

Muslim men leaving mosques accompanied by text claiming the footage was filmed during quarantine, a [seemingly deliberate attempt to create anti-Muslim sentiment.](#)) (Source: The Guardian)

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

- May Day discussion carried over into concern for essential workers and individuals who may be returning to work soon. There was a large amount of discussion about worker's rights and ensuring people have access to a safe workplace and more businesses begin to discuss reopening.
- People are anxiously waiting to see how some of the first reopenings go this weekend with restrictions beginning to lift on various businesses across the country. Many are viewing these initial days as a test to see if people will still follow social distancing guidelines and make safe decisions while in public.
- FEMA discussion on social media has remained focused on the lack individual assistance funds for burial costs with a smaller number of people discussing the recent announcement of FEMA's role in distributing PPE to nursing homes. FEMA coverage on traditional media is high and centered on FEMA's response role to COVID-19 vs. hurricane season, PPE distribution, and homeless shelter assistance.
- Traditional media continues reporting on businesses reopening in certain states as well as protests against stay-at-home orders and unsafe work conditions. Nursing home fatalities continues to receive national attention as the toll reportedly has surpassed 16,000. There is isolated national mention of a university study concluding the virus could last two years.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- There has been a high volume of discussion about the Defense Production Act over the course of the day largely driven by elected officials. Most feel the Act is not being used enough or in the right manner.
 - The Speaker of the House called for the DPA to be used to ramp up [production of syringes and vials](#) to avoid a shortage once a vaccine is developed.
- One Senator and one U.S. Representative introduced legislation to fill critical supply shortages by setting up a new [Emergency Office of Manufacturing for Public Health](#) within HHS, bypassing the need for the DPA.
- Global recoveries [surpassed 1 million cases](#) today. People are viewing this as an extremely positive announcement and celebrating the news. Many wonder if the number is actually significantly higher.
- The social media conversation remains focused on reopening, with many people discussing the need for widespread testing. Most people believe testing capacity is not adequate to reopen safely at this point.
- The burden of staying home and out of work is taking a strong emotional and financial toll on many Americans. Most people realize things won't be normal again for a while and many are concerned about making ends meet.
- There are mixed reactions to news that the federal social distancing guidelines will not be extended when they expire tomorrow. Many are urging people to continue to stay home and exercise caution, others are grateful.
- Many are discussing [statements made by the President](#) yesterday saying he's not relying on having a vaccine and that the virus could otherwise be "eradicated". The reaction to this is

negative, with people fearing that thought could influence priorities and timelines for reopening.

(U) **Russia-State Backed Media Promotes False COVID-19 Cures in the Balkans:** Moscow-backed media portray the EU as incompetent and selfish, NATO as rudderless, and Russia and China as benevolent saviors.

Skopje's Ministry of Science and Technology uncovered several articles about non-existent cures for COVID-19. One was about a treatment discovery by the Russian Biomedical Agency, while another reported the Russian-manufactured drug Arbidol as a cure. A third article cites Russian doctors developing a treatment for the coronavirus using helium. In another article, a Russian doctor speaks about the superiority of the Russian healthcare system over those of the Western countries. These false hopes were buoyed by reports of a secret Russian centre in Siberia that will save the world. This article features a YouTube video from Russia 1/Russia 24 as a supplement. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) 5/1 Reporting

(U) **Beyond China: Global dissemination channels mobilized to spread coronavirus disinformation, pro-Beijing narratives:** As countries around the world grapple with the spread of COVID-19, Chinese state propaganda organs are attempting to influence the global conversation on the epidemic. Over the last month, CCP-backed media, in an effort to downplay criticism of the party's mishandling of the outbreak in its early stages, have pushed three narratives for a global audience: first, China's response to the crisis is a model for other countries to follow; second, China is a global leader in the fight against COVID-19 and is providing aid to grateful nations; and finally, that the outbreak may actually have originated outside of China.

