

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.”

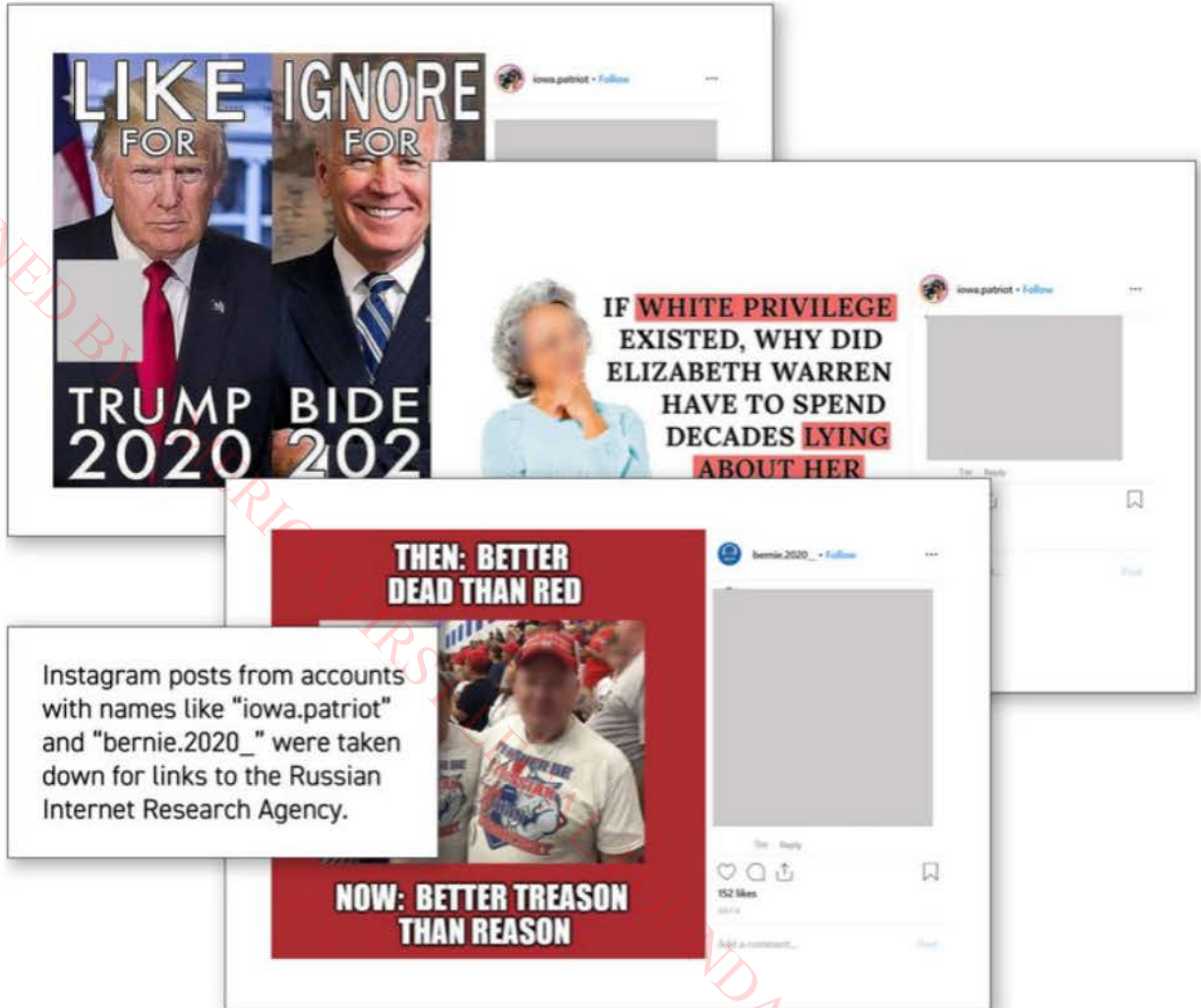
Anger at the social media giants’ inability to win the game of Whac-A-Mole against false information was a recurring theme at last week’s congressional hearing with big tech CEOs, where Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg attempted to bat down complaints that his company is profiting from disinformation about 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.

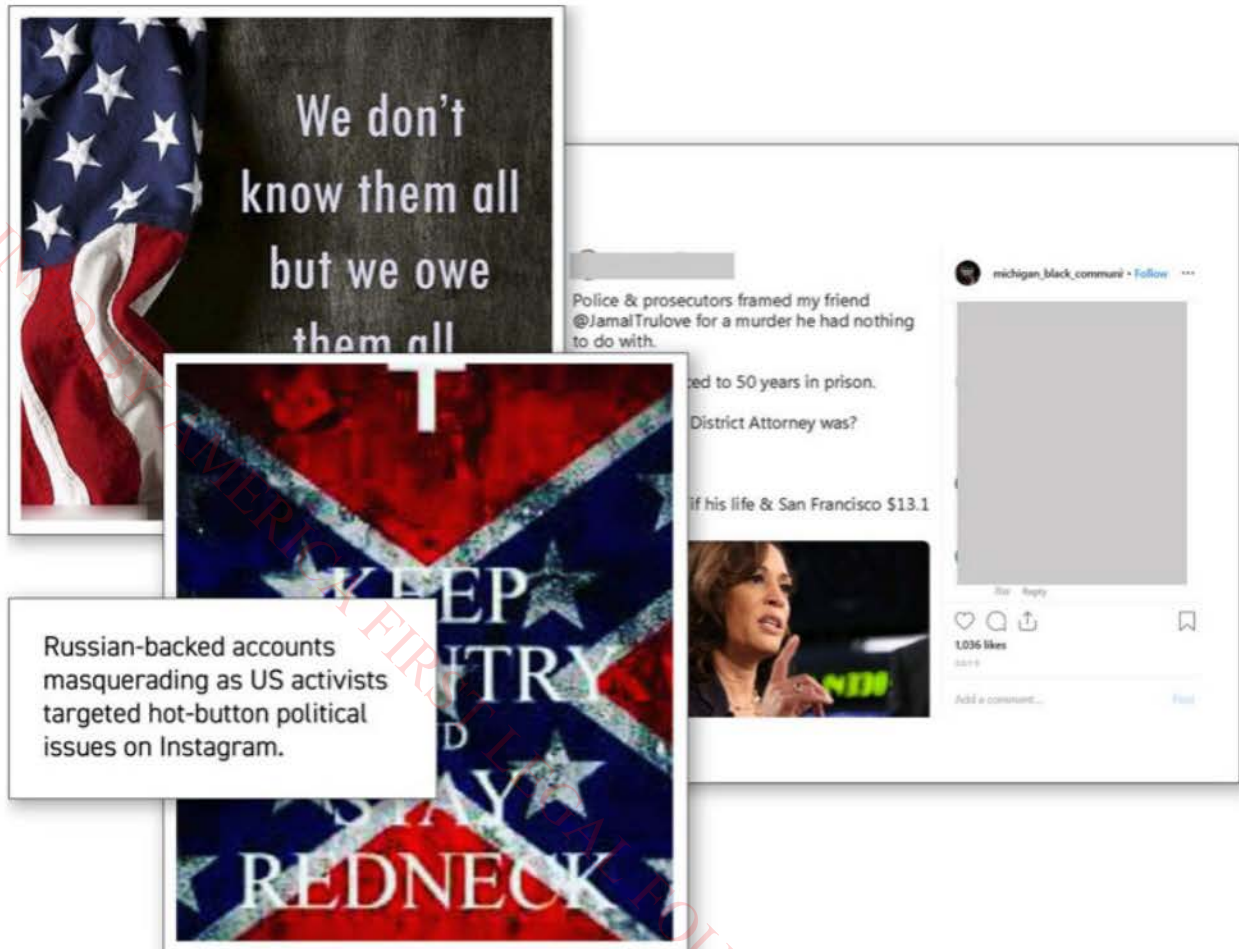
Kim, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison specializing in political communication on social media, noticed a number of the seemingly unrelated accounts using tactics favored by the Russia-linked Internet Research Agency, a group that U.S. national security agencies say carried out a multiyear 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.



Russian-backed accounts masquerading as US activists targeted hot-button political issues on Instagram.

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.



