he was desperate.

He bought 10 for \$227.90.

An hour later, he was shown *another* Facebook video ad for masks. "They looked like better-quality masks," he said, so Michailow bought three "AeroShield N95 Masks" for \$118.95.

None of the masks, from either order, ever arrived. And contrary to what he thought, he didn't buy from two separate US companies. Instead, PayPal receipts show the purchases came from the same entity: ZestAds, a company registered in Hong Kong with headquarters in Malaysia.

Since March, the company has made a mockery of Facebook's ban by running ads that dangerously claimed its masks would "fully protect" from the virus, cited a fake expert, and falsely listed US companies as behind the ads.

Facebook's **inability to enforce its mask ad ban** is a symptom of the company's larger failure to police the **scammers and shady e-commerce operators** who use its powerful ad targeting tools to rip off people at scale. (Source: BuzzFeed News)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening**

- The most frequently mentioned topics on social media today were mostly focused on the debate over reopening and concerns about the long-term nature of the pandemic and its impacts. Many discussed statements from current and former public health officials that contrasted with more optimistic estimates and plans from the administration. The public is growing increasingly worried about the economic costs and the potential for significant subsequent waves of the virus.
- FEMA conversation remains focused on the distribution of medical supplies, including continued discussion of the Panthera contract for PPE and the purchasing of body bags. This is part of a broader conversation regarding FEMA's involvement in supply chain management in which most are critical of the agency.
- Traditional media is focused on testimony of the former Director of BARDA warning that the nation faces "darkest winter" of COVID-19 outbreaks because of a lack of a vaccine plan and the general response to the pandemic. The president lauds American workers in visit to Allentown PPE distributor. Unemployment has reached 36.5 million as nearly 3 million more workers filed last week. Wisconsin bars reopen after the Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down the governor's stay-home order.

**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

- The debate over when schools should reopen is becoming more heated as the administration's views on the issue clashed with those presented by Dr. Fauci earlier this week.
  - Many in the general public feel this is another sign that the administration is not on the same page as other parts of the response.
- WHO warned that COVID-19 may never become completely eradicated and could become embedded in populations similar to HIV. This is leading many to question why stay-at-home orders are needed and push for a swifter reopening of the country.
- The U.N. is warning of a global mental health crisis as millions of people worldwide grapple with isolation, financial concerns and immense grief.
- High levels of stress and anger are resulting in increased reports of aggressive behavior over mask requirements.
- The former director of BARDA will testify before Congress today and is expected to say that the US faces the "darkest winter in modern history" with "unprecedented illness and fatalities" if federal officials don't develop a more coordinated response.
  - The public is having mixed reactions to these statements with some feeling it is necessary messaging to get people to understand the gravity of the situation. Many others feel this is intended to incite fear.

- During the testimony, committee members questioned if the U.S. has sufficient testing capacity for states to reopen, reasons for the former director's dismissal, and outlook on a potential second surge in cases.
- There is growing concern that the anti-vaccine movement could hinder efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. Studies of social networks show current opposition to vaccines is small but far-reaching and increasing.
- There is a small conversation about the decline in COVID-19 numbers for states that have reopened quickly with a small number of people are questioning if other states should reopen sooner.

### (U) 5/13 Reporting

**(U) EU Counterterrorism Coordinator Warns of Extremists Exploiting Virus Outbreak:** The European Union's counterterrorism official is warning that the coronavirus pandemic is being used by extremists as an opportunity to spread their message and could be exploited to carry out attacks.

In a confidential briefing to member nations obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove cautioned that right-wing extremists and Islamic militants "could view attacks on medical personnel and facilities as highly effective, because these would generate a massive shock in society."

He noted that in the U.S., the FBI in March shot and killed a white supremacist while trying to arrest him for plotting to blow up a hospital treating COVID-19 patients, after initially considering an attack on an African-American school, mosque or synagogue.

From past experience, he said it's known that "terrorists and violent extremists, aiming to change societies and governmental systems through violence, seek to exploit major crises to achieve their objectives". (Source: Star Tribune)

**(U) Facebook Removes Record Number Of Hate Speech Posts:** On Tuesday, Facebook released its biannual [Community Standards Enforcement Report](#) which provided the latest metrics on the number of controversial posts removed from the platform. The company took action against more than 2 billion pieces of content violating its community standards between January and March 2020 and an upsurge in content promoting hate and violence was particularly noteworthy.

Facebook deleted a record number of hate speech posts with 9.6 million taken down compared to 5.7 million in the prior period. That marks a six-fold increase in hateful content removals compared with the second half of 2017, the earliest point for which data is available. The company removed 4.7 million pieces of content originating from organized hate groups in the first three months of 2020, an increase of more than 3 million on the final quarter of last year.

Facebook has attributed the sharp increase in hate speech removals to technology improvements for automatically identifying images and text. In a statement, the company said that "we're now able to detect text embedded in images and videos in order to understand its full context, and we've built media matching technology to find content that's identical or near-identical to photos, videos, text and even audio that we've already removed." According to the latest data, 88.3% of all hate speech content was removed before users reported it in Q1.

# Facebook Removes Record Number Of Hate Speech Posts

Amount of hate speech content removed by Facebook



(Source: Facebook, Forbes)

**Facebook's** AI tools are the only thing standing between its users and the growing onslaught of hate and misinformation the platform is experiencing. The company's researchers have cooked up a few new capabilities for the systems that keep the adversary at bay, identifying COVID-19-related misinformation and hateful speech disguised as memes.

Detecting and removing misinformation relating to the virus is obviously a priority right now, as Facebook and other social media become breeding grounds not just for ordinary speculation and discussion, but malicious interference by organized campaigns aiming to sow discord and spread pseudoscience.

"We have seen a huge change in behavior across the site because of COVID-19, a huge increase in misinformation that we consider dangerous," said Facebook CTO Mike Schroepfer in a call with press earlier today.



(U) **Facebook Upgrades Its AI to Better Tackle COVID-19 Misinformation and Hate Speech:** The company contracts with dozens of fact-checking organizations around the world, but — leaving aside the question of **how effective the collaborations really are** — misinformation has a way of quickly mutating, making taking down even a single image or link a complex affair.

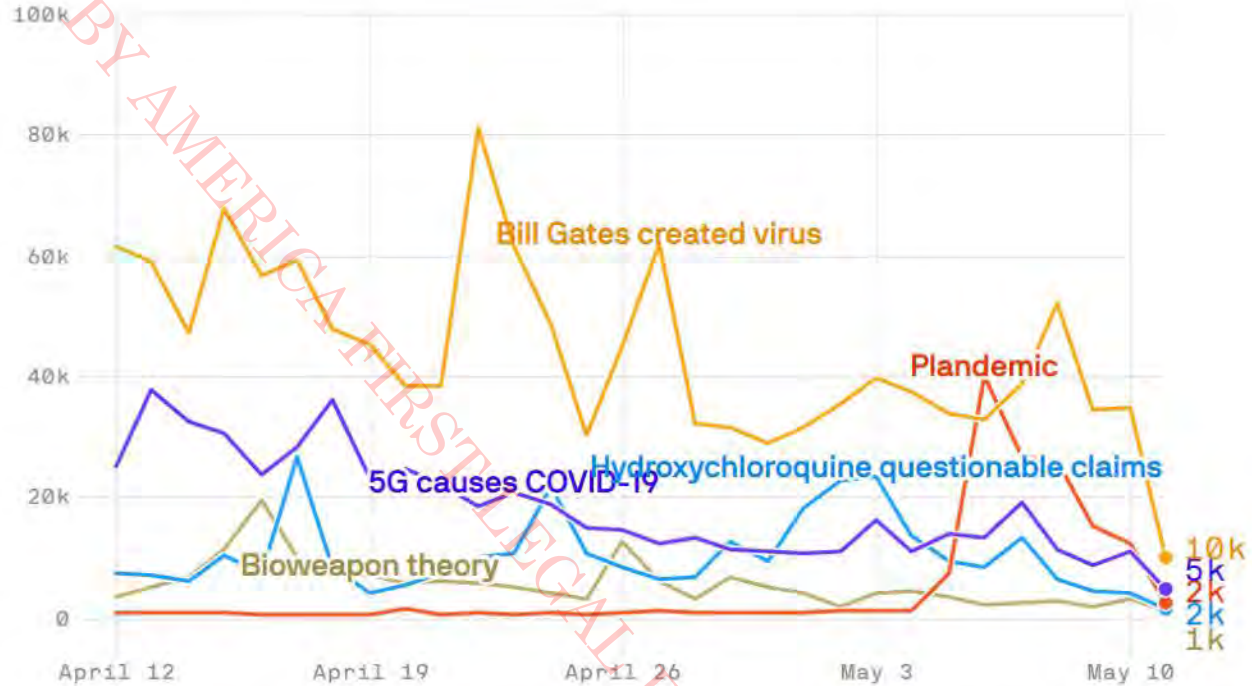
While Facebook warned that its AI systems might remove content too aggressively, hate speech, **violent threats** and misinformation continue to proliferate on the platform as the coronavirus crisis stretches on. Facebook most recently came under fire for disseminating a viral video discouraging people from wearing face masks or seeking vaccines once they are available — a clear violation of the platform’s rules against health misinformation.

The video, an excerpt from a forthcoming pseudo-documentary called “Plandemic,” initially took off on YouTube, but researchers found that Facebook’s **thriving ecosystem of conspiracist groups** shared it far and wide on the platform, injecting it into mainstream online discourse. The 26-minute-long video, peppered with conspiracies, is also a perfect example of the kind of content an algorithm would have a difficult time making sense of. (Source: TechCrunch)

(U) **The Coronavirus Conspiracy News Cycle:** The coronavirus conspiracy news cycle has grown more powerful off of audiences that were already susceptible to misinformation about other health care myths, like anti-vaccination conspiracies.

## Web and social mentions of select conspiracy theories

April 12 to May 11, 2020



Data: Signal; Chart: Axios Visuals. NOTE: This does not include mentions of "disinfectant," which is disproportionately much more viral than all of the select conspiracy theories combined. We removed it from this chart to show you the smaller theories at scale.

The latest conspiracy theory — that the virus is a "plandemic" engineered to increase vaccination rates — stems from a documentary-style video featuring a discredited medical researcher that has gone viral.

*The big picture:* The most effective misinformation plays into existing fears, especially around health, safety and well-being. This is in part due to the fact that there's already so much uncertainty about causes and cures for new and existing diseases.

*The bottom line:* The "plandemic" conspiracy theory is the latest in a series of myths around the virus that will spread quickly, before big web platforms take notice and users and bad actors move to another falsehood.

(U) **Australian Public's Confidence in 5G 'Shaken' by Misinformation Campaign:** Public confidence in the planned 5G network has been significantly undermined by a strong misinformation campaign, an Australian parliamentary committee has admitted.

The House of Representatives committee was established last year to examine the plans for 5G networks in Australia, currently under construction by Telstra, Optus and Vodafone, but the committee received hundreds of submissions from members of the public and groups concerned about perceived health issues associated with 5G networks.

In the report tabled in parliament on Tuesday evening, the committee, chaired by Nationals MP David Gillespie, expressed concern about 5G misinformation.

“Community confidence in 5G has been shaken by extensive misinformation preying on the fears of the public spread via the internet, and presented as facts, particularly through social media,” the report said.

“The communication of the reality of 5G has been neglected, allowing fears over health and safety, the technology involved and the application of 5G to take hold. Misinformation has filled the vacuum and public confidence in 5G has been shaken.”

The report was finalised in March before misinformation began spreading online claiming either 5G was responsible for coronavirus, due to the construction of 5G networks in Wuhan, or for “poisoning cells” that created coronavirus.

The misinformation has been widely spread on Facebook, in particular – a video went viral where a man claiming to be a former Vodafone executive warned the pandemic was a global plot to install 5G and track the population through vaccines.

In reality, the Guardian revealed, the voice on the tape making the baseless claims is an evangelical pastor who had only worked in sales for Vodafone for less than a year in 2014.

In Australia, a Nazi flag with #COVID19 written on it was tied to two Chinese flags on a mobile tower in regional Victoria in April.

Last weekend, anti-5G protesters joined anti-lockdown protesters in small protests in Sydney and Melbourne. (Source: The Guardian)

#### (U) Facebook Claims it Labeled 50 Million Pieces of Coronavirus Misinformation in April

Facebook put misinformation warning labels on about 50 million pieces of content related to COVID-19 during the month of April, the company announced Tuesday.

The social networking site attaches these warnings to posts sharing articles that have been reviewed by the company’s independent fact-checking partners. The company said that the warnings greatly reduce the number of people who view the original content.

Facebook and other tech platforms have taken a variety of steps to counter the spread of coronavirus misinformation, but misleading claims and conspiracy theories have proven hard to contain, particularly when shared in public and private groups.

The report comes at a time when the company’s content moderation teams are operating at reduced capacity and it is more reliant on automated systems that use things like image matching technology to identify violating content. (Source: NBC)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Conversation today has touched various subjects related to the gradual reopening of the economy. While some states are lifting restrictions with caution, others with increasing case counts extend their stay-at-home orders, leading to large discussions about the countermeasures and strategies businesses and local governments are taking to reopen.

- Conversation about FEMA on both social and traditional media has focused on the cancellation of the \$55 million Panthera contract for masks, to which many are questioning the pricing for the bulk amount of supply in an emergency.
- There has been a growing amount of concern regarding Pediatric Multi-System Inflammatory System as reported cases increase in several states, and people question the condition being more closely related to COVID-19.
- There has been an increase in media coverage about national preparedness as the National Hurricane Center issues advisories for a system in the Atlantic and wildfire season becomes more active.
- Other subjects of media interest include delays in information sharing between hospitals and health agencies, and growing concern that lax enforcement of mitigation measures could cause a second outbreak in the fall or winter.

*(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment*

- There has been an increase in discussion about children presenting with symptoms of [Kawasaki disease](#) which may be linked to COVID-19 in children. The medical community is referring to this as Pediatric Multi-System Inflammatory Syndrome (PMIS). The New York City Health Department [has issued a fact sheet](#) on the symptoms.
  - Parents are pointing to this as a reason why they feel schools should not reopen any time soon. There is general worry that more is not understood about the condition.
  - A smaller number of people are claiming these are classic cases of Kawasaki's disease that do not have anything to do with COVID-19.
- There is growing concern over the potential for a new housing crisis in the rental industry. There the risk of a cascading effect that if tenants cannot pay rent, landlords cannot pay for the rental property or mortgages and all involved fall down the economic scale.
  - People are debating the best way to provide financial support as many solutions seem lopsided benefiting either the renter or landlord more.
- There is a large amount of discussion about the Los Angeles' "Safer-at-Home" order after the Public Health Director said it could very likely be extended another three months.
  - People are shocked and saddened at the prospect of missing the entire summer. However, many feel this is the result of people not following existing social distancing guidance.
  - The mayor of Los Angeles and other elected officials quickly clarified that the comment about the "Safer-at-Home" order was taken out of context. The LA County Board of Supervisors issued a statement saying that the intent was to convey that lifting the order would be a gradual process that could take months.
- There is renewed concern that COVID-19 will impact the November presidential election, fueled by a statement from a member of the White House Task Force who said he was "not sure [he could] commit one way or the other" when asked whether the election will be held as scheduled.
  - Many respond with anger against the administration, noting that only congress can postpone the election.

(U) 5/12 Reporting

**Platforms Scramble as ‘Plandemic’ Conspiracy Video Spreads Misinformation Like Wildfire:** A video about the coronavirus featuring a well-known vaccine conspiracist is spreading like wildfire on social media this week, even as platforms talk tough about misinformation in the midst of the pandemic.

In the professionally-produced video, a solemn interviewer named Mikki Willis interviews Judy Mikovits, a figure best known for her [anti-vaccine activism](#) in recent years. The video touches on a number of topics favored among online conspiracists at the moment, filtering most of them through the lens that vaccines are a money-making enterprise that causes medical harm.

The video took off mid-week after first being [posted to Vimeo and YouTube on May 4](#). From those sites, it traveled to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter where it circulated much more widely, racking up [millions of views](#). Finding the video is currently trivial across social platforms, where it’s been reposted widely, sometimes with its title removed or reworded to make it more difficult to detect by AI moderation.

According to Twitter, tweets by Mikovits apparently don’t violate the platform’s rules around COVID-19 misinformation, but it has marked the video’s URL as “unsafe” and blocked the related hashtags [“#PlagueOfCorruption and #Plandemicmovie](#). The company also hasn’t found evidence that her account is being amplified as part of a coordinated campaign.

Over on Facebook, the video indeed runs afoul of the platform’s coronavirus and health misinformation rules—but it’s still very easy to find. For this story, I was able to locate a copy of the full video within seconds and at the time of writing Instagram’s [#plandemic](#) hashtag was well-populated with long clips from the video and even suggestions for related hashtags like [#coronahoax](#). Facebook is currently working to stem the video’s spread, but it’s already collected millions of views in a short time.

On YouTube, a search for “Plandemic” mostly pulls up content debunking the video’s many false claims, but plenty of clips from the video itself still make the first wave of search results.

Mikovits, who in the video states that she’s not opposed to vaccines, later goes on to make the claim that vaccines have killed millions of people. “The game is to prevent the therapies ‘til everyone is infected and push the vaccines, knowing that the flu vaccines increase the odds... of getting COVID-19,” Mikovits says, conspiratorially. At the same time, she suggests that doctors and health facilities are incentivized to overcount COVID-19 cases for the medicare payouts, an assertion that contradicts the expert consensus that coronavirus cases are likely still being [meaningfully undercounted](#).

Mikovits also touches on a [popular web of conspiracy theories](#) fixated on the idea Bill Gates is somehow implicated in causing the pandemic to profit off the eventual vaccine and makes the unfounded claim that “it’s very clear this virus was manipulated and studied in the laboratory.”

In other interviews, Mikovits has suggested that face masks [pose a danger](#) because they can “activate” the virus in the wearer. In the “Plandemic” clip, Mikovits also makes the unscientific claim that beaches should not have been closed due to “healing microbes in the saltwater” and “sequences” in the sand that protect against the coronavirus.

With “Plandemic,” Mikovits seems to have positioned herself successfully for relevance in the pandemic’s information vacuum—her book sales have even soared on Amazon. Toward the end of the clip, her interviewer even cannily sets up a future outrage cycle at the inevitable crackdown from social

media platforms, where the video flouts rules ostensibly banning harmful health conspiracies like the ones it contains. (Source: TechCrunch)

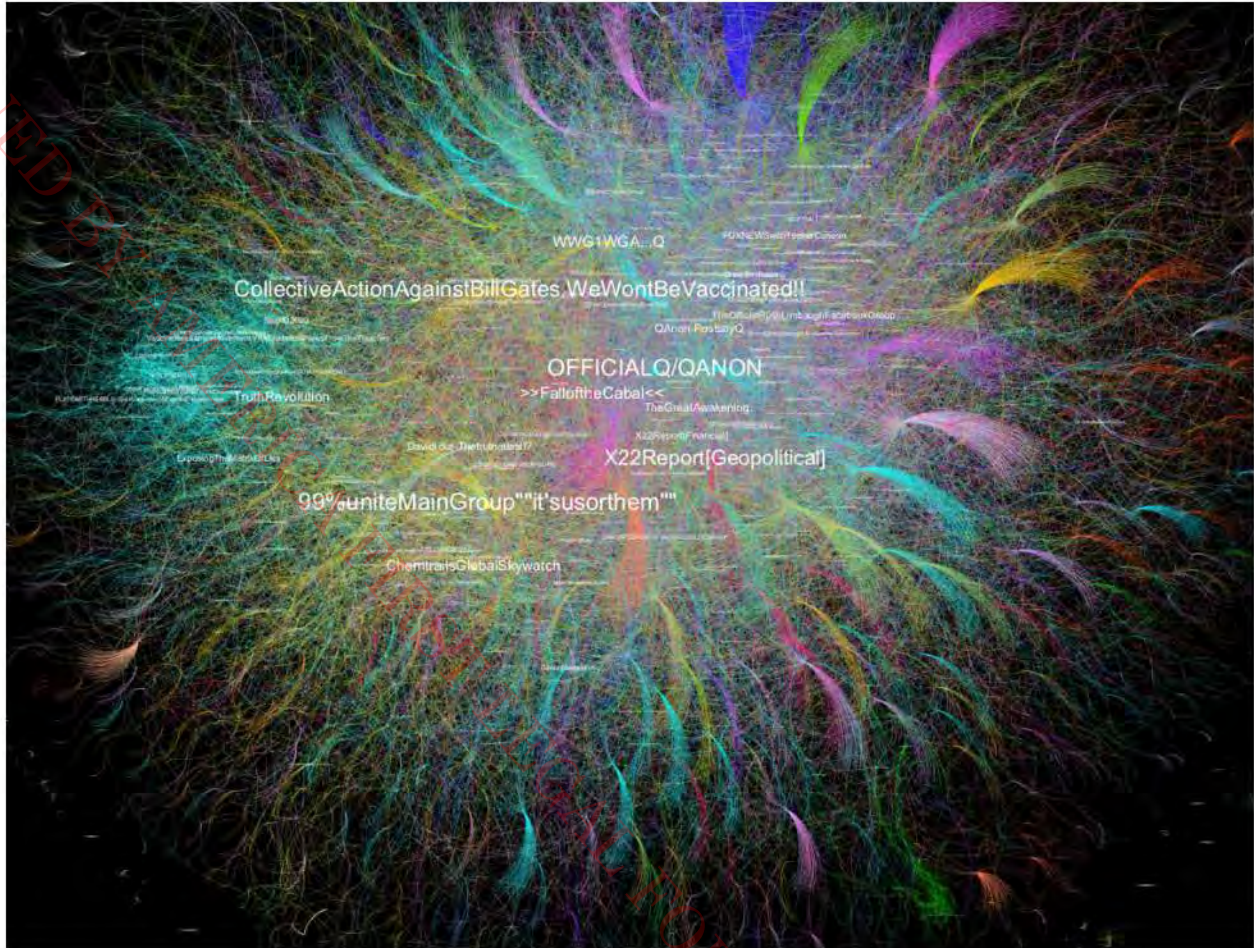
**(U) A Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Film Attacking Vaccines Has Racked Up Millions of Views and Engagements on YouTube and Facebook:** A film featuring a known anti-vaxxer pushing conspiracy theories and false claims about the novel coronavirus, including attacking vaccines, has racked up more than 9 million views on YouTube. Additionally, the video and its reuploads have tallied more than 16 million Facebook engagements. The spread of the film -- called "Plandemic" -- through reuploads on YouTube shows the platform's continuing issues with enforcing its policies against coronavirus misinformation during this public health crisis.

In March, as the disease spread throughout the United States, YouTube **wrote** that it had "worked to prevent misinformation associated with the spread of the virus" and would "quickly remove videos that violate our policies when they are flagged, including those that discourage people from seeking medical treatment or claim harmful substances have health benefits."

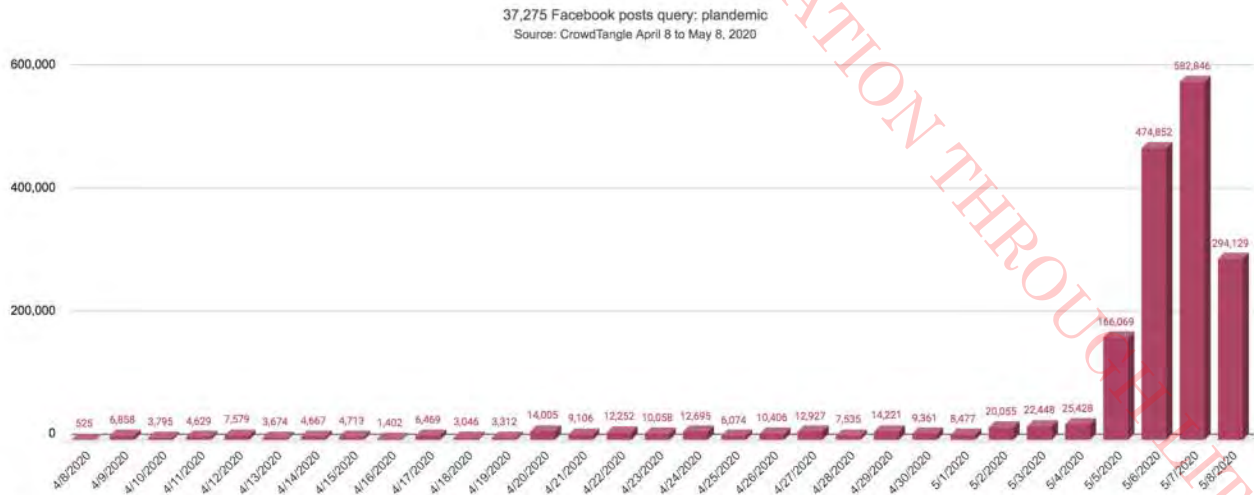
Yet despite that promise -- and despite YouTube's attempts to take the video down for **violating its policies** -- "Plandemic" has gone viral on the platform, and has been going viral on Facebook and even **trending on Twitter**. In the video, a filmmaker named **Mikki Willis** interviews Dr. Judy Mikovits, a former chronic fatigue researcher whose **claims have been retracted** by a scientific journal and who was arrested for "allegedly stealing equipment belonging to the Institute that fired her." (Source: Media Matters)

**(U) Facebook Groups and YouTube Enabled Viral Spread of Plandemic Misinformation:** DFR Lab made a network graph of 37,275 public "plandemic" Facebook posts containing URLs from April 8 to May 8, 2020. The larger, visible labels are highly active Facebook groups with tens of thousands of members. These Facebook groups are the central hubs in the network. The graph contains links to YouTube and links to other websites outside of Facebook, but links to YouTube are the most common URLs.

The core of the network (filtered out all nodes with less than 50 edges). QAnon, antivax and general conspiracy themed Facebook groups were the most active hubs on Facebook.



Network graph of 37,275 public "plandemic" Facebook posts from April 8 to May 8, 2020



I will continue to explore this data and may add more information later, but I suspect many people are looking for explanations as to how this video went so incredibly viral, so quickly and I think these visualizations help to illustrate what happened. The video spread from YouTube to Facebook thanks to

highly active QAnon and conspiracy-related Facebook groups with tens of thousands of members which caused a massive cascade. Both platforms were instrumental in spreading viral medical misinformation. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Gov. Whitmer Becomes Target of Dozens of Threats on Private Facebook Groups Ahead of Armed Rally in Lansing:** Dozens of angry Michiganders, fueled by conspiracy theories and disinformation about the coronavirus, are promoting violence and mobilizing armed rallies against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on Facebook, in violation of the social media company's policies.

*Metro Times* gained access to four private Facebook groups that can only be seen by approved members. The pages, which have a combined 400,000 members, are filled with paranoid, sexist, and grammar-challenged rants, with members encouraging violence and flouting the governor's social-distancing orders.

On Sunday, after being contacted by *Metro Times*, Facebook removed one of the groups, Michigan United for Liberty, and deleted posts on others for violating the company's policy against inciting violence. Facebook announced last month that it will remove groups and events that encourage people to defy social-distancing measures. Facebook also is investigating the other groups.

Assassinating Whitmer is a common theme among members of the groups. Dozens of people have called for her to be hanged.

"We need a good old fashioned lynch mob to storm the Capitol, drag her tyrannical ass out onto the street and string her up as our forefathers would have," a member wrote in a group called "People of Michigan vs. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer," which had nearly 9,000 members as of Monday morning. (Detroit *Metro Times*)

(U) **How Covid-19 Conspiracy Theorists Are Exploiting YouTube Culture:** Experts have said that social-media platforms' moves to [prioritize reliable information](#) and demonetize, limit the reach of, or outright [remove](#) content containing misinformation can help limit its spread. But platforms have struggled with effective enforcement. Health misinformation poses its own challenges, and existing conspiracy theories and false claims are adapting and spreading in the current pandemic [faster than fact-checking](#)—or sometimes [science](#)—can catch up.

But an interview with Bet-David and a review of [other conspiracy-riddled activity](#) on YouTube shows that in fact, many prominent peddlers of conspiracy theories are successfully using the system exactly as intended—applying the same techniques that many YouTubers have used to become famous: collaborating with more mainstream channels that have not been banned.

Anti-vaccine activists are particularly good at gaining views on virtually any social app, says Renee DiResta, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory who works to combat this type of misinformation. "They are on every single social platform—even TikTok," she says. "If they can create content people will find if they search for a specific term, they'll invest the time."

The relationship between fringe and mainstream YouTubers can be symbiotic, according to Alice Marwick, an assistant professor in communication at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



“Both members of the discussion are trying to benefit,” she says. “The fringe person from getting this mainstream, and the mainstream from getting a potentially increased audience.”

While YouTube [bans](#) creators who break the rules too many times in a row, some conspiracy theorists are using collabs and [interviews](#) as a workaround, getting other YouTubers to either host them or talk about them on their channels. (Source: MIT Technology Review)

(U) **Germany: Politicians worry about radicalization at anti-lockdown protests:** German lawmakers from across the political spectrum on Monday warned that the growing wave of anti-lockdown protests could provide fertile ground for radicalization, including from the far-right. Over the weekend, [thousands of people gathered](#) in cities across Germany to demand an end to restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

They warned that the demonstrations and conspiracy theories were [fomenting violence against journalists](#) and police. Over the weekend, a group of right-wing extremists attacked a group of journalists in the city of Dortmund, following two similar attacks on reporters in Berlin earlier this month.

There have also been sporadic reports of assaults and resistance to police officers. In the western town of Troisdorf on Monday, two people who attempted to enter a supermarket without wearing the required facemasks were arrested after attacking the police officers who were called to check on the disturbance.

On Saturday, some 3,000 people rallied in Munich to demand that all pandemic-related restrictions be lifted, many of them not wearing masks and in defiance of an order that protests not exceed more than 50 people. Multiple smaller protests were held in Berlin, as well as Stuttgart and Dortmund.

Authorities have noted that not only are far-right groups a regular feature at the demonstrations, but anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists as well. Instead of reducing the prevalence of anti-vaccine sentiment, the pandemic appears to be spreading false claims that vaccines actually spread diseases or are used as a tool of government control.

Other major far-right and false claims made by the protestors include the idea that lockdown measures are being used to slowly install a dictatorship, that 5G digital networks are causing the spread of the virus, or that billionaires like Bill Gates are using the pandemic as a form of control over the public. (Source: DW)

(U) **5G COVID-19 Conspiracies Grip Georgia:** On social media, thousands of Georgians (country, not state) have been discussing conspiracy theories about the alleged link between 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19.

The theories that the mobile technology may pose a threat to health have been circulating for years. Last year, [The New York Times reported](#) that Russian disinformation campaigns were exploiting 5G health fears. For the most part, those discussions remained fringe, garnering little engagement. The increased anxiety and confusion brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has catapulted some of those conspiracies into the mainstream.

Much of the 5G coronavirus conspiracies in Georgia have been fueled by a large Georgian Facebook group called "STOP 5G GEORGIA!!!," which was created on April 7, 2020 and already has 13,436 members.

A CrowdTangle analysis showed that the Facebook group has expanded rapidly over the past few weeks. The total interactions with the group's posts between April 7–21 approached 126,000. The most interacted with pieces are statuses and photos shared to the group.



A CrowdTangle analysis of the Georgian 5G conspiracies Facebook group's expansion and interactions. (Source: [EtoBuziashvili/DFRLab](#) via CrowdTangle)

(Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) Twitter Disputes State Department Claims China Coordinated Coronavirus Disinformation**

**Accounts:** Twitter pushed back on an assertion from the US State Department Friday that it was "highly probable" that the Chinese government coordinated networks of Twitter accounts to disseminate disinformation related to the [coronavirus outbreak](#), saying their initial review of the accounts in question does not support the government's claims.

Lea Gabrielle, head of the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) -- which works to coordinate efforts to expose foreign disinformation and propaganda -- said the US "has uncovered a

new network of inauthentic Twitter accounts, which we assess were created with the intent to amplify Chinese propaganda and disinformation."

However, an initial review from Twitter of more than 5,000 accounts turned over to them by the State Department cast doubt on the claims. According to Twitter, they have instead found that numerous accounts belong to government entities, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists. The review was ongoing, the company said, noting that it planned to follow up with the GEC on its findings.

A State Department spokesperson told CNN that "the GEC provided Twitter with a small sample of the overall dataset that included nearly 250,000 accounts," adding that it was "was not surprising that there are authentic accounts in any sample."

"Our overall analysis is based on a confluence of factors that drive our assessment, which we stand by," they said.

A subset of posts to the group claimed that coronavirus would naturally spread more widely in places with access to 5G, as the technology supposedly weakens the immune system.

Group members actively shared news of arson attacks on cell towers in different countries and endorsed those responsible for setting the towers on fire.

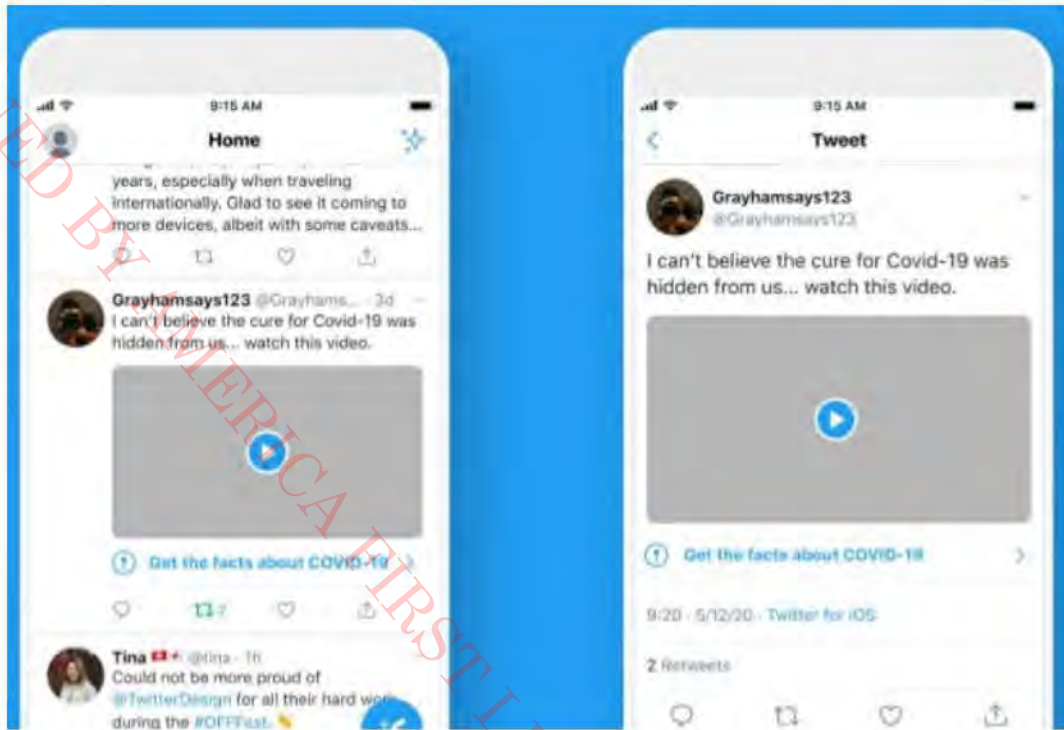
The group's admins also focused on mobilizing and expanding its membership. In posts to the group, admins called on society to expand it by adding more people and taking on-the-ground action, such as organizing massive protests against 5G in Georgia.

Georgian far-right group Alt-Info presented an alternative conspiracy theory involving 5G and coronavirus — blaming the United States for spreading 5G coronavirus disinformation worldwide to economically sabotage China. In a [YouTube video](#), Alt-Info claimed that there is a war on 5G dominance between the United States and China, and since the latter was faster in rolling out 5G technology, the United States spread conspiracies demonizing the technology in order to undermine China's success. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) Twitter Will Start Labeling Misleading or Disputed Coronavirus Tweets:** The new labels will apply in situations where the risk of harm is not severe enough to remove the tweet, but could still confuse people, the company said in a [blog post](#). It's the latest effort from tech companies to expand their arsenal of tools to fight an influx of misinformation about the coronavirus.

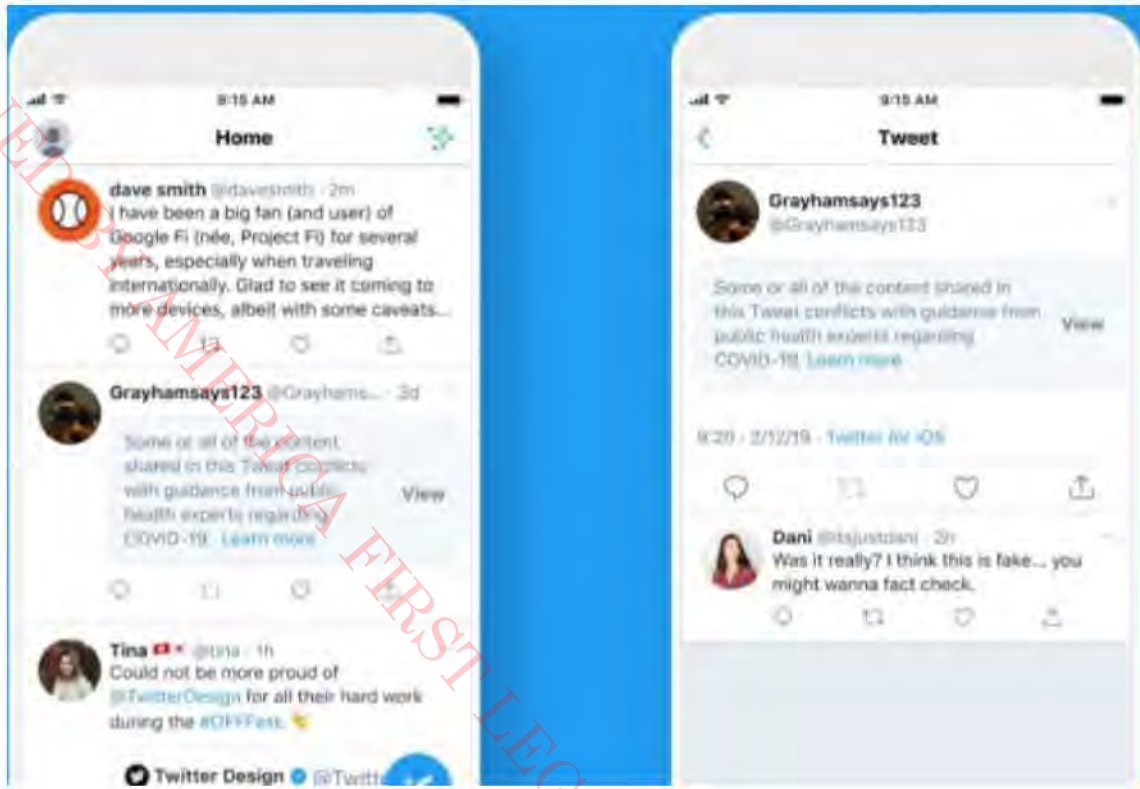
According to Twitter, "In March, we [broadened our policy](#) guidance to address content that goes directly against guidance on COVID-19 from authoritative sources of global and local public health information. Moving forward, we may use these labels and warning messages to provide additional explanations or clarifications in situations where the risks of harm associated with a Tweet are less severe but where people may still be confused or misled by the content. This will make it easier to find facts and make informed decisions about what people see on Twitter.

"During active conversations about disputed issues, it can be helpful to see additional context from trusted sources. [Earlier this year](#), we introduced a new label for Tweets containing synthetic and manipulated media. Similar labels will now appear on Tweets containing potentially harmful, misleading information related to COVID-19. This will also apply to Tweets sent before today.



“These labels will link to a [Twitter-curated page](#) or external trusted source containing additional information on the claims made within the Tweet.

“Depending on the propensity for harm and type of misleading information, warnings may also be applied to a Tweet. These warnings will inform people that the information in the Tweet conflicts with public health experts’ guidance before they view it.”



(Source: Twitter)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Today's U.S. Senate hearing with federal health experts has dominated traditional and social media. Many felt some of the testimony was contradictory to the current narrative being produced by state and federal government. People generally applauded or disagreed with this depending on political leanings
- There are growing concerns that people won't return to work both due to safety concerns and because they're making more though unemployment. This is leading some governors to voice concerns that a second round of economic woes could be around the corner with businesses being forced to close due to a lack of staff.
- FEMA mention on social media has remained steady throughout the day. There is limited discussion of FEMA's role in providing food for food banks and whether or not the agency will cover depopulation costs for farmers and ranchers.

#### (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- In addition to reporting on this morning's Senate hearing, broadcast media is increasingly interested in the newly proposed \$3 trillion HEROES Act and House Speaker's expected comments.
- FEMA mention in traditional media is broad and includes concerns about the safety of ventilators imported from Russia, PPE arrivals, congressional officials' advocating for the agency to support food banks and cover one state's pandemic expenses.

- Dr. Fauci's testimony and the Senate hearings dominated social media conversation throughout the course of the day. There was a high level of interest in what the country's top health advisor for COVID-19 would have to say today.
  - Many felt the testimony was contradictory to much of the messaging the public has been receiving from the state and federal government. Some applauded this feeling it was an honest portrayal of the facts, others felt it was pushing an agenda.
- There is increasing concern that even if businesses reopen people will not return to work, which will have a lasting impact on the economy. This concern is two-fold:
  - Many feel businesses are reopening too soon and express concerns for their health if they have to go into work. There is a feeling that not enough guidance is being provided to employers on how to keep employees safe.
  - Others are sometimes making more money collecting unemployment than they would make in their daily jobs. This is leading many states to have to remind people they will no longer be eligible for unemployment if they choose not to return to work.
- A growing number of people are becoming frustrated waiting for their stimulus payments or unemployment insurance. Both were intended to help people navigate difficult financial times but many are feeling they have been let down. This is exacerbating the debate over when businesses should reopen.
- The debate over the need to wear masks in public spaces is ongoing. More people are pleading with others to wear masks in public to protect those most at risk.
- Poll shows distrust of contact tracing. Americans are split on whether they would use a voluntary cellphone-based contact tracing system established by public health officials to help stem the spread of coronavirus but broadly opposed to using one developed by tech companies, the federal government or internet providers.

#### (U) 5/11 Reporting

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines May 2-8:** The coronavirus remained an important topic in the Russian media ecosystem last week, though its margin of prominence again declined as compared to the previous week. Most pandemic content relayed basic news updates; although, critical responses to U.S. government officials' claims that the virus originated in a laboratory in China received a fair amount of attention. Russian government and diplomatic accounts on Twitter, along with a much smaller amount of content on websites and YouTube, continued a strong messaging push marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day, which is known as Victory Day and celebrated on May 9 in Russia. Common themes in this campaign emphasized the importance of the Soviet role in World War II, as well as cooperation and friendship with Allied countries.

