

In a United States made even more unstable by a contentious presidential election season, and the social and epidemiological effects of COVID-19, every protest or street battle and its aftermath will carry the potential for serious acts of violence. As protests over the death of George Floyd heated up in Minneapolis on May 26th, members of Boogaloo groups across Facebook considered it a call to arms. Memes were churned up that day, adding George to the movement's list of martyrs.

One member of the Big Igloo Bois Facebook group showed up at the protests, bearing a Boogaloo flag and, he claimed 15 other bois. [Reports indicate](#) he was wounded with a rubber bullet during the protest.

Meanwhile, other Boogaloo supporters online expressed their desire to travel to Minneapolis and start the civil war now.

On May 1, 2020, Facebook and Instagram both updated their "violence and incitement" policy to ban the use of "boogaloo terms" when they occur alongside images or statements depicting or urging armed violence. Our research suggests that this policy has done virtually nothing to curb either the growth of this movement or reduce the violence of its rhetoric. Every new Boogaloo page and group we found led us to new related pages and "liked" pages, each either organizing people for direct armed action or agitating them to anticipate violence.

The world's largest social network remains a hospitable place for would-be insurrectionists. We now know that Facebook has buried evidence that its platform facilitates the growth of extremism, due to a fear that combatting this would be seen as anti-conservative bias. It is not yet possible to say if the movement that has been nurtured on that platform will ever play a part in an American civil war. But every day, tens of thousands of heavily armed people log on to repeat their hope that it will. (Source: Bellingcat)

As Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms crack down on [coronavirus](#) disinformation, people spreading false information and conspiracy theories are turning to TikTok.

(U) **COVID-19 Conspiracy Theorists Have Found A New Home On TikTok:** A flashpoint in the spread of pandemic falsehoods is "[Plandemic](#)," a documentary-style video containing long-debunked conspiracies and disinformation about COVID-19. Other platforms have made moves to remove the video, but an analysis showed that clips have made their way to TikTok.

Data compiled by [First Draft](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to fact-checking worldwide, shows that snippets of the documentary as well as videos tagged #plandemic have surged on TikTok, recently peaking on May 12 with 62 new videos. They contain false conspiracies connecting COVID-19 to [Bill Gates](#) and the World Health Organization, as well as flat-out denial of the virus's existence.

"That will always happen. The moment the stuff gets crackdown in one place, they move to other platforms," Laura Garcia, the training and support manager at First Draft, told BuzzFeed News. First Draft is an organization that studies misinformation and disinformation online.

Its initial analysis scraped 326 TikTok videos with the #plandemic tag and found those videos produced 537,168 interactions. Of those, just 10 videos account for 210,433 of the interactions, which shows how wide of a reach a small number of videos can have on the platform. (Source: BuzzFeed News)

(U) **Facebook Will Start Verifying the Identities of Accounts That Keep Going Viral:** Facebook will now require people behind individual profiles with “high reach” to verify their identity, the [company announced today](#). Facebook hopes this will ensure users are seeing more authentic posts from people, instead of ones from bots or users concealing their identity. The change follows a similar move two years ago in which Facebook [required viral page owners to disclose their identities and locations](#), following numerous accounts of overseas content farms using partisan US politics to game Facebook’s algorithms, go viral, and cash in on ad revenue.

Accounts on the social network that exhibit “inauthentic behavior” that have posts continuously going viral in the US will need to provide a form of ID. Should the ID not match the identity of the account in question or if the user declines ID verification, Facebook will reduce the distribution of that account’s viral posts, which will reduce the number of people who see it pop up in their feed. If any one of these profiles deemed suspicious is also an admin for a Facebook page, the profile will be banned from using the page if they fail to identify themselves through Facebook’s [Page Publisher Authorization Process](#), which the company released back in 2018. (Source: The Verge)

(U) **Russian Disinformation Site Distorts U.S. Coronavirus Poll:** On May 21, the pro-Kremlin news site News Front covered a survey commissioned by [Reuters](#).

The News Front story, published in Russian, was headlined “Every fourth American is against taking anti-COVID-19 vaccine.”

The headline is false.

News Front downplayed findings showing support for a coronavirus vaccine in the survey, which polled 4,428 U.S. adults between May 13 and May 19.

The News Front [story](#) equated lack of interest in a vaccine with opposition. “While pharmaceutical corporations are involved in a race for the development of a vaccine against the coronavirus, it has transpired that the fourth of Americans are not interested in it,” it stated.

In fact, that characterization muddies the results as reported by Reuters, which said that 14% of those surveyed “said they were not at all interested in taking a vaccine, and 10% said they were not very interested. Another 11% were unsure.”

Being uninterested or uncertain does not necessarily indicate resistance. The survey showed majority support for a coronavirus vaccine and strong support for vaccinations that have worked against other diseases. (Source: Stopfake.org)

(U) **We Don’t Even Have a COVID-19 Vaccine, and Yet the Conspiracies Are Here:** In March, when a woman in Seattle volunteered for a COVID-19 vaccine trial, rumors immediately began circulating that she was a crisis actor who had received a fake vaccine. She is, in fact, real, and so is the prospective

vaccine she got, as [the Associated Press asserted in a follow-up story](#). In Oxford, England, another volunteer for a separate COVID-19 vaccine trial became the subject of a fake news story that purported she had died after a shot. She too was forced to clarify the situation: [She is very much alive](#).

There is no COVID-19 vaccine, but there are already COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies. Even as vaccines for the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 are being held up as the last hope for a return to normalcy, misinformation about them is spreading. A more fraught scenario for science communication is hard to imagine: a novel vaccine, probably fast-tracked, in the middle of a highly politicized and badly mishandled pandemic.

“I was initially optimistic that, when people felt the need for a COVID-19 vaccine, the anti-vaccination movement would undergo a period of retreat,” says Peter Hotez, a vaccine scientist at Baylor College of Medicine, who has himself become a frequent target of vaccine skeptics. “It’s actually had the effect of reinvigorating the anti-vaccine movement. (Source: The Atlantic)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Social media conversation today varied greatly in regards to COVID-19. The reopening of the economy has resurfaced today as the main subject of online conversation as more states continue easing restrictions and an increasing amount of businesses are reopening, sometimes defying their government’s mandates.
- There is a high level of discussion on traditional and social media about reports that the federal government mistakenly distributed shipments of remdesivir to the wrong hospitals.
- FEMA conversation continues to mostly be composed of the agency delivering PPE to nursing homes. This afternoon, conversation about FEMA turned more towards the agency’s preparedness for the hurricane season amid the pandemic, much of this was driven by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security tweeting that the agency is more prepared than ever.
- Traditional media focused today on the U.S. exiting WHO, with lesser coverage on businesses reopening in many states and outbreaks in prisons, nursing homes, and meat processing plants. FEMA coverage relates the recently released hurricane season operational guidance factoring in COVID-19 and U.S House of Representatives lawmakers seeking details on Project Airbridge contracts.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Over the course of the day discussion of businesses reopening increased as multiple states and cities began progressing into new stages of the process. In areas where businesses and restaurants still have not reopened business owners are growing more anxious and worried about their finances. There has been an increase in reports of businesses choosing to ignore current reopening plans and instead opening early.
- Members of the general public are expressing concern over the possibility that the added federal unemployment benefits may not be extended in the next COVID-19 relief bill. Recent statements from Senate leadership make it seem like there is not support for extending the

benefits. This leaves many worried about [how they will pay bills](#) if they remain out of work in July.

- The debate on mask usage continues. People are expressing confusion after news media shared WHO guidance that was released in March, recommending healthy people, including those who don't exhibit COVID-19 symptoms, only wear masks when taking care of someone infected with the virus, which is a contradiction to U.S. public officials who recommend everyone wear a mask in public.

(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) 5/28 Reporting

(U) DVEs' Explosives-Related Tactics Influenced by COVID-19 and Increasing Internationalization of TTPs and Networks: Domestic Violent Extremists seeking to advance their causes by attacking COVID-19 related targets, and the increased internationalization of DVE ideology and tactics may reinforce each other, as many societies in the West are taking similar unprecedented steps to contain the COVID-19 virus, leading DVEs to believe that the time for violent action to achieve their desired ends has arrived. DVE groups and particularly "accelerationists" are saying the pandemic is a sign that it is the time to strike weakened or distracted governments, whose counterterrorism missions are diminished because of the pandemic. The types of biases and grievances prevalent among many DVEs may lead them to see the current extraordinary measures to fight the spread of COVID-19 as confirmation of conspiracy theories about government plans to take away their Constitutional rights and could lead to an acceleration of any plots under development.

(U//FOUO) FBI Director Wray has stated that the underlying drivers for many DVEs, including "perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions...and reactions to legislative actions," persist. Recent DVE plots and Telegram posts reflect similar trends.

(U) Posters on WSE Telegram channels argue that the pandemic has caused many to question the Federal Government's ability to steer the United States through such a crisis and support the accelerationist argument that modern society is headed toward collapse.

(U//FOUO) RMVE hospital plotter Timothy Wilson, who wanted to "kick start a revolution," explicitly tied his attack plans to fears of government overreach or conspiracy theories about links between the virus and alleged plans to institute martial law. He told an undercover FBI source that he wanted to "attack high value targets if the government issued martial law and quarantine orders as a result of COVID-19." Wilson also mentioned Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh as an inspiration, underscoring his anti-government sentiment.

(U//FOUO) A number of publications have noted the isolation mandated by the COVID-19 response may actually increase the consumption of conspiracy theories and extremist material online, as individuals are deprived of their usual social connections. A spike in interest in DVE Telegram channels followed the spread of pandemic-induced social distancing measures in the United States—channels associated with white supremacy and racism gained an additional 6,000 users in March 2020, and one WSE channel focused on messaging related to COVID-19 saw its user base jump from 300 to 2,700 users (an increase of 800 percent) in March alone. (Source: CISA, Extremist Threat Report)

(U) Self-Described "Incel" Arizona Mall Shooter Claims COVID-19 Restrictions Pushed Him Over Edge: On 20 May, USPERArmando Hernandez, 20, who prosecutors claimed considered himself an incel, opened fire at the Westgate Entertainment District in Glendale, AZ, injuring three people. According to

the prosecutor at his initial hearing, Armando specifically targeted couples and told police he thought he would “gain respect” after the shooting.

According to prosecutors, Hernandez was frustrated about not being able to get a meal at a restaurant and that his friends did not call him back when he arrived at Westgate. He was allegedly set over the edge because he wanted to go to the movies but could not because of COVID-19. Hernandez then launched the attack and sent a livestream of it to a girl he was interested in.

Hernandez, who had been planning an attack at Westgate for at least three years, sought to harm 10 people and specifically targeted couples, according to prosecutors. Hernandez’s plan did not come to fruition due to a jam in his rifle. (Source: NCTC)

(U) Conspiracy Beliefs Reduce the Following of Government Coronavirus Guidance: A new study from the University of Oxford shows that people who hold coronavirus conspiracy beliefs are less likely to comply with social distancing guidelines or take-up future vaccines.

The research, led by clinical psychologists at the University of Oxford and published today in the journal Psychological Medicine, indicates that a disconcertingly high number of adults in England do not agree with the scientific and governmental consensus on the coronavirus pandemic. The findings indicated that:

- 60% of adults believe to some extent that the government is misleading the public about the cause of the virus
- 40% believe to some extent the spread of the virus is a deliberate attempt by powerful people to gain control
- 20% believe to some extent that the virus is a hoax

Guidelines are only effective if the majority of people use them. This pandemic requires a unified response. However the high prevalence of conspiracy beliefs, and low level of trust in institutions, may impede the response to this crisis. The figures suggest a breakdown of trust between political and scientific leadership and a significant proportion of the English population.

Other beliefs endorsed by a significant minority include (further examples available in the paper):

	Do not agree	Agree a little	Agree moderately	Agree a lot	Agree completely
Coronavirus is a bioweapon developed by China to destroy the West.	54.6%	20.2%	11.7%	8.0%	5.5%
Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain.	80.8%	5.3%	6.8%	4.6%	2.4%
Muslims are spreading the virus as an attack on Western values.	80.1%	5.9%	7.0%	4.6%	2.4%
Bill Gates has created the virus in order to reduce the world population.	79.0%	6.4%	6.6%	5.1%	3.0%
The WHO already has a vaccine and are withholding it.	70.9%	10.6%	9.3%	5.4%	3.8%
Celebrities are being paid to say they have coronavirus.	74.5%	8.5%	7.9%	5.6%	3.4%
Politicians (e.g. Boris Johnson) have faked having coronavirus.	73.5%	9.2%	8.1%	5.7%	3.6%

(Source: University of Oxford)

(U) China Tailors Disinformation TTPs to COVID-19 Information Landscape: Seven decades ago, Mao Zedong publicly embraced a benevolent view of propaganda, as if he were a latter-day prophet spreading the communist gospel: “We should carry on constant propaganda among the people on the facts of world progress and the bright future ahead so that they will build their confidence in victory,” he mused in 1945. Just a few months ago, Xi Jinping urged state journalists to spread “positive propaganda” for the “correct guidance of public opinion.” Indeed, Beijing’s global propaganda efforts in recent years have been more about promoting China’s virtues than about spreading acrimony and confusion, à la Russian information ops and election meddling. Moscow wants a weakened and divided West, one that leaves Russia free to dominate its self-appointed sphere of influence—but Russia in 2016 was also an economically sluggish, oil-dependent nation with an economy a tenth the size of America’s, and lacked the resources to remake the world in its image.

Beijing has a much bigger prize in mind and a much longer-term plan to get it: The contest isn’t about who gets to run the U.S. It’s about who deserves to run the world. And China, with its economy poised to overtake that of the United States, has already plowed billions into crafting an image as a responsible global leader, and billions more into cultivating global dependence on Chinese investments and Chinese markets.

The coronavirus outbreak and the global outcry against China’s failures of transparency and containment were not part of the plan. They sparked an international backlash that, by Beijing’s reported reckoning, was worse than anything it had faced since the Tiananmen Square massacre in

1989. So Beijing leaped to seize, or at least confuse, the global story of the virus and its cast of heroes and villains.

This has involved unleashing techniques Russia perfected during the U.S. presidential election in 2016. “We’ve seen China adopt Russian-style social media manipulation tactics like using bots and trolls to amplify disinformation on COVID-19,” Lea Gabrielle, the special envoy and coordinator for the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, wrote to me in an email. “Both countries repress information within their countries while taking advantage of the open and free information environments in democracies to push conspiracy theories that seek to undermine those environments.”

As the world realized the virus was spreading out of control, Chinese diplomats, official media, and Twitter influencers launched an aggressive frenzy of defense, scrambling to preserve the Chinese Communist Party’s cratering reputation at home and overseas. And then they went on offense, with an assist from [perhaps thousands of fake or hacked](#) Twitter accounts, according to the investigative site ProPublica. The result was a coordinated campaign of attacks on the United States, and the spread of disinformation and confusion about where the virus really came from and whose screwup it was, really, that led to so much death.

The longer-term implications stretch far beyond the immediate crisis, however. When it’s all over, China will have gained experience pushing its propaganda overseas at a volume and intensity it never had before. The CCP has succeeded at home, through rigorous information management, in controlling what Schrader, the former German Marshall Fund scholar, calls the “means of perception.” And the party is having some success extending those tools beyond its borders. “Controlling the means of perception is fundamental to power,” Schrader said. And the better China’s propaganda works, the more power it will have to shape the rest of the world. (Source: The Atlantic)

(U) Empty Hospitals, Fake Burials and Chloroquine: Systemic Disinformation Downplays COVID-19 in Brazil: As Brazil surged to [second](#) place in confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, internet users in the country have been constantly bombarded with messages downplaying the pandemic. These messages misleadingly suggested that hospitals were empty and coffins were buried with no corpses inside them, as well as that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine were proven cures to COVID-19.

Although it is not always possible to identify who created these narratives, it is clear that they reinforce the position of the country’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, who has dismissed COVID-19 as a “[little flu](#)” and said that strict social isolation measures would harm the country’s economy.

The DFRLab has already [reported](#) that articles profiling people that had recovered from COVID-19 were among the most popular in Brazil. These messages, despite not being false, were being pushed by pro-Bolsonaro groups on Facebook, reinforcing the false narrative that the novel coronavirus is not so serious.

Alongside these messages, disinformation is also circulating in Brazil. Claims about empty hospitals, for instance, started to circulate in April, after the president himself [claimed](#) he did not know of “any crowded hospitals” in the country and that the virus was not as bad as media portrayed it. While hospitals were still not crowded at that point in time, state governments were already building field

hospitals to deal with the expected increased demand. In his statement, Bolsonaro also mentioned one specific hospital and [incorrectly downplayed](#) how many patients were being treated there.

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening**

- As more states and local areas reopen, the debate continues about whether face masks should be worn in public. Many schools are beginning to share their plans for resuming classes in the fall, following CDC releasing its guidance last week for schools reopening. Parents and teachers are voicing concerns about the proposals.
- There continues to be a high volume of discussion about the U.S. COVID-19 death toll and the potential of a second wave of infections. Some are sad about the high COVID-19 numbers, while others question the validity of the numbers.
- The majority of FEMA conversation is focused on the upcoming hurricane season following the hurricane briefing for the President and First Lady today. Additionally, the COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season continues to be shared at a low volume on social media.
- Traditional news coverage remains largely focused on the U.S. fatality toll increasing as questions loom around PPE shortages, antibody testing reliability and requirements to ensure employees' safe return to work. Other subjects receiving high coverage frequency include unemployment reaching about 25%, Congress asking for details on ventilators imported from Russia, and President Trump's pledge to extend National Guard deployments.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- [Debates about the use of masks](#) in areas that are reopening continue to be one of the top topics of discussion. An increasing number of people are saying they prefer not to wear masks because they feel the masks restrict their breathing or they cause heightened anxiety.
 - As an increasing number of school systems begin to release [plans for reopening](#), parents and teachers are sharing their thoughts on whether it is a good idea to move forward with in-person classes in the fall. Many feel it will be difficult to impossible to enforce social distancing among children and could impose more harm than good.
- The CDC shared their previously released [guidance for school and health officials](#) to help determine when schools may be ready to reopen.
 - Following news that the U.S. COVID-19 death toll has surpassed 100,000, many people are expressing sadness and frustration.
- Some people continue to question the validity of the numbers.
- Others share concern that the number is so high in less than three months or feel the U.S. has failed in its COVID-19 response and in particular highlight that nearly one-third of the deaths came from nursing homes.
 - There continues to be a high level of discussion about the potential for a second wave of infections. People are wondering if the country is preparing any differently for a second wave. There are questions regarding the ability to staff and supply hospitals as well as what would happen to the economy during a second wave.

(U) 5/27 Reporting

(U) Social Media Usage Is At An All-Time High. That Could Mean A Nightmare For Democracy: Four years after Russia's expansive influence operation, which touched the feeds of more than [100 million users](#) on Facebook alone, Americans' usage of social media has only increased — and drastically so, as a result of the pandemic.

More people are more online right now than at any point in human history, and experts say the Internet has gotten only more flooded since 2016 with bad information.

And in 2020, as in 2016, it's only a matter of time before the focus shifts back away from the coronavirus and to the presidential election.

One way that increased usage may be felt in the 2020 election isn't in just the amount of false information being seen and shared, Yildirim says — but in how polarized the American public is during the campaign cycle.

A [study from last year](#) found people's usage of Facebook correlated with how polarized they are and how open they are to understanding the views or ideas of the opposition party.

Facebook had internal research pointing to the same conclusion, according to a new [report from the Wall Street Journal](#), but the company reportedly brushed it aside.

"Our algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness," said one slide, from a 2018 presentation.

More people spending more time on the platforms where this takes place likely will mean even more attempts at amplifying divisions and stoking discord. (Source: NPR)

(U) How COVID-19 Misinformation Spreads Online: Many of the falsehoods online don't have obvious sources or intentions. Rather, they often begin with niche groups mobilizing around their favoured agendas. Neil Johnson, a physicist at George Washington University in Washington DC, has reported [4](#) COVID-19 misinformation narratives taking shape among online communities of extremist and far-right 'hate' groups, which occupy largely unregulated platforms including VKontakte, Gab and 4Chan, as well as mainstream ones such as Facebook and Instagram.

The study says that a "hate multiverse" is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to spread racism and other malicious agendas, focusing an initially rather diverse and incoherent set of messages into a few dominant narratives, such as blaming Jews and immigrants for starting or spreading the virus, or asserting that it is a weapon being used by the "Deep State" to control population growth

An alarming feature of this network is its capacity to draw in outside users through what Johnson and his team call "wormhole" links. These are shortcuts from a network engaged with quite different issues. The hate multiverse, the researchers say, "acts like a global funnel that can suck individuals from a

mainstream cluster on a platform that invests significant resources in moderation, into less moderated platforms like 4Chan or Telegram". As a result, Johnson says, racist views are starting to appear in the anti-vaccine communities, too. "The rise of fear and misinformation around COVID-19 has allowed promoters of malicious matter and hate to engage with mainstream audiences around a common topic of interest, and potentially push them toward hateful views," his team says in the paper.

Communication scholar Scott Brennen at the Oxford Internet Institute, UK, and his co-workers have found that social-media companies have done a decent job of removing misleading posts, given the hard task. The team followed up 225 pieces of misinformation about the coronavirus that independent fact-checkers had collated in the IFCN or Google databases as false or misleading. In a 7 April report, the team found that by the end of March, only some 25% of these false claims remained in place without warning labels on YouTube and Facebook, although on Twitter that proportion was 59% (see go.nature.com/2tvhuj5). And Ferrara says that about 5% of the 11 million Twitter users his team has studied so far in its COVID-19 database have been shut down for violating the platform's policies of use, and that these tended to be unusually active accounts.

But some creators of content have found ways to delay detection by social-media moderators, Donovan notes, in what she calls "hidden virality". One way is to post content in private groups on Facebook. Because the platform relies largely on its users to flag up bad information, shares of misleading posts in private communities are flagged less often because everyone in the group tends to agree with one another, she says. Donovan used to study white supremacy online, and says a lot of 'alt-right' content wasn't flagged until it leaked into public Facebook domains. Using CrowdTangle, a social-media-tracking tool owned by Facebook, Donovan found that more than 90% of the million or so interactions referring to the *New York Post* article about the Gates vaccine conspiracy were on private pages.

Another way in which manipulators slip past moderation is by sharing the same post from a new location online, says Donovan. For instance, when people on Facebook began sharing an article that alleged that 21 million people had died of COVID-19 in China, Facebook put a label on the article to indicate that it contained dubious information, and limited its ranking so that it wasn't prioritized in a search (China has confirmed many fewer deaths: 4,638). Immediately, however, people began posting a copy of the article that had been stored on the Internet Archive, a website that preserves content. This copy was shared 118,000 times before Facebook placed a warning on the link. Another post, on the website Medium, was removed by Medium because it falsely claimed that all biomedical information known about COVID-19 was wrong, and put forward a dubious theory. Before it was taken down, it garnered some shares. But a version on an archived site remains. It has garnered 1.6 million interactions and 310,000 shares on Facebook — numbers that are still climbing. (Source: Nature)

(U) Fake CDC Guidelines on Virginia School Reopening Circulate Online: You may have seen it circulating around social media over the past week: an image that claims to be a list of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s guidelines for schools reopening this fall.

Over the weekend, an email was sent out to parents from Rockingham County Public Schools in regards to posts sharing that list, which contains false information.

Dr. Oskar Scheikl, Rockingham County School Division Superintendent, said the posts may look like they contain information from the CDC, but are written in a way that are false. There are misspellings in the text that should give away from the beginning that the post's not from the CDC, including "guidelines" in the title shown in the image, he pointed out. (Source: ABC)

(U) **How Media Consumption Patterns Fuel Conspiratorial Thinking:** False news **travels faster than truth online**. Incubated in online communities, mis- and disinformation often coalesce into conspiratorial narratives that receive **higher, more sustained engagement** on social media. Viral conspiracies can motivate individuals to engage in targeted harassment and violence that—while often aimed at elites—disproportionately affects marginalized populations.

Who is more likely to interpret events conspiratorially? Conspiracy theories are stickiest when they satisfy an individual's underlying **needs**. Those with a strong need for closure or certainty, those facing threats to themselves or those close to them, and those seeking to maintain a positive image of themselves, their identity, or groups they belong to tend to gravitate toward conspiratorial interpretations. Previous research showed that highly **knowledgeable people who also lack trust** in governmental institutions are more prone to endorse political conspiracy theories, as are people **who have been on the losing side of an election** and are looking for a reason to keep holding onto their worldview.

Our new research, conducted with colleagues in the **Center for Communication and Civic Renewal team at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**, shows that how we approach our mediated world matters as well. We found that the way people do and don't search for news online greatly affects their propensity to believe that a group of secret, malevolent actors are controlling the world. In short, people who avoid following the news because they think they will hear about the important stuff eventually are among the most likely people to think conspiratorially.

People **encounter** the news in a variety of ways. While some people omnivorously devour all the news they can and others prefer news from their ideological side, a considerable number of people choose not to look for the news at all, confident they can stay informed because if it is important enough the news will work its way into their interpersonal networks or social media feeds. People exhibiting high levels of this **"news finds me"** perception tend to have lower political knowledge and interest than others, and tend to use social media more often. Since previous research shows that those who are highly knowledgeable about, and distrustful of, the government are more prone to conspiracism, we wondered whether these media-use patterns and orientations toward news consumption contributed to a conspiratorial mentality as well.

Does it? In a word, yes. We conducted a panel survey of adults in five 2020 presidential election swing states (Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and North Carolina), tapping people's social media use, political interest and knowledge, trust-in-government, racial resentment, and whether they held a **"news finds me"** perception. The top-left panel of the figure shows that people with a higher **"news finds me"** perspective are the most likely to exhibit conspiracism in their thinking.

(U) **China-, Iran-, Russia-, and Turkey-Backed English-Language Media Outlets Produce Highly Effective Content About the Coronavirus Pandemic That Reaches a Large Global Audience and Attracts Millions of Engagements:** The prominent themes of content produced by these countries' state-backed media include criticism of the democratic response, praise for the country's own leadership, and conspiracies about the virus' origin. Russia's RT criticized the Western response as capitalistic opportunism, while China criticized President Trump for not taking the situation seriously. Russia's Sputnik, China's People's Daily, and Turkey's TRT World have emphasized their national success, while highlighting contributions to other countries' fight against the virus. Iran's PressTV is the most notable propagator of coronavirus conspiracies, claiming that the U.S. created the virus in a "biowarfare" lab, and some Chinese sources claimed that U.S. military personnel brought the virus to Wuhan. Though these state-backed sources produce less content than other global outlets, such as BBC, they can attract engagement that is as much as ten times more effective. (Source: Oxford Internet Institute)

(U) **Russia Seeks to Aggravate the Public Health Crisis in Western Countries by Spreading Disinformation:** Russian narratives about COVID-19 fit into three categories. The first refers to the dissemination of anti-American sentiments to domestic Russian audiences. Such narratives claim the Western response is incompetent and contradicts the values the West purports to champion. The second category propagates conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origin and the Western response with "the main objective of confusing people and diminishing the levels of trust and credibility in Western political systems and institutions." The final group uses 'experts' to tout Russian global leadership and assert an American inability to continue as a great power, arguing the U.S. is impeding global efforts to contain the pandemic. (Source: University of Calgary)

(U) **How the Coronavirus Increases Terrorism Threats in the Developing World:** As the coronavirus reaches [developing countries in Africa and Asia](#), the pandemic will have effects beyond public health and economic activity. As the disease wreaks its havoc in areas poorly equipped to handle its spread, terrorism likely will increase there as well.

We are political scientists who study the [developing world](#) and [political conflict](#). Our recently [published research](#) identifies a potential link between the pandemic and an uptick in violence. We find that food insecurity – the lack of both financial and physical access to nutritious food, which leads to malnutrition and undernourishment in a population – makes citizens angry at their governments.

Citizens conclude that their political leaders are either unable or unwilling to ease their suffering. This anger gives terrorist groups opportunities to recruit new members by providing them a violent outlet for venting their frustrations. In many cases, terrorist organizations do what their governments can't or won't do: give people the food and money they badly need to survive. (Source: The Conversation)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- There has been a high volume of discussion on both traditional and social media regarding updated guidance provided by the CDC on antibody tests and the dangers of touching contaminated services. This has caused some skepticism among the general public who feel they have been receiving mixed messages.

- Masks continue to be an increasingly polarizing issue among the general public as people voice frustrations over mask mandates while others share that they feel masks are an essential part of public health safety at this time. The conversation is growing more political.
- FEMA conversation on social media has been steady over the course of the day with no major stories dominating the discussion. Instead, conversation has been largely driven by local media reports of PPE deliveries and congressional concerns over the potential deactivation of the National Guard.
- Traditional media has focused on multiple health news items, including health officials' belief that protective masks are critical to overcoming the virus until a vaccine is available. PPE is also generating national and local media interest, specifically expected deliveries to nursing homes and evaluating Project Airbridge's success. The U.S. fatality toll remains of high interest as it nears 100,000.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- The CDC's latest updated guidance on COVID-19 antibody tests (also known as serological tests) is producing wide conversation this afternoon.
 - Public Health experts share and emphasize from the CDC's report that serological testing should not determine immunity until durability and duration of immunity is established.
 - Many are skeptical at how the media is covering the news, saying headlines are misleading. Others express frustration at how the new information is confusing and different from what was originally thought.
- As the number of deaths in the United States inches closer to 100,000 there are a growing number of people questioning the validity of this number while others note that this number remains lower than some of the original projections.
 - A smaller number of people are expressing sadness and grief over the number of dead. Many feel not enough has been done to acknowledge the loss of life that has occurred over the past several months.
- There are ongoing discussions about how to capture the full financial and mental impacts of COVID-19 on the public, businesses and communities. Many continue to struggle emotionally and financially with social distancing and closures during the pandemic and it has been difficult to grasp the long term impacts these issues are having on people.
- As an increasing number of states and private businesses make masks a requirement, the employees who must enforce these rules and regulations are voicing concern over the potential for confrontations with those who do not want to comply.
- There continues to be widespread debate regarding the use of masks in public spaces. Public health officials contend there is clear evidence they protect against transmission, but feel they have become politically polarized, so whether they will help in the country's fight against the disease is still a question.
- Discussions of individuals expressing concerns about future COVID-19 vaccines have increased, with people discussing several different issues:

- Vaccine safety remains a top concern. A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research indicates that only half of Americans would get a COVID-19 vaccine. Among those who said they would not get vaccinated, 7 in 10 cited concerns about the safety of the vaccine.
- Bipartisan leadership from the House Energy and Commerce Committees have sent a letter to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, addressed to Dr. Birx, urging transparency in the development and release of the White House's national vaccine plan.
- There are growing mentions of HHS plans to modify the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP) by removing coverage under the program for Shoulder Injuries Related to Vaccine Administration (SIRVA). SIRVA is a common injury related to vaccine administration and accounts for 54% of all claims filed with VICP.

(U) 5/26 Reporting

(U) California Anti-Lockdown Protests Show Influence of Extremist Groups, Adaptability of COVID-19 Conspiracies to Include Other Issues: In California and across the country, lockdown protests have drawn a melting pot of participants, including peaceful activists such as the DeBows and militias such as the Boogaloo Boys, who have credos that call for civil war, said Brian Levin, professor of criminal justice and director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at Cal State San Bernardino.

It's unclear how large a role extremist groups are playing in protests. The demonstrations have drawn people with a wide array of concerns, including those who feel it's wrong for the stay-at-home orders to cover religious institutions and libertarians who fear the rules are destroying the economy. Some people who oppose vaccines have also taken up the cause.

It's uncertain to what extent extremist groups are trying to recruit at the events. Saturday's Sacramento gathering, estimated by city police to be the largest yet, with 2,000 in attendance, resembled a family carnival, with an organic-gelato vendor, and music performances sprinkled among political speeches.