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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 Lab¹ 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.⁵ 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.

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"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 20th 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)

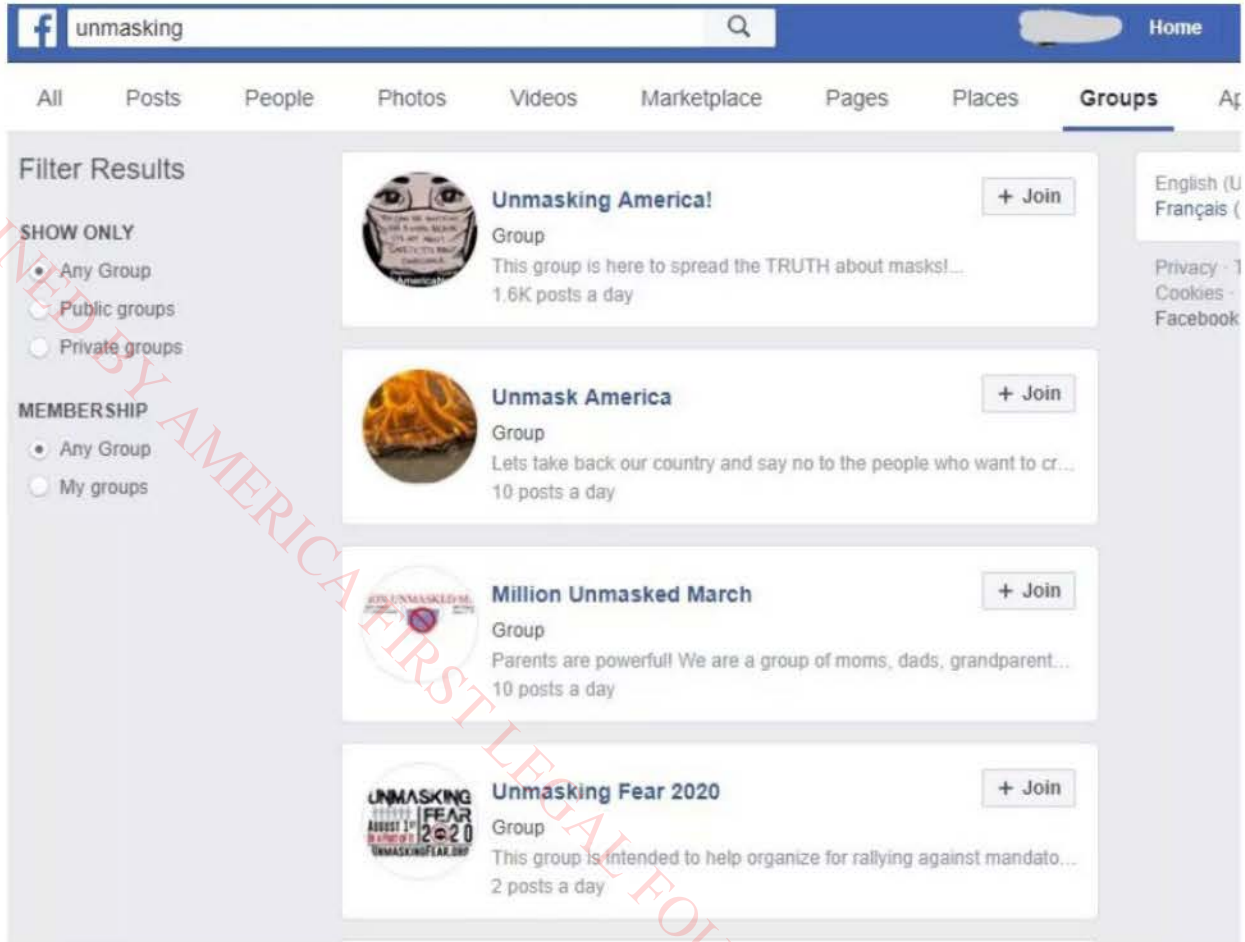
(U) 7/23 Reporting

(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.⁵ Two of these accounts had bios that explicitly expressed support of communism, and retweeted French and Russian, as well as CCP sources.⁶ 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.¹³ 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/), 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 breathe 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), although less deep nasal swabs are also used to take samples from the upper respiratory tract ([here](#)).

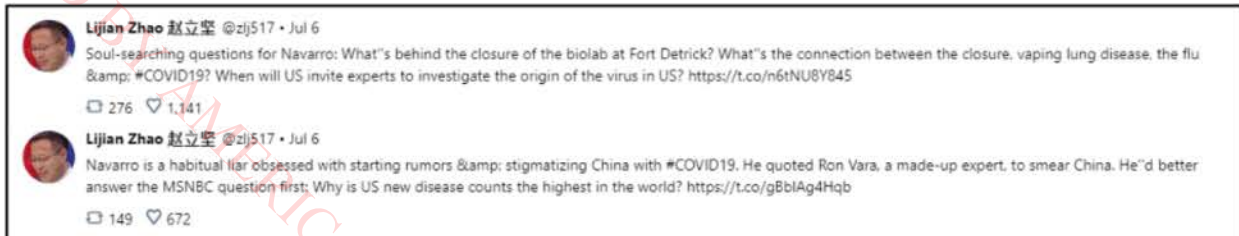
Nasopharyngeal swabs used to test for COVID-19 are inserted parallel to the nasal floor to take samples from the nasopharynx, which is found between the base of the skull and the soft palate ([here](#)), as shown in this video ([here](#)). As such, the swabs do not take samples from the cribriform plate, 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.

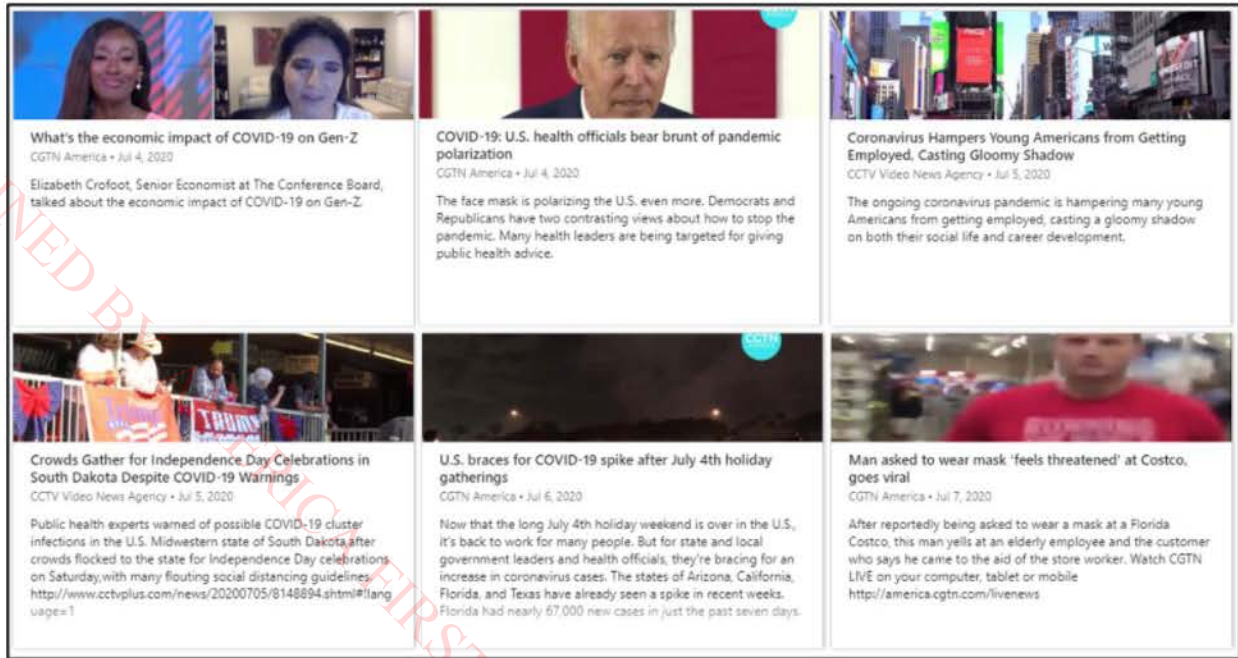
After White House adviser Peter Navarro accused Beijing of “[spawning] the virus” on MSNBC, deputy spokesperson at the Chinese Foreign Ministry Zhao Lijian counterattacked by rehashing an earlier conspiracy theory surrounding the Fort Detrick laboratory in the United States:



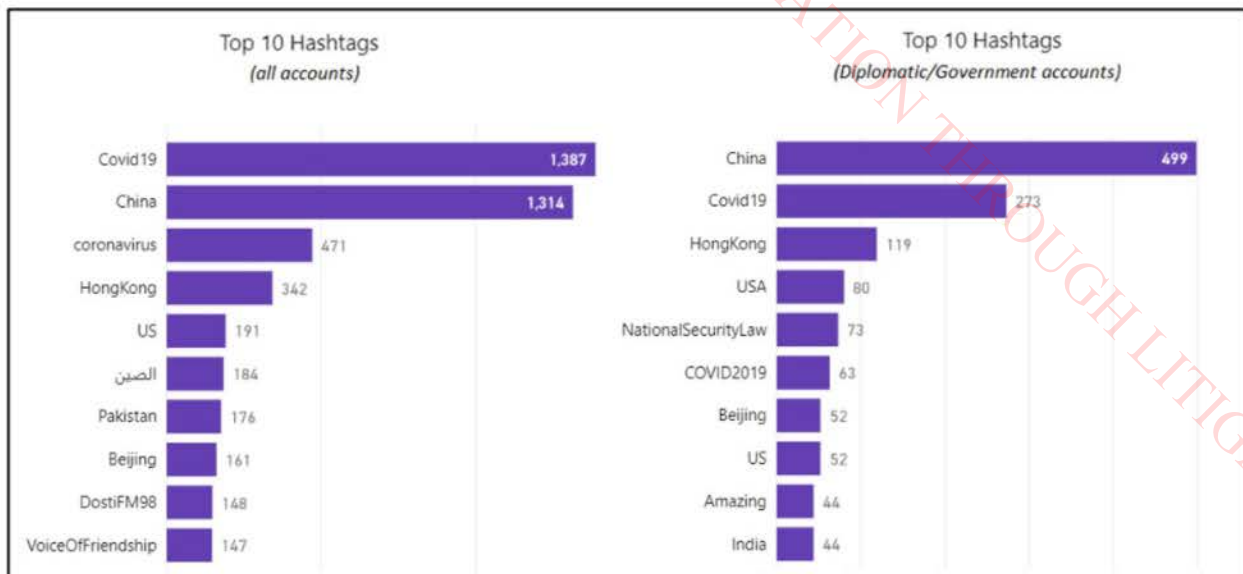
The next day, spokesperson Hua Chunying weighed in on the issue by sharing a screenshot of a viral tweet from American author Stephen King:



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*

OBTAINED BY AMERICAN FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION THROUGH LITIGATION



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 21st 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 11th 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.

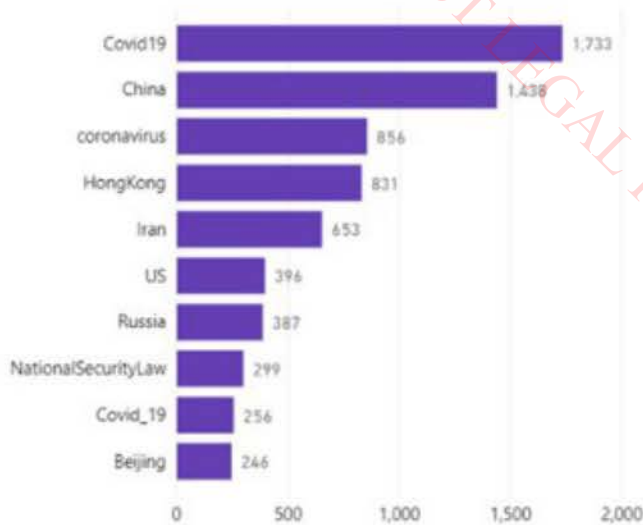
"There has been an increasing amount of propaganda online calling for vehicular attacks on protesters, targeting the Black Lives Matter movement in particular," said Josh Lipowsky, a senior researcher at the Counter Extremism Project. "It is being used as a form of intimidation against them to get them 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.

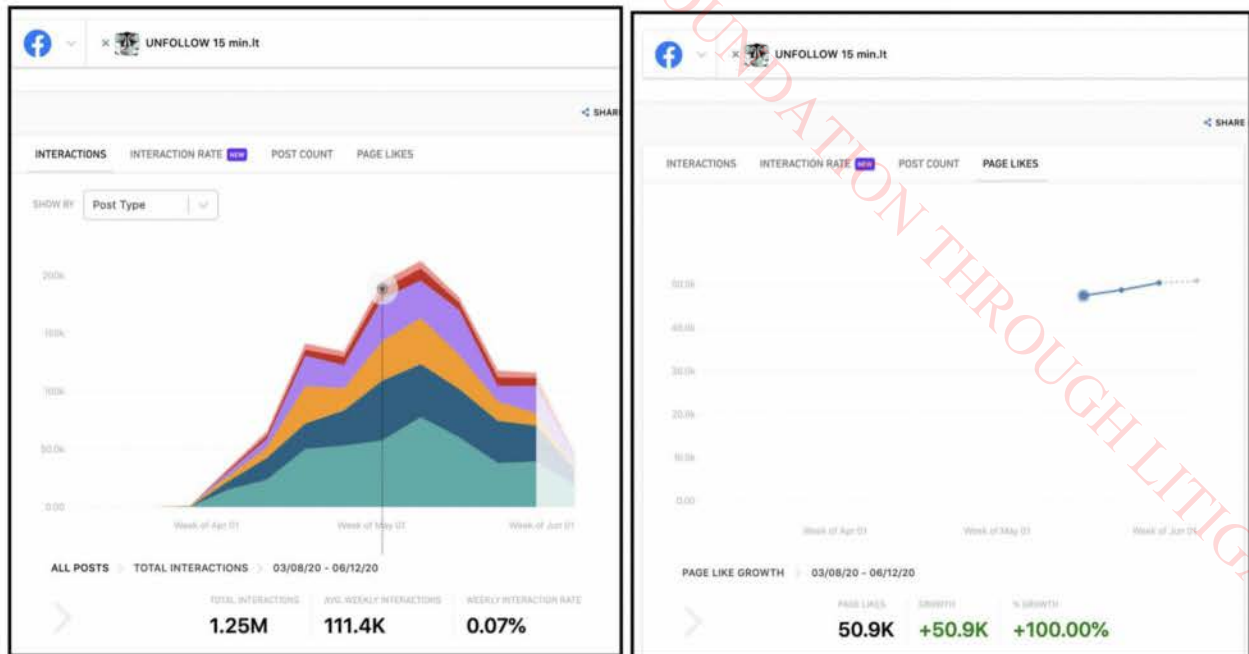
There are a number of active 5G conspiracy Facebook groups in Lithuania, as there are in many countries. Amid the pandemic, several of them have gained a significant number of followers. These Facebook groups do not receive a lot of attention from Lithuanian media, as they either go unnoticed or are 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.