While there is some truth to a few of these claims, others—like the assertion that COVID-19 began in the United States or Italy—suggest that Chinese state media and other state-backed actors are deliberately promoting disinformation abroad, mimicking Russian tactics. In some cases, the Chinese messaging has been shared on existing disinformation networks established on social media platforms by Iran and Russia. Over the last month, a number of tactics have been deployed:

- **Leveraging existing channels to embed state media content in mainstream foreign media:** Foreign news outlets have continued to accept funds from Chinese state media to disseminate party propaganda on China's response to COVID-19 to their audiences. Over the past two months, the *Economist*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper are among foreign media that have published such articles as paid advertorials, although the *Telegraph* appears to have subsequently discontinued its partnership with the *People's Daily*, the official paper of the Communist Party, and *China Daily*, a state-run English-language outlet. The Xinhua news agency has also used content-sharing partnerships with African news websites like *News Ghana* to highlight Chinese assistance in combatting COVID-19 in various countries.

- **Foreign ministry spokespeople and diplomats spreading disinformation:** Throughout March, fringe conspiracy theories concerning the origins of COVID-19 and other proven **falsehoods** have been amplified by senior Chinese diplomats. On March 12, Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao **tweeted a link to an article** falsely claiming that the virus had originated in the United States, which was later retweeted **by the official account of China's embassy in South Africa**. It has also been reported that Chinese officials in Tokyo have been ordered to refer to COVID-19 as the "**Japanese coronavirus**." The effort was reaping the fruits of a 2019 initiative to set up Twitter accounts for dozens of Chinese officials, even as the platform remains blocked in China.
- **State media ads online:** Chinese state media have been purchasing political advertisements on foreign social media sites in an effort to **cover up** the Chinese state's botched early response to the spread of the coronavirus, and instead place blame for the pandemic on the United States. Appearing on Facebook and Instagram, the undisclosed ads promote content on China's handling of COVID-19 produced by Chinese state media outfits including Xinhua, China Central Television, and the *Global Times*.
- **Twitter bots:** A **March 26 investigation by ProPublica** found a network of fake and hijacked Twitter accounts that were covertly spreading Chinese government propaganda about the virus to global audiences. While some of these accounts have tweeted messages expressing support for the Chinese government's handling of the epidemic, others have promoted disinformation or attacked political opponents in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong. Parts of the network were linked to a Beijing-based company that had previously been contracted by the China News Service, part of the CCP's United Front Work Department, to increase its Twitter following. China has also made use of Twitter bots to **amplify Italian hashtags** praising China's medical assistance to Italy, which has been hard-hit by the coronavirus. (Source: Freedom House)

(U) **As America Is Distracted By Covid-19, Putin Pursues Hybrid Warfare Tactics:** Hans Peter Midttun, a former Norwegian Naval Attaché, warns of the danger that the ongoing Russian hybrid warfare poses to Ukraine, and through it to Europe and the West. He writes, "Do not lose track of Russia amid the COVID-19. It offers Russia a unique opportunity to exploit the consequences of the pandemic, enabling it to reach its strategic aim and objectives. The West needs to take a firm stand alongside Ukraine as Russia is becoming increasingly more brazen and self-confident. Former Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euroatlantic Integration (2016-2019), Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze, argues that "there can be no successful Europe without a strong and independent Ukraine. She is correct ... And please, please stop talking about the "war in Donbas" and start discussing the Hybrid War in Ukraine."

Strategically, one can argue that the same way Hitler used the Spanish Civil War to test his military strategies for war in Europe, today Putin is using Ukraine to test his hybrid warfare options for use against the West. The wide ranging extent of this ongoing Russian hybrid campaign in Ukraine is solidly documented in a military report published **recently**.

But Ukraine is not Russia's only target in this hybrid warfare campaign. Putin has also targeted the West. The New York Times **reported** recently that, "As the pandemic has swept the globe, it has been

accompanied by a dangerous surge of **false information** — an “infodemic,” according to **the World Health Organization**. Analysts say that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has played a principal role in the spread of false information as part of his wider effort to discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within.” The news item concluded that, “Analysts see an effort not only to undermine American officials but also to accomplish something more basic: to damage American science, a foundation of national prosperity.”