The Hamilton dashboard collected about 15,000 tweets from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 2 and May 8 (figures as of 2pm on May 8). Like the previous week, less than half of the top ten hashtags related to the pandemic; although, total uses of pandemic-related hashtags outnumbered those of non-pandemic hashtags. In total, a little over 3,300 tweets mentioned "virus," "covid," and/or "outbreak," accounting for about 22 percent of posts and marking a second consecutive week of more than ten percent declines in coronavirus output on Twitter, as compared to the previous week. The absence of explicitly virus-related content in the top overall tweets further reflected this decline. Top tweets about the pandemic primarily consisted of basic news updates, as well as posts about cute or interesting animals, such as:



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 5

Jaarchaana polar bear plays volleyball with employees of the St. Petersburg Zoo where it resides to entertain itself during quarantine for the covid-19 pandemic. <https://t.co/qjcpmp19>

222 671



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 5

A large flock of sheep invades a Turkish city A large flock of sheep strolled down a central street in a city in Turkey, amid the curfew imposed by local authorities in an attempt to stop the spread of covid-19. <https://t.co/3ni33nhvOu>

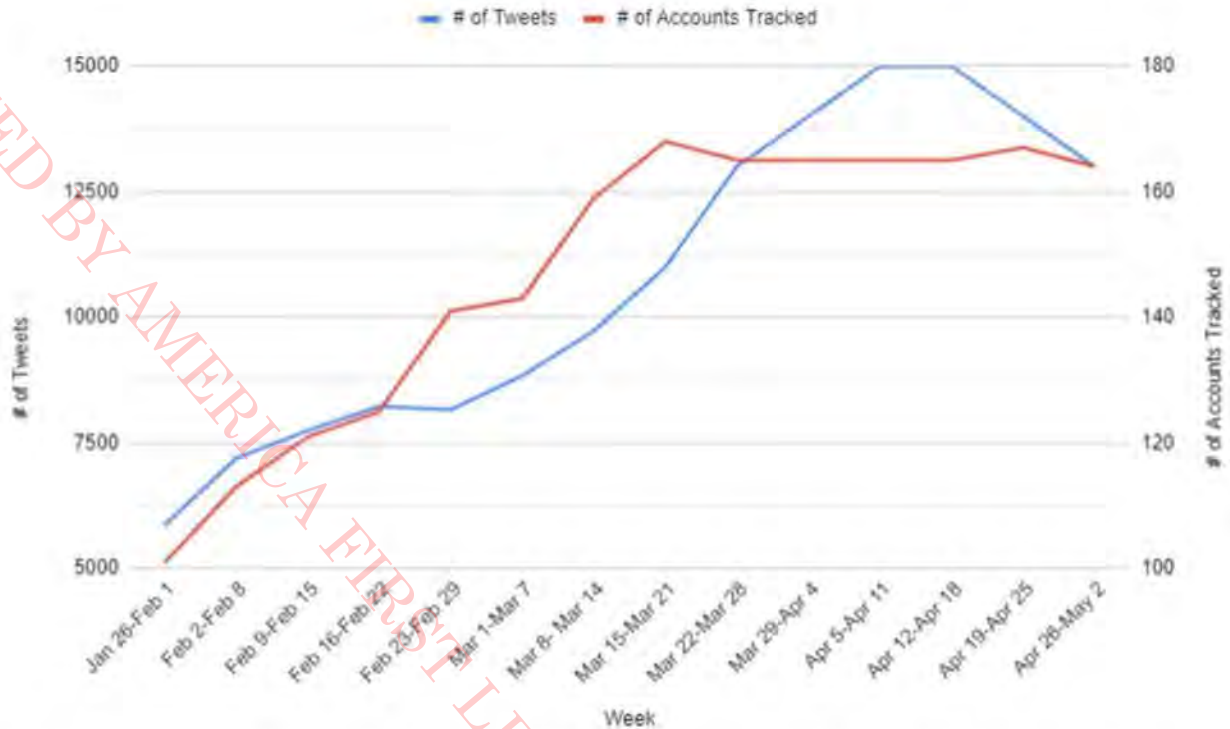
261 609

A little over 600 of the about 1,338 articles from Russian government-funded news websites collected on the dashboard last week mentioned “virus” in the first 200 words. As usual, this output mainly featured basic news updates. By a substantial margin, the [top article](#) by Facebook shares covered a development in research on the coronavirus. Articles of interest among the top overall articles by Facebook shares addressed several pandemic-related topics, including criticism of the UK’s coronavirus response and doubts about U.S. officials’ claims that the virus originated in a laboratory in China. An op-ed denouncing social media platform [bans](#) on conspiracy theorist David Icke was also noteworthy.

About two-thirds of the videos collected from Russian state-owned media on YouTube last week covered some facet of the pandemic. Notable among the coronavirus videos were a couple of videos on anti-lockdown protests, continuing criticism of the U.K. government’s coronavirus response, and efforts to prevent Chinese investors from buying global businesses during the global economic downturn. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

**(U) Chinese-State Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines May 2-8:** As in previous weeks, coronavirus continued to dominate messaging from China’s state media and diplomatic outlets. State media highlighted [news that](#) two American mercenaries—part of a small force that planned to capture Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and extradite him to the United States—had been captured in Venezuela. Additionally, state media attacked the U.S. government’s positions on the coronavirus pandemic, seeking to cast doubt on the virus’s origins in China and demonstrating China’s support for multilateral efforts to combat its spread. Other messaging attempted to signal to foreign businesses and decisionmakers another step on the China’s return to normalcy following the coronavirus pandemic, while highlighting the negative effects the virus is having inside the United States.

As in previous weeks, almost all top hashtags were linked with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The Hamilton dashboard collected about 13,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 2 and May 8 (figures as of 4pm on May 8). This continues a downward trend in overall Chinese activity on Twitter since mid-April. However, overall activity—both in number of tweets and number of accounts active—remains much higher than the beginning of the year, prior to the global spread of coronavirus (see chart below).



At its peak in early April, Chinese accounts tracked on Hamilton were tweeting nearly three times as much on a weekly basis as in late January. Even now, the overall number of weekly tweets remains at more than twice its earlier level (though, again, it is important to note that this is due in part to an increase in the total number of accounts monitored on the dashboard).

Top tweets criticized U.S. involvement in Venezuela and attacked the U.S. government’s position on the coronavirus pandemic, while also seeking to demonstrate China’s support for multilateral efforts to combat the virus’ spread.

- 
**Hua Chunying** 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6  
 The #US is pressuring other countries in smear campaign against China. The choice is NOT between the US and China, but between LIES & FACTS, bullying & cooperation, unilateralism & multilateralism.  
 272 1,304
- 
**Hua Chunying** 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6  
 #WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said French #COVID19 case in December without link to China "gives us a whole new picture on everything" and urged countries to retest cases of atypical pneumonia in Nov-Dec 2019. <https://t.co/GfPsZjPft2>  
 117 452
- 
**CGTN America** @cgtnamerica • May 5  
 A mayor in the U.S. claims he had #coronavirus, as far back as November of 2019. Take a look at what he said. <https://t.co/ujAcg3QdayW>  
 11 20
- 
**Hua Chunying** 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6  
 China commends #EU for initiating Int'l Pledging Conference. China is joining ACT Accelerator&working with @CEPIvaccines & @gavi for global #COVID19 response. China backs #G20 debt moratorium&suspends debt repayments for 77 developing countries from May 1 to the end of this year.  
 97 534

The most-shared story of the week focused on China’s race to develop a coronavirus vaccine, presenting news that a vaccine had been successfully tested on animals. Many of the other top stories shared on Facebook leaned hard into theories that the coronavirus pandemic did not originate inside of China. Three of the top ten most-shared stories on Facebook either cast doubt on the notion the virus



originated inside of China or that it had come from a lab in Wuhan. Other stories leaned hard into traditional themes of China's negative messaging, analyzing "attacks" on China from the Trump administration and presenting "experts" warning the United States against a more aggressive stance towards China. Another article decried U.S. interference in Hong Kong through the National Democratic Institute, while yet another highlighted racism towards the Chinese diaspora in Australia. Interestingly, a widely shared story that featured the Chinese ambassador to the United States casting doubt on the virus's origins inside China no longer appears to be available on CGTN's website.

**(U) Russian Media Company Recruiting U.S. Journalists Ahead of 2020 Election:** RT America, a newsgathering unit of Moscow-based media company RT, is looking to beef up its US staffing ahead of the 2020 election, a flurry of recent job postings shows. Formerly called Russia Today, it's the same stateside operation that was accused by intelligence agencies of spreading misinformation in the US prior to the 2016 election.

In September 2017, RT was forced by the Justice Department to register as a [foreign agent of the Russian government](#). At the time, RT representatives disputed the Justice Department's findings but said they agreed to register to avoid charges.

Currently, the company is posting on journalism job boards under the name RT — without disclosing its Russian roots or its alleged ties to Vladimir Putin's government.

One source who responded to an ad was called from a number in Moscow by a person identified as Igor Ogorodnev, the Web editor-in-chief in the US.

Ogorodnev told our source that he was interested in stories that can investigate the "rumor" that COVID-19 deaths are being exaggerated by US media outlets. (Source: New York Post)

**(U) Conspiracy Theories Run Rampant When People Feel Helpless. Like Now:** Psychologists have identified a number of [psychological traits](#) that are related to conspiracy beliefs, including the predisposition to see systematic patterns where there is only random noise or to interpret coincidence as intentional cause. But when it comes to a global pandemic — and the deaths, social isolation and collapsing economy that it has brought about — three other factors are key: uncertainty, anxiety and powerlessness.

Conspiracy theories, more than benign beliefs in wacky ideas about the Illuminati or aliens, actually do serve valuable psychological functions. They don't merely entertain us; they could be used to comfort us. They are tools for imposing structure on an unpredictable and unforgiving world, thereby relieving stress and reducing anxiety.

The less people feel in control of their world, however meek or grand, the more likely they are to seek out some method of restoring control — to fight their sense of powerlessness. The covid-19 pandemic is the ultimate power grab: No one knows when the threat will subside, what the economic impact will be or when a vaccine will be available. When events are, in actuality, out of our control, the psychological burden can be alleviated by turning to alternative explanations for events. In this case, we might choose to believe that covid-19 is a Chinese bioweapon, created in a lab and intentionally spread to cause harm. Alternative explanations such as this not only explain why things are as they are, but also incorporate the fact that one has no control over the situation.

Conspiracy theories nicely meet these criteria. Admittedly, they are ill-defined, illogical and, usually, just plain bizarre. But conspiracy theories aren't attractive to people because of these qualities, but rather for the subconscious functions they serve. A conspiracy theory can restore control — you know what happened and why, and you have the psychological relief to know that it was out of your control!

The story is similar when it comes to anxiety and uncertainty. The pandemic has increased people's worries about their physical, mental and economic health in both the short term and distant future. Conspiracy theories cannot remedy these circumstances. However, they can explain why these horrible circumstances have manifested and provide peace of mind that they are of no fault of one's own. Choosing to believe that the coronavirus is a hoax or that the threat has been strategically exaggerated for political purposes — two popular variants of covid-19 conspiracy theory — can reduce anxiety by playing down the severity of the circumstances. A purely psychological effect, to be sure — but, then again, we primarily live in our own heads. (Source: The Washington Post)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report

- The reopening of the economy is today's main topic of online conversation as many states are beginning to permit low-risk businesses to open while others set reopening dates with certain countermeasures in place.
- Mother's Day travel also formed a large part of the conversation as flight numbers spiked to their highest since March while many continue to worry of a possible second wave of COVID-19 infections due to loosened restrictions.
- Conversation about FEMA has increased since the weekend due to more coverage about the agency, mainly being driven by news of how FEMA legal aid has not been offered in the COVID-19 response despite furloughs, evictions and other problems.
- Traditional media coverage today included discussion of disaster legal aid for the public, the virus' impact on children, new White House staff safety guidance, and debates on whether different states are ready to reopen amid reported increases in positive cases. A congressional bill proposal intended to expand contact tracing and testing efforts through the use national service groups is recently gaining attention.
- New FEMA media coverage also features the Administrator's meeting with D.C.'s mayor and the expected hand-off of long-term supply acquisition tasks to Defense Logistics Agency.

#### (U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- There continues to be a large amount of discussion about whether a [vaccine will be needed](#) following comments made by the Administration and CDC Director over the weekend.
- There remains a high volume of discussion about White House staff, [health officials](#), and [military leaders](#) testing positive or having to isolate due to exposure.
- This discussion continues to fuel debate about workplace safety, testing, and mask use.
  - An increasing number of people are wondering how they will handle childcare if the reopening of the economy does not correspond with the opening of schools — however, most feel it is also too early for children to return to school.
  - Many are discussing large crowds and people ignoring social distancing guidelines in many areas as families celebrated Mother's Day and went out over the weekend. As [videos of crowds are shared](#) there is debate over mask use, social distancing, and if it is too soon to reopen.

(U) **What Experts Say Works for Combating Coronavirus Misinformation:** When it comes to combating misinformation, research shows that it's more effective for authoritative figures to present accurate facts early and routinely alongside misinformation, rather than to try to negate every piece of misinformation after-the-fact by labeling it false or by calling it out as false.

1. **Proactive messaging:** According to [research](#) from Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and co-founder of FactCheck.org, gaps in the public's background knowledge about common sense flu cures, like whether vitamin C prevents viruses, show "ongoing need for effective communication of needed information long before a crisis."
2. **Pre-bunking:** Australian psychologist and professor Stephan Lewandowsky, who chairs the Cognitive Psychology department at the University of Bristol, argues that if people are made aware of the flawed reasoning found in conspiracy theories, they may become less vulnerable to such theories.
3. **Label misinformation at the source level:** In order to avoid chasing thousands, if not millions of pieces of misinformation during an "infodemic," Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz, co-CEOs of [NewsGuard](#), argue it's better to rate the sources of misinformation that are repeat offenders, like certain websites or authors, rather than pieces of content themselves.
4. **Go where fake news spreads:** According to Hall Jamieson, it's especially important that health care officials spread context in venues where people generally receive misinformation.
5. **The 10% rule:** Some experts, including Hall Jamieson, [say](#) it's better to wait until a piece of misinformation reaches a 10% penetration level amongst the population before it's debunked, otherwise, you risk unintentionally spreading the rumor further before it may ever reach a point where it's truly problematic.
6. **Prioritizing misinformation:** Hall Jamieson says that in addition to understanding what has the threshold to warrant debunking, health officials, policymakers, news organizations and others need to evaluate how problematic certain forms of misinformation are when determining how much they should invest in providing context. (Source: Axios)

#### (U) 5/7 Reporting

(U) **More Than 70 Cell Phone Towers in the UK Have Been Set on Fire Due to 5G-Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory:** A conspiracy theory claiming that 5G internet has somehow caused the spread of the coronavirus has led to more than 70 cell phone towers in the United Kingdom to become targets of arson attacks, according to a report [from Business Insider](#).

It was reported last month that the U.K. reported about 50 fires targeting towers, the majority of which was not 5G-enabled, and other equipment, but Mobile UK, an organization representing Britain's four mobile operators, told Business Insider Wednesday that the number has grown to 77.

The group, however, noted the rate of attacks was decreasing.

"Daily attacks are very low now but have not stopped entirely," a Mobile UK spokesperson told Business Insider.

But the equipment is not the only target. Several instances of telecom engineers being attacked or harassed have been reported.

"We have 40 incidents where people have attacked, either physically or verbally, our staff. We've had engineers being driven at by people and swerve away at the last minute, and we've even had one Openreach engineer stabbed and put in hospital," Philip Jansen, CEO of British telecom company BT, said in April in a [YouTube video](#).

Such conspiracy theories have grown in popularity recently as the number of coronavirus cases and deaths rise. The baseless claims have circulated online and [on social media](#), prompting Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to try to curb the spread of videos and content falsely tying the spread of the virus to 5G. (Source: The Hill; Business Insider)

(U) **"Plandemic" COVID-19 Disinformation Documentary Goes Viral:** The "Plandemic" documentary appears to have first appeared on more fringe conspiracy corners of the internet, before gaining traction recently on more mainstream platforms. YouTube continues to remove the content, but copies of the video keep resurfacing on different channels. In addition, additional dis/misinformation outlets now amplify the central claims of the video, and users amplify these claims organically.

The video makes salacious, unsubstantiated claims that question the official origin story of the virus and claim that the pandemic is part of an alleged government ploy to erode civil liberties. The documentary features prominent self-described "medical professionals" popular in anti-vaccination circles whose work has been repeatedly discredited by public health experts. (Source: YouTube)

(U) **Fake Labor Department COVID-19-Related Emails Attempt to Spread Malware:** In an apparent attempt to spread TrickBot malware, cybercriminals are sending fake emails designed to look like notifications from the Labor Department concerning changes to the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#), according to [IBM X-Force](#).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's growing interest in the Act, which can provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for employees who are ill or need to care for someone with a serious medical condition. Benefits from the program increased in March when President Donald Trump signed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, according to [U.S. News and World Report](#).

"Spam purporting to come from official and government entities has been increasing considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic, with cybercriminals developing spam to match trending news, developments, merchandise and initiatives surrounding the outbreak as a means to deliver unsolicited emails that attract recipients to open and launch attachments," Ashkan Vila, a security analyst with IBM X-Force, notes in the report. (Source: IBM, Data Breach Today)

(U) **New Survey Shows Americans Are Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media:** People often blame social media for [propagating misinformation](#), but these channels also offer an opportunity to mitigate the problem. [Our work](#), and the [work of others](#), demonstrates that [observational correction](#) — correction that occurs on social media where people can observe other people being corrected — reduces misperceptions.

Observational correction works because of the nature of social media. Correcting a friend, family member or stranger in person, on email, or in some other relatively private communication may [set that](#)

person straight about the facts on that topic. But doing the same on social media means that dozens of people — and perhaps thousands — can witness the correction.

In addition to the sheer scale that social media networks offer, other structural elements may improve correction efficacy. First, the correction occurs in proximity (temporally and spatially) to the original misinformation, increasing the likelihood that people hadn't had a chance to absorb the misinformation at all. Second, witnessing someone else being corrected may be less threatening than being corrected directly, but with all the same benefits.

Expert correction is particularly effective. When highly trusted groups like the CDC directly respond to users sharing misinformation on social media, people are likely to believe the correction.

Correction can also come from social media platforms themselves. For example, Facebook uses its "related articles" function to display debunking information from third-party fact-checkers. Our work shows that exposure to this type of information reduces public misperceptions.

In the previous week, 34 percent of people reported seeing someone else being told they shared misinformation regarding covid-19 on social media, and 23 percent reported having told someone they shared misinformation on the topic. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Defend Beijing on COVID-19:** Since April 20, pro-Beijing news stories related to COVID-19 have been published by the state-controlled news agency RIA Novosti, carrying the following headlines:

"Chinese media dispel myths about COVID-19"; "Biologist doubts bats caused pandemic"; "To survive, America must become China"; "China says there are no wild animal markets in the country"; "China appreciates Russia's approach to the origin of coronavirus" and "[Russia's] Foreign Ministry condemns attempts to blame pandemic on China and WHO".

In the same period, RT published pro-Beijing messages on its English online edition under the following headlines:

"'What's the US hiding?' Beijing slams Washington's Covid-19 response & 'desperate' attempts to pin blame on China"; "China is victim, not mastermind of Covid-19 disinformation – Foreign Ministry"; "Meddling will 'not succeed': Beijing rebukes Pompeo's charge of 'exploiting' Covid-19 crisis to boost influence in South China Sea" and "Beijing rejects Australia's 'groundless questions' on its handling of coronavirus".

The pro-Kremlin narrative was clear: Moscow and Beijing are in the same boat as victims of allegedly unjust accusations from the West. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **How the Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Network Capitalizes on the COVID-19 Outbreak:** A special strand of disinformation on the COVID-19 outbreak is the claim that there is no outbreak. It is a hoax; exaggerated by incompetent politicians, amplified by corrupt media and masterminded by shadowy rulers.

The first case in the Disinformation Database with this claim was detected January 29, when Russian news agency RIAFAN told the reports on the outbreak were merely a stunt by "Big Pharma" to up their profits.

This claim, “The COVID-19 Hoax”, has since been repeated several times: [here in Russian](#), [here in German](#), [in Russian again here](#), [in English here...](#)

The general idea is that the COVID-19 is exaggerated and is used as a pretext for different kinds of sinister plans, spun by more or less shadowy rulers. Pro-Kremlin sites describe how [mortality figures are exaggerated](#), how the “secret elites” are [brainwashing the public](#) for sinister reasons. The COVID-19 is a [grand scheme](#):

*This has been on the drawing board for years. The final decision to go ahead NOW, was taken in January 2020 at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos – behind very much closed doors, of course. The Gates, GAVI (an association of vaccination-promoting pharmaceuticals), Rockefellers, Rothschilds et al, they are all behind this decision*

This quote appeared [mid-March in Russia-based South Front](#), brought to the audience from the Canadian conspiracy site Global Research. All the elements of the trope is there: the COVID-19 is not a pandemic: “*there is not the slightest trace of a pandemic*”; it’s not worse than any old seasonal flu; “*The common flu in Europe in the 2019 / 2020 season, has apparently so far killed about 16,000*”, and fiendish forces scheming to control us all: “*isn’t that what the “Black Men” behind this intended pandemic want – chaos, panic, hopelessness, leading to human vulnerability – a people becoming easy prey for manipulation?*”

#### *The Plandemic*

Mid-March seems also to be the big breakthrough for the [Bill Gates Conspiracy](#). He has, as we see from the quote above, the role in this conspiracy theory as one of those who planned the pandemic.

Around this time, the hashtag “[Plandemic](#)” appears on Twitter, suggesting that the COVID-19 outbreak is merely a scheme by fiendish forces to curb personal freedoms. The hashtag is often connected to other conspiracy theory tropes and fits seamlessly into a current of discontent with the quarantine restrictions. This allows the pro-Kremlin disinformation network to expand into new audiences.

This trope boils down to one of the [core narratives](#) used by the pro-Kremlin disinformation network: The Elites vs. The People. The outlets define themselves as a “voice of the people”, which challenges elites controlling corporations, media and politicians. The narrative can be – and has been – adopted to literally any challenging situation. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

**(U) A Majority of Vaccine Skeptics Plan to Refuse a COVID-19 Vaccine, a Study Suggests, and That Could Be a Big Problem:** According to [some estimates](#), 50% to 70% of Americans would need to develop immunity to COVID-19 – either naturally, or via a vaccine – in order to thwart the spread of the virus. If these estimates are correct, that could mean that nearly twice as many Americans would need to elect to receive a COVID-19 vaccine than those who currently opt to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza. [Just 37%](#) of American adults did so in 2017-2018, even in the midst of a [historically severe](#) flu season.

Making matters more complicated is the possibility that people who hold skeptical views about vaccine safety – sometimes referred to as “anti-vaxxers” – will not opt to receive the coronavirus vaccine. According to some estimates, about [one-fifth](#) to [two-fifths](#) of Americans express reservations about

vaccine safety. If most of these individuals forego receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, they could potentially jeopardize the recovery process.

We asked respondents whether they would be willing to get vaccinated against COVID-19 once a vaccine becomes available. Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents said that they would not.

Prominent anti-vaxx outlets continue to promote COVID-19 related disinformation (Source: Researchers from Universities of Minnesota and Oklahoma)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening:**

- An increasing number of states are beginning to enter phase one of their reopening plans. For most that means many restaurants and retail stores will begin to reopen with limitations. Cities are thinking through ways to further help restaurants stay safe while still increasing their business with some considering closing streets to allow increased outdoor seating space.
- There continues to be a high level of skepticism directed at the government and media. People question if death tolls are accurate with people split between feeling numbers are over or under reported. No matter which side people fall on, they often feel numbers are being manipulated to support a given agenda.
- Traditional media coverage has broadly focused on the virus' negative impact on unemployment, PPE distribution updates and fears of federal interference, and potential medical treatments for the virus. Hurricane preparedness slowly continues gaining traction, specifically related to how FEMA's staffing vacancies and state governments' budget deficits may limit their respective response capabilities.

(U//FOUO) *Sentiment Analysis*

- Public speculation about the validity of claims about COVID-19 is growing and trust in the federal government is declining as people increasingly feel information is being kept from them. This has led to a growing number of conspiracy theories being shared across social media.
  - Individuals are increasingly voicing frustration and mistrust of public health data and projections, claiming that it has often been wrong and is changing frequently.
  - This is causing some frontline workers to grow increasingly frustrated and fatigued feeling the right message is not being received by the general public.
- There is a high volume of discussion regarding reports that the Administration has shelved a CDC document meant to provide guidance on when and how to reopen public spaces.
  - Public reaction is largely political with people questioning or supporting the Administration's decisions.
- There is a growing concern about the President's exposure to COVID-19 following news reports that one of his personal valets has tested positive.
  - One Maine senator says he is interested in getting tested as U.S. Senate has reconvened on Capitol Hill.

(U) **False Claims on Patents Fuel Novel COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Online:** Posts on social media claim there is a US patent on the novel coronavirus and a European one for a vaccine, citing specific patent numbers. This is false; the US number relates to an application about a different coronavirus, and the European number is for a patent aimed at a disease that afflicts poultry.

"Something just since the beginning hasn't seemed right with this coronavirus," a California chiropractor, says in a video posted on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

"There is a patent on it -- it's patent US2006257852 -- a US patent on the coronavirus," he says. "It's called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, and that was applied for in 2006."

And "there's a European patent on a coronavirus vaccine -- European patent EP3172319B1 that was applied for in 2014, and what do you know, it was just granted in November of 2019. What perfect timing," he says.

Having said at the start of the video that school closures due to the novel coronavirus had affected his family, he claims that a "big pharmaceutical play" could be behind the emergency. (Source: AFP FactCheck)

**(U) Russian-State Baked Media COVID-19 Disinformation Declining, Increased Focus on Ukraine:** Out of 55 disinformation messages we tracked this week, 31 still focused on the coronavirus. In addition to the usual conspiracies about the coronavirus being used to achieve [world dominance](#) or being a [Western operation](#), we also found one that uses the "lost sovereignty card": American lobbyists will force Poland to [buy more weapons](#) to help the struggling US economy. In other words, using the coronavirus for disinformation purposes to smear opponents continues.

As we wrote last week, the pro-Kremlin media is slowly [turning away from the virus](#) and it seems the left-over attention has turned back towards Ukraine. Looking back to December last year, we found weeks where the number of cases about Ukraine fell as low as 4. However, this week we got 16 cases with some focusing on the age-old topics like Euromaidan, MH17 crash and the war in eastern Ukraine. Probably inspired by the virus, there are also cases claiming secret US laboratories in Ukraine might have [provoked cholera](#) or plans to [close biolabs in Ukraine](#) made the US start supporting Euromaidan. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

#### **(U) 5/6 Reporting**

**(U) Ongoing Pro-China Information Operation Uses Social Media Bot Network To Amplify COVID-19 Disinformation:** An ongoing information operation is using a network of bots made up of newly created and stolen accounts to target a businessman, exiled from China, who has spoken critically of China's response to COVID-19.

Yet identifying the network has revealed a much larger operation amplifying content across multiple languages, platforms, countries, and topics, with links to information operations against protests in Hong Kong, as well as involving cryptocurrency, coronavirus disinformation, and the most significant of all, the long-standing targeting of Guo Wengui, an exiled Chinese businessman residing in the United States.

Over a period of nine days, a Bellingcat investigator captured data from Twitter, both in real-time and past, and conducted an ongoing analysis of the dataset as it grew. This report will show the initial findings from the dataset.

The findings indicate that there is a well-structured information campaign displaying a number of criteria similar to those of past campaigns identified as "significant state-backed information

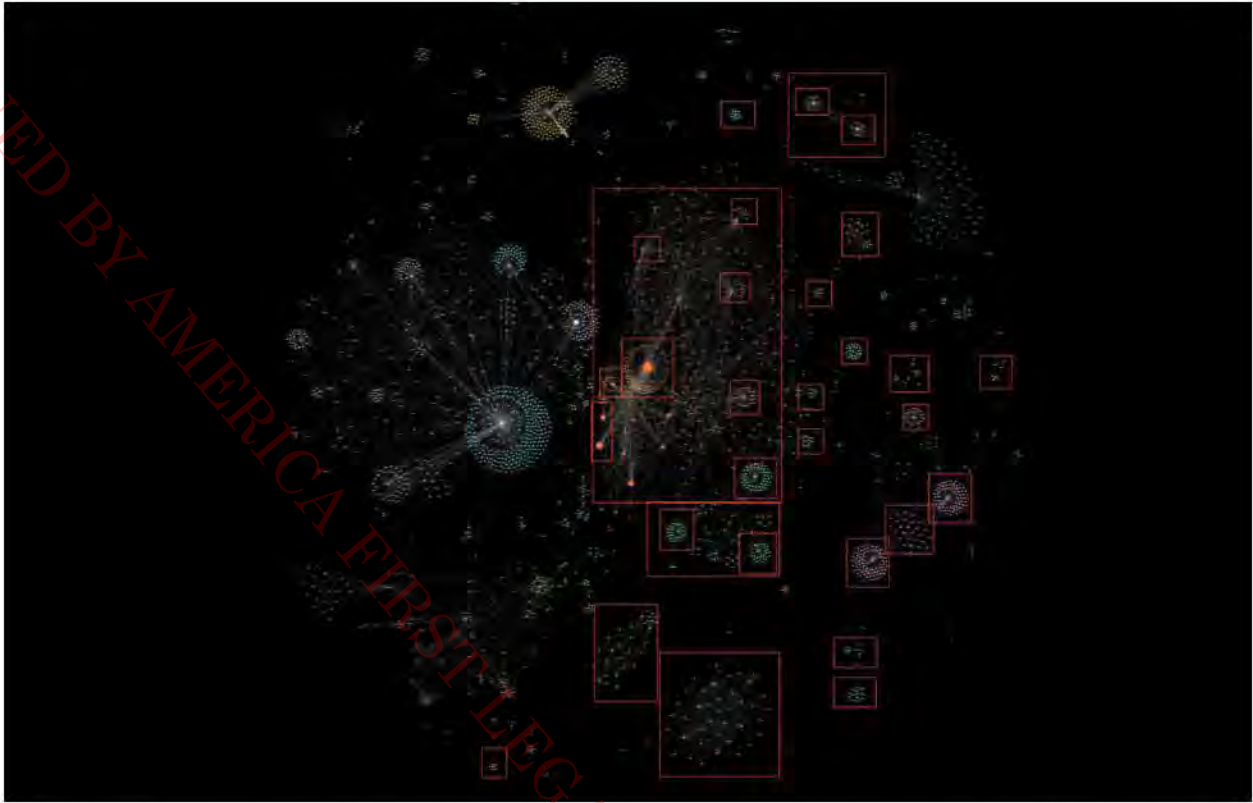


operations" originating from within the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a disclosure report by Twitter in August 2019.

This report does not focus on the veracity of the targets of the information operation, nor does it seek to discredit or support the claims presented herein. The analysis is on the structure and operations of the network alone.



Structure of the Network



This network operates in a structured manner to ensure brand new accounts with zero followers and zero accounts following are able to post one tweet and have that tweet magnified with, on average, between 200 and 1000 likes and retweets.

This can be seen in the image above. The red boxes included are clusters that operate within this network to post and amplify the campaign's agenda.

This is a sustainable and effective model for the network — when it suffers account closures and mass deletions, it can simply create new accounts to re-support that model.

To carry out that task, the network consists of two limbs: posters and amplifiers. Each has their function in the chain of operations. This can be seen in the image below, which shows central accounts that would have posted content, and the surrounding accounts that retweeted it.

#### *Creation of New Accounts To Fuel The Network*

The network supports its operations by creating new accounts every day. Over the time the dataset was collected, many new accounts were created to join the network.

Over the space of four days, the following numbers joined the network:

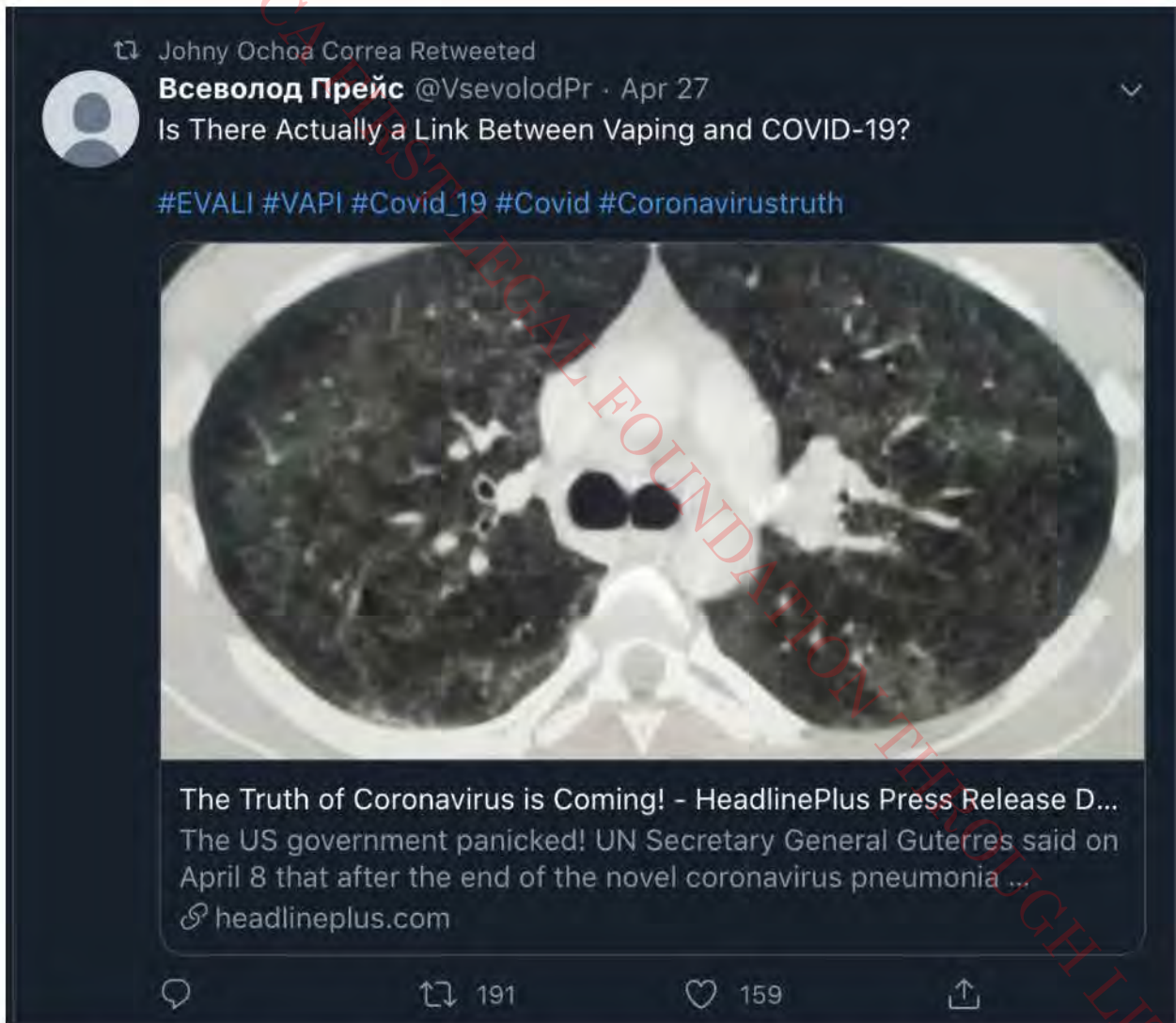
- April 27, 2020: 52 accounts
- April 28, 2020: 97 accounts
- April 29, 2020: 109 accounts

- April 30, 2020: 151 accounts

COVID-19 Content

That same cluster seen above has also amplified specific posts on COVID-19, targeting the U.S. These accounts posting the content follow the same structure of name, account creation, and targeted campaign areas.

The posts seen include subject matter of health posts on links between vaping and COVID-19 and allegations of biosecurity incidents in the U.S. with the tags #coronavirus and #TruthAboutCovid. Examples can be seen below, these are screenshots from two of the same accounts that were seen amplifying pro-Beijing content on cryptocurrency, Elon Musk, and Hong Kong (Johny Ochoa Correa, Наталья).



Again, the retweets of the above post follow the same signs present among amplifiers in the network.

ОБТАЙНЕНА АМЕРИКАНСКИ ФЕДЕРАЛНИ ФУНДАЦИИ ЧЕРОЗ СУДЕБНА ЛИТИГАЦИЯ

@VsevolodPr

### Is There Actually a Link Between Vaping and COVID-19?

#EVALI #VAPI #Covid\_19 #Covid #Coronavirustruth

Trends for

**Retweeted by**

-  **Иван**  
@npPr9BvvE2Pm9p3 [Follow](#)
-  **Али**  
@VLoedJBntIPRSdn [Follow](#)
-  **andris berzins**  
@andrisberzins12 [Follow](#)
-  **Азирет**  
@0OePwcVXYVKMrMX  
Fghgdddgrxexevycsaartycrzezrgx [Follow](#)
-  **Марина Куликова**  
@SBixlBm7TzYFzkG [Follow](#)
-  **Татьяна**  
@yTUkxary4fNtdEg  
бла бла бла [Follow](#)
-  **Олег**  
@QW7dhfrvQ68Qjtk  
Особо не чего [Follow](#)
-  **Алла Черняк**  
@OZBeKhLmqWtPS8K  
Я просто человек! [Follow](#)

The Truth of C  
The US govern  
that after the  
headlineplu

3:13 AM · Apr 2

191 Retweets

Дмитрий Retweeted



**Всеволод Прейс** @VsevolodPr · Apr 30

The virus "variola" was found in NIH Bethesda campus!  
We believe that there are more biosecurity incidents in the United States that have not been revealed!

#coronavirus #Covid\_19 #COVID\_19 #TruthAboutCovid



159

291

IMG↓

and onsite biosafety personnel have not identified any infectious exposure risk to lab workers or the public.

Late on July 7, the vials were transported safely and securely with the assistance of federal and local law enforcement agencies to CDC's high-containment

4 lab confirm  
variola sampl  
(i.e., can grow

By internatio  
(WHO)-desig  
State Resea  
Novosibirsk,  
facilities and  
and security.



**Retweeted by**

- Наталья** @VQQcKrJLcAfsKWj  
жизни рада [Follow](#)
- Саида** @ihcRAep4L7hekqo  
Читать люблю [Follow](#)
- Johny Ochoa Correa** @JohnyOC2 [Follow](#)
- Олег** @QW7dhfrvQ68QjTK  
Особо не чего [Follow](#)
- Евгения** @Jc3NtmVsgTFwoPT [Follow](#)
- giang** @giang93042568  
Từng làm giám đốc tại gia [Follow](#)
- He Скажу)** @gtog6IKFbazLvvQ  
нет [Follow](#)
- Колян** @riFN8nrBbBH5Gxw [Follow](#)

9:24 PM - Apr 30, 2020 · Twitter Web App · IMG-3

159 Retweets 291 Likes

Summary of Findings

This analysis shows that there is an active network of accounts targeting subjects in a coordinated approach to skew the narrative around varying topics, and to push set agendas. Many of these agendas are supportive of the Chinese government and critical of either popular figures or protestors who are against it.

The network operates through consistent account creation to add more numbers and seeming veracity to its network, using a system of poster and amplifier accounts to “stage” trending topics, and to provide the illusion of viral tweets.

This network exists on both Twitter and Facebook.

Content of the accounts correlates with findings made in the past, both by Twitter and other entities, of state-linked information operations that are being run out of People’s Republic of China. (Source: Bellingcat)

**(U) Facebook Takes Down White Supremacist and QAnon Networks:** Facebook also took down two U.S. networks linked to the Q-Anon fringe conspiracy theory and white-supremacist websites VDare and Unz Review. QAnon promotes a conspiracy theory about a deep state that seeks to overthrow Trump and has pushed conspiracies that Bill Gates and 5G networks caused the coronavirus outbreak. VDare and Unz promote content with anti-Semitic and anti-Asian themes.

Facebook discovered the networks while investigating suspected inauthentic coordinated behavior ahead of the 2020 elections. The takedowns show that domestic actors are learning from foreign influence campaigns, says Nathaniel Gleicher, head of security policy at Facebook.

Facebook also took down hundreds of fake Iranian accounts targeting U.S. voters. Many of the accounts had low numbers of followers but used the same kinds of content as other Iranian networks Facebook has taken down in the past, [the company said](#). Some of the pages, which were run by Iran’s state broadcaster, were active as far back as the 2012 Republican primaries, researchers at the firm Graphika found. (Source: Facebook, Graphika)

**(U) Facebook Claims Recently Removed Pro-Russian Disinformation Outlets Were Involved in Coordinated Unauthentic Behavior:** On April 30, as part of a larger takedown, Facebook removed 140 assets connected to Russian propaganda outlets *News Front* and *South Front*.

According to Facebook: “The individuals behind this activity relied on a combination of authentic, duplicate and fake accounts — many of which had been previously detected and disabled by our automated systems. They used fake accounts to post their content and manage Groups and Pages posing as independent news entities in the regions they targeted. This network posted about geopolitical and local news including topics such as the military conflict in Ukraine, the Syrian civil war, the annexation of Crimea, NATO, US elections, and more recently the coronavirus pandemic. Our investigation linked this activity to individuals in Russia and Donbass, and two media organizations in Crimea — NewsFront and SouthFront.” (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**Hackers Using Fake Web Domains that Mimic Coronavirus Information Pages From Top Retailers to Try to Steal Consumers' Personal and Financial Information:** The retailers include Walmart and Costco, [threat intelligence researchers at Mimecast found](#). (Source: Mimecast)

(U) **White Supremacist Violent Extremists Known As “Accelerationists” Are Advancing Conspiracy Theories and Propaganda Against Jews and Migrants Online to Promote Calls for Social Upheaval Amidst COVID-19:** Accelerationism is the most violent ideology in the global white supremacist movement. Accelerationists believe that a race war is inevitable and that social upheaval is necessary in order to begin rebuilding society based on white power. Accelerationist propaganda will be energized by the pandemic, as accelerationists believe that the social upheaval they endorse has been made possible by the images of death leading the mainstream news. (Source: Foreign Policy Research Institute)

(U) **The World’s Attention Has Shifted from Extremism to the Health and Economic Impacts of COVID-19, However, the Threat of Violent Extremism Has Been Exacerbated During the Crisis:** The pandemic creates six new obstacles: 1. Young people are spending more time online, increasing the chance of radicalization 2. Rumors surrounding COVID-19 targeting minority communities call for violent action 3. Community policing now focuses on enforcing lockdowns 4. Government responses in the form of reducing community gatherings and increased unemployment may exacerbate drivers for radicalization 5. Confidence in local authorities is flagging 6. Budgets for preventing violent extremism are being diverted to COVID-19. (Source: Brookings Institution)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening:**

- The social media conversation today included an increase in concern about meat processing plants, potential surges of cases linked to loosened social distancing guidelines, and rural outbreaks of COVID-19. Many continue to discuss recurring topics such as PPE supplies, widespread testing, and the debate over when and how to reopen.
- Conversation about FEMA has increased significantly due to renewed coverage from several national outlets exploring FEMA’s PPE supply chain management and alleged influence from the White House on that process.
- While traditional news coverage remains focused on growing congressional interest in the federal supply chain, nursing homes generate renewed interest following state governors growing concerns of data gaps, seniors’ vulnerability, and need for PPE. FEMA mention continues to revolve volunteers assigned by White House administration officials to help acquire PPE for the agency.

(U//FOUO) *Sentiment Analysis*

- In a traditional news article about the aversion to wearing masks in public places experts offered suggestions on why some members of the public continue to push back:
  - Mental fatigue of constantly calculating risk associated with each activity
  - Not seeing leaders wearing them
  - A dislike for being told what to do
- There continues to be debate about meat processing plants and meat inspector safety upon news of 145 meat inspectors diagnosed with COVID-19. Many are expressing distrust towards the media, saying it’s magnifying the problem, while there continues to be a general calling for more safety measures for meat industry employees.
  - A small amount of people also question the safety of buying and consuming meat, worrying that the supply could be infected with COVID-19.