Still, Levin said he found the intermingling of hate groups with others to be concerning.

"Different people are showing up with different goals, but when they collect together, they influence each other," he said, creating a "petri dish for conspiracy theories and bad information, as well as aggressiveness."

That mishmash, Levin said, could make the events a "recruiting rabbit hole" for groups that struggle to find inroads with mainstream audiences.

Devin Burghart, a researcher with the nonprofit Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, has been monitoring reopening groups online and says he sees extremism and conspiracy theories gaining traction in thousands of internet postings that have sprung up in recent weeks.

"These groups, while initially established around reopening, are pivoting to a larger, far-right political project," Burghart said.

He said the number of people joining such groups and the speed with which they had grown was “unprecedented” in American social movements. In California, he has found more than 70 such Facebook groups with about 300,000 members, and more than 2 million participants nationwide.

Burghart said he had already seen a shift in talking points that he thought would move the focus of some groups from lockdowns to the upcoming election, and said many of those now online had both money and experience in organizing.

Conspiracy theories about the virus are rampant in reopen forums and at rallies. Those that have gained traction include the belief that a coronavirus vaccine will carry a microchip that allows the government to track citizens, or that the virus is a political hoax perpetrated by the Democratic Party to promote voter fraud with mail-in ballots.

The spread of such views, Levin said, has already led to some extreme reactions.

Levin pointed to armed protesters in Michigan and elsewhere, and the recent arrest of a Colorado protester [for having a pipe bomb](#). In Fresno, shutdown protesters [followed a City Council member home](#), leading to a scuffle that ended with misdemeanor charges against the politician.

Levin and Burghart said they believed there would be more such incidents. Hate crimes have increased since the pandemic began, Levin said.

“You see these different political strains gaining steam and also gaining new followers,” Burghart said. “I worry about acts of violence.”

Levin said that as the “initial grievance” of the stay-at-home order faded from view, he expected the groups to grow online and on the ground and to refocus on new shared concerns. (Source: LA Times)

(U) Study: White Supremacist Groups Are ‘Thriving’ On Facebook, Despite Extremist Ban: Dozens of white supremacist groups are operating freely on Facebook, allowing them to spread their message and recruit new members, according to a Tech Transparency Project (TTP) investigation, which found the activity is continuing despite years of promises by the social network that it bans hate organizations.

TTP recently documented how online extremists, including many with white supremacist views, are using Facebook to [plan for a militant uprising dubbed the “boogaloo,”](#) as they stoke fears that coronavirus lockdowns are a sign of rising government repression. But TTP’s latest investigation reveals Facebook’s broader problems with white supremacist groups, which are using the social network’s unmatched reach to build their movement.

With millions of people now quarantining at home and vulnerable to ideologies that seek to exploit people’s fears and resentments about Covid-19, Facebook’s failure to remove white supremacist groups could give these organizations fertile new ground to attract followers.

Facebook’s Community Standards [prohibit hate speech](#) based on race, ethnicity, and other factors because it “creates an environment of intimidation and exclusion and in some cases may promote real-world violence.” The company also [bans hate organizations](#). Since the Charlottesville violence, Facebook

has announced the removal of specific hate groups and tightened restrictions on white extremist content on the platform.

To test those claims, TTP conducted searches on Facebook for the names of 221 white supremacist organizations that have been designated as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), two leading anti-hate organizations.

The analysis found:

- Of the 221 designated white supremacist organizations, more than half—51%, or 113 groups—had a presence on Facebook.
- Those organizations are associated with a total of 153 Facebook Pages and four Facebook Groups. Roughly one third of the organizations (34) had two or more Pages or Groups on Facebook. Some had Pages that have been active on the platform for a decade.
- Many of the white supremacist Pages identified by TTP were created by Facebook itself. Facebook auto-generated them as business pages when someone listed a white supremacist or neo-Nazi organization as their employer.
- Facebook’s “Related Pages” feature often directed users visiting white supremacist Pages to other extremist or content, raising concerns that the platform is contributing to radicalization.
- One of Facebook’s strategies for combatting extremism—redirecting users who search for terms associated with white supremacy or hate groups to the Page for “Life After Hate,” an organization that promotes tolerance—only worked in 6% (14) of the 221 searches for white supremacist organizations.
- In addition to the hate groups designated by SPLC and ADL, TTP found white supremacist organizations that Facebook had explicitly banned in the past. One known as “Right Wing Death Squad” had at least three Pages on Facebook, all created *prior* to Facebook’s ban.

Roughly 36% (52 Facebook Pages and four Facebook Groups) of the content identified was created by users. One user-generated Page for a group designated as white nationalist by SPLC had more than 42,000 “likes” on Facebook and has been active since 2010.

The remaining 64% of the white supremacy content identified by TTP involved Pages that had been auto-generated by Facebook. These Pages are automatically created by Facebook when a user lists a job in their profile that does not have an existing Page. When a user lists their work position as “Universal Aryan Brotherhood Movement,” for instance, Facebook generates a business page for that group.

The auto-generation problem has [existed for some time](#). In April 2019, an anonymous whistleblower filed a [Securities and Exchange Commission \(SEC\) petition](#) regarding extremism on the platform and Facebook’s practice of auto-generating business pages for terrorist and white supremacist groups. Some of these Facebook-generated Pages gained thousands of “likes,” giving a way for the groups to identify potential recruits, according to the whistleblower.

One of the auto-generated hate group Pages with the most “likes” in TTP’s analysis was for the Council of Conservative Citizens, an SPLC-designated white nationalist group. The group made headlines in 2015 after an online manifesto linked to white supremacist Dylann Roof [referenced the organization](#); Roof opened fire at a historically black church in South Carolina, killing nine people. Facebook’s auto-generated Page for the Council of Conservative Citizens included a description of the group’s white supremacist affiliations, complete with a direct link to their website.

Related Pages: Facebook’s Extremist Echo Chamber

The TTP review highlights flaws in Facebook’s content moderation system, which relies heavily on artificial intelligence (AI) and Facebook users to [report problematic content to human moderators for review](#).

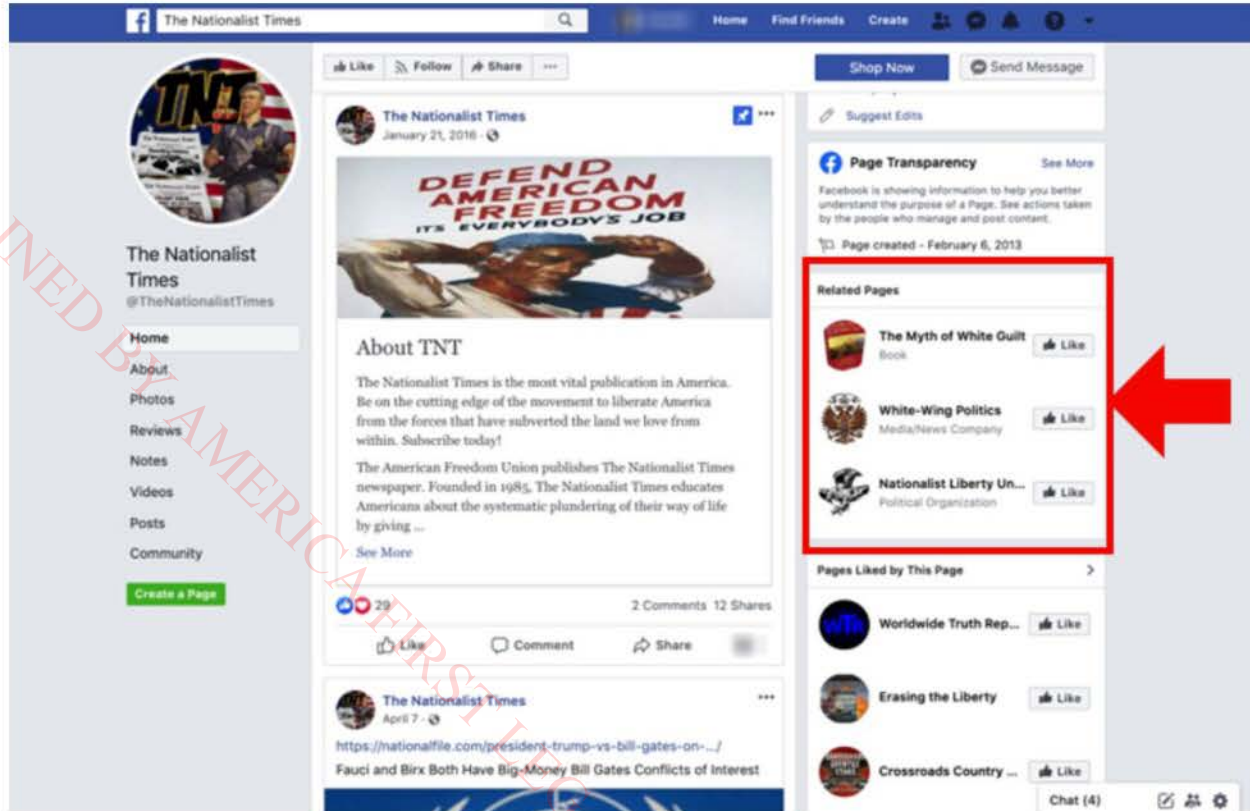
Relying on users to identify objectionable material doesn’t work well when the platform is designed to connect users with shared ideologies, experts have noted, since white supremacists are unlikely to object to racist content they see on Facebook. “A lot of Facebook’s moderation revolves around users flagging content. When you have this kind of vetting process, you don’t run the risk of getting thrown off Facebook,” [according to SPLC research analyst Keegan Hanks](#).

Artificial intelligence, which Facebook has touted for years as the solution to identifying and removing bad content, also has [limitations when it comes to hate speech](#). AI can miss deliberate misspellings; manipulation of words to include numbers, symbols, and emojis; and missing spaces in sentences. Neo-Nazis, for example, have managed to avoid detection through [simple measures like replacing “S” with “\\$.”](#)

At the same time, Facebook’s algorithms can create an echo chamber of white supremacy through its “Related Pages” feature, which suggests similar Pages to keep users engaged on a certain topic. TTP’s investigation found that among the 113 hate groups that had a Facebook presence, 77 of them had Pages that displayed Related Pages, often pointing people to other extremist or right-wing content. In some cases, the Related Pages directed users to additional SPLC- or ADL-designated hate groups.

For example, TTP found that the user-generated Page for Nazi Low Riders, an [ADL-listed hate group](#), showed Related Pages for other groups associated with white supremacy. The top recommendation was another user-generated Page called “Aryanbrotherhood.” (By omitting the space between the two words, the Page may have been trying to evade Facebook’s AI systems, as discussed above.) The Aryan Brotherhood is “the oldest and most notorious racist prison gang in the United States,” [according to ADL](#).

Facebook’s algorithms even pick up on links between organizations that may not be obvious to others. For example, the [auto-generated Page for Sacto Skins](#), a short form of the [SPLC-designated racist hate group Sacto Skinheads](#), included a Related Page recommendation for Embassy of Russia in the United States. A recent investigation by *The New York Times* found that [Russian intelligence services](#) are using Facebook and other social media to try to incite white supremacists ahead of the 2020 election. (Source: Tech Transparency Project)



(U) **Russia's Pushing a Quack COVID-19 Cure All Over Africa:** In Africa, news outlets and social media posts notorious for spreading Russian-created disinformation and conspiracy theories are leveling all sorts of allegations against the WHO, ranging from incompetence to fraud.

At the center of the attacks is what appears to be a coordinated campaign promoting an herbal concoction the Moscow-backed government of Madagascar claims will cure COVID-19.

The attacks on the WHO intensified when the agency released a statement on May 4 warning Africans against using untested remedies for treatment of the coronavirus after the Malagasy government began to extoll—and export in large quantities—an untested herbal infusion sometimes bottled like soda that's called Covid-Organics. The main component for the tonic is artemisia annua, known as sweet wormwood, which has been shown to have some therapeutic value against malaria.

The herbal remedy's biggest booster is Malagasy President Andry Rajoelina, a 45-year-old media entrepreneur elected in 2018 with help from Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose meddling, as detailed by the *New York Times*, was blatant even by Kremlin standards.

The focus of Russia's activities has been to drive a wedge between Africa and other international players, whether the U.S., European nations, or China. The Covid-Organics controversy is potentially just another tool to create resentment, as reflected in President Rajoelina's assertions that his country's "cure" for the pandemic is being ignored by the West because it is from Africa.

Much of the news that people in Madagascar see or listen to is content created by media outlets set up by the operations of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Putin who was indicted by Special Counsel Robert

Mueller for allegedly financing the Internet Research Agency that worked to influence the U.S. 2016 presidential election. (Source: MSN)

Students on Lockdown Create a Global Guide to Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories, Fake Cures, and Other Whopping Lies: Many of the student researchers attend Princeton. Others come from Bocconi University, The University of Chicago, and Columbia University. They've been updating a project spreadsheet—so far more than 800 entries long—that lists all of the disinformation narratives they've found spreading in countries around the world. Princeton Professor Jacob Shapiro, the co-director of Princeton's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, and Jan Oledan, a research specialist for the project, kicked off the disinformation tracking effort in March. "We weren't seeing any place where things from multiple countries were really pulled together," Shapiro said.

The researchers comb social media and the internet, including the fact-checking sites that have cropped up around the world, and use a coding manual to characterize the type of stories they find. An email circulating in the Czech Republic about how the United States supposedly "registered" the coronavirus in 2003 (it didn't) in order to attack China? According to the student researchers, that's a "weaponization or design" story. A chain message on the messaging platform Line falsely claiming that Japan would go into a nationwide lockdown on April 1? That one is labeled an "emergency response" narrative.

Looking at the team's data, a few storylines appear over and over again—like the false conspiracy theory that the disease is some kind of [weapon](#). Frequently these tales take on a local flavor. In Syria, for instance, social media posts were circulating that claimed COVID-19 was the product of US [sarin gas](#) experimentation in Afghanistan. Given the many allegations of chemical-weapons use that have surfaced during the Syrian civil war, it's perhaps not surprising that sarin gas would factor in local conspiracy theories about COVID-19. In another narrative, a Facebook user alleged that European countries were spreading the virus to Egypt by exporting their "gently used" infected clothing. An overlay on the post indicated Facebook had flagged it as false.

COVID-19 disinformation often seems to target a country's foreign or [minority population](#). The Princeton team reported that the influential Nepali journalist Rajendra Dahal speculated on Twitter last month about the "role of Muslims in spreading COVID-19" and about why they are "hiding" in mosques. Nepali media have reported on [rising Islamophobia](#) following several positive cases among Muslims in the country. Likewise, in Japan, social media users have pushed the false information that "one third or half of Japan's coronavirus cases are [among] non-citizens." (Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)

(U) The Information Apocalypse Is Already Here, And Reality Is Losing: We're now living in a version of that dystopian future, where people are struggling to distinguish fact from fiction and are resistant to information from credible sources. But it's not the result of new technology or sophisticated synthetic media. As it turns out, the tools needed to unmoor people from our shared reality already exist and are less technological than societal: a global pandemic that unleashes fear, uncertainty, and an economic catastrophe among a deeply polarized public; motivated and well-organized fringe and conspiracy groups eager to seize the moment to reach the mainstream; and seemingly authoritative sources and institutions that stoke that disagreement and fail to communicate effectively with the public.

In the end, the information apocalypse arrived a couple of weeks ago, ushered in not by some new reality-bending technology but by a disgraced scientist in a slick 26-minute video.

In its first few days of release, “The Plandemic” — a short film filled with so much coronavirus disinformation that it has since been banned by major tech platforms — racked up more than 8 million views across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, peddling outright falsehoods and conspiratorial claims about the origins of the current pandemic.

This wasn't so much the result of the film's promptly and widely debunked content as it was the professional credentials of its main character, Judy Mikovits — a [disgraced](#) research scientist with a PhD in biochemistry and a resume that includes 22 years working for the National Cancer Institute. Mikovits lent a seemingly authoritative voice to a slop bucket of virus disinformation that was already circulating. She offered a PhD endorsement of long-debunked falsehoods about the coronavirus. She was a reason to believe — so much so that she is now a bestselling author on Amazon.

“The Plandemic” had untethered viewers from our common reality and left them unable to distinguish fact from fiction. And it had done it entirely without technological wizardry. This was the future researchers and the media warned us about. And an avalanche of fake news hearings, news literacy efforts, and investments in fact-checking infrastructure since 2016 couldn't stop it.

As [Renee DiResta](#), a disinformation expert and the research manager of the Stanford Internet Observatory, explained, there's little need for deepfakes when you have a pandemic to exploit. “The additional layer of synthetic content — you don't need that in this case,” she told BuzzFeed News.

“There's enough to work with; there's enough fear, there's enough uncertainty.” [Nina Jankowicz](#), a disinformation specialist with the Wilson Center, a Washington think tank, agreed. “You cannot fact-check your way out of an emotional argument, particularly when it is slickly packaged and designed to appeal to those looking to fill a trust gap.”

As doomsday warnings about deepfakes captured the collective imagination, anti-vaccine activists, QAnon conspiracy devotees, and political extremists have used Facebook Groups, YouTube, and Twitter to form online communities, churn out memes and messaging to attract new followers, and mint “experts” like Mikovits to undermine scientific authorities.

The ultimate goal for anti-vaxxers is to convert more people to their worldview, which is something this community excels at, according to [a new paper](#) published in Nature by researchers at George Washington University and other institutions. They studied user behavior on Facebook and found that “anti-vaccination clusters manage to become highly entangled with undecided clusters in the main online network, whereas pro-vaccination clusters are more peripheral.”

While pro-vaccine communities on Facebook largely keep to themselves, anti-vaccine advocates often intermingle with people who are “undecided” about vaccines. A piece of content like “The Plandemic” is engineered to reach the undecided and fearful. The researchers suggested that, based on current growth trends, “anti-vaccination views will dominate in a decade” on Facebook.

The ultimate goal is likely to undermine confidence in a future vaccine and continue the assault against the medical community, the government, and related targets, ranging from Bill Gates to 5G technology. The creation of a COVID-19 vaccine will very likely **open a new front in the information wars** — one for which health authorities, social media platforms, and the public are not ready.

“The anti-vaccine activists who initially elevated Mikovits, and Plandemic, have been quite direct about the fact that they see the COVID-19 vaccine as an opportunity not only to erode confidence in *that* vaccine, but in the very concept of vaccination overall,” DiResta said.

She predicts they will “begin to harass the individuals who are doing the work of vaccine development, and the people working on the public education campaigns to come, ‘exposing’ them as somehow ethically compromised, ‘bought,’ incompetent, etc, relying on discrediting tactics of the type commonly seen in political smear campaigns.”

The battle over the coronavirus pandemic and a vaccine will reverberate beyond health communities, ultimately increasing the number of people “who are part of an organized and active community that has lost its ability to make sense of the world, and that might take actions that are severely harmful to themselves and others.”

In the meantime, conspiracy theorists are preparing to release the second part of “The Plandemic.”

(U) Somehow This Wild Hoax Bill Gates Anti-Vaxx Video Doesn't Violate YouTube's Policies: A bonkers hoax video about Bill Gates has been making the rounds on social media — and it’s setting the anti-vaxx conspiracy world on fire.

The video claims to show Gates briefing the CIA in 2005 about a vaccine to immunize religious fanatics. The video, which is obviously faked, is getting gobbled up by online conspiracy theorists who’ve latched onto the Microsoft co-founder as the mastermind behind the coronavirus pandemic.

The video started circulating about a week ago and is now gaining steam on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter — despite those companies’ repeated pledges to contain the spread of disinformation. One version of the video had amassed close to 37,000 views in just a few days.

A spokesperson for YouTube says they reviewed the video and it does not violate their policies against harmful misinformation related to COVID-19, nor does it violate their other community policies against hate speech, spam, or violence. (Source: Vice)

(U) Canadian-Led NATO Battlegroup in Latvia Targeted by Pandemic Disinformation

Campaign: The Canadian-led NATO battle group in Latvia was the target of a pandemic-related disinformation campaign that alliance commanders say they believe originated in Russia.

Reports circulated recently in some Baltic and Eastern European media outlets that suggested the contingent at Camp Adazi in Kadaga, outside the capital of Riga, had “a high number” of cases of the deadly virus.

“That was definitely not true,” said Col. Eric Laforest, commander of Task Force Latvia.

When the reports first surfaced, ahead of a major exercise late last month, the Latvian defence ministry swung into action to counter the false information.

It's not the first time Russian-backed media outlets in the Baltic country have been accused of working to drive a wedge between the western military contingent and the Latvian public. Not long after the deployment began three years ago, reports emerged online that specifically smeared Canadian troops. (Source: CBC)

(U) More Harm Than Good? Twitter Struggles to Label Misleading COVID-19 Tweets: Automated technology that Twitter began using this month to label tweets containing coronavirus misinformation is making mistakes, raising concerns about the company's reliance on artificial intelligence to review content.

On May 11, Twitter started labeling tweets that spread a conspiracy theory about 5G causing the coronavirus. Authorities believe the false theory prompted some people to set fires to cell towers.

Twitter's technology, though, has made scores of mistakes, applying labels to tweets that refute the conspiracy theory and provide accurate information. Tweets that include links to news stories from Reuters, BBC, Wired and Voice of America about the 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory have been labeled. In one case, Twitter applied the label to tweets that shared a page the company itself had published titled "No, 5G isn't causing coronavirus." Tweets with words such as 5G, coronavirus, COVID-19 or hashtags #5Gcoronavirus have also been mistakenly labeled.

Experts say the mislabeled tweets could confuse users, especially if they don't click on the label. Since Twitter doesn't notify users when their tweets get labeled, they likely won't know their tweets have been flagged. Twitter also doesn't give users a way to appeal its evaluation of their posts.

"Arguably, labeling incorrectly does more harm than not labeling because then people come to rely on that and they come to trust it," said Hany Farid, a computer science professor at University of California, Berkeley. "Once you get it wrong, a couple hours go by and it's over."

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Conversation today was relatively smaller than previous weeks and was mostly driven by coverage of large crowds defying social distancing practices this Memorial Day weekend. This has renewed and increased public discussion about the possibility of a second wave due to the timing of the holiday with the gradual reopening of businesses throughout the U.S.
- Virginia's new mandatory mask order also produced wide discussion today about mask use and its roll in containing the spread of COVID-19. Many continue to express skepticism toward mask use guidelines, perceiving it as an unnecessary and ineffective measure despite the government's messaging promoting their use.
- Many private hospital systems continue furloughing and laying off employees, as well as many retail businesses affected by the crisis. New studies showing that many people who became unemployed due to the pandemic might not find work again is producing growing levels of concern among the general public.

- Traditional news coverage has focused on the U.S. fatality toll approaching 100,000. Other stories marked the reopening of the New York Stock Exchange trading floor and examined the potentially unsafe crowds over the Memorial Day weekend. Several national and local outlets reported on news that the President has finished a two-week course of hydroxychloroquine.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There has been a high volume of discussion about mask mandates on the heels of Virginia's new mask requirement. There is increasing debate over whether businesses should be able to mandate that patrons wear masks or face coverings. The majority of people support businesses that choose to enforce a mask mandates. Those that do not support it say they will take their business elsewhere. (example 1, example 2, example 3)
- The majority of the conversation over the weekend focused on large groups of people gathering for the holiday while ignoring social distancing guidelines and not wearing masks as photos and reports of crowded beaches and venues are shared. People feel the next two weeks will be a critical time period to watch for new outbreaks as a result of these gatherings.
 - This is causing a large amount of discussion about when the "second peak" could happen as people question if it will be associated with the economy reopening or if it will be later in the fall.
 - Some feel if there are no major outbreaks this could be an indicator that the country is ready to begin a larger recovery effort.
 - Some people are expressing frustration that state and federal officials are not wearing masks when in public.

(U) 5/21 Reporting

(U) EU Monitor Sees Drop In COVID-19 Disinformation, Urges Social Media To Take More Action:

- In line with the previous EEAS Special Reports and based on publicly available information, this edition gives an overview of recent developments around COVID-19 related disinformation. The report focusses on foreign state and non-state actors trying to exploit the uncertainty in societies as well as people's fears and insecurities to advance their own agenda.
- While misinformation and disinformation[1] relating to issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to spread across the globe, the volume has – according to our findings – shown at least a temporary decrease during the period observed, alongside a general downward trend on COVID-19 related web searches[2].
- There is a crystallizing and clustering around specific topics and narratives: alleged links between COVID-19 and 5G networks; COVID-19 restrictions as pretext establishing global domination of secretive elites; and attacks on individuals engaged in the development of vaccines, especially Bill Gates.

- External actors, notably pro-Kremlin sources, are still involved in spreading disinformation, including by amplifying existing conspiracy theories, which link the COVID-19 pandemic to biological warfare, 5G technology and fuel anti-vaccination sentiment.
- The efforts of state actors like China to deflect blame, to use the pandemic to promote their own governmental system and enhance their image abroad continue. The claim that there are clandestine US biological laboratories on the territory of “former Soviet republics”[3] has been spread both by pro-Kremlin outlets as well as Chinese officials and state media.
- Disinformation around COVID-19 has real world consequences. It has become clear that disinformation is not just a potential health risk when false cures are propagated. The spread of false information pertaining to the 5G network has also led to multiple arson attacks on telecommunication infrastructure across Europe.[4]
- In some regions and countries, the COVID-19 pandemic is used to restrict freedom of speech and freedom of the media. The EEAS has observed numerous cases in which governments or state officials have used the crisis to curtail media freedoms.
- The work of independent media and fact-checkers is crucial to deliver reliable and authoritative information about the pandemic. Continued threats and harassment against fact-checkers and fact-checking organizations are being observed.
- Social media companies continue to invest into detecting and countering misinformation and disinformation on their platforms. While the efforts are commendable, it is clear that much more needs to be done. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **494 Coronavirus-Related Cases Spreading Disinformation and Collected at EUvsDisinfo Database Received 1,152,270 Likes, Shares and Comments on Different Social Media Platforms:** As of 19 May, The EUvsDisinfo database has a total of 8508 disinformation cases, of which 494 are related to conspiracies and false information on the coronavirus. The coronavirus cases were based on 1608 URLs, which we traced and analysed using media analysis tool BuzzSumo.

The article with the most engagements was published on Sputnik Italian, receiving 112,800 likes, shares and comments on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit. It falsely claimed that Poland did **not allow Russian aircraft** carrying humanitarian aid and a team of medical experts to Italy into its airspace.

In second place, with 94,000 engagements, we find an article fuelled by conspiracy theories and published by orientalreview.org site in English. It falsely claims that the **coronavirus is a fake pandemic**; that Italy will leave the EU and that Trump and Putin have to stop the secret elites and bankers from dominating the world.

In third place with 68,800 engagements is an article published on Russian-language cont.ws claiming that the coronavirus was created artificially and is a **biological weapon**. This claim falls into the common

category of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives about biological weapons and alleged US laboratories in Russia's neighbourhood.

Fourth place belongs to Russian-language amediainfo.ru that was one of 18 outlets in our database which published an article claiming that a professor from Harvard University had been [arrested for creating the coronavirus](#). In reality, the arrest had nothing to do with the coronavirus. The article received 57,400 engagements.

The last place in the top 5 belongs to RT Arabic for an article with 51,700 engagements spreading disinformation about the [US being behind the coronavirus](#). (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) Online Conspiracy Groups Advocate Claiming Disability to Avoid Wearing Masks in Public: Shelly Lewis approached the [California supermarket](#) with a script in mind.

"Hi, I have a medical condition that I'm not allowed to wear a mask and I'm not required by HIPAA rules and regulations to disclose that," Lewis told a supermarket manager, who nonetheless explained that she would not be allowed inside without a protective face mask. "You're discriminating against me now, do you know that? You're discriminating against me."

Lewis, a prominent member of the Flat Earth movement, recently uploaded footage of the encounter online, where it went viral even after she deleted it. A re-upload on Twitter currently has 5.4 million views.

But across the internet, in circles decidedly less fringe than Flat Earth, Americans are spreading disinformation about medical laws that allegedly exempt them from wearing face masks amid a pandemic that has killed over 90,000 people in the United States. Earlier this month, a set of memes began instructing COVID-19 skeptics (many of them conspiracy theorists or [conservatives](#)) to lie about having a medical condition in order to avoid masking up. One meme, which was amplified by [an erstwhile Republican congressional candidate](#), tells readers to cite laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) to essentially trick people who ask them to wear protective gear.

The memes aren't just annoying for frontline grocery-store workers who have to enforce masking rules. They undermine regulations written for people with legitimate disabilities, experts said. (Source: The Daily Beast)

(U) Why the Debunked COVID-19 Conspiracy Video "Plandemic" Won't Go Away: Despite efforts by major platforms to limit its spread, copies of the widely debunked conspiracy video "Plandemic" continued to multiply and spread largely through niche online conspiracy communities. Once Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube began [proactively removing](#) the video, users from groups like QAnon promoted it, hosting the video on "alt-tech" platforms that cast themselves as "pro-free speech" options, while continuing to share links to the video on Facebook and Twitter at a rapid rate.

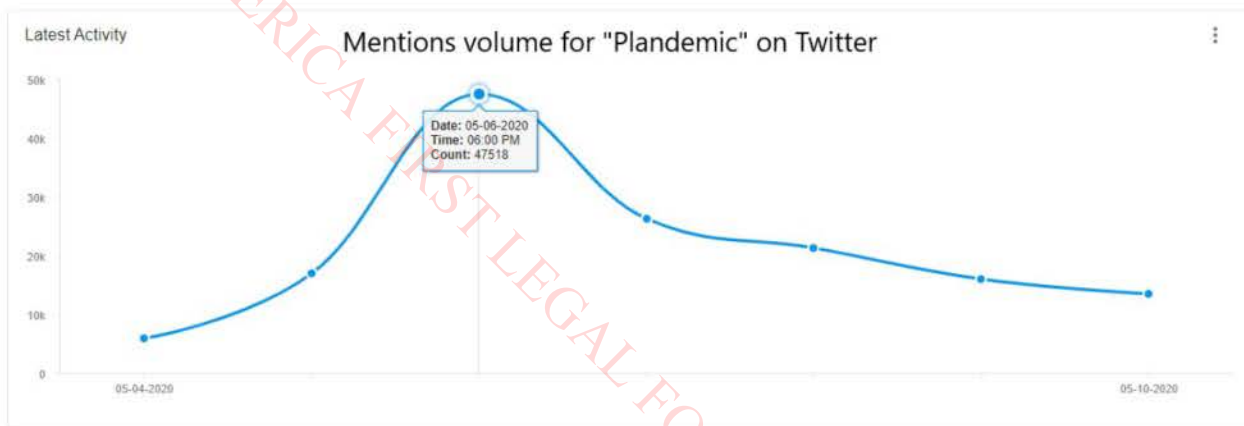
The video's [enduring online presence](#) in spite of major platforms' efforts to limit its spread demonstrates that the removal of the offending content does not prevent the spread of a conspiracy

once it has gone viral. In the case of “Plandemic,” the removal of the video seems to have triggered a form of the [Streisand Effect](#), in which attempts to suppress online content paradoxically fuel greater interest and seeking out of that content.

The discovery that the “Plandemic” video has migrated to various “alt-tech” video sharing sites, at times *in anticipation* of future removals, underscores the limits of content moderation on individual platforms. Faced with removal by major platforms, harmful content usually moves to find niche refuges on the internet in order to meet demand.

The Role of QAnon Groups

A search on social media listening tool Meltwater Explore for mentions of the topic between May 4 and May 10, 2020 returned roughly 148,000 tweets, with a peak in volume on May 6.



Mention volume for the Plandemic conspiracy from May 4, 2020 — May 10, 2020. (Source: @zkharazian/DFRLab via Meltwater Explore)

Using the [rtweet](#) R package, the DFRLab collected 10,000 tweets that used the hashtag #plandemic for a network analysis. The data for the network analysis was pulled on May 7. As such, it should not be viewed as representative of all conversations on Twitter regarding the “Plandemic” conspiracy; but rather, a snapshot of a portion of the activity at a moment when the topic had just crested its peak. Even analysis of this limited dataset revealed discernible and consistent trends when compared with the overall traffic flow for the topic obtained through Meltwater Explore. Importantly, many of the accounts identified as key hubs for interactions related to the conspiracy in the sample also appeared as the most retweeted accounts in Meltwater.