Just as it was unwise for us to ignore the prospects of the covid-19 virus spreading from China to other parts of the world until it was too late, ignoring what Putin is doing today in his hybrid war with Ukraine could lead to disastrous consequences for the West. Just the other day, for example, a **report** from the Jamestown Foundation speculated that Moscow was sending new Cossack paramilitary units to the Ukrainian border in possible preparation for another offensive there. Better that we focus our efforts on stopping this hybrid war in Ukraine, and that we win there, than that it continue to be spread all over Europe and America. (Source: Forbes)

(U) Are Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Outlets Disenchanted with the Coronavirus? The COVID-19 outbreak is still the dominating topic in the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem, and the outbreak itself continues to be a serious issue to handle for health care workers, national and European systems, and international bodies. Many of the “usual” examples of disinformation are employed this week, just as previous weeks: **The virus is man-made; it is a biological weapon**; it is the Global Elites’ scheme to **reduce the world’s population** and the **World Health Organization** is part of it! Most of these tropes have been repeated over and over again since the start of the outbreak in January. This week, the number of **cases devoted to the coronavirus** passes 400.

However, several countries note that the epidemic is beginning to recede. Governments have started discussing a cautious loosening of quarantine restrictions. The curve is flattening. And we can see a similar development in the pro-Kremlin disinformation network. The subject is no longer as conducive for Kremlin disinformation targeting the EU: European national healthcare systems have managed to operate through the crisis; cooperation within the European Union is deepening.

It is likely that the COVID-19 outbreak will continue to dominate both in professional news reporting and in the content of disinformation outlets, but it appears that the topic is starting to become less comfortable as a vessel for pro-Kremlin disinformation. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- As the COVID-19 discussion remains primarily focused on reopening the economy, people are finding hope in the 1 million cases of global recoveries reported today. There are mixed reactions to news that the federal social distancing guidelines will not be extended upon expiration tomorrow and many are urging people to stay home, however others express they are suffering emotionally and financially due to remaining home. As officials and businesses plan for reopening, many colleges and universities across the U.S. are announcing plans to reopen in the fall.

- FEMA conversation today includes news of the agency coordinating PPE shipments to nursing homes in May and coverage that FEMA placed an order for an additional 100,000 body bags. People are confused about the order of body bags and wondering whether or not there is improvement with flattening the curve. The agency is being met with criticism for not providing funds for the burial of COVID-19 victims, while the media reports that FEMA has covered these costs in previous disasters.
- Traditional media coverage focuses on states' mitigation efforts to ensure a safe, slow reopening. Medical specialists, journalists, and elected officials interviewed express mixed opinion over whether states have enough testing resources to avoid another surge in cases. This precedes newly cited optimism of a vaccine becoming available by early 2021. FEMA coverage includes PPE distribution, nursing home assistance, disaster cost share, and mortuary services.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment:*

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- Many are discussing [statements made by the President](#) yesterday saying he's not relying on having a vaccine and that the virus could otherwise be "eradicated". The reaction to this is [negative](#), with people fearing that thought could influence priorities and timelines for reopening.

(U) 4/30 Reporting

(U) **International Anti-5G Conspiracy Groups Amplify Calls for Anti-Lockdown Protests:** A poster exhorting people to join the so-called “global march for freedom” on April 12, 2020, to protest COVID-19 lockdown measures spread to multiple countries within days, seeding similar messaging for further anti-lockdown protests around the world.

The first “no more lockdowns” marches were organized took place on April 12. Within days, protests arose in [at least 15 U.S. states](#). Many of the U.S. protests were organized by [the Dorr brothers](#) — a trio of right-wing gun rights activists — with a significant pro-Trump sentiment characterizing many of the events. Another round of protests are expected on May 2.