- There is growing concern about the spread of COVID-19 in rural areas where outbreaks in prisons, nursing homes, and meat processing plants are contributing to increased exposure in local communities.
  - Many worry that the demographics of rural areas increase vulnerability, particularly among the working poor and the elderly.
  - Members of the medical community and local residents express concern about the limited capacity and resources of rural healthcare systems.

#### **(U) 5/5 Reporting**

**(U) 5G Disinformation Website Calls for Global Anti-5G Protest on June 6:** The website stop5ginternational.org, which is devoted to 5G disinformation, has called for global anti-5G protests on June 6. Recently, erroneous narratives associating 5G technology with COVID-19 have proliferated on the internet. The website claims to have already facilitated previous protests across the world, including in four U.S. cities.

**(U) Harmful Misinformation on COVID-19 has Been Shared More Than 1.7 million Times on Facebook and Viewed an Estimated 117 Million Times:** Millions of Facebook's users are still being put at risk of consuming harmful misinformation on coronavirus at a large scale. Representing only the tip of the misinformation iceberg, we found that the pieces of content we sampled and analyzed were shared over 1.7 million times on Facebook, and viewed an estimated 117 million times.

Even when taking into consideration the commendable efforts Facebook's anti-misinformation team has applied to fight this infodemic, the platform's current policies were insufficient and did not protect its users.

Of the 41% of this misinformation content that remains on the platform without warning labels, 65% has been debunked by partners of Facebook's *very own* fact-checking program. Throughout the timeframe of our research, this content remained on the platform despite the company's promise to issue "strong warning labels" for misinformation flagged by fact-checkers and other third party entities, and remove misinformation that could contribute to imminent physical harm.

Secondly, Avaaz found that there are significant delays in Facebook's implementation of its anti-misinformation policies. These delays are especially troubling because they result in millions of users seeing harmful misinformation content about the coronavirus before the platform labels it with a fact check and warning screen or removes it. Specifically, we found that it can take up to 22 days for the platform to downgrade and issue warning labels on such content, giving ample time for it to go viral.

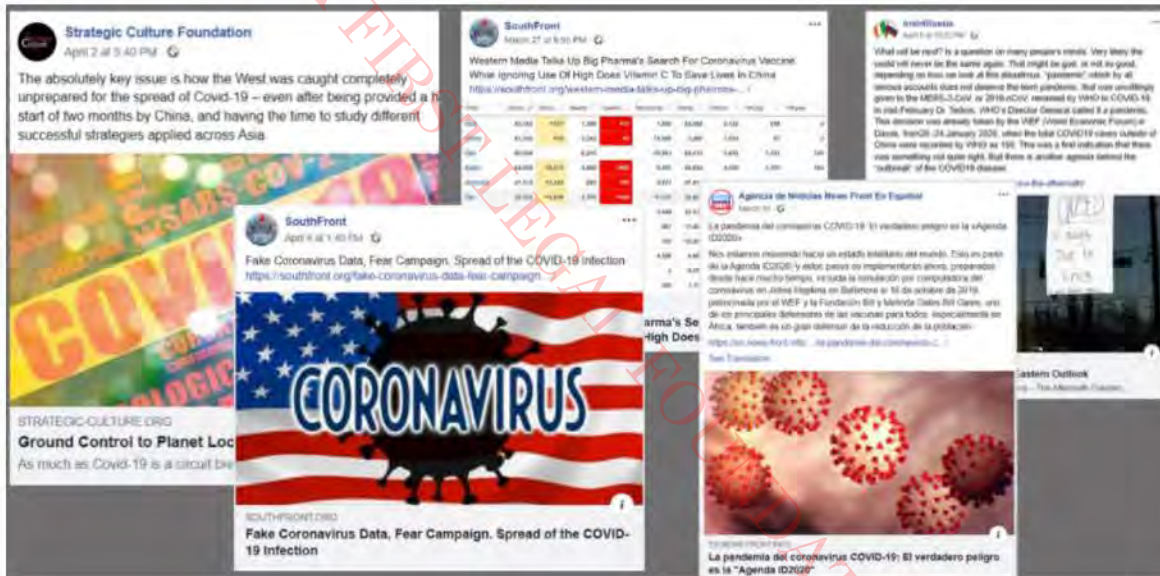
Our analysis also indicates that Italian and Spanish-speaking users may be at greater risk of misinformation exposure. Facebook has not yet issued warning labels on 68% of the Italian-language content and 70% of Spanish-language content we examined, compared to 29% of English-language content.

The scale of this "infodemic" along with Facebook's reluctance to retroactively notify and provide corrections to every user exposed to harmful misinformation about the coronavirus is threatening efforts to "flatten the curve" across the world and could potentially put lives at risk. (Source: Avaaz)

(U) Facebook, YouTube Take Down Russian-Linked Disinformation Outlets Spreading COVID-19 Disinformation: NewsFront, a pro-Russian disinformation site managed from illegally annexed Crimea and publishing in eight languages, was taken down from Facebook on April 30. Fellow Russian-linked disinformation outlet South Front’s account on Facebook was also taken down 30 April, and one day later, the South Front YouTube Channel was switched off.

Before taken down from Facebook, South Front, an outlet with a history of promoting conspiracy theories and a strong presence in the EUvsDisinfo database, was heavily engaged in blatant anti-vax messaging, “Big Pharma” conspiracy theories, and attempts to downplay the COVID-19 pandemic.

South Front’s efforts were further amplified on Facebook in Spanish by News Front. The two outlets even shared a same disinformation article on Facebook, one version in English, and the other in Spanish, with claims that the search for the COVID-19 vaccine is a Big Pharma “rip-off”, with plans to change the human life and implement the “New World Order”.



*Not just a Facebook problem*

The proliferation of false and harmful information and conspiracy theories is not just a Facebook problem. Twitter has also committed to **remove tweets that run the risk of causing harm by spreading dangerous misinformation about COVID-19**, including denial of health authorities' recommendations. However, tweets with anti-vax and "Big Pharma" conspiracy theories from South Front, News Front and other pro-Kremlin outlets remain online.



Other News Front posts on Facebook spread unfounded claims that behind the COVID-19 pandemic hides "Agenda ID2020", which in conspiracy-speak means "secret plans" by global elites to control the world's population with the vaccines.

Conspiracy theories of a similar magnitude continue to be shared on Facebook by the Strategic Culture Foundation, an outlet with a front of the state-of-the-art think-tank, which goes at length to hide its Russian roots. New Eastern Outlook, managed by the Russian Academy of Science's Institute for Oriental Studies, chimes in as well stating that **implantation of nano-chip via vaccines "is a reality"**. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Monetization of False and Harmful COVID-19 Related Online Disinformation Continues:** Online ads continue to pop up on disinformation articles, a major investigation by the Global Disinformation Index shows, generating an estimated 76 million USD in revenues for disinforming outlets in Europe alone. For example, an article by Russia-linked disinformation outlet South Front claims, among other things that "vitamin C saves lives in China" was accompanied by a Soundcloud ad delivered by Google. Similarly, a Sputnik Czech article claiming that COVID mortality figures are "insignificant" had an O2 ad delivered by Google. (Source: Global Disinformation Index)

WESTERN MEDIA TALKS UP BIG PHARMA'S SEARCH FOR CORONAVIRUS VACCINE WHILE IGNORING USE OF HIGH DOSE VITAMIN C TO SAVE LIVES IN CHINA

Country/Other	Total Cases	New Cases	Total Deaths	New Deaths	Total Recovered	Active Cases	Genes	100 Cases	100 Deaths
USA	85,762	+321	1,336	+111	1,266	82,088	2,122	100	1
China	81,346	+30	2,282	+2	14,366	2,469	1,094	30	4
Spain	80,989	0	8,214	0	18,361	62,073	2,812	1,333	156
South Korea	84,759	+5,215	4,538	+463	8,357	48,884	4,087	1,372	164
Germany	47,573	+5,438	781	+10	8,672	41,891	25	565	3
UK	32,332	+6,828	2,378	+164	11,333	18,821	2,692	585	28
France	26,155	0	1,594	0	4,046	22,091	3,375	667	26
Switzerland	12,311	+566	287	+15	867	11,237	303	1,472	34
Italy	11,888	0	378	0	126	16,383	163	172	5
South Africa	9,324	+91	134	+9	4,328	4,895	39	160	3
Netherlands	8,802	+1,172	348	+112	2	8,254	791	502	12
Sweden	7,283	+484	84	+9	220	7,063	128	821	6
Singapore	7,284	+1,548	289	+60	888	8,537	900	820	28

Written by Dr. Leon Tressell exclusively for SouthFront

→ Clinical trials using high dose vitamin C therapy in China ignored by Western media

<https://www.southfront.com/2020/03/27/coronavirus-high-dose-vitamin-c-therapy-in-china-ignored-by-western-media/>



(U) **Public Trust in Social Media Content as High as Trust in Public Health Officials:** The gaps in the efforts of social media companies to curb the spread of false information seemingly have an impact on user trust. A survey conducted by the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) shows that people across Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US consistently consider social media platforms as less trustworthy in terms of COVID-19 information than experts, health authorities, and news organisations. The same study also found that almost a quarter of respondents believe that the coronavirus was made in a laboratory, which speaks about the impact of disinformation online.

The platforms have acted to curb the spread of disinformation; the question is – is it enough? (Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening:**

- FEMA conversation shifted over the course of the day to focus on the release of internal documents that show projections of increasing death rates. The release of these documents is leading many to wonder if the government is being transparent with the information they have.
- As we head into hurricane preparedness week, it is sparking increased debate over whether the agency will be able to handle a major natural disaster and pandemic.
- People are also expressing concern about the lack of social distancing at beaches and other outdoor areas that have reopened leaving people worried a second wave of infections could be around the corner.

- While traditional media remains focused on initial impacts of states reopening, the projected fatality toll has received sharp spike in interest following infection and fatality projections from Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation as well as a federal interagency document. Tonality is of serious uncertainty.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There is growing skepticism over the perceived federal push for economies to reopen across the nation. Following the release of FEMA and CDC documents that predict deaths to increase to 3000 per day by June 1st, many are questioning why states are lifting stay-at-home orders.
  - This narrative is being further fueled by elected officials who are questioning why additional body bags have been ordered at the same time that states are reopening.
- There is increasing confusion over the purpose of antibody testing due to lingering questions over whether individuals who test positive are immune, or still able to transmit the virus.
- Beaches and other outdoor areas in different states with loosened restrictions were reportedly full of people this weekend, leading some to worry about growing COVID-19 case numbers, saying they will continue social distancing.
- Concerns over employee safety in meat processing plants are resurfacing after reports of a new outbreak in a plant in Missouri and national media coverage about their working conditions.
- There continues to be a large amount of discussion of protests around the country against current stay-at-home orders.

**(U) 5/4 Reporting**

**(U) 5G-COVID-19 Disinformation Serves as Ongoing Case Study of How Conspiracy Theories Spread, and How They Can Be Stopped:** Misinformation spreads online much like a virus itself. Although various types spread slightly differently, the transmission of the 5G conspiracy theory offers some insight into how false claims grow online.

*How it starts*

A “calamitous event” like the pandemic creates a “very fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories,” said John Cook, an expert on misinformation with George Mason University’s Center for Climate Change Communication.

The onslaught of information and misinformation on social media, on cable news and in general conversation may create confusion, but it’s made even worse by human discomfort with ambiguity, especially when our lives are at stake.

In this case, it involved 5G, the newest, fastest type of cellular network, which began deploying globally in 2019. As is usually the case with new technologies, it has attracted its fair share of conspiracy

theories. A general practitioner in Belgium named Kris Van Kerckhoven baselessly told the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* in a Jan. 22 story that 5G was life-threatening and linked to the coronavirus, as [Wired reported](#).

The newspaper quickly issued a correction and deleted the offending article from its website, but it was too late. Anti-5G groups began spreading the rumor, and some members of a frightened public, desperate for some sense of order, believed this deeply implausible lie.

“When people feel threatened or out of control or they’re trying to explain a big significant event, they’re more vulnerable or prone to turning to conspiracy theories to explain them,” Cook said. “Somewhat counterintuitively, it gives people more sense of control to imagine that, rather than random things happening, there are these shadowy groups and agencies that are controlling it. Randomness is very discomfoting to people.”

#### *How it spreads*

It’s certainly more difficult to fight misinformation if someone is purposely and relentlessly spreading it, which is partially the case with various 5G conspiracy theories. The Russian network RT America has been peddling disinformation about the mobile network since long before covid-19, in part, [according to the New York Times](#), to slow the rollout in the United States and give Russia time to catch up.

“There are people who believe one conspiracy theory or another because it fits their political beliefs, and there are some people for whom conspiracy theories *are* their beliefs,” said Mike Wood, a psychologist and expert on belief in conspiracy theories who studied the spread of misinformation during the Zika outbreak in 2016. “For those people, the specifics of the conspiracy theory don’t matter all that much.”

Eventually, the 5G false claims spread from conspiratorial corners of the Internet into the mainstream, [fueled by celebrities](#).

#### *How it’s stopped*

While the origin of a piece of information might not matter, the type of misinformation does. The idea that eating garlic can help fight the disease is a natural rumor — it’s just bad information. But a conspiracy theory supposes that a nefarious group of people are carrying out a plan, and that’s much more difficult to disprove.

“More natural rumors will go really fast and burn out,” said Kate Starbird, an associate professor with the Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington. “But conspiracy theory rumors build up, and they persist.”

One reason for the disparity: Conspiracy theories often have something of a built-in safety mechanism in that they falsely implicate fact-checking organizations as being part of the conspiracy.

“For a conspiracy theory where the misinformation is wrapped up around this air of distrust, distrust of institutions, distrust of mainstream accounts, even distrust the science, then any evidence that comes in that disproves the theory is seen as being part of the conspiracy,” Cook said.

So while there haven’t been many reports of people following some of the more bogus claims that have gone around — such as [the erroneous claim that drinking bleach will cure the virus](#) — the 5G conspiracy theory has led to the real-world destruction of cell towers across Europe, according to government officials. In Britain alone, the New York Times [reported](#), “more than 30 acts of arson and vandalism have taken place against wireless towers and other telecom gear” in the month of April, including towers in Liverpool and Birmingham on April 2 and 3.

Even when your readers or social media followers *are* open to a correction, it’s difficult to write about misinformation without spreading the very misinformation you’re debunking. “You need to put emphasis on facts,” Cook said. And “when a piece of misinformation is introduced, you must flag it as misinformation. So when people read it, they’re cognitively on-guard and less likely to believe it.”

But it can be done. Bode emphasized the importance of correcting untruths in person or on social media, saying, “You need to be nice and provide some indication that you know what you’re talking about. We generally recommend you provide some kind of link to an authoritative source like the CDC or the WHO.” Having multiple people weigh in with the truth is even more effective. (Source: The Washington Post)

**(U) Fact-Checker’s Identity Stolen to Spread Disinfo About NATO and COVID-19:** Authors of a disinformation campaign about NATO troops leaving Lithuania due to the spread of COVID-19 impersonated Vilius Petkauskas, a well-known journalist and fact-checker from the Lithuanian media outlet *15min.lt*. This case is yet another example of COVID-19 being used to [create anti-NATO sentiment](#) in the Baltic states.

The outlets that were involved in the campaign had [previously](#) used anonymous online personas, as the DFRLab reported in 2019. This case demonstrates greater dedication to achieving authenticity, as a real person’s identity and credibility was used to spread falsified information. The case also demonstrates a new approach by disinformation actors to psychologically influence the fact-checker. Fact-checkers in Latvia have also [received](#) blowback due to the authors of disinformation that created personally offensive videos and unflattering content.

(U) **How a False Story About a Cuban COVID-19 Vaccine Spread in Latin America:** In the beginning of February, Cuba [announced](#) via official channels that a Cuban-manufactured drug was being used to treat COVID-19 cases in China. Soon after, a Brazilian politician and a Mexican regional newspaper picked up the story. Both, perhaps inadvertently, made a small but significant change to the story: in the new version, the story claimed that Cuba had developed a vaccine for the novel coronavirus.

Since then, the claim that Cuba had developed a vaccine for COVID-19 has reverberated on Twitter in different Latin American countries, until it reached Brazilian hyper-partisan media and left-wing influencers on March 12. On that day, "Cuban vaccine" reached the trending topics in the country. The story spread further to other continents, with a mayor from a South African town promising the population he would buy the Cuban vaccine for his people. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Facebook Begins to Re-Open Moderation Centers as Concerning Content Gains Momentum in the App:** Amid the COVID-19 lockdowns, Facebook has been forced to [shut down its moderation centers](#), and send some 35,000 content reviewers home, which has significantly reduced its capacity to review posts, ads and more.

Now, The Social Network is looking to get some moderators back in operation. According to [BBC News](#), Facebook is now re-opening some of its review offices, though staff are only being asked to return on a voluntary basis at this stage.

How many staff will actually be returning to work was unclear - and given some of the horror stories around the [experiences of Facebook moderators](#), it's hard to imagine that many of them will be quick to head back in, especially given that they're on full pay while they stay at home.

But Facebook is bringing moderators back, in some capacity - which is important, because there's also been an influx of concerning content on the platform of late, including [COVID-19 misinformation](#), and arguably worse, child pornography. (Source: Social Media Today; BBC)

(U) **A Threat to Public Health Weaponized by Online Extremists:** Early last month, HateLab (an online violent extremism monitoring tool used by Moonshot CVE) identified three forms of coronavirus-related hate speech: anti-Chinese or Asian; antisemitic, focused on conspiracy theories; and Islamophobic, focused on accusations of profiteering. "What we are seeing is a threat to health being weaponized to justify targeting minority groups, no matter how illogical the connections may seem."

(Moonshot has monitored similar rises in hate speech targeting Chinese nationals. The hashtag [#ChinaLiedPeopleDied](#) was tweeted 65,895 times in March, while [#coronavirustruth](#), implying that the pandemic is a hoax, was used 77,548 times. The company also picked up tweets showing old videos of



Muslim men leaving mosques accompanied by text claiming the footage was filmed during quarantine, a seemingly deliberate attempt to create anti-Muslim sentiment.) (Source: The Guardian)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- May Day discussion carried over into concern for essential workers and individuals who may be returning to work soon. There was a large amount of discussion about worker's rights and ensuring people have access to a safe workplace and more businesses begin to discuss reopening.
- People are anxiously waiting to see how some of the first reopenings go this weekend with restrictions beginning to lift on various businesses across the country. Many are viewing these initial days as a test to see if people will still follow social distancing guidelines and make safe decisions while in public.
- FEMA discussion on social media has remained focused on the lack individual assistance funds for burial costs with a smaller number of people discussing the recent announcement of FEMA's role in distributing PPE to nursing homes. FEMA coverage on traditional media is high and centered on FEMA's response role to COVID-19 vs. hurricane season, PPE distribution, and homeless shelter assistance.
- Traditional media continues reporting on businesses reopening in certain states as well as protests against stay-at-home orders and unsafe work conditions. Nursing home fatalities continues to receive national attention as the toll reportedly has surpassed 16,000. There is isolated national mention of a university study concluding the virus could last two years.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- There has been a high volume of discussion about the Defense Production Act over the course of the day largely driven by elected officials. Most feel the Act is not being used enough or in the right manner.
  - The Speaker of the House called for the DPA to be used to ramp up production of syringes and vials to avoid a shortage once a vaccine is developed.
- One Senator and one U.S. Representative introduced legislation to fill critical supply shortages by setting up a new Emergency Office of Manufacturing for Public Health within HHS, bypassing the need for the DPA.
- Global recoveries surpassed 1 million cases today. People are viewing this as an extremely positive announcement and celebrating the news. Many wonder if the number is actually significantly higher.
- The social media conversation remains focused on reopening, with many people discussing the need for widespread testing. Most people believe testing capacity is not adequate to reopen safely at this point.
- The burden of staying home and out of work is taking a strong emotional and financial toll on many Americans. Most people realize things won't be normal again for a while and many are concerned about making ends meet.
- There are mixed reactions to news that the federal social distancing guidelines will not be extended when they expire tomorrow. Many are urging people to continue to stay home and exercise caution, others are grateful.
- Many are discussing statements made by the President yesterday saying he's not relying on having a vaccine and that the virus could otherwise be "eradicated". The reaction to this is

negative, with people fearing that thought could influence priorities and timelines for reopening.

(U) **Russia-State Backed Media Promotes False COVID-19 Cures in the Balkans:** Moscow-backed media portray the EU as incompetent and selfish, NATO as rudderless, and Russia and China as benevolent saviors.

Skopje's Ministry of Science and Technology uncovered several articles about non-existent cures for COVID-19. One was about a treatment discovery by the Russian Biomedical Agency, while another reported the Russian-manufactured drug Arbidol as a cure. A third article cites Russian doctors developing a treatment for the coronavirus using helium. In another article, a Russian doctor speaks about the superiority of the Russian healthcare system over those of the Western countries. These false hopes were buoyed by reports of a secret Russian centre in Siberia that will save the world. This article features a YouTube video from Russia 1/Russia 24 as a supplement. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

#### (U) 5/1 Reporting

(U) **Beyond China: Global dissemination channels mobilized to spread coronavirus disinformation, pro-Beijing narratives:** As countries around the world grapple with the spread of COVID-19, Chinese state propaganda organs are attempting to influence the global conversation on the epidemic. Over the last month, CCP-backed media, in an effort to downplay criticism of the party's mishandling of the outbreak in its early stages, have pushed three narratives for a global audience: first, China's response to the crisis is a model for other countries to follow; second, China is a global leader in the fight against COVID-19 and is providing aid to grateful nations; and finally, that the outbreak may actually have originated outside of China.

While there is some truth to a few of these claims, others—like the assertion that COVID-19 began in the United States or Italy—suggest that Chinese state media and other state-backed actors are deliberately promoting disinformation abroad, mimicking Russian tactics. In some cases, the Chinese messaging has been shared on existing disinformation networks established on social media platforms by Iran and Russia. Over the last month, a number of tactics have been deployed:

- **Leveraging existing channels to embed state media content in mainstream foreign media:** Foreign news outlets have continued to accept funds from Chinese state media to disseminate party propaganda on China's response to COVID-19 to their audiences. Over the past two months, the *Economist*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper are among foreign media that have published such articles as paid advertorials, although the *Telegraph* appears to have subsequently discontinued its partnership with the *People's Daily*, the official paper of the Communist Party, and *China Daily*, a state-run English-language outlet. The Xinhua news agency has also used content-sharing partnerships with African news websites like *News Ghana* to highlight Chinese assistance in combatting COVID-19 in various countries.

- **Foreign ministry spokespeople and diplomats spreading disinformation:** Throughout March, fringe conspiracy theories concerning the origins of COVID-19 and other proven **falsehoods** have been amplified by senior Chinese diplomats. On March 12, Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao **tweeted a link to an article** falsely claiming that the virus had originated in the United States, which was later retweeted **by the official account of China's embassy in South Africa**. It has also been reported that Chinese officials in Tokyo have been ordered to refer to COVID-19 as the "**Japanese coronavirus**." The effort was reaping the fruits of a 2019 initiative to set up Twitter accounts for dozens of Chinese officials, even as the platform remains blocked in China.
- **State media ads online:** Chinese state media have been purchasing political advertisements on foreign social media sites in an effort to **cover up** the Chinese state's botched early response to the spread of the coronavirus, and instead place blame for the pandemic on the United States. Appearing on Facebook and Instagram, the undisclosed ads promote content on China's handling of COVID-19 produced by Chinese state media outfits including Xinhua, China Central Television, and the *Global Times*.
- **Twitter bots:** A **March 26 investigation by ProPublica** found a network of fake and hijacked Twitter accounts that were covertly spreading Chinese government propaganda about the virus to global audiences. While some of these accounts have tweeted messages expressing support for the Chinese government's handling of the epidemic, others have promoted disinformation or attacked political opponents in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong. Parts of the network were linked to a Beijing-based company that had previously been contracted by the China News Service, part of the CCP's United Front Work Department, to increase its Twitter following. China has also made use of Twitter bots to **amplify Italian hashtags** praising China's medical assistance to Italy, which has been hard-hit by the coronavirus. (Source: Freedom House)

(U) **As America Is Distracted By Covid-19, Putin Pursues Hybrid Warfare Tactics:** Hans Peter Midttun, a former Norwegian Naval Attaché, warns of the danger that the ongoing Russian hybrid warfare poses to Ukraine, and through it to Europe and the West. He writes, "Do not lose track of Russia amid the COVID-19. It offers Russia a unique opportunity to exploit the consequences of the pandemic, enabling it to reach its strategic aim and objectives. The West needs to take a firm stand alongside Ukraine as Russia is becoming increasingly more brazen and self-confident. Former Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euroatlantic Integration (2016-2019), Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze, argues that "there can be no successful Europe without a strong and independent Ukraine. She is correct ... And please, please stop talking about the "war in Donbas" and start discussing the Hybrid War in Ukraine."

Strategically, one can argue that the same way Hitler used the Spanish Civil War to test his military strategies for war in Europe, today Putin is using Ukraine to test his hybrid warfare options for use against the West. The wide ranging extent of this ongoing Russian hybrid campaign in Ukraine is solidly documented in a military report published **recently**.

But Ukraine is not Russia's only target in this hybrid warfare campaign. Putin has also targeted the West. The New York Times **reported** recently that, "As the pandemic has swept the globe, it has been

accompanied by a dangerous surge of **false information** — an “infodemic,” according to **the World Health Organization**. Analysts say that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has played a principal role in the spread of false information as part of his wider effort to discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within.” The news item concluded that, “Analysts see an effort not only to undermine American officials but also to accomplish something more basic: to damage American science, a foundation of national prosperity.”

Just as it was unwise for us to ignore the prospects of the covid-19 virus spreading from China to other parts of the world until it was too late, ignoring what Putin is doing today in his hybrid war with Ukraine could lead to disastrous consequences for the West. Just the other day, for example, a **report** from the Jamestown Foundation speculated that Moscow was sending new Cossack paramilitary units to the Ukrainian border in possible preparation for another offensive there. Better that we focus our efforts on stopping this hybrid war in Ukraine, and that we win there, than that it continue to be spread all over Europe and America. (Source: Forbes)

**(U) Are Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Outlets Disenchanted with the Coronavirus?** The COVID-19 outbreak is still the dominating topic in the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem, and the outbreak itself continues to be a serious issue to handle for health care workers, national and European systems, and international bodies. Many of the “usual” examples of disinformation are employed this week, just as previous weeks: **The virus is man-made; it is a biological weapon**; it is the Global Elites’ scheme to **reduce the world’s population** and the **World Health Organization** is part of it! Most of these tropes have been repeated over and over again since the start of the outbreak in January. This week, the number of **cases devoted to the coronavirus** passes 400.

However, several countries note that the epidemic is beginning to recede. Governments have started discussing a cautious loosening of quarantine restrictions. The curve is flattening. And we can see a similar development in the pro-Kremlin disinformation network. The subject is no longer as conducive for Kremlin disinformation targeting the EU: European national healthcare systems have managed to operate through the crisis; cooperation within the European Union is deepening.

It is likely that the COVID-19 outbreak will continue to dominate both in professional news reporting and in the content of disinformation outlets, but it appears that the topic is starting to become less comfortable as a vessel for pro-Kremlin disinformation. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- As the COVID-19 discussion remains primarily focused on reopening the economy, people are finding hope in the 1 million cases of global recoveries reported today. There are mixed reactions to news that the federal social distancing guidelines will not be extended upon expiration tomorrow and many are urging people to stay home, however others express they are suffering emotionally and financially due to remaining home. As officials and businesses plan for reopening, many colleges and universities across the U.S. are announcing plans to reopen in the fall.

- FEMA conversation today includes news of the agency coordinating PPE shipments to nursing homes in May and coverage that FEMA placed an order for an additional 100,000 body bags. People are confused about the order of body bags and wondering whether or not there is improvement with flattening the curve. The agency is being met with criticism for not providing funds for the burial of COVID-19 victims, while the media reports that FEMA has covered these costs in previous disasters.
- Traditional media coverage focuses on states' mitigation efforts to ensure a safe, slow reopening. Medical specialists, journalists, and elected officials interviewed express mixed opinion over whether states have enough testing resources to avoid another surge in cases. This precedes newly cited optimism of a vaccine becoming available by early 2021. FEMA coverage includes PPE distribution, nursing home assistance, disaster cost share, and mortuary services.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment:*

- There has been a high volume of discussion about the Defense Production Act over the course of the day largely driven by elected officials. Most feel the Act is not being used enough or in the right manner.
  - The Speaker of the House called for the DPA to be used to ramp up production of syringes and vials to avoid a shortage once a vaccine is developed.
  - One Senator and one U.S. Representative introduced legislation to fill critical supply shortages by setting up a new Emergency Office of Manufacturing for Public Health within HHS, bypassing the need for the DPA.
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- The burden of staying home and out of work is taking a strong emotional and financial toll on many Americans. Most people realize things won't be normal again for a while and many are concerned about making ends meet.
- There are mixed reactions to news that the federal social distancing guidelines will not be extended when they expire tomorrow. Many are urging people to continue to stay home and exercise caution, others are grateful. (example 1, example 2)
- Many are discussing statements made by the President yesterday saying he's not relying on having a vaccine and that the virus could otherwise be "eradicated". The reaction to this is negative, with people fearing that thought could influence priorities and timelines for reopening.

(U) 4/30 Reporting

(U) **International Anti-5G Conspiracy Groups Amplify Calls for Anti-Lockdown Protests:** A poster exhorting people to join the so-called “global march for freedom” on April 12, 2020, to protest COVID-19 lockdown measures spread to multiple countries within days, seeding similar messaging for further anti-lockdown protests around the world.

The first “no more lockdowns” marches were organized took place on April 12. Within days, protests arose in **at least 15 U.S. states**. Many of the U.S. protests were organized by **the Dorr brothers** — a trio of right-wing gun rights activists — with a significant pro-Trump sentiment characterizing many of the events. Another round of protests are expected on May 2.

The poster, which first appeared on April 8, advertised an April 12 “global march for freedom” in “every city hall, village piazza, or town hall in every country.” It was amplified by 5G and Illuminati conspiracy pages on Facebook, as well as by fringe influencers with large social media followings. Online, it spread to English, Filipino, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish language environments. The poster’s spread occurred despite little engagement on many of the social media platforms it was posted on.

The DFRLab found the earliest reference to the poster on **an April 8 post** by a Facebook page called “Stop 5g Global,” run in part by Australian Paul Seils. While this is the earliest confirmed posting, the poster had likely already been shared elsewhere online, as the image in this post appears slightly cropped compared to later images of the poster. Stop 5g Global used the hashtag #nomorelockdowns and tagged separate location-based 5G Instagram accounts in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and elsewhere, none of which shared the poster on their own accounts. While the post only received 35 reactions and 11 comments, it was shared 83 times, many of which were to other 5G conspiracy pages and groups.



Some of the poster's cross-platform spread on April 8, 2020. The two right-most images are the same screenshot, on two image aggregation platforms that appear different but have the same Google advertising ID. (Source: [@stop5global/archive](#), left; [@WaterFilterLady/archive](#), left middle; [americasbestpics.com/archive](#), right middle; [ifunny.co/archive](#), right)

The promotional poster gained traction on April 9 through a Facebook page called "Illuminati Exposed," in a [post](#) that gained 557 reactions, 222 comments, and 324 shares. Not all of the engagement on the post was positive; many reacted negatively to the poster and the perceived irresponsibility of protesting social-distancing. That same day, the poster appeared on [Dutch](#) and [Spanish](#) websites, with a [follow-up article](#) on April 14 on the Dutch website implying that a protest in Amsterdam had indeed occurred, although the 36-second clip shared showed empty streets.

On April 13, a modified version of the poster was [shared](#) in a Facebook group called "Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine." A *Washington Post* analysis found that the Dorr brothers created similar Facebook groups — "Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine," "Pennsylvanians Against Excessive Quarantine," "Ohioans Against Excessive Quarantine," and "New Yorkers Against Excessive Quarantine." The Michigan version of the group has over 300,000 members, despite being only created on April 9; Ben Dorr is one of the group's members. (Source: Atlantic Council DFR Lab)

**(U) Trolls Are Spreading Conspiracy Theories That a U.S. Army Reservist is "COVID-19 Patient Zero." China is Amplifying That Disinformation:** A brigade of trolls is spreading conspiracy theories about a U.S. Army reservist, falsely claiming that she is "COVID-19 patient zero" and responsible for starting the [coronavirus pandemic](#).

Maatje Benassi is a civilian security officer stationed at [Fort Belvoir](#) in Virginia. Since March she and her husband Matt, also a government employee at the military base, have been targeted in YouTube videos and social media posts that wrongly claim she contracted COVID-19 in October while competing in the

Military World Games, which were hosted in Wuhan, China. Neither Benassi or her husband have tested positive for or experienced [symptoms](#) of COVID-19.

Many of the videos targeting Benassi and her husband were viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube after the conspiracy was amplified by Chinese [diplomats](#) and [state-run media](#). In February, The Global Times, a site run by the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily newspaper, [alleged that coronavirus was brought to China](#) from a U.S. military base during the World Games. A few weeks later, Lijian Zhou, a Chinese diplomat, [reinforced the conspiracy theory](#) in a tweet that speculated, "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."

The use of state media to amplify online conspiracies is part of a broad strategy to deflect and reframe the coronavirus narrative away from China, said Priscilla Moriuchi, a senior researcher at Recorded Future, a cybersecurity firm that specializes in digital threat assessment. Moriuchi told CBS News that the coronavirus pandemic provided China with an opportunity to present a binary comparison between the Chinese government's response and the West's. (Source: CBS News)

**(U) Evolving TTPs: Find, Copy, Amplify: How Ukrainian Fringe Media Used Other Alphabets to Disguise False COVID-19 Claims:** Several Ukrainian fringe media outlets republished an article amplifying the false claims of an Italian anti-vaxxer regarding the efficacy of quarantines and the feasibility of a potential vaccine in slowing the COVID-19 outbreak. In a likely effort to evade detection, the outlets substituted letters borrowed from different alphabets in the headline to foil automated web crawlers.

The DFRLab [previously covered](#) the narrative spread of the anti-vaxxer's claims on April 14, 2020. This report details an inauthentic amplification scheme concerning a related article by Ukrainian fringe media outlets.

The alphabet-blending approach has become quite popular on fringe media and junk news sites in [Ukraine](#) as a means to avoid Google's attempts to [scrub coronavirus misinformation](#) from its platforms, including Google Search. While this method helps these outlets avoid detection by search engines, it ironically makes detection of coordinated behavior easier for researchers when websites copy/paste each other's publications featuring the same orthographic substitutions. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) American Touting COVID Conspiracies Probably Posted WHO, Gates Foundation Passwords Online, Report Says:** An American touting conspiracy theories about the spread of the [coronavirus](#) was the likely source of an incident in which nearly 25,000 credentials from the World Health Organization, the Gates Foundation and other institutions fighting the pandemic were posted to the Internet last week, new research concludes.

The research, by the SITE Intelligence Group, which [revealed the incident](#) in a report last week, concluded that the emails and passwords posted online were not from a recent hack. Rather, the credentials came from a larger set of hacked materials originally put online in 2016.



SITE, based in Bethesda, Md., concluded that whoever posted the credentials last week was hoping to inspire a new wave of intrusions that might reveal information about how the targeted institutions responded to the pandemic. Posting personal information online is called "doxing" and typically is regarded as a form of harassment or a way to incite harassment.

Details about who posted the emails and passwords remain scant, and SITE has not learned the real-world identity of the culprit. Based on comments and links on various social media sites that appear to be from the same person, however, SITE determined that the initial poster probably was an American who espoused conspiracy theories popular on the political right, including that government officials and news organizations are exaggerating covid-19 death counts to manipulate the public. (Source: Washington Post, SITE Intelligence)

(U) **"Jews Control Chinese Labs That Created Coronavirus": White Supremacists' Dangerous New Conspiracy Theory:** As COVID-19 has swept around the globe, causing unprecedented levels of suffering and national shutdowns, the boards and websites of the dark web – that part of the internet intentionally hidden from mainstream search engines, maximized for anonymity and often a sanctuary for hate groups and criminal activity – have kept pace, filled up with conspiracy theories accusing the Jews of triggering the pandemic.

Dark web communities are already infamous for their hosting and cultivation of the anti-Semitic, [white nationalist far right](#). The perpetrator of the massacre at the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque, Brenton Tarrant, was an active member of 8Chan. The Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, Robert Bowers, posted on Gab his intention to carry out an attack. Neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer, one of the organizers of the Charlottesville far right rally, moved to the dark web after it was [booted off](#) the mainstream internet.

The discussions about Jews' "responsibility" for the coronavirus are generally riffs on the storied theory of a global Jewish conspiracy for power and domination. Added to that are references to other anti-Semitic theories regarding Jews as poisoners and deliberate carriers of disease, Jews as inveterate economic profiteers and, inevitably, Holocaust denial. The newer element is the idea of coronavirus as a grand plan engineered by the Jews and China together.

In a discussion, an anonymous poster (or "anon") attempted to reveal the "real" viral genesis. He noted as fact that the coronavirus came from a Chinese lab but that it was not created by the Chinese: "The kikes get the credit for that one. It was the kikes. It's ALWAYS the kikes."

The idea of the Jews pulling the strings but using proxies for deniability and to amplify their power is a core plank of far right thought. Many anons' sense of Jewish power is so inflated that they believe Jews developed the virus not only to spread suffering and disease, but also to "knock down" China herself.



Image from dark web discussion board: 'It's not Chinese. It's the Jew flu' Credit: Flora Cassen  
(Source: Haaretz)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- Conversations about reopening continue to increase in volume, as frustration grows with stay at home orders and restrictions. There are significant concerns related to reopening, such as a surge in cases and reports that testing capacity will not be adequate to provide the best possible information needed to reopen safely. Many are concerned they are not getting clear messaging on what testing capacity needs to be met before it is safe to reopen.
- Criticism of the administration and FEMA have increased, following a number of news stories related to the distribution of relief funding, DPA use to keep meat plants open, and concerns about FEMA's role in the federal response.
- As traditional media continues to examine state's ability to reopen with sufficient testing capacity, reporters and broadcast commentators increasingly highlight White House's recently expressed optimism, following Remdesivir medical trials to treat the virus. FEMA coverage includes reports of a potential role change ahead of hurricane season, PPE distribution to hospitals & nursing homes, and purchase of mortuary supplies. National broadcast media

consistently mentions a White House administration official's recent praise of the federal response.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of conversation. Most support a cautious and data-based approach, but a growing number are becoming more frustrated and want to return to normal right away.
- Many are concerned about the likelihood of a second wave of COVID-19 cases caused by reopening, citing statements from a senior White House Task Force member who said the US could be in for "a bad fall and a bad winter" if unprepared for a second wave.
- Strong criticism of the Administration and the federal response continues both generally and in relation to recent issues.
  - The Vice President's trip to Mayo Clinic is producing a high volume of negative conversation. Many are pointing out that by not wearing a mask the VP contradicted the Administration's own guidance and hospital policies.
  - There is a high level of discussion about statements from a White House press briefing suggesting that the Administration may withhold relief funding from states unless they make concessions on sanctuary cities.
- There is a high volume of conversation regarding the use of the Defense Production Act to keep meat processing plants open. The general public is largely split over the decision:
  - On Facebook, the majority of people are supportive of the decision feeling it will help keep food on tables.
  - On Twitter, the majority of people are against the idea worrying that it places workers in danger and questioning why the DPA has not been used for the production of ventilators.
- There continues to be a large amount of discussion about testing capacity. The head of the government's testing response refutes the claim that the U.S. will be able to test 5 million people a day; instead, he suggests the country will be able to test 8 million per month.
  - The general public does not feel like it is getting clear answers on what the current testing capacity is in the country, and what it needs to be for the general population to be safe.
- There is increasing discussion of state's push for federal funding to fill budget gaps caused by COVID-19. A Morning Consult/Politico poll finds that 74% of voters believe that the federal government should provide financial support to the states during the pandemic

(U) **Is TikTok Escaping Scrutiny About How It's Handling Coronavirus Misinformation?** Representatives from all of the major social media giants are gathering to meet with lawmakers in the United Kingdom tomorrow to discuss the fight against coronavirus misinformation on the web. But one thing will be absent: no one from TikTok, the [world's most downloaded social media app](#), will be present.

TikTok is exploding in popularity and has been installed more than 100 million times in the past year. The platform, which allows users to share short 15-second videos, has grown even more during the past two months, when COVID-19 has landed a huge percentage of the world at home and sheltering in place. And yet, perhaps because of its newness or its medium, has not faced much scrutiny regarding misinformation and fake news in comparison to other industry leaders.

The Chinese-owned app was founded in 2012 and has since grown at a rapid rate across the globe. And while it has been a success, it has been plagued with issues related to those who want to use the platform's reach to take advantage of others. Dating scams, conspiracy theories, impersonator accounts, and political untruths abound as individuals and groups find ways to wreck havoc, make money, or influence others on the app. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **Russia's COVID-19 "Humanitarian Aid" to the U.S. Comes at a Price:** Amid the global outbreak of the new coronavirus, several undemocratic countries have been trying to take advantage of the crisis and depict themselves as accountable players on the international scene. The Kremlin recently did so by hailing its sale of medical supplies to the United States in early April as generous humanitarian aid.

Western leaders have interpreted Russia's willingness to dispatch its medical personnel and supplies abroad amid the COVID-19 crisis as a shrewd propaganda and PR move. In a [letter](#) to the President of the European Commission on April 3, 2020, several members of the European Parliament stated that the Kremlin's recent assistance to Italy may be an attempt to have E.U. sanctions on Russia "reviewed or lifted." The motives behind Russian aid are also called into question in the light of a recent [European External Action Service report](#) stating that the Kremlin is sowing coronavirus-related disinformation in the West. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Bolsonaro Supporters Amplify Positive COVID-19 Narratives on Facebook:** Articles about patients who recovered from COVID-19 and pieces arguing the pandemic will end sooner than expected are among the most engaged-with content about the pandemic on Facebook in Brazil. Rather than simply indicating that Brazilians are interacting with optimistic news about the crisis, the data suggests that articles supporting the argument made by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro that the disease is not that serious are getting more traction than those expressing more concern about the pandemic. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

#### **(U) 4/29 Reporting**

(U) **Trolls and Bots are Flooding Social Media with Disinformation Encouraging States to End Quarantine:** Christopher Bouzy, the founder of bot tracking platform [Bot Sentinel](#), conducted a Twitter analysis for Business Insider and found bots and trolls are using hashtags like [#ReOpenNC](#), [#ReopenAmericaNow](#), [#StopTheMadness](#), [#ENDTHESHUTDOWN](#), and [#OperationGridlock](#) to spread disinformation. According to Bouzy, the bots and trolls are spreading conspiracy theories about Democrats wanting to hurt the economy to make Trump look bad, Democrats trying to take away

people's civil liberties, and Democrats trying to prevent people from voting. The accounts are also using **false data** to underplay the threat of the coronavirus.