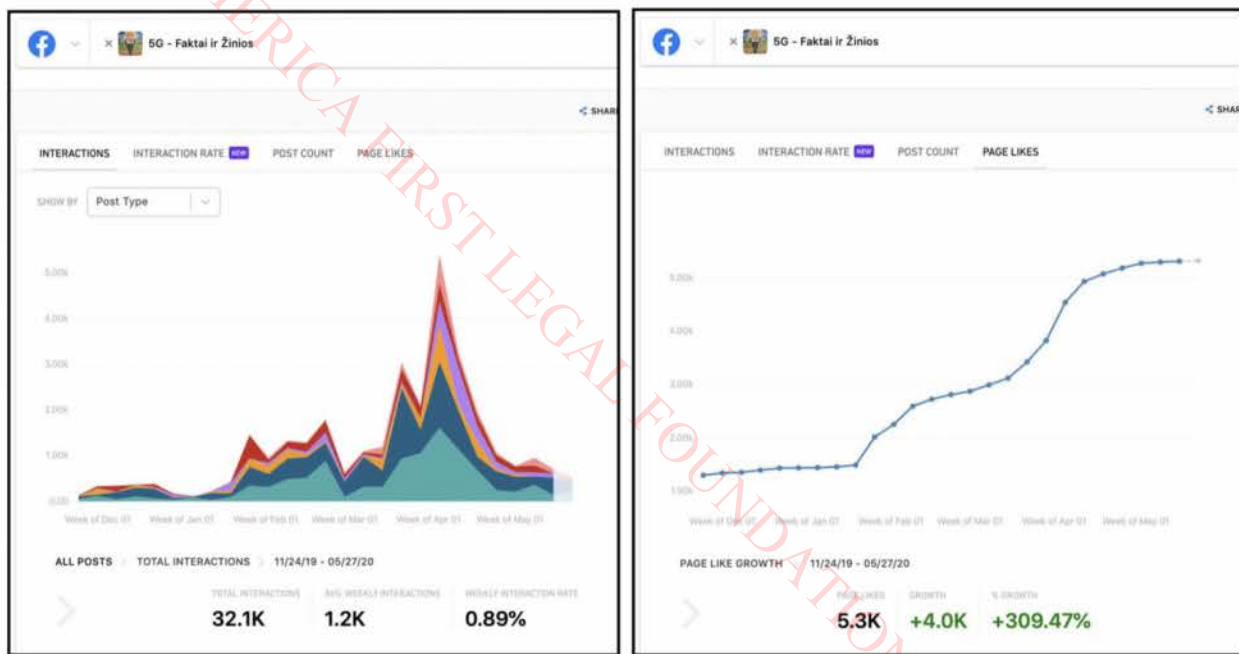
A CrowdTangle analysis of the “Unfollow 15 min.lt” Facebook group’s expansion and interactions. (Source: @LAndriukaitis/DFRLab via CrowdTangle)

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

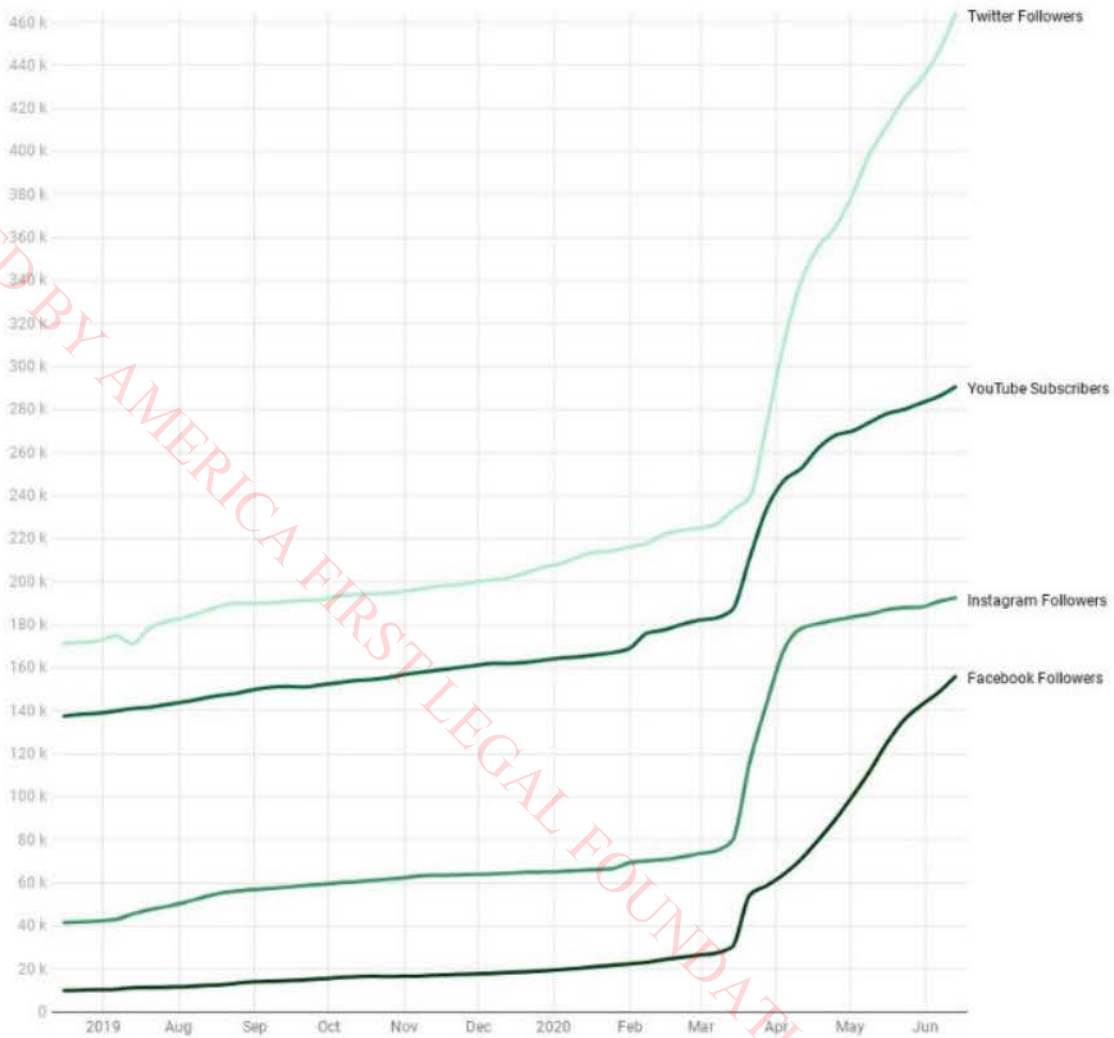
QAnon's ostensible leader is "Q," an anonymous online poster who adherents believe is a top government insider leaking coded intel to the public. Q posts cryptic messages to the forum 8kun, which [replaced the now-shuttered](#) website [8chan](#) last fall. There's no clear indication of how many subscribers 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: CrowdTangle and Social Blade. • Created with Datarwrapper

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. o 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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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.'
 - o 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

LIVE

MINNEAPOLIS POLICE PRECINCT ON FIRE AS PROTESTS GROW



...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

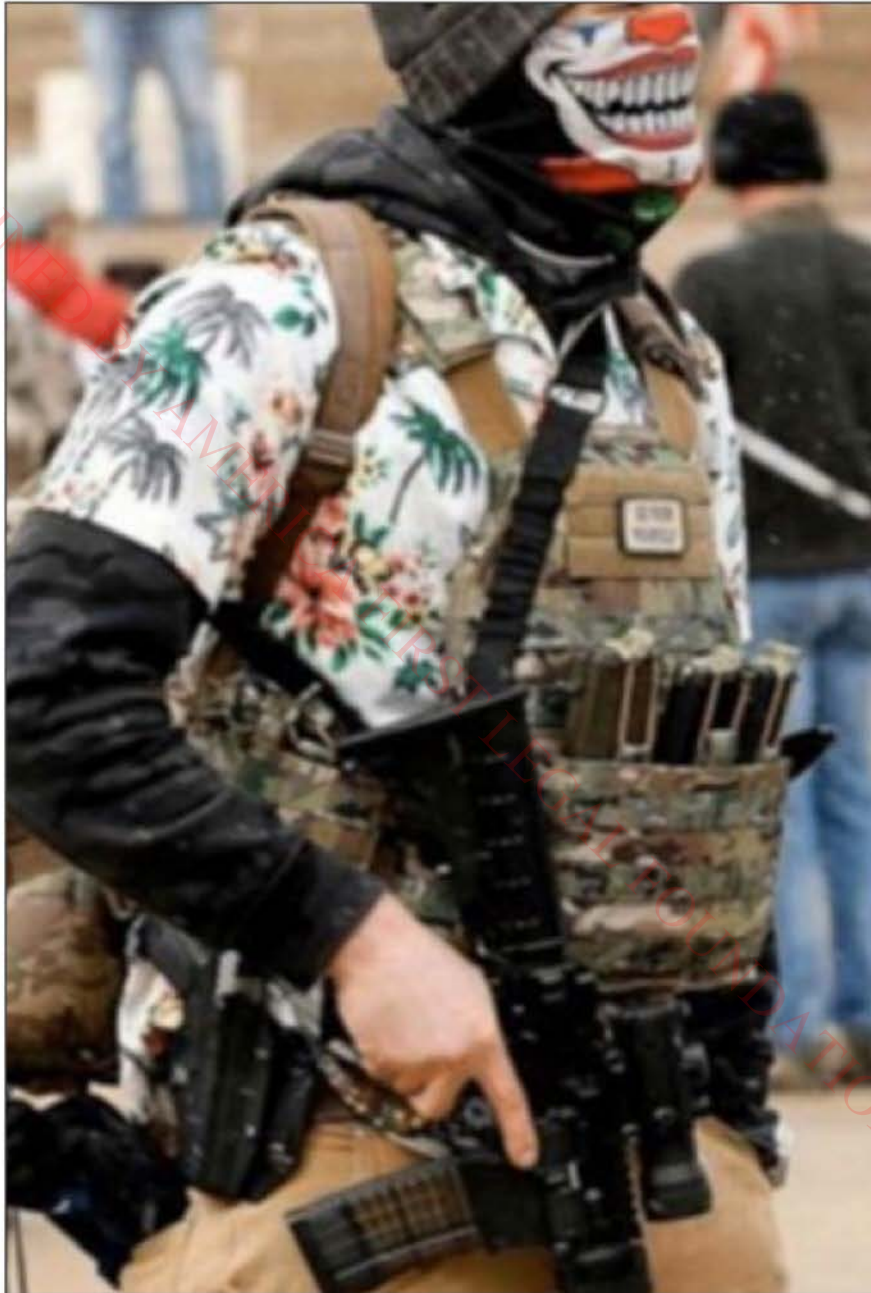
(U) The Boogaloo meme that has crystallized as an “irl” (in real life) movement of heavily armed protesters started with the phrase, “Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo”, patterned on the title of the 1984 sequel to the breakdance film, “Breakin’.” Internet users for some time used “Electric Boogaloo” as 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".