The data was visualized as an [actor network](#) using the [vsonSML](#) R package, a suite of tools for social media network analysis, and [Gephi](#), a social network visualization software. After processing, the resulting graph file had 8,910 nodes and 8,826 edges. Each node represents an individual Twitter account, and the connections joining them — the edges — represent interactions between accounts in

the forms of retweets, quote tweets, replies, or mentions. Nodes were sized by *in-degree*, which is a measure of how many “inlinks” the account received from other accounts — in simple terms, how many other accounts retweeted, mentioned, replied to, or quote-tweeted the source account.

Conversations involving the conspiracy were clustered into “communities” arranged around a key discussion hub or influencer account that received high engagement from the other accounts in the cluster. Most of these communities consisted of accounts actively promoting QAnon conspiracies. Thus, while the accounts involved seemed to share a common interest in QAnon, the manner in which they engaged with one another about the conspiracy was highly multipolar — there was no central discussion hub with which the accounts interacted.

This may be a feature of QAnon Twitter networks. [Previous analysis](#) by researcher Erin Gallagher described QAnon networks as “dense and frenetic,” and noted how these accounts are known to congregate in “[Twitter rooms](#),” where they coordinate retweets of each other’s posts to artificially increase engagement.

(U) **Capitalizing on the Coronavirus Conspiracist Frenzy:** Under conditions of uncertainty – combining health anxiety about a novel disease, economic insecurity, social isolation, and exceptionally restrictive government measures – it is no surprise that mis- and disinformation flourish more vigorously than usual. Indeed, history shows that widespread disinformation is a [common feature](#) across pandemics – a phenomenon for which human psychology and cognition are [partly to blame](#). Uncertainty predisposes us to search for answers to help us make sense of what’s going on, which can enforce mental shortcuts and errors of logic that lead us to accept false conclusions. At the same time, the present [infodemic](#) is also exacerbated by the [flawed incentive structure](#) of the online environment and specifically social media – which favours cheap, low-quality information with strong emotional appeal over high-quality, rigorously-researched content. (To their credit, platforms are now taking steps to mitigate this problem, though with [limited success](#).)

It is therefore hardly surprising that the [coronavirus conspiracy boom](#) is a natural fit for the Kremlin’s disinformation machine, which has a long track record of promoting [conspiracy theories](#) on a wide array of topics (Soros, “global elites”, Western false flag operations...the list goes on). Regarding the coronavirus, pro-Kremlin media have also been spreading conspiracy theories since the very beginning of the outbreak: our first recorded case on the topic, from January 22nd, asserts that the coronavirus was “[likely elaborated in NATO biolabs](#)”. Notably, the origin of this conspiracy theory in the Kremlin-linked media sphere is confirmed by data analytics firm [Semantic Visions](#), which found that the [first ever reference](#) to COVID-19 being a US-made biological weapon came from tvzvezda.ru, a state-owned outlet operated by the Russian Ministry of Defence, on January 20th. This conspiracy theory was repeated yet again this week in various forms (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

This week, it was interesting to observe the pro-Kremlin media bandwagoning on other conspiracy theories about the coronavirus that have originated and spread via other channels. Bill Gates and his evil “vaccination microchip plot” were a leading target – see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Absurdly, Gates also stands accused of [paralysing 496,000 children in India with a polio vaccine](#) and seeking to [reduce the world’s population via vaccines for over 15 years](#). Gates has long warned about the dangers of being unprepared for a new global pandemic and has mobilised significant resources in the fight against the coronavirus, including for the development of a vaccine. As a result, he has become the [punching bag for anti-vax activists](#) – and the pro-Kremlin media appears more than happy to play along. (For more on Bill Gates and the Kremlin’s anti-vax disinformation campaign, see [here](#).)

Related to Gates, other cases invoked the conspiracist notion of “global elites” orchestrating the pandemic – a narrative largely in line with the “Plandemic” video referenced above. For example, we saw claims that the [WHO is part of the global government and the coronavirus is a pretext for a global colour revolution](#); that the [coronavirus is a game coordinated by the pharmaceutical and media industries](#); and that the [Freemasons have begun “chipping” Ukraine’s population](#). (No, no, and no.) One creative case also claimed that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the highly respected public face of the US government’s pandemic response, [threatened President Trump with a “major epidemic”](#) due to his personal sympathies for Hillary Clinton. Another alleged that [“diabolical Masters of Darkness”](#) manufactured the pandemic and are “committing mass genocide”.

A particularly disruptive variation of the conspiracy theory that the pandemic is a tool of mass control links the coronavirus with 5G technology – and in recent weeks, it has led to [arson and vandalism attacks against cell towers](#) in several European countries. But this naturally didn’t stop News Front from [falsely claiming](#) that the US Secretary of Defense admitted that 5G poses a threat to humans. (He didn’t, and it doesn’t.) Incidentally, News Front was included in Facebook’s latest [takedown](#) for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour – more on that [here](#).

Finally, to round out the list, other coronavirus conspiracy theories this week included claims that [the virus spreads on the basis of race](#); that [there is no pandemic and COVID-19 is just like the flu](#); and that [COVID-19 tests are likely infecting patients in Italy and Spain](#). (EU vs Disinfo)

(U) Islamophobic Disinformation and Hate Speech Has Swamped Social Media During the Coronavirus Pandemic: A series of Twitter hashtags falsely accusing Muslims around the world of deliberately spreading the novel coronavirus has pushed Islamophobic disinformation and hate speech to 170 million users since the outbreak of the pandemic, according to new research.

The report is published by Equality Labs, a New York-based South Asian community advocacy group. It shows that the hashtag #Coronajihad has run rampant on Twitter since late March. Posts featuring the hashtag and a range of anti-Muslim rhetoric have also been shared widely on platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

The organization calculates that more than 293,000 conversations pushing Islamophobic Covid-19 content have taken place on Twitter, where they have generated more than 700,000 points of

engagement, including likes, clicks, shares and comments. It has also found that the majority of users creating and sharing such content are young men between the ages of 18 and 34, based in India or the United States.

The report, which is due to be published tomorrow, notes that Islamophobic coronavirus-related hate speech and disinformation first appeared on Twitter as early as March 1, weeks before countries around the world began to enforce lockdowns.

In many cases, Islamophobic content blaming Muslims for the spread of the virus was first posted to Twitter by Indian Hindu nationalists, but was later amplified by global Islamophobic individuals and groups. Hate speech and disinformation tied to Covid-19 also emanated from Islamophobic social media accounts, pages and groups based in the West. (Source: CodaStory, Equality Labs)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Links COVID-19 to “Secret U.S. Labs”**: For years, pro-Kremlin disinformation sources have been exploiting the false trope of secret Western-sponsored military laboratories “in Russia’s neighbourhood”. Of these, the most significant is the case of the [Lugar lab](#) in Tbilisi, Georgia, which pro-Kremlin media have long sought to portray as a facility for US bioweapon development and other invented evils. When the coronavirus outbreak started, the Lugar lab served as a convenient disinformation template. Indeed, the very first example of pro-Kremlin disinformation about the coronavirus recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database, on 22 January 2020, deploys that same familiar narrative, telling Belarusian audiences that the new Chinese virus was likely [elaborated in NATO biolabs](#). Armenians also heard that [Pentagon-funded labs were involved in the creation of COVID-19](#).

Soon thereafter, multiple disinformation messages expanded on this narrative: REN TV, one of Russia’s largest TV stations, claimed that the coronavirus served US interests as [American laboratories were operating not only around Russia, but also in Asian countries](#). RT Arabic added that the US has [25 dangerous laboratories](#) surrounding Russia, China, and Iran. Within the span of a few short months, pro-Kremlin outlets saw secret laboratories pop up around the world: in the [Baltic States](#) and [Indonesia](#), and of course in the [EU’s Eastern neighbourhood](#).

Multiple pro-Kremlin outlets claimed that the [US was afraid of the leakage of infectious substances on its own territory](#), so it built clandestine military biological labs in “colonised countries”, i.e. Ukraine, Georgia, and also [Moldova](#). The insinuation behind these messages is that epidemics start “next to those facilities”, not excluding the possibility that [COVID-19 could have been manufactured in one of the labs in Ukraine](#). Such conspiracy theories got an additional boost after RT’s Russian edition quoted concerns by Chinese officials about allegedly secret activities by [US biological laboratories](#) in the former Soviet Republics.

The narrative of “secret labs” has proved to be a good vessel for distraction and disinformation. Encouraged by the apparent success of the pro-Kremlin media, [other actors](#) have begun using it as well, reinforcing each other and tying several disinformation strands in a neat conspiracy theory: the secret labs explain the outbreak of the coronavirus; the outbreak of the coronavirus proves the [existence of secret labs](#).

One of the main goals of pro-Kremlin disinformation in the region is to drive a wedge between the EU and its Eastern Neighborhood partners. In the context of COVID-19, such disinformation efforts take on a new appearance, where the EU is systematically portrayed as **unable** to respond to the outbreak itself, let alone help its neighbors. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) **Italian MP Amplifies Debunked COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories on the Floor of Parliament:** On May 14, Italian MP Sara Cunial created a public stir across the country after giving a speech at the Chamber of Deputies riddled with COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Seeking to criticize the Italian government for its measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis, Cunial spent seven minutes amplifying some of the most popular conspiracy theories in Italy and around the world about COVID-19 and the so-called deep state. In doing so, Cunial's speech amplified conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives that have been circulating for years among fringe groups and anti-establishment communities online, which in turn have offered her their strong support on social media.

In her speech, Cunial accused Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, who is often placed at the center of many COVID-19 conspiracy theories, of a litany of wrongdoing, including planning to depopulate the world — even wishing for a genocide; creating a dictatorial monopoly over the global economy; causing a polio epidemic in India; and creating vaccines that “sterilized millions of women in Africa.” Along with Gates, Cunial also targeted the World Economic Forum in Davos, the World Health Organization, the global financial system, and an “Italian deep state” cabal involving the current and previous prime minister, the pharmaceutical industry and high-tech companies, for profiting from the COVID-19 pandemic at the expense of citizens. (Source: Atlantic Council)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Outlets Distort Facts on Russian COVID-19 Relief Aid to Europe:** Following the Kremlin's shipments of COVID-19 aid to European countries, pro-Kremlin outlets **repeatedly** and falsely **alleged** that senior NATO countries had forbidden the European Union and fellow NATO members from accepting Russian help.

The Kremlin's initial shipment of aid **to Italy** and subsequent shipments throughout the West, including to the United States, have all the hallmarks of a publicity stunt. Pro-Kremlin media has portrayed Russia as a benevolent player on the world stage that is repeatedly willing to extend a helping hand to its adversaries in the midst of a global public health crisis. But while the Kremlin has been eager to cast its shipments of medical supplies as humanitarian aid, various sources — including **previous analysis** from the DFRLab — have reported that the “aid” comes with **strings attached**.

The stories circulated primarily in Russian and English in a variety of countries; the DFRLab identified three main narratives focused on Russia's aid shipments to Europe:

- Claim 1: The powerful “Big Brother” countries have forbidden E.U. and NATO members from accepting Russian help
- Claim 2: Help from Russia and China buried the “European dream of Serbia”
- Claim 3: Spain refused help from NATO (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Following the announcement of the most recent unemployment numbers there has been an increase in discussion about growing economic and financial concerns amid the pandemic.
- As states continue to move forward with plans to reopen there is increasing anxiety over the potential for a second wave of infections with many voicing concerns that people are not following social distancing guidelines properly.
- NOAA released its outlook for the 2020 hurricane season today which generated a high volume of discussion on both traditional and social media with many questioning how preparations will differ due to COVID-19. On traditional media, FEMA's operational guidance amid COVID-19 has generated nationwide media interest on the financial strain major storms could cause emergency management services.
- Besides coverage of how COVID-19 will affect hurricane season planning, traditional media also focuses on U.S. investment in a potential vaccine from AstraZeneca, nursing homes' vulnerabilities due to limited PPE supply, and increases/decreases in COVID-19 cases as states and countries try to reopen.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Public distrust of the overall government response (state/federal) continues. This is being driven by political debates over key decisions and alleged manipulation of case and test data in some states.
- There is wide social media discussion regarding the latest unemployment numbers almost reaching a total of 40 million, after 2.4 million Americans more filed for unemployment benefits last week. (example 1, example 2)
- Many are requesting the extension of benefits and better wages from their employers. Conversation is heavily political, many debate whether people are not working because they're better receiving unemployment benefits, and if unemployment benefits will continue amid the pandemic and the next month.
- College graduates are very concerned about finding employment in the summer and fall or facing a lasting recession with a significant lack of job opportunities.
- According to media, a survey showed that up to 20% of Americans may not be able to pay rent next month.
- Rural outbreaks are a growing concern among many, particularly in the rural south. Many are worried about limited healthcare infrastructure, high levels of poverty, reluctance to follow social distancing guidelines, and high rates of comorbidities in these communities.
- Many suggest churches may be a source for rural outbreaks. There is increasing frustration at the lack of CDC guidance for churches despite reports that the CDC has traced cases back to churches.
- Issues regarding differences of opinions on face mask usage are escalating as people defy store policies by not wearing masks and express aggressive behavior towards employees. (example 1,

o While some people feel it is their right to enter a store without a mask, many others feel that masks should be worn. (example 1, example 2, example 3)

- Many media outlets are sharing about federal and state officials who have chosen not to wear masks. (example 1, example 2)
- There is increasing concern regarding the safety of wildfire fighters. Following a relatively quiet 2019 fire season, experts are worried there will be a buildup of new growth to fuel fires. Wildfire fighters however, have not received standard guidance on how response operations may need to be adjusted to account for COVID-19.
- Recent polls show that approximately 25% of Americans are hesitant about COVID-19 vaccines, with many voicing concern that the fast-tracked development could compromise safety. Most expect the vaccine to be ready within a year.

(U) 5/20 Reporting

(U) There Isn't a COVID-19 Vaccine Yet. But Some Are Already Skeptical About It: Well-known antivaccine activists have been hard at work sowing doubt about the COVID-19 vaccine—a vaccine that **does not yet exist**, and likely will not exist for many months, if not longer. Yet their efforts seem to be working: approximately one in five Americans have already expressed unwillingness to get an eventual COVID-19 vaccine, **according** to an April 15 survey undertaken by Oklahoma State University.

So far, the digital misinformation campaign around COVID-19 has relied upon the techniques of the anti-vaccine movement, including discrediting public health officials, raising concerns about vaccine safety, and making claims that vaccination is primarily profit-driven. Some recent content spreads unsubstantiated claims about public health officials, like longtime National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases head Dr. Anthony Fauci, and philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates. Other material celebrates those advocating for a reopening, or hails people challenging the truth of the virus' origins. One notorious, widely-shared example: "Plandemic," a slickly-produced pseudo-documentary alleging without evidence that the COVID-19 outbreak was orchestrated by global elites; a book written by a discredited scientist featured in the video now ranks among Amazon's best-sellers.

"There seems to have been the explicit intent to make it go viral on [digital] platforms," says David Broniatowski, an associate professor in the Department of Engineering Management and Systems Engineering at George Washington University. "That both increases its reach, but also increases people's perception that it's somehow got some degree of legitimacy, because they're hearing it from a lot of different sources." (Source: Time)

(U) **Instagram and the New Wave of Viral Disinformation:** Despite Instagram's effort to minimize the spread of misinformation on their platform, conspiracy theories and fake news about the [vaccine continue to thrive](#) on the user's newsfeed.

Unfortunately, the problem escalated during the coronavirus pandemic has paved way for a new surge of viral disinformation – most of which has been promoted by the advocates of anti-vaccination. At the same time, Facebook's moderators have been unable to combat the situation and [review the 'rule-breaking' content](#) in an effective manner. Much of the disinformation has also been fueled by Instagram's recommendation algorithms.

Some U.S. officials are worried that foreign adversaries may be generating or amplifying COVID-19 misinformation, too. Russia, for instance, has been known to amplify "local voices that push conspiracy theories," said Lea Gabrielle, special envoy and coordinator of the Global Engagement Center for the U.S. Department of State, during a press briefing on May 6. "There's a high probability that the Russian disinformation ecosystem will act to undermine faith in a COVID vaccine when it becomes available," she added. She has raised concerns about similar potential Chinese efforts as well.

Experts say that 50% to 80% of the public will need immunity before COVID-19 is slowed enough to mostly resume our typical lives.

However, Instagram claims that it doesn't ban anti-vaccine content. But, yes, it does try to make it less visible on the platform – similar to its flagship social media channel, Facebook. According to Instagram, they block a few specific hashtags and tries to make anti-vaccine content harder to find in public areas of the app, like Explore.

Yet, such inaccurate information – specifically those related to the COVID-19 vaccine continues to dominate the app's search results.

For example, when one searches the word '[vaccine](#)' on Instagram, several recommendations of anti-vaccine account in top results. These include accounts with names like 'vaccines_revealed,' 'vaccinesaregenocide,' 'vaccines_kill,' and 'say_no_to_bill_gates_vaccine.'

Most of these accounts have nearly 100,000 followers, while there are a few with a couple hundred. Nevertheless, Instagram's algorithm continues to recommend them, even though not one of them is related to a verified health organization. (Source: Digital Information World)

(U) **The Kremlin's Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing:** The coronavirus pandemic is laying bare a growing competition between democratic and authoritarian governments. As the U.S. and Europe struggle to contain the virus at home, Russia and China are seizing the moment to enhance their international influence through information operations. Moscow and Beijing have long aimed to weaken the United States, blunt the appeal of democratic institutions, and sow divisions across the West. Their goals in this crisis are no different.

China has benefitted from Russia's brazen disinformation campaigns in the West while itself deploying more subtle information manipulation strategies. But that might be changing. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, China has carried out a striking disinformation campaign of its own that borrows a few pages from the Kremlin's playbook.

According to U.S. officials, Chinese agents are creating fake social media accounts akin to Russia-backed trolls to push out false messages that are designed to create chaos in the United States. In mid-March, U.S. intelligence agencies asserted that Chinese operatives helped to push false messages that the Trump administration was planning to lock down the country. The rumors became so widespread that the National Security Council had to issue an [announcement](#) stating they were fake.

Chinese diplomats and embassies are also using Twitter, which is banned within China, to promote and amplify conspiracy theories about the virus's origin. Chinese diplomats and embassies now have more than 100 accounts on Twitter — a 300% increase since April of last year. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian promoted a conspiracy theory to his more than 300,000 Twitter followers that the U.S. military could have brought the coronavirus to China. [The tweet](#), which linked to the blog of a known pro-Kremlin outfit, was promptly retweeted by more than a dozen Chinese diplomats and embassies. China's state media then ran [multiple stories to amplify](#) the claim.

While China's overt assertiveness in this space might be new, its long-term goals are not. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long employed disinformation, censorship, and monitoring tools to suppress criticism at home and press on democracy's inherent weaknesses abroad. Its information operations are coupled with economic coercion and strategic investments to enhance Chinese ownership in key industries and sway other countries' policies. (Source: The Brookings Institution)

(U) Misinformation About Coronavirus Finds New Avenues on Unexpected Sites: Within days of social media companies taking down a viral video touting conspiracy theories about the novel [coronavirus](#), a clip popped up on YouTube telling viewers about another way they could still access the banned footage: through a link to the video on the file-sharing service Google Drive.

Google Drive is not a social media platform, nor is it set up to tackle the problems that social media companies face: the weaponization of their services to amplify dangerous content. But the use of the Drive link, to the trailer for a documentary called "Plandemic," reflects a wave of seemingly countless workarounds employed by people motivated to spread misinformation about the virus — efforts that continue to thwart social media companies' attempts at preventing hoaxes and conspiracy theories from spreading in the midst of the greatest public health crisis in decades.

Social media counter-COVID-19 misinformation efforts have prompted those spreading covid-19 misinformation to try new methods, including using social media services that have not historically been platforms for news, such as the short video app TikTok, and productivity tools such as Google Drive and Google Docs. They've even used digital library Internet Archive. These services have more limited systems for policing content compared with the major social media platforms, which have spent years investing in moderation efforts in response to criticism.

Borrowing techniques used by other illicit industries, including porn, many of the remaining posts about “Plandemic” on YouTube and Facebook have the most inflammatory content edited out to avoid detection. Instead, they direct people to a link where they can see the entire film.

Less than two weeks after the major social media company bans, however, researchers are finding that the video and references to it are resurfacing across social media, particularly on YouTube. At least 40 versions of the trailer were uploaded on YouTube over the past week and were easily found using a simple hashtag search, according to Eric Feinberg, vice president of content moderation at Coalition for a Safer Web, who shared his findings with The Washington Post. Some of them have more than 40,000 views and stayed up for days. (Source: The Washington Post)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening**

- There continues to be a high volume of discussion about reopening concerns, particularly that the relaxation of restrictions could trigger a second wave of COVID-19 cases. Debate over when and how to reopen is ongoing and highly political in nature.
- Many are discussing the dam failures and subsequent flooding taking place in Midland County, Michigan. News outlets and individuals have voiced concerns about social distancing in shelters and protections for vulnerable survivors that have been displaced. The conversation has decreased throughout the day but remains high.
- Distrust of testing data and the overall pandemic response continue, as many share news of issues with case data reporting and worry that data is being manipulated. Additionally, the ongoing political debates about public health and economic decisions are generating a strong negative sentiment and low confidence in the federal response.
- Traditional news coverage broadly covers states’ ongoing reopening and federal response efforts. A new poll highlights public pessimism about incomes loss as well as fear of a new wave of infections as states resume business and social activity. National media also reports on discord between CDC and White House officials regarding most recent reopening guidance issued to states and general public.
- The Vice President’s delivery of PPE to an Orlando, Florida nursing home generated high local coverage from Florida broadcast and newspaper outlets, but less from national broadcast stations.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Public polls continue to show a high level of concern regarding the potential for a [second wave of COVID-19 infections](#). This is reinforcing opposition to reopening public places as state leaders move forwards with steps to return to normal life. Sentiment supporting public health restrictions however, has eroded due to partisanship.
- There is ongoing discussion about how states are choosing to use testing data to portray the current state of affairs in their area. Public health officials in several states have been accused of using data in a way that makes it appear the virus is [more under control than it is](#).
- There [continue to be individuals](#) who hope to avoid wearing a mask in required areas by claiming exemptions under ADA laws. Many feel these individuals are [exploiting a system](#) intended to protect and help individuals with disabilities.
- Some people are frustrated as they seek travel refunds from flights that were cancelled by airlines.

- Discussion of the dam failures and evacuations in Midland County, Michigan decreased throughout the day.
 - Many are sharing concerns about social distancing among evacuated survivors, particularly in shelters.
 - Some are worried that vulnerable people who were sheltering for COVID-19 will now be at risk of exposure. Public information released by local officials did not specify any precautions or guidance for vulnerable survivors and infection control.

(U) 5/19 Reporting

(U) **Triad of Disinformation: How Russia, Iran, & China Ally in a Messaging War against America:** When Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian began [tweeting](#) about the origins of the coronavirus in March, it marked a significant turning point in China's social media disinformation operations. While China has long deployed widespread censorship, propaganda, and information manipulation efforts within its borders, information operations directed at foreign audiences have generally focused on framing China in a positive way and casting doubt on events and narratives that reflect poorly on the party-state. In the past, this has included using state media as well as covert social media campaigns to promote, for example, stories alleging that the 2019 Hong Kong protests [may have been](#) connected to the CIA and that Uighur detention [camps do not](#) exist.

In the last two months, however, Beijing has conducted a much more [ambitious effort](#) not only to shape global perspectives about what's occurring inside China, but to influence public opinion about events outside its borders.

This new approach is exemplified by the dramatic uptick in the number of Chinese diplomats leveraging western social media platforms. On Twitter, there has been a more than 300 percent increase in accounts associated with Chinese embassies, ambassadors, and key government officials since April 2019. Borrowing a page from the Russian playbook, these accounts, with the assistance of state-controlled media outlets, have promoted multiple and at times conflicting conspiracy theories asserting U.S. responsibility for the pandemic. [Iran](#) and [Russia](#) have joined in with a concerted effort to [push Chinese social media conspiracies](#) to new heights. The United States now finds itself in a multi-front social media war against a triad of disinformation stretching from Moscow to Tehran and Beijing.

Coronavirus – Triad of Disinformation - Case Study

Narrative Alignment: U.S. challengers take on coronavirus

- Pick & Choose Each Others' Narratives
- Amplify common antagonisms
- Chip into former areas of U.S. influence

As of 24 April 2020

Iran



Russia



Source: C. Watts (Alliance For Securing Democracy)

Since January 1, 2019, a team at the Foreign Policy Research Institute has analyzed more than 8,700 Russia Today, Sputnik News (Russia), PressTV (Iran) and Global Times (China) stories. Several patterns are apparent in this dataset. All three countries promote narratives that cast the United States as an aggressive, imperialist country seeking to dominate the world. The emphasis shifts, however, when the scope is limited to narratives conspicuously promoted by only two of the three regimes. Bilateral convergence between Russia and China arises in their denigration of American technology companies and of the relationship between Washington and Silicon Valley, as well as vocal support for Chinese tech companies like Huawei. Russian and Iranian efforts converge in opposition to U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, but also in other areas of overlapping interest like Latin America. Chinese and Iranian narratives focus on highlighting racial injustice in America, and casting it as a fundamentally racist country with no standing to promote democracy or human rights.

As pairs, the countries have come together in unsurprising ways to challenge the United States with manipulated information about coronavirus. China and Russia reinforce each other's claims that American democracy is central to the coronavirus challenge, and that U.S. policymakers are to blame. Russia and Iran have used coronavirus precautions and resulting delays in the voting process as evidence of electoral corruption, while also amplifying narratives of elite profiteering at the hands of the poor. China and Iran use coronavirus to level charges of racism, while highlighting inadequacies in the U.S. healthcare system.

At a time when the U.S. is taking a less active role in many international institutions, and relations with many key allies are fraught, China and Russia are engaged in a full-spectrum effort to shape the information environment. They have deployed a narrative that serves to undermine American credibility, while simultaneously reaching out to American allies like Italy with coronavirus aid and messages of goodwill and solidarity. Alongside the specific bogus claim of coronavirus being an

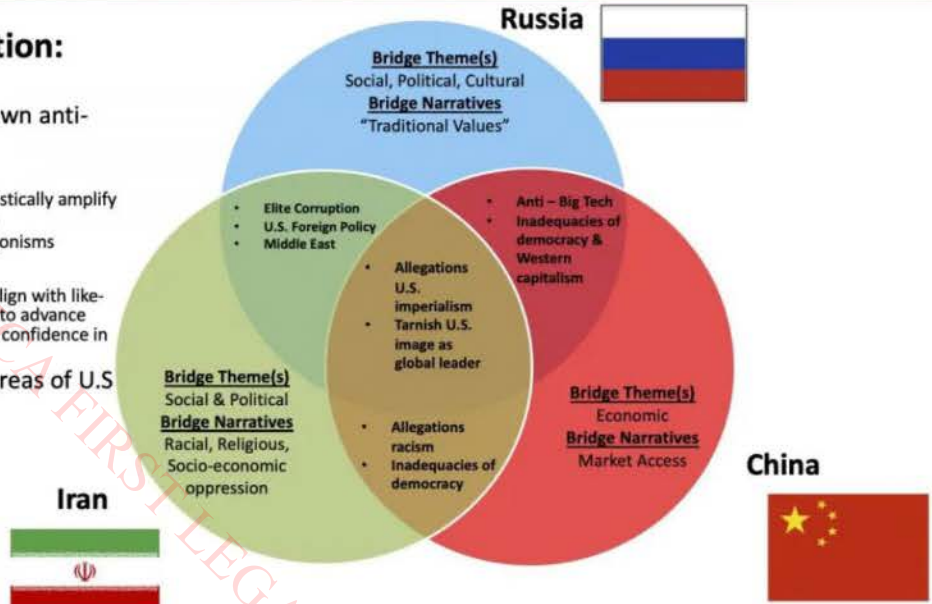
American bioweapon, these countries have also advanced swaths of medical **misinformation** that further confuses world audiences about the origin, advance, containment, and treatment of coronavirus.

Triad of Disinformation – Authoritarian Info War Against The U.S.

Axis of Disinformation:

Russia, Iran & China

- Create some of their own anti-U.S. narratives
- **Convergence**
 - Selectively & opportunistically amplify each others' narratives
 - Amplify common antagonisms
- **Divergence**
 - Seek to bridge with & align with like-minded U.S. audiences to advance their positions & erode confidence in U.S. democracy
- Advance into former areas of U.S. influence



Source: C. Watts (Alliance For Securing Democracy)

What can the U.S. and the West do to counter authoritarian disinformation?

The United States presently faces a sustained effort, largely unfolding on social media platforms and websites hosted in the Western world, to undermine American legitimacy and subvert its democracy. This concerted effort may in the coming months convince many around the world of the falsehood that the United States created the coronavirus as a **bioweapon**. These disinformation peddlers stand poised to write an alternative history, in large part because authoritarians have been consistent, sustained, and disciplined in their messaging, while the United States has not.

The United States and allied democracies can counter authoritarian states by pursuing several efforts in tandem:

- Work with tech companies to downrank, demonetize, and de-platform authoritarian state-sponsored news outlets and social media accounts spreading manipulated information that threatens public safety and public health. Twitter has done this on several occasions in recent weeks, **removing fringe news sites** for coronavirus violations. While nefarious political influence and hate speech remain difficult to consistently police, threats to public safety, such as it relates to the coronavirus pandemic, are much easier to adjudicate. Broad systematic enforcement action on mainstream platforms could enforce a sizable reduction in authoritarian reach into Western audiences.

- Develop counter-messaging strategies designed to stress and undermine the credibility of authoritarian networks. For example, Russian propaganda appeals to white nationalists and orthodox Christian audiences to the exclusion of other minorities. Iranian propaganda focuses heavily on the persecution of racial and religious minorities. And both Iranian and Chinese officials use Western social media platforms that are banned domestically within their countries. The United States could seek to expose these contradictions amongst these authoritarian allies by strategically messaging in selected audience spaces. A nimble messaging campaign might be aimed at international discussions about the conflict in Syria, in which Iran and Russia are complicit with the Syrian government in the massacre of Muslim civilians perceived as disloyal.

Presently, the voices promoting discredited anti-American conspiracy theories are growing louder in the social media space. The United States and other democracies must move to rapidly rebut and repeatedly counter such narratives with facts and evidence. Further analysis of open source material must aim to evaluate the degree of cooperation on information manipulation taking place between and among authoritarian states. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Pro-Russia Media Toplines:** The coronavirus, while still the most prominent topic in the Russian media ecosystem last week, continued to decline in prominence for the third week in a row. At the same time, World War II Victory Day messaging predictably reached its zenith on the day itself (May 9). Like in previous years, it largely emphasized the Soviet Union's role in the war, general celebratory themes, and cooperation with Allied countries. However, accusations that the United States was rewriting history by downplaying the Soviet contribution trended—a familiar theme emanating from the highest levels of the Russian government. Finally, a small amount of coverage addressed the week's developments regarding former U.S. national security adviser Michael Flynn, playing up claims that cast doubt on the significance (or even existence) of Russian interference in 2016. This narrative resembles previous Russian state-sponsored media coverage of U.S. investigations into Russia's operation against the 2016 election.

This week saw a particularly strong push to undermine the reliability and credibility of U.S. authorities. Many of the most engaged-with tweets painted the United States' response to coronavirus in hyperbolic terms and blasted the country's alleged hypocrisy and scapegoating of China. By contrast, Chinese efforts against the virus were portrayed in the usual upbeat and vaguely heroic tone. This messaging dynamic was particularly pronounced after American intelligence agencies announced that Chinese cyber attackers were trying to steal coronavirus research. Beijing portrayed the announcement as yet another dastardly plot by a former superpower gone rogue.