The poster, which first appeared on April 8, advertised an April 12 “global march for freedom” in “every city hall, village piazza, or town hall in every country.” It was amplified by 5G and Illuminati conspiracy pages on Facebook, as well as by fringe influencers with large social media followings. Online, it spread to English, Filipino, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish language environments. The poster’s spread occurred despite little engagement on many of the social media platforms it was posted on.

The DFRLab found the earliest reference to the poster on [an April 8 post](#) by a Facebook page called “Stop 5g Global,” run in part by Australian Paul Seils. While this is the earliest confirmed posting, the poster had likely already been shared elsewhere online, as the image in this post appears slightly cropped compared to later images of the poster. Stop 5g Global used the hashtag #nomorelockdowns and tagged separate location-based 5G Instagram accounts in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and elsewhere, none of which shared the poster on their own accounts. While the post only received 35 reactions and 11 comments, it was shared 83 times, many of which were to other 5G conspiracy pages and groups.



Some of the poster's cross-platform spread on April 8, 2020. The two right-most images are the same screenshot, on two image aggregation platforms that appear different but have the same Google advertising ID. (Source: [@stop5global/archive](#), left; [@WaterFilterLady/archive](#), left middle; [americasbestpics.com/archive](#), right middle; [ifunny.co/archive](#), right)

The promotional poster gained traction on April 9 through a Facebook page called "Illuminati Exposed," in a [post](#) that gained 557 reactions, 222 comments, and 324 shares. Not all of the engagement on the post was positive; many reacted negatively to the poster and the perceived irresponsibility of protesting social-distancing. That same day, the poster appeared on [Dutch](#) and [Spanish](#) websites, with a [follow-up article](#) on April 14 on the Dutch website implying that a protest in Amsterdam had indeed occurred, although the 36-second clip shared showed empty streets.

On April 13, a modified version of the poster was [shared](#) in a Facebook group called "Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine." A *Washington Post* analysis found that the Dorr brothers created similar Facebook groups — "Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine," "Pennsylvanians Against Excessive Quarantine," "Ohioans Against Excessive Quarantine," and "New Yorkers Against Excessive Quarantine." The Michigan version of the group has over 300,000 members, despite being only created on April 9; Ben Dorr is one of the group's members. (Source: Atlantic Council DFR Lab)

(U) Trolls Are Spreading Conspiracy Theories That a U.S. Army Reservist is "COVID-19 Patient Zero." China is Amplifying That Disinformation: A brigade of trolls is spreading conspiracy theories about a U.S. Army reservist, falsely claiming that she is "COVID-19 patient zero" and responsible for starting the [coronavirus pandemic](#).

Maatje Benassi is a civilian security officer stationed at [Fort Belvoir](#) in Virginia. Since March she and her husband Matt, also a government employee at the military base, have been targeted in YouTube videos and social media posts that wrongly claim she contracted COVID-19 in October while competing in the

Military World Games, which were hosted in Wuhan, China. Neither Benassi or her husband have tested positive for or experienced [symptoms](#) of COVID-19.

Many of the videos targeting Benassi and her husband were viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube after the conspiracy was amplified by Chinese [diplomats](#) and [state-run media](#). In February, The Global Times, a site run by the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily newspaper, [alleged that coronavirus was brought to China](#) from a U.S. military base during the World Games. A few weeks later, Lijian Zhou, a Chinese diplomat, [reinforced the conspiracy theory](#) in a tweet that speculated, "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."

The use of state media to amplify online conspiracies is part of a broad strategy to deflect and reframe the coronavirus narrative away from China, said Priscilla Moriuchi, a senior researcher at Recorded Future, a cybersecurity firm that specializes in digital threat assessment. Moriuchi told CBS News that the coronavirus pandemic provided China with an opportunity to present a binary comparison between the Chinese government's response and the West's. (Source: CBS News)

(U) Evolving TTPs: Find, Copy, Amplify: How Ukrainian Fringe Media Used Other Alphabets to Disguise False COVID-19 Claims: Several Ukrainian fringe media outlets republished an article amplifying the false claims of an Italian anti-vaxxer regarding the efficacy of quarantines and the feasibility of a potential vaccine in slowing the COVID-19 outbreak. In a likely effort to evade detection, the outlets substituted letters borrowed from different alphabets in the headline to foil automated web crawlers.