"Inauthentic accounts are amplifying disinformation and inaccurate statistics and sharing false information as a reason to reopen the country," Bouzy says. "Many of these accounts are also spreading bizarre conspiracy theories about Democrats using COVID-19 as a way to take away American freedoms and prevent Americans from voting."

When reached for comment, a Twitter spokesperson disputed the idea that the company is allowing bots and trolls to spread disinformation on its platform, and criticized Bot Sentinel's methodology, which uses publicly available information from the company. Ironically, Twitter pointed to its bi-yearly "**transparency report**," which supposedly uses unreleased private data, as a superior indicator of bot activity, but it only provides general figures on how many spam challenges and reports the platform sees. (Source: Business Insider, Bot Sentinel)

(U//FOUO); **FEMA Social Listening:**

- States across the nation are in various stages of reopening or continuing to stay-at-home. This continues to cause some concern over the lack of consistency in policies and procedures being used to reopen state economies. While people are cautiously optimistic about some stay-at-home orders being lifted, local officials caution that strict social distancing and hand washing guidance must still be followed to avoid future outbreaks.
- There continues to be wide discussion about masks, similar to the stay-at-home orders each state and city is handling the wearing of masks and face coverings differently. Most people support wearing them in public, but some locations are stopping short of making it a requirement.
- Traditional media is strongly interested in how the general public is adhering or dismissing social distancing guidelines, following certain states loosening stay-at-home guidelines. News discussion continues to highlight recent projection models that warn of a possible second surge in positive cases due to states' limited ability to conducting mass testing on a frequent basis.
- Traditional press is equally focused on potential pork, poultry, and beef shortages due to meat-processing plant closings and employee illnesses. There is mixed reaction from federal officials, economists, and farmers on if the food supply chain is vulnerable.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- As more states make announcements about their reopening, there are growing concerns about mixed messaging between federal, state, and local guidance on reopening.
  - Many feel some states are moving ahead of federal guidelines and reopening too soon.
    - With many states entering regional pacts with neighboring states, some question if federal guidelines will be followed or if states will create their own.

- A growing number are worried that political and economic factors have more influence on these decisions than public safety and health data.
- Parents strongly disagree with comments made during yesterday's call with state governors that indicate states should begin to consider reopening schools before the summer.
  - Many people understand this would improve childcare issues and make returning to work easier. However, most would prefer to keep children at home longer out of an abundance of caution and concern for their safety.
- The conversation about mass testing continues to increase following yesterday's White House press briefing. Most are in favor of more testing and demand increased federal support.

Several national media outlets are reporting that the administration received more than a dozen warnings about COVID-19 in January and February. Many are responding to the news with outrage and distrust of the federal response, saying the administration downplayed the threat of COVID-19 during those months. (example 1, example 2, example 3)

- Concerns about the mental health safety of front line workers have resurfaced after news that a New York ER doctor committed suicide. People are expressing concern that frontline healthcare workers do not have enough access to mental health resources and are not being given enough support.
- National media outlets report that the Vice President did not wear a mask when touring the Mayo Clinic. The news coverage and public reaction are critical of this action and point out that it goes against CDC guidance and the hospital's policy on mask use.

**(U) Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report on Covid-19 Disinformation:** Bowing to heavy pressure from Beijing, European Union officials softened their criticism of China this week in a report documenting how governments push disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, according to documents, emails and interviews.

Worried about the repercussions, European officials first delayed and then rewrote the document in ways that diluted the focus on China, a vital trading partner — taking a very different approach than the confrontational stance adopted by the Trump administration.

The initial European Union report, obtained by The New York Times, was not particularly strident: a routine roundup of publicly available information and news reports.

It cited Beijing's efforts to curtail mentions of the virus's origins in China, in part by blaming the United States for spreading the disease internationally. It noted that Beijing had criticized France as slow to respond to the pandemic and had pushed false accusations that French politicians used racist slurs against the head of the World Health Organization. The report also highlighted Russian efforts to promote false health information and sow distrust in Western institutions.

"China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image," the initial report said. "Both overt and covert tactics have been observed."

But China moved quickly to block the document's release, and the European Union pulled back. The report had been on the verge of publication, until senior officials ordered revisions to soften the language. (Source: The New York Times)

(U) **YouTube Expands Fact-Check Panels to US Amid Widespread Coronavirus Misinformation:** Amid the onslaught of [coronavirus](#) misinformation, YouTube announced on Tuesday an expansion of its fact-check panels to the United States.

The video-sharing platform owned by [Google](#) launched the service last year in Brazil and India. It provides verified, third-party fact-checked information panels and articles regarding pertinent topics. The fact checks only show up when people search for specific claims. For example, a query such as "Does ibuprofen treat COVID-19?" would turn up a fact check, but something general about the drug itself probably would not. (Source: Fox News, YouTube)

(U) **Groups Spread Misinformation About Coronavirus Vaccine Before One Even Exists:** A coronavirus vaccine is still months or years away, but groups that peddle misinformation about immunizations are already taking aim, potentially eroding confidence in what could be humanity's best chance to defeat the virus.

In recent weeks, vaccine opponents have made several unsubstantiated claims, including allegations that vaccine trials will be dangerously rushed or that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious diseases expert, is blocking cures to enrich vaccine makers. They've also falsely claimed that Microsoft founder Bill Gates wants to use a vaccine to inject microchips into people — or to cull 15% of the world's population.

From the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, vaccine skeptics have tailored several long-standing claims about vaccine safety to fit the current outbreak. When the first U.S. case was announced in January, some alleged the coronavirus was manufactured and that patents for it could be found online. Thousands of deaths later, vaccine opponents are endorsing unapproved treatments, second-guessing medical experts and pushing fears about mandatory vaccinations. They've also latched onto protests against stay-at-home orders in the U.S.

Last week, an anti-vaccine activist was arrested in Idaho after repeatedly refusing police orders to leave a playground closed because of the pandemic. The woman, who was there with other families, is affiliated with two groups that protested at the Idaho Statehouse against stay-at-home orders. Facebook groups formed to organize the protests have been peppered with vaccine hoaxes and myths. Perhaps no one plays a bigger role in the conspiracy theories than Gates, who is funding vaccine research. The online movement has centered concerns around a COVID-19 vaccine on false claims that Gates is planning to microchip people with the vaccine or use it to reduce the world's population. (Source: CBS Boston)

**(U) 4/28 Reporting**

(U) **Covid-19 5G Theories Are Most Common Misinformation in UK:** Unfounded theories linking Covid-19 to 5G technology are the most common example of online misinformation in the UK, an Ofcom survey suggests.

The media regulator said 50% of respondents had seen some examples of misinformation during the third week of lockdown - up from 46% in week one.

Of those, half had seen the disproven 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory, it said. There are concerns the false claims prompted people to set communication masts set on fire across the UK.

A spokesman for industry body Mobile UK told BBC News there had been "more than 50" of these arson attacks but fewer in recent days. Claims 5G spreads coronavirus or weakens people's immune systems, making them susceptible to it, have been denounced as "complete rubbish" by scientists.

There will likely be a flood of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories if and when a vaccine for coronavirus is made available. (Source: BBC)

**(U//FOUO) European External Action Service Disinformation on COVID-19 Information Environment Assessment****(U//FOUO) Key findings**

- COVID-19-related disinformation continues to proliferate widely on social media, with increasing numbers of reports highlighting direct harm to the health of citizens and public security.
- Russian official sources and state-controlled media and social media channels have been running a coordinated campaign across EU Member States and neighbouring regions promoting false health information and disinformation about the EU and its partners
- Reports indicate that China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image. Both overt and covert tactics have been observed.
- Disinformation networks linked to the Iranian Government have been exploiting the pandemic to frame "the West" and attack international sanctions.
- Analysis by EEAS Stratcom and external groups shows that highly harmful disinformation about COVID-19 is going particularly viral in smaller media markets within and outside the EU, where tech companies face lower incentives to take adequate counter-measures.
- The EU working with international partners, both inside the EU and globally, to step up its response to malign influence campaigns and COVID-19-related disinformation, including in the context of the EU Rapid Alert System.



(U//FOUO) **Russia:** EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Official Russian sources and state media continue running a coordinated campaign with the twofold aim of undermining in the EU and its crisis response, and to sow confusion about the origins health implications of COVID-19.
- The campaign mostly builds on open source media and social media channels, with some indications of covert behavior.
- The campaign exposes coordination across EU Member States and the wider Neighborhood.
- Kremlin-backed disinformation on covid-19 continues to proliferate widely on social media even if it contradicts official WHO guidance and the content policies of social media companies.
- Potential harm is assessed to be high, as conspiracy theories and false health information have been proven to negatively impact health behavior.

(U//FOUO) Russian state-sponsored media and related outlets continue to share misleading and deceptive health information around COVID-19 with international audiences. Much of this disinformation directly contradicts the WHO's official guidance, as well as the content policies of online platforms. Nonetheless, most of the health-endangering content EEAS Stratcom identified continues to proliferate widely on social media services such as Twitter and Facebook. Google and other ads-delivery services continue to monetize and incentivize harmful health disinformation by hosting paid ads on respective websites. The most common narratives include,

- Disinformation around disease prevention, including anti-vaccination narratives
- Disinformation around COVID-19 cures
- Disinformation seeking to downplay the pandemic

(U//FOUO) **China:** EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Continued and coordinated push by official Chinese sources to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic
- High level of coordination between different parts of the Chinese system in messaging and amplification of messages across different languages and communication channels
- Use of both overt and covert tactics
- Continued assertiveness by Chinese officials, including direct targeting of the French Government with disinformation messages
- New domestic restrictions on COVID-19 related research in China
- Potential harm is assessed as medium, as the larger share of Chinese propaganda and disinformation efforts has received scrutiny in international media. However, polls in certain countries show China is perceived as more helpful in fighting the pandemic than the EU. (Source: EEAS)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening Report**

- Discussions about state and local reopenings remained the dominant topic of traditional and social media conversations. Many are concerned about reopening too soon and continue to call

for widespread testing, but financial pressure has many eager to return to work despite worries of COVID-19 exposure.

- An increasing number of individuals and news outlets are discussing economic issues and worries following concerns of mixed messaging from two White House economic advisors. Many are doubtful that the economy will bounce back quickly and fear worsening financial conditions for businesses, individuals, and governments.
- FEMA conversation has increased significantly and is being driven by a national news outlet reporting that FEMA diverted a PPE shipment that was badly needed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Reactions are almost entirely negative, with many expressing strong distrust of the agency and asking for an explanation as to why so many similar reports keep emerging regarding FEMA's role in seizures and diverted supplies.
- Traditional news media has increasingly focused on food supply chain stability, following warnings from a major food supply company.
- National broadcast news media is highly focused on states' economic conditions as some governors resume limited economic activity. There is particular focus on what mitigation measures, testing supplies, and assurance is needed in order to safely reopen.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Across the country, many local news outlets are trying to take the pulse of their communities through informal social media polls to better understand how people are feeling about actions being taken by state and local officials. These polls are drawing an enormous amount of engagement as they provide a forum for people to share their concerns about reopenings or mask orders.
- Many are reacting with concern and confusion following different economic predictions from two senior White House economic advisors. One shared a more concerning outlook, predicted unemployment rates as high as 16% and made comparisons to the Great Depression.
- The other described the situation more optimistically by predicting the economy could reopen in May and June, and that the economy would "really bounce back" in Q3.
- People are concerned about their finances – worried about being out of work but also worried that if businesses reopen too soon they will have to choose between work and exposure.
  - Many are also voicing frustration about the status of their stimulus checks, with people expressing confusion about the timelines and process.
- There are increasing concerns about the integrity of the food supply chain as Tyson Foods warns that "millions of pounds of meat" will disappear from the supply chain as processing plants are forced to close.
- Many first responders who have recovered from COVID-19 have started returning to work, with fears about whether or not they are immune to SARS-CoV-2, and what reinfection might look like.

(U) **WhatsApp Viral Message Forwarding Drops 70% After New Limits To Stop Coronavirus**

**Misinformation:** WhatsApp has seen a 70% drop in the number of viral forwarded messages being sent, three weeks after the Facebook-own messaging app imposed a limit on shared messages to halt the spread of coronavirus misinformation.

Whatsapp imposed a Highly Forwarded Message limit on April 7, in response to a "significant increase" in the number of forwarded messages, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. The limit means

people can only forward these viral messages to just one chat, instead of five, to curtail false information being spread widely about the virus. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **Pro-China Trolls Use Fake Accounts to Hound Foreign Media Over Coronavirus:** Patriotic Chinese trolls have been using fake Twitter accounts to hound foreign media companies about their reporting of the coronavirus outbreak.

According to an analysis of social media trends released on Thursday by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a network of bloggers operating independently of the Chinese government have targeted outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, BBC and the US government-funded non-profit Radio Free Asia with a barrage of criticism and fake news.

The Twitter accounts have also apparently sought to increase tensions between Taiwan and Beijing. Although many media outlets were being trolled by Chinese accounts well before 2020, “the main campaign appears to have picked up steam around mid-March as a loose network of Twitter accounts designed to mimic and harass Western media”, according to the Institute's researchers

Some troll accounts appear to have been mocked up to resemble the Chinese-language accounts of outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and the BBC, the researchers concluded.



Co-ordinated 'apologies' from troll accounts posing as Taiwanese users. ASPI

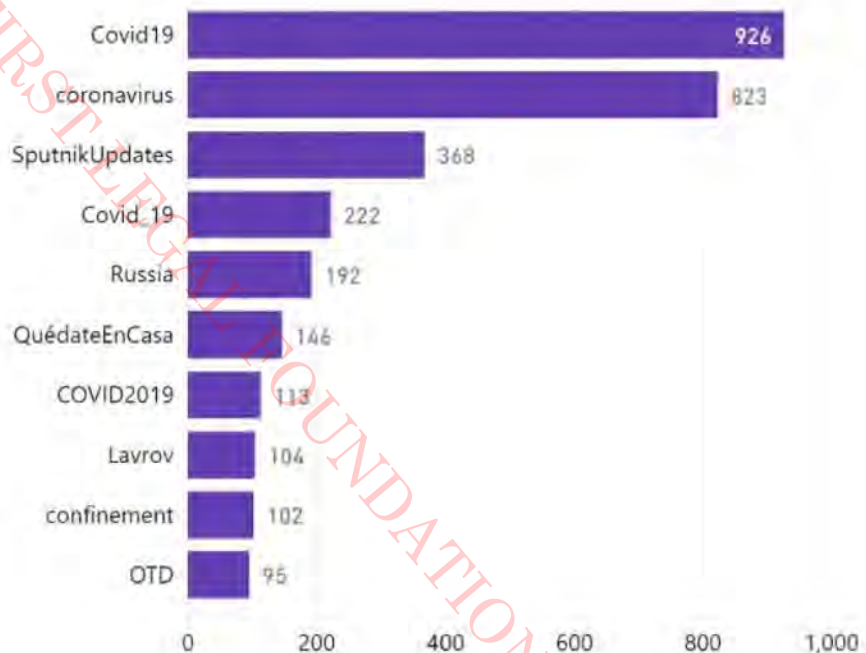
(Source: The Age, Australian Strategic Policy Institute)

(U) **Russia-State Media Toplines:** The leading topic of the Russian media ecosystem last week was once again the coronavirus. The virus has now occupied this position for 14 straight weeks. Basic news updates on the pandemic accounted for much of this coverage. Some content addressed anti-lockdown protests around the world, coming down on both sides of the issue—RT in particular focused on the perspectives of the protestors themselves. In non-coronavirus output, articles on U.S.-Iran tensions saw significant engagement on websites, while the steady drip of updates related to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on RT YouTube channels continued.

## Twitter

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — April 18-24:

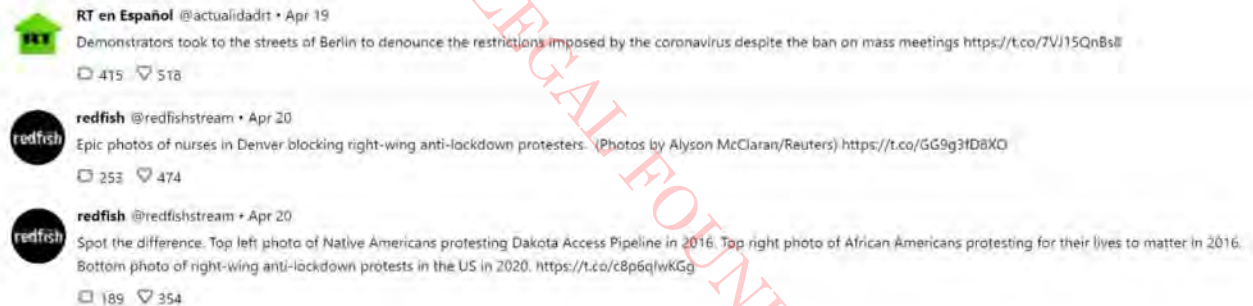


The three accounts that tend to receive very high engagement regardless of topic (@actualidadrt, @rtultimahora, and @sputnik\_tr) posted all but one of the top overall tweets by engagement metrics, mainly providing basic news about the coronavirus and oil prices.

The top overall tweets from accounts—besides the three high engagement accounts—included four related to anti-lockdown protests or lockdown violations in the West. These posts included one from Redfish, a Berlin-based media company supported by the Kremlin, featuring a video compilation of clips from anti-lockdown protests across the United States and asked if the people shown were a “capitalist death cult.” RT seemed to focus on the sentiments of the protestors, while left-leaning Redfish took the opportunity to make systemic critiques of problems in the United States, characterizing the protestors as the embodiment of these issues. RT also covered reports of overzealous police responses in Europe:



Around 270 tweets directly mentioned protests, demonstrations, or rallies during this period (note that this tally excludes tweets that reference such events more obliquely or through images, and it may include some false positives like diplomatic protests). Examples included:



(The above tweet sought to draw attention to police responses to the listed protests.)

#### *Russian government-funded websites:*

Out of about 1,300 articles from Russian government-funded news websites collected on the dashboard last week, a little over 700 mentioned “virus” in the first 200 words. Continuing a trend, much of this content consisted of basic news updates. However, two of the top four stories based on Facebook shares covered heightened [tensions](#) between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf, including the top story.

Other top stories and opinion pieces highlighted studies questioning the timeline and mortality rate of the coronavirus pandemic and anti-lockdown protests in the United States, and they criticized U.S. officials’ “legitimiz[ation of] Covid-19’s China lab origins conspiracy theory.” RT appeared to focus heavily on the protestors’ anger. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Russian-Backed Media Coverage of “Liberate” Protests:** About 30 articles covered protests around the world related to the coronavirus, primarily anti-lockdown demonstrations. Notable articles on U.S. protests included:

**“‘Open the economy – I need to feed my family!’ Will lockdown fatigue spiral into destructive mass protests?”** Op-ed, RT, April 22, 2020.

*“As the world races against time to beat Covid-19, many feel the lockdown has been unfair and over-the-top. Now, anger and frustration threatens to snowball into something that makes a pandemic look like a picnic by comparison. For many Westerners, many of whom are living paycheck to paycheck, the ‘shelter-at-home’ order in response to the coronavirus feels like a death sentence, especially if accompanied by the loss of a job. Now, many people, despite lockdown orders, are beginning to vent their anger on the streets.”*

**“US Anti-Quarantine Protests Win Billionaire Support as Bludgeon Against the Left – Professor,”** Opinion, Sputnik News, April 21, 2020.

*“Protests last week in several US states against what residents claimed to be draconian measures imposed by Democratic governors to curb the spread of COVID-19 have gotten support from high places as a right-wing weapon against a perceived threat of left-wing ideas, political science professor Jodi Dean told Sputnik.”*

**“Facebook CENSORS anti-quarantine protests in US as ‘harmful misinformation,’”** RT, April 20, 2020.

*“Americans protesting their states’ coronavirus lockdown measures won’t be able to organize protests on Facebook any longer, after the Silicon Valley firm declared them ‘harmful misinformation.’”*

Sputnik also put out several radio shows that commented on the U.S. protests, with titles such as **“Trump Eggs on Anti-Government Protests”** and **“As Leftists Uplift Essential Workers, the Right Works to Endanger Them,”** both from April 20.

In reporting on other countries’ protests, the most noteworthy articles included one detailing what was described as a “strong police response” to protests in Berlin and, a bit unusually, two on protests in Russia:

**“WATCH Berlin police forcefully disperse unsanctioned protest against coronavirus lockdown,”** RT, April 18, 2020.

*“Hundreds of activists gathered in central Berlin, defying government Covid-19 lockdown measures and arguing the state is heading for “authoritarian rule.” The gathering was met with a strong police response.”*

**“Russians ‘take to the streets’ ONLINE in protest over coronavirus measures,”** Russia Beyond, April 22, 2020.

*“The recent ban on public gatherings, social distancing and self-isolation rules in Russia has people protesting by way of Yandex’s satellite navigation app. Modern problems require modern solutions, they*

say. At least, that's what some people across Russia decided having had enough of the government's self-isolation regime. The citizens of more than 10 Russian cities took to 'Yandex.Navigator' and 'Yandex.Maps' – the Russian search giant's GPS apps – to create huge chat sessions and mark every protester on the map, together with a small comment."

"Protesters gather in Russia's N. Ossetia-Alania to demand cancellation of self-isolation rules," RT, April 20, 2020.

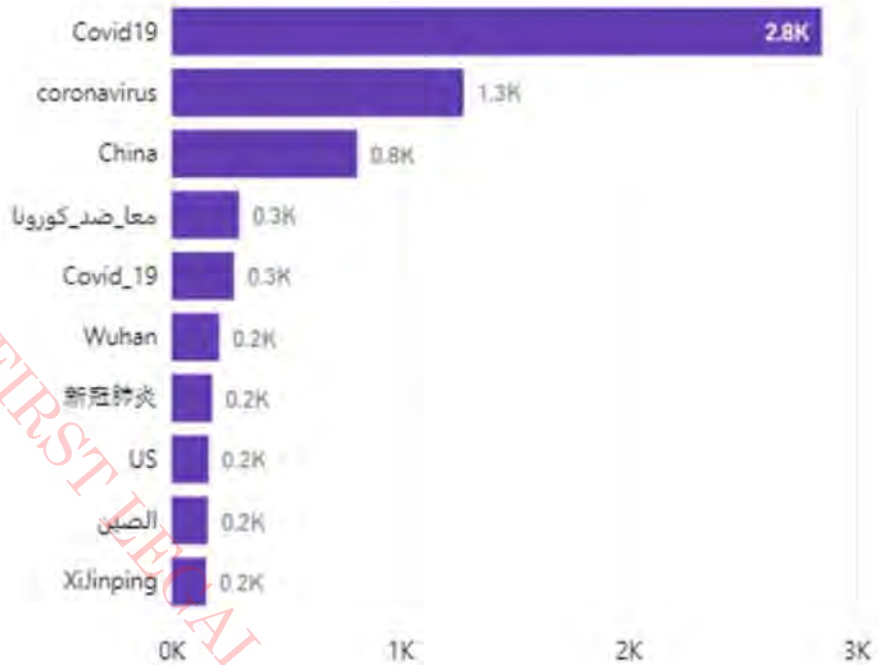
"Hundreds of protesters – most of them unmasked – gathered on Monday in Vladikavkaz, the capital of the southern Russian Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, to demand the cancellation of the self-isolation regime. The unauthorized meeting took place near the building of the local government despite restrictions, which will last till April 30." (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **China-State Media Toplines:** Chinese state media outlets continue to focus on the coronavirus epidemic. As the war of words between China and the United States has escalated, Chinese state media has focused increasingly on deflecting blame onto the United States and highlighting what it characterizes as the United States's failure to respond effectively to the virus. This included messaging contrasting China's embrace of a multilateral, WHO-centered approach with what state media characterized as U.S. attacks on the organization and multilateralism itself. Many tweets and state media pieces also spotlighted pain, dissatisfaction, and dissent in the United States caused by the epidemic, with a particular focus on protests over coronavirus lockdowns.

Twitter

Chinese state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — April 18-24:



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 18-24 (figures as of 3pm April 24). The coronavirus continued to dominate all top hashtags; every top hashtag was either directly related to the virus or promoted epidemic-related coverage (“XiJinping”, for example, covered the Chinese Communist Party leader’s virus-related messaging).

Many of the most engaged-with tweets for the past week sought to cast the United States’ coronavirus response in a negative light.



- 
**Hu Xijin 胡锡进** @huxijin\_gt • Apr 18  
 President Trump couldn't understand why China's death toll is much lower than US's. It's because Chinese govt has adopted scientific&effective control measures.Loose political system of the US allows more than 4000 people die of pandemic every day. Americans are so good tempered.  
 458 2,562
- 
**Hua Chunying 华春莹** @spokespersonchn • Apr 20  
 Right decisions can only be built on Facts. Some people in the US should know that their enemy is the virus, not China.  
 323 2,359
- 
**Hu Xijin 胡锡进** @huxijin\_gt • Apr 18  
 Daily COVID-19 deaths in the US have topped 4000, close to the global daily death toll barring the US. Trump administration has been seriously negligent in their duty and should be subject to criminal liability. Hope the US law won't condone such dereliction of duty.  
 358 2,025
- 
**CGTN** @cgtnofficial • Apr 20  
 - When H1N1 influenza in the U.S spread to 214 countries - When AIDS first found in the U.S. in the 1980s - When financial turmoil in the U.S. became a global crisis in 2008 Did anyone ask the U.S. to pay for it? Chinese FM spokesperson refutes the U.S. call for compensation <https://t.co/XOFsEiTU5y>  
 466 1,071

Two of China's top foreign ministry spokespeople, Zhao Lijian and Chunying Hua, also retweeted an article from U.S. outlet The GrayZone calling the theory of coronavirus escaping from a Wuhan research lab the "Trump administration's Iraqi WMD [moment]," a nearly identical take to the RT op-ed highlighted in the above Russia report.

Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 Retweeted

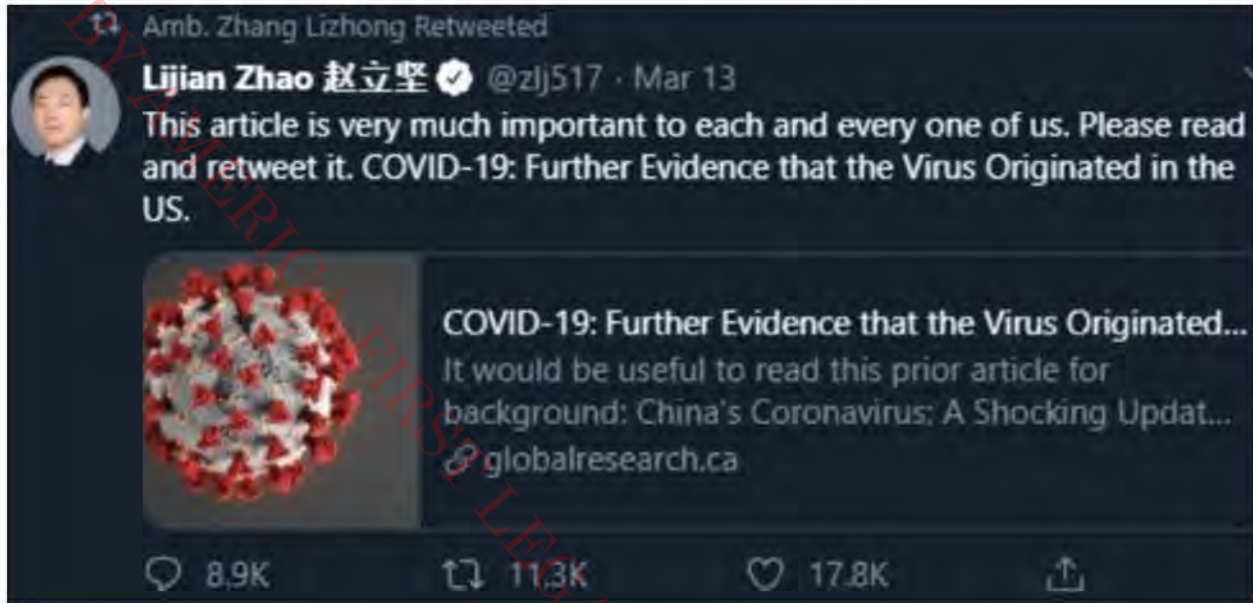
 **Hua Chunying 华春莹** @SpokespersonCHN • Apr 23



How a Trump media dump mainstreamed Chinese lab coronavirus cons...  
 A conspiracy theory about Covid-19 escaping from the Wuhan Institute of Virology is the Trump administration's Iraqi WMD. And the...  
[thegrayzone.com](https://thegrayzone.com)

158 201 1.1K

Lijian amplifying a tweet criticizing U.S. officials for pushing a “conspiracy theory” about the Coronavirus escaping from a Chinese research lab is deeply ironic, given that Lijian previously tweeted a parallel theory that claimed the Coronavirus originated in a U.S. research lab.



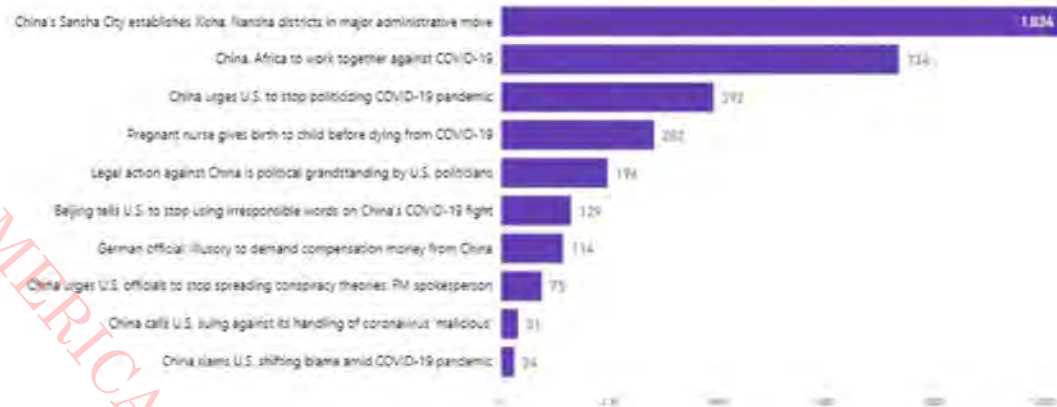
Other top tweets focused on other countries praising China for its assistance during the epidemic, including one highlighting praise from Vladimir Putin. Although the tweets frame this assistance as a gift, it is typically masks purchased on a commercial basis.



One important change from previous weeks was the appearance of Xi Jinping in the top hashtags. The Chinese Communist Party’s supreme leader made a public inspection tour of poverty alleviation work in Shaanxi Province on Tuesday. Significantly, he was not wearing a protective facemask, nor were any of the people in his staged photo shoots. This is a marked departure from Xi’s relatively few public appearances since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak.

## Websites

Chinese government-funded websites:



(Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Russian Coronavirus Aid to Italy: The Mask Falls Off:** Since February of this year, as the coronavirus pandemic has swept the globe, China has been engaging in what media commentators are calling “**mask diplomacy**”—the sale or donation of medical supplies to countries battling the terrible disease. Russia seemed poised to do the same. On March 22, the Russian Ministry of Defense **announced** it would be sending medical specialists and supplies to hard-hit Italy as aid from the Russian people. As is often the case with the Russian government’s goodwill campaigns, Russia’s motives were not entirely altruistic. Russia’s aid mission to Italy was in reality a self-interested attempt to use such donations as fodder for information operations to exacerbate existing divisions within the European Union and NATO, portraying the two alliances as weak and uncaring about Italians’ suffering.

At first, things seemed to turn out quite well for the Kremlin. Far-right Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio hailed the aid, and front-page headlines in *La Repubblica* **proclaimed** that the crisis had “redrawn the map of Italy’s allies.” Russia had previously **invested** in its relationship with Italy, going so far as to attempt to surreptitiously **fund** a major Italian political party, and it considers the country a **weak point** both in NATO and in the EU. All this in mind, Russia saw the contribution of medical gear—during a time when the country appeared to have its own coronavirus epidemic **under control**—as a sound investment.

Things went quickly downhill, however, when the supplies arrived in Italy. According to unnamed high level sources **quoted** by *La Stampa*, 80 percent of the supplies were “useless,” and the shipments were “merely a pretext” to place a Russian **military presence** in Italy. This reporting by Coda Story and *La Stampa* caused a **furious backlash** in Russia, with Russian General Igor Konashenkov going so far as to issue a threatening statement against *La Stampa* journalist Jacopo Iacoboni on **Facebook**, quoting in Latin from **Ecclesiastes 10:8**, “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.”

This bluster highlights the **self-interested** aspects of the aid mission, which Sergio Germani of Gino Germani Institute for Social Sciences and Strategic Studies in Rome **called** “a half-propaganda, half-intelligence operation” meant to “to strengthen anti-EU feelings and to reinforce the impression that the EU is crumbling, to make propaganda gains and gather intelligence at the heart of NATO.” As ASD’s **Hamilton 2.0 tracker** has illustrated, Russian state media has made much of this aid to Italy, emphasizing, for example, local pro-Russia **politicians’** praise for the shipments and **criticism** of the **EU and NATO** as unwilling or unable to provide aid to one of their own member states.

Russia may continue to troll the West with these small shipments of aid, as it has done recently with the **United States**. Low-cost, high-reward information operations that exacerbate divisions in the EU and NATO have played a **consistent role** in Russia’s authoritarian playbook, and Russia’s response to the coronavirus pandemic crisis, and its ultimate goals, to drive a wedge between EU and NATO member states and aggravate existing divisions in the alliances, remain the same. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

#### **(U) 4/27 Reporting**

**(U//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE): Suspected Arsonists Attempt to Damage 5G Cell Tower in Portland, OR.** On 10 April 2020, suspected arsonists set fire to electrical conduit pipe and associated cell tower component metal cabinetry located at the base of a major cell phone carrier’s cell tower in Portland, Oregon. First responders found remnants of gas in empty water bottles at the scene. The fire did not compromise the structural integrity of the cell tower.

The incident comes amidst a global increase in conspiracy theories and online misinformation linking the COVID-19 pandemic to 5G infrastructure.

**(U//FOUO) Incidents Nationwide Indicate Domestic Terrorists Also Using COVID-19 as an Impetus for Violence:** To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has driven at least two individuals motivated in whole or in part by domestic terrorist ideologies to attempt or threaten violence in the Homeland. These incidents indicate that COVID-19 is serving as the impetus for some domestic terrorist plots.

**(U//FOUO)** Domestic terrorists and other violent extremist actors probably will continue to threaten violence in the Homeland in response to the COVID-19 pandemic until the virus is contained and the normal routine of US societal life resumes. As the COVID-19 threat expands throughout the United States, the violent extremist threat will also continue to evolve, potentially increasing in frequency and severity. The emphasis on social distancing, closures of many businesses, and cessation of popular leisure activities nationwide precludes most mass gathering events—historically appealing targets for both international and domestic terrorists. However, the pandemic has created a new source of anger and frustration for some individuals. As a result, violent extremist plots will likely involve individuals seeking targets symbolic to their personal grievances.

(U//FOUO) **Florida Incidents Highlight Potential for COVID-19 to Drive Violence as Pandemic**

**Continues:** Recent incidents and arrests nationwide illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic is driving violent actors—both non-ideologically and ideologically motivated—to threaten violence. Two non-ideological examples occurred in Florida where one individual exploited the pandemic to spread fear while targeting a seemingly random location, while the other individual threatened people or entities perceived as having a direct role in fighting the pandemic.

(U//FOUO) On 29 March, an individual in Jacksonville, Florida sprayed the entrance of a local business with an aerosol substance from a spray bottle labeled “COVID-19” and allegedly told employees and patrons that they were infected with the virus, according to a Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office press statement posted on social media.

(U//FOUO) The incident and motivation remain under law enforcement investigation. The individual was arrested on federal weapons of mass destruction-related charges and has been released from jail on a \$15,000 bond, according to the same sources.

(U) **Murder Threats Against UK Telecoms Engineers Over 5G:** Telecoms engineers have told Radio 1 Newsbeat they’re being threatened and harassed by people who believe they’re working on 5G, which has been wrongly linked to coronavirus.

But the union and trade body representing thousands of workers across the UK say they’ve had around 120 cases of abuse reported to them. The reports have included threats of extreme violence.

"We've actually had cases where people have been threatened with being stabbed, threatened with physical violence and in some cases actually threatened with murder," says Andy Kerr, deputy general secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). (Source: BBC)

(U) **Chlorine Manufacturer Peddles Dangerous COVID-19 Chlorine Treatment to NRM Chem Sector Partners:** The Chemical Sector notified the CFI TF about chlorine manufacturing company CONVE & AVS Inc’s. attempt to promote a potentially dangerous COVID-19 treatment to NRM chem sector partners. The company claims without evidence that they can treat COVID-19 via a chlorine-based inhalant. The company posted a corresponding video to YouTube of the alleged “treatment.”

The CFI TF has flagged the video for YouTube and Google for review. DHS and chem sector partners have notified HHS and the CDC.

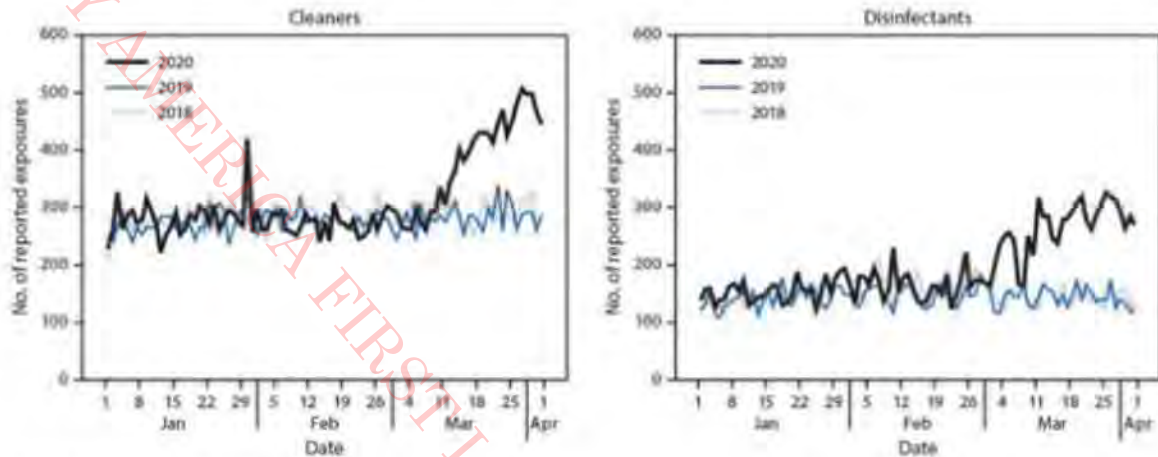
(U) **CDC Says Poison Hotlines See Spike From Cleaning Product Accidents Amid Virus:** From January to March, CDC said poison centers have received 45,550 exposure calls regarding cleaners and disinfectants. That represents a little over a 20% increase in calls from the same time period last year.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says [poison hotlines](#) have seen a spike from [cleaning product accidents](#) since the coronavirus outbreak.

CDC says although data doesn't provide a "definitive link" between exposures and COVID-19 cleaning efforts, "there appears to be a clear temporal association with increased use of these products."

(Source: CDC, ABC)

**FIGURE. Number of daily exposures to cleaners and disinfectants reported to U.S. poison centers — United States, 2019, and 2020\***



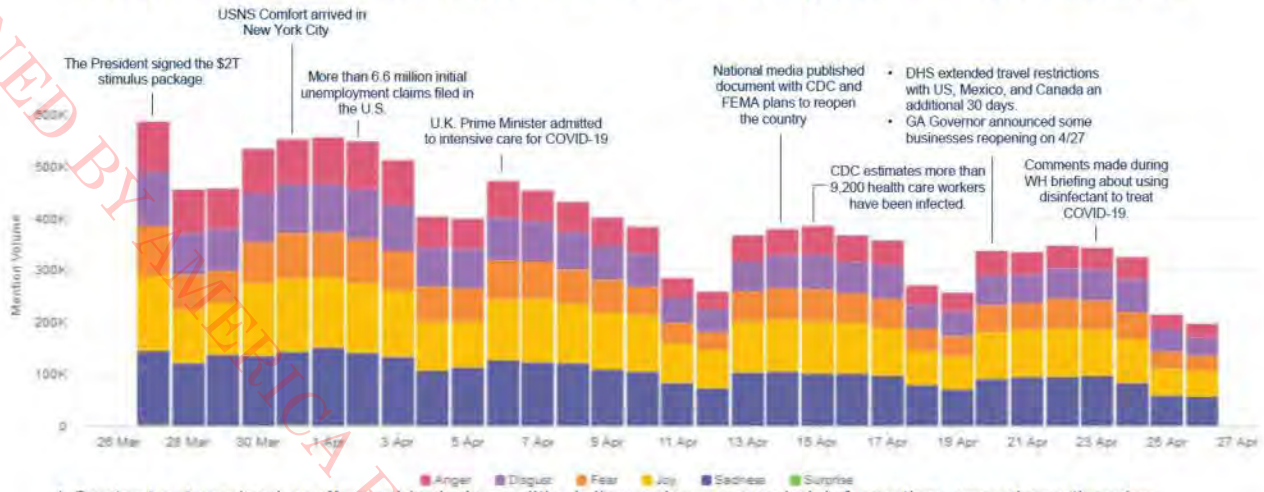
\* Excluding February 29, 2020.

† Increase in exposures to cleaners on January 29, 2020, came from an unintentional exposure to a cleaning agent within a school.

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Public conversation around COVID-19 on social media has once again slightly decreased since last week. This is the fifth week in a row of decreasing conversation.
- Sadness continues to be the most commonly expressed emotion. This category captured public conversation around the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, especially for New York City. It also captured conversation about economic hardship resulting from the stay at home orders and social distancing
- The disgust category mostly captured public conversation around the suggestion during a White House briefing that injecting disinfectant might be an effective approach to treating COVID-19
- Some of the conversation within the anger category has surrounded the lack of testing capacity to safely reopen and loosen restrictions

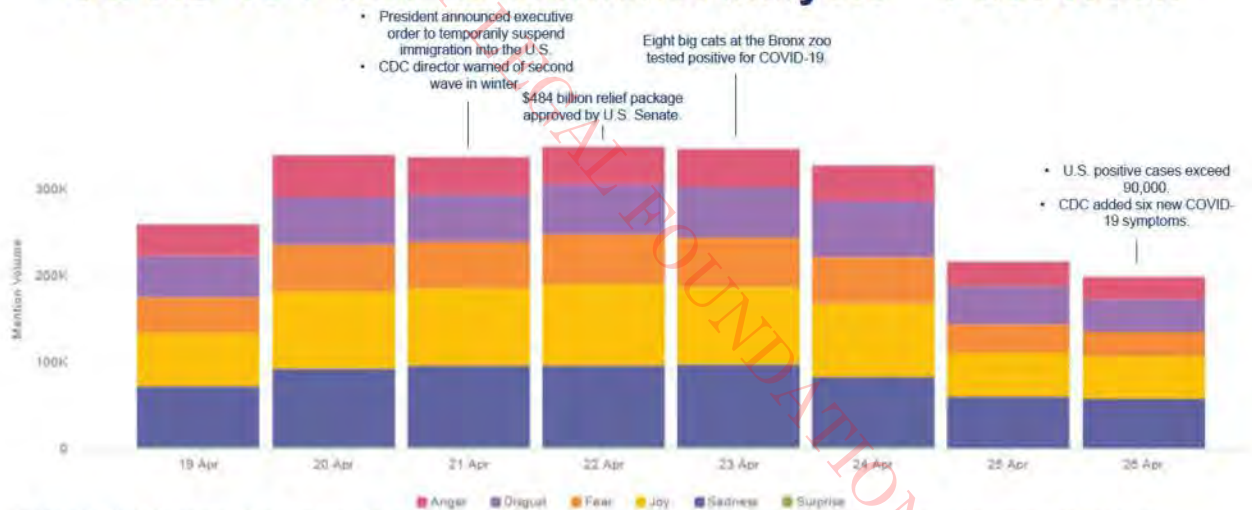
## COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Month



\* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.