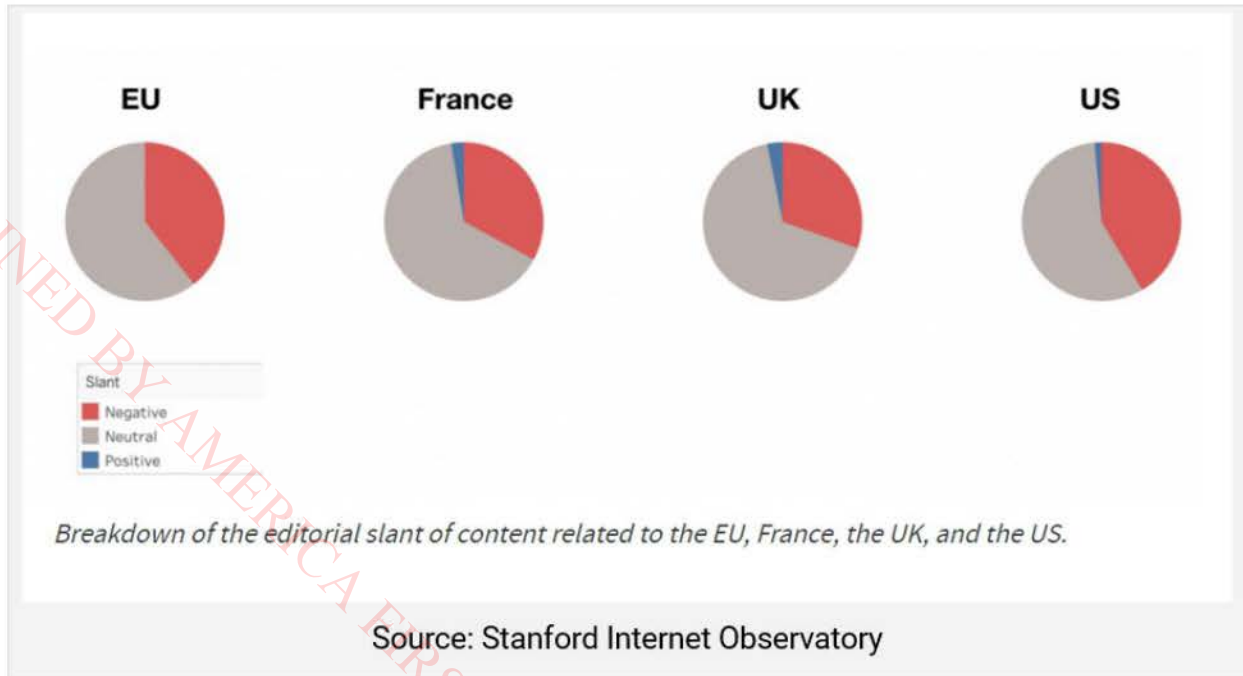
As for topics, it turned out that "negative" content highlighted political dysfunction, diplomatic conflicts and conspiracy theories in the US, the UK, France, and the EU.

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.

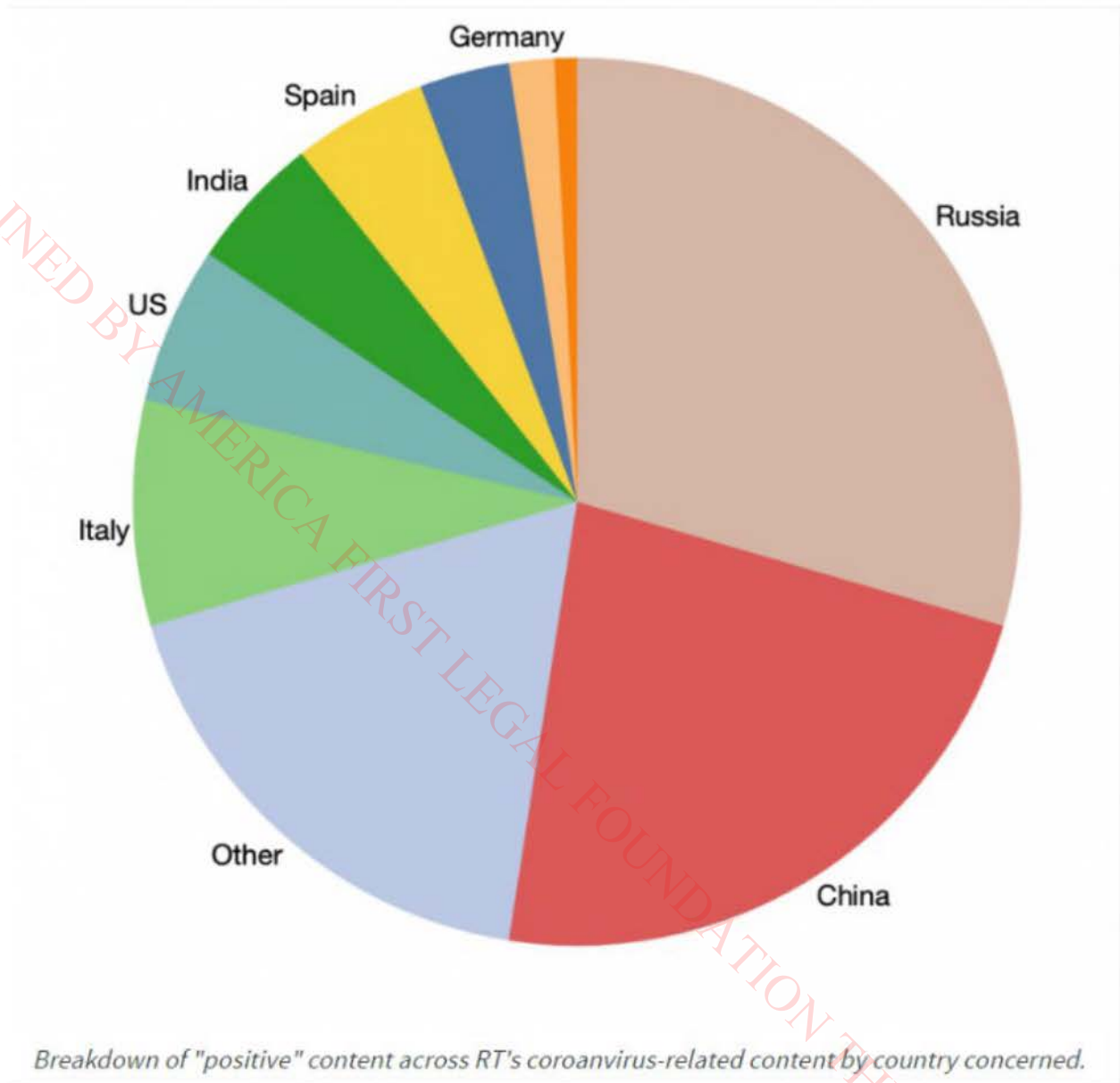
As for the main target of content with negative sentiment, US was in the lead with 50%, followed by UK (10%), France (6%), Italy (2%), and Germany (2%). Despite the majority of content being neutral, the negative content clearly outweighs the positive, as shown by the visual below. It should also be 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.