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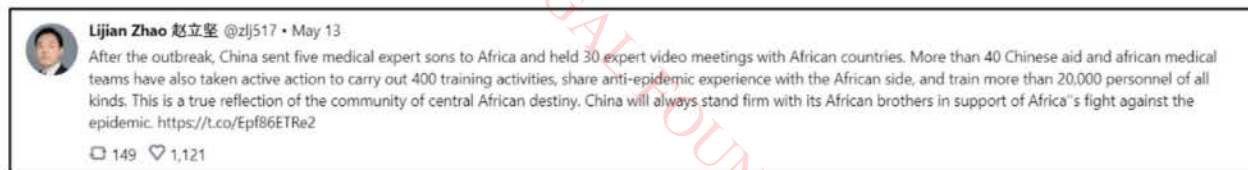
The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 9 and May 15 (figures as of 4pm on May 8), a noticeable

increase over the previous week and a break in the downward trend in overall Chinese activity on Twitter since mid-April. As in previous weeks, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic was the subject of almost all the top hashtags. China's diplomats continued to portray the U.S. response to the pandemic as feckless and hypocritical, while simultaneously highlighting China's humanitarian aid and supposed dependability as a global partner.

China's ambassador to Venezuela, Li Baorong, illustrated this juxtaposition in a pair of tweets, one of which slammed Vice President Mike Pence for transporting empty boxes of medical supplies to a hospital "for the cameras," while the other announced the arrival of Chinese medical supplies in Venezuela.



Highlighting China's humanitarian aid to virus-stricken parts of the world was a prominent theme with diplomats, as evidenced further by Deputy Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who emphasized Chinese aid to Africa.

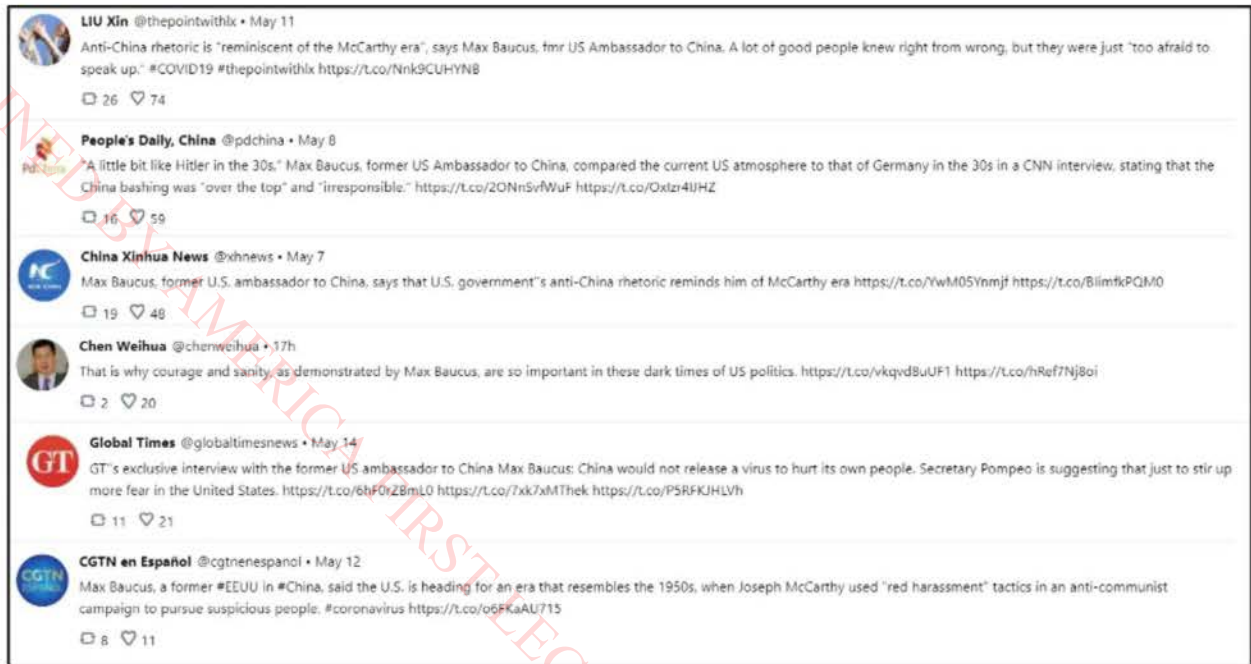


Contrasting the supposed failings of the United States with the effectiveness of China implicitly suggests that Beijing is now the world's most trustworthy superpower.

Reinforcing this message is the idea that the U.S. government is lying to the world. Hua Chunying, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, illustrated this message in a trio of tweets, one of which stated, "China won't be Iraq"—presumably a reference to the United States' use of faulty weapons of mass destruction intelligence.



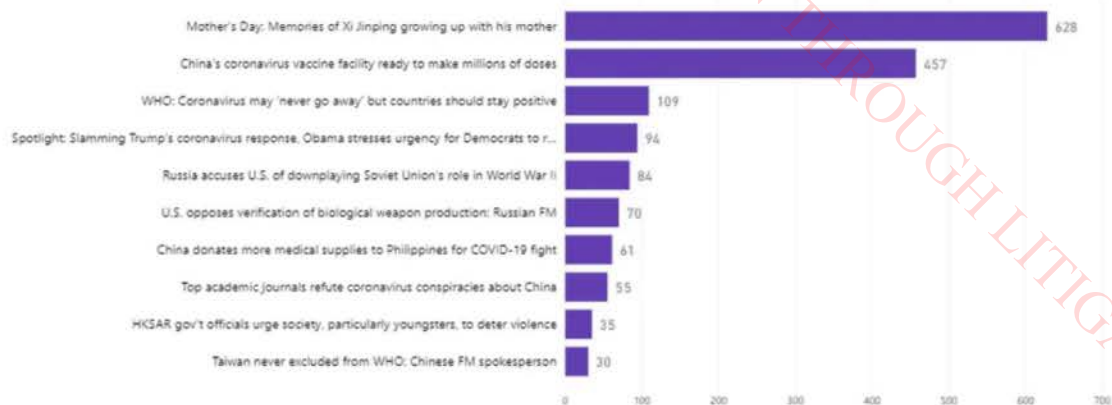
Finally, Chinese state-run media last week picked up and disseminated a CNN interview with former U.S. ambassador to China Max Baucus, who compared anti-China rhetoric from U.S. officials with McCarthyism.



By the end of the week, Ambassador Baucus was lauded as a lone American hero “in dark times.”

Although a constant over the past several weeks, efforts to cast U.S. officials as untrustworthy were perhaps more pronounced in light of last week’s announcement that Chinese cyber attackers were attempting to steal coronavirus vaccine research. Interestingly, while U.S. intelligence agencies only announced the hack on Wednesday, Chinese authorities and state media were already refuting accusations on Monday (based on a single *New York Times* article).

Chinese government-funded websites:



The top story published on Facebook by China’s state media concerned Xi Jinping and his mother (who remains alive at the age of 93), reflecting state media’s continuing effort to cast the country’s paramount leader as a man of the people and a family man.

Other top stories saw China's state media boosting official Russian narratives. These included an accusation by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the United States refused to adopt an international protocol banning the use of biological weapons (echoing ongoing efforts by Chinese state media to sow suspicion that a U.S. biological weapons research lab was the true source of the coronavirus pandemic), and repeating Russian state media's allegation that the United States downplays Russia's role in World War II (a standard trope of Russian propaganda).

Other top stories boosted U.S. domestic criticism of President Donald Trump, elevated China's efforts to help other countries combat the coronavirus pandemic, and cited international praise of China's own domestic measures. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) To Ensure a Healthy Election in a Pandemic, First Prepare the Information Space: New York democrats may not be casting a ballot in the presidential primary this June. That's because last month, New York became the first state to cancel its presidential primary over coronavirus concerns—a move that was **reversed** last week by a federal judge in a decision the State Board of Elections has since appealed. Not content to miss an opportunity to cry foul, Russia's propaganda apparatus seized on the move to highlight domestic "**outrage**" at the change and question whether it constituted a "**blatant coronation**" of Vice President Joe Biden at the expense of Senator Bernie Sanders. And it illustrates a challenge policymakers and election administrators will have to grapple with: changes to our voting processes—even reasonable ones—are potential fodder for the Kremlin's information operations.

Russia's efforts to shape the narrative around New York's decision is consistent with its efforts to amplify intra-party divisions and cast the primary process as "rigged." By deepening divides within the American public and diminishing its trust in institutions, the Kremlin hopes to weaken our democracy by making it harder to govern.

That's deeply concerning. To ensure that every American can vote safely in remaining primaries and in November, numerous changes to existing election processes will be necessary. Process changes can spark confusion. Voters are likely to have questions about new procedures. And as election administrators and poll workers adapt to new ways of working, mishaps and snafus could occur. Confusion, we know, generates demand for information—and that creates an environment ripe for disinformation.

We learned this lesson in February after the Iowa Caucus debacle. Then, the Kremlin's network of state media and sympathetic agitators sprung into action, highlighting conspiracy theories about murky ties between various candidates and the malfunctioning app that caused delays in the reporting of election results, and pressing the case that the primary had been rigged by the "corporate" media and party elites in order to deny Senator Sanders a clear win.

If confusion reigns in future elections, the Kremlin will be more than happy to stoke it. Frighteningly, in such a scenario, Russia and its proxies would not actually have to interfere in our election to cast doubt on its outcome. It could instead simply capitalize on confusion to claim that the results are illegitimate.

New York leaders face a difficult decision—one that requires weighing risks to public health and to public confidence in the voting process. Election administrators across the country will be forced to face similar fraught tradeoffs. It's up to federal, state and local leaders, in partnership with social media platforms, to prepare the information space in advance for the onslaught of disinformation that

epidemic-necessitated changes to the election process could generate. These steps should be easy, inexpensive, and non-controversial. Amidst a noisy conversation about how to vote safely in a pandemic, let's not lose sight of them. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **25 Percent of COVID-19 Related YouTube Videos Contain Misinformation:** More than one-quarter of the most viewed YouTube videos on COVID-19 contained misleading information, reaching millions of viewers worldwide. As the current COVID-19 pandemic worsens, public health agencies must better use YouTube to deliver timely and accurate information and to minimize the spread of misinformation. This may play a significant role in successfully managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Misinformation about COVID-19 is reaching more individuals than in past public health crises, as YouTube continues to grow as a source of health information. As the current COVID-19 pandemic worsens, public health agencies must better use YouTube to deliver quality content and minimize the spread of misinformation. (BMJ Global Health)

(U) **Nearly Half of Accounts Tweeting on COVID-19 Are Bots:** According to [David Caplan](#), the co-founder of TwitterAudit, "based on our data we would estimate that 40-60 percent of Twitter accounts represent real people." Separately, [new research](#) from Carnegie Mellon University reveals, "Nearly half the 'people' talking about the coronavirus pandemic on Twitter are not actually people, but bots."

Twitter is evidently becoming a proving ground for disinformation as data volumes are circulated by fake accounts. For example, recently, [Benjamin Strick](#), an open source investigator for BBC, identified an ongoing pro-Chinese government information operation aiming to skew narratives surrounding different topics.

A multitude of social analytics tools leverage Twitter data as their means of detecting emerging trends, their means of measuring the effectiveness of a marketing campaign or to use in the planning of information operations. Bots can skew assessments — through confirmation biases that are bolstered by amplified volumes of data disseminated by fictitious personas. It is an alarming problem that is both costly and potentially damaging for businesses, rendering ineffective the application of data in making strategic decisions.

(U) **China Is Using COVID-19 to Cozy Up to Europe:** As the world has grappled with COVID-19, China has sought to leverage the crisis for geopolitical advantage. To do so, China isn't relying on the traditional forms of statecraft, such as diplomacy. Instead, it is pairing highly publicized aid with public bullying, bombastic rhetoric and outright coercion.

We have spent the last month closely monitoring Chinese donations to European allies and the messages that have accompanied them. These cases—which involve at least 23 different countries in Europe—tell us a lot about China's bid for political influence and the malign behavior that comes with China's "leadership."

China's rationale for providing assistance to Europe is multifold. Given that the EU provided 56 tons of aid to China as it battled the virus and given China's excess supply of things like personal protective equipment and masks, it seemed logical that China would return the favor as the virus spread across

Europe. Unlike European contributions to China, though, which the Chinese government asked to keep quiet in order not to lose face, China has insisted on widely publicizing its aid to Europe.

The glitzy public relations campaigns surrounding the contributions serve three purposes. They portray China as an altruistic partner to the world, changing the story at a time when many are criticizing its initial handling of the virus; double down on Chinese government efforts to divide Europe from within and from the United States; and repair China's image in European countries where it has recently encountered friction. (Source: Newsweek)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Social media and traditional media discussion is primarily focused on the President's comments that he is taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventative measure against COVID-19. There also continues to be a large amount of discussion on social media about the President's letter to the World Health Organization, which mentions the possibility of permanently defunding the organization. The public reaction is varied on both topics.
- FEMA mentions are mostly in relation to increased media coverage about the thousands of National Guard members supporting the COVID-19 response whose deployments will be ending in June. People express frustration that the soldiers pulling out of the response means many will not qualify for federal benefits and that the support they are providing will leave a gap. Governors continue to push for FEMA aid in multiple areas, including approval of 100% cost share for COVID-19 expenses, supporting testing sites to ensure states can increase testing capacity, and forgiveness for the Community Disaster Loans program in the US Virgin Islands.
- Other subjects of national media interest include the \$19 billion in federal aid promised for farmers and agricultural industry, and President Trump's comments on Capitol Hill and during a White House meeting with cabinet secretaries. Today's U.S. Senate hearing on the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act generated news discussion on aid recipients and uneven distribution among affected individuals and businesses.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- Throughout the day, COVID-19 discussion on social media remained focused on public reaction to comments made by the President last evening saying he is [currently taking hydroxychloroquine](#). At least one other lawmaker has come out saying he too is [taking the medication](#). Reaction from the general public is a mixture of concern and support:
 - Many supporters feel the medication is responsible for saving the lives of COVID-19 patients and [approve of this as a preventative measure](#).
 - Others are concerned that the medication [could pose a health risk](#), or that the statement could cause a shortage of the drug for those who currently take it for other reasons including lupus.
 - Most news outlets [highlighted research and advisories that show no conclusive evidence of medical benefits](#) to the drug and interviewed experts that cautioned against prophylactic use of the drug.
- There is a high level of discussion about a [letter](#) sent by the President to the head of the World Health Organization, demanding the organization make "major substantive improvements" within 30 days or risk permanent loss of funding.
 - Public reaction is mixed, many support the work of the WHO and think it is vital is coordinating the global response to COVID-19.

- Others feel the WHO contributed to the severity of the pandemic through what they feel was a mishandling of early phases of the response.

(U) 5/18 Reporting

(U) **Extremists Are Using Facebook to Organize for Civil War Amid Coronavirus:** Online extremists are using Facebook to plan and organize for a militant uprising in the United States as they cast coronavirus lockdowns as a sign of rising government suppression, according to a Tech Transparency Project investigation.

A review by TTP found 125 Facebook groups devoted to the “boogaloo,” the term that extremists use to describe a coming civil war. More than 60% of the groups were created in the last three months, as Covid-19 quarantines took hold in the U.S., and they attracted tens of thousands of members from March 22-April 22, the length of TTP’s study.

In several private boogaloo Facebook groups that TTP was able to access, members discussed tactical strategies, combat medicine, and various types of weapons, including how to develop explosives and the merits of using flame throwers.

The fact that Facebook is letting such activity proliferate, despite explicit threats of violence to government authorities, is another sign of the company’s inability to manage harmful content on its platform—even among groups that make no secret of their intentions.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group interface for 'BoogieBastards: The Armory', a private group. The left sidebar contains navigation options: About, Discussion (selected), Announcements, Members, Events, Videos, Photos, Files, Recommendations, and Watch Party. Below this is a search bar for the group. The main content area shows a post from a user with a profile picture of a person with a beard, dated April 13 at 6:28 PM. The post text reads: 'Let's talk grenades, flash bangs, and other things you can throw at the enemy. Let's just say that you didn't want to get the paperwork in order to possess certain things that go boom or can act as a room clearer/stunner. Is there anything you can buy to make your own flash bangs? I was thinking about getting an air soft banger and having a look at it, modifying it with magnesium strips, etc, from what I've seen they could work as a quick 2-3 second WTF moment, but overall, what would you guys recommend for something I can DIY. Also, just for the record, I do plan on eventually getting my explosives permit lol where I am we can get one. But what's the point if I can just DIY?'. The post has 5 reactions (likes and hearts) and 87 comments. Below the post are buttons for 'Like' and 'Comment'. A 'View 24 more comments' link is visible. The first comment is from a user with a profile picture of a person with a beard, stating 'YouTube is your friend.' with 'Like · Reply · 1d' below it. The second comment is from a user with a profile picture of a person with a beard, stating 'If you have a mask or a way to keep the button depressed then bear spray makes a great room clearer.' with 'Like · Reply · 21h' below it. The third comment is from a user with a profile picture of a person with a beard, stating 'we can get chemical Spray at the local stores just not online. Due to the corona crap canadian tires and shops like cabelas have close to the public. We can legally buy and own chemical sprays like bear spray dog spray etc but no human... See More' with 'Like · Reply · 21h' below it. The fourth comment is from a user with a profile picture of a person with a beard, stating 'Yeah but the bigger container means more product and it has like a 25 foot distance.' with 'Like · Reply · 21h' below it. A large red watermark 'OBTAINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION THROUGH INVESTIGATION' is overlaid diagonally across the image.

Some boogaloo supporters see the public health lockdowns and other directives by states and cities across the country as a violation of their rights, and they're aiming to harness public frustration at such measures to rally and attract new followers to their cause.

The concept of the boogaloo has been gaining in popularity recently, and it's become a meme among a range of extremist groups. On public Facebook pages, supporters of the movement circulate satirical posts about the overthrow of government, painting the boogaloo as a viral online phenomenon rather than a real-world threat.

But communications of boogaloo supporters in private Facebook groups accessed by TTP tell a different story: extremists exchanging detailed information and tactics on how to organize and execute a revolt against American authorities. This activity is occurring without any apparent intervention by Facebook.

Of the 125 boogaloo-focused Facebook groups identified by TTP, 63% (79) were created between February and April of this year. The groups count 72,686 members, though it wasn't clear how many individuals may be members of more than one group. Nearly half of the members (36,117) have joined the groups within the past 30 days.

TTP identified the boogaloo groups based on their names, which often incorporated slang and other terms used by supporters to reference the coming civil war, such as "boog," "big igloo," and "boojihadeen." The majority of the groups—112, or roughly 89%—are **private**, which means Facebook users must request to join and be approved by moderators in order to view the discussions.

Documents Detail Civil War Plan

Boogaloo group members have used the Files function in Facebook groups to upload dozens of planning documents, including military manuals, CIA handbooks, and instructions on how to reuse N95 facemasks, among other material. Many of the files are digital versions of open source data and military operations information. One, called The Anarchist Cookbook, is notorious for its instructions on bomb making.

The most concerning document is one entitled Yeetalonians, a reference to the boogaloo. At over 133 pages, the document provides an in-depth look at preparing for the boogaloo and offers advice on what weapons should be used, what propaganda to distribute, and how to psychologically win over civilians to the cause.

The document mentions "target selection," noting that assassinations of figureheads are "overrated" but "some people have to go." It discusses how to disrupt U.S. government supply lines, noting that "national guard depots, police stations and factories that produce munitions are all very solid targets." On propaganda, meanwhile, the document notes that the most important job is "to make the enemy (government forces) see that they are not fighting terrorists, they are fighting their own countrymen who simply love liberty."

BASIC BOOGALOO TACTICS: PART 10 - TARGET SELECTION

IG BLOODY.REVOLUTIONS

FIGUREHEADS

THE PART I'M SURE MANY OF YOU ARE WAITING FOR: THE TRUTH IS, ASSASSINATIONS ARE OVERRATED. IT MIGHT SEND A MESSAGE BUT ONLY IF THAT PERSON HAS PROVEN THEMSELVES TO THE MASSES THEY ARE MONSTERS. MANY OF OUR PERSONAL CHOICES WOULD BE DIVISIVE IN THE EXTREME AND WOULD SERVE ONLY TO HELP DEMONISE THE MOVEMENT. WAR CRIMINALS CAN ANSWER FOR THEIR CRIMES AT A LATER DATE, MOVING A REVOLUTION FORWARD THAT NEEDS POPULAR SUPPORT REQUIRES MOVES THAT MAKE SENSE TO EVEN THE MOST UNINFORMED DURING IT'S INFANCY, AND EVEN DURING LATER STAGES, CONTROVERSIAL ACTIONS CAN KILL A MOVEMENT IN IT'S TRACKS IF ENOUGH BECOME DISILLUSIONED WITH THE END GOAL. SOME PEOPLE HAVE TO GO, THOSE THAT DIRECTLY AND VISIBLY HARM OTHERS ARE FAIR GAME, BUT THE PENCIL PUSHERS NEED THEIR CRIMES PROVEN TO THE PEOPLE BEFORE ANY EXAMPLE SHOULD BE MADE OF THEM.

A [Facebook profile](#) that appears to be a pseudonym for an Arkansas man named Aaron Swenson—who was [arrested](#) after live-streaming himself on Facebook looking for a police officer to kill, according to authorities—has liked more than a dozen pages that mention boogaloo in their names, including Thicc Boog Line.

Some Facebook users leaving comments on the profile on the night of the attempted attack endorsed the targeting of police officers, while others suggested calling 911 in response to the live broadcast. The two videos remain active on the Facebook page and have amassed over 1,500 and 3,400 views, respectively. (Source: Tech Transparency Project)

(U) **Nigerian Pastor Spreads COVID-19 Conspiracies and Disinformation:** Influential preacher Chris Oyakhilome [delivered a sermon](#) with over 12,000 views on YouTube in which he claimed that the introduction of 5G technology was responsible for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He also alleged that the administration of a COVID-19 vaccine will be used as a ruse to enthrone a “new world order” led by the anti-Christ.

The public health implication of peddling these conspiracy theories has great ramifications. Already, the Nigerian senate has [started an investigation](#) on the status of 5G and its potential health impact on citizens.

Oyakhilome is worth \$30–50 million United States dollars and his church has about 13 million members within and outside Nigeria. (Source: Global Voices)

(U) RT Uses Bill Gates Investment in South Korean Telecom Firm to Amplify Conspiracy Theories:

Russian-state backed media like RT have frequently amplified COVID-19 related disinformation and conspiracy theories, with Bill Gates serving as a particularly popular target. From a recent RT article,

“Is that Big Brother behind the medical mask? Bill Gates to co-fund South Korean research of next-gen quarantine methods?”

“South Korea’s biggest telecom firm is banding with Bill Gates to develop next-generation quarantine methods. The \$10-million project may stir uncomfortable thoughts in those who suspect the billionaire of having a sinister agenda . . .

“Some however can’t help but see sinister undertones beyond the philanthropy. Just last week an Italian MP delivered a fierce rant in parliament, calling for the arrest of Bill Gates. Sara Cunial accused the billionaire of masterminding “dictatorial control plans on global politics” and using the current situation to further them.” (Source: RT)

(U) Senators Urge Facebook to Curb Coronavirus Misinformation in Other Languages: A group of senators on Friday sent a letter to Facebook urging the company to take steps to curb coronavirus misinformation that is not in English.

The letters from Sens. [Bob Menendez](#) (D-N.J.), [Mazie Hirono](#) (D-Hawaii) and [Elizabeth Warren](#) (D-Mass.) notes that more than 60 million Americans speak another language and cites a study that Facebook fails to issue warning labels on content in those languages at a much higher rate.

The study cited by the lawmakers from nonprofit activism group Avaaz found that the social media giant failed to issue warning labels on 70 percent of Spanish-language content and 68 percent of Italian, compared to 29 percent of English. (Source: The Hill)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- A significant portion of the social media conversation remains focused on concerns related to reopening, specifically concerns that relaxed social distancing could lead to surges in cases. In some areas where reopening has begun, many are unsure if rising case counts can be attributed to increased testing or the loosening of restrictions.
- There is a high volume of conversation about testing and vaccine development. Many are optimistic about vaccine development following news of potential successes with the Moderna vaccine. The conversation about testing is much less optimistic, with many people expressing serious concerns about testing accuracy.
- Developments in reopening states and positive news about a vaccine trial led COVID-19 coverage in traditional news media today. Besides health concerns amid states reopening, other developments with significant coverage included PPE distribution, food security needs, and international demands that China submit to a probe into the virus’ origins.
- Late this afternoon, in his press conference, the President stated he has been taking hydroxychloroquine. This has been gaining an immense amount of traction on both traditional

and social media as people question either question the safety of these statements or support it.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- During his press conference this afternoon, the President stated [he has been taking hydroxychloroquine](#). This has been receiving a large amount of public response.
 - Some feel this could be a dangerous statement to make as it could cause a run on the medication and encourage people to take it without medical guidance or approval.
 - Other people approve of the statement feeling he is taking precautionary measures against COVID-19.
- The top topic of discussion remains re-openings, many are sharing news about the loosening restrictions in their communities. In communities that are reopening, there is growing concern about people and businesses that are not practicing social distancing and rising case counts.
- Many continue to voice concern about the rising case count in Texas, as the state reported an increase of at least 1,800 new cases on Saturday following their reopening.
 - As testing increases, many are confused whether rising case counts can be attributed to reopenings or expanded testing capacity.
- With many businesses and daily activities resuming, people are sharing their thoughts on how they will cope with activities that used to be common occurrences.
 - As pools and recreational areas reopen, people are concerned about the safety of pools and hot tubs. There is confusion about mask usage in relation to pools and a distrust of public health officials since CDC says it is safe to swim in chemically treated hot tubs and pools. There are concerns [that people will not wear masks on flights](#), although airlines have made it a requirement, after the news reports that about half of the passengers during a recent Southwest flight did not wear a covering.
- There is ongoing concern over the [reliability and accuracy of COVID-19 testing](#) across the U.S. Most recently, AdventHealth announced about 33,000 and 35,000 tests conducted in Florida had to be deemed unreliable because one of the processing labs was "unable to fulfill its obligation."
 - Similarly, businesses and consumers find antibody testing "[immunity passports](#)" appealing, but there is concern about their accuracy along with a lack of understanding regarding how much immunity antibodies confer or how long it lasts.
- Parents are increasingly discussing the long term impacts the pandemic is having on children. Many are reporting the desire to bring more structure and consistency to their children's days. Some are sharing their kids have been experiencing an increase in behavioral issues over the past months.
- There is an emerging trend of individuals claiming to have medical conditions which exempt them from following mask use guidelines. These individuals are claiming that the ADA and HIPAA protect them from any punishment for violating these regulations, that businesses must not interfere with them, and that HIPPA protects them from having to disclose their condition.
 - Individuals in the disabled community are raising concerns that abuse of the ADA by people faking disabilities could erode trust and rights of those with actual disabilities.
- A recent Gallup survey found that [Americans' emotional health is improving](#) as states move to reopen their economies following weeks of stay-at-home orders. The poll said just under half of those surveyed reported they spent time worrying the previous day. This number is down from 59% earlier in the pandemic.

(U) 5/15 Reporting

The “Streisand Effect” as an Amplification Tactic for “Plandemic” Disinformation: Biella Coleman documented this tactic in her study of [Anonymous trolling Scientology](#), where a video of Tom Cruise became the fodder in a war between the protest ensemble of Anonymous and the Church of Scientology. More than just riding a wave of media attention from a public takedown, though, Coleman describes “The Streisand Effect” as “a well-known Internet phenomenon wherein an attempt to censor a piece of information has the inverse effect: more people want to see it in order to understand the motivation for the censorship, and thus it spreads much more widely than it would have if left alone.” Distributed amplification relies on reactive updates to platforms’ terms of service, coupled with inadequate enforcement of policies against online harms. Ultimately, each attempt at content moderation risks becoming a new opportunity for media manipulators to hijack media attention.

While our team observed this behavior amongst white supremacists to spread their ideology, conspiracy theorists are also using it to expand their audiences, especially among the online communities supporting The Plandemic documentary. On The Plandemic documentary’s website, they include instructions for downloading and uploading the long clip, without any warning that distributing this content could result in a content takedown or your personal account getting banned. By participating in the process of uploading and receiving a warning or suspension by platform companies, it confirms the theory that “big tech” is suppressing speech. Rather, what is really happening is enforcement of their terms of service.

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

In this case, the makers of The Plandemic video capitalized on a pre-existing dystopian narrative already circulating in fringe communities, knowing that a content takedown would trigger the Streisand effect and allow them to set media agendas. This tactic of distributed amplification shows how human actors, rather than bots or other artificial forms of signal boosting, are integral to disinformation campaigns. (Source: Meme War Weekly, Harvard Kennedy School)

(U) COVID-19 Disinformation Weaponizes the Internet’s Structural Weaknesses: The coronavirus and the accompanying deluge of misinformation have laid bare a truth about the internet itself: The early notion that users could be both producers and consumers of information has turned platforms into information landfills, where people are forced to sift through increasingly dangerous garbage in the search for real information.

"Information is extremely cheap to produce," Joan Donovan of Harvard's Kennedy School said. "That's why misinformation is a problem, because you don't need any evidence, you don't need any investigation, you don't need any methods to produce it. Knowledge is incredibly expensive to produce. Experts are sought after, and they aren't going to work for free. So platform companies can't rely on the idea that the web is something we build together."

Donovan is watching coronavirus misinformation that goes unnoticed or undocumented because its virality is hidden — spread inside private messaging apps and within secret groups or by users who employ tactics to evade detection [like web archivers](#).

The volume of misinformation and its potential for widespread harm is unprecedented, and the only real solution would have to be, too, Donovan said, suggesting that the platforms should move beyond moderation to a kind of curation.

"Believing that platform companies can clean this up is like believing that you're going to win the lottery," Donovan said. "They need to hire 10,000 librarians to get in there and to look at what's on the shelves, to sort, to document and to cull what is not viable, what is not useful, what is not serving the public's interest." (Source: NBC)

(U) Virus Restrictions Fuel Anti-government 'Boogaloo' Movement: The coronavirus pandemic has become a catalyst for the "boogaloo" movement because the stay-at-home orders have "put a stressor on a lot of very unhappy people," said J.J. MacNab, a fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. MacNab said their rhetoric goes beyond discussions about fighting virus restrictions — which many protesters brand as "tyranny" — to talking about killing FBI agents or police officers "to get the war going."

"They are far more graphic and far more specific in their threats than I've seen in a long time," she said.

The violent rhetoric is dramatic escalation for an online phenomenon with its roots in meme culture and steeped in dark humor. Its name comes from the panned 1984 movie "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo," which has become slang for any bad sequel. Another derivation of "boogaloo" is "big luau" — hence the Hawaiian garb donned by many adherents.

An April 22 report by the Tech Transparency Project, which tracks technology companies, found 125 Facebook "boogaloo"-related groups that had attracted tens of thousands of members in the previous 30 days. The project pointed to coronavirus crisis as a driving factor.

Facebook has since updated its policies to prohibit use of "boogaloo" and related terms "when accompanied by statements and images depicting armed violence," the company said in a statement.

In March, a Missouri man with ties to neo-Nazis was shot and killed when FBI agents tried to arrest him. Timothy Wilson, 36, was planning to bomb a hospital in the Kansas City area on the day that a COVID-19 stay-at-home order was scheduled to take effect, authorities said. Wilson told an undercover FBI agent that his goal was "to kick start a revolution" and referred to his plans as "operation boogaloo," according to an agent's affidavit. (Source: Voice of America)

(U) **Neo-Nazis, Qanon Conspiracy Theorists, and Hardcore Vegans Unite to Protest Germany's Lockdown:** Football hooligans and neo-Nazis were arrested, journalists beaten up and bottles thrown, while neighbors on the sidelines discussed how a Satan-worshipping clique of millionaires had planned the coronavirus pandemic, and how Germany was now a medical dictatorship.