(Graphic U//FOUO)

## COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Week



\* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.

(Graphic U//FOUO)

**(U) Posts Promoting Unproven Drugs Highlight Limits of Social Networks' Coronavirus Fight:** Posts selling unproven drug therapies to treat the novel coronavirus continued to surface on social networks over the last week, despite the companies' promises to promote public health and crack down on misleading information.

On Facebook, one account peddled hydroxychloroquine, the anti-malarial drug. The page, which has since been removed, pushed people to text a WhatsApp number to place an order. It was still live **days after** a study found the anti-malarial had no benefit and was linked to higher rates of death for Veterans Affairs patients hospitalized with the novel coronavirus.

Meanwhile on YouTube, a video promoted the sale of raw materials to make the drug. And another promoted sales in the United States of Avigan, a flu treatment [being tested](#) against covid-19.

Researchers fear they're starting to see the effects of the companies' staffing limitations. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Hospitals Around the World Are Being Targeted by Conspiracy Theorists:** In the midst of a global pandemic, conspiracy theorists have found yet another way to spread dangerous [disinformation and misinformation](#) about COVID-19, sowing seeds of doubts about its severity and denying the very existence of the pandemic.

Since March 28, conspiracy theorists...aka "[coronavirus deniers](#)" have been using the hashtag #FilmYourHospital to [encourage people](#) to visit local hospitals to take pictures and videos to "prove" that the COVID-19 pandemic is an elaborate hoax.

The premise for this conspiracy theory rests on the baseless assumption that if hospital parking lots and waiting rooms are empty then the pandemic must not be real or is not as severe as reported by health authorities and the media.

Of course, in reality, there is a simple explanation for why some hospital parking lots and waiting rooms might have been empty. As part of pandemic planning, many hospitals have banned visitors and doctors have had to postpone or cancel elective and non-urgent procedures to free up medical staff and resources. This is in keeping with expert [advice from the CDC](#) and other health authorities.

This empty-hospital conspiracy theory joins a parade of [false, unproven and misleading claims](#) about the virus that have been making the rounds on social media including allegations that [5G wireless technology](#) somehow plays a role in the spread of the COVID-19 virus or taking cocaine and drinking bleach might prevent or cure you of the virus. (Source: COVID-19 Misinfo.org)

#### **(U) 4/24 Reporting**

(U) **COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Continue to Spread and Thrive on Social Media:** According to a [new report from network analysis firm Graphika](#), social media is being used to spread coronavirus-related misinformation and even disinformation – as well as use of "conspiratorial hashtags." Graphika noted that it had begun a systematic analysis of narratives designed to stoke geopolitical tensions.

"Initial insights into the messaging being propagated by pro-Kremlin voices in various geographies indicate a focus on undermining trust in global institutions and drawing attention to the failures of other governments, predominantly the Chinese response," the report explained.



Where social media gives misinformation and outright disinformation a boost is that the right hashtag can help these topics go viral almost as quickly as an actual virus can spread. Common conspiracy hashtags, such as #coronahoax or #covid19hoax, are being used by conspiracy theorists around the world. Added with the right subject line and these find an audience like a virus seeks out a host. (Source: [Forbes](#))

(U) **Malicious forces creating 'perfect storm' of coronavirus disinformation:** The coronavirus crisis has sparked a “perfect storm” of global online disinformation, cyber-espionage and disruption, involving up to a dozen states but most prominently Russia and China, experts have warned. During a pandemic that has killed tens of thousands of people, analysts have witnessed a sharp rise in deliberate misinformation campaigns on social media, which have occurred in parallel with attempts to hack international organizations at the forefront of the coronavirus response. Senior executives from Facebook, Google and Twitter are scheduled to appear before UK MPs next Thursday to answer questions about the spread of coronavirus disinformation.

A report published by the EU on Friday accused Russia and China of targeting European citizens, including Britons, during the pandemic, and provided a range of examples. Echoing other experts, the bloc’s foreign affairs wing, the European external action service, said there had been a “proliferation” during the month of April. “Despite their potentially grave impact on public health, official and state-backed sources from various governments, including Russia and – to a lesser extent – China, have continued to widely target conspiracy narratives and disinformation both at public audiences in the EU and the wider neighbourhood,” the report said. (Source: [The Guardian](#))

(U) **Nearly 50% of Twitter Accounts Talking about Coronavirus Might Be Bots:** Nearly half the “people” talking about the coronavirus pandemic on Twitter are not actually people, but bots, according to new research from Carnegie Mellon University. And many of those bots are rapidly feeding Twitter with harmful, false story lines about the pandemic, including some inspiring real-world activity, such as the theory that 5G towers cause COVID-19, or state-sponsored propaganda from Russia and China that falsely claims the U.S. developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon or that American politicians are issuing “mandatory” lockdowns.

“We do see that a lot of bots are acting in ways that are consistent with the story lines that are coming out of Russia or China,” said Kathleen Carley, professor at Carnegie Mellon’s School of Computer Science’s Institute for Software Research. Researchers there found that 45.5% of users tweeting about the coronavirus have the characteristics of bots, such as tweeting more frequently than is humanly possible, or appearing to be in one country and then another a few hours later. Carley says that’s a massive jump from the 20% she’d expected based on previous analyses of bot activity around other major global news events and national disasters.

The Carnegie Mellon team identified more than 100 false narratives relating to coronavirus worldwide, which they divided into six different categories: cures or preventative measures, weaponization of the

virus, emergency responses, the nature of the virus (like children being immune to it), self-diagnosis methods, and feel-good stories, like dolphins returning to Venice's canals. (Source: [Vice](#))

(U) **NJOHSP Leads New Jersey's Efforts to Combat Spread of COVID-19 Disinformation:** The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (NJOHSP) is leading New Jersey's efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation, rumors, and scams that may impact residents and businesses throughout the State. NJOHSP is collaborating with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, New Jersey Regional Operations Intelligence Center, and New Jersey State Police to provide the public with guidance regarding false and fraudulent information and activity stemming from the pandemic. A webpage, "COVID-19 Rumor Control and Disinformation Updates," launched in mid-March is updated as new information becomes available.

The [webpage](#) features unclassified intelligence products on COVID-19 disinformation, details about scams that New Jersey residents and visitors might be susceptible to, and cybersecurity alerts regarding potential threats to individuals and businesses caused by the pandemic. Multiple foreign nations are leveraging the pandemic to sow anti-US sentiment and undermine the credibility of the United States. This includes nation-state actors such as China and Russia using disinformation campaigns via multiple mediums to alter the views of individuals and distort facts. Additionally, individuals and groups domestically are using false or misleading information about COVID-19 to target their perceived adversaries and conduct scams. (Source: [Insider NJ](#))

#### **(U) 4/23 Reporting**

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media Supports Anti-Stay-at-Home Protest Narratives, Though Scale of Amplification Limited for Now:** Russian state outlets seem to take the sides of demonstrators and strive to convey the image of the protests as an action aimed to reverse overly restrictive measures that are undermining people's constitutional rights and strangling the economy. From this perspective, the articles continuously report the opinions and comments of protesters, while the views of those who criticize the demonstrations are rarely and only partially represented

Russian-state media reporting focuses on the allegedly "draconian" or "dictatorial" nature of the U.S.'s COVID-19 response, presenting distorted and one-sided analysis to support this narrative. Nevertheless, the current scale and narrative harmonization across the Russian disinformation ecosystem is more limited than other ongoing Russian-backed COVID 19 disinformation narratives, such as conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus. (Source: [Eu vs. Disinfo](#); [RT](#); [Sputnik](#))

(U) **Facebook to Remove Some Anti-Stay-at-Home Protests:** Facebook will remove some posts on [anti-stay-at-home protests](#) being organized in California, New Jersey and Nebraska after consulting with officials in those states

Facebook is working to get answers from state governments in Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York as to whether anti-stay-at-home protests are also prohibited under their social distancing guidelines

"Unless government prohibits the event during this time, we allow it to be organized on Facebook," a Facebook spokesperson said. "For this same reason, events that defy government's guidance on social distancing aren't allowed on Facebook." (Source: CNN)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Engagement:** Recent cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation managed to generate a total of 36,534 shares, likes and comments on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit.

The most popular disinformation case this week was an article on RT Arabic, which tried to discredit the EU by making a wrong claim that it has not been helping its partners fight the coronavirus, while [China and Russia have rushed to help](#). This article received 9,900 likes on Facebook and its total volume of engagement was 10,400.

In second place came a pro-Kremlin article claiming that [Bill Gates might have had a hand in creating the coronavirus](#) and spreading the pandemic around the world, so that he could implant microchips in people's heads. The former Microsoft boss would do this to determine who has been tested for COVID-19 and to enforce mandatory vaccinations.

In third place landed a video published by a YouTube channel called [Ahi les Va](#). According to the video, a recent article in the *New York Times* used the Russian president as a scapegoat, claiming that he can be [blamed for problems of the US health system](#). However, the original piece in the *New York Times* only affirms that Russia has been promoting an anti-vaccination stance in the West. It also exposes the techniques the Kremlin has used to spread disinformation on health issues for over a decade. While this video received 4,400 engagements on Facebook and more than 800 engagements on Twitter, the YouTube video easily scored 296,542 views. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Twitter Will Remove Coronavirus Content that Could Lead to Offline Destruction of 5G**

**Telecommunications Infrastructure:** Ever since it first started rolling out, 5G skeptics have attempted to link the next-gen cellular technology to all manner of health issues. Most recently, it's become an easy scapegoat for the global COVID-19 pandemic, given the rapid rise of both.

Conspiracy theories have gained such a foothold that vigilantes have taken matters into their own hands by [destroying cell towers](#) in various European countries. In its latest bid to tamp down on the spread of false information pertaining to the novel coronavirus, Twitter today [expanded its COVID-19 guidance](#) to include the topic.

"We're prioritizing the removal of COVID-19 content when it has a call to action that could potentially cause harm," a spokesperson for the company told TechCrunch. "As we've said previously, we will not take enforcement action on every Tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about

COVID-19. Since introducing these new policies on March 18, we've removed more than 2,200 Tweets. As we've doubled down on tech, our automated systems have challenged more than 3.4 million accounts which were targeting discussions around COVID-19 with spammy or manipulative behaviors." (Source: Tech Crunch)

(U) **Fraudulent COVID-19 Contact Text Messages and Robocalls Circulate:** Fraudulent text messages saying people have come into contact with someone who's tested positive for Covid-19 are part of a nationwide scam currently circulating in multiple states. The fraudulent message then contains a website link that claims to provide information, but is embedded with malware, ransomware or other fraudulent methods to steal personal and financial information.

The FTC, the main national agency that tracks and responds to alleged consumer scams, [has already collected](#) more than 20,000 complaints from all 50 states related to coronavirus, according to data the agency released last week. Almost half of the complaints from consumers say they've lost money, at a midpoint of about \$560 per reported scam. (Source: CNN)

(U) **COVID-19 Misinformation Flourishes in Online Protest Groups:** Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of posts fly in the new Facebook groups daily.

The [coronavirus](#) numbers are fake, some of the social media videos claim. "Social distancing is the new way to control you, your family and your behavior," another commenter warns. Others say the pandemic is an overblown hoax.

The loose network of Facebook groups spurring protests of stay-at-home orders across the country have fast become a hotbed of misinformation, conspiracy theories and skepticism around the coronavirus pandemic.

Twitter users are also pushing YouTube video links that describe the coronavirus as a hoax or promoting farflung theories that it was created in a lab, using the hashtags ReOpen or Gridlock, said Kathleen Carley, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University's CyLab Security and Privacy Institute.

Nearly identical claims are also being posted across multiple platforms — from Twitter to Reddit to the Facebook groups — suggesting that the misinformation is orchestrated on some level, she added. (Source: Associated Press)

(U) **COVID-19 Related Scams Likely to Increase Alongside Federal Stimulus:** Justice Department officials are girding for another wave of digital scams connected with the trillions of dollars in aid the government is distributing to individuals, families and small businesses to manage through the pandemic. The department plans to deploy data analytic tools that it typically uses to spot health-care fraud to identify when people might be applying for benefits they don't deserve or are posing as someone else.

Scammers are already stealing people's identities to apply for stimulus checks in their names. There also has been a 6,000 percent increase in phishing and spam emails related to the virus just since March 11 when the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic, according to a [report](#) this morning from IBM's X-Force threat monitoring division.

(Source: Washington Post)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report

- State and local officials sharing their plans and priorities for keeping people safe while reopening businesses and services. Testing and tracing capacity continue to be a focal point of this discussion, as well as the need of many to work to generate income.
- There is an increase in mistrust from the public, reporters, and elected officials regarding how FEMA and the supply chain task force is gathering and distributing equipment to states in need. More people are questioning FEMA's messaging and ability to respond.
- National broadcast and print/online media remain focused on states' current mitigation measures and ability to safely resume economic activity. Following the CDC director's comments reported earlier this morning, there is also frequent commentary on how reopening state economies earlier than advised might counteract states' mitigation measures.

#### *Public Sentiment*

- Many people are discussing social distancing, stay-at-home orders and protests as people continue to share their views on if it is too soon for the loosening of restrictions and reopening by some states.
  - As orders are relaxed, local officials and lawmakers are urging people to continue practicing social distancing.
  - Many are concerned about more people becoming infected once people resume normal activities.
  - Some people feel that their civil liberties are being taken away with stay-at-home orders and are ready to return to normal.
  - In some states, health care professionals are attending protests to stand against those who want stay-at-home orders to be lifted.
- While many discuss reopening the economy, calls for more testing continue. People feel that this is vital for being able to successfully reopen without concern of spreading COVID-19. There is a growing desire for comprehensive national testing plan to be shared.
- A high volume of individuals and news outlets are sharing that the CDC Director issued a warning to expect a second, worse, wave of COVID-19 in the winter that will coincide with a heavy burden from seasonal flu. Many are reacting to this news with concern and fear.
  - The President tweeted that the CDC Director was misquoted and that he would be putting out a statement. In response many are sharing concerns that the Administration will pressure the CDC director to adopt a new position on the issue.
- Santa Clara County in California revealed autopsy results showing the first recorded COVID-19 death in the nation occurred on February 6th, weeks earlier than initially believed. Many are

sharing this news with reactions ranging from surprise to anger. Some are surprised to hear that the virus was here and went undetected for so long, while others blame the government and cite this as proof that action should have been taken sooner.

- News outlets and public health experts are raising concerns about the validity of recent California antibody studies. (Santa Clara County, Los Angeles County)
  - News media are reporting that case and fatality data from New York City appears to debunk the results and that the high failure rates of the test kits are not being taken into account.
  - Statisticians are questioning the accuracy of the studies, saying that the sample was unreliable. They feel the sample size was too small and skewed because of how participants were recruited and because symptomatic participants were incentivized by receiving a test.

#### **(U) 4/22 Reporting**

**(U) Recent Media Reporting on WHO/NIH Hacking Misleading:** Recent media reporting in the Washington Post and other mainstream media outlets on the alleged hacking of WHO/NIH emails and passwords is misleading. According to CS&C analysis, “the information is just recycled combinations of emails: passwords from different databases. Posting of this type of information can make it seem as if any organization has been hacked, so a lot of fake news is ahead of us.

All the emails listed are a compilation of information from old leaked databases. Password re-use is an issue on its own, but these organizations didn't get hacked.”

While SITE Intelligence was unable to verify whether the email addresses and passwords were authentic, the group said the information was released Sunday and Monday and almost immediately used to foment attempts at hacking and harassment by far-right extremists. (Source: Washington Post, CS&C)

**(U) Chinese Intelligence Amplified Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., According to Unnamed Intelligence Officials:** Beijing amplified recent fraudulent viral texts warning the public of an impending national shutdown in an apparent attempt to incite panic, according to anonymous intelligence officials who spoke with the New York Times:

“Since that wave of panic, United States intelligence agencies have assessed that Chinese operatives helped push the messages across platforms, according to six American officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to publicly discuss intelligence matters. The amplification techniques are alarming to officials because the disinformation showed up as texts on many Americans’ cellphones, a tactic that several of the officials said they had not seen before.”

The CFI Task Force and its partners were unable to immediately confirm this reporting through open source channels. (Source: The New York Times)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:**

- Reopening the economy is the focus of social media discussion as people debate relaxing stay-at-home orders and speculate why some states are proceeding with reopening prior to May 1st. Public officials are concerned people will stop practicing social distancing once states reopen and are reminding residents to stay vigilant.
- While orders are being relaxed in various states, there is an increased desire for more testing and transparency regarding a nationwide plan.
- FEMA social and traditional media discussion is heavily focused on reports that FEMA seized 400,000 masks from a Delaware medical supplier.
- Traditional media coverage also focuses on the updated \$484 billion stimulus package, states' testing needs, and states planning to resume economic activity.

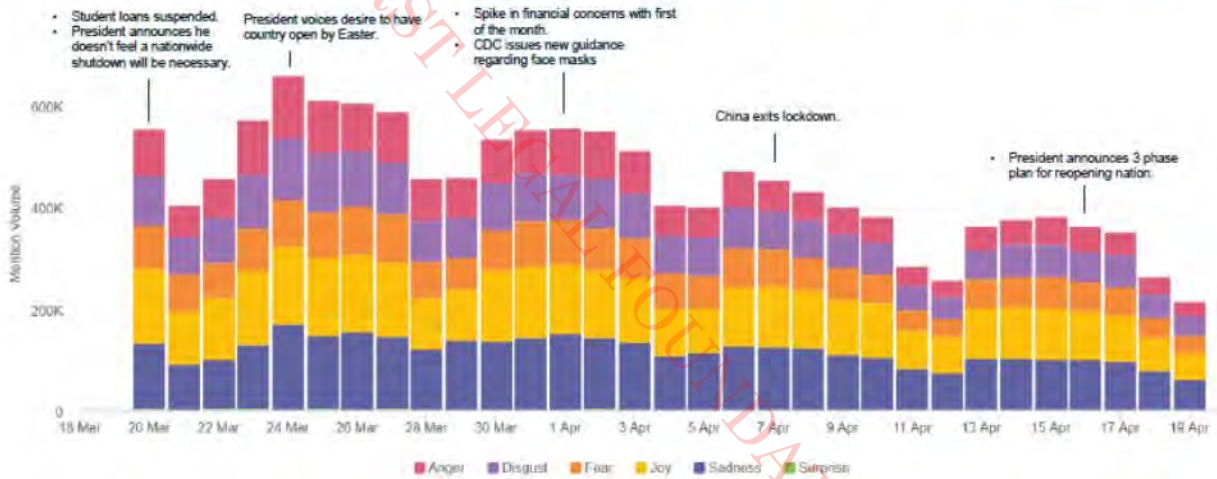
**(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment**

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  - Statisticians are questioning the accuracy of the studies, saying that the sample was unreliable. They feel the sample size was too small and skewed because of how participants were recruited and because symptomatic participants were incentivized by receiving a test.

(U//FOUO) HHS Public Sentiment Analysis:

- Public conversation around COVID-19 on social media has slightly decreased again since last week. This is the fourth week in a row of decreasing conversation.
- Sadness was the most commonly expressed emotion again this past week, due in large part to social media users talking about the loss of a loved one to the virus, as well as missing daily routines (gym, hairdresser/barber, etc.)
- Sadness also captured increasing discussion of the inequitable impact of COVID-19 on Black and low-income communities compared to other demographics
- Joy was the second most commonly expressed emotion which captured social media users saluting those on the front lines including first responders, healthcare workers, drivers, grocery store workers, etc.

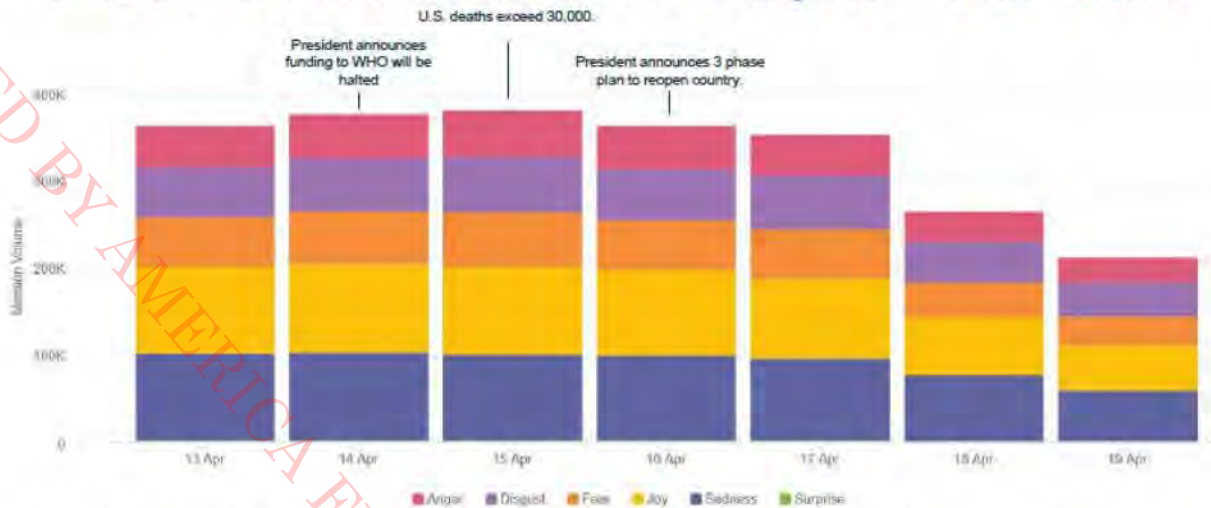
### COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Month



\* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.  
 (Graphic: U//FOUO)



## COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Week



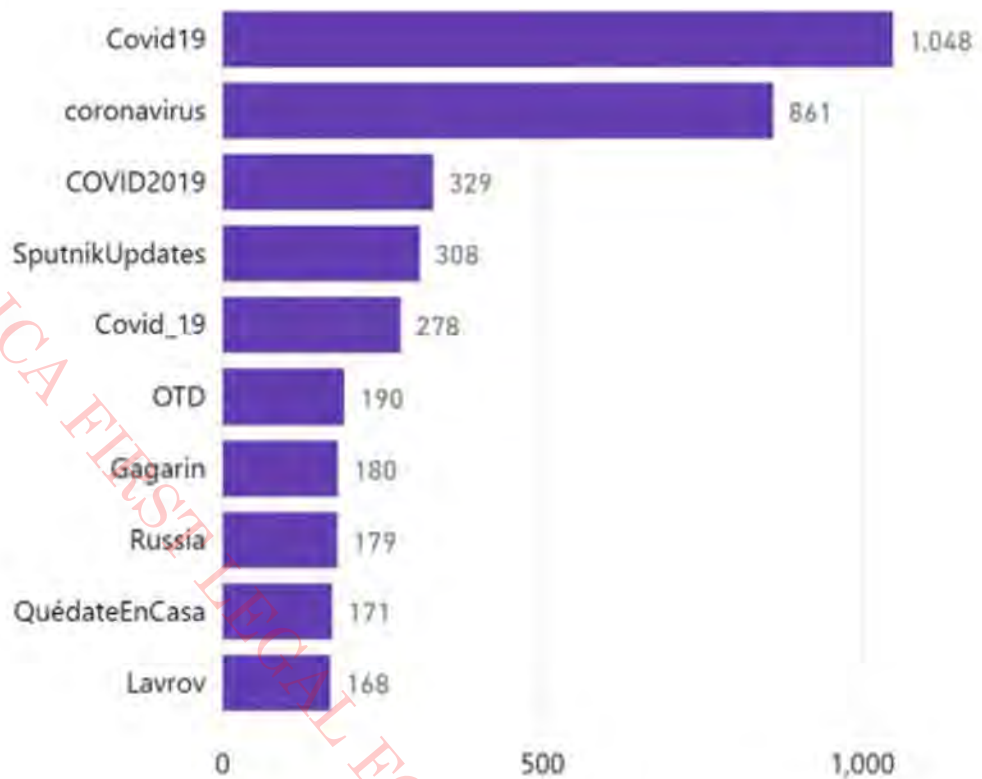
\* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.  
(Graphic: U//FOUO)

### (U) 4/21 Reporting

(U) **Iranian-Linked Group Spreads Disinformation on Facebook, Twitter Blaming the United States for Coronavirus:** Since late February, a group with close ties to the Iranian government has been spreading disinformation on Twitter and Facebook that promotes Iranian and Chinese interests, according to a new report by social media mapping firm Graphika. The propaganda group, known as the International Union of Virtual Media, seeded articles, videos, and memes accusing the United States of creating the coronavirus in order to remain a dominant global power. Other narratives praised the Iranian response to the outbreak and critiqued U.S. sanctions against Iran, which allegedly hurt the country's ability to combat the virus. Fellow for the Middle East Ariane Tabatabai has argued that Iran is attempting to shift blame away from its own inaction in preventing the spread of the virus to portray the United States as the irresponsible party, which also helps to widen the gulf between the United States and its Western allies. (Source: Forbes, Graphika, Tech Crunch, CyberScoop, The Verge, Twitter)

(U) **Russia Media Ecosystem COVID-19 Toplines:** For the thirteenth consecutive week, coronavirus coverage dominated the Russian media ecosystem last week, though to a slightly lesser extent than in previous weeks. As usual, much of this output consisted of basic news updates on the pandemic. One notable coronavirus theme across platforms involved criticism of various U.S. media outlets' coverage of the pandemic.

Top 10 Hashtags — April 11-17:



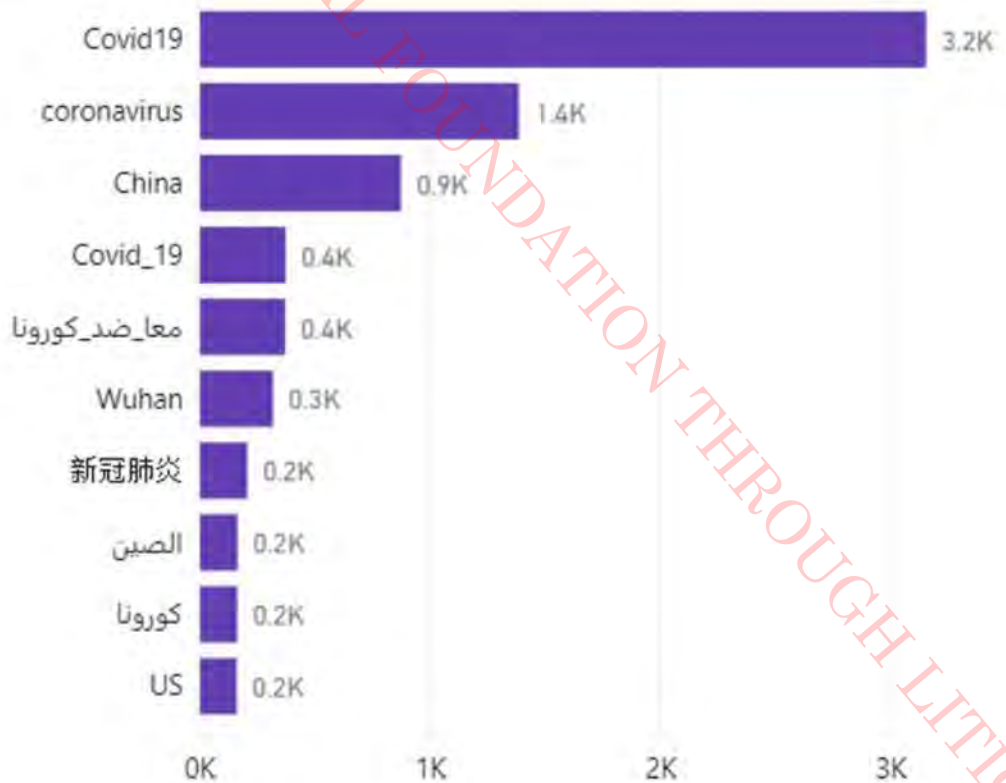
The Hamilton dashboard collected about 13,000 tweets from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 11-17 (figures as of 2pm April 10). A little over 4,300 tweets mentioned “virus,” “covid,” or both. Only half of the top ten hashtags were directly related to the pandemic this week (including #QuédateEnCasa, Spanish for “stay at home”), but the top two hashtags, which both referenced the coronavirus, saw more uses than the rest of the top ten combined.

Almost all of the top overall tweets by likes reported basic news updates from the three accounts that typically receive very high engagement regardless of topic (@actualidadrt, @rtultimahora, and @sputnik\_tr). The dominance of these accounts may mask more widespread trends and excluding them yielded a more diverse set of top tweets. Notable tweets from this set included several tweets from the [Kremlin-supported](#) media outlet *Redfish*, which featured broad coronavirus-related criticism of capitalism in the United States, as well as tweets from the Russian embassy in Italy highlighting Russian medical assistance and *RT* describing lockdown-related violence in India. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 11  
"Corona is the virus. Capitalism is the pandemic." Graffiti seen in Chicago, United States: <https://t.co/kEe6qxFGtl>  
769 1,812
- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 14  
"Make the rich pay for COVID19" Seen in Albuquerque, United States <https://t.co/dJa70gEVMY>  
352 905
- Russian Embassy in Italy** @rusembitaly • Apr 14  
RU ❤️ RT To date, Russian specialists have sanitized 59 RSA in 55 Bergamo locations in close collaboration with their Italian colleagues. The 32 Russian doctors so far have treated 31 infected by the #Covid19 of which 6 are already discharged. <https://t.co/yMGLm5JO32> #DallaRussiaConAmore  
351 834
- RT** @rt.com • Apr 15  
When the #COVID19 lockdown turns violent, Police with batons charged hundreds of jobless migrants in #India after they crowded into a #Mumbai train station demanding special trains to take them home to their villages <https://t.co/cPwVv77JYl>  
744 804
- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 16  
Remember how defenders of capitalism tried to scare people of socialism with the scenario of mass unemployment & bread lines. Today massive food bank lines are seen all over the United States & almost 22 million filed for unemployment, only 1 month into the economic downturn. <https://t.co/bksc5mHGKC>  
522 728

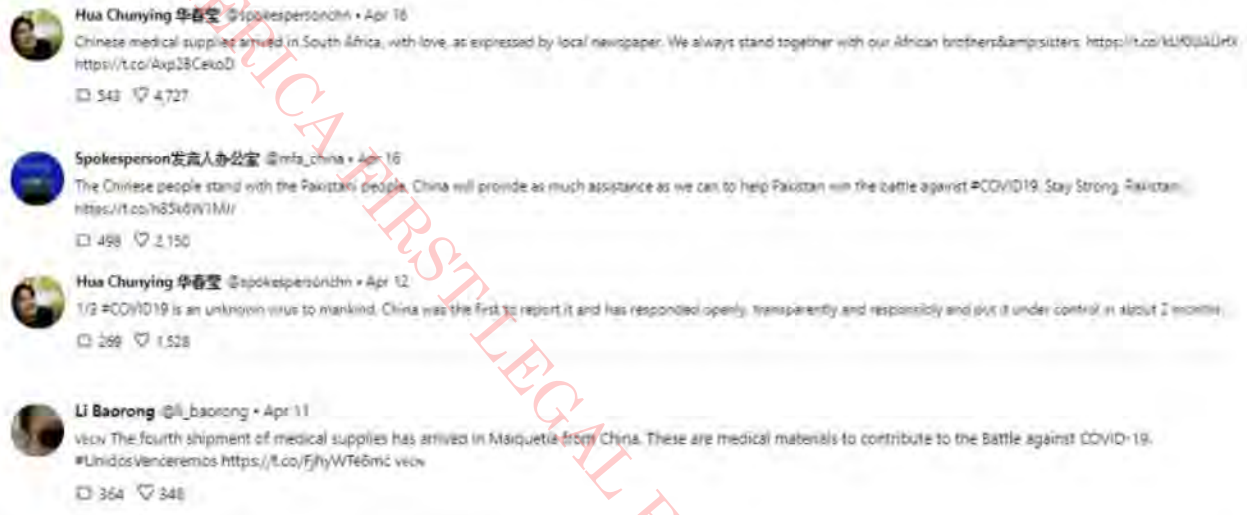
(U) China Media Ecosystem COVID-19 Toplines:

Top 10 Hashtags — April 11-17:



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 11-17 (figures as of 2pm April 17). Roughly 6,500 tweets mentioned “virus”, “covid”, “coronavirus”, or some combination of the three. Coronavirus-related content dominated the top hashtags.

Top tweets for the week were concentrated among state media outlets and Foreign Ministry spokespersons, and they concentrated on the competence of China’s response and China’s solidarity with countries affected by the coronavirus outbreak.



Overall, state media tweets of the COVID-19 pandemic have shifted focus from earlier weeks. As both Italy and Spain have bent their infection curves downwards, state-tied tweets have deemphasized China-led relief efforts there. Instead, more tweets have mentioned the United States and the United Kingdom, focusing on rising case totals in both countries.

Of the approximately 3,600 articles collected from China’s state-funded news websites last week, the top articles by shares on Facebook focused on defending China from mounting foreign criticism as COVID-19 spread to the rest of the world. Two of the top articles attacked the theory put forth by U.S. media and government officials that the virus may have escaped in an accidental release from a bioweapons laboratory in Wuhan. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

#### (U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- Financial concerns are becoming an increasingly hot topic both for the general public and for lawmakers. Many states are facing budget deficits as a result of losses suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are looking to the federal government to provide assistance in filling some of those gaps.
- Debate over the state and federal roles in building testing capacity continues to grow leaving the general public anxious about whether the country will be able to accomplish the necessary levels of testing to move forward.

- As case counts continue to grow at nursing homes across the country, CMS is preparing new requirements to improve reporting and communication with loved ones.
- In addition to different states' testing capacities, traditional media is increasingly interested in the results of today's call between White House and state governors.

#### *Public Sentiment*

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of discussion as people continue debating if it is too soon and discussing plans different states have for reopening.
  - This also includes continued discussion of [protests across the U.S.](#) with some pointing out some states recorded their highest case numbers on days that protests were held.
- A growing number of polls indicate the majority of Americans do not support lifting stay-at-home orders.
  - There is frustration among many mayors and [Congress members](#) that the next round of proposed stimulus funding will not provide direct support for cities. Additionally, the National Governor's Association is renewing a bipartisan call for \$500 billion in aid to states, as many states struggle to fill revenue shortfalls without federal assistance.
  - Multiple media outlets are sharing news of the bill introduced to cancel rent and mortgage payments during the pandemic. Many people expressing how it would help those who are having financial hardships, ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)) however some are concerned it could hurt those who depend on rent payments as [part of their income](#).
  - There is a growing conversation about [large restaurant chains that obtained loans](#) from the federal Paycheck Protection Program. After the program exhausted its funding limit, many feel it's unfair that funds weren't prioritized for small businesses.
- In response, restaurant chain Shake Shack announced they are [returning all \\$10 million it received from the program](#).
  - There is increasing concern about how the pandemic is affecting [migrant workers](#) following a 60-Minutes segment last night featuring former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate.
- Concerns are two-fold, people are worried those individuals are being forgotten and not provided for, and they worry this will lead to major food supply-chain issues.
  - Many are still worried about the impacts of COVID-19 on nursing homes and long-term care facilities, as new reports of high case and death counts continue to make headlines across the country.
  - There is a small discussion surrounding how life will change socially and financially after COVID-19. Some feel things will not be able to fully return to "normal" without a vaccine and that it will be a slow and frustrating process until then.

#### **(U) 4/20 Reporting**

##### **(U) 5G-COVID 19 Conspiracy Theory Gains Traction Among Anti-Semitic Groups, Facebook Takes**

**Action:** Facebook has stepped up efforts to stop the promotion of baseless conspiracy theories linking Covid-19 to 5G, after research highlighted a "toxic cocktail" of far-right-influenced groups pushing the idea alongside incitement to attack telecommunications infrastructure.

Groups in the UK promoting the conspiracy theory on [Facebook](#) – often linking it to explicitly antisemitic messages – have been growing at a significant rate, warned the campaign group Hope not Hate.

The largest group in the UK, Stop 5G UK, added almost 3,000 members in just 24 hours from 6-7 April while another, Direct Action Against 5G, gained more than 1,400 members in its first week after it was created on 31 March.

[Hope not Hate](#) warned that an ever-growing number of Facebook users are now accessing posts that not only encourages them to take illegal action against [5G infrastructure](#) but also contains potentially damaging misinformation about health and wellbeing.

Almost a third of British people say they can't rule out a link between coronavirus and 5G, according to new polling revealing the extent of the baseless conspiracy theory.

Some 8% believe there is a link, while 19% are unsure, according to the survey of 2,032 adults by the polling firm Focldata.

Facebook told the Guardian that it had removed the Stop 5G UK group following violations of its "promoting or publicizing" crime policies before it received the report from Hate not Hate and has since removed a Destroy 5G Save Our Children group. It also removed a number of other posts flagged by Hope not Hate.

It said it had begun removing false claims that 5G technology causes Covid-19: "We are taking aggressive steps to stop misinformation and harmful content from spreading on our platforms and connect people to accurate information from the NHS about coronavirus. Content encouraging attacks on 5G masts clearly violates our policies and we have removed a number of pages, groups and posts." (Source: The Guardian)

**(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Media Listening:**

- As reopening the economy remains the focal point of COVID-19 social media discussion, people debate whether or not it is too soon. Individuals are discussing states' plans for reopening, recent protests against stay-at-home orders and their views on keeping these orders in place. There is a small discussion about how the process for returning to normal will take a while and that a vaccine is needed to do so.
- FEMA social media mentions are mostly in relation to the President's comments about the agency's progress with Project Airbridge and California's announcement about partnering with FEMA for Project Roomkey. Smaller discussions include confusion over FEMA's rent suspension news release from last week, the Panthera contract and the agency's involvement with supply distribution to states.

- Besides small business loans and companies facing financial strain, traditional media remains focused on stay-at-home protests planned today, essential employees' working conditions, and states' pending challenges to reopen their economies.

#### Public Sentiment

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of discussion as people continue debating if it is too soon and discussing plans different states have for reopening.
  - This also includes continued discussion of [protests across the U.S.](#) with some pointing out some states recorded their highest case numbers on days that protests were held.
  - A growing number of polls indicate the majority of Americans [do not support lifting stay-at-home orders.](#)
- There is growing concern about how the pandemic is affecting [migrant workers](#) following a 60-Minutes segment last night featuring former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate. Concerns are two-fold, people are worried those individuals are being forgotten and not provided for, and they worry this will lead to major food supply-chain issues.
- Many are still worried about the impacts of COVID-19 on nursing homes and long-term care facilities, as new [reports of high case and death counts](#) continue to make headlines across the country.
- There is a small discussion surrounding how life will change socially and financially [after COVID-19.](#) Some feel things will not be able to fully return to "normal" without a vaccine and that it will be a slow and frustrating process until then.

(U) **Continued Increase in COVID-19 as a Lure for Digital Attacks:** The average number of coronavirus-themed digital attacks tracked each day by researchers at the cybersecurity firm Check Point has [increased sixfold](#) to 14,000. The attacks include:

- Malware-laced emails posing as information about pandemic stimulus efforts
- Phony stimulus-related domains to con users into giving up their personal information.

Hackers are also increasingly posing as videoconferencing brands including Zoom and Webex, [researchers at Proofpoint found.](#) They found:

- Hackers send emails posing as missed meeting alerts or telling users they need to reset their passwords to steal their log-in information.
- Some emails also come laced with information-stealing malware. (Source: Check Point)

(U) **Russian-State Backed Disinformation Operation Continues to Target Bill Gates:** Russian-state backed accusations against Mr. Gates follow two main tropes. One is that Bill Gates has pecuniary interests in the pandemic, and that his philanthropy is merely a front for ordinary capitalist greed. Making profits from peoples illness is, of course, bad; but the pro-Kremlin media is suggesting even worse reasons to Mr. Gates' activities in the field of global health: population reduction! According to pro-Kremlin sources, Bill Gates apparently has an interest in creating dire economic conditions that would lead to less people on the planet. We find this claim at the [above mentioned site](#), managed by the Russian Academy of Sciences:

*“We may be looking at a complete collapse of our western economy, and growing misery- for the masses. – What will happen to these people, without jobs, without incomes, many of them may also lose their homes, as they will not be able to pay their mortgages or rents? – They may die from famine, diseases of all sorts, despair – the desired world population reduction that Bill Gates, Rockefeller and Co aspire. It may be part of and the beginning of their sinister eugenics plan.”*

The trope of population reduction has surfaced strongly in the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem during the COVID-19 outbreak; but there are [similar cases](#) as early as 2016. The oldest case in our base concerning Bill Gates is also [referring to this sinister plan](#). 2017, broadcast by Russian State TV. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

**(U) Scammers Use WhatsApp Chain Message About COVID-19 and Fake Profiles to Harvest Personal Data in South Africa:** Planet49, a Hong Kong-based digital marketing company with close associations with Asia Pacific Marketing Limited, targeted South African users with a digital marketing campaign intended to harvest their personal information. The campaign falsely presented a COVID-19 “relief promotion” by local grocery chains. In reality, it enticed WhatsApp users to not only share the promotion with several of their WhatsApp contacts, but also consent to Planet49 selling their personal information to third parties. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

#### **(U) 4/17 Reporting**

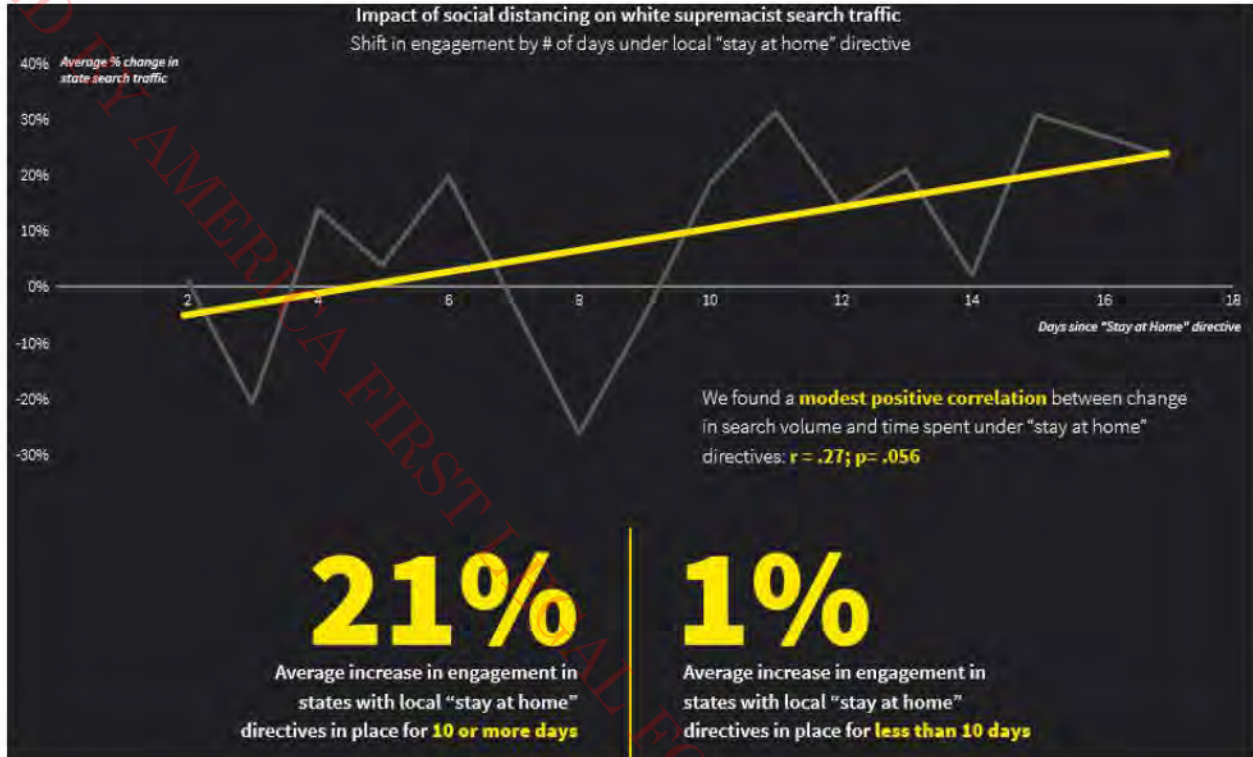
**(U//FOUO) COVID-19 and Other Environmental Factors Likely to Contribute to Domestic Extremism Attacks This Year:** The FBI and DHS assess several current social and political factors likely will contribute to the radicalization and mobilization of individuals across Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) ideologies seeking to conduct increasingly lethal or sophisticated attacks. We base this assessment on motivating factors of recent DVE violence and a review of social and political indicators present during previous periods of heightened DVE activity. DVEs often perceive these social and political indicators as threatening their way of life and are frequently outlined in DVE manifestos and online threats.