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.

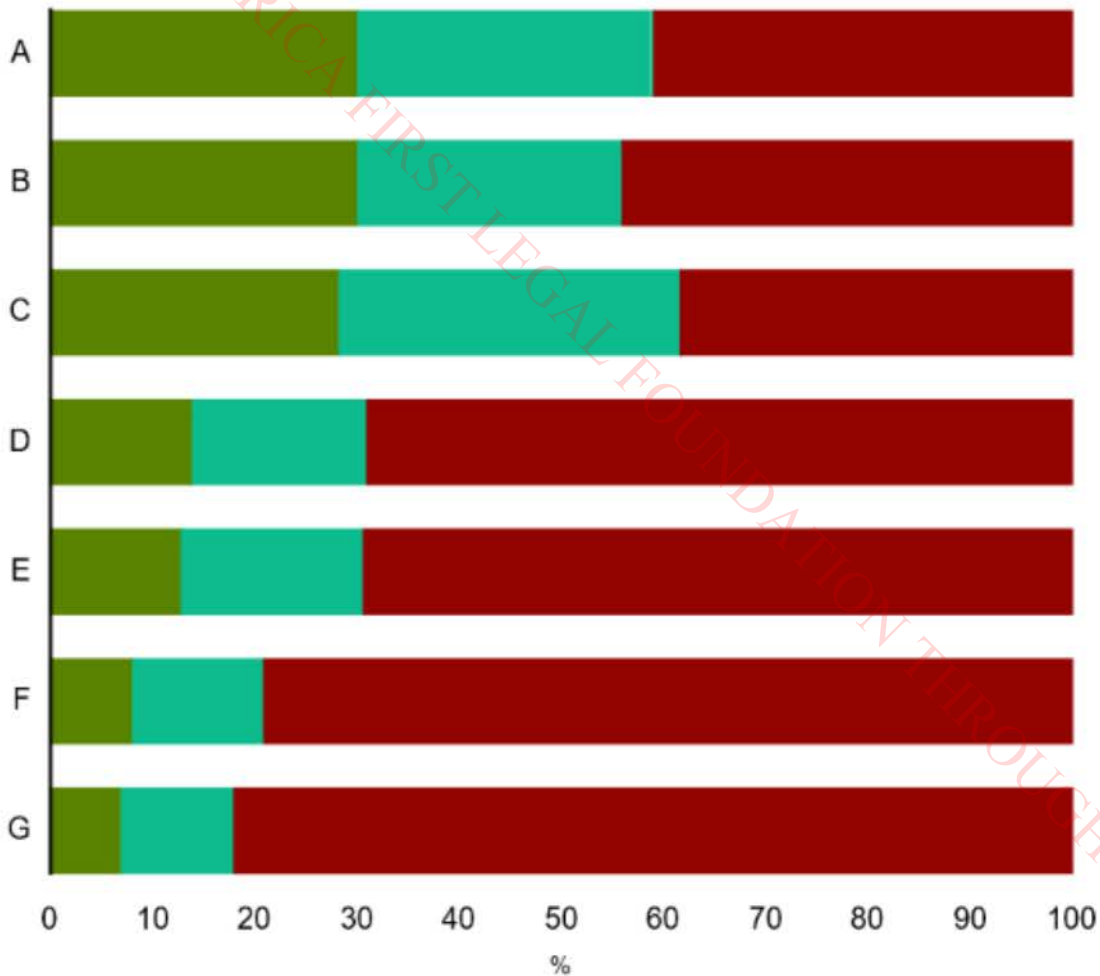
About 13% believed the pandemic was part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated, and 8% believed there was some connection between symptoms and radiation from 5G phone masts.

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 complaint.

"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

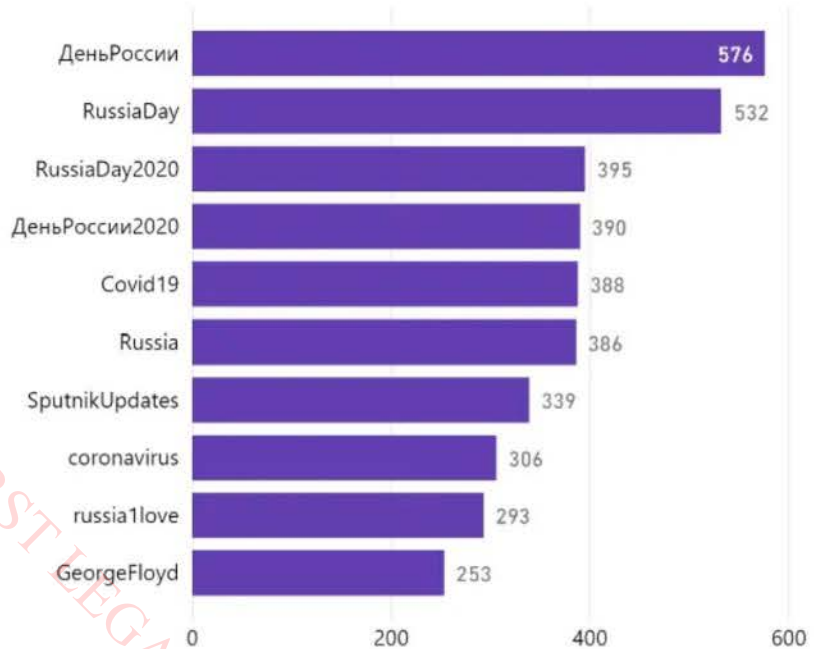
(U) **Russia, China, Iran State-Media Toplines Overview:** As with the past four months, the coronavirus was yet again the primary topic discussed by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian messengers, though the specific narratives differed depending on the country. China's diplomats and state media, for example, 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.

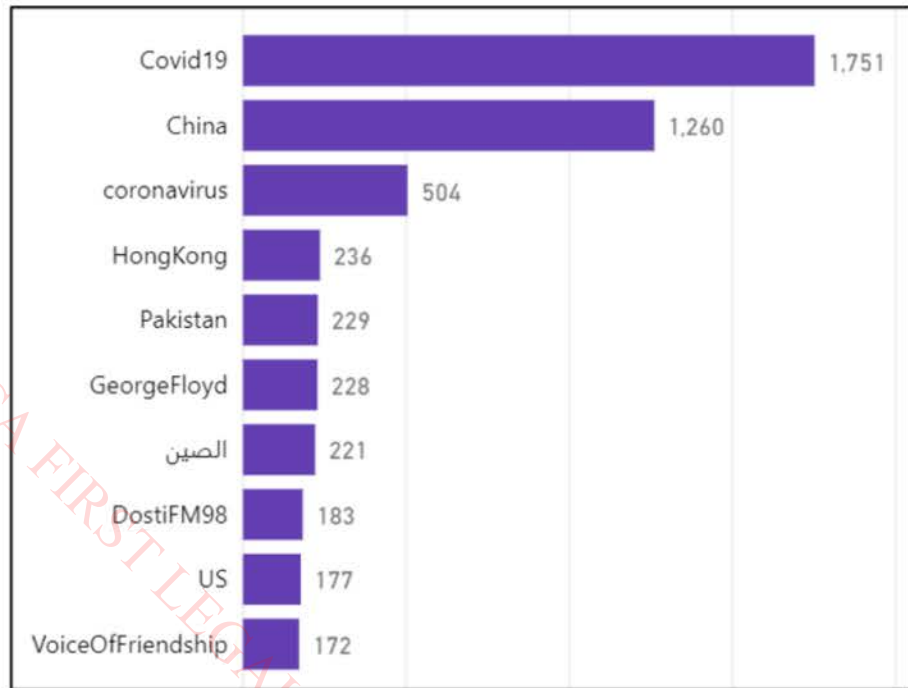
However, the coronavirus-related story that drew the most attention was the release of a Harvard study claiming that China had coronavirus cases as early as August 2019. Nationalist tabloid *Global Times* and its firebrand editor Hu Xijin led the countercharge against the university:

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:



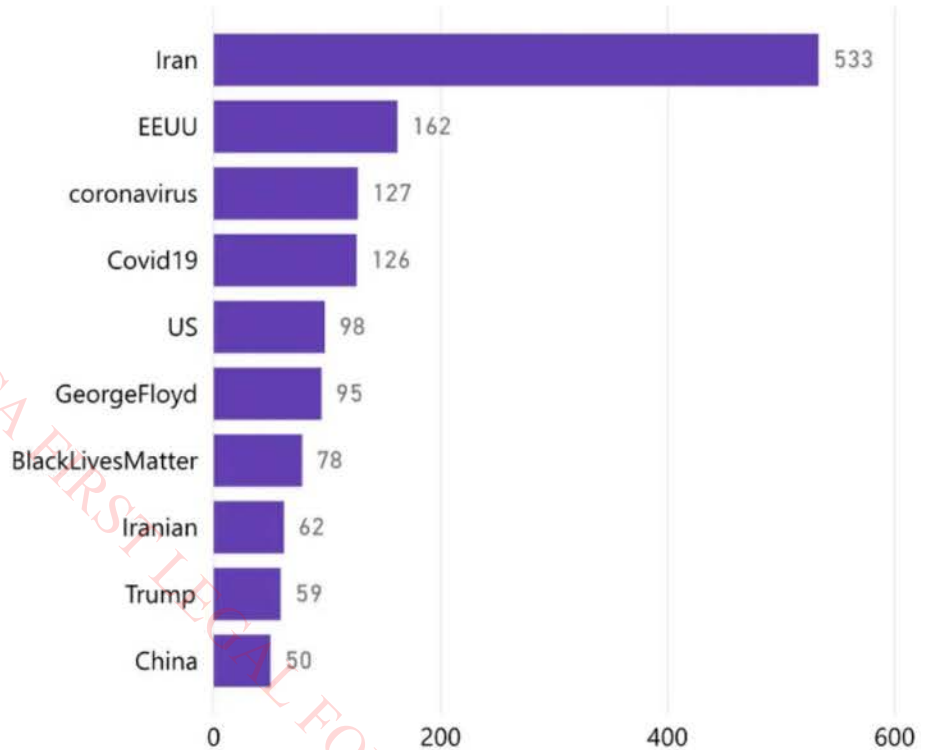
The Hamilton dashboard collected approximately 16,000 tweets from monitored Twitter accounts between June 6 and June 12, which was a slight decline from the past two weeks. The number of tweets containing the hashtags #GeorgeFloyd, #US, and #HongKong were down by more than 50 percent from the previous 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.
 - 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.

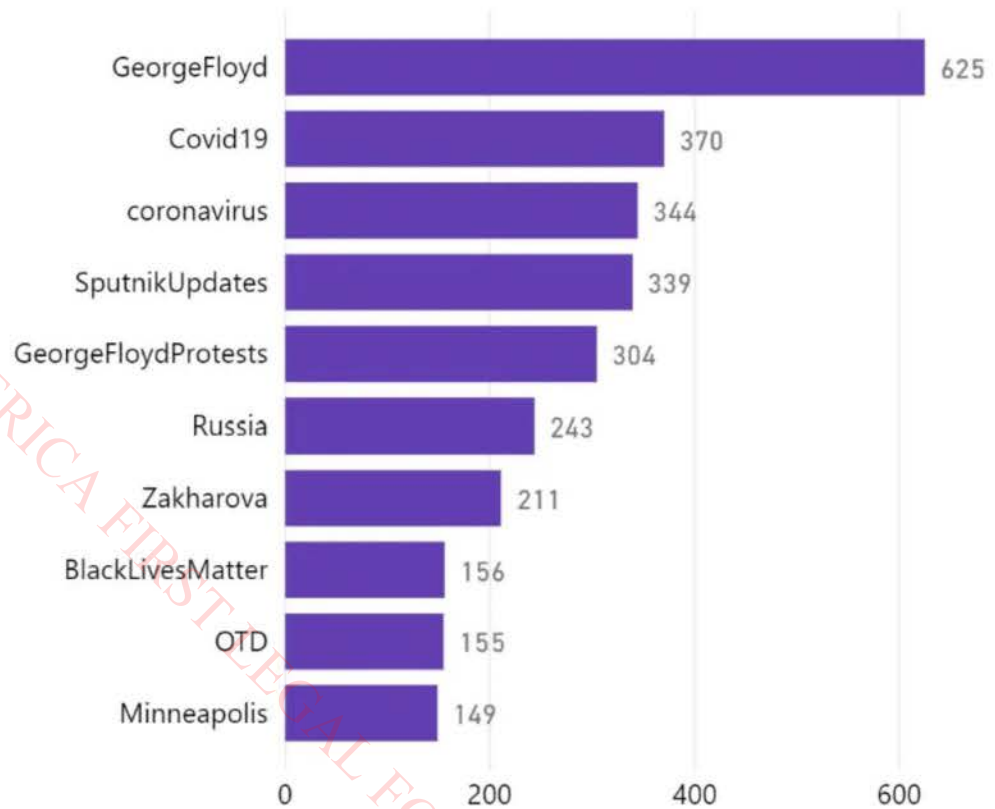
(U) 6/10 Reporting

(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

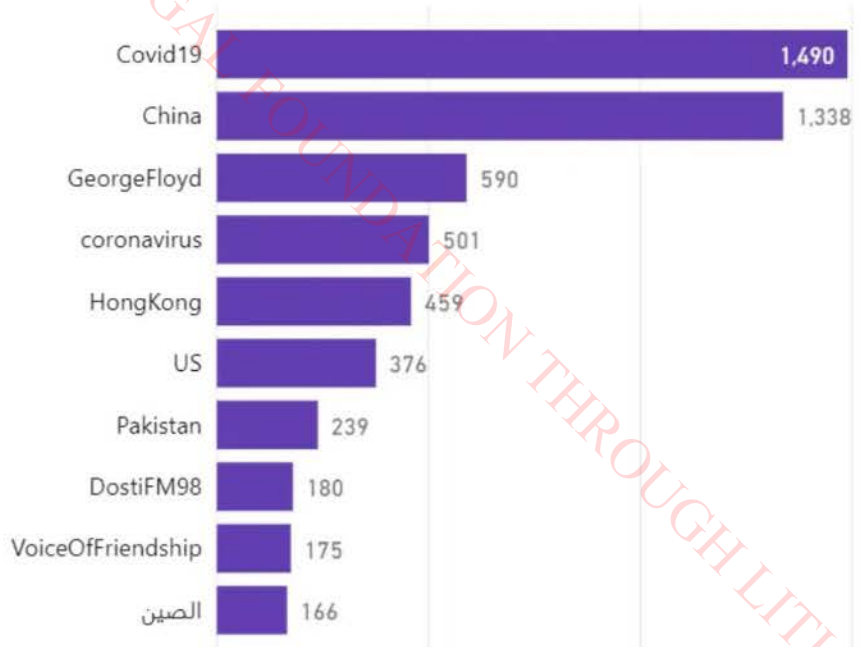


7:00 PM · Jun 1, 2020 ·

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



OBTAINED

CA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION THROUGH LITIGATION

(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 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.