These were some of the scenes at nationwide anti-lockdown demonstrations in Germany over the weekend, attended by an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people. Politically, it appeared a wild mash-up. But who exactly were these people?

Unlike in the U.S., where protests have mostly originated on one side of the political spectrum, the demonstrators' signs didn't offer many clues at first. One man held up a hand-written paper saying, "I'm not right wing, I'm not left wing, I am for free expression, constitutional rights and democracy." Another sign said, "Don't give [Bill] Gates a chance! No enforced vaccinations." Yet another wore a mask nearby decorated with the words "Merkel's muzzle," and there was at least one with a T-shirt reading, in English, all caps: **Q ANON - DO YOU BELIEVE IN COINCIDENCE?**

The demonstrators call themselves "the corona-rebels," or "alternative thinkers" or part of the Querfront, a venerable German political term that suggests different social and political subgroups drawn to one plan of action. In this case, they include anti-vaxxers, hard core vegans, neo-Nazis, members of the Reichburger sovereign citizen movement, which rejects the legitimacy of the modern German state, and politicians from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, plus a sprinkling of their sometime allies the Free Democrats.

Local experts talk about an emerging "hybrid ideology" because despite other political differences, there are a number of things that many of those protesting do have in common. It's not just opposition to anti-COVID measures, it is a fascination—for some a kind of enthrallment—with conspiracy theories, which meshes with their mistrust of established information sources such as the mainstream media or their government.

Certain social media channels and messaging groups, many of them private, have been seeing huge membership gains since the pandemic began, Dittrich added. He believes the pandemic makes locals more vulnerable to conspiracy theorists because they're stuck at home, most likely on their computers. (Source: The Daily Beast)

(U) **The Pandemic of Misinformation:** Nearly **two-thirds of Americans** said they have seen news and information about the disease that seemed completely made up, according to a recent Pew Research Center study.

What distinguishes the proliferation of bad information surrounding the current crisis, though, is social media. **Kasisomayajula "Vish" Viswanath**, Lee Kum Kee Professor of Health Communication at the **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**, said the popularity and ubiquity of the various platforms means the public is no longer merely passively consuming inaccuracies and falsehoods. It's disseminating and even creating them, which is a "very different" dynamic than what took place during prior pandemics MERS and H1N1.

The sheer volume of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation online is "crowding out" the accurate public health guidance, "making our work a bit more difficult," he said.

But turning around those who buy into false information is not as simple as piercing epistemic bubbles with facts, said [Christopher Robichaud](#), senior lecturer in ethics and public policy at Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) who teaches the Gen Ed course “Ignorance, Lies, Hogwash and Humbug: The Value of Truth and Knowledge in Democracies.”

Over time, bubble dwellers can become cocooned in a media echo chamber that not only feeds faulty information to audiences, but anticipates criticisms in order to “prebut” potential counterarguments that audience members may encounter from outsiders, much the way cult leaders do.

“It’s not enough to introduce new pieces of evidence. You have to break through their strategies to diminish that counterevidence, and that’s a much harder thing to do than merely exposing people to different perspectives,” he said. (Source: Harvard Gazette)

(U) **Why is Facebook So Afraid of Checking Facts?** A video laden with [falsehoods](#) about Covid-19 emerged on Facebook last week, and has now been viewed [many millions of times](#). The company has taken steps to minimize the video’s reach, but its fact-checks, in particular, appear to have been applied with a curious—if not dangerous—reticence. The reason for that reticence should alarm you: It seems that the biggest social network in the world is, at least in part, basing its response to pandemic-related misinformation on a misreading of the academic literature.

At issue is the company’s long-standing deference to the risk of so-called “backfire effects.” That is to say, Facebook worries that the mere act of trying to debunk a bogus claim may only help to make the lie grow stronger. CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg [expressed](#) this precise concern back in February 2017: “Research shows that some of the most obvious ideas, like showing people an article from the opposite perspective, actually deepen polarization,” he said. The company would later cite the same theory to explain why it had stopped applying “red flag” warnings to fallacious headlines: “Academic research on correcting misinformation,” a Facebook product manager [wrote](#), has shown that such warnings “may actually entrench deeply held beliefs.”

Facebook’s fear of backfire hasn’t abated in the midst of this pandemic, or the [infodemic](#) that came with it. On April 16, the company [announced](#) a plan to deal with rampant Covid-19 misinformation: In addition to putting warning labels on some specific content, it would show decidedly [nonspecific warnings](#) to those who’d interacted with a harmful post and nudge them toward more [authoritative sources](#). The vagueness of these latter warnings, Facebook told the website STAT, was meant to [minimize the risk of backfire](#).

But here’s the thing: Whatever Facebook says (or thinks) about the backfire effect, this phenomenon has not, in fact, been “shown” or demonstrated in any thorough way. Rather, it’s a bogeyman—a zombie theory from the research literature circa 2008 that has all but been abandoned since. More recent studies, encompassing a broad array of issues, find the opposite is true: On almost all possible topics, almost all of the time, the average person—Democrat or Republican, young or old, well-educated or not—responds to facts just the way you’d hope, by becoming *more* factually accurate.

All those Snopes.com articles, Politifact posts and CNN fact-checks you’ve read over the years? By and large, they do their job. By our count, across experiments involving more than 10,000 Americans, fact-checks increase the proportion of correct responses in follow-up testing by more than 28 percentage points. But it’s not just us: [Other researchers](#) have reached very similar conclusions. If backfire effects

exist at all, they're hard to find. Entrenchment in the face of new information is certainly not a general human tendency—not even when people are presented with corrective facts that cut against their deepest political commitments. (Source: Wired)

(U) **Pandemic Misinformation Throughout the Ages (it's not a new thing):** The [infodemic](#) of misinformation and disinformation around the coronavirus is a serious threat to understanding how to deal with the pandemic — but this is nothing new.

The big picture: Whether the Black Death, smallpox or COVID-19, deadly diseases strike fear into people and, as scientific understanding is still gathered, stories and theories can start percolating into more serious finger-pointing, xenophobia or even violence.

The Parrot Pandemic: The "parrot panic of 1930" is an interesting case of "an outbreak of hysteria" when somebody had a pet parrot that died and shortly after a few members of that family fell dangerously ill, says Lawrence Poos, a professor of history at the Catholic University of America.

A Washington Post headline, "'Parrot Disease' Baffles Experts," captured the attention of Americans and helped foment a mass culling of parrots everywhere, [per the New Yorker](#).

The Black Death: Because [no one in Europe knew the cause](#) of the black death and some thought Jewish communities didn't seem to be dying as fast as others, there was a belief it was all a "Jewish plot," leading to a [massacre of Jews](#).

Small Pox: Immigrants in general have often been targets of finger-pointing while also facing disparities in health care systems.

This disparity combined with a general distrust in vaccinations in the German and Polish immigrant communities in Milwaukee, and an alderman who denounced health department efforts, led to [rioting in the streets](#) for a month. (Source: Axios)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Conversation shifted largely from testing to vaccines following the press conference on Operation Warp Speed - the general public feels the time frame being given for vaccine development is too optimistic.
- There is growing discussion about the inflammatory condition affecting children across the nation, now called Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C). The CDC issued an advisory today asking healthcare providers to help track cases. Parents are expressing concern over how little is known about the disease.
- As more states and cities begin to move forward with the reopening process there is increasing confusion among the general public. In some states residents feel they have not received clear guidance from their state government on how to proceed, while in other areas state guidance and local guidance contradict each other.
- On traditional media, FEMA's pen and pad call with national reporters is gaining nationwide attention focused on Project Airbridge winding down' and FEMA Administrator's characterization of PPE seizure allegations as 'absurd.' Some elected officials are quoted in their assessment of Airbridge's successes and shortcomings. Other high-profile news reports concern declining retail sector during April and the HEROES Act's unlikely passage and approval by U.S. Senate and White House.

- National broadcast media have been consistently opening hourly segments with the White House's announcement of the 'Operation Warp Speed' goal to get a vaccine before end of year, followed by discussion of the likelihood of a vaccine being available before 2021.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Over the course of the day there has been a high volume of discussion about vaccines following the President's press conference on Operation Warp Speed.
- The general public is largely concerned the timeframe being provided is overly optimistic and unobtainable.
 - There is increased discussion about the availability and accuracy of testing in the country.
- Many individuals continue to feel there is not enough testing available in the country – though states have been pushing messaging about how and where to get tested. A recent poll by ABC News/Ipsos found 3 out of 4 Americans feel the country is lagging in testing capacity.
- Following the announcement from the FDA that the Abbott ID NOW test is vulnerable to false negatives many feel they cannot trust the accuracy of test results or data. A small number of people are questioning if these are the tests being used in the White House and if this means the President is at greater risk.
 - Hospitals, health officials, and media outlets are expressing concern and confusion about remdesivir distribution and how the limited supply is being allocated. Many feel the drug is not going to places with the most need, and some report receiving less than expected.
- A member of Congress from Texas commented, "... distribution of remdesivir seems akin to winning the lottery — a random stroke of luck rather than a medically-informed decision,"
 - There is ongoing anxiety among the general public over the prospect of returning to work. For many the concern extends beyond worry for individual health, and more for the health of family members who live in the same household.
 - Many members of the general public are saying they are unsurprised to hear that recent studies showed droplets generated by people talking while infected with COVID-19 could linger in the air for several minutes. (example 1, example 2, example 3) Most felt this information would not change the current steps they are taking to avoid contracting COVID-19.
 - Many continue to observe reopenings taking place across the country and are concerned at scenes of large crowds of individuals not practicing social distancing. There is growing concern that reopenings will lead to increases in cases.

(U) 5/14 Reporting

(U) New Study Shows Emerging Trend of COVID-19 Misinformation Embedded in Non-Public Health

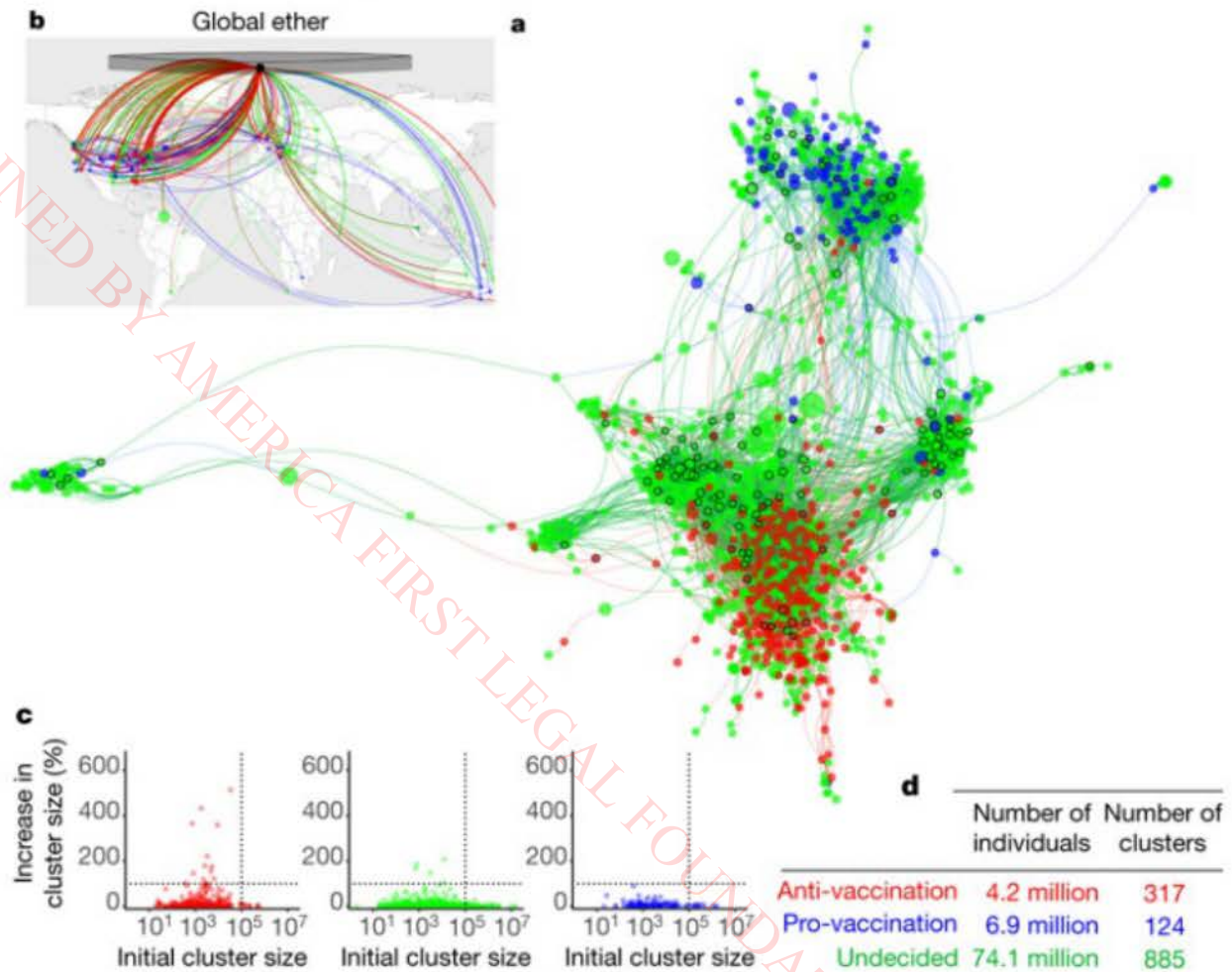
Related Online Groups: Researchers who released a new study on COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook expected to see that, in the map of the online world, there will be a core of the central establishment, accepted medical science, government public health advice, surrounded maybe by some fringe kind of buzzing around. They found the opposite. The core of the whole online debate of - and discussion and battle over views is really dominated by this relatively small-size but very well-distributed

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

Researchers at the George Washington University found is that undecided people are getting exposed to anti-vaccination views not while visiting anti-vaccination Facebook groups, but just within other community groups that seem totally unrelated to vaccination, like the pet groups. Because of the way social media works, if communities are linked, then people in the pet lovers community can be exposed to information and rumors - false information - coming from these other communities - for example, that Bill Gates will eventually have a vaccine that injects semiconductor quantum dots into children to institute universal government monitoring.

The study, which mapped the vaccine conversation on Facebook during the 2019 measles outbreak, also found that there were nearly three times as many active anti-vaccination communities as pro-vaccination communities. In addition, they found that while pro-vaccine pages tended to have more followers, anti-vaccine pages were faster-growing.

The researchers found that Facebook pages pushing accurate pro-vaccine information were mostly clustered in an insular group, while the anti-vaccine pages treated vaccine resistance as a kind of political campaign, and used different messages to reach different types of undecided "voters." A page promoting holistic health remedies might start seeding doubts about vaccines among liberal yoga moms, while a page promoting resistance to government-mandated vaccines might appeal to conservatives and libertarians.

Fig. 1: Online ecology of vaccine views.

(Source: NPR, GWU)

(U) **Get Ready for a Vaccine Information War:** Social media is already filling up with misinformation about a Covid-19 vaccine, months or years before one even exists.

I've been following the anti-vaccine community on and off for years, watching its members operate in private Facebook groups and Instagram accounts, and have found that they are much more organized and strategic than many of their critics believe. They are savvy media manipulators, effective communicators and experienced at exploiting the weaknesses of social media platforms. (Just one example: Shortly after Facebook and YouTube began taking down copies of "Plandemic" for violating their rules, I saw people in anti-vaccine groups editing it in subtle ways to evade the platforms' automated enforcement software and reposting it.)

In short, the anti-vaxxers have been practicing for this. And I'm worried that they will be unusually effective in sowing doubts about a Covid-19 vaccine for several reasons.

First, because of the pandemic's urgency, any promising Covid-19 vaccine is likely to be fast-tracked through the testing and approval process. It may not go through years of clinical trials and careful studies of possible long-term side effects, the way other drugs do. That could create an opening for anti-vaccine activists to claim that it is untested and dangerous, and to spin reasonable concerns about the vaccine into widespread, unfounded fears about its safety.

Second, if a vaccine does emerge, there is a good chance that leading health organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the World Health Organization will have a hand in producing or distributing it. If that's the case, anti-vaccine activists, who have been crusading against these groups for years, will have plenty of material stockpiled to try to discredit them. They are already taking aim at Mr. Gates with baseless [conspiracy theories](#) claiming that he created and is trying to profit from the virus. These theories will be amplified, and the attempts to discredit leading virus research efforts will intensify as the vaccine nears.

Third, if and when a Covid-19 vaccine is approved for widespread use, people may be required to take it before being allowed to fly on certain airlines, attend certain schools or enter certain businesses. That's a good idea, public health-wise, but it would play into some of the worst fears of the anti-vaccine movement. (Source: New York Times)

(U) False COVID- 19 Claims Viewed by Millions on YouTube: More than a quarter of the most-viewed coronavirus videos on YouTube contain "misleading or inaccurate information", a recent study suggests.

In total, the misleading videos had been viewed more than 62 million times.

Among the false claims was the idea that pharmaceutical companies already have a coronavirus vaccine but are refusing to sell it.

Of the videos found to include inaccurate information,

- about a third came from entertainment news sources
- national news outlets accounted for about a quarter
- internet news sources also account for about a quarter
- 13% had been uploaded by independent video-makers

The report recommends that governments and health authorities should collaborate with entertainment news sources and social media influencers to make appealing, factual content that is more widely viewed. (Source: BBC)

(U) Russia Spreading Coronavirus Disinformation in Netherlands, Minister Says: Russia is spreading disinformation about the coronavirus in the Netherlands, Minister Kasja Ollongren of Home Affairs said in a letter to parliament. Intelligence service AIVD found "Russian narratives" about the virus being shared in a number of Dutch-language social media groups, she said.

These narratives emphasize "alleged European divisions and lack of mutual solidarity between countries in Western Europe in the field of Covid-19," Ollongren wrote. She added that outside the social media groups in which these messages were shared, their reach remained limited.

The Minister did not say in which social media groups the messages were shared, or what evidence the AIVD found of Russian interference. (Source: NL Times)

(U) **Russia Slams New York Times, Financial Times on Virus Deaths:** Russia's Foreign Ministry has criticized the Financial Times and The New York Times after they reported that Russia's [coronavirus](#) death toll could be much higher than government officials are saying.

The articles said that they were based on a spike in total mortality rates reported by officials in Moscow, who said the capital registered about 1,800 deaths more in April 2020 than the monthly average.

The New York Times reported that total is far higher than the official COVID-19 death count of 642, which the newspaper said was an indication of significant underreporting by the authorities. It quoted Tatiana N. Mikhailova, a senior researcher at the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow, as saying that the number who died from the virus is "possibly almost three times higher than the official toll."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova complained about what she called "disinformation" by the two newspapers and said letters demanding a retraction would be passed on to both on Thursday.

(U) **Conspiracy Theorists and Extremists Seize on Pandemic to Promote Disinformation:** As the world economy craters and the coronavirus' global death toll [ticks past 280,000 people](#), extremist messages are finding fertile ground on fringe online platforms like 4chan, Telegram and a gamer hangout called Discord. From there, such harmful content can make its way to mainstream sites like Facebook and Google-owned YouTube — each boasting roughly 2 billion users apiece — despite the companies' attempts to weed out violent or dangerous content.

Facebook [said last week](#) that one collection of fake accounts and pages it removed in April — tied to two anti-immigrant websites in the U.S. — had drawn more than 200,000 followers with messages including the hashtag "#ChinaVirus" and a false claim that the coronavirus mainly kills white people. Twitter announced Monday that it would [begin more aggressively labeling tweets](#) that contain misleading or harmful coronavirus information.

One coronavirus-related term, "Coronachan," has also exploded on social media, first emerging in January and drawing more than 120,000 shares on Twitter in one week in late April, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that tracks extremist groups. (The term is a play on the name of 4chan, a message board that is a favorite gathering spot for the global far right.) In Germany, Telegram groups where influential extremists and far-right activists attack vulnerable groups have doubled their number of followers, to more than 100,000 participants since February, according to a review by POLITICO of those accounts.

'Coronachan' on Twitter

Mentions of the term, a play on the name of the fringe message board 4chan, exploded among people discussing the pandemic.



*Figures don't include retweets
Source: Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Mark Scott / POLITICO

The themes of far-right posts include long-standing grievances, including allegations that migrants spread disease, antagonism toward the EU or opposition to gun control. One online rumor, [accusing Microsoft founder Bill Gates](#) of creating the coronavirus, echoes centuries-old conspiracy theories and Anti-Semitic tropes about global elites pulling the world's strings. (Source: Politico, Institute for Strategic Dialogue)

(U) Facebook Banned Mask Ads. They're Still Running: Using misleading Facebook pages and deceptive ads, ZestAds sold coronavirus masks at wildly inflated prices.

Three weeks earlier, Facebook had [banned](#) ads for masks, over price gouging and first responder shortages. But when Michailow saw the video ad for the "MediCare Reusable Surgical Mask," it seemed legit — and he was desperate.

He bought 10 for \$227.90.

An hour later, he was shown *another* Facebook video ad for masks. "They looked like better-quality masks," he said, so Michailow bought three "AeroShield N95 Masks" for \$118.95.

None of the masks, from either order, ever arrived. And contrary to what he thought, he didn't buy from two separate US companies. Instead, PayPal receipts show the purchases came from the same entity: ZestAds, a company registered in Hong Kong with headquarters in Malaysia.

Since March, the company has made a mockery of Facebook's ban by running ads that dangerously claimed its masks would "fully protect" from the virus, cited a fake expert, and falsely listed US companies as behind the ads.

Facebook's **inability to enforce its mask ad ban** is a symptom of the company's larger failure to police the **scammers and shady e-commerce operators** who use its powerful ad targeting tools to rip off people at scale. (Source: BuzzFeed News)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- The most frequently mentioned topics on social media today were mostly focused on the debate over reopening and concerns about the long-term nature of the pandemic and its impacts. Many discussed statements from current and former public health officials that contrasted with more optimistic estimates and plans from the administration. The public is growing increasingly worried about the economic costs and the potential for significant subsequent waves of the virus.
- FEMA conversation remains focused on the distribution of medical supplies, including continued discussion of the Panthera contract for PPE and the purchasing of body bags. This is part of a broader conversation regarding FEMA's involvement in supply chain management in which most are critical of the agency.
- Traditional media is focused on testimony of the former Director of BARDA warning that the nation faces "darkest winter" of COVID-19 outbreaks because of a lack of a vaccine plan and the general response to the pandemic. The president lauds American workers in visit to Allentown PPE distributor. Unemployment has reached 36.5 million as nearly 3 million more workers filed last week. Wisconsin bars reopen after the Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down the governor's stay-home order.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- The debate over when schools should reopen is becoming more heated as the administration's views on the issue clashed with those presented by Dr. Fauci earlier this week.
 - Many in the general public feel this is another sign that the administration is not on the same page as other parts of the response.
- WHO warned that COVID-19 may never become completely eradicated and could become embedded in populations similar to HIV. This is leading many to question why stay-at-home orders are needed and push for a swifter reopening of the country.
- The U.N. is warning of a global mental health crisis as millions of people worldwide grapple with isolation, financial concerns and immense grief.
- High levels of stress and anger are resulting in increased reports of aggressive behavior over mask requirements.
- The former director of BARDA will testify before Congress today and is expected to say that the US faces the "darkest winter in modern history" with "unprecedented illness and fatalities" if federal officials don't develop a more coordinated response.
 - The public is having mixed reactions to these statements with some feeling it is necessary messaging to get people to understand the gravity of the situation. Many others feel this is intended to incite fear.

- During the testimony, committee members questioned if the U.S. has sufficient testing capacity for states to reopen, reasons for the former director's dismissal, and outlook on a potential second surge in cases.
- There is growing concern that the anti-vaccine movement could hinder efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. Studies of social networks show current opposition to vaccines is small but far-reaching and increasing.
- There is a small conversation about the decline in COVID-19 numbers for states that have reopened quickly with a small number of people are questioning if other states should reopen sooner.

(U) 5/13 Reporting

(U) EU Counterterrorism Coordinator Warns of Extremists Exploiting Virus Outbreak: The European Union's counterterrorism official is warning that the coronavirus pandemic is being used by extremists as an opportunity to spread their message and could be exploited to carry out attacks.

In a confidential briefing to member nations obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove cautioned that right-wing extremists and Islamic militants "could view attacks on medical personnel and facilities as highly effective, because these would generate a massive shock in society."

He noted that in the U.S., the FBI in March shot and killed a white supremacist while trying to arrest him for plotting to blow up a hospital treating COVID-19 patients, after initially considering an attack on an African-American school, mosque or synagogue.

From past experience, he said it's known that "terrorists and violent extremists, aiming to change societies and governmental systems through violence, seek to exploit major crises to achieve their objectives". (Source: Star Tribune)

(U) Facebook Removes Record Number Of Hate Speech Posts: On Tuesday, Facebook released its biannual [Community Standards Enforcement Report](#) which provided the latest metrics on the number of controversial posts removed from the platform. The company took action against more than 2 billion pieces of content violating its community standards between January and March 2020 and an upsurge in content promoting hate and violence was particularly noteworthy.

Facebook deleted a record number of hate speech posts with 9.6 million taken down compared to 5.7 million in the prior period. That marks a six-fold increase in hateful content removals compared with the second half of 2017, the earliest point for which data is available. The company removed 4.7 million pieces of content originating from organized hate groups in the first three months of 2020, an increase of more than 3 million on the final quarter of last year.

Facebook has attributed the sharp increase in hate speech removals to technology improvements for automatically identifying images and text. In a statement, the company said that "we're now able to detect text embedded in images and videos in order to understand its full context, and we've built media matching technology to find content that's identical or near-identical to photos, videos, text and even audio that we've already removed." According to the latest data, 88.3% of all hate speech content was removed before users reported it in Q1.

Facebook Removes Record Number Of Hate Speech Posts

Amount of hate speech content removed by Facebook



(Source: Facebook, Forbes)

Facebook's AI tools are the only thing standing between its users and the growing onslaught of hate and misinformation the platform is experiencing. The company's researchers have cooked up a few new capabilities for the systems that keep the adversary at bay, identifying COVID-19-related misinformation and hateful speech disguised as memes.

Detecting and removing misinformation relating to the virus is obviously a priority right now, as Facebook and other social media become breeding grounds not just for ordinary speculation and discussion, but malicious interference by organized campaigns aiming to sow discord and spread pseudoscience.

"We have seen a huge change in behavior across the site because of COVID-19, a huge increase in misinformation that we consider dangerous," said Facebook CTO Mike Schroepfer in a call with press earlier today.

(U) **Facebook Upgrades Its AI to Better Tackle COVID-19 Misinformation and Hate Speech:** The company contracts with dozens of fact-checking organizations around the world, but — leaving aside the question of [how effective the collaborations really are](#) — misinformation has a way of quickly mutating, making taking down even a single image or link a complex affair.

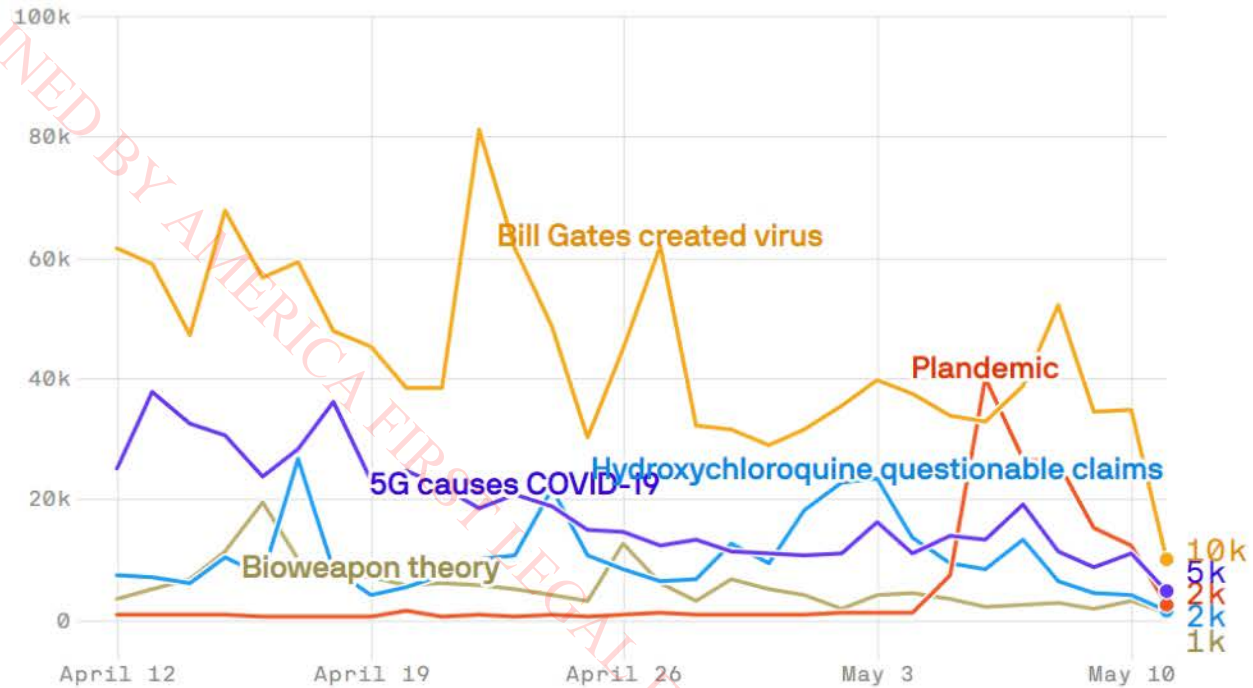
While Facebook warned that its AI systems might remove content too aggressively, hate speech, [violent threats](#) and misinformation continue to proliferate on the platform as the coronavirus crisis stretches on. Facebook most recently came under fire for disseminating a viral video discouraging people from wearing face masks or seeking vaccines once they are available — a clear violation of the platform’s rules against health misinformation.

The video, an excerpt from a forthcoming pseudo-documentary called “Plandemic,” initially took off on YouTube, but researchers found that Facebook’s [thriving ecosystem of conspiracist groups](#) shared it far and wide on the platform, injecting it into mainstream online discourse. The 26-minute-long video, peppered with conspiracies, is also a perfect example of the kind of content an algorithm would have a difficult time making sense of. (Source: TechCrunch)

(U) **The Coronavirus Conspiracy News Cycle:** The coronavirus conspiracy news cycle has grown more powerful off of audiences that were already susceptible to misinformation about other health care myths, like anti-vaccination conspiracies.

Web and social mentions of select conspiracy theories

April 12 to May 11, 2020



Data: Signal; Chart: Axios Visuals. NOTE: This does not include mentions of "disinfectant," which is disproportionately much more viral than all of the select conspiracy theories combined. We removed it from this chart to show you the smaller theories at scale.

The latest conspiracy theory — that the virus is a "plandemic" engineered to increase vaccination rates — stems from a documentary-style video featuring a discredited medical researcher that has gone viral.

The big picture: The most effective misinformation plays into existing fears, especially around health, safety and well-being. This is in part due to the fact that there's already so much uncertainty about causes and cures for new and existing diseases.

The bottom line: The "plandemic" conspiracy theory is the latest in a series of myths around the virus that will spread quickly, before big web platforms take notice and users and bad actors move to another falsehood.

(U) **Australian Public's Confidence in 5G 'Shaken' by Misinformation Campaign:** Public confidence in the planned 5G network has been significantly undermined by a strong misinformation campaign, an Australian parliamentary committee has admitted.

The House of Representatives committee was established last year to examine the plans for 5G networks in Australia, currently under construction by Telstra, Optus and Vodafone, but the committee received hundreds of submissions from members of the public and groups concerned about perceived health issues associated with 5G networks.