**(U//FOUO) Racial and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) who advocate for the superiority of the white race seek to exploit the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to bolster their narratives and encourage attacks against minorities, including Jewish and Asian Americans, according to open source reporting. Some DVEs are also probably influenced by online conspiracy theories describing the pandemic as a government-perpetrated hoax, according to open source and FBI reporting. Militia extremists particularly have an enduring concern about government overreach they believe could culminate in government-led mass firearm confiscations or the imposition of martial law. (Source: FBI, DHS)**

**(U) Nationwide Increase in Engagement with White Supremacist Content Coincides with Stay-at-Home Directives:** Since March 30, when most states implemented stay at home orders, there has been a 13 percent nationwide increase in engagement with white supremacist content on Google. The below



graph shows average change in state search traffic between March 30th - April 5th 2020, based on the number of days each state was under "stay at home" directives. Please note these are early results and may shift over the coming weeks. (Source: Moonshot CVE)





(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- The major topic of discussion on social media throughout the day has been the reopening of the economy. Elected officials are beginning to outline their plans for how they will approach the process. Some feel reopening the economy should be addressed as quickly as possible to avoid further economic consequences. Others feel it should be a slower process to avoid a resurgence of cases.
- As this debate carries on, people continue to share their overall fatigue regarding stay-at-home orders. There has been an increase in demonstrations and residents voicing their disagreement over the use of the orders.
- FEMA conversation remains highly focused on the distribution of PPE. People are frustrated with ongoing traditional media reports stating FEMA is diverting supplies from hospitals and contracting with a previously bankrupt company.
- Traditional media discussion remains strongly focused on debate regarding when to resume economic activity between elected officials, healthcare workers, academics, and news correspondents.

(U//FOUO) Sentiment Analysis

- There has been heated debate throughout the day regarding the reopening of the economy. Several governors and elected officials have cautioned that reopening the economy too fast would be 'dangerous' and result in a resurgence in cases, however there is growing concern that the economy cannot withstand further shutdowns and delays.
  - Emotions are high on both sides of the argument as all parties involved feel lives depend on the decisions be made.
- People are growing weary of stay-at-home orders causing some to begin to push back on state and local regulations. They are seeking more information on what a reopening strategy for their communities may look like.
  - There continues to be calls for widespread testing to be made available before major actions are taken to reopen the economy.
- An increasing number of medical professionals are protesting having to do their job without proper protective equipment. The general public is supportive of their endeavors and question why it has been so difficult to maintain supplies in hospitals.

(U) **Increased Threats From Violent Extremist Groups Against Italian Journalists Critical of Russia's Faulty Medical Aid:** Italian journalists who exposed faulty medical equipment provided by Russia to the country have experienced increased harassment from the Kremlin and threats of violence from Italian domestic violent extremist groups. It has been widely analyzed how the [Kremlin operates in Italy](#) for years through the use of [Trojan horses](#), a constellation of far-right groups, lobbies, and agents of influence, some of which are particularly active in this time of crises in campaigning to lift sanctions to Russia. Thus, while the attacks to the newspaper "La Stampa" comes publicly from Russian institutions, there is no reason not to believe the other attacks may have been conducted through the usual use of deniable proxies, and that more is yet to come. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

#### **(U) 4/16 Reporting**

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Increasingly Amplify Anti-Vaccination Narratives During COVID-19 Pandemic:** Since January, pro-Kremlin media have increasingly amplified anti-vaccination narratives typically reserved for Russian-linked social media accounts. The goal is to increase popular acceptance of conspiracy theories and to erode faith in American public health experts and institutions, particularly dangerous during a pandemic.

Anti-vaxxers continue to find support in pro-Kremlin outlets. Common narratives include that Bill and Melinda Gates and the rest of the "shadow rulers" are scheming to introduce mandatory vaccination that will contain secret implants to control the world. We find the claim in [Russian](#), [English](#) and [Georgian](#). We can note that, to date, Mr. Gates appears in [ten cases in the disinformation database](#)—eight of which have occurred in just the last few weeks, after the onset of the "COVID-19 outbreak.

The "Vaccine Scare" [has been present](#) in the pro-Kremlin disinformation network for a long time, usually in the "undergrowth" of the disinformation jungle, spreading through social media - notably [Twitter](#). The

*New York Times* describes in a recent article how Russia-based Twitter accounts influence the “anti-vaxxer community”, and already a year ago, in March 2019, US CBS News reported on [pro-Kremlin ties to a Twitter campaign](#) against vaccination. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)



- 1 A FORCED VACCINATION WILL INJECT **NANO CHIPS**
- 2 **BILL GATES** WANTS TO INTRODUCE MANDATORY VACCINATION TO CONTROL THE WORLD
- 3 COVID-19 MIGHT BE AN ACT OF **ANGLO-SAXON** REVENGE
- 4 A CANADIAN REPORT INDICTS THE **US** FOR SPREADING THE CORONAVIRUS
- 5 COVID-19 EPIDEMIC IS MANUFACTURED BY THE **MEDIA**

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Encourage Rioting in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic:** Disinformation narratives include outlandish conspiracy theories of mass government sponsored forced vaccination and microchipping. Pro-Kremlin media instructed followers how to best take to the streets to fight what they’re attempting to brand as “World War C.” (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) **5G Conspiracy Theories Spread on Tik Tok:** Conspiracy theories about the supposed dangers of 5G wireless networks are [spreading on the Chinese-owned TikTok](#) video-sharing service, promoted by a number of high-profile creators and accounts tied to the QAnon conspiracy group. The company’s guidelines prohibit “misinformation that could cause harm,” but some of the conspiracy theories that are being promoted may be tied to recent incidents in which 5G phone antennas have been burned down across the UK. (Source: iNews)

(U) **Trenton City Council Members Pushed to Ban 5G:** A faction of the Trenton, New Jersey city council pushed to ban 5G technology in the city, though the council members’ draft ordinance seems to have stalled. Recent conspiracy theories falsely linking 5G technology to COVID-19 have circulated on social media, amplified by Russian state-backed media and a potentially inauthentic social media disinformation campaign . (Source: The Trentonian; Bloomberg)

(FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening Report:**

- The main topic on social media is the lack of PPE and the federal government's handling of medical supply distribution. Local officials and the public are growing increasingly frustrated with FEMA's COVID-19 response, fueled by recent news about the agency's contract for N95 masks and resurfacing articles accusing the agency of confiscating supplies from states and hospitals. Additionally, FEMA is facing criticism for Project Airbridge, which people feel prioritizes some areas over others.
- As more health care professionals share about working without the proper PPE, FEMA's union president reportedly wrote a letter to Congress urging more access to PPE for frontline workers and first responders.
- People are tired of staying at home, which is causing them to disagree with stay-at-home orders. There are more calls for insight into plans for reopening and a push for more testing as an avenue for reopening.
- Traditional media remains focused on how White House and state governors plan to resume economic activity as unemployment claims grow. Multiple elected officials are interviewed for their perspective on reopening strategies.
- Newspaper front page headlines are increasingly citing county and state budget concerns and furloughed public employees.

(FOUO) Public Sentiment

- People are growing weary of stay-at-home orders causing some to begin to push back on state and local regulations. They are seeking more information on what a reopening strategy for their communities may look like.
  - There continues to be calls for widespread testing to be made available before major actions are taken to reopen the economy.
- An increasing number of medical professionals are protesting having to do their job without proper protective equipment. The general public is supportive of their endeavors and question why it has been so difficult to maintain supplies in hospitals.

(U) **Facebook COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts:** Hoping to stem the torrent of false cures and [conspiracy theories](#) about [COVID-19](#), Facebook announced Thursday it would begin informing users globally who have liked, commented on, or shared "harmful" [misinformation](#) about the coronavirus, pointing them instead in the direction of a reliable source.

Under Facebook's new policy, when a piece of "harmful" coronavirus-related misinformation has been debunked by its fact checkers, and removed from the site, all users who have interacted with it will be shown a message in their news feed directing them to the [WHO's list of debunked claims](#). People who have liked, commented on, or shared Facebook posts saying that drinking bleach can cure COVID-19, or that social distancing does not prevent the disease from spreading, will be among the first to see the new message "in the coming weeks," Rosen said.

The new policy only applies to false claims related to the coronavirus, but campaigners say the announcement could lay the groundwork for a breakthrough in the battle against [political disinformation](#) online.

(U) **Russian and Ukrainian Media Amplify Italian Anti-Vaxxer Fueling Doubt Over COVID-19 Danger in Russia and Ukraine:** Russian media picked up the interview of Italian anti-vaxxer Stefano Montanari, who claimed that only three people had died in Italy due to COVID-19. In reality, 3,405 people had died of COVID-19 by the time of the interview, according to [worldometers](#) data. The story received wide dissemination in social media and migrated to Ukrainian media as well. A group of Italian doctors had already [denounced](#) his claims, and even filed a criminal complaint against him.

This case demonstrates how a single source's ill-founded judgment may be recycled in other countries without reference to the source's background or proper vetting. Notably, the story was picked by mainstream media in Russia and fringe media in both Ukraine and Russia. It also received a boost from anti-vax communities on social media. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**Pro-Kremlin Outlets "Predict" Coronavirus-Driven Economic Collapse of the Baltic Countries:** As the Baltic states went into quarantine, pro-Kremlin media predicted the crash of their economies.

Pro-Kremlin media outlets routinely push various [narratives](#) targeting the Baltic states; usually, these narratives accuse them of [Russophobia](#), or describe them [as aggressive](#). As COVID-19 puts pressure on the world's economic system, however, these outlets have shifted their attention, publishing stories that claim the coronavirus is going to destroy the Baltic economies and undo their decades of post-Soviet progress. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **QAnon Conspiracy Theorists Amplify COVID-19 Disinformation:** The QAnon community have also mobilized to advance a range of other conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19. The first significant mention of it occurred on 23 March, when a user of 8kun claiming to be the mysterious 'Q' posted a screenshot of a 2007 research paper for the American Society of Microbiology entitled: "SARS and Coronavirus as an emerging and re-emerging infection".

In a highlighted section of the article, the author claimed: "the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb". The user went on to say that the Democrats were likely behind the virus release since it would allow them to destroy the Trump administration's economic record.

Interestingly, the day before the 'Q' user published this COVID-19 post, a screenshot of the same study was posted on the forum subreddit under 'r/interestingasfuck', where it received 50,000 upvotes and made its way to Reddit's main page. This highlights the interplay between the fringe QAnon community and content shared on more mainstream platforms, and demonstrates how extremist communities are skilled at appropriating content from elsewhere on the web. (source: ISD Global)

#### **(U) 4/15 Reporting**

(U) **Iran-Linked Group Caught Spreading COVID-19 'Disinformation' On Facebook And Instagram:** Researchers from Graphika, a New York-based startup that analyzes social networks, claim the crew, referred to as the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), has been active on Facebook-owned platforms and Twitter as they try to spread disinformation about coronavirus. IUVM's modus operandi typically involves creating or copying news, cartoons or videos that amplify Iranian government narratives and spreading them across social media posing as journalists or official sources.

Amongst IUVM's latest narratives are suggestions that COVID-19 was a biological weapon created by the U.S. Other Facebook groups Graphika suspected of being created by IUVM included two that appeared to be focused on Africa, Ethiopianow and Durban Daily. Both were seen posting articles from Iranian state media without attribution. On Instagram, Graphika found IUVM created a western persona, which appeared to be a personal account, but posted much the same content as appeared on Facebook and other IUVM-linked sources. Outside of social media, IUVM has been using its own website and another apparent covert effort, to disseminate the same Iranian propaganda on COVID-19. (Source: [Forbes](#))

(U) **False Claim: Johns Hopkins University Shared Bullet-point Coronavirus Tips:** Social media users have been sharing a post online with what they claim to be a list of bullet points compiled by Johns Hopkins University to summarize best practice for avoiding the coronavirus. The post makes various claims about the virus and how to protect yourself from it. Other versions say the summary is provided by Dr. Irene Ken or her daughter, who is described as an assistant professor in infectious diseases at Johns Hopkins University.

Some posts advise people to eat more foods that are "above the pH level of the virus". They refer to an academic article that while it refers to coronaviruses, it was published in April 1991. The novel coronavirus was discovered in December 2019 and had never been seen in humans before. On April 3, 2020, Johns Hopkins University's news center "The Hub" wrote an article about this online misinformation. It confirmed the "message" or "summary" did not come from the university and advised readers to be cautious when evaluating information online. The university also tweeted about the fake summary and advised to get credible information from its website instead. (Source: [Reuters](#))

(U) **Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe Covid-19 Was Made in a Lab:** As news and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, many Americans have encountered conflicting narratives about how the new coronavirus originated. Scientists have determined the virus came about naturally, but there is some uncertainty about how it first infected people.

While a plurality of Americans (43%) say the new coronavirus most likely came about naturally, nearly three-in-ten (29%) say it most likely was created in a lab, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted from March 10 to 16, 2020. Around a quarter of adults (23%) say it is most likely that the current strain of coronavirus was developed intentionally in a lab; another 6% say it was most likely made accidentally in a lab. A quarter say they aren't sure where the virus originated.

Confusion surrounding these facts parallels Americans' overall experience with misinformation during the outbreak. About half of U.S. adults (48%) report having come across at least some news and information about COVID-19 that seemed completely made up, with 12% saying they have seen a lot of it and 35% saying they have seen some. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

(U) **Fact Checkers Under Strain:** Snopes has been overwhelmed with so many covid-19-related questions that the website can't keep up. The company has done something that seems counterintuitive: It has scaled back operations by publishing fewer stories. There have been no furloughs or layoffs. Readers submitted roughly 10,000 covid-related queries to Snopes during the last two weeks of March. Rather than trying to answer the avalanche of questions, Snopes said it will pick its targets and amplify credible sources, highlighting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and WHO in particular.

The avalanche at Snopes is mirrored in what's happening globally, especially as information is being spread not just on social media outlets but also platforms like WhatsApp. "So many organizations are overwhelmed by the number of requests they are receiving from their audiences," said Baybars Örsek, director of the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute.

The network, which includes more than 70 members, started a database of more than 3,000 fact-checks from around the world. It's "the largest collaboration among fact-checkers ever, and that by itself is a pretty strong indicator that the amount of misinformation around covid-19 is unprecedented," said Örsek, who estimates fact-checking organizations worldwide are seeing 10 times the number of requests than they usually do. (Source: [The Washington Post](#))

#### **(U) 4/14 Reporting**

(U) **U.N. Chief Targets 'Dangerous Epidemic of Misinformation' On Coronavirus:** The world is facing "a dangerous epidemic of misinformation" about COVID-19 — and the only vaccine is to reestablish public trust, the head of the United Nations said Tuesday. "Around the world, people are scared. They want to know what to do and where to turn for advice," said U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres. The distortion and willful ignorance of scientific facts is a "poison that is putting even more lives at risk" during the most challenging crisis since World War II, Guterres said.

With COVID-19 now responsible for more than 120,000 deaths and nearly 2 million cases worldwide, the U.N. is creating a special communications project to combat misinformation about the virus, the secretary general said. The U.N. head called on social media companies to do more to root out harmful and bogus claims about COVID-19. He also said people must be able to put their trust in institutions that are "grounded in responsive, responsible, evidence-based governance and leadership." (Source: [NPR](#))

(U) **Coronavirus Tests Science's Need for Speed Limits:** Preprint servers and peer-reviewed journals are seeing surging audiences, with many new readers not well versed in the limitations of the latest research findings. Since 2013, Dr. Inglis, executive director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press in



New York, has been helping manage a website called bioRxiv, pronounced “bio archive.” The site’s goal: improve communication between scientists by allowing them to share promising findings months before their research has gone through protracted peer review and official publication.

But the mess he was seeing on Twitter suggested a downside of the service provided by the site, known as a preprint server, during the emerging coronavirus pandemic. The social media platform was awash with conspiracy theories positing that the new coronavirus had been engineered by the Chinese government for population control. And the theorists’ latest evidence was a freshly submitted paper on bioRxiv from a team of Indian researchers that suggested an “uncanny similarity” between proteins in H.I.V. and the new virus.

Traditionally, the Indian researchers would have submitted a paper to a peer-reviewed journal, and their manuscript would be scrutinized by other scientists. But that process takes months, if not more than a year. BioRxiv, medRxiv — another site co-founded by Dr. Inglis — and other preprint servers function as temporary homes that freely disseminate new findings. For scientists on the front lines of the coronavirus response, early glimpses at others’ research helps with study of the virus. But there is a growing audience for these papers that are not yet fully baked, and those readers may not understand the studies’ limitations.

Views and downloads on medRxiv, for instance, have increased more than 100-fold since December, Dr. Inglis says. People with little scientific training, or none at all, are desperate for new knowledge to better inform their day-to-day decisions. The news media wants to keep readers and viewers updated with the latest developments. And agents of disinformation seek to fuel conspiratorial narratives. (Source: [The New York Times](#))

**(U) Coronavirus Misinformation Reaching One in Two Adults:** Almost half of adults online have come across false or misleading information about coronavirus in the last week, a study has found. A report by Ofcom says that 40% of people are finding it hard to know what is true or false about the virus, particularly younger people. Myths on avoiding the virus were the most common form of misinformation, with 35 per cent of online adults saying they had seen the untrue claim that drinking more water can flush out the infection. Nearly a quarter also said they had seen inaccurate claims that gargling saltwater or avoiding cold food and drink might also stop a person catching COVID-19. Among those who have been exposed to falsehoods, the report says, two-thirds are seeing it every day (Source: [Public Technology](#))

**(U) Great, the Anti-Vaxxer Coronavirus Protests Are Here:** On Easter Sunday, a group of around fourteen people, led by an anti-vaxxer and documented by a conspiracy vlogger, intentionally broke social distancing and took to the streets of Vancouver.

Videos show the group—which featured both older people and a child—holding a sign featuring an illustration of the coronavirus and the words “Fake News”. The rally even featured one grey-haired person wearing a Guy Fawkes mask with sunglasses over it. In photos and videos, the protesters seem to

pay no heed to the six feet rule experts have recommended to avoid the spread of COVID-19. Stanfield-Spooner said she didn't even know most of the people at the rally—a 70-year-old woman helped organize the event. She said this march was just a trial run and bigger rallies are on the way.

Stanfield-Spooner was only able to get a small group out in Vancouver but did inspire a similar rally in Vernon B.C. at the same time. The march was attended and promoted by Dan Dicks, a bit player in the Canadian conspiracy scene. Dicks had originally posted a longer video of the rally but it was removed by YouTube, which is cracking down on conspiracy videos. Dicks boasts a YouTube channel called Press for Truth with over 260,000 subscribers in which he posts mishmash of videos ranging from his more conspiracy-centric videos about globalists, wireless technology, and Trudeau's evil plans; to more far-right videos. Recently Dicks has turned his eye to COVID-19 and conspiracies surrounding that, with a focus on the "tyranny" of self-isolation. Experts have warned that during a pandemic, conspiracies can do real damage to real people. (Source: [Vice](#))

#### (U) 4/13 Reporting

(U) **"The COVID-19 Outbreak: A Window of Opportunity to Attack the Deep State":** "One World Think Tank" is an outlet, registered in Russia and managed by a member of the expert board of Russian State-owned University of People's Friendship. In a recent article, the site speculates on whether "colour revolution technology" should be employed to [curb the "Deep State's" attempt to take control of the world](#). What is strange is that a media outlet with ties to Russian state structures, albeit cautiously, suggests attacking a society struggling with saving peoples' lives at a time of a global pandemic.

Pro-Kremlin media produces narratives on the current COVID-19 outbreak that look contradictory. The "One World Think Tank" is, together with other Russia-based English language outlets suggesting a dark future, where the Deep State finally stomped out freedom. If nothing is done, we will be controlled with nano-chips, injected in our bodies, through force vaccination. This narrative resonates with an "alt-right" audience, always suspicious of anything that could be connected to "The GOVERNMENT", the shadow rulers, the Deep State. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Surprise, surprise: Anti-vaxxers are spreading false claims about cures for COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic has given some members of this faction an opportunity to spread more anti-vaccine propaganda, and it's starting to make its way to the mainstream. A new report from Yonder, a company that dissects popular social media interactions to understand trends, has found that stalwart anti-vaxxers are pushing [a narrative that vitamin C can prevent COVID-19](#). Yonder CEO Jonathon Morgan says conversations around vitamin C began on 4Chan, but anti-vaxxers have been able to drive that messaging to the broader media landscape. Morgan says the first time his company noticed the vitamin C narrative hitting mainstream news was when CNN published a piece debunking the idea that vitamin C can cure or prevent COVID-19.

Morgan says that while redressing misinformation is good, it can also have the unintended effect of amplifying the original messaging. Just take the replies to CNN's tweet sharing its story—there are

several arguments as to why CNN is wrong and vitamin C is helpful for fighting the coronavirus. Anti-vaxxers are not just falsely promoting the idea that vitamin C can prevent COVID-19. The group is also using reporting about actual COVID-19 treatments to further its agenda. A few outlets have reported that doctors in China and the U.S. are administering heavy doses of vitamin C intravenously as part of a treatment for COVID-19. The vitamin C is being used in combination with other drugs like hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin. While there is currently no evidence that vitamin C on its own can treat or prevent COVID-19 or pneumonia associated with COVID-19, these bits of information shared out of context by agenda-driven groups create the illusion that basic supplements might be the best answer to COVID-19. (Source: Fast Company)

(U) **Putin's Long War Against American Science:** On Feb. 3, soon after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus to be a global health emergency, an obscure Twitter account in Moscow began retweeting an American blog. It said the pathogen was a germ weapon designed to incapacitate and kill. The headline called the evidence "irrefutable" even though top scientists had already debunked that claim and declared the novel virus to be natural.

As the pandemic has swept the globe, it has been accompanied by a dangerous surge of false information — an "infodemic," according to the World Health Organization. Analysts say that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has played a principal role in [the spread of false information as part of his wider effort to discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within.](#)

An investigation by The New York Times — involving scores of interviews as well as a review of scholarly papers, news reports, and Russian documents, tweets and TV shows — found that Mr. Putin has spread misinformation on issues of personal health for more than a decade. His agents have repeatedly planted and spread the idea that viral epidemics — including flu outbreaks, Ebola and now the coronavirus — were sown by American scientists. The disinformers have also sought to undermine faith in the safety of vaccines, a triumph of public health that Mr. Putin himself promotes at home. (Source: The New York Times)

(U) **Coronavirus conspiracies like that bogus 5G claim are racing across the internet:** As the U.S. and much of the world hunkers down to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, some virus-related conspiracy theories are having a heyday. Specifically, [a conspiratorial false claim that 5G technology is linked to COVID-19 gained ground,](#) accelerating from obscurity into the rattled mainstream by way of conspiracy theorists who'd been chattering about 5G conspiracies for years.

According to Yonder conspiracies that would normally remain in fringe groups are traveling to the mainstream faster during the epidemic. While the company estimates that it would normally take six to eight months for a "fringe narrative" to make its way from the edges of the internet into the mainstream, that interval looks like three to 14 days in the midst of COVID-19. "In the current infodemic, we've seen conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation spread across the internet at an unprecedented velocity," Yonder Chief Innovation Officer Ryan Fox told TechCrunch. He believes that

the trend represents the outsized influence of “small groups of hyper passionate individuals” in driving misinformation, like the 5G claims. (Source: Tech Crunch)

#### **(U) 4/10 Reporting**

**(U) Rumors about helicopters spraying chemicals go viral globally alongside COVID-19:** A rumor that helicopters would spray disinfectant to kill the coronavirus in Italy made its way across social networks and messaging platforms before changing into different strains as it spread across the globe. Different versions appeared in South Africa, the U.S. and Russia, varying in terms of the timing of the spraying, where it will take place, the type of helicopters involved and their number. There were also differences in what substance would be sprayed. Some iterations in the U.S. and Italy emphasized the use of disinfectants, while some Russian versions referenced medicine. In Malaysia, it was pesticides. [While the DFRLab could not determine the original source of the rumor](#), they confirmed it spread to more than 30 other countries over the course of two weeks. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) China Pushes Viral Messages to Shape Coronavirus Narrative:** China has been buying up ads on U.S. social-media sites and adopting online tactics reminiscent of Russian disinformation campaigns in an [apparent attempt to shape the story internationally about the coronavirus response](#), according to researchers analyzing the activity. The efforts include ad purchases on Facebook promoting the English-language arms of Chinese state-media outlets, as well as posts there and on Twitter’s platform that in some cases disparage U.S. efforts to fight the global pandemic. From mid-February until early March, social-media sites linked to Chinese state media posted more than 3,300 times a day, triple the normal rate, according to Recorded Future.

China has bought more than 200 political ads on Facebook since the end of 2018, but more than a third have been purchased in the past two months, said Vanessa Molter, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory, a cyber-policy institute. Most of the recent ads focused on trying to shape global perception around China’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak. The Chinese tweets, researchers say, evoke Russia’s tactics, which involved spreading messages that can incite doubt and stir anger about basic facts and sometimes promote fictitious claims. Russia also leaned heavily on state media to spread its message online. (Source: WSJ)

**(U) Far-right groups may try to take advantage of pandemic, watchdogs warn:** Far-right groups across North America are seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic by ["weaponizing the virus" and spreading disinformation](#). As a result of physical-distancing measures related to the coronavirus outbreak, many organizations have moved to video-conferencing apps like Zoom. The FBI has issued a warning about "Zoom-bombing," where online video meetings are hijacked by virtual intruders who post racist or pornographic content, yell hateful slurs or utter threats.

A New York Times report documented networks of accounts involved in coordinating Zoom attacks — including one group chat on Discord. While it's not always clear who is behind these intrusions or their motivations, at least of some of the attacks have been linked to white supremacists or are being

coordinated on platforms and channels favored by the far right, like Discord and anonymous message boards.

"There's nothing the far right likes more ... than a crisis," said Barbara Perry, director of the Centre of Hate, Bias and Extremism at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Perry said she is currently seeing online activity that falls under three main categories: conspiracy theories, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes and so-called accelerationist rhetoric. The conspiracy theories in this case often focus on the origin of the new coronavirus, insisting that it was created in a lab (it wasn't) and let loose by powers-that-be in order to profit somehow or control people. (Source: CBC)

**(U) Russian Trolls Hype Coronavirus and Giuliani Conspiracies:** Working with researchers from the disinformation-tracking firm Graphika, The Daily Beast found [at least 20 fake news articles pushed by over 40 suspected Kremlin-backed personas across dozens of social media networks](#) like Facebook, Reddit, Medium, and smaller web forums.

"This looks like a Russian disinformation operation we call 'Secondary Infektion' that's been running for years," said Ben Nimmo, director of investigations at Graphika, who has been investigating the operation since Facebook exposed a first set of accounts in May 2019. "It uses blogging platforms as the soft underbelly of the internet, planting false stories based on forged documents or leaks that never happened. The fakes mostly appear designed to trigger tensions between European countries, or between Europe and the United States, but they were generally too clumsy to be believed."

The story, posted to Russian-language blogs and Reddit by multiple fake personas, tries to pin the blame on the COVID-19 outbreak on the U.S. and Kazakhstan by casting the virus as the byproduct of a U.S. nonproliferation program in the country. The trolls pointed to social media posts by a group of hackers calling themselves "Anonymous Kazakhstan." (Source: The Daily Beast)

#### **(U) 4/9 Reporting**

**(U) Cybercriminals Buying Domain Names of Potential COVID-19 Drug Websites:** Cybercriminals are buying up domains related to COVID-19 related drugs they can use to hack unwitting victims, [researchers at the cybersecurity company NormShield found](#). The number of suspicious domains mentioning the drug hydroxychloroquine has quadrupled since the Administration first mentioned it was being investigated as a treatment, researchers found. Overall, the NormShield team found 362 new suspicious web domains referencing 10 possible coronavirus cures including hydroxychloroquine in the first three months of 2020.

Some of the domains researchers examined referred users to a checkout page that would capture their credit or debit card information. Many of the domains were registered by the same person, researchers said, which makes them even more suspicious. Hackers often buy up domains in bulk so they can quickly shut them down once they've reached a certain number of customers to avoid detection.

Researchers at the cybersecurity firm Check Point also **uncovered** hackers registering tens of thousands of domains that advertise coronavirus-related Android apps that are actually designed to steal users' personal information from their text messages, microphone and camera (Source: NormShield; Checkpoint)

**(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report**

- Discussion of PPE continues to dominate the online landscape as elected officials use social media and traditional media platforms to voice their frustrations with the process. There is an increasing need among the general public and elected officials for some form of accountability at the federal level.
- The financial implications of these response are becoming more clear as cities and states are forced to adjust their spending and share updates on predicted revenues losses.
- Concerns for mental health remain one of the most common topics of discussion on social media as people become more fatigued, however many are looking to stories of recovery for hope and positivity.

*Public Sentiment*

- Distrust in the administration and the federal response continues to grow amid the news that the Acting Inspector General of the Department of Defense was removed over PPE supply chain issues.
- People are growing concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic is putting the long-term mental health of front line medical workers at risk.
- There is growing concern that child abuse could be on the rise despite decreasing numbers being reported. Many worry that the decline in numbers is because children are having less interaction with adults outside their own homes.
- Reports of the CDC possibly loosening guidelines for self-isolation have residents angry, as they believe self-isolation is critical in preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- As people are fatigued from growing numbers of cases and deaths, they are expressing joy for the news of virus recovery counts increasing. They prefer this type of information over death counts.
- There a lot of discussion surrounding yesterday's comments about the World Health Organization in the White House Press briefings as people debate whether not to defund the WHO.

**(U) Likely Increase in Cyberattacks Targeting Healthcare Workers:** CISA and top cybersecurity agencies in the United States and United Kingdom are **warning about** a surge in cyberattacks during the pandemic targeting health-care workers and employees working from home.

The attackers are posing as doctors and even World Health Organization officials to trick users into opening messages that then infect their computers with malware, steal personal information and lock up computer files to hold them for ransom. The report included a list of over 2,500 domains tied to known coronavirus scams. (Source: CISA)

(U) **Russian Information Operation Targets U.S., EU with Fraudulent Documents:** Insikt Group recently identified with high confidence an ongoing covert information operation targeting governments in the United States and Europe and believed to originate from Russia.

The investigation revealed previously undisclosed, attempts to plant false documents targeting U.S. officials and U.S. political organizations' relationships with international policymakers and governmental bodies. It appears that these fraudulent documents attempt to emulate confidential correspondences on sensitive international issues in Eastern Europe to make them seem to be authentic leaked information on the topics. The age of these documents range from January to June 2019.

This activity shared significant overlap with previously reported tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), namely the use of self-publisher blogs with single-use personas, Reddit promotion, and multilingual obfuscation. Distinct TTPs overlapping include the following:

- The use of forged letters and email correspondence
- Targeting of geopolitical incidents in the greater CIS
- Language errors that are characteristic of native-Russian speakers
- Seeding on self-publisher websites to include homment.com, as well as self-publishers based within Russia's "near abroad" (Source: Recorded Future)

(U) **The Echo-Chamber of Russia's COVID-19 Disinformation Operation:** The pro-Kremlin disinformation operation can be divided into five distinct branches – three of them present in this week's caseload of disinformation:

- Sites openly belonging to, or affiliated with, Russian state structures. In this group we find this week [RT](#), [Sputnik](#), [Pervy Kanal](#), and [rubaltic.ru](#);
- Sites registered in Russia and with open and obvious connection to pro-Kremlin circles. Examples this week are [geopolitica.ru](#) and [News Front](#);
- Sites registered in Russia, but without manifest connections to the Kremlin or other Russian structures. Here we find [Strategic Culture Foundation](#), [South Front](#) and [One World](#);

The two other categories function as multipliers and sources. A large proportion of the content of the above-mentioned sites is shared with, or brought to, the following types of sites:

- Sites registered outside Russia and with no apparent ties to Russian state or oligarch structures, but devoted mainly to Russian topics and with an openly pro-Kremlin agenda: e.g., [Russia-Insider](#), [Russian-Faith](#), [The Duran](#), [The Saker](#);
- And sites registered outside Russia that support pro-Kremlin narratives while having no apparent ties to Russia, and also report on a wider range of issues: e.g., [Global Research](#), [Unz Review](#), [Veterans Today](#), [The Alt World](#), and more...

These sites create a kind of echo-chamber of disinformation. They share content and contributors, views, and narratives. Claims are repeated and adapted for new audiences. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

**Social Media Companies Takedown Inauthentic UAE and Saudi-Linked Accounts Publishing COVID-19 Disinformation:** Inauthentic social media accounts and bot networks promoting Saudi and UAE interests pivoted to amplifying COVID-19 disinformation since the start of the pandemic. Twitter has taken down a network of more than 9,000 Twitter bots that published inauthentic posts promoting the political interests of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This “astroturfing” network criticized Turkey’s intervention in Libya — a shared interest of both governments — by targeting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In addition, social media companies took down 5,350 Twitter accounts, 164 Facebook pages, accounts and groups, and 76 Instagram accounts inauthentically amplifying similar messaging.

**WhatsApp Disinformation Mitigation:** In January, WhatsApp limited how often messages can be forwarded—to only five groups instead of 20—in an attempt to slow the spread of disinformation. (They had previously limited it to 20 from 256.) New research suggests that the change is working, but more can still be done.

They found that changing the forwarding limit to five slowed down the spread of information by roughly an order of magnitude. Under the new limit, 80% of messages died within two days, but 20% were still very viral and reached the full network during this time, according to Garimella. The result isn’t perfect because, again, it only uses public data, but it shows what seemingly small fixes can do. (Source: MIT)

#### (U) 4/8 Reporting

**(U) Social Media Bots Amplify China’s Propaganda in Italy:** Between March 11 and 23, as China was delivering much-needed medical supplies to Italy, bots pushed two pro-China, Italian-language hashtags, according to a March 30 investigation published by Italian news outlet Formiche.

The big picture: 46.3% of tweets using the peppy-sounding hashtag #forzaCinaeItalia, which means “come on China and Italy,” were bots, according to an analysis performed by Alkemy in partnership with Formiche.

- The other hashtag was #grazieCina, which means “Thank you China.” 37.1% of tweets using this hashtag were bots.
- Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts, including the account belonging to the Chinese Embassy in Italy, used these hashtags. (Source: Axios)

#### **(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:**

- People feel social distancing is working after New York, New Jersey and Louisiana reported lower numbers of new cases when compared to previous days. More people are also now discussing the use of masks, where to acquire one, and how to make one, as people closely follow local officials and CDC latest guidelines.



- Elected officials and governors continue sharing in traditional and social media the requests and needs of their communities and states. There is ongoing interest regarding FEMA's process for distributing medical supplies, its priorities and the logistics.
- There remains significant national media and public interest on emergency medical supply needs, state governors' updates on their respective responses and difficult working conditions in medical facilities.
- There has been a high-volume of people wanting to make positive contributions to combat the pandemic by taking care of themselves and supplying local medical centers with additional resources. Many are posting "how-to" videos on YouTube for how to make various types of DIY face masks.
- There is increasing concern for healthcare workers at risk of contracting COVID-19 while on the job, especially in hard hit areas like Detroit and New York.
  - People are expressing frustration at that healthcare workers have not had access to proper PPE, leading many to place blame on the federal government for not distributing supplies.
- There is growing concern that poor and/or minority lead communities are the ones being the most affected by the pandemic in the United States.
- As many people are beginning to feel like each day is groundhog day they are leaning on friends and loved ones through social media for emotional support.
- Amid reports of some hospitals becoming overwhelmed, there are reports of other hospitals being forced to furlough or layoff employees due to drastic revenue losses. This is leading people to question what the current reality is for the American hospital system.

(U) **Increase in COVID-19 Lures for Digital Scams:** Hackers have used the dark web and encrypted messaging groups to spread scams selling face masks — and even blood from a person who allegedly recovered from the virus and might be immune. Hackers have hit the health-care sector, followed by finance and education, the hardest.

McAfee Labs found several malicious Android applications with names like "Corona Safety mask" that contained spyware and ransomware. Researchers also noticed an increase in coronavirus-themed documents that were being sent to victims and contained malware that would steal their personal information. (Source: McAfee Labs)

(U) **Psychology Behind the Spread of COVID-19 Disinformation:** The belief that an individual is privy to forbidden knowledge offers feelings of certainty and control amid a crisis that has turned the world upside down. And sharing that "knowledge" may give people something that is hard to come by after weeks of lockdowns and death: a sense of agency

Rumors and patently unbelievable claims are spread by everyday people whose critical faculties have simply been overwhelmed, psychologists say, by feelings of confusion and helplessness.

The conspiracy theories all carry a common message: The only protection comes from possessing the secret truths that "they" don't want you to hear.

People are drawn to conspiracies because they promise to satisfy certain psychological motives that are important to people. Chief among them: command of the facts, autonomy over one's well-being and a sense of control.

If the truth does not fill those needs, we humans have an incredible capacity to invent stories that will, even when some part of us knows they are false. A [recent study](#) found that people are significantly likelier to share false coronavirus information than they are to believe it." (Source: The New York Times).

#### **(U) 4/7 Reporting**

**(U) Cell Towers Attacked in UK Amid 5G-Covid 19 Conspiracy Theories:** Several cell towers in the U.K. have been set on fire and engineers harassed amid the spread of online conspiracy theories that link 5G technology with the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

Four of [Vodafone's](#) mobile phone masts were attacked in the last 24 hours, a spokesperson for the British carrier told CNBC Sunday. It's unclear whether the sites affected were used for 5G.

There are floods of posts on Facebook claiming the coronavirus outbreak was caused by 5G, the fifth generation of mobile internet. Many of the claims center on the idea that the virus originated in Wuhan because the Chinese city had deployed 5G networks last year. (Source: NBC)

**(U) YouTube Moves to Limit Spread of False Coronavirus 5G Theory:** YouTube will reduce the amount of content spreading conspiracy theories about links between 5G technology and coronavirus that it recommends to users, it has said, as four more attacks were recorded on phone masts within 24 hours. The online video company will actively remove videos that breach its policies, it said. But content that is simply conspiratorial about 5G mobile communications networks, without mentioning coronavirus, is still allowed on the site.

YouTube said those videos may be considered "borderline content" and subjected to suppression, including loss of advertising revenue and being removed from search results on the platform. (Source: The Guardian)

#### **(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- Conversation about COVID-19 today included various topics as different states grapple with different needs. States with a high amount of confirmed cases continue to deal with personnel and supply shortages, leading to healthcare workers rationing equipment or making life/death decisions. Other states are adding checkpoints at their borders and implementing more rigorous safety measures and economic assistance for those affected.
- Hydroxychloroquine was also a major subject of interest among the general public, as many share first-hand experiences regarding its effectiveness and possible side effects. Increased discussion about convalescent plasma trials are a new hope for many as well after initial testing has shown promising results on COVID-19 patients.

- FEMA conversation remains centered on the agency's role within the federal response, with many elected officials continuing to publicly request for more federal assistance. Many continue to share news of the federal government seizing supplies. A smaller number are discussing the installation of field hospitals.

(FOUO) *Sentiment Analysis*

- The emotional toll of this experience is weighing on people as there is an increase in people being hospitalized and deaths affecting families.
- Individuals in high-risk categories and front line workers are discussing getting their affairs in order. Many are discussing updating wills, reviewing wills and insurance policies with loved ones and making arrangements for dependents.
- News of a tiger in the Bronx zoo testing positive for COVID-19 has produced wide volumes of conversation, fueling debate about whether animals can transmit the virus to humans and vice versa. This is creating increased feelings of mistrust among many members of the public who feel they were misled to believe the virus could not be transmitted between humans and animals.
- Frustration is increasing between individuals and airline companies regarding reimbursement for canceled flights. Federal Officials are holding companies accountable for refunds after consumer complaints
- Healthcare workers are using social media to instruct citizens on how to properly wear a mask, and the do's and don'ts when wearing one.

(U) **Russia COVID-19 Narrative Analysis:** For the eleventh week in a row, coverage of the coronavirus dominated the Russian media ecosystem last week. As has become the norm, much of this content relayed basic news updates on various aspects of the pandemic. However, one important theme this week emphasized Russia's medical aid to other countries, particularly the United States. A few articles also highlighted areas of geopolitical tension that the pandemic has exacerbated, such as the transatlantic relationship and the divide between the West and authoritarian regimes.