The DFRLab [previously covered](#) the narrative spread of the anti-vaxxer's claims on April 14, 2020. This report details an inauthentic amplification scheme concerning a related article by Ukrainian fringe media outlets.

The alphabet-blending approach has become quite popular on fringe media and junk news sites in [Ukraine](#) as a means to avoid Google's attempts to [scrub coronavirus misinformation](#) from its platforms, including Google Search. While this method helps these outlets avoid detection by search engines, it ironically makes detection of coordinated behavior easier for researchers when websites copy/paste each other's publications featuring the same orthographic substitutions. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) American Touting COVID Conspiracies Probably Posted WHO, Gates Foundation Passwords Online, Report Says: An American touting conspiracy theories about the spread of the [coronavirus](#) was the likely source of an incident in which nearly 25,000 credentials from the World Health Organization, the Gates Foundation and other institutions fighting the pandemic were posted to the Internet last week, new research concludes.

The research, by the SITE Intelligence Group, which [revealed the incident](#) in a report last week, concluded that the emails and passwords posted online were not from a recent hack. Rather, the credentials came from a larger set of hacked materials originally put online in 2016.

SITE, based in Bethesda, Md., concluded that whoever posted the credentials last week was hoping to inspire a new wave of intrusions that might reveal information about how the targeted institutions responded to the pandemic. Posting personal information online is called "doxing" and typically is regarded as a form of harassment or a way to incite harassment.

Details about who posted the emails and passwords remain scant, and SITE has not learned the real-world identity of the culprit. Based on comments and links on various social media sites that appear to be from the same person, however, SITE determined that the initial poster probably was an American who espoused conspiracy theories popular on the political right, including that government officials and news organizations are exaggerating covid-19 death counts to manipulate the public. (Source: Washington Post, SITE Intelligence)

(U) **"Jews Control Chinese Labs That Created Coronavirus": White Supremacists' Dangerous New Conspiracy Theory:** As COVID-19 has swept around the globe, causing unprecedented levels of suffering and national shutdowns, the boards and websites of the dark web – that part of the internet intentionally hidden from mainstream search engines, maximized for anonymity and often a sanctuary for hate groups and criminal activity – have kept pace, filled up with conspiracy theories accusing the Jews of triggering the pandemic.

Dark web communities are already infamous for their hosting and cultivation of the anti-Semitic, [white nationalist far right](#). The perpetrator of the massacre at the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque, Brenton Tarrant, was an active member of 8Chan. The Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, Robert Bowers, posted on Gab his intention to carry out an attack. Neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer, one of the organizers of the Charlottesville far right rally, moved to the dark web after it was [booted off](#) the mainstream internet.

The discussions about Jews' "responsibility" for the coronavirus are generally riffs on the storied theory of a global Jewish conspiracy for power and domination. Added to that are references to other anti-Semitic theories regarding Jews as poisoners and deliberate carriers of disease, Jews as inveterate economic profiteers and, inevitably, Holocaust denial. The newer element is the idea of coronavirus as a grand plan engineered by the Jews and China together.

In a discussion, an anonymous poster (or "anon") attempted to reveal the "real" viral genesis. He noted as fact that the coronavirus came from a Chinese lab but that it was not created by the Chinese: "The kikes get the credit for that one. It was the kikes. It's ALWAYS the kikes."

The idea of the Jews pulling the strings but using proxies for deniability and to amplify their power is a core plank of far right thought. Many anons' sense of Jewish power is so inflated that they believe Jews developed the virus not only to spread suffering and disease, but also to "knock down" China herself.