In [the report](#) tabled in parliament on Tuesday evening, the committee, chaired by Nationals MP David Gillespie, expressed concern about 5G misinformation.

“Community confidence in 5G has been shaken by extensive misinformation preying on the fears of the public spread via the internet, and presented as facts, particularly through social media,” the report said.

“The communication of the reality of 5G has been neglected, allowing fears over health and safety, the technology involved and the application of 5G to take hold. Misinformation has filled the vacuum and public confidence in 5G has been shaken.”

The report was finalised in March before misinformation began spreading online claiming either 5G was responsible for coronavirus, due to the construction of 5G networks in Wuhan, or for “poisoning cells” that created coronavirus.

The misinformation has been widely spread on Facebook, in particular – a video went viral where a man claiming to be a former Vodafone executive warned the pandemic was a global plot to install 5G and track the population through vaccines.

In reality, [the Guardian revealed](#), the voice on the tape making the baseless claims is an evangelical pastor who had only worked in sales for Vodafone for less than a year in 2014.

In Australia, [a Nazi flag with #COVID19 written on it](#) was tied to two Chinese flags on a mobile tower in regional Victoria in April.

Last weekend, anti-5G protesters joined [anti-lockdown protesters in small protests in Sydney and Melbourne](#). (Source: The Guardian)

(U) Facebook Claims it Labeled 50 Million Pieces of Coronavirus Misinformation in April

Facebook put misinformation warning labels on about 50 million pieces of content related to COVID-19 during the month of April, the company announced Tuesday.

The social networking site attaches these warnings to posts sharing articles that have been [reviewed by the company’s independent fact-checking partners](#). The company said that the warnings greatly reduce the number of people who view the original content.

[Facebook](#) and other tech platforms have taken a variety of steps to counter the spread of coronavirus misinformation, but misleading claims and conspiracy theories have proven [hard to contain](#), particularly when shared in public and private groups.

The report comes at a time when the company’s content moderation teams are operating at reduced capacity and it is more reliant on automated systems that use things like image matching technology to identify violating content. (Source: NBC)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Conversation today has touched various subjects related to the gradual reopening of the economy. While some states are lifting restrictions with caution, others with increasing case counts extend their stay-at-home orders, leading to large discussions about the countermeasures and strategies businesses and local governments are taking to reopen.

- Conversation about FEMA on both social and traditional media has focused on the cancellation of the \$55 million Panthera contract for masks, to which many are questioning the pricing for the bulk amount of supply in an emergency.
- There has been a growing amount of concern regarding Pediatric Multi-System Inflammatory System as reported cases increase in several states, and people question the condition being more closely related to COVID-19.
- There has been an increase in media coverage about national preparedness as the National Hurricane Center issues advisories for a system in the Atlantic and wildfire season becomes more active.
- Other subjects of media interest include delays in information sharing between hospitals and health agencies, and growing concern that lax enforcement of mitigation measures could cause a second outbreak in the fall or winter.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There has been an increase in discussion about children presenting with symptoms of [Kawasaki disease](#) which may be linked to COVID-19 in children. The medical community is referring to this as Pediatric Multi-System Inflammatory Syndrome (PMIS). The New York City Health Department [has issued a fact sheet](#) on the symptoms.
 - Parents are pointing to this as a reason why they feel schools should not reopen any time soon. There is general worry that more is not understood about the condition.
 - A smaller number of people are claiming these are classic cases of Kawasaki's disease that do not have anything to do with COVID-19.
- There is growing concern over the potential for a new housing crisis in the rental industry. There the risk of a cascading effect that if tenants cannot pay rent, landlords cannot pay for the rental property or mortgages and all involved fall down the economic scale.
 - People are debating the best way to provide financial support as many solutions seem lopsided benefiting either the renter or landlord more.
- There is a large amount of discussion about the Los Angeles' "Safer-at-Home" order after the Public Health Director said it could very likely be extended another three months.
 - People are shocked and saddened at the prospect of missing the entire summer. However, many feel this is the result of people not following existing social distancing guidance.
 - The mayor of Los Angeles and other elected officials quickly clarified that the comment about the "Safer-at-Home" order was taken out of context. The LA County Board of Supervisors issued a statement saying that the intent was to convey that lifting the order would be a gradual process that could take months.
- There is renewed concern that COVID-19 will impact the November presidential election, fueled by a statement from a member of the White House Task Force who said he was "not sure [he could] commit one way or the other" when asked whether the election will be held as scheduled.
 - Many respond with anger against the administration, noting that only congress can postpone the election.

(U) 5/12 Reporting

Platforms Scramble as ‘Plandemic’ Conspiracy Video Spreads Misinformation Like Wildfire: A video about the coronavirus featuring a well-known vaccine conspiracist is spreading like wildfire on social media this week, even as platforms talk tough about misinformation in the midst of the pandemic.

In the professionally-produced video, a solemn interviewer named Mikki Willis interviews Judy Mikovits, a figure best known for her [anti-vaccine activism](#) in recent years. The video touches on a number of topics favored among online conspiracists at the moment, filtering most of them through the lens that vaccines are a money-making enterprise that causes medical harm.

The video took off mid-week after first being [posted to Vimeo and YouTube on May 4](#). From those sites, it traveled to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter where it circulated much more widely, racking up [millions of views](#). Finding the video is currently trivial across social platforms, where it’s been reposted widely, sometimes with its title removed or reworded to make it more difficult to detect by AI moderation.

According to Twitter, tweets by Mikovits apparently don’t violate the platform’s rules around COVID-19 misinformation, but it has marked the video’s URL as “unsafe” and blocked the related hashtags “#PlagueOfCorruption and #Plandemicmovie. The company also hasn’t found evidence that her account is being amplified as part of a coordinated campaign.

Over on Facebook, the video indeed runs afoul of the platform’s coronavirus and health misinformation rules—but it’s still very easy to find. For this story, I was able to locate a copy of the full video within seconds and at the time of writing Instagram’s #plandemic hashtag was well-populated with long clips from the video and even suggestions for related hashtags like #coronahoax. Facebook is currently working to stem the video’s spread, but it’s already collected millions of views in a short time.

On YouTube, a search for “Plandemic” mostly pulls up content debunking the video’s many false claims, but plenty of clips from the video itself still make the first wave of search results.

Mikovits, who in the video states that she’s not opposed to vaccines, later goes on to make the claim that vaccines have killed millions of people. “The game is to prevent the therapies ‘til everyone is infected and push the vaccines, knowing that the flu vaccines increase the odds... of getting COVID-19,” Mikovits says, conspiratorially. At the same time, she suggests that doctors and health facilities are incentivized to overcount COVID-19 cases for the medicare payouts, an assertion that contradicts the expert consensus that coronavirus cases are likely still being [meaningfully undercounted](#).

Mikovits also touches on a [popular web of conspiracy theories](#) fixated on the idea Bill Gates is somehow implicated in causing the pandemic to profit off the eventual vaccine and makes the unfounded claim that “it’s very clear this virus was manipulated and studied in the laboratory.”

In other interviews, Mikovits has suggested that face masks [pose a danger](#) because they can “activate” the virus in the wearer. In the “Plandemic” clip, Mikovits also makes the unscientific claim that beaches should not have been closed due to “healing microbes in the saltwater” and “sequences” in the sand that protect against the coronavirus.

With “Plandemic,” Mikovits seems to have positioned herself successfully for relevance in the pandemic’s information vacuum—her book sales have even soared on Amazon. Toward the end of the clip, her interviewer even cannily sets up a future outrage cycle at the inevitable crackdown from social

media platforms, where the video flouts rules ostensibly banning harmful health conspiracies like the ones it contains. (Source: TechCrunch)

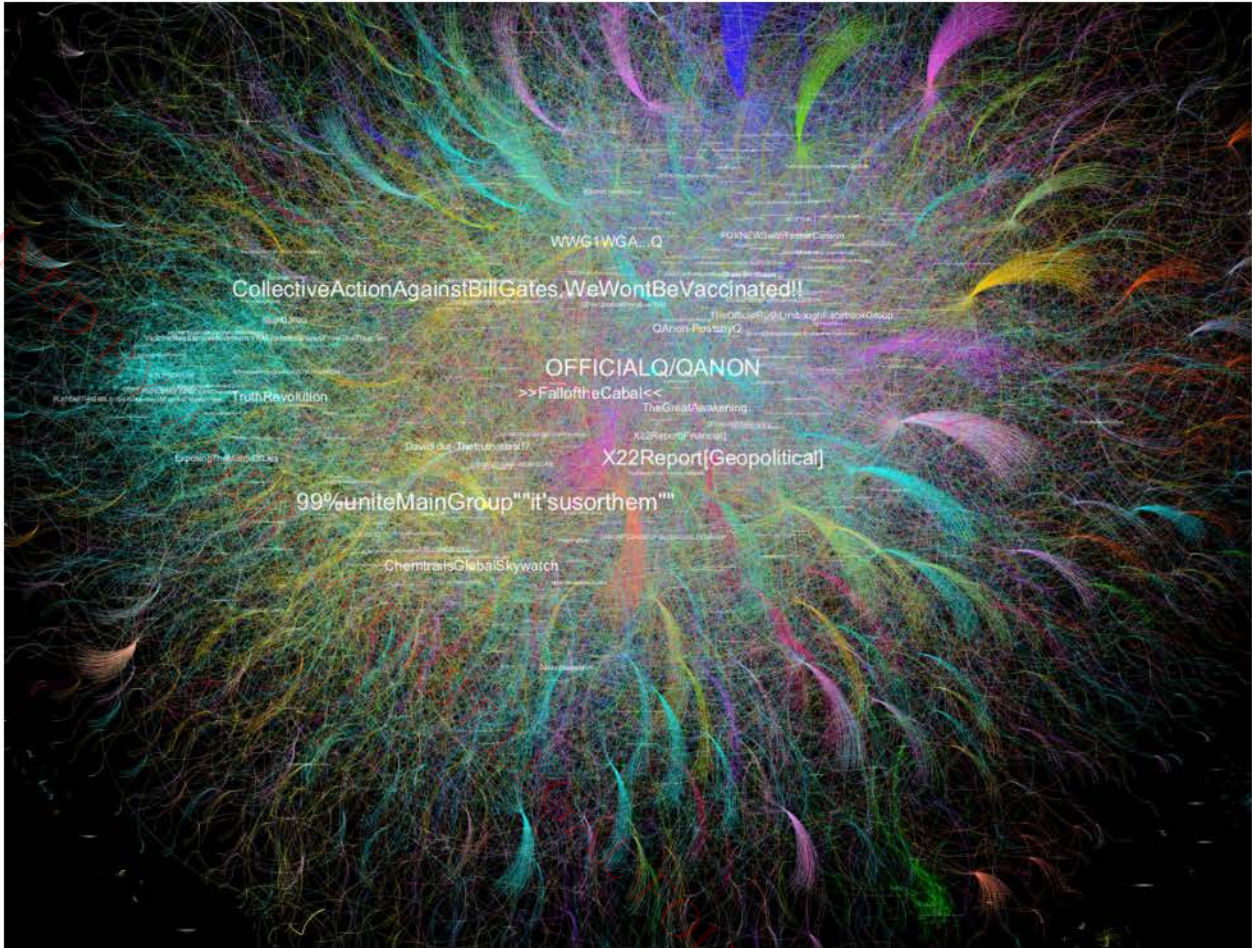
(U) A Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Film Attacking Vaccines Has Racked Up Millions of Views and Engagements on YouTube and Facebook: A film featuring a known anti-vaxxer pushing conspiracy theories and false claims about the novel coronavirus, including attacking vaccines, has racked up more than 9 million views on YouTube. Additionally, the video and its reuploads have tallied more than 16 million Facebook engagements. The spread of the film -- called "Plandemic" -- through reuploads on YouTube shows the platform's continuing issues with enforcing its policies against coronavirus misinformation during this public health crisis.

In March, as the disease spread throughout the United States, YouTube **wrote** that it had "worked to prevent misinformation associated with the spread of the virus" and would "quickly remove videos that violate our policies when they are flagged, including those that discourage people from seeking medical treatment or claim harmful substances have health benefits."

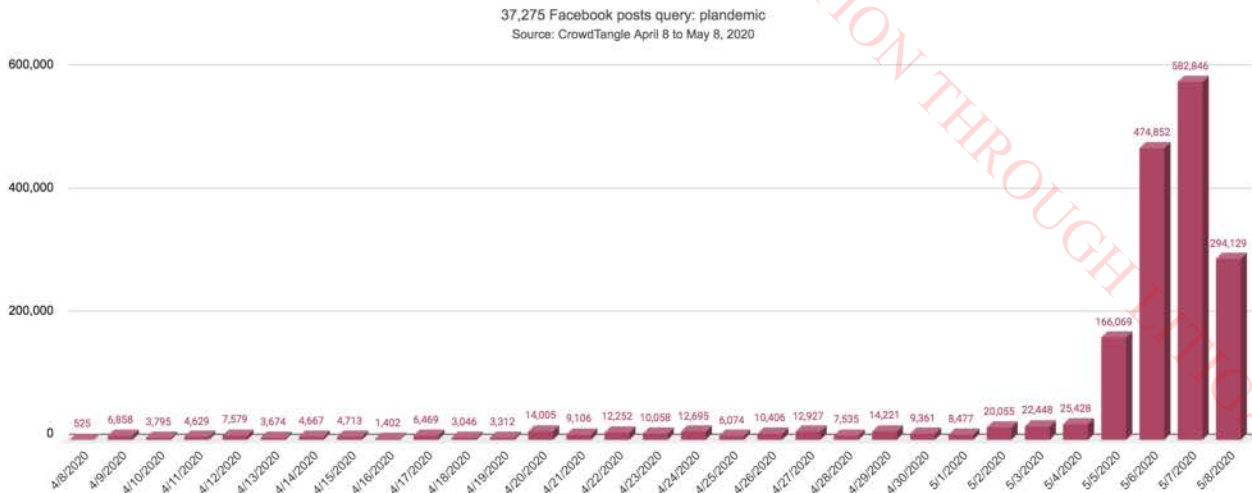
Yet despite that promise -- and despite YouTube's attempts to take the video down for **violating its policies** -- "Plandemic" has gone viral on the platform, and has been going viral on Facebook and even **trending on Twitter**. In the video, a filmmaker named **Mikki Willis** interviews Dr. Judy Mikovits, a former chronic fatigue researcher whose **claims have been retracted** by a scientific journal and who was arrested for "allegedly stealing equipment belonging to the Institute that fired her." (Source: Media Matters)

(U) Facebook Groups and YouTube Enabled Viral Spread of Plandemic Misinformation: DFR Lab made a network graph of 37,275 public "plandemic" Facebook posts containing URLs from April 8 to May 8, 2020. The larger, visible labels are highly active Facebook groups with tens of thousands of members. These Facebook groups are the central hubs in the network. The graph contains links to YouTube and links to other websites outside of Facebook, but links to YouTube are the most common URLs.

The core of the network (filtered out all nodes with less than 50 edges). QAnon, antivax and general conspiracy themed Facebook groups were the most active hubs on Facebook.



Network graph of 37,275 public "plandemic" Facebook posts from April 8 to May 8, 2020



I will continue to explore this data and may add more information later, but I suspect many people are looking for explanations as to how this video went so incredibly viral, so quickly and I think these visualizations help to illustrate what happened. The video spread from YouTube to Facebook thanks to

highly active QAnon and conspiracy-related Facebook groups with tens of thousands of members which caused a massive cascade. Both platforms were instrumental in spreading viral medical misinformation. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) Gov. Whitmer Becomes Target of Dozens of Threats on Private Facebook Groups Ahead of Armed Rally in Lansing: Dozens of angry Michiganders, fueled by conspiracy theories and disinformation about the coronavirus, are promoting violence and mobilizing armed rallies against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on Facebook, in violation of the social media company's policies.

Metro Times gained access to four private Facebook groups that can only be seen by approved members. The pages, which have a combined 400,000 members, are filled with paranoid, sexist, and grammar-challenged rants, with members encouraging violence and flouting the governor's social-distancing orders.

On Sunday, after being contacted by *Metro Times*, Facebook removed one of the groups, Michigan United for Liberty, and deleted posts on others for violating the company's policy against inciting violence. Facebook announced last month that it will remove groups and events that encourage people to defy social-distancing measures. Facebook also is investigating the other groups.

Assassinating Whitmer is a common theme among members of the groups. Dozens of people have called for her to be hanged.

"We need a good old fashioned lynch mob to storm the Capitol, drag her tyrannical ass out onto the street and string her up as our forefathers would have," a member wrote in a group called "People of Michigan vs. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer," which had nearly 9,000 members as of Monday morning. (Detroit Metro Times)

(U) How Covid-19 Conspiracy Theorists Are Exploiting YouTube Culture: Experts have said that social-media platforms' moves to [prioritize reliable information](#) and demonetize, limit the reach of, or outright [remove](#) content containing misinformation can help limit its spread. But platforms have struggled with effective enforcement. Health misinformation poses its own challenges, and existing conspiracy theories and false claims are adapting and spreading in the current pandemic [faster than fact-checking](#)—or sometimes [science](#)—can catch up.

But an interview with Bet-David and a review of [other conspiracy-riddled activity](#) on YouTube shows that in fact, many prominent peddlers of conspiracy theories are successfully using the system exactly as intended—applying the same techniques that many YouTubers have used to become famous: collaborating with more mainstream channels that have not been banned.

Anti-vaccine activists are particularly good at gaining views on virtually any social app, says Renee DiResta, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory who works to combat this type of misinformation. "They are on every single social platform—even TikTok," she says. "If they can create content people will find if they search for a specific term, they'll invest the time."

The relationship between fringe and mainstream YouTubers can be symbiotic, according to Alice Marwick, an assistant professor in communication at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“Both members of the discussion are trying to benefit,” she says. “The fringe person from getting this mainstream, and the mainstream from getting a potentially increased audience.”

While YouTube [bans](#) creators who break the rules too many times in a row, some conspiracy theorists are using collabs and [interviews](#) as a workaround, getting other YouTubers to either host them or talk about them on their channels. (Source: MIT Technology Review)

(U) **Germany: Politicians worry about radicalization at anti-lockdown protests:** German lawmakers from across the political spectrum on Monday warned that the growing wave of anti-lockdown protests could provide fertile ground for radicalization, including from the far-right. Over the weekend, [thousands of people gathered](#) in cities across Germany to demand an end to restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

They warned that the demonstrations and conspiracy theories were [fomenting violence against journalists](#) and police. Over the weekend, a group of right-wing extremists attacked a group of journalists in the city of Dortmund, following two similar attacks on reporters in Berlin earlier this month.

There have also been sporadic reports of assaults and resistance to police officers. In the western town of Troisdorf on Monday, two people who attempted to enter a supermarket without wearing the required facemasks were arrested after attacking the police officers who were called to check on the disturbance.

On Saturday, some 3,000 people rallied in Munich to demand that all pandemic-related restrictions be lifted, many of them not wearing masks and in defiance of an order that protests not exceed more than 50 people. Multiple smaller protests were held in Berlin, as well as Stuttgart and Dortmund.

Authorities have noted that not only are far-right groups a regular feature at the demonstrations, but anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists as well. Instead of reducing the prevalence of anti-vaccine sentiment, the pandemic appears to be spreading false claims that vaccines actually spread diseases or are used as a tool of government control.

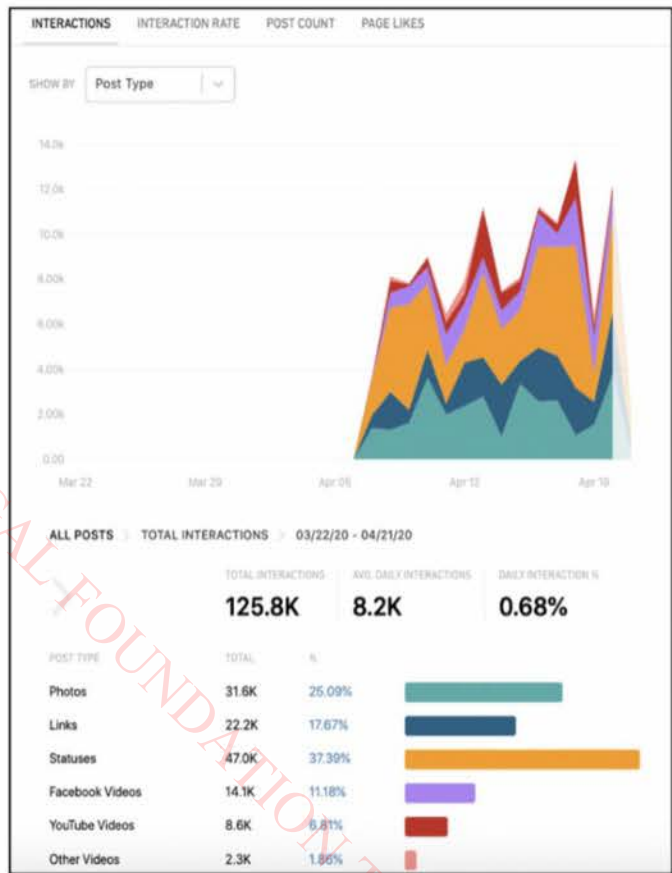
Other major far-right and false claims made by the protestors include the idea that lockdown measures are being used to slowly install a dictatorship, that 5G digital networks are causing the spread of the virus, or that billionaires like Bill Gates are using the pandemic as a form of control over the public. (Source: DW)

(U) **5G COVID-19 Conspiracies Grip Georgia:** On social media, thousands of Georgians (country, not state) have been discussing conspiracy theories about the alleged link between 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19.

The theories that the mobile technology may pose a threat to health have been circulating for years. Last year, [The New York Times reported](#) that Russian disinformation campaigns were exploiting 5G health fears. For the most part, those discussions remained fringe, garnering little engagement. The increased anxiety and confusion brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has catapulted some of those conspiracies into the mainstream.

Much of the 5G coronavirus conspiracies in Georgia have been fueled by a large Georgian Facebook group called "STOP 5G GEORGIA!!!" which was created on April 7, 2020 and already has 13,436 members.

A CrowdTangle analysis showed that the Facebook group has expanded rapidly over the past few weeks. The total interactions with the group's posts between April 7–21 approached 126,000. The most interacted with pieces are statuses and photos shared to the group.



A CrowdTangle analysis of the Georgian 5G conspiracies Facebook group's expansion and interactions. (Source: EtoBuziashvili/DFRLab via CrowdTangle)

(Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) Twitter Disputes State Department Claims China Coordinated Coronavirus Disinformation

Accounts: Twitter pushed back on an assertion from the US State Department Friday that it was "highly probable" that the Chinese government coordinated networks of Twitter accounts to disseminate disinformation related to the coronavirus outbreak, saying their initial review of the accounts in question does not support the government's claims.

Lea Gabrielle, head of the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) -- which works to coordinate efforts to expose foreign disinformation and propaganda -- said the US "has uncovered a

new network of inauthentic Twitter accounts, which we assess were created with the intent to amplify Chinese propaganda and disinformation."

However, an initial review from Twitter of more than 5,000 accounts turned over to them by the State Department cast doubt on the claims. According to Twitter, they have instead found that numerous accounts belong to government entities, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists. The review was ongoing, the company said, noting that it planned to follow up with the GEC on its findings.

A State Department spokesperson told CNN that "the GEC provided Twitter with a small sample of the overall dataset that included nearly 250,000 accounts," adding that it was "was not surprising that there are authentic accounts in any sample."

"Our overall analysis is based on a confluence of factors that drive our assessment, which we stand by," they said.

A subset of posts to the group claimed that coronavirus would naturally spread more widely in places with access to 5G, as the technology supposedly weakens the immune system.

Group members actively shared news of arson attacks on cell towers in different countries and endorsed those responsible for setting the towers on fire.

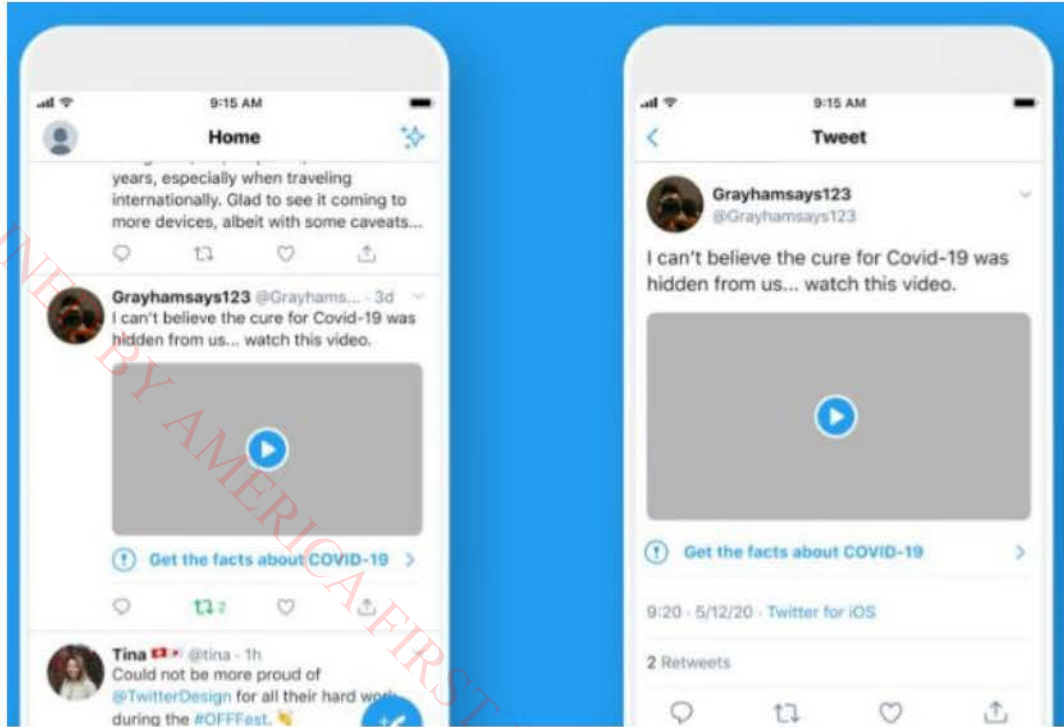
The group's admins also focused on mobilizing and expanding its membership. In posts to the group, admins called on society to expand it by adding more people and taking on-the-ground action, such as organizing massive protests against 5G in Georgia.

Georgian far-right group Alt-Info presented an alternative conspiracy theory involving 5G and coronavirus — blaming the United States for spreading 5G coronavirus disinformation worldwide to economically sabotage China. In a [YouTube video](#), Alt-Info claimed that there is a war on 5G dominance between the United States and China, and since the latter was faster in rolling out 5G technology, the United States spread conspiracies demonizing the technology in order to undermine China's success. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) Twitter Will Start Labeling Misleading or Disputed Coronavirus Tweets: The new labels will apply in situations where the risk of harm is not severe enough to remove the tweet, but could still confuse people, the company said in a [blog post](#). It's the latest effort from tech companies to expand their arsenal of tools to fight an influx of misinformation about the coronavirus.

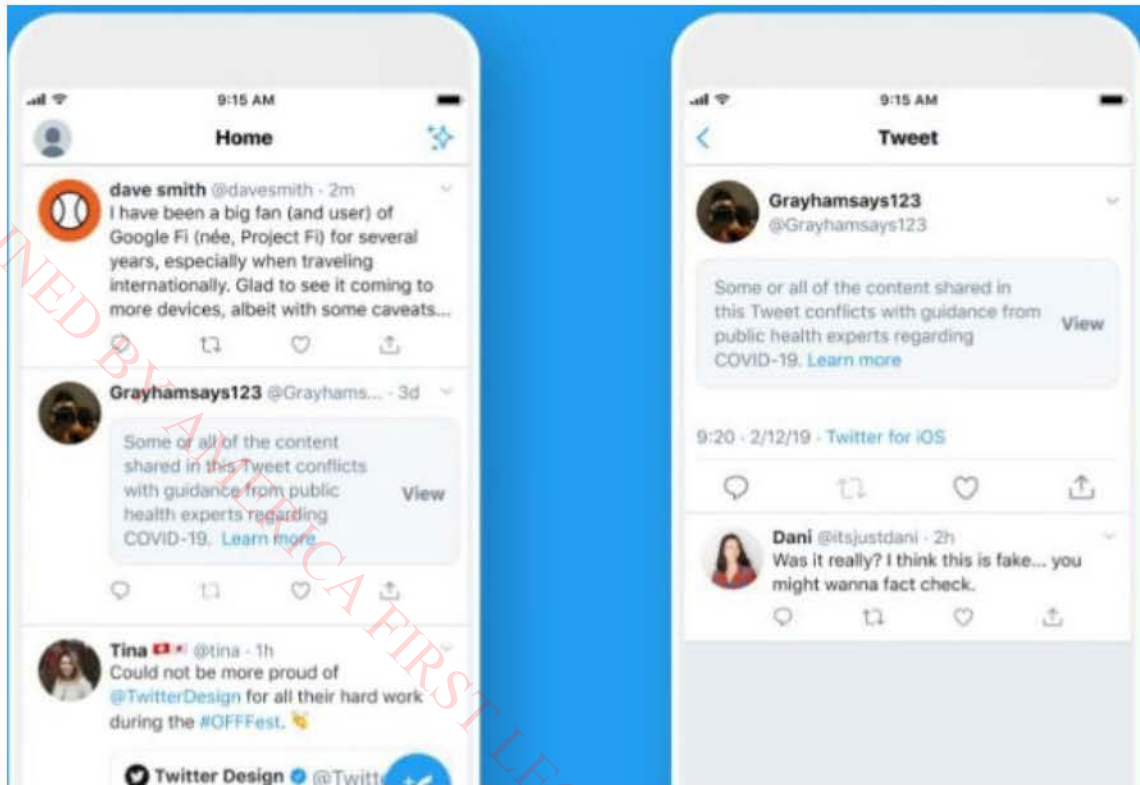
According to Twitter, "In March, we [broadened our policy](#) guidance to address content that goes directly against guidance on COVID-19 from authoritative sources of global and local public health information. Moving forward, we may use these labels and warning messages to provide additional explanations or clarifications in situations where the risks of harm associated with a Tweet are less severe but where people may still be confused or misled by the content. This will make it easier to find facts and make informed decisions about what people see on Twitter.

"During active conversations about disputed issues, it can be helpful to see additional context from trusted sources. [Earlier this year](#), we introduced a new label for Tweets containing synthetic and manipulated media. Similar labels will now appear on Tweets containing potentially harmful, misleading information related to COVID-19. This will also apply to Tweets sent before today.



“These labels will link to a [Twitter-curated page](#) or external trusted source containing additional information on the claims made within the Tweet.

“Depending on the propensity for harm and type of misleading information, warnings may also be applied to a Tweet. These warnings will inform people that the information in the Tweet conflicts with public health experts’ guidance before they view it.”



(Source: Twitter)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening

- Today's U.S. Senate hearing with federal health experts has dominated traditional and social media. Many felt some of the testimony was contradictory to the current narrative being produced by state and federal government. People generally applauded or disagreed with this depending on political leanings
- There are growing concerns that people won't return to work both due to safety concerns and because they're making more though unemployment. This is leading some governors to voice concerns that a second round of economic woes could be around the corner with businesses being forced to close due to a lack of staff.
- FEMA mention on social media has remained steady throughout the day. There is limited discussion of FEMA's role in providing food for food banks and whether or not the agency will cover depopulation costs for farmers and ranchers.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- In addition to reporting on this morning's Senate hearing, broadcast media is increasingly interested in the newly proposed \$3 trillion HEROES Act and House Speaker's expected comments.
- FEMA mention in traditional media is broad and includes concerns about the safety of ventilators imported from Russia, PPE arrivals, congressional officials' advocating for the agency to support food banks and cover one state's pandemic expenses.