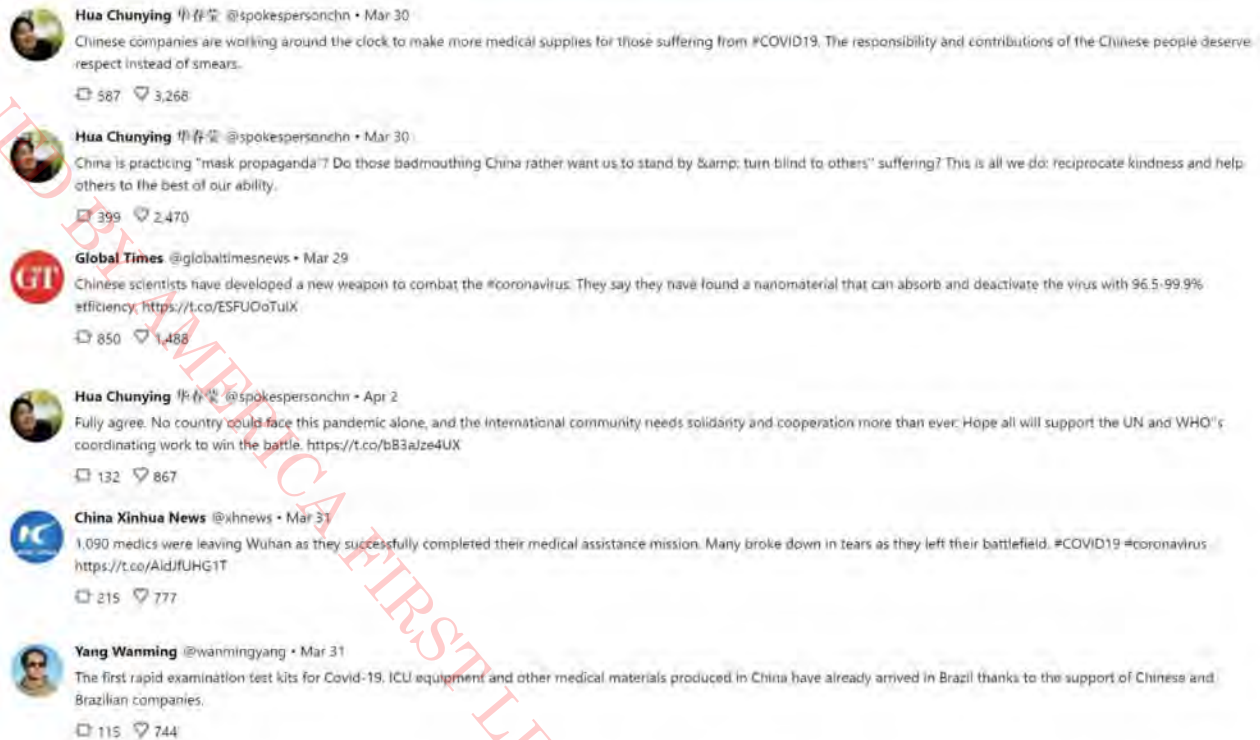
Out of a little more than 1,500 articles collected from Russian government-funded news websites last week, about 1,050 mentioned "virus" in the first 200 words, including all of the top ten articles as measured by Facebook engagement (reactions, comments, and shares; each ranking contained the same ten articles). Four of these top articles dealt with Russian or Chinese medical aid to the West, and another covered China's reaction to criticism of its efforts to contain the virus in Wuhan. Examples included

(Source: German Marshall Fund)

- Ruptly** @ruptly • Apr 1  
BREAKING: Plane with #Russian humanitarian aid lands in #NewYork  
198 413
- MFA Russia ru** @mfa\_russia • Apr 1  
rus Following phone talk between Presidents #Putin & @realDonaldTrump #Russia sends largest cargo aircraft An-124 Ruslan ✈️ with 🇺🇸 medical supplies (masks + equipment) to #US to help fight #COVID19 pandemic, save lives of American citizens. 🇷🇺 The plane is en route #RussiaHelps <https://t.co/efeSK78cuB>  
316 565
- redfish** @redfishstream • Mar 30  
"Italy got more solidarity from China and Cuba than it got from Europe." Irish Member of the European Parliament Mick Wallace condemning the European political elite for how it has dealt with the #coronavirus pandemic. <https://t.co/xlBSav7JqI>  
279 593
- RT** @rt.com • Mar 31  
BREAKING: Russian Covid-19 plane aid to US: Putin asked Trump if he needed help & he accepted MORE <https://t.co/ipcpTTNpxc> <https://t.co/roeeQM5QLo>  
287 468
- Russia in USA ru** @rusembusa • 22h  
#Putin and @AVucic agreed on the provision of humanitarian aid to #Serbia in order to #StopCovid19 in the spirit of traditional friendly #rusbilateral relations. This aid, including sending experts, will mostly be provided by the Russian Defence Ministry <https://t.co/mtlpe8wkj> <https://t.co/NFp6NWyAzP>  
314 417
- Ruptly** @ruptly • Apr 1  
BREAKING: Plane with #Russian humanitarian aid lands in #NewYork  
198 413

(U) **China COVID-19 Narrative Analysis:** The coronavirus was the most prominent topic by far within the Chinese media ecosystem last week. Much of this coverage consisted of basic news updates, but China's humanitarian aid to other countries facing outbreaks received significant emphasis. At the same time, output also heavily disputed any suggestions of problems with Chinese medical equipment donations or China's response to the outbreak more generally, often firing back with criticism of Western countries and officials making these suggestions. As has been the case since the beginning of the outbreak, Chinese media outlets this week continued their efforts to portray China as a benevolent global leader in this time of crisis.

Hashtags associated with China's medical aid to other countries included #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos (Spanish for "We stop this virus together": 11 uses) and #ForzaCinaeItalia (Italian for "Come on China and Italy": 9 uses). According to [media reports](#), bot networks may have helped boost the popularity of these hashtags. (Source: German Marshall Fund)



(U) **COVID-19 Disinformation Major Concern for Political Campaigns:** U.S. officials, including DHS, have accused Russia, China and Iran of exploiting the global health crisis to spread misinformation about the disease and the United States' response to the pandemic. This could extend to the political space as the election draws near — especially as virtual and phone campaigning open up the door for pranksters to pose as candidates.

Scams targeting voters or campaign workers could also pose a threat. Agari, an email security firm, has seen a nearly 600 percent increase of coronavirus-themed attacks against the private sector. While so far there has been no similar uptick in phishing scams using coronavirus-themed bait to steal personal information from campaigns, that could change as November approaches. (Source: Washington Post)

#### (U) 4/6 Reporting

#### (U) FEMA Social Listening:

- Many are struggling to adapt to the new normal and the realization that things will soon get worse is weighing heavily on many. Statements from federal officials suggesting the situation will get worse this week coupled with the extension of many state stay-at-home orders are contributing to the anxiety and fear many are feeling.
- Frustration regarding the PPE supply chain continues, much of this is being driven by several governors who continue to refer to their attempts to compete with the federal government on

the open market as a “bidding war”. Many are expressing concern about FEMA’s management of PPE distribution.

- Traditional media is speculating about a predicted food shortage based on a FEMA Senior Leadership Brief that was shared with press. The public worries these reports will lead to further hoarding issues.

**(U) Violent extremist groups have taken to social media and encrypted applications to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19, in an effort to motivate individuals to take violent actions:**

Federal law enforcement agencies have alerted state and local police forces of white supremacists’ interest in weaponizing the pandemic. While improbable that a white supremacist group can successfully carry out even a low-scale WMD attack, much more likely during the pandemic would be small-arms and critical infrastructure attacks. (Source: The Soufan Center)

White supremacists are blaming Jews, Israel, and China for the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging those infected to spread the virus: Conspiracy theories in white supremacist circles are claiming that COVID-19 was the result of an accidental release of a Chinese bio-weapon. Other theories claim that the virus originated in Israel and was intentionally spread by Jews, while others have accused immigrants. Memes were also found on the messaging app Telegram encouraging infected individuals to spread the virus on public transport and infect religious and racial minorities. While considered by some as a poor attempt at humor, the memes invoke genocidal fantasies of white supremacists. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

**(U) Once Accurate COVID 19 Data Becomes Misinformation With Age:** Given the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic even valid data might be misused simply by being published or amplified several days or weeks after its initial release date. Once-accurate information can become misinformation as it ages, leading to erroneous conclusions and misinterpretation of the current situation.

In the middle of March 2020, multiple websites began sharing an article called “You are more likely to win the lottery than getting coronavirus.” The story was based on a now-deleted Facebook [post](#) of Veso Yolov, a Bulgarian doctor from the Medical Institute of Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mr. Yolov allegedly claimed that most COVID-19 cases were occurring in China and that the mortality rate for people younger than 50 is so low so that it is easier to win the lottery than die from it if you had not visited China. Moreover, the article provided mortality statistics from February 10 as “one of the worst days for now,” with 108 COVID-related deaths in China, comparing the stats favorably to mortality rates from other situations like cancer, heart disease, and even insect bites.

While the date of the now-deleted Facebook post is unclear, the articles citing it appeared in [Bulgaria](#) on March 10 and in Russian [media](#) on March 11, giving the post’s publication date as ranging somewhere between February 10 and March 10. The author provided data suggesting that around 100,000 people were sick at the moment, which according to Johns Hopkins [tracking data](#), potentially narrowing down the publication date to approximately March 3–4, when the official tally surpassed 100,000 positive

cases. However, if the article was written in early March, it ignored that fact that several other days since February 10 had actually been worse, including 158 people dying on February 23.

The post also began to circulate on fringe media and social media. The main spreader of this news in the Russian language was *GoodHouse.ru*, which published it on March 11; at the time of publishing, this article had been shared on Facebook 57,443 times. At the same time, other sources like aggregator *golbis.com*, fringe media *from-ua.info*, and Kyrgyz National News Agency *Kabar.kg* republished the article. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **COVID-19 Likely to Increase Global Terrorism Threat:** As COVID-19 spreads and negatively impacts the stability of fragile states where terrorist organizations operate, the pandemic will also undermine security cooperation aimed at combatting international terrorism: "It is almost certainly correct that COVID-19 will handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation, allowing the jihadists to better prepare spectacular terror attacks." (International Crisis Group; Washington Post)

(U) **Forged Statement About Gates Foundation Vaccine Investments Goes Viral:** Tech billionaire and philanthropist Bill Gates reached the third spot on South Africa's Twitter trends on March 31, with over 35,000 tweets mentioning his name. An overwhelming number of the accounts that tweeted his name claimed Africa should not accept a vaccination for COVID-19 from Bill Gates, even though no vaccination is currently available. Tracing the content of the tweets revealed a fake message claiming to be from a French doctor that hopped from Facebook to Twitter, making its way from France to the U.S. to South Africa.

Gates has been the target of multiple conspiracy theories about the spread of the new coronavirus. One of the first theories, started by QAnon supporter Jordan Sather, claimed the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave funding to an institute that patented a coronavirus vaccination, thus somehow implying Gates started the virus so he could sell vaccinations. The theory was debunked after it was proven the funding in question had gone to avian coronavirus research, not COVID-19. Nonetheless, its online spread demonstrates how disinformation can quickly travel across languages, countries and internet platforms. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Fake Pop-Up COVID 19 Testing Site Scam:** State and local officials in Kentucky are warning against "pop-up" COVID-19 testing sites which offer quick results for cash. A self-proclaimed medical marketing company set up makeshift testing sites outside various churches in Louisville with workers dressed head to toe in hazmat gear. Local officials said the scammers are charging more than \$200 a test and using people's DNA and personal information. (Source: ABC News)

(U) **Defective Chinese Medical Supplies Belie China's Disinformation Campaign:** As the coronavirus rages across Europe, a growing number of countries are reporting that millions of pieces of medical equipment donated by, or purchased from, China to defeat the pandemic are defective and unusable. The revelations are fueling distrust of a public relations effort by Chinese President Xi Jinping and his

Communist Party to [portray](#) China as the world's new humanitarian superpower. (Source: Gatestone Institute)

**(U) 4/2 Reporting**

**(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:**

- State and local officials are battling to get residents to follow stay-at-home guidelines. There continue to be reports of people holding gatherings or crowds forming in public areas. This is leading some officials to shut down more public spaces and enforce stricter rules including curfews in some area.
- Throughout the day the general public and elected officials remained highly critical of the current process for the procurement and distribution of essential medical supplies. There continues to be intense frustration with FEMA over this process.
- There is growing anxiety over hospital capacity issues in major urban areas. As traditional media reports on the number of available beds many worry that hospitals will be too quickly overwhelmed.

**(U) Russia Exploits Italian Coronavirus Outbreak to Expand its Influence:** *From Russia, with love:* that is how the Kremlin has branded its shipment of medical supplies and experts to Italy to help the latter deal with the COVID-19 crisis. From March 23 onward, pro-Kremlin outlets and Russian officials introduced supporting narratives that quickly spread across social media in both Russia and Italy.

**(U) A video on Youtube** titled "Russia tries to help Italy. But is someone mysteriously boycotting it?" was watched by more than 250,00 people and liked over 8,000 times. On social media, pro-Russian Italians started circulating similar [images showing a Russian cargo plane's trajectory](#) to insinuate that EU countries are posing obstacles to the countries that send help, such as Russia. The image was often combined with angry slogans against Poland and the rest of the European Union, as well as the hashtags #italexit and #uscITA, both in support of Italy leaving the EU.

Videos, memes, and images of Italians replacing the E.U. flag with the Russian flag also started circulating online. One [particular video](#), posted on March 23, went viral on Facebook. In less than one week, it gained 567,000 views, 10,000 likes, and was shared by 44,000 users. These social media posts were amplified by Russian-state backed media. (Source: Atlantic Council)

**(U) Top Five Russian COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives:** EU vs Disinfo has recorded 215 cases of Russian-state backed media COVID-19 disinformation. Comparing the cases on the coronavirus published between January 22 and March 25 with the caseload from this week alone, it appears that the anti-American vibe is still going strong. In total, we have collected 39 cases claiming that the US created the coronavirus.



(U) The second most common narrative is that the EU is failing to cope with the crisis and is disintegrating as a result, together with the border-free Schengen area. In particular, this narrative of failure and lack of EU solidarity is trending after the delivery of Russian aid to Italy – we have added 26 new disinformation cases to the database.

(U) The narrative that the virus is being used as a weapon against China and its economy comes in third place with 24 cases.

(U) And in fourth place is the rather creative notion that the whole coronavirus crisis is a secret plan of the global elite, with 17 cases and counting.

(U) Rounding out our top five is a group of messages targeting Ukraine in the context of the coronavirus crisis, with the pro-Kremlin media successfully managing to mix in accusations of Nazism. Total cases: 13. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Most Engaged with Russian COVID-19 Disinformation Narrative:** While the pro-Kremlin media has been pushing all sorts of different and often contradictory narratives – ranging from bizarre conspiracy theories, to Ukraine responding inadequately to the pandemic, to the West either failing to react or reacting hysterically – the articles that saw the biggest engagement numbers all claimed that the virus was manufactured by the United States.

If 68,700 likes, shares, and comments across different social media platforms doesn't seem like much, the 263,902 engagements for all those 152 coronavirus-related disinformation articles looks somewhat more worrying. Especially since this is a topic where disinformation can bring life-threatening consequences. (EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Spins Story of U.S. Military Transporting COVID-19 Test Swabs From Italy:** In a continuing attempt to discredit the U.S. and the West amid the coronavirus pandemic, pro-Kremlin outlets put a misleading spin on the news that the U.S. military had transported 500,000 COVID-19 test swabs from Italy to the United States to meet increased U.S. demand. The outlets framed the operation as if the United States was taking tests away from “suffering” Italians. This story emerged as pro-Kremlin media and social media actors made efforts to draw positive attention to Russia's humanitarian shipment of supplies to Italy, both in English-language information environments as well as domestic Russian-language media outlets.

(U) Pro-Kremlin media seized the opportunity to smear NATO, the United States, the European Union, and other rivals experiencing the coronavirus pandemic. It has been particularly active in Italy, one of the world's hardest-hit countries: the DFRLab has previously reported on how pro-Kremlin and fringe outlets spread an anti-NATO narrative suggesting that U.S. troops in Italy may have been infected by the virus, and thus posed a health risk to other NATO forces. (Source: Atlantic Council)

(U) **Iranian-Linked Hackers Attempt to Break into WHO Email:** Hackers working in the interests of the Iranian government have attempted to break into the personal email accounts of staff at the World Health Organization. It is not clear if any accounts were compromised, but the attacks show how the WHO and other organizations at the center of a global effort to contain the coronavirus have come under a sustained digital bombardment by hackers seeking information about the outbreak. (Source: Reuters)

(U) **Russian Telegram Rumor Claiming Smoking Protects from Coronavirus Spreads to Ukraine:** Ukrainian media picked up an incorrect interpretation of a scientific article claiming that smoking decreases the chances of falling ill with COVID-19. The story received wide dissemination in social media, despite being wrong from the very beginning. The original report traced back to Russian fringe media and was subsequently deleted from the website without any correction.

(U) The story can be traced to the Telegram channel *Tolkovatel* ('Expositor'), which has 22,406 members. The [post](#) was viewed 20,100 times. *Tolkovatel* was founded by Dmitry Tkachev, a former editor-in-chief of *Russian Planet* who [censored](#) reports from Crimea, ultimately leading to five journalists resigning in protest. (Source: Atlantic Council)

#### **(U) 4/1 Reporting**

**EU Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic:** Disinformation and misinformation around COVID-19 continue to proliferate around the world, with potentially harmful consequences for public health and effective crisis communication. In the EU and elsewhere, coordinated disinformation messaging seeks to frame vulnerable minorities as the cause of the pandemic and to fuel distrust in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver effective responses. Some state and state-backed actors seek to exploit the public health crisis to advance geopolitical interests, often by directly challenging the credibility of the European Union and its partners.

- Global: Claims that the EU is disintegrating in the face of COVID-19 are trending on social media in all analyzed regions. Among COVID-19-related content published by RT and Sputnik, articles covering conspiracy narratives such as that "the virus was man-made" or intentionally spread, typically received more social engagement than other stories.
- EU: Disinformation and false health advice on COVID-19 continues to circulate on social media, in contradiction to the WHO's official guidance and the internal policies of online platforms. For instance, Sputnik Deutschland promotes the claim on Facebook and Twitter that "washing hands does not help". Evidence shows that online platforms continue to monetize COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Africa: Hate campaigns against social and ethnic groups are going viral in some countries. China's proactive communication around support delivery creates reputational challenges for other donors.
- China: state media and government officials promote not proven theories about the origin of COVID-19. Chinese coverage highlights displays of gratitude by some European leaders in response to Chinese aid.

- MENA: Daesh encourages militants to exploit chaos and confusion around COVID-19, while framing the pandemic as a “painful torment” against “crusader nations”. The Syrian regime is using COVID-19 to attack EU sanctions. EU Member States are portrayed as unable to help each other or stealing resources meant for local use.
- Russia: More than 150 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation on COVID-19 have been recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database (since January 22). Russian state-controlled media outlets have shifted their focus to highlight Russia’s preparedness to tackle the outbreak. Russian aid to Italy was extensively covered.
- Turkey: False and distorted health information continues to circulate widely in the social media, while COVID-19 is nurturing anti-EU discourses and criticism towards the EU, also more publicly.
- Western Balkans: conspiracy theories suggesting the virus is a US bioweapon or pretext for a foreign invasion continue trending. The COVID crisis is linked to the existing narrative that the EU is “turning its back” on the Western Balkans. (Source: EEAS; EU vs Disinfo)

(FOUO) **Terrorists Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic in an Attempt to Incite Violence** Violent extremists probably are seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, intimidate targets, and promote their ideologies, and we assess these efforts will intensify in the coming months. Since early March, violent extremists have used online platforms to spread misinformation related to federal, state, and local government mitigation efforts and, in some cases, infected individuals with COVID-19. Increased travel restrictions and social distancing possibly will complicate violent extremist efforts to operationalize attacks against more traditional terrorist targets in the Homeland, and we have no information indicating any active plotting is underway.

(FOUO) Other social media users are sharing and discussing perceived threats associated with the US Government response to the outbreak, specifically tied to social media rumors and fears of martial law and gun confiscation. Some domestic terrorism-related activity in the United States historically has been driven by similar conspiracy theories, increasing our concern that a violent extremist could seek to conduct an attack based on this misinformation. (Source: DHS)

(U) **Most Identified Disinformation Websites Pivot to COVID-19 Disinfo:** Website identified by the German Marshall Fund as known purveyors of disinformation have pivoted to promoting false information on COVID-19. Many are self-described “wellness” sites that publish content on false COVID-19 treatment or promote false narratives on the origin of the pandemic. Russian-state backed disinformation websites are also included.

## 8 out of top 10 sites that repeatedly publish false or misleading information are now pushing coronavirus content

### Why coronavirus is a punishment from God that should lead to repentance

God sends His angels to be medicinal. They are so stimulate us to repent and help us grow in holiness.

The M... 2020/01/27



### STUDY: 6 Chinese Herbs "Directly Inhibit" Coronavirus Infection

Chinese government-funded researchers have identified 26 herbs with a "high probability" of preventing coronavirus infection, 6 of them prevented infection by an earlier version of coronavirus in ALL study participants.



(Source: German Marshall Fund)

**COVID-19 Scams:** The number of emails that used phony information about the virus to trick people into infecting their phones and computers has **increased by 14,000 percent** in just two weeks, according to a report from IBM's X-Force research division.

Palo Alto Networks **logged over 100,000** new potentially phony Web domains registered with words including "covid," "virus" and "corona" in their names, in just the past few weeks. And that doesn't count phony sites that claim to sell protective gear such as masks and hand sanitizer.

The explosion of scams includes robocalls, texts, and emails posing as government officials or businesses offering refunds for missed vacations or virus-testing kits. **The average loss for a consumer duped by one of these scams is nearly \$600, the agency reported, which adds up to nearly \$5 million nationwide.**

(U) **Private Social Media Groups and COVID-19 Disinformation:** Private groups, along with fringe sites that link to the mainstream platforms, are "where unsavory narratives ferment and are spread, often with directions about how to achieve maximum impact." These private groups and smaller platforms with looser rules provide avenues for recruiting and radicalizing extremists and for harassment, especially of women (through doxxing and revenge porn), immigrant, and minority group members. Despite Facebook policies banning content that could cause harm, in private groups users are sharing stories claiming that the coronavirus was created by the pharmaceutical industry to sell expensive drugs. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

**(U) 3/31 Reporting**

(U) **Increased Chinese-State Back COVID-19 Disinformation:** Twitter accounts linked to China's ambassadors, embassies and consulates grew by more than 250 percent since this time last year, when political protests in Hong Kong first erupted. Official Chinese accounts frequently retweeted news outlets funded by the Iranian or Russian governments – three of the top five non-Chinese, most-retweeted news outlets were backed by Tehran or Moscow, according to the German Marshall Fund.

The analysis also showed a marked evolution in the type of content Chinese accounts shared since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. While early messaging focused on Beijing's efforts to stem the virus' spread, those messages grew more overtly hostile in February and March, as cases proliferated outside of China. Some of those accounts shared conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus and attacked Western officials for criticizing China's role.



(Source: German Marshall Fund)

(U) **Social Media COVID-19 Disinformation Mitigation Efforts—Mixed Results:** Implementation of these aggressive new policies has been uneven due to a lack of uniform enforcement and greater reliance on automation — both challenges that extend to disinformation beyond COVID-19. Despite the strongly-worded policy to the contrary, ads for face masks continued to surface through [Google's advertising platform](#) and on [Facebook](#). And Twitter [refused to remove a tweet](#) from Elon Musk incorrectly calling children “essentially immune” from the virus — even as its policy earlier directly cited an example of

claiming the virus did not infect children as a prohibited denial of established facts. It has also left up [conspiracy theories](#) from Chinese state officials and media about the origins of the virus itself. On Facebook, [a bug in its anti-spam filter](#) designed to remove coronavirus disinformation also removed posts linking to legitimate sources — including *The Guardian*, *Dallas Morning News*, and the European Union's coronavirus guidance.

Where platforms have been more successful is in prioritizing quality information — a crucial element of a counter-disinformation strategy that should remain beyond this crisis. Google search displays authoritative information from mainstream media outlets and prominently offers links to sources such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO). On [Instagram](#), a pop-up banner linking to information from the WHO greets all users. Google and Facebook are also launching hubs for trusted coronavirus information. Even platforms relatively new to the challenge of disinformation, like [Pinterest](#), now send coronavirus searches to sparse pages with WHO content. WhatsApp, which has been criticized for allowing viral disinformation to flourish under the radar in encrypted and group chats, has taken the initiative to provide special accounts for users to [forward suspect information](#) for verification. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

#### (U) COVID-19 Related Scams

- Hackers are creating bogus sites that claim to have information about stimulus cash for citizens recently approved by Congress but that actually contain information-stealing malware, [researchers at Cisco Talos say](#).
- Hackers have posed as officials with the U.S. Small Business Administration to seed struggling business owners with malware, [IBM X-Force researchers found](#). In just the past 14 days, the researchers have seen a 14,000 percent increase in spam related to covid-19, they said.
- The number of suspicious domains and files referring to the teleconferencing company Zoom have also increased, [researchers at Check Point observed](#).
  - (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Egypt's State Media Amplifies Russian, Chinese, Iranian COVID-19 Disinformation:** Egypt's pro-government media is amplifying Chinese, Russian, and Iranian COVID-19 disinformation that coronavirus is a lab-manufactured biological weapon to destroy the Chinese economy. Advocates of this conspiracy theory made no mention of where the virus may have originated. TV presenter Basma Wahba devoted an episode of her daily show on the ONE channel to biological warfare in early February. "Machine guns and cannons are no longer the weapons used in today's wars. Some countries resort to bio-weapons to target the economies of other states," she said. (Source: Al-Monitor)

#### (U) 3/30 Reporting

(FOUO) **No Indication Fraudulent Text Messages Result of Communications Network Infiltration:** AT&T and other telecoms industry representatives confirmed to the CFI TF that recent fraudulent COVID-19 text messages are not a result of infiltration of telecoms networks. The texts are most likely viral spam texts.

(FOUO) **Disruption of a Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist's Plot to Attack a Missouri Medical Center** The recently disrupted Racial/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist plot to attack a hospital in Missouri is indicative of the persistent threat posed by RMVEs and the potential for world events to influence the timing and location of an attack. Wilson's target selection—while a hospital is novel for RMVEs—reflects the current trend of RMVEs seeking to maximize their audience and the dissemination of their message. Law enforcement activities have identified RMVE actors often desire to promulgate ideology through enhanced media attention, including live streaming attacks, publicized manifestos, or engaging social media platforms. Additionally, an offender may select a target based on the perceived response from media outlets, and subsequent messaging/attention that could spark sympathetic dialogue or action. The FBI and DHS urge state and local authorities, as well as private sector security partners, to promptly report suspicious activities related to potential RMVE violence. (Source: FBI-DHS Joint Intelligence Bulletin)

(U) **Anti-Vax and Conspiracy Social Media Groups Spreading COVID-19 Disinformation:** Two weeks ago an anti-vaccine Facebook group called 'We Brought Vaxxed to the UK' started to disseminate a new and dangerous contagion: misinformation about Covid-19. Its posts promote xenophobia, conspiracy theories and erroneous medical information about the disease and how it might be treated.

One post claimed China was using the outbreak to cull the elderly, another suggested hand sanitiser causes cancer and a "probiotic yogurt suppository" was recommended as a cure.

The group is just one of some 50 social media accounts being tracked by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a charity dedicated to preventing false and divisive lies and myths spreading across the web.

"I took our file on these groups to Facebook executives to express our deep concern", said CCDH chief executive Imran Ahmed. "But nearly two weeks later, they have still not taken action to enforce their own policies and remove them." (Source: CCDH; The Telegraph)

(U) **Digital Forensic Research Lab COVID-19 Mitigation Recommendations:** The Atlantic Council's DFR lab issued the following public recommendations for fighting COVID-19 related disinformation:

1. **CHECK YOUR OWN BIASES.**

- a. Our brains repeat patterns in order to make decisions more quickly, and they selectively seek out information that confirms what we already believe. These mental shortcuts don't always lead to accurate conclusions. We all have beliefs we hold dear, and we tend to trust others who share those beliefs—which means that we often find ourselves caught in echo chambers or [filter bubbles](#).

2. **ASK YOURSELF IF YOU'RE BEING CONSTRUCTIVE.**

- a. Before you share something, ask yourself if doing so is constructive for everyone who might see or hear it. Even if you intend to share something with only your immediate friends or family, they might share it as well, and their followers might share it too.

Before you share a Facebook status or send a tweet, picture yourself standing at your local PTA, church, or community meeting. Is what you're about to share constructive for those folks, or will it make the situation worse?

3. **BE EMPHATIC, BUT ALSO EMPATHETIC.**

- a. If you've followed the steps above, you know the facts. And you're right to be emphatic about those facts, but that's not always enough. **To quote** the late social psychologist Leon Festinger, when you present someone who has a strong conviction with evidence that he's wrong, "The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before." In other words, your goal shouldn't be to be *right*, but to be *helpful*. Allow the people around you to discover the facts for themselves, even if—and especially when—they have your guidance.

4. **REMEMBER THAT ANXIETY IS NATURAL, BUT IT'S ALSO VIRAL.**

- a. Anxiety compounds. As the public-health expert Judson Brewer recently **wrote** in the *Harvard Business Review*, "[W]hen anxiety is spread by social contagion—defined as the spread of affect from one person to another—it can lead to something even more problematic: panic."
- b. When we conduct fire drills, the guidance is to remain calm and file out of the building in an orderly fashion. We are trained to make sure that our response doesn't worsen the situation. The same applies to navigating the online information space and personal communications—especially during a crisis. Your tone matters. And **screaming into the void** online or at someone in particular isn't likely to make things better.

Be patient, kind, deliberate, and fact-based. More people will listen.

We're in this together. It's our civic duty to ensure we're all making the smartest decisions and not allowing rumors or conspiracy theories to take seed. We all have a role to play. You don't have to become an epidemiology expert—the medical professionals and journalists will do their jobs. You do have to make an effort to not spread rumors or falsehoods, or anything else that could make a public-health response harder for those around you.

Lives depend on it. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

**(U) 3/27 Reporting**

**Chinese-State Backed Covert COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign:** Since August 2019, ProPublica has tracked more than 10,000 suspected fake Twitter accounts involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government. Among those are the hacked accounts of users from around the world that now post propaganda and disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak, the Hong Kong protests and other topics of state interest. They included **a professor in North Carolina; a graphic artist and a mother in Massachusetts; a web designer in the U.K.; and a business analyst in Australia.** (It is unclear whether the current fake account holders hacked the accounts themselves or purchased them from elsewhere.) Suspected Chinese operatives have stepped up their efforts in recent



days, according to private messages shared with ProPublica, offering influential Chinese-speaking Twitter users cash for favorable posts.

These efforts appear to be aimed at disparate audiences outside of China. Most of the posts uncovered are in Chinese and appear aimed at influencing the millions of ethnic Chinese who live outside of China's borders. Others are in English.

ProPublica's research tracked how the government-linked influence accounts that had targeted political dissidents and the Hong Kong protests turned their focus to the coronavirus outbreak. During the height of the epidemic in China, many of them became cheerleaders for the government, calling on citizens to unite in support of efforts to fight the epidemic and urging them to "dispel online rumors."

Another post in English trumpeted aid the Chinese government recently provided to Italy. It came from the Twitter handle @RNA\_Chinese, an account that appears to have been an attempt to fool the casual reader into believing it was coming from the U.S. government-funded broadcaster Radio Free Asia (@RFA\_Chinese).

Others accounts have taken a darker turn in response to the pandemic, using it as a vehicle for disinformation and attacks on Beijing's usual political opponents.





Now-suspended Twitter user Melinda Butler posted about the coronavirus and the Hong Kong protesters, sometimes in a mix of traditional and simplified Chinese characters. Shown in the People's Daily graphic: Domingo Rado, Marco Rubio, State Department employee Julie Eades, Nancy Pelosi, Mitt Romney, Mike Pompeo, Eliot Engel and Tom Cotton.



Radio Free Asia's Twitter profile (@RFA\_Chinese) compared with that of the Chinese government-linked impersonator (@RNA\_Chinese).

**(U) Online Extremists Exploit COVID-19 to Inspire Supporters:** White supremacist extremists are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for the theory of accelerationism. The theory states that participating in mass attacks or creating other forms of chaos will accelerate the imminent and necessary collapse of society in order to build a racially pure nation. A neo-Nazi media group that promotes this theory has encouraged supporters to incite panic while people are practicing social isolation during the COVID-19 outbreak, which includes discharging firearms in cities and putting bullet-sized holes into car windows. (Source: State of New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness)

As more Americans have been reported as infected in the past few days and stock exchanges have fallen, the administrators of these chats and channels seem to have realized that this is a moment to increase their calls for disorder and advocacy for violence, whether it is against the government, against people of color, or against Jews and Muslims. While this is online chatter, the fact that it's seeking to take advantage of and exacerbate a crisis is alarming. (Counter Extremism Project; Vice)

**(U) Self-Isolation May Facilitate Radicalization Process:** With the spread of COVID-19, people are being instructed to stay at home, and rightly so. Unfortunately, this risks increasing the consumption of fake news, conspiracy theories, and extremist material online, as people try to make sense of the crisis surrounding them. While governments have made major efforts to provide accurate information about COVID-19 online, there are two areas where social media companies will have to remain vigilant: the rise of conspiracy theories and the role this plays in calls to increase targeted violence against at-risk communities. The first often leads to the second.

Disinformation campaigns are helped by such state actors as [China](#)—to deflect blame of government actions—and [Russia](#), which is looking to increase divisions, sow distrust, and exacerbate crisis situations. (Source: Foreign Policy)

**Hackers target mobile users in Italy and Spain, taking advantage of coronavirus hot spots:** Coronavirus-themed scams show no signs of letting up as hackers have tried to breach mobile phone users in Italy and Spain, the two countries with the most deaths from the virus.

Attackers laced mobile apps with malware to try to steal data from, or otherwise compromise, Italian and Spanish residents looking for updates on the pandemic, according to Slovakian antivirus firm [ESET](#). The phony apps posed as legitimate ones offering updates on the spread of the novel coronavirus and how to assess your risk of infection. (Source: Cyberscoop)

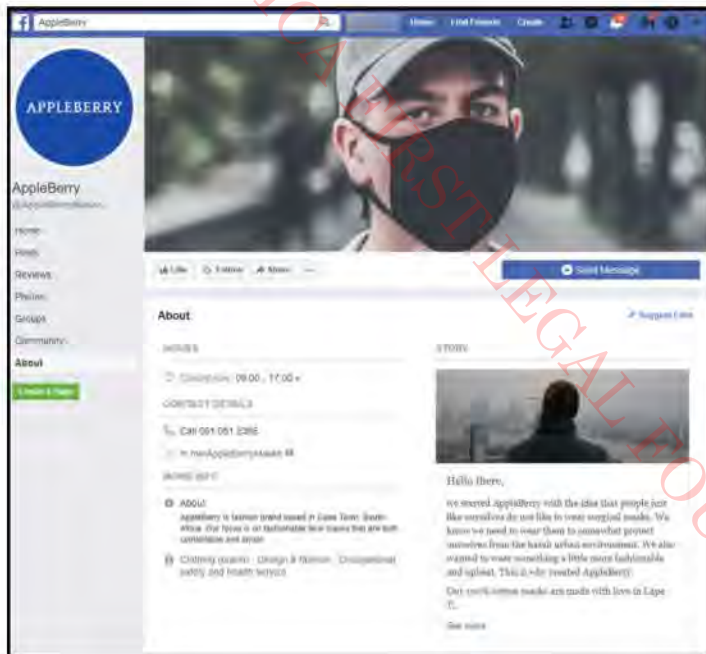
**FBI arrests COVID-19 Scammer:** The FBI arrested a Southern California man for soliciting investments for a fake coronavirus vaccine and cure. It's the first arrest that the Justice Department has made since Attorney General William Barr promised earlier this month to crack down on cyber criminals exploiting coronavirus fears.

The accused scammer, Keith Lawrence Middlebrook, claimed in social media posts that he'd developed pills to prevent coronavirus infections and a serum that would cure people already infected with the virus. The videos racked up over half a million views on YouTube and 1 million views on Instagram before his arrest.

**South Africa-based Facebook groups stoked coronavirus fears to sell non-medical face masks:** A Facebook page linked to Cape Town-based digital marketing firm Fansgate created at least 33 Facebook groups between January and March 2020 that leveraged fears around the novel coronavirus to build their respective audiences. Fansgate's director subsequently used a separate but related entity called AppleBerry to exploit these fears and market non-medical face masks to the members of these groups.

Fangate's for-profit venture had an unintended consequence: in commercializing coronavirus-related fears of group members to market its product, it also created a platform for the propagation of misinformation. The Facebook groups quickly became vectors for the spread of coronavirus mis- and disinformation after the administrator seemingly abandoned them to volunteer moderators.

In response to the DFRLab's investigation, Facebook took action against the companies hosting the groups. "We removed these Pages and Groups for misleading people about their purpose and attempting to evade our [prohibition on the sale of medical equipment](#)," a Facebook company spokesperson said in a statement. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)



Screenshot from the Facebook page @AppleBerryMasks, indicating the page's marketing blurb added on February 12, 2020. (Source: Facebook)

### **(U) 3/26 Reporting**

**(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist Who Planned to Bomb Hospital Amid Pandemic Dies in Incident With FBI:** A domestic terrorism suspect in Belton, Missouri who allegedly planned to car bomb a hospital struggling with the coronavirus pandemic died while the FBI was trying to arrest him on March 24, the agency confirmed. The FBI described what happened next as an "agent-involved shooting" but declined to say whether Wilson was shot by an agent or someone else or whether he killed himself.

The news comes at a time when [counterterrorism experts](#) have warned neo-Nazi extremists adhering to 'accelerationism'—a hyper violent doctrine among REMVE groups seeking to hasten the collapse of

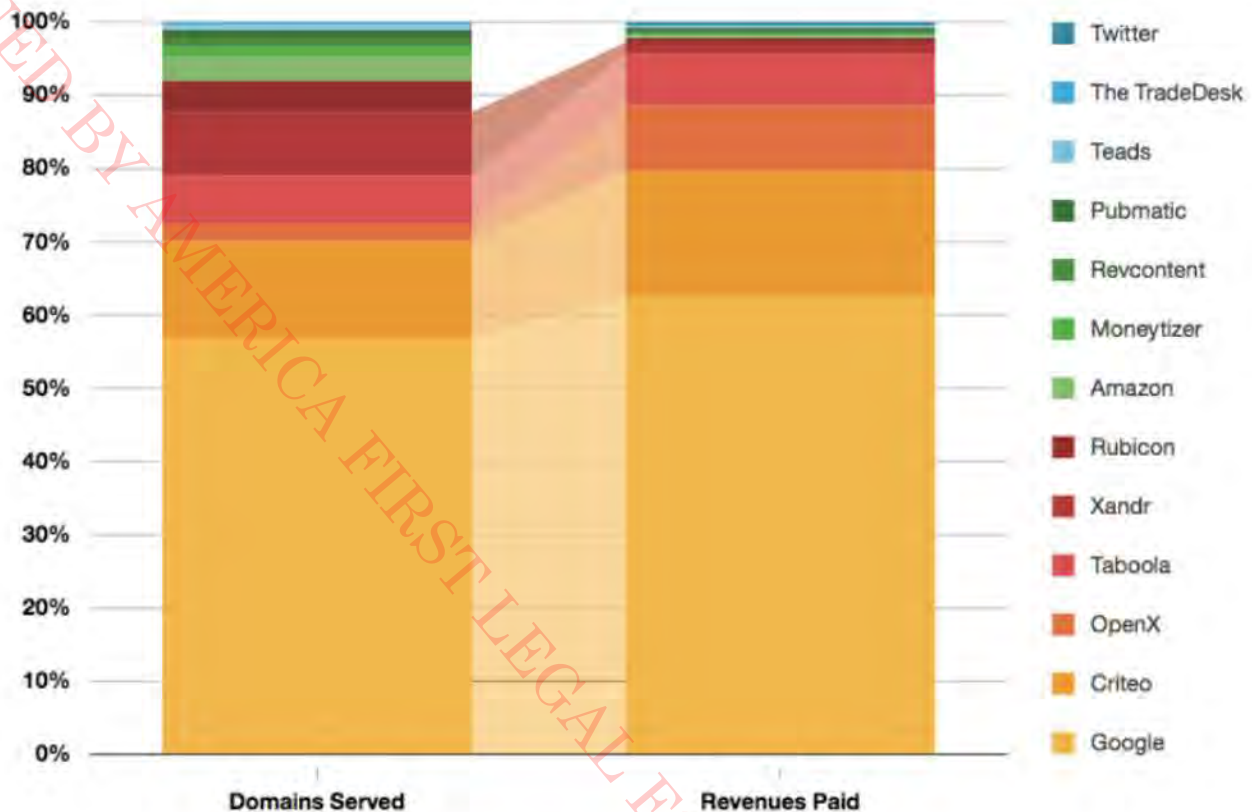
society through terrorist acts—have discussed using the global COVID-19 pandemic to spur the disintegration of vulnerable governments dealing with the crisis. (Source: Vice; Washington Post)

**(U) Limits of Social Media Platforms' Disinformation Mitigation:** However, despite their publicly announced measures, evidence indicates that **platforms are continuing to host false and harmful ads** that for example propagate “numerical codes” as a cure for COVID-19 or misrepresent quarantine as the first step in imposing NATO rule over Europe. This suggests that platforms have difficulties adhering to their own published standards and public commitments on preventing the proliferation of dangerous coronavirus-related disinformation, despite allocating significant resources to this task. As a result, this raises concerns that the problem is not merely the prevalence of harmful speech online but rather a system of broken incentives which prevents internet platforms from adequately protecting the public interest. Moreover, the scope, impact, and success of the actions that platforms are taking is hard to assess independently, especially considering the restrictions on privacy-compliant access to public interest data for researchers. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

**(U) \$76 Million in Annual Ad Revenue Goes to Disinformation Websites:** New research by the **Global Disinformation Index** has produced the findings, estimating that more than \$76 million in ad revenues is inadvertently being spent annually on sites that spread disinformation by major corporations including Amazon Prime, Burger King, Mercedes Benz, Samsung, Spotify, and Volvo. Crucially, the placement of these ads is enabled by a number of equally prominent tech companies, with Google (Ad Services and DoubleClick) and Criteo leading the pack. These companies provide ads for each site based on each user's online data footprint and geolocation.

(U) The study found that Google provides ad services to 57% of the disinformation sites used in the sample, paying them 62% of the estimated total revenues – a whopping US\$48 million annually. GDI highlights that Google's market dominance with this problem in Europe “reflects its global role in serving ads to disinformation sites globally.” Second to Google, French ad tech company Criteo also serves up a significant portion of ads to European disinformation sites, providing 13% of them with ads that result in payments totaling US\$13 million annually (17% of overall revenues). (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

Figure 1. Share of EU disinformation domains served and revenues paid, by ad tech company



Source: Global Disinformation Index

**(U) Six Reasons Russia has Launched a Coordinated COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign:** The Kremlin's [long-term strategic goal](#) in the information sphere is enduring and stable: undermining Western unity while strengthening Kremlin influence. Pro-Kremlin information operations seize on high-profile and divisive issues, employing six complementary tactics to achieve that goal, and the ongoing disinformation campaign on COVID-19 is no exception.

1. Spread anti-US, anti-Western, and anti-NATO messages to weaken them
  - a. These messages aim to deepen anti-American, or more generally, anti-Western sentiment. The impact on an average consumer of these messages will be approximately the same: anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-U.S. feelings often go hand-in-hand in Europe.
2. Sow Chaos and Panic

- b. Russian disinformation campaigns aim to stoke and **exploit** emotions, among which fear is one of the strongest. An audience shaken by fear will be more irrational and more prone to further disinformation operations.
3. Undermine the target audience's trust in credible sources of information, be it traditional media or the government
  - c. Convincing people to believe bogus sources of information first requires persuading them that real sources of accurate information cannot be trusted.
4. Undermine trust in objective facts by spreading multiple contradictory messages
  - d. The aim here is not to persuade people to believe one particular version of events, but to persuade the average consumer that there are so many versions of events that the truth can never be found.
5. Spread conspiracies to facilitate the acceptance of other conspiracies
  - e. People who believe one conspiracy theory **are more likely** to accept others. If your job is to spread lies, it helps to promote other conspiracies as well. A global pandemic that naturally leads to rumor-mongering is an ideal opportunity to spread some additional unfounded beliefs.
6. Identify the channels which amplify Russian disinformation
  - f. In a time of crisis, when rumors spread faster and travel further than normal, a well-organized disinformation campaign can lend valuable insight into how an adversary's information environment is organized. This insight is extremely valuable for any future disinformation operations.