Note: Responses to the survey that polled less than 5 percent have not been listed
 Kristyna Foltynova | Source: Moscow's Higher School of Economics

(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:

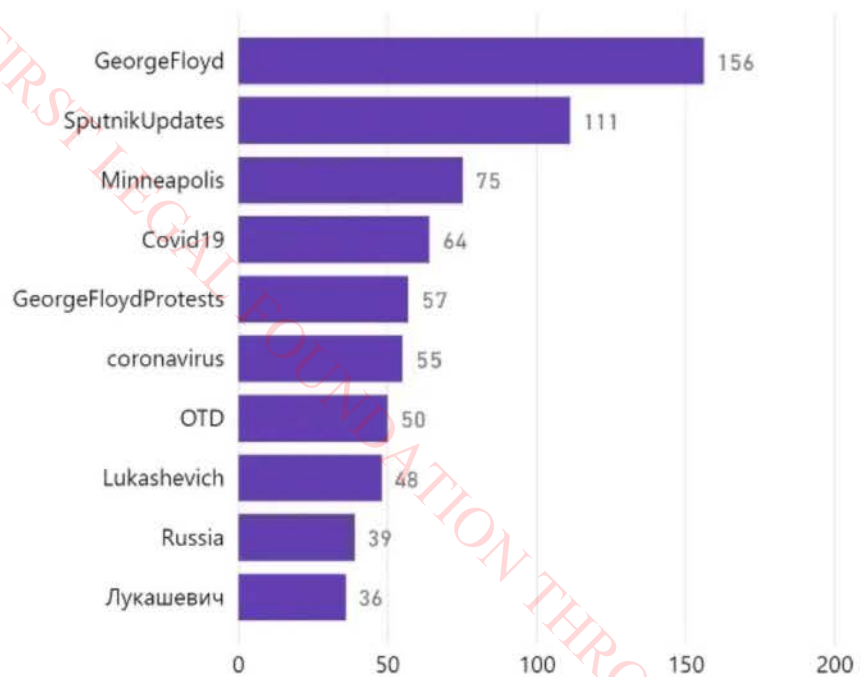
- 
RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 26
 A Minneapolis police officer was caught pressing the neck of an African-American who lay handcuffed on the ground with his knee. The victim ended up losing consciousness and dying. <https://t.co/6ZlqLDjqH>
 5,039 retweets 3,454 likes

- 
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/GlPpgngVGn>
 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/hLFTFEEfwx>
 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:



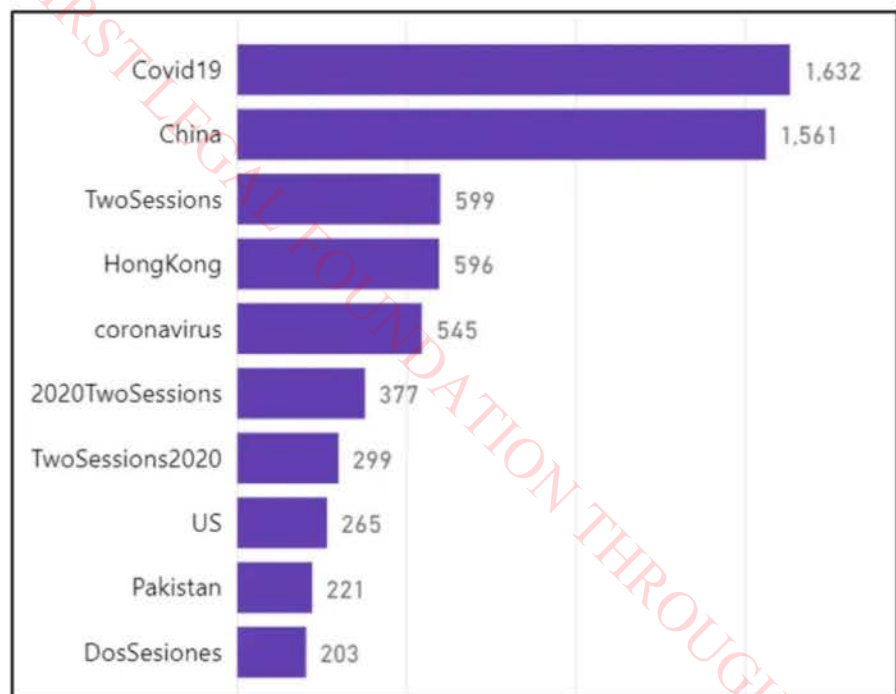
Other notable articles among the top ten by Facebook shares included an op-ed about not being able to trust coronavirus statistics, an article on the United States reportedly considering a nuclear test due to “a convenient allegation that Russia and China have resumed testing low-yield nuclear munitions,” 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

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 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!!

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 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:



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.

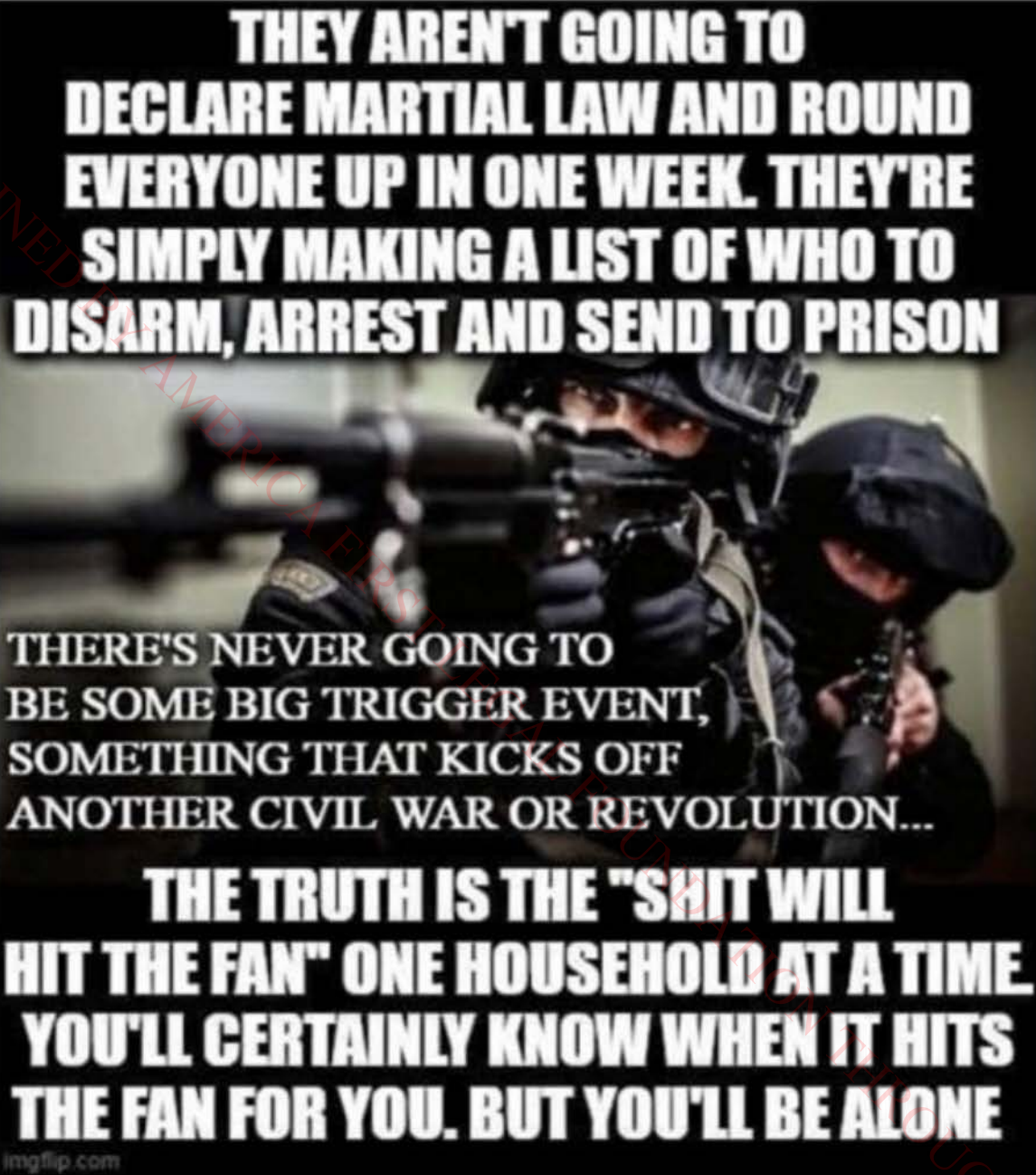
Red Flag laws and gun confiscation are frequently cited as grounds for a hypothetical insurrection.

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:



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.