- **Dr. Fauci's testimony** and the Senate hearings dominated social media conversation throughout the course of the day. There was a high level of interest in what the country's top health advisor for COVID-19 would have to say today.
 - Many felt the testimony was contradictory to much of the messaging the public has been receiving from the state and federal government. Some applauded this feeling it was an honest portrayal of the facts, others felt it was pushing an agenda.
- There is increasing concern that even if businesses reopen people will not return to work, which will have a lasting impact on the economy. This concern is two-fold:
 - Many feel businesses are reopening too soon and express **concerns for their health** if they have to go into work. There is a feeling that not enough guidance is being provided to employers on how to keep employees safe.
 - Others are sometimes **making more money collecting unemployment** than they would make in their daily jobs. This is leading many states to have to remind people they will no longer be eligible for unemployment if they choose not to return to work.
- A growing number of people are becoming frustrated **waiting for their stimulus payments** or unemployment insurance. Both were intended to help people navigate difficult financial times but many are feeling they have been let down. This is exacerbating the debate over when businesses should reopen.
- The debate over the need to wear masks in public spaces is ongoing. More people are pleading with others to wear masks in public to protect those most at risk.
- **Poll shows distrust** of contact tracing. Americans are split on whether they would use a voluntary cellphone-based contact tracing system established by public health officials to help stem the spread of coronavirus but broadly opposed to using one developed by tech companies, the federal government or internet providers.

(U) 5/11 Reporting

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines May 2-8:** The coronavirus remained an important topic in the Russian media ecosystem last week, though its margin of prominence again declined as compared to the previous week. Most pandemic content relayed basic news updates; although, critical responses to U.S. government officials' claims that the virus originated in a laboratory in China received a fair amount of attention. Russian government and diplomatic accounts on Twitter, along with a much smaller amount of content on websites and YouTube, continued a strong messaging push marking the 75th anniversary of VE Day, which is known as Victory Day and celebrated on May 9 in Russia. Common themes in this campaign emphasized the importance of the Soviet role in World War II, as well as cooperation and friendship with Allied countries.

The Hamilton dashboard collected about 15,000 tweets from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 2 and May 8 (figures as of 2pm on May 8). Like the previous week, less than half of the top ten hashtags related to the pandemic; although, total uses of pandemic-related hashtags outnumbered those of non-pandemic hashtags. In total, a little over 3,300 tweets mentioned "virus," "covid," and/or "outbreak," accounting for about 22 percent of posts and marking a second consecutive week of more than ten percent declines in coronavirus output on Twitter, as compared to the previous week. The absence of explicitly virus-related content in the top overall tweets further reflected this decline. Top tweets about the pandemic primarily consisted of basic news updates, as well as posts about cute or interesting animals, such as:



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 5

Jaarchaana polar bear plays volleyball with employees of the St. Petersburg Zoo where it resides to entertain itself during quarantine for the covid-19 pandemic <https://t.co/qjcpfnp19>

222 671



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 6

A large flock of sheep invades a Turkish city A large flock of sheep strolled down a central street in a city in Turkey, amid the curfew imposed by local authorities in an attempt to stop the spread of covid-19. <https://t.co/3nj33nhxOu>

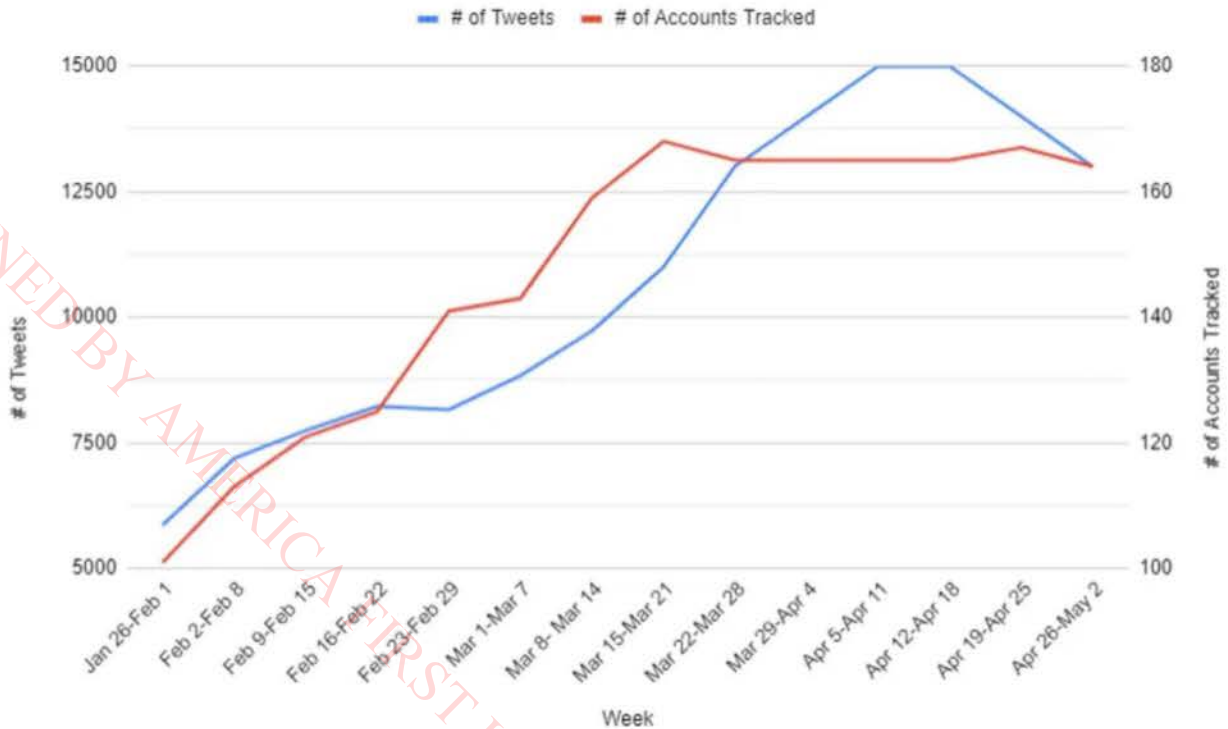
261 609

A little over 600 of the about 1,338 articles from Russian government-funded news websites collected on the dashboard last week mentioned “virus” in the first 200 words. As usual, this output mainly featured basic news updates. By a substantial margin, the [top article](#) by Facebook shares covered a development in research on the coronavirus. Articles of interest among the top overall articles by Facebook shares addressed several pandemic-related topics, including criticism of the UK’s coronavirus response and doubts about U.S. officials’ claims that the virus originated in a laboratory in China. An op-ed denouncing social media platform [bans](#) on conspiracy theorist David Icke was also noteworthy.

About two-thirds of the videos collected from Russian state-owned media on YouTube last week covered some facet of the pandemic. Notable among the coronavirus videos were a couple of videos on anti-lockdown protests, continuing criticism of the U.K. government’s coronavirus response, and efforts to prevent Chinese investors from buying global businesses during the global economic downturn. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)


(U) Chinese-State Backed Media COVID-19 Toplines May 2-8: As in previous weeks, coronavirus continued to dominate messaging from China’s state media and diplomatic outlets. State media highlighted [news that](#) two American mercenaries—part of a small force that planned to capture Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and extradite him to the United States—had been captured in Venezuela. Additionally, state media attacked the U.S. government’s positions on the coronavirus pandemic, seeking to cast doubt on the virus’s origins in China and demonstrating China’s support for multilateral efforts to combat its spread. Other messaging attempted to signal to foreign businesses and decisionmakers another step on the China’s return to normalcy following the coronavirus pandemic, while highlighting the negative effects the virus is having inside the United States.

As in previous weeks, almost all top hashtags were linked with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The Hamilton dashboard collected about 13,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts between May 2 and May 8 (figures as of 4pm on May 8). This continues a downward trend in overall Chinese activity on Twitter since mid-April. However, overall activity—both in number of tweets and number of accounts active—remains much higher than the beginning of the year, prior to the global spread of coronavirus (see chart below).



At its peak in early April, Chinese accounts tracked on Hamilton were tweeting nearly three times as much on a weekly basis as in late January. Even now, the overall number of weekly tweets remains at more than twice its earlier level (though, again, it is important to note that this is due in part to an increase in the total number of accounts monitored on the dashboard).

Top tweets criticized U.S. involvement in Venezuela and attacked the U.S. government’s position on the coronavirus pandemic, while also seeking to demonstrate China’s support for multilateral efforts to combat the virus’ spread.

- 
Hua Chunying 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6
 The #US is pressuring other countries in smear campaign against China. The choice is NOT between the US and China, but between LIES & FACTS, bullying & cooperation, unilateralism & multilateralism.
 272 1,304
- 
Hua Chunying 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6
 #WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said French #COVID19 case in December without link to China "gives us a whole new picture on everything" and urged countries to retest cases of atypical pneumonia in Nov-Dec 2019. <https://t.co/GIPsZjPft2>
 117 452
- 
CGTN America @cgtnamerica • May 5
 A mayor in the U.S. claims he had #coronavirus, as far back as November of 2019. Take a look at what he said. <https://t.co/uAcg3qqayW>
 11 20
- 
Hua Chunying 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • May 6
 China commends #EU for initiating Int'l Pledging Conference. China is joining ACT Accelerator&working with @CEPIvaccines & @gavi for global #COVID19 response. China backs #G20 debt moratorium&suspends debt repayments for 77 developing countries from May 1 to the end of this year.
 97 534

The most-shared story of the week focused on China’s race to develop a coronavirus vaccine, presenting news that a vaccine had been successfully tested on animals. Many of the other top stories shared on Facebook leaned hard into theories that the coronavirus pandemic did not originate inside of China. Three of the top ten most-shared stories on Facebook either cast doubt on the notion the virus

originated inside of China or that it had come from a lab in Wuhan. Other stories leaned hard into traditional themes of China's negative messaging, analyzing "attacks" on China from the Trump administration and presenting "experts" warning the United States against a more aggressive stance towards China. Another article decried U.S. interference in Hong Kong through the National Democratic Institute, while yet another highlighted racism towards the Chinese diaspora in Australia. Interestingly, a widely shared story that featured the Chinese ambassador to the United States casting doubt on the virus's origins inside China no longer appears to be available on CGTN's website.

(U) Russian Media Company Recruiting U.S. Journalists Ahead of 2020 Election: RT America, a newsgathering unit of Moscow-based media company RT, is looking to beef up its US staffing ahead of the 2020 election, a flurry of recent job postings shows. Formerly called Russia Today, it's the same stateside operation that was accused by intelligence agencies of spreading misinformation in the US prior to the 2016 election.

In September 2017, RT was forced by the Justice Department to register as a [foreign agent of the Russian government](#). At the time, RT representatives disputed the Justice Department's findings but said they agreed to register to avoid charges.

Currently, the company is posting on journalism job boards under the name RT — without disclosing its Russian roots or its alleged ties to Vladimir Putin's government.

One source who responded to an ad was called from a number in Moscow by a person identified as Igor Ogorodnev, the Web editor-in-chief in the US.

Ogorodnev told our source that he was interested in stories that can investigate the "rumor" that COVID-19 deaths are being exaggerated by US media outlets. (Source: New York Post)

(U) Conspiracy Theories Run Rampant When People Feel Helpless. Like Now: Psychologists have identified a number of [psychological traits](#) that are related to conspiracy beliefs, including the predisposition to see systematic patterns where there is only random noise or to interpret coincidence as intentional cause. But when it comes to a global pandemic — and the deaths, social isolation and collapsing economy that it has brought about — three other factors are key: uncertainty, anxiety and powerlessness.

Conspiracy theories, more than benign beliefs in wacky ideas about the Illuminati or aliens, actually do serve valuable psychological functions. They don't merely entertain us; they could be used to comfort us. They are tools for imposing structure on an unpredictable and unforgiving world, thereby relieving stress and reducing anxiety.

The less people feel in control of their world, however meek or grand, the more likely they are to seek out some method of restoring control — to fight their sense of powerlessness. The covid-19 pandemic is the ultimate power grab: No one knows when the threat will subside, what the economic impact will be or when a vaccine will be available. When events are, in actuality, out of our control, the psychological burden can be alleviated by turning to alternative explanations for events. In this case, we might choose to believe that covid-19 is a Chinese bioweapon, created in a lab and intentionally spread to cause harm. Alternative explanations such as this not only explain why things are as they are, but also incorporate the fact that one has no control over the situation.

Conspiracy theories nicely meet these criteria. Admittedly, they are ill-defined, illogical and, usually, just plain bizarre. But conspiracy theories aren't attractive to people because of these qualities, but rather for the subconscious functions they serve. A conspiracy theory can restore control — you know what happened and why, and you have the psychological relief to know that it was out of your control!

The story is similar when it comes to anxiety and uncertainty. The pandemic has increased people's worries about their physical, mental and economic health in both the short term and distant future. Conspiracy theories cannot remedy these circumstances. However, they can explain why these horrible circumstances have manifested and provide peace of mind that they are of no fault of one's own. Choosing to believe that the coronavirus is a hoax or that the threat has been strategically exaggerated for political purposes — two popular variants of covid-19 conspiracy theory — can reduce anxiety by playing down the severity of the circumstances. A purely psychological effect, to be sure — but, then again, we primarily live in our own heads. (Source: The Washington Post)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report

- The reopening of the economy is today's main topic of online conversation as many states are beginning to permit low-risk businesses to open while others set reopening dates with certain countermeasures in place.
- Mother's Day travel also formed a large part of the conversation as flight numbers spiked to their highest since March while many continue to worry of a possible second wave of COVID-19 infections due to loosened restrictions.
- Conversation about FEMA has increased since the weekend due to more coverage about the agency, mainly being driven by news of how FEMA legal aid has not been offered in the COVID-19 response despite furloughs, evictions and other problems.
- Traditional media coverage today included discussion of disaster legal aid for the public, the virus' impact on children, new White House staff safety guidance, and debates on whether different states are ready to reopen amid reported increases in positive cases. A congressional bill proposal intended to expand contact tracing and testing efforts through the use national service groups is recently gaining attention.
- New FEMA media coverage also features the Administrator's meeting with D.C.'s mayor and the expected hand-off of long-term supply acquisition tasks to Defense Logistics Agency.

(U//FOUO) Public Sentiment

- There continues to be a large amount of discussion about whether a [vaccine will be needed](#) following comments made by the Administration and CDC Director over the weekend.
- There remains a high volume of discussion about White House staff, [health officials](#), and [military leaders](#) testing positive or having to isolate due to exposure.
- This discussion continues to fuel debate about workplace safety, testing, and mask use.
 - An increasing number of people are wondering how they will handle childcare if the reopening of the economy does not correspond with the opening of schools – however, most feel it is also too early for children to return to school.
 - Many are discussing large crowds and people ignoring social distancing guidelines in many areas as families celebrated Mother's Day and went out over the weekend. [As videos of crowds are shared](#) there is debate over mask use, social distancing, and if it is too soon to reopen.

(U) **What Experts Say Works for Combating Coronavirus Misinformation:** When it comes to combating misinformation, research shows that it's more effective for authoritative figures to present accurate facts early and routinely alongside misinformation, rather than to try to negate every piece of misinformation after-the-fact by labeling it false or by calling it out as false.

1. **Proactive messaging:** According to [research](#) from Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and co-founder of FactCheck.org, gaps in the public's background knowledge about common sense flu cures, like whether vitamin C prevents viruses, show "ongoing need for effective communication of needed information long before a crisis."
2. **Pre-bunking:** Australian psychologist and professor Stephan Lewandowsky, who chairs the Cognitive Psychology department at the University of Bristol, argues that if people are made aware of the flawed reasoning found in conspiracy theories, they may become less vulnerable to such theories.
3. **Label misinformation at the source level:** In order to avoid chasing thousands, if not millions of pieces of misinformation during an "infodemic," Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz, co-CEOs of [NewsGuard](#), argue it's better to rate the sources of misinformation that are repeat offenders, like certain websites or authors, rather than pieces of content themselves.
4. **Go where fake news spreads:** According to Hall Jamieson, it's especially important that health care officials spread context in venues where people generally receive misinformation.
5. **The 10% rule:** Some experts, including Hall Jamieson, [say](#) it's better to wait until a piece of misinformation reaches a 10% penetration level amongst the population before it's debunked, otherwise, you risk unintentionally spreading the rumor further before it may ever reach a point where it's truly problematic.
6. **Prioritizing misinformation:** Hall Jamieson says that in addition to understanding what has the threshold to warrant debunking, health officials, policymakers, news organizations and others need to evaluate how problematic certain forms of misinformation are when determining how much they should invest in providing context. (Source: Axios)

(U) 5/7 Reporting

(U) **More Than 70 Cell Phone Towers in the UK Have Been Set on Fire Due to 5G-Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory:** A conspiracy theory claiming that 5G internet has somehow caused the spread of the coronavirus has led to more than 70 cell phone towers in the United Kingdom to become targets of arson attacks, according to a report [from Business Insider](#).

It was reported last month that the U.K. reported about 50 fires targeting towers, the majority of which was not 5G-enabled, and other equipment, but Mobile UK, an organization representing Britain's four mobile operators, told Business Insider Wednesday that the number has grown to 77.

The group, however, noted the rate of attacks was decreasing.

"Daily attacks are very low now but have not stopped entirely," a Mobile UK spokesperson told Business Insider.

But the equipment is not the only target. Several instances of telecom engineers being attacked or harassed have been reported.

"We have 40 incidents where people have attacked, either physically or verbally, our staff. We've had engineers being driven at by people and swerve away at the last minute, and we've even had one Openreach engineer stabbed and put in hospital," Philip Jansen, CEO of British telecom company BT, said in April in a [YouTube video](#).

Such conspiracy theories have grown in popularity recently as the number of coronavirus cases and deaths rise. The baseless claims have circulated online and [on social media](#), prompting Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to try to curb the spread of videos and content falsely tying the spread of the virus to 5G. (Source: The Hill; Business Insider)

(U) **"Plandemic" COVID-19 Disinformation Documentary Goes Viral:** The "Plandemic" documentary appears to have first appeared on more fringe conspiracy corners of the internet, before gaining traction recently on more mainstream platforms. YouTube continues to remove the content, but copies of the video keep resurfacing on different channels. In addition, additional dis/misinformation outlets now amplify the central claims of the video, and users amplify these claims organically.

The video makes salacious, unsubstantiated claims that question the official origin story of the virus and claim that the pandemic is part of an alleged government ploy to erode civil liberties. The documentary features prominent self-described "medical professionals" popular in anti-vaccination circles whose work has been repeatedly discredited by public health experts. (Source: YouTube)

(U) **Fake Labor Department COVID-19-Related Emails Attempt to Spread Malware:** In an apparent attempt to spread TrickBot malware, cybercriminals are sending fake emails designed to look like notifications from the Labor Department concerning changes to the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#), according to [IBM X-Force](#).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's growing interest in the Act, which can provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for employees who are ill or need to care for someone with a serious medical condition. Benefits from the program increased in March when President Donald Trump signed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, according to [U.S. News and World Report](#).

"Spam purporting to come from official and government entities has been increasing considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic, with cybercriminals developing spam to match trending news, developments, merchandise and initiatives surrounding the outbreak as a means to deliver unsolicited emails that attract recipients to open and launch attachments," Ashkan Vila, a security analyst with IBM X-Force, notes in the report. (Source: IBM, Data Breach Today)

(U) **New Survey Shows Americans Are Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media:** People often blame social media for [propagating misinformation](#), but these channels also offer an opportunity to mitigate the problem. [Our work](#), and the [work of others](#), demonstrates that [observational correction](#) — correction that occurs on social media where people can observe other people being corrected — reduces misperceptions.

Observational correction works because of the nature of social media. Correcting a friend, family member or stranger in person, on email, or in some other relatively private communication may [set that](#)

person straight about the facts on that topic. But doing the same on social media means that dozens of people — and perhaps thousands — can witness the correction.

In addition to the sheer scale that social media networks offer, other structural elements may improve correction efficacy. First, the correction occurs in proximity (temporally and spatially) to the original misinformation, increasing the likelihood that people hadn't had a chance to absorb the misinformation at all. Second, witnessing someone else being corrected may be less threatening than being corrected directly, but with all the same benefits.

Expert correction is particularly effective. When highly trusted groups like the CDC directly respond to users sharing misinformation on social media, people are likely to believe the correction.

Correction can also come from social media platforms themselves. For example, Facebook uses its "related articles" function to display debunking information from third-party fact-checkers. Our work shows that exposure to this type of information reduces public misperceptions.

In the previous week, 34 percent of people reported seeing someone else being told they shared misinformation regarding covid-19 on social media, and 23 percent reported having told someone they shared misinformation on the topic. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Defend Beijing on COVID-19:** Since April 20, pro-Beijing news stories related to COVID-19 have been published by the state-controlled news agency RIA Novosti, carrying the following headlines:

"Chinese media dispel myths about COVID-19"; "Biologist doubts bats caused pandemic"; "To survive, America must become China"; "China says there are no wild animal markets in the country"; "China appreciates Russia's approach to the origin of coronavirus" and "[Russia's] Foreign Ministry condemns attempts to blame pandemic on China and WHO".

In the same period, RT published pro-Beijing messages on its English online edition under the following headlines:

"'What's the US hiding?' Beijing slams Washington's Covid-19 response & 'desperate' attempts to pin blame on China"; "China is victim, not mastermind of Covid-19 disinformation – Foreign Ministry"; "Meddling will 'not succeed': Beijing rebukes Pompeo's charge of 'exploiting' Covid-19 crisis to boost influence in South China Sea" and "Beijing rejects Australia's 'groundless questions' on its handling of coronavirus".

The pro-Kremlin narrative was clear: Moscow and Beijing are in the same boat as victims of allegedly unjust accusations from the West. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **How the Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Network Capitalizes on the COVID-19 Outbreak:** A special strand of disinformation on the COVID-19 outbreak is the claim that there is no outbreak. It is a hoax; exaggerated by incompetent politicians, amplified by corrupt media and masterminded by shadowy rulers.

The first case in the Disinformation Database with this claim was detected January 29, when Russian news agency RIAFAN told the reports on the outbreak were merely a stunt by "Big Pharma" to up their profits.

This claim, “The COVID-19 Hoax”, has since been repeated several times: [here in Russian](#), [here in German](#), [in Russian again here](#), [in English here...](#)

The general idea is that the COVID-19 is exaggerated and is used as a pretext for different kinds of sinister plans, spun by more or less shadowy rulers. Pro-Kremlin sites describe how [mortality figures are exaggerated](#), how the “secret elites” are [brainwashing the public](#) for sinister reasons. The COVID-19 is a [grand scheme](#):

This has been on the drawing board for years. The final decision to go ahead NOW, was taken in January 2020 at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos – behind very much closed doors, of course. The Gates, GAVI (an association of vaccination-promoting pharmaceuticals), Rockefellers, Rothschilds et al, they are all behind this decision

This quote appeared [mid-March in Russia-based South Front](#), brought to the audience from the Canadian conspiracy site Global Research. All the elements of the trope is there: the COVID-19 is not a pandemic: “*there is not the slightest trace of a pandemic*”; it’s not worse than any old seasonal flu; “*The common flu in Europe in the 2019 / 2020 season, has apparently so far killed about 16,000*”, and fiendish forces scheming to control us all: “*isn’t that what the “Black Men” behind this intended pandemic want – chaos, panic, hopelessness, leading to human vulnerability – a people becoming easy prey for manipulation?*”

The Plandemic

Mid-March seems also to be the big breakthrough for the [Bill Gates Conspiracy](#). He has, as we see from the quote above, the role in this conspiracy theory as one of those who planned the pandemic.

Around this time, the hashtag “[Plandemic](#)” appears on Twitter, suggesting that the COVID-19 outbreak is merely a scheme by fiendish forces to curb personal freedoms. The hashtag is often connected to other conspiracy theory tropes and fits seamlessly into a current of discontent with the quarantine restrictions. This allows the pro-Kremlin disinformation network to expand into new audiences.

This trope boils down to one of the [core narratives](#) used by the pro-Kremlin disinformation network: The Elites vs. The People. The outlets define themselves as a “voice of the people”, which challenges elites controlling corporations, media and politicians. The narrative can be – and has been – adopted to literally any challenging situation. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) A Majority of Vaccine Skeptics Plan to Refuse a COVID-19 Vaccine, a Study Suggests, and That Could Be a Big Problem: According to [some estimates](#), 50% to 70% of Americans would need to develop immunity to COVID-19 – either naturally, or via a vaccine – in order to thwart the spread of the virus. If these estimates are correct, that could mean that nearly twice as many Americans would need to elect to receive a COVID-19 vaccine than those who currently opt to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza. [Just 37%](#) of American adults did so in 2017-2018, even in the midst of a [historically severe](#) flu season.

Making matters more complicated is the possibility that people who hold skeptical views about vaccine safety – sometimes referred to as “anti-vaxxers” – will not opt to receive the coronavirus vaccine. According to some estimates, about [one-fifth](#) to [two-fifths](#) of Americans express reservations about

vaccine safety. If most of these individuals forego receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, they could potentially jeopardize the recovery process.

We asked respondents whether they would be willing to get vaccinated against COVID-19 once a vaccine becomes available. Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents said that they would not.

Prominent anti-vaxx outlets continue to promote COVID-19 related disinformation (Source: Researchers from Universities of Minnesota and Oklahoma)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening:**

- An increasing number of states are beginning to enter phase one of their reopening plans. For most that means many restaurants and retail stores will begin to reopen with limitations. Cities are thinking through ways to further help restaurants stay safe while still increasing their business with some considering closing streets to allow increased outdoor seating space.
- There continues to be a high level of skepticism directed at the government and media. People question if death tolls are accurate with people split between feeling numbers are over or under reported. No matter which side people fall on, they often feel numbers are being manipulated to support a given agenda.
- Traditional media coverage has broadly focused on the virus' negative impact on unemployment, PPE distribution updates and fears of federal interference, and potential medical treatments for the virus. Hurricane preparedness slowly continues gaining traction, specifically related to how FEMA's staffing vacancies and state governments' budget deficits may limit their respective response capabilities.

(U//FOUO) *Sentiment Analysis*

- Public speculation about the validity of claims about COVID-19 is growing and trust in the federal government is declining as people increasingly feel information is being kept from them. This has led to a growing number of conspiracy theories being shared across social media.
 - Individuals are increasingly voicing frustration and mistrust of public health data and projections, claiming that it has often been wrong and is changing frequently.
 - This is causing some frontline workers to grow increasingly frustrated and fatigued feeling the right message is not being received by the general public.
- There is a high volume of discussion regarding reports that the Administration has shelved a CDC document meant to provide guidance on when and how to reopen public spaces.
 - Public reaction is largely political with people questioning or supporting the Administration's decisions.
- There is a growing concern about the President's exposure to COVID-19 following news reports that one of his personal valets has tested positive.
 - One Maine senator says he is interested in getting tested as U.S. Senate has reconvened on Capitol Hill.

(U) **False Claims on Patents Fuel Novel COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Online:** Posts on social media claim there is a US patent on the novel coronavirus and a European one for a vaccine, citing specific patent numbers. This is false; the US number relates to an application about a different coronavirus, and the European number is for a patent aimed at a disease that afflicts poultry.

“Something just since the beginning hasn’t seemed right with this coronavirus,” a California chiropractor, says in a video posted on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

“There is a patent on it -- it’s patent US2006257852 -- a US patent on the coronavirus,” he says. “It’s called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, and that was applied for in 2006.”

And “there’s a European patent on a coronavirus vaccine -- European patent EP3172319B1 that was applied for in 2014, and what do you know, it was just granted in November of 2019. What perfect timing,” he says.

Having said at the start of the video that school closures due to the novel coronavirus had affected his family, he claims that a “big pharmaceutical play” could be behind the emergency. (Source: AFP FactCheck)

(U) Russian-State Baked Media COVID-19 Disinformation Declining, Increased Focus on Ukraine: Out of 55 disinformation messages we tracked this week, 31 still focused on the coronavirus. In addition to the usual conspiracies about the coronavirus being used to achieve [world dominance](#) or being a [Western operation](#), we also found one that uses the “lost sovereignty card”: American lobbyists will force Poland to [buy more weapons](#) to help the struggling US economy. In other words, using the coronavirus for disinformation purposes to smear opponents continues.

As we wrote last week, the pro-Kremlin media is slowly [turning away from the virus](#) and it seems the left-over attention has turned back towards Ukraine. Looking back to December last year, we found weeks where the number of cases about Ukraine fell as low as 4. However, this week we got 16 cases with some focusing on the age-old topics like Euromaidan, MH17 crash and the war in eastern Ukraine. Probably inspired by the virus, there are also cases claiming secret US laboratories in Ukraine might have [provoked cholera](#) or plans to [close biolabs in Ukraine](#) made the US start supporting Euromaidan. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) 5/6 Reporting

(U) Ongoing Pro-China Information Operation Uses Social Media Bot Network To Amplify COVID-19 Disinformation: An ongoing information operation is using a network of bots made up of newly created and stolen accounts to target a businessman, exiled from China, who has spoken critically of China’s response to COVID-19.

Yet identifying the network has revealed a much larger operation amplifying content across multiple languages, platforms, countries, and topics, with links to information operations against protests in Hong Kong, as well as involving cryptocurrency, coronavirus disinformation, and the most significant of all, the long-standing targeting of Guo Wengui, an exiled Chinese businessman residing in the United States.

Over a period of nine days, a Bellingcat investigator captured data from Twitter, both in real-time and past, and conducted an ongoing analysis of the dataset as it grew. This report will show the initial findings from the dataset.

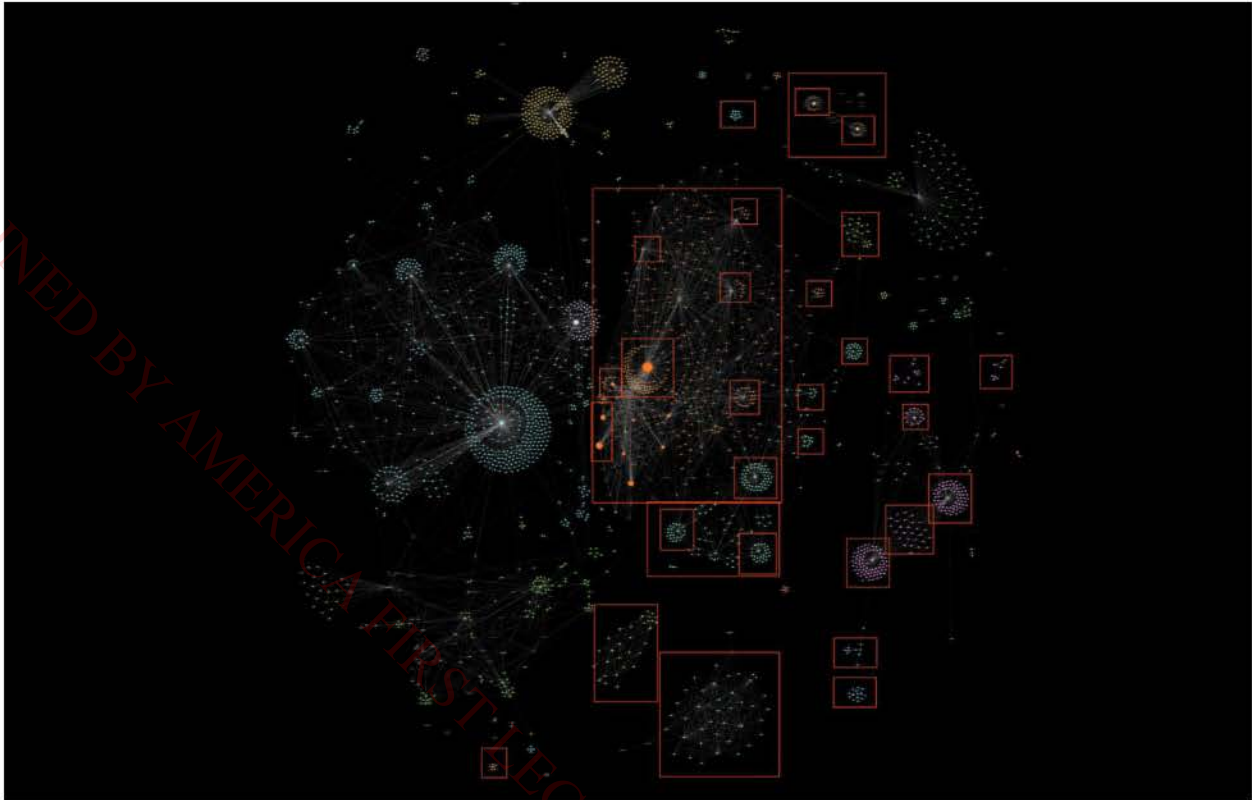
The findings indicate that there is a well-structured information campaign displaying a number of criteria similar to those of past campaigns identified as “significant state-backed information

operations” originating from within the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in a disclosure report by Twitter in August 2019.