**(U) Private Sector Mitigation Efforts:** Web domain registrar Namecheap is blocking any new applications for web addresses that contain "coronavirus," "covid," and other words referring to the virus in an effort to crack down on scammers. The move comes after the Justice Department announced a restraining order against Namecheap on Sunday for hosting a website set up to sell fake coronavirus vaccines.

The company says it's working with authorities to prevent more scammers from using its services to exploit coronavirus fears. Companies can still request domains with the banned words, but Namecheap will review their requests manually. (Source: Washington Post)

**(U) Secretary of State Pompeo Accuses China of Disinformation Campaign:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is accusing China of an "intentional disinformation campaign" by China on coronavirus, as the United States deals with its own growing outbreak.

In a news briefing on March 25, Pompeo said China was "the first country to know about the risk to the world from this virus. And they repeatedly delayed sharing that information with the globe." (Source: PBS)

### **(U) 3/25 Reporting**

**(FOUO) Wide Spread NC Elections Related SMS Spam:** Between March 18 and March 19 North Carolina residents were targeted with fraudulent phone-based text messages instructing them to register to vote by visiting the link <http://nc-registrations.org> which redirects to <https://www.vote.org> (Vote), a known valid site. During this time the NC State Board of Elections (NCBSE) received numerous emails and phone calls asking about these messages. The NCSBE PIO reached out to contacts at Vote and confirmed that they did not register the site, set up the domain, or send the suspect text messages.

(FOUO) The inauthentic text messages come in the wake of fraudulent COVID-19 related text message campaigns in multiple states, and a viral text message earthquake warning in Utah erroneously citing information from FEMA.

(FOUO) The goal of the recent North Carolina election campaign could be to gather information on how many people may fall for a future malicious attack, gather IP data to improve the adversary's future attack, the owner of the link site could redirect to malicious content in the future, or gauge the response of election officials.

(FOUO) Gaps in current knowledge include,

- The entity responsible for sending text messages to NC residents.
- If this is a poorly planned method to attempt to help voters and voter registration or if this has malicious intent.
- The method used to send the text messages to NC residents.
- Whether messages were targeted to any groups or individuals.

Text Message Example:

- Voters are receiving a text message from 1-855-213-6019 with a message of "[MISSING RECORD] You need to register to vote in NC. Register to vote in 2 minutes here." LINKFOLLOWS
  - Voters receiving this text that reported they were already registered and did not need to take any action. (Source: North Carolina Board of Elections)

**(U) China Hijacks U.S. Citizen Tweet to Advance COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign**

(U) Chinese foreign ministry and communist party spokesman Lijian Zhao, who has been the most prominent figurehead for China's COVID-19 propaganda campaign, hijacked a New Mexico woman's tweet to amplify Beijing's disinformation narrative that COVID-19 did not start in Wuhan, but was instead a bioweapon designed in the U.S.





(Source: The Daily Beast)

**(U) Social Media Platforms Mitigation for COVID-19 Disinformation:** Mainstream social media platforms have taken steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 -related disinformation. For example, many platforms link all COVID-19/Coronavirus searches to official WHO or CDC information, take down content that poses a risk to public health, and offer expanded emergency response alerts for state and local governments.

- **(U) Facebook**
  - Created the “Coronavirus Information Center” to provide real time information about the pandemic to be placed at the top of the News Feed
  - Removing content posing a risk to public health
  - Expanding availability of local alerts for local and state governments and emergency response organizations to get information out better
- **(U) Twitter**
  - Placed a warning label linking to the CDC when people search for Coronavirus All
  - Searches for #coronavirus immediately see health information from credible sources
  - Broadened what is defined as harmful to include content that:
    - Denies health recommendations
    - Pushes treatments that are ineffective
    - Denies facts
    - Claims meant to manipulate behavior benefiting a 3<sup>rd</sup> party
    - Makes unverified claims meant to incite panicked action
    - Impersonates health officials
    - Gives false information regarding diagnosis criteria

- Makes claims on how to differentiating COVID19 and other diseases
  - Makes claims that groups are more/less susceptible to the virus
- Has partnered with health organizations around the world to help them navigate the platform, get experts verified, and to give Twitter counsel on how to mitigate harm
- Using increased automated moderation
- (U) **Google**
  - Promotes “Do the Five” Campaign on the homepage: 5 things to prevent the spread of the virus according to the WHO
  - Pushes out SOS Alerts with links to national health websites and maps of infected areas at the top of the search page
  - Blocking ads trying to capitalize on the virus
  - Google.com/covid19 is dedicated to information regarding the virus, including state information and prevention
- (U) **YouTube**
  - Continues to remove videos that spread virus misinformation, says this will increase as they rely more on automation as workers change environment
  - Will introduce a shelf/row of verified Coronavirus videos on its homepage
  - Demonetized (now slowly remonetized) videos related to the virus
  - Linking to the CDC website from the home page
  - Highlighting authoritative content when people search for COVID19
  - Linking to WHO at the top of the search bar
- **TikTok**
  - Actively encourages users to report content that includes misleading information
  - Includes a notice under the coronavirus hashtag encouraging users to verify facts and use trusted sources
  - Has partnered with WHO to create an informational page (present on the discover page, top of coronavirus searches, and a link on videos that could relate to the virus) and created a series of livestreams where users can ask questions
- **Reddit**
  - Created r/CoronaVirus sub-thread to house official information, sent out notification to users that this would be the place for updates and information
  - Workign to target threads that promote misinformation
  - Promoted r/AskScience on the front page, which is curated and includes verified experts<sup>1</sup>
- **Instagram**
  - Adding an educational message connected to resources from WHO and other health organizations when Coronavirus or COVID19 is searched
  - Adding stickers to promote accurate information in stories, including reminders to wash hands and social distance
  - Adding a notice at the top of the feed with resources from trusted health organizations
  - Highlighting trusted health organization resources when people look at virus related hashtags

<sup>1</sup> <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/481956-reddit-enlists-users-to-combat-coronavirus-misinformation>

- Will remove COVID19 accounts from recommendations and some COVID19 content from explore (unless posted by a trusted source)
- Down-ranking content in feed/stories that has been deemed false by 3<sup>rd</sup> party fact checkers
  - Posts deemed false are already removed from explore and hashtags

### **(U) 3/24 Reporting**

**(U) COVID-19 Disinformation Risk Mitigation:** To mitigate the risk of COVID-19, CISA and its partners advise citizens to recognize the risk of COVID-19 disinformation; rely on trusted sources such as the CDC, WHO, or HHS; slow down, think, and let emotions cool before sharing online content; be wary of emotional content attempting to spread fear, anger, or panic; and talk to friends and family about the risk of spreading disinformation. More information can be found at [www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control](http://www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control)

Tech companies such as [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have added banners and filters to fight or block coronavirus misinformation. (Source: Wired)

The U.S. Agency for Global Media continues to publish content refuting state backed COVID-19 disinformation, as well as debunking pseudoscientific fake virus treatments that have gained traction online. (Source: U.S. Agency for Global Media)

**(U) Chinese-State Backed Twitter Disinformation:** Misinformation about the coronavirus spread by Chinese government officials does not violate Twitter's policies, according to a spokesperson for the company.

In particular, tweets from Lijian Zhao, an official spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, insinuating that the U.S. military may have spread the coronavirus to Wuhan, China, will remain up.

Twitter's spokesperson pointed to the company's position of giving public figures broad exemptions to many of its policies. (Source: The Hill)

**(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists Seek to Recruit Amidst Coronavirus and Economic Downturn:** The leader of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), Simon Lindberg, recently posted a blog on the NRM website aiming to recruit members amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and economic hardships.

(U) Simon Lindberg, the leader of the neo-Nazi [Nordic Resistance Movement](#) (NRM) posted a blog on March 16 stating that long term effects of the coronavirus could benefit his group. While stating that he was sorry for the deaths caused by the coronavirus, and the economic damage to Scandinavian workers, Lindberg also expressed his "great excitement" regarding the effects of the coronavirus, including the

economic fallout, because it could lead to a “national uprising.” Further, he urged his readers to withdraw their money from banks and join the NRM. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

**(U) ISIS COVID-19 Propaganda:** ISIS online supporters on the RocketChat platform praised the coronavirus for killing Americans, Europeans, and Iranians. Users also stated that the coronavirus did not exist in ISIS controlled areas, implying that the group is impervious to infection. Official ISIS publications have warned their members of the coronavirus. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

**(U) Martial Law Disinformation:** The Pentagon issued a statement to debunk conspiracy theories that the increased deployment of the National Guard to areas hardest hit by COVID-19 represents an impending declaration of Martial Law. The DoD suggested people visit [www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control](http://www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control) for the most current rebuttals to common COVID-19 disinformation.

**(U) Russia Likely Behind Ukrainian Forged Health Ministry Emails:** It is likely that Russian actors exploited uncertainty and fear around Ukraine’s coronavirus response to provoke protests and increase public distrust of the Ukrainian government: The disinformation campaign targeted specific Ukrainian cities with sanatoriums, especially Novi Sanzhary, the location of the quarantine site for evacuees from China. Tactics including a fake email supposedly from the Ministry of Health were intended to cause confusion and fear ahead of the arrival of evacuees, and the level of coordination suggests Kremlin involvement. Following the campaign, Russian media used the events to depict Ukraine, especially western Ukrainian “nationalists,” as disorganized, incompetent, “violent, lawless, and prone to ignorant village hysterics”. (Source: Institute for the Study of War)

**(U) China is spinning Western responses to Coronavirus into anti-American and anti-Western propaganda:** China has seized upon the various responses of Western countries to Coronavirus by using state-run media and ambassadors to Western states to upbraid Westerners for harboring deep-seated colonialist and xenophobic sentiment against people of Asian descent. Two Chinese media outlets, *Xinhua* and *the Global Times*, amplified accusations from the Foreign Minister’s office which claimed that the United States’ move to pull their consular staff out of Wuhan was “immoral but not surprising.” Russian media outlets including *RT* claimed that the virus is exposing racist Western sentiments against China. *RT* made note, however, of China’s largely relaxed and “calm” response to Russia closing its borders with China. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

**(U) Secretary Pompeo Condemns Iranian COVID-19 Disinformation:** The Department of State released a [Iran: COVID-19 DISINFORMATION FACT-SHEET](#) in response to Iran’s coordinated disinformation campaign on the pandemic. Iranian officials at the highest level of government have repeatedly claimed the spread of COVID-19 in Iran might be due to a U.S. biological attack, and an advisor to the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament claimed coronavirus was being used as biological warfare by the United States.

**(U) 3/23 Reporting**

**(U) China's COVID-19 State-Backed Media Disinformation:** Beijing is seeking to use the crisis to its advantage in a global propaganda push. A Chinese state spokesman, for example, tweeted a story from a Canadian-based disinformation site that claims COVID-19 originated in the US. That same website previously claimed flight MH17 was not shot down by a Russian missile over Ukraine.

(U) The Chinese account also tweeted video of a U.S. congressional testimony edited and framed to suggest COVID-19 didn't originate in Wuhan, but in the U.S. instead. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy; the Sydney Morning Herald)

**(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE) Weaponization of COVID-19:** In an alert obtained by ABC News, the FBI's New York office reports that "members of extremist groups are encouraging one another to spread the virus, if contracted, through bodily fluids and personal interactions" to minorities and law enforcement.

(U) The FBI alert, which went out on March 19, told local police agencies that extremists want their followers to try to use spray bottles to spread bodily fluids to cops on the street. The extremists are also directing followers to spread the disease to Jews by going "any place they may be congregated, to include markets, political offices, businesses and places of worship." (ABC News)

(U) The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also reported that white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, VK, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media. (Anti-Defamation League)

(FOUO) The California State Threat Assessment Center assesses that some racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists and foreign terrorist organizations likely will continue using the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to promote their ideological narratives, spread misinformation, and encourage violence against certain minority groups, law enforcement, faith-based communities, and critical infrastructure. (Source: California State Threat Assessment Center)

(FOUO) On March 10, an unidentified REMVE Telegram account posted a fake CDC flyer encouraging infected individuals to visit religious centers, diverse neighborhoods, and use public transit. Other examples of misinformation shared by REMVEs include Telegram posts blaming Jews, Israel, China, or Chinese people for COVID-19. (Source: DHS)

(FOUO) On March 19, REMVE groups indicated a desire to spread COVID-19 to law enforcement officers, Jewish Americans, and other targeted groups through bodily fluids and personal interactions, according to the FBI. (Source: Vice.com)

(FOUO) On March 19, ISIS issued its weekly al-Naba newsletter, which contained calls for attacks in Western countries against healthcare systems that are strained by the COVID-19 pandemic. The newsletter also included directions for ISIS supporters to “kill [non-Muslims] wherever you find them,” according to DHS. (Source: Middle East Media Research Institute)

**(FOUO) Foreign Influence and Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists:** The Countering Foreign Influence Task Force considers the bulk of REMVE propaganda efforts as an inherent foreign influence issue due to their increasingly transnational nature. As far as more specific foreign linkages, the CFI TF has not seen any open source information to suggest that foreign actors are directly involved in supporting the COVID-19 related threat vectors described by the FBI and FPS: intentionally spreading the virus to minorities and law enforcement. Nevertheless, the CFI TF does have open-source reporting on Russia providing support to the global REMVE movement and amplifying COVID-19 conspiracy theories, increasing the Kremlin’s complicity in any resulting REMVE violence.

(FOUO) At a broader Russian disinformation level, many REMVE/accelerationist narratives dovetail quite easily with Alexander Dugin’s (The Russian nationalist pseudo-philosopher sometimes referred to as Putin’s Rasputin, though his actual influence on policy is likely overstated) messaging on COVID-19. He has been highly influential with REMVE groups, particularly in Europe. According to EU vs. Disinfo, the following narrative has been amplified across Russia-state backed media. If past is prologue, then it is likely that Russian linked accounts are amplifying the same narrative on social media.

(U) “When pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets continue to create confusion and distrust, they are playing with peoples’ lives. The Russian Nationalist philosopher [Alexander Dugin](#) relishes on the disease, comparing it with the ancient gods’ punishments:

*“The coming of the plague allows for a complete renewal of societies. The epidemic has no logic and spares neither the noble nor the rich, nor the powerful. It destroys everyone indiscriminately, and brings people back to the simple fact of being. The plague gods are the fairest . . . The plague is an existential phenomenon. The Greeks called Apollo Smintheus “the Mouse god” and attributed to his arrows the power to bring plague . . .*

*That is what Apollo would do if he looked at modern mankind – bankers, bloggers, rappers, deputies, office workers, migrants, feminists... that’s about it.”*

(FOUO) Dog whistles permeate Dugin’s messaging on COVID-19, which could likely perk the ears of many REMVE actors. Note that he often uses “bankers” as a stand in for a “Jews.” (Source: EU vs. Disinfo; Soufan Center).

**(U) Russia State-Backed Disinformation:** By March 21, [110 examples](#) of pro-Kremlin disinformation concerning the coronavirus had been recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database, the majority propagated by Russia-state backed media.

**(U) Covid-19 Scams and Cybercrime:** The FBI has warned of a significant spike in coronavirus scams, adding to concerns about [an "unprecedented wave" of cyber-attacks](#) voiced by United States Attorney Scott Brady. According to the FBI Cyber Division, threat actors are primarily based outside of the U.S.

and are mainly targeting three states—Washington, New York, and California—Which have higher rates of COVID-19 infection. (Source: FBI Cyber Division interview with Forbes).

COVID-19 related scams will likely skyrocket, according to a new report from analysts at Moody's Investor Service, a division of the credit rating agency, especially as more employees work from home, straining their employers' digital protections. (Source: Moody's)

Scammers are also getting more creative. The cybersecurity firm Sophos found scammers threatening to infect victims and their families with coronavirus if they don't pay a \$4,000 ransom. It's a twist on a classic "sextortion scam," where hackers threaten to release alleged private videos or messages if the victim doesn't pay up. (Source: Sophos)

Cybersecurity firm Sentinel Labs has also noticed an uptick in coronavirus-themed scams, including malware-laced documents posing as important public-health information. Over the last few months the firm has seen aggressive use of COVID-19/Coronavirus as a lure all over the spectrum of sophistication. Campaigns range from run-of-the mill scams (selling supplies for BTC via .onion sites) to non-targeted spam campaigns (primarily for credential harvesting). The firm has even observed enterprising criminals selling COVID-19-specific malware/phishing 'kits' which can be customized and leveraged in downline attacks for a very small investment (less than \$1000 USD). (Source: Sentinel Labs)

**(U) Recent Social Media COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives:** Disinformation on social media circulated that one way to get tested for the virus is by donating blood, warning that mosquitoes can carry it, or that people can test themselves for the virus by holding their breaths. All are untrue. (Source: Associated Press)

### **(U) 3/21 Reporting**

#### **(U) COVID-19 Scams and Cybercrime**

(U) Despite DOJ's actions, coronavirus-themed scams are unlikely to abate anytime soon. In fact, the scams probably will skyrocket, according to a new report from analysts at Moody's Investor Service, a division of the credit rating agency, especially as more employees work from home, straining their employers' digital protections.

(U) Some scammers are also getting more creative. The cybersecurity firm Sophos found scammers threatening to infect victims and their families with coronavirus if they don't pay a \$4,000 ransom. It's a twist on a classic "sextortion scam," where hackers threaten to release alleged private videos or messages if the victim doesn't pay up.

(U) Cybersecurity firm Sentinel Labs has also noticed an uptick in coronavirus-themed scams, including malware-laced documents posing as important public-health information.

**(U) 3/20 Reporting**

**(U) COVID-19 Election Disinfo:** Viral posts on social media claim COVID-19 is no worse than other outbreaks that have occurred in “every election year,” suggesting that the new coronavirus is being “hyped” to interfere in the 2020 election. But most of the dates cited to defend those conclusions about previous outbreaks are misleading or incorrect.

(U) A viral image of a [whiteboard sign](#) claiming to have been “Posted at a Doctors office today” purportedly erroneously lists disease outbreaks that occurred in “every election year” since 2004. The image says the new coronavirus is “being hyped as The Black Plague.”

(U) But the dates listed for the outbreaks of most of the diseases are incorrect; the impact of those diseases was not widely felt in federal election years.

(U) The image, which appears in numerous [Facebook posts](#), shows a handwritten sign that reads, in part, “Every election year has a disease.” It then incorrectly lists: “SARS-2004 Avian-2008 Swine-2010 MERS-2012 Ebola-2014 Zika-2016 Ebola-2018 Corona-2020” (Source: Factcheck.org)

**(U) China COVID-19 Propaganda:** Chinese and U.S. media articles display different levels of both alarmism and optimism in their coverage of the global pandemic. Chinese outlets included many articles with a focus on positive stories such as the number of recovered patients and examples of successful treatments, while U.S. media reported on new cases of infections and trends in death. For example, Chinese state media reported on a coronavirus patient who gave birth to a healthy baby not infected with coronavirus, whereas the U.S. media told the story of a different [newborn](#) in Wuhan who had become the youngest coronavirus patient. [CNN](#) credited the story’s source as Chinese state media CCTV, yet no English-language Chinese state media posted this story on their Facebook pages. (Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)





Chinese state outlet China Daily (left) reports on a baby born to a coronavirus patient with no infection, whereas CNN (right) reports on a newborn baby becoming the youngest person diagnosed with coronavirus

(Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)



Words frequently used in connection with the word "patient" by Chinese media (left) and U.S. media (right). Exclude "patient" and the term "coronavirus" for better visibility of other terms. Chinese media use several recovery- and treatment-related terms.

(Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)

**(U) 3/19 Reporting**

**(U) Fraudulent COVID-19 Text Messages:** There is currently no open-source evidence to suggest the COVID-19-related fake viral texts are part of a coordinated foreign influence operation. There is precedent for both adversarial nation states and online pranksters using text messages to spread a crisis hoax. In 2014, the Russian Internet Research Agency sent text messages to residents of St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, claiming that a nearby chemical plant had exploded. In January 2020, after the United States killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, a Youtube influencer likely triggered a spate of text messages warning Americans that they had been drafted into the military for the expected World War Three.

(Source: Graphika)

(U) The Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Lab splits reported activity thus far into two groups – scam texts and fake official texts:

- The scam texts include stuff like “my X works at the pentagon, and they said Y, so we should all go and do Z. PLS FORWARD”. In other words, a presentation of a false fact pattern and a call to action. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon via SMS, social media, or – originally – email! The saving grace of this behavior on SMS, is that there is more friction to forward the message than in other formats like WhatsApp or email because it requires the user to take more actions, like taking a screen shot and forwarding or copy/pasting the text and forwarding. On WhatsApp or email, you can just forward.
- The fake official texts are more pernicious. There were a number of reports of this in NYC, in which a text would say “Mayor De Blasio is shutting down the city, do X, Y, and Z before he does.” The vulnerability here is obviously panic, but also that it looks/feels more like an official government communication. DFR Lab has spent time recently clarifying the what the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (ipaws) is, and that there is no indication that it has been deployed during the COVID-19 response.

(Source: Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Lab)

**(U) COVID-19 Text Disinformation Narratives:**

(U) Example: “Here’s the intel! My friend sent me this: ‘Message from friend of mine, we should stock foods for 2 weeks: From a trusted source of mine: from a trusted friend connected to the UN in NY Please be advised, within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends up in DC who just got out of a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything. Please forward to your network.’”

(U) Example: “Please be advised, within 48 to 72 hours the President will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends up in DC who just got out of a two

hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything.”

My client...  
Within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends in DC who had a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything.

9:11 PM · Mar 15, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

From a friend of a friend who works for Cleveland clinic. And Chris's work is confirming with their sources at Trump administration as well as my brother who works for the govt.  
  
FRIENDS:  
  
Please be advised, within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends down in DC who just got out of a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything. Please forward to your network.

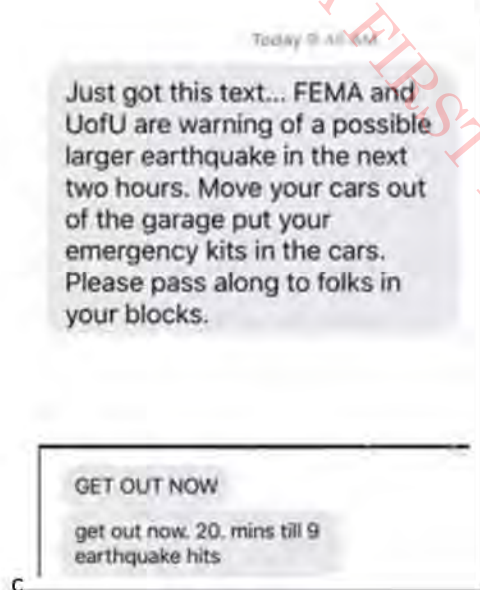
Btw take this with a grain of salt but this is from andrea's coworker: 2:49 PM  
  
I hate to be alarmist but I would rather say something than not... I just heard from a friend whose partner is CIA. They're shutting everything down. We're going to get 48 hour notice today or tomorrow to get everything we need and then stay inside for a one month. Supposedly gov is sending everyone unemployment checks. This is getting bizarre.  
  
Get groceries and stuff ASAP. 2:49 PM

Screen captures of false information spread through text messages. via Twitter

- Example: Hoax Audio File:  
[https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F777022780&color=ff5500&auto\\_play=false&hide\\_related=false&visual=true&show\\_artwork=true](https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F777022780&color=ff5500&auto_play=false&hide_related=false&visual=true&show_artwork=true)

(U) **Utah Earthquake Disinfo:** On March 18, in the wake of a recent 5.7 magnitude earthquake, fraudulent viral text messages targeted Utah residents with a false FEMA warning about a large imminent earthquake, urging people to flee their homes as quickly as possible. The disinfo prompted the Utah Emergency Management service to issue a public rebuttal.

(U) The disinfo seems to mirror the tactic of recent fraudulent coronavirus texts that have circulated in cities across the country: cite a trusted source of authority and play to people's fears in order to incite panic. It's unclear at this time if the Utah texts are part of a broader coordinated disinformation campaign, or the work of local copycats. The use of local terminology like "UofU" indicates an actor with knowledge of area vernacular.



(FOUO) **Twitter:** Twitter has expanded its safety rules to include content that could place people at a higher risk of transmitting COVID-19. (This blog is updated in real-time)

To escalate accounts/content to Twitter for review under these rules, use [civic-help@twitter.com](mailto:civic-help@twitter.com), including additional context if possible.

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media Disinfo:** The outbreak is, not surprisingly, dominating this week's cases of disinformation. Approximately a third of the just under 90 cases this week is devoted to disinformation about the virus; its causes and spread. The pro-Kremlin outlets had their reliable [conspiracy theory](#) ready from the very beginning and have kept parroting the same line ever since: "The virus is created in NATO and/or laboratories". This week is no exception. We find the same claim, with small variations, this week: in [Russian](#), in [Arabic](#), in [Italian](#), in [English](#)... The Russian state-owned channel

RT's Spanish service has evolved into one of the world's largest domains by total social engagement on the COVID-19 outbreak.

(U) English language outlets tend to describe the COVID-19 outbreak in much darker, cynical terms. The virus is spread to **reduce the population** of planet Earth. The Global Elites are **using the outbreak to introduce tyranny**. There is no outbreak; just **common flu**, but the **Rothschilds et al** use it as a pretext to **introduce forced vaccination, injecting nano-chips** to control the people... And then there are recurrent claims that there is no outbreak. South Front, one leading, English language pro-Kremlin disinformation outlet, suggest that it is **all a scheme by the Italian government** to milk EU for money and relax stringent EU's budgetary rules.

(U) Pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts, targeting an International audience, aim at inducing distrust in national, European and International institutions; distrust in experts, the health care system and the individuals, engaged in the self-less work to help people affected by the virus. In a situation where trust, cooperation and persistence is essential, disinformation kills people. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

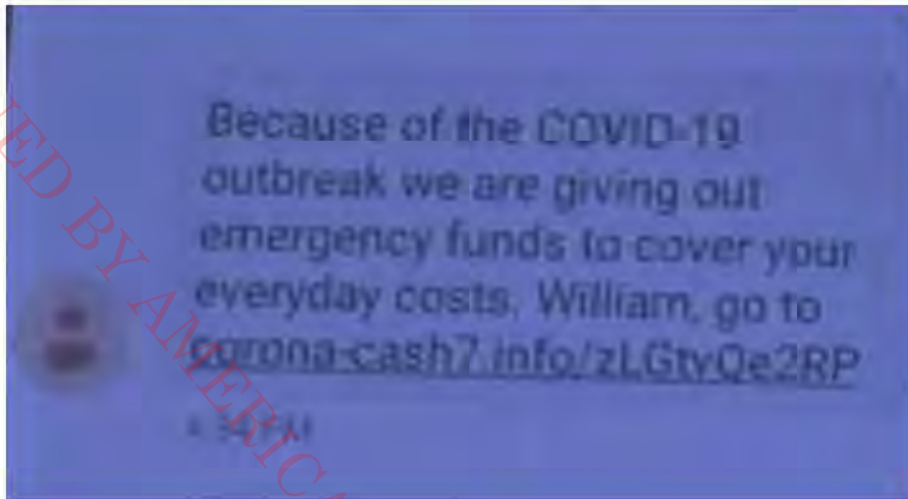
#### **(U) 3/18 Reporting**

(U) **Russia:** Russian media have deployed a "significant disinformation campaign" against the West to worsen the impact of the coronavirus, generate panic and sow distrust, according to a European Union document seen by Reuters. The EU document said the Russian campaign, pushing fake news online in English, Spanish, Italian, German and French, uses contradictory, confusing and malicious reports to make it harder for the EU to communicate its response to the pandemic. (Source: Reuters, EU/EEAS)

(U) "The overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries...in line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies," the document produced by the EU's foreign policy arm, the European External Action Service, said. (Source: Reuters, EU/EEAS)

(U) **Facebook:** Facebook falsely flagged posts from a number of legitimate news organizations as spam on March 17. The company issued a statement that the issue was due to an automated system error, and has since been resolved.

(U) **COVID-19 Stimulus Scam:** The FTC issues a public warning on fake texts and phishing scams related to COVID-19 stimulus payments. (Source: FTC; WTVR, Richmond)



**(U) 3/17 Reporting**

(U) Administration officials said that recent fraudulent text messages urging the public to stock up supplies in advance of a national quarantine is a deliberate effort by a foreign entity to sow fears of a nationwide quarantine amid the virus outbreak is underway, according to the Associated Press.

(U) In Europe, one viral video shared on WhatsApp claimed to show shoppers mobbing a store in the Netherlands. A version of the same clip put to music on TikTok, a popular China-based platform for short videos, was viewed more than 4 million times, according to a report last week by disinformation research group [Bellingcat](#), which determined the video was actually from an incident in Germany several years ago.

(U) China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian continues to spread disinformation that the U.S. military brought the virus to China to his nearly 300,000 twitter followers. Most recently, Zhao published out of context CDC Congressional testimony from February in support of this conspiracy theory. The video was also published to Twitter by other state media outlets, including national broadcaster CCTV and the popular Global Times tabloid.

**(U) 3/16 Reporting**

(U) The National Security Council issued a statement that text messages related to an impending national quarantine are fraudulent. Inauthentic text messages claiming to cite information from inside sources in the NYPD, UN, or DoD advising people to stock up on food, gas, and other supplies in advance on a national lockdown have circulated in recent days. In addition, hoax audio claiming to be from someone with sources at the Pentagon spread online and across group chats, according to COVID-19 social media disinformation analysis by BuzzFeed News. It mirrors the hoax texts attributed to other authorities disavowed by the NSC.

(U) Russian overt state-backed media are intentionally promoting contradictory narratives on COVID-19 in order to muddle and confuse the public discourse, according to EU vs. Disinfo. For example, [one pro-Kremlin outlet](#) reports that the coronavirus is less harmful than the seasonal influenza, while [another](#) claims that the virus will lead to the collapse of civilization.

(U) As COVID-19 cases drop in China, Beijing will likely utilize its increased bureaucratic capacity to ramp up COVID-19 related foreign propaganda efforts, according to Matt Schrader of the Alliance for Securing Democracy. The most likely narratives and strategy will be to contrast alleged Chinese success to contain the pandemic and assist other nations, with Western democracies' floundering response to the crisis. For example, a Peoples Republic of China spokesman has amplified doctored videos of Italians clapping alongside to the PRC national anthem while thanking Beijing for its support.

(U) A group of hackers based in China has leveraged the coronavirus crisis to attack the public and telecom sectors in Mongolia by impersonating the country's foreign ministry, according to cybersecurity firm Check Point. The attack, which researchers at Check Point dubbed "Panda-19," faked two documents from the Mongolian minister of foreign affairs. The documents were disguised as updates on the prevalence of coronavirus cases in Mongolia, but opening them would infect the target's computer with a tool called RoyalRoad, which would take over the devices without users' knowledge.

(U) A conspiracy theory channel on YouTube with more than 1 million subscribers has published 25 videos in less than 40 days spreading falsehoods and rumors about the incidence of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus in Latin America, according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab). The *Conciencia Radio* channel kept publishing — and people kept watching — false claims even after a fact-checking agency [debunked](#) the channel's content. The most-watched coronavirus video published by the channel claimed that the virus had been genetically engineered and contained DNA strands of HIV and Hepatitis-C. DFR analysis shows that most videos that received more than the average number of views were about the coronavirus, including the most watched video between January 27 and February 24, 2020.

(U) Mutually independent political experts in Russia, left-wing politicians in Germany, and an anonymous online persona from Latvia have attempted to spread a narrative suggesting that Defender Europe 20, the U.S.-led multinational military exercise including NATO participation will bring the COVID-19 novel coronavirus to the Baltic states, according to the DFR lab. The narrative has the hallmarks of [prior Russian attempts](#) to promote anti-NATO sentiment in Europe, though so far has failed to garner much engagement on social media. Regardless of engagement, however, the political opportunism of spreading fear and dislike of NATO in the context of coronavirus is a distraction from controlling the spread of a disease that ignores borders.

(U) EU vs. Disinfo identified harmonization across the pro-Kremlin media ecosystem to promote the false narrative that the EU is using the coronavirus pandemic to frame Russia in the upcoming trial on Russian involvement in the downing of flight MH17.

(U) EU vs. Disinfo assed the contradictory narratives pushed by pro-Kremlin media channels: “On the one hand, the coronavirus is presented as a tool of Western imperialism – an American biological weapon against China and other countries, an instrument of the West’s information war, even a tool of hybrid warfare waged by shadowy “world centres.” On the other hand, we’re told that Western governments are lying about the coronavirus and exaggerating the threat with help from mainstream media. Poor Russia is caught in the middle, with Western media claiming that the coronavirus is a ‘Kremlin project’. Meanwhile, NATO is using the virus for bioterrorism against the EU to fend off Russia – this is obviously why it’s being found in countries that want to cooperate with Russia.”

(U) The Secret Service warned of an increase in COVID-19 related phishing and fake charity scams, and an increase in scammers posing as medical or healthcare workers.

(U) The FTC and FDA have jointly issued warning letters to seven sellers of unapproved and misbranded products, claiming they can treat or prevent the Coronavirus. The companies’ products include teas, essential oils, and colloidal silver. The FTC says the companies have no evidence to back up their claims – as required by law. The FDA says there are no approved vaccines, drugs or investigational products currently available to treat or prevent the virus.

**(U//FOUO) Principle Threat Actors:**

**(U//FOUO) Russia:** Russia has identified the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to deploy its traditional information operations playbook with the goal of increasing polarization in the U.S. and allied nations, undermining public confidence in American institutions, advancing key Russian geopolitical interests such as countering NATO and the EU, and distorting the global information environment in order to delegitimize the very concept of objective truth. Russian disinformation efforts, which promote a constellation of often contradictory narratives and conspiracy theories on the pandemic, have the potential to undermine global cooperation and efforts to respond to the pandemic.

**(U) Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE):** Extremist and white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media, according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

(U//FOUO) Racist online dis/mis information on COVID-19 has the potential to motivate racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists to mobilize to violence, radicalize individuals engaging with REMVE narratives, and to inspire acts of targeted violence against racial and ethnic minorities.

**(U) China:** Chinese trolls launched a coordinated disinformation campaign against Taiwan, erroneously claiming that Taipei has lied about the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths, according to a high-confidence assessment from the Digital Intelligence Lab. Misinformation that the USG is also covering up



the severity of the outbreak also spread in Chinese on social media. These rumors appear to be separate from the Taiwan campaign, but all cite the same YouTube video falsely alleging that the CDC has covered up over 1,000 cases of the virus in the US.

**(U) 3/10 Reporting**

(U) The coronavirus continued to receive the most coverage of a single topic on monitored Russian state-owned media YouTube channels, according to the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy. Notable videos about the virus include discussion of the politicization of the virus in the United States and stigmatization of Chinese-Americans. On Twitter, the top overall hashtag for the approximately 9,400 tweets collected from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts this week (Feb. 29-Mar. 6) is again #coronavirus, with #COVID19 also prominent for the first time. The most retweeted tweet about the virus contains commentary from a Russian virologist that appears aimed at calming panic. Russian disinformation narratives also claim that the U.S. is exaggerating the scale of the outbreak in order to undermine a rising China.

(U) Chinese trolls launched a coordinated disinformation campaign against Taiwan, erroneously claiming that Taipei has lied about the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths, according to a high-confidence assessment from the Digital Intelligence Lab. Misinformation that the USG is also covering up the severity of the outbreak also spread in Chinese on social media. These rumors appear to be separate from the Taiwan campaign, but all cite the same YouTube video falsely alleging that the CDC has covered up over 1,000 cases of the virus in the US.

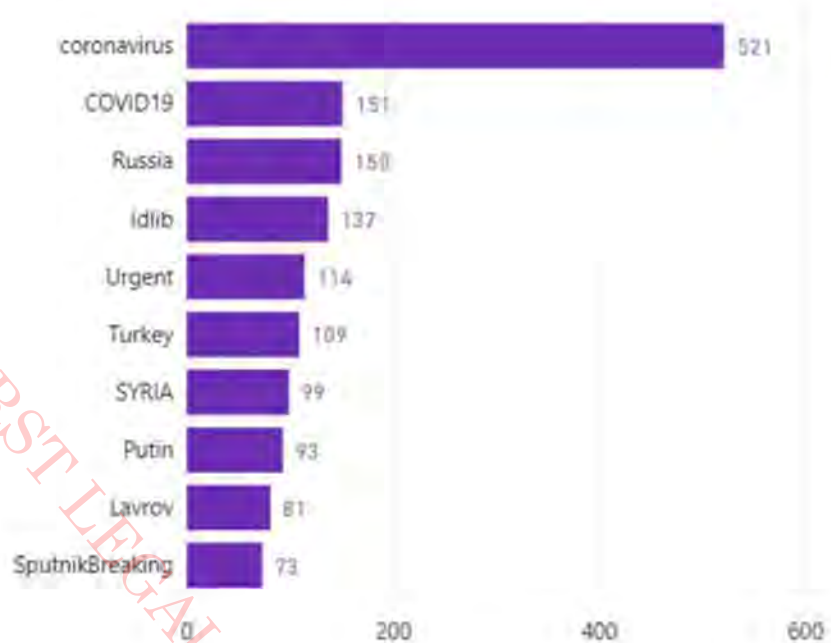
(U) Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have instituted pop up windows directing all coronavirus related searches to WHO and verifiable health sources. Facebook has also banned ads for products that claimed to cure or prevent Covid-19 or created a "sense of urgency" about the outbreak.

(U) The UK's National Health Service (NHS) unveiled a package of measures to combat coronavirus misinformation – working with Google, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – to help the public get easy access to accurate information. The measures include Google providing easy access to verified NHS guidance when someone searches for coronavirus, working with Twitter to suspend an account falsely posing as a hospital and tweeting inaccurate information, and publicly condemning erroneous health treatments.

**Twitter**

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags – February 29-March 6:



Source: German Marshall Fund

**(U) 2/18 Reporting**

(U//FOUO) Twitter has seen an increase in content linking the virus to anti-Hispanic narratives, claiming that Hispanics and other immigrants are at risk to spread the virus to the U.S. There is no evidence of inauthentic social media amplification of this narrative at this time.

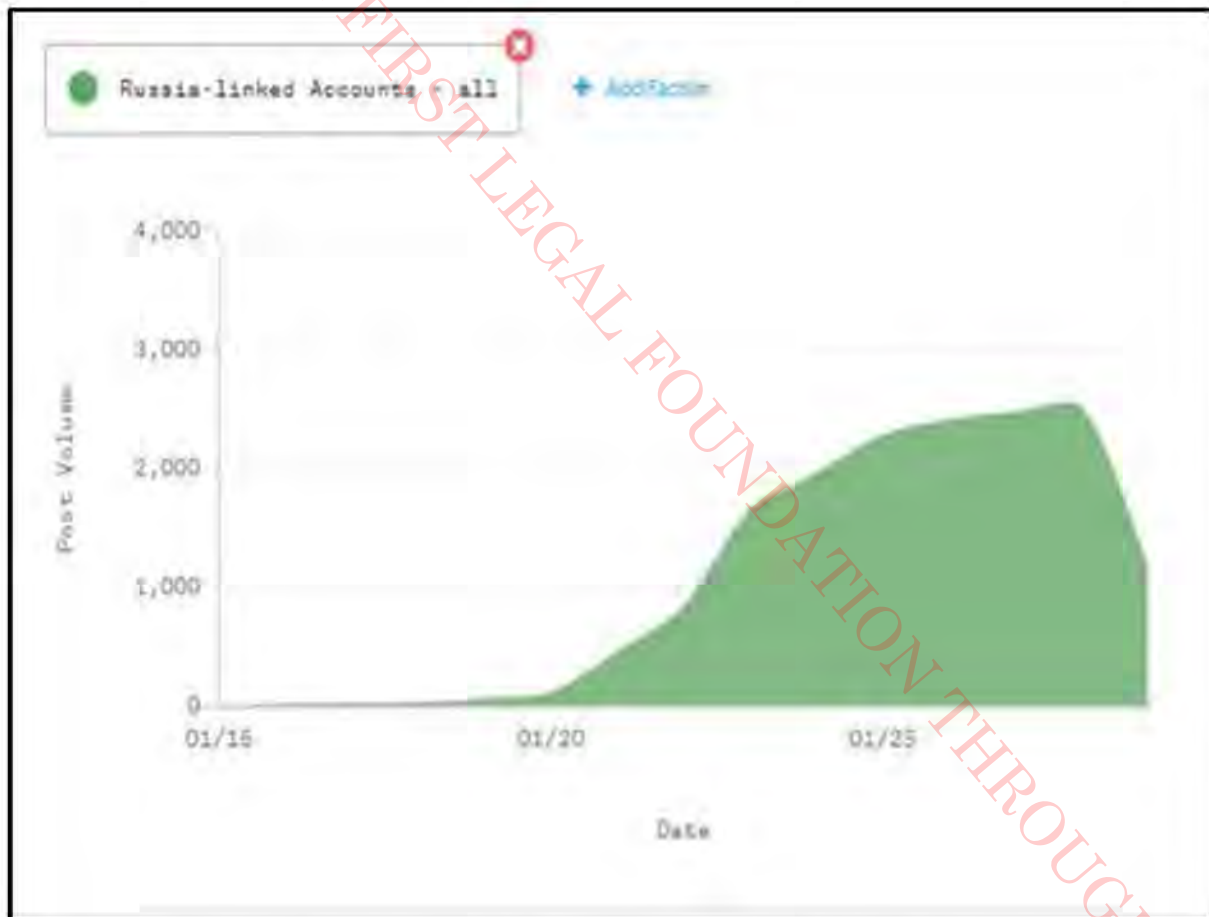
(U//FOUO) A constellation of virus related conspiracy theories continue to circulate on social media, including narratives on impending martial law, FEMA concentration camps, "big pharma" conspiracies, bioweapons, and anti-vaccination messaging.

(U) Extremist and white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media. (Source: Anti-Defamation League [ADL])

(U) Misinformation on false coronavirus treatments continue to circulate on social media, including drinking bleach or chlorine dioxide dubbed the Miracle Medical Solution (MMS), vitamin c, or boiled garlic can "cure" the virus.

(U//FOUO) Chinese state-backed media continue to promote content minimizing the threat of the coronavirus and amplifying narratives of an allegedly much deadlier “American flu” –the traditional seasonal flu virus. These narratives have also been amplified on Chinese social media platforms.

(U) The coronavirus, and sight of people wearing medical masks in public, has fueled a “racist backlash related to hysteria and misinformation,” according to the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (A3PCON).



(U) The drastic increase in Russia-linked covert social media posts about the coronavirus seen in the above graph is reflective of the global media’s coverage of the issue. Russia, following its known tactics, likely sees this as an opportunity to shape the global conversation against the United States and western countries.