This report does not focus on the veracity of the targets of the information operation, nor does it seek to discredit or support the claims presented herein. The analysis is on the structure and operations of the network alone.



Structure of the Network



This network operates in a structured manner to ensure brand new accounts with zero followers and zero accounts following are able to post one tweet and have that tweet magnified with, on average, between 200 and 1000 likes and retweets.

This can be seen in the image above. The red boxes included are clusters that operate within this network to post and amplify the campaign's agenda.

This is a sustainable and effective model for the network — when it suffers account closures and mass deletions, it can simply create new accounts to re-support that model.

To carry out that task, the network consists of two limbs: posters and amplifiers. Each has their function in the chain of operations. This can be seen in the image below, which shows central accounts that would have posted content, and the surrounding accounts that retweeted it.

Creation of New Accounts To Fuel The Network

The network supports its operations by creating new accounts every day. Over the time the dataset was collected, many new accounts were created to join the network.

Over the space of four days, the following numbers joined the network:

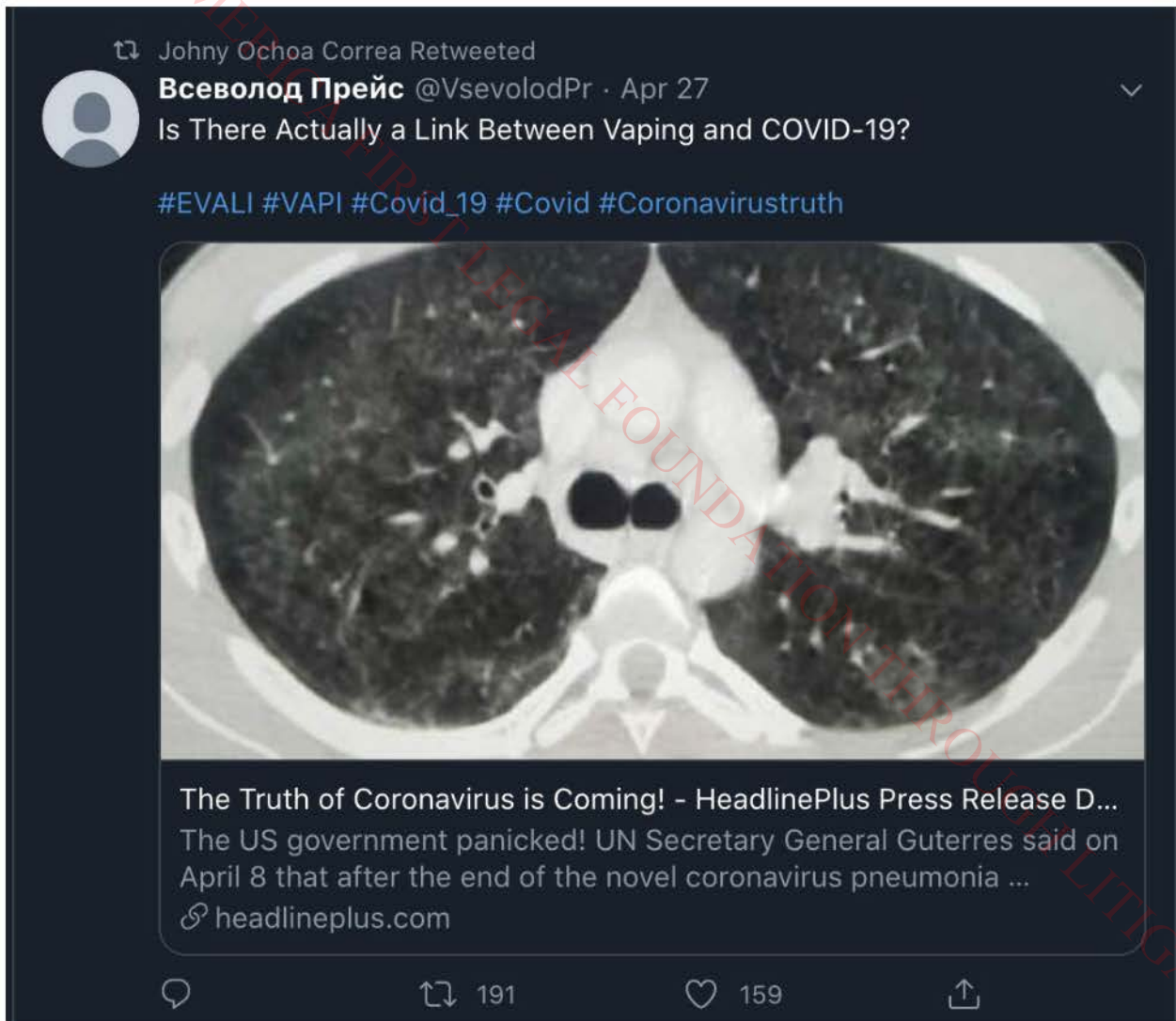
- April 27, 2020: 52 accounts
- April 28, 2020: 97 accounts
- April 29, 2020: 109 accounts

- April 30, 2020: 151 accounts

COVID-19 Content

That same cluster seen above has also amplified specific posts on COVID-19, targeting the U.S. These accounts posting the content follow the same structure of name, account creation, and targeted campaign areas.

The posts seen include subject matter of health posts on links between vaping and COVID-19 and allegations of biosecurity incidents in the U.S. with the tags #coronavirus and #TruthAboutCovid. Examples can be seen below, these are screenshots from two of the same accounts that were seen amplifying pro-Beijing content on cryptocurrency, Elon Musk, and Hong Kong (Johny Ochoa Correa, Наталья).



Again, the retweets of the above post follow the same signs present among amplifiers in the network.


@VsevolodPr

Is There Actually a Link Between Vaping and COVID-19?

#EVALI #VAPI #Covid_19 #Covid #Coronavirustruth

Trends for

Retweeted by

-  **Иван**
@npPr9BvvE2Pm9p3 [Follow](#)
-  **Али**
@VLoedJBntIPRSdn [Follow](#)
-  **andris berzins**
@andrisberzins12 [Follow](#)
-  **Азирет**
@0OePwcVXYVKMrMX
Fghgdddgrhexevycsaartycrzezrgx [Follow](#)
-  **Марина Куликова**
@SBixlBm7TzYFzkG [Follow](#)
-  **Татьяна**
@yTUkxary4fNtdEg
бла бла бла [Follow](#)
-  **Олег**
@QW7dhfrvQ68Qjtk
Особо не чего [Follow](#)
-  **Алла Черняк**
@OZBeKhLmqWtPS8K
Я просто человек! [Follow](#)

The Truth of C
The US govern
that after the
headlineplu

3:13 AM · Apr 2

191 Retweets

OBTAINED BY AMERICAN OVERSIGHT FOUNDATION THROUGH LITIGATION

Дмитрий Retweeted



Всеволод Прейс @VsevolodPr · Apr 30

The virus "variola" was found in NIH Bethesda campus!
We believe that there are more biosecurity incidents in the United States that have not been revealed!

#coronavirus #Covid_19 #COVID_19 #TruthAboutCovid



159

291

IMG

and onsite biosafety personnel have not identified any infectious exposure risk to lab workers or the public.

Late on July 7, the vials were transported safely and securely with the assistance of federal and local law enforcement agencies to CDC's high-

containment

4 lab confirm

variola sampl

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facilities and

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Retweeted by



Наталья

@VQQcKrJLcAfsKWj

жизни рада

Follow



Саида

@ihcRAep4L7hekqo

Читать люблю

Follow



Johny Ochoa Correa

@JohnyOC2

Follow



Олег

@QW7dhfrvQ68QjtK

Особо не чего

Follow



Евгения

@Jc3NtmVsgTFwoPT

Follow



giang

@giang93042568

Từng làm giám đốc tại gia

Follow



Не Скажу)

@gtog6IKFbazLvvQ

нет

Follow



Колян

@riEN8nrBbBH5Gxw

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9:24 PM · Apr 30, 2020 · Twitter Web App

159 Retweets 291 Likes

Summary of Findings

This analysis shows that there is an active network of accounts targeting subjects in a coordinated approach to skew the narrative around varying topics, and to push set agendas. Many of these agendas are supportive of the Chinese government and critical of either popular figures or protestors who are against it.

The network operates through consistent account creation to add more numbers and seeming veracity to its network, using a system of poster and amplifier accounts to “stage” trending topics, and to provide the illusion of viral tweets.

This network exists on both Twitter and Facebook.

Content of the accounts correlates with findings made in the past, both by Twitter and other entities, of state-linked information operations that are being run out of People’s Republic of China. (Source: Bellingcat)

(U) Facebook Takes Down White Supremacist and QAnon Networks: Facebook also took down two U.S. networks linked to the Q-Anon fringe conspiracy theory and white-supremacist websites VDare and Unz Review. QAnon promotes a conspiracy theory about a deep state that seeks to overthrow Trump and has pushed conspiracies that Bill Gates and 5G networks caused the coronavirus outbreak. VDare and Unz promote content with anti-Semitic and anti-Asian themes.

Facebook discovered the networks while investigating suspected inauthentic coordinated behavior ahead of the 2020 elections. The takedowns show that domestic actors are learning from foreign influence campaigns, says Nathaniel Gleicher, head of security policy at Facebook.

Facebook also took down hundreds of fake Iranian accounts targeting U.S. voters. Many of the accounts had low numbers of followers but used the same kinds of content as other Iranian networks Facebook has taken down in the past, [the company said](#). Some of the pages, which were run by Iran’s state broadcaster, were active as far back as the 2012 Republican primaries, researchers at the firm Graphika found. (Source: Facebook, Graphika)

(U) Facebook Claims Recently Removed Pro-Russian Disinformation Outlets Were Involved in Coordinated Unauthentic Behavior: On April 30, as part of a larger takedown, Facebook removed 140 assets connected to Russian propaganda outlets *News Front* and *South Front*.

According to Facebook: “The individuals behind this activity relied on a combination of authentic, duplicate and fake accounts — many of which had been previously detected and disabled by our automated systems. They used fake accounts to post their content and manage Groups and Pages posing as independent news entities in the regions they targeted. This network posted about geopolitical and local news including topics such as the military conflict in Ukraine, the Syrian civil war, the annexation of Crimea, NATO, US elections, and more recently the coronavirus pandemic. Our investigation linked this activity to individuals in Russia and Donbass, and two media organizations in Crimea — NewsFront and SouthFront.” (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

Hackers Using Fake Web Domains that Mimic Coronavirus Information Pages From Top Retailers to Try to Steal Consumers' Personal and Financial Information: The retailers include Walmart and Costco, [threat intelligence researchers at Mimecast found](#). (Source: Mimecast)

(U) White Supremacist Violent Extremists Known As “Accelerationists” Are Advancing Conspiracy Theories and Propaganda Against Jews and Migrants Online to Promote Calls for Social Upheaval Amidst COVID-19:

Accelerationism is the most violent ideology in the global white supremacist movement. Accelerationists believe that a race war is inevitable and that social upheaval is necessary in order to begin rebuilding society based on white power. Accelerationist propaganda will be energized by the pandemic, as accelerationists believe that the social upheaval they endorse has been made possible by the images of death leading the mainstream news. (Source: Foreign Policy Research Institute)

(U) The World’s Attention Has Shifted from Extremism to the Health and Economic Impacts of COVID-19, However, the Threat of Violent Extremism Has Been Exacerbated During the Crisis:

The pandemic creates six new obstacles: 1. Young people are spending more time online, increasing the chance of radicalization 2. Rumors surrounding COVID-19 targeting minority communities call for violent action 3. Community policing now focuses on enforcing lockdowns 4. Government responses in the form of reducing community gatherings and increased unemployment may exacerbate drivers for radicalization 5. Confidence in local authorities is flagging 6. Budgets for preventing violent extremism are being diverted to COVID-19. (Source: Brookings Institution)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- The social media conversation today included an increase in concern about meat processing plants, potential surges of cases linked to loosened social distancing guidelines, and rural outbreaks of COVID-19. Many continue to discuss recurring topics such as PPE supplies, widespread testing, and the debate over when and how to reopen.
- Conversation about FEMA has increased significantly due to renewed coverage from several national outlets exploring FEMA’s PPE supply chain management and alleged influence from the White House on that process.
- While traditional news coverage remains focused on growing congressional interest in the federal supply chain, nursing homes generate renewed interest following state governors growing concerns of data gaps, seniors’ vulnerability, and need for PPE. FEMA mention continues to revolve volunteers assigned by White House administration officials to help acquire PPE for the agency.

(U//FOUO) Sentiment Analysis

- In a traditional news article about the aversion to wearing masks in public places experts offered suggestions on why some members of the public continue to push back:
 - Mental fatigue of constantly calculating risk associated with each activity
 - Not seeing leaders wearing them
 - A dislike for being told what to do
- There continues to be debate about meat processing plants and meat inspector safety upon news of 145 meat inspectors diagnosed with COVID-19. Many are expressing distrust towards the media, saying it’s magnifying the problem, while there continues to be a general calling for more safety measures for meat industry employees.
 - A small amount of people also question the safety of buying and consuming meat, worrying that the supply could be infected with COVID-19.

- There is growing concern about the spread of COVID-19 in rural areas where outbreaks in prisons, nursing homes, and meat processing plants are contributing to increased exposure in local communities.
 - Many worry that the demographics of rural areas increase vulnerability, particularly among the working poor and the elderly.
 - Members of the medical community and local residents express concern about the limited capacity and resources of rural healthcare systems.

(U) 5/5 Reporting

(U) 5G Disinformation Website Calls for Global Anti-5G Protest on June 6: The website stop5ginternational.org, which is devoted to 5G disinformation, has called for global anti-5G protests on June 6. Recently, erroneous narratives associating 5G technology with COVID-19 have proliferated on the internet. The website claims to have already facilitated previous protests across the world, including in four U.S. cities.

(U) Harmful Misinformation on COVID-19 has Been Shared More Than 1.7 million Times on Facebook and Viewed an Estimated 117 Million Times: Millions of Facebook's users are still being put at risk of consuming harmful misinformation on coronavirus at a large scale. Representing only the tip of the misinformation iceberg, we found that the pieces of content we sampled and analyzed were shared over 1.7 million times on Facebook, and viewed an estimated 117 million times.

Even when taking into consideration the commendable efforts Facebook's anti-misinformation team has applied to fight this infodemic, the platform's current policies were insufficient and did not protect its users.

Of the 41% of this misinformation content that remains on the platform without warning labels, 65% has been debunked by partners of Facebook's *very own* fact-checking program. Throughout the timeframe of our research, this content remained on the platform despite the company's promise to issue "strong warning labels" for misinformation flagged by fact-checkers and other third party entities, and remove misinformation that could contribute to imminent physical harm.

Secondly, Avaaz found that there are significant delays in Facebook's implementation of its anti-misinformation policies. These delays are especially troubling because they result in millions of users seeing harmful misinformation content about the coronavirus before the platform labels it with a fact check and warning screen or removes it. Specifically, we found that it can take up to 22 days for the platform to downgrade and issue warning labels on such content, giving ample time for it to go viral.

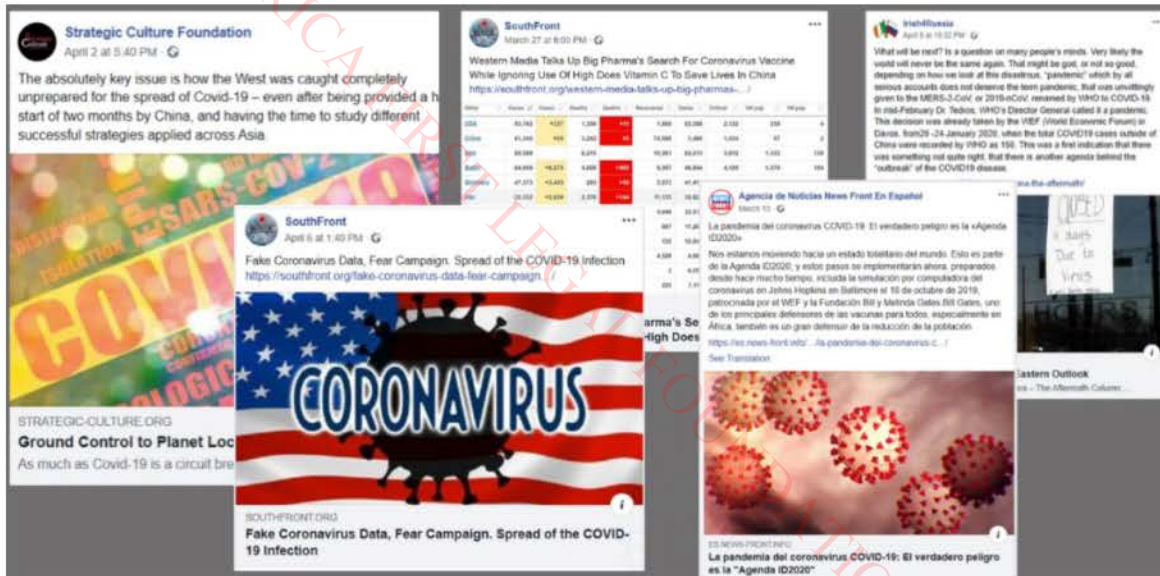
Our analysis also indicates that Italian and Spanish-speaking users may be at greater risk of misinformation exposure. Facebook has not yet issued warning labels on 68% of the Italian-language content and 70% of Spanish-language content we examined, compared to 29% of English-language content.

The scale of this "infodemic" along with Facebook's reluctance to retroactively notify and provide corrections to every user exposed to harmful misinformation about the coronavirus is threatening efforts to "flatten the curve" across the world and could potentially put lives at risk. (Source: Avaaz)

(U) Facebook, YouTube Take Down Russian-Linked Disinformation Outlets Spreading COVID-19 Disinformation: NewsFront, a pro-Russian disinformation site managed from illegally annexed Crimea and publishing in eight languages, was taken down from Facebook on April 30. Fellow Russian-linked disinformation outlet South Front’s account on Facebook was also taken down 30 April, and one day later, the South Front YouTube Channel was switched off.

Before taken down from Facebook, South Front, an outlet with a history of promoting conspiracy theories and a strong presence in the EUvsDisinfo database, was heavily engaged in blatant anti-vax messaging, “Big Pharma” conspiracy theories, and attempts to downplay the COVID-19 pandemic.

South Front’s efforts were further amplified on Facebook in Spanish by News Front. The two outlets even shared a same disinformation article on Facebook, one version in English, and the other in Spanish, with claims that the search for the COVID-19 vaccine is a Big Pharma “rip-off”, with plans to change the human life and implement the “New World Order”.



Not just a Facebook problem

The proliferation of false and harmful information and conspiracy theories is not just a Facebook problem. Twitter has also committed to [remove tweets that run the risk of causing harm by spreading dangerous misinformation about COVID-19](#), including denial of health authorities' recommendations. However, tweets with anti-vax and "Big Pharma" conspiracy theories from South Front, News Front and other pro-Kremlin outlets remain online.



Other News Front posts on Facebook spread unfounded claims that behind the COVID-19 pandemic hides "Agenda ID2020", which in conspiracy-speak means "secret plans" by global elites to control the world's population with the vaccines.

Conspiracy theories of a similar magnitude continue to be shared on Facebook by the Strategic Culture Foundation, an outlet with a front of the state-of-the-art think-tank, which goes at length to hide its Russian roots. New Eastern Outlook, managed by the Russian Academy of Science's Institute for Oriental Studies, chimes in as well stating that [implantation of nano-chip via vaccines "is a reality"](#). (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Monetization of False and Harmful COVID-19 Related Online Disinformation Continues:** Online ads continue to pop up on disinformation articles, a major investigation by the [Global Disinformation Index](#) shows, generating an estimated 76 million USD in revenues for disinforming outlets in Europe alone. For example, an article by Russia-linked disinformation outlet [South Front](#) claims, among other things that "vitamin C saves lives in China" was accompanied by a Soundcloud ad delivered by Google. Similarly, a Sputnik Czech article claiming that COVID mortality figures are "insignificant" had an O2 ad delivered by Google. (Source: Global Disinformation Index)

WESTERN MEDIA TALKS UP BIG PHARMA'S SEARCH FOR CORONAVIRUS VACCINE WHILE IGNORING USE OF HIGH DOES VITAMIN C TO SAVE LIVES IN CHINA.

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Country, Other	Total Cases	New Cases	Total Deaths	New Deaths	Total Recovered	Active Cases	Serious, Critical	Total Cases/ 1M pop	Total Deaths/ 1M pop
USA	85,762	+527	1,396	+11	1,868	82,888	2,122	299	4
Spain	81,340	+20	2,282	+0	74,266	2,409	1,034	30	2
Italy	80,980		8,215		16,361	62,613	2,612	1,333	136
Spain	84,059	+5,273	4,858	+683	6,307	46,844	4,180	1,370	104
Germany	47,375	+3,435	285	+18	8,670	41,815	20	595	3
Iran	32,332	+2,926	2,376	+164	11,150	16,821	2,890	385	28
France	26,155		1,896		4,948	22,581	3,375	447	26
Switzerland	12,311	+588	297	+15	897	11,237	203	1,422	24
UK	11,688		879		126	10,365	160	172	0
S. Korea	9,032	+81	159	+8	4,526	4,855	59	182	3
Netherlands	8,800	+1,172	346	+112	0	8,354	781	592	32
Austria	7,380	+484	58	+9	225	7,193	128	821	8
Belgium	7,284	+1,668	289	+80	950	6,137	690	620	25

The situation as of March 27, 2020. [Click to see the full-size image](#)

Written by *Dr. Leon Tressell* exclusively for *SouthFront*

• Clinical trials using high dose vitamin C therapy in China Ignored by Western media

<https://pdfcrowd.com/bwack.net/news/1c675x-AAAQGRS-8UB01B7700C2mV1C9P1g7-1g-1g2789047850wka38L333M9UjMm7h27VzRCuZV1vdrK8r8KtU1Qd8W8eYyJ8DkpaACUk8Ag3v-8t>



(U) **Public Trust in Social Media Content as High as Trust in Public Health Officials:** The gaps in the efforts of social media companies to curb the spread of false information seemingly have an impact on user trust. A survey conducted by the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) shows that people across Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US consistently consider social media platforms as less trustworthy in terms of COVID-19 information than experts, health authorities, and news organisations. The same study also found that almost a quarter of respondents believe that the coronavirus was made in a laboratory, which speaks about the impact of disinformation online.

The platforms have acted to curb the spread of disinformation; the question is – is it enough? (Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism)

(U//FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening:**

- FEMA conversation shifted over the course of the day to focus on the release of internal documents that show projections of increasing death rates. The release of these documents is leading many to wonder if the government is being transparent with the information they have.
- As we head into hurricane preparedness week, it is sparking increased debate over whether the agency will be able to handle a major natural disaster and pandemic.
- People are also expressing concern about the lack of social distancing at beaches and other outdoor areas that have reopened leaving people worried a second wave of infections could be around the corner.

- While traditional media remains focused on initial impacts of states reopening, the projected fatality toll has received sharp spike in interest following infection and fatality projections from Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation as well as a federal interagency document. Tonality is of serious uncertainty.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There is growing skepticism over the perceived federal push for economies to reopen across the nation. Following the release of FEMA and CDC documents that predict deaths to increase to 3000 per day by June 1st, many are questioning why states are lifting stay-at-home orders.
 - This narrative is being further fueled by elected officials who are questioning why additional body bags have been ordered at the same time that states are reopening.
- There is increasing confusion over the purpose of antibody testing due to lingering questions over whether individuals who test positive are immune, or still able to transmit the virus.
- Beaches and other outdoor areas in different states with loosened restrictions were reportedly full of people this weekend, leading some to worry about growing COVID-19 case numbers, saying they will continue social distancing.
- Concerns over employee safety in meat processing plants are resurfacing after reports of a new outbreak in a plant in Missouri and national media coverage about their working conditions.
- There continues to be a large amount of discussion of protests around the country against current stay-at-home orders.

(U) 5/4 Reporting

(U) 5G-COVID-19 Disinformation Serves as Ongoing Case Study of How Conspiracy Theories Spread, and How They Can Be Stopped: Misinformation spreads online much like a virus itself. Although various types spread slightly differently, the transmission of the 5G conspiracy theory offers some insight into how false claims grow online.

How it starts

A “calamitous event” like the pandemic creates a “very fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories,” said John Cook, an expert on misinformation with George Mason University’s Center for Climate Change Communication.

The onslaught of information and misinformation on social media, on cable news and in general conversation may create confusion, but it’s made even worse by human discomfort with ambiguity, especially when our lives are at stake.

In this case, it involved 5G, the newest, fastest type of cellular network, which began deploying globally in 2019. As is usually the case with new technologies, it has attracted its fair share of conspiracy

theories. A general practitioner in Belgium named Kris Van Kerckhoven baselessly told the newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws in a Jan. 22 story that 5G was life-threatening and linked to the coronavirus, as [Wired reported](#).

The newspaper quickly issued a correction and deleted the offending article from its website, but it was too late. Anti-5G groups began spreading the rumor, and some members of a frightened public, desperate for some sense of order, believed this deeply implausible lie.

“When people feel threatened or out of control or they’re trying to explain a big significant event, they’re more vulnerable or prone to turning to conspiracy theories to explain them,” Cook said.

“Somewhat counterintuitively, it gives people more sense of control to imagine that, rather than random things happening, there are these shadowy groups and agencies that are controlling it. Randomness is very discomfoting to people.”

How it spreads

It’s certainly more difficult to fight misinformation if someone is purposely and relentlessly spreading it, which is partially the case with various 5G conspiracy theories. The Russian network RT America has been peddling disinformation about the mobile network since long before covid-19, in part, [according to the New York Times](#), to slow the rollout in the United States and give Russia time to catch up.

“There are people who believe one conspiracy theory or another because it fits their political beliefs, and there are some people for whom conspiracy theories *are* their beliefs,” said Mike Wood, a psychologist and expert on belief in conspiracy theories who studied the spread of misinformation during the Zika outbreak in 2016. “For those people, the specifics of the conspiracy theory don’t matter all that much.”

Eventually, the 5G false claims spread from conspiratorial corners of the Internet into the mainstream, [fueled by celebrities](#).

How it’s stopped

While the origin of a piece of information might not matter, the type of misinformation does. The idea that eating garlic can help fight the disease is a natural rumor — it’s just bad information. But a conspiracy theory supposes that a nefarious group of people are carrying out a plan, and that’s much more difficult to disprove.

“More natural rumors will go really fast and burn out,” said Kate Starbird, an associate professor with the Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington. “But conspiracy theory rumors build up, and they persist.”

One reason for the disparity: Conspiracy theories often have something of a built-in safety mechanism in that they falsely implicate fact-checking organizations as being part of the conspiracy.

“For a conspiracy theory where the misinformation is wrapped up around this air of distrust, distrust of institutions, distrust of mainstream accounts, even distrust the science, then any evidence that comes in that disproves the theory is seen as being part of the conspiracy,” Cook said.

So while there haven’t been many reports of people following some of the more bogus claims that have gone around — such as [the erroneous claim that drinking bleach will cure the virus](#) — the 5G conspiracy theory has led to the real-world destruction of cell towers across Europe, according to government officials. In Britain alone, the New York Times [reported](#), “more than 30 acts of arson and vandalism have taken place against wireless towers and other telecom gear” in the month of April, including towers in Liverpool and Birmingham on April 2 and 3.

Even when your readers or social media followers *are* open to a correction, it’s difficult to write about misinformation without spreading the very misinformation you’re debunking. “You need to put emphasis on facts,” Cook said. And “when a piece of misinformation is introduced, you must flag it as misinformation. So when people read it, they’re cognitively on-guard and less likely to believe it.”

But it can be done. Bode emphasized the importance of correcting untruths in person or on social media, saying, “You need to be nice and provide some indication that you know what you’re talking about. We generally recommend you provide some kind of link to an authoritative source like the CDC or the WHO.” Having multiple people weigh in with the truth is even more effective. (Source: The Washington Post)

(U) Fact-Checker’s Identity Stolen to Spread Disinfo About NATO and COVID-19: Authors of a disinformation campaign about NATO troops leaving Lithuania due to the spread of COVID-19 impersonated Vilius Petkauskas, a well-known journalist and fact-checker from the Lithuanian media outlet *15min.lt*. This case is yet another example of COVID-19 being used to [create anti-NATO sentiment](#) in the Baltic states.

The outlets that were involved in the campaign had [previously](#) used anonymous online personas, as the DFRLab reported in 2019. This case demonstrates greater dedication to achieving authenticity, as a real person’s identity and credibility was used to spread falsified information. The case also demonstrates a new approach by disinformation actors to psychologically influence the fact-checker. Fact-checkers in Latvia have also [received](#) blowback due to the authors of disinformation that created personally offensive videos and unflattering content.

(U) **How a False Story About a Cuban COVID-19 Vaccine Spread in Latin America:** In the beginning of February, Cuba [announced](#) via official channels that a Cuban-manufactured drug was being used to treat COVID-19 cases in China. Soon after, a Brazilian politician and a Mexican regional newspaper picked up the story. Both, perhaps inadvertently, made a small but significant change to the story: in the new version, the story claimed that Cuba had developed a vaccine for the novel coronavirus.

Since then, the claim that Cuba had developed a vaccine for COVID-19 has reverberated on Twitter in different Latin American countries, until it reached Brazilian hyper-partisan media and left-wing influencers on March 12. On that day, “Cuban vaccine” reached the trending topics in the country. The story spread further to other continents, with a mayor from a South African town promising the population he would buy the Cuban vaccine for his people. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Facebook Begins to Re-Open Moderation Centers as Concerning Content Gains Momentum in the App:** Amid the COVID-19 lockdowns, Facebook has been forced to [shut down its moderation centers](#), and send some 35,000 content reviewers home, which has significantly reduced its capacity to review posts, ads and more.

Now, The Social Network is looking to get some moderators back in operation. According to [BBC News](#), Facebook is now re-opening some of its review offices, though staff are only being asked to return on a voluntary basis at this stage.

How many staff will actually be returning to work was unclear - and given some of the horror stories around the [experiences of Facebook moderators](#), it's hard to imagine that many of them will be quick to head back in, especially given that they're on full pay while they stay at home.

But Facebook is bringing moderators back, in some capacity - which is important, because there's also been an influx of concerning content on the platform of late, including [COVID-19 misinformation](#), and arguably worse, child pornography. (Source: Social Media Today; BBC)

(U) **A Threat to Public Health Weaponized by Online Extremists:** Early last month, HateLab (an online violent extremism monitoring tool used by Moonshot CVE) identified three forms of coronavirus-related hate speech: anti-Chinese or Asian; antisemitic, focused on conspiracy theories; and Islamophobic, focused on accusations of profiteering. “What we are seeing is a threat to health being weaponized to justify targeting minority groups, no matter how illogical the connections may seem.”

(Moonshot has monitored similar rises in hate speech targeting Chinese nationals. The hashtag [#ChinaLiedPeopleDied](#) was tweeted 65,895 times in March, while [#coronavirustruth](#), implying that the pandemic is a hoax, was used 77,548 times. The company also picked up tweets showing old videos of