Image from dark web discussion board: 'It's not Chinese. It's the Jew flu' Credit: Flora Cassen
(Source: Haaretz)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- Conversations about reopening continue to increase in volume, as frustration grows with stay at home orders and restrictions. There are significant concerns related to reopening, such as a surge in cases and reports that testing capacity will not be adequate to provide the best possible information needed to reopen safely. Many are concerned they are not getting clear messaging on what testing capacity needs to be met before it is safe to reopen.
- Criticism of the administration and FEMA have increased, following a number of news stories related to the distribution of relief funding, DPA use to keep meat plants open, and concerns about FEMA's role in the federal response.
- As traditional media continues to examine state's ability to reopen with sufficient testing capacity, reporters and broadcast commentators increasingly highlight White House's recently expressed optimism, following Remdesivir medical trials to treat the virus. FEMA coverage includes reports of a potential role change ahead of hurricane season, PPE distribution to hospitals & nursing homes, and purchase of mortuary supplies. National broadcast media

consistently mentions a White House administration official's recent praise of the federal response.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of conversation. Most support a cautious and data-based approach, but a growing number are becoming more frustrated and want to return to normal right away.
- Many are concerned about the likelihood of a second wave of COVID-19 cases caused by reopening, citing statements from a senior White House Task Force member who said the US could be in for "a bad fall and a bad winter" if unprepared for a second wave.
- Strong criticism of the Administration and the federal response continues both generally and in relation to recent issues.
 - The Vice President's trip to Mayo Clinic is producing a high volume of negative conversation. Many are pointing out that by not wearing a mask the VP contradicted the Administration's own guidance and hospital policies.
 - There is a high level of discussion about statements from a White House press briefing suggesting that the Administration may withhold relief funding from states unless they make concessions on sanctuary cities.
- There is a high volume of conversation regarding the use of the Defense Production Act to keep meat processing plants open. The general public is largely split over the decision:
 - On Facebook, the majority of people are supportive of the decision feeling it will help keep food on tables.
 - On Twitter, the majority of people are against the idea worrying that it places workers in danger and questioning why the DPA has not been used for the production of ventilators.
- There continues to be a large amount of discussion about testing capacity. The head of the government's testing response refutes the claim that the U.S. will be able to test 5 million people a day; instead, he suggests the country will be able to test 8 million per month.
 - The general public does not feel like it is getting clear answers on what the current testing capacity is in the country, and what it needs to be for the general population to be safe.
- There is increasing discussion of state's push for federal funding to fill budget gaps caused by COVID-19. A Morning Consult/Politico poll finds that 74% of voters believe that the federal government should provide financial support to the states during the pandemic

(U) **Is TikTok Escaping Scrutiny About How It's Handling Coronavirus Misinformation?** Representatives from all of the major social media giants are gathering to meet with lawmakers in the United Kingdom tomorrow to discuss the fight against coronavirus misinformation on the web. But one thing will be absent: no one from TikTok, the [world's most downloaded social media app](#), will be present.

TikTok is exploding in popularity and has been installed more than 100 million times in the past year. The platform, which allows users to share short 15-second videos, has grown even more during the past two months, when COVID-19 has landed a huge percentage of the world at home and sheltering in place. And yet, perhaps because of its newness or its medium, has not faced much scrutiny regarding misinformation and fake news in comparison to other industry leaders.

The Chinese-owned app was founded in 2012 and has since grown at a rapid rate across the globe. And while it has been a success, it has been plagued with issues related to those who want to use the platform's reach to take advantage of others. Dating scams, conspiracy theories, impersonator accounts, and political untruths abound as individuals and groups find ways to wreck havoc, make money, or influence others on the app. (Source: Forbes)

(U) Russia's COVID-19 "Humanitarian Aid" to the U.S. Comes at a Price: Amid the global outbreak of the new coronavirus, several undemocratic countries have been trying to take advantage of the crisis and depict themselves as accountable players on the international scene. The Kremlin recently did so by hailing its sale of medical supplies to the United States in early April as generous humanitarian aid.

Western leaders have interpreted Russia's willingness to dispatch its medical personnel and supplies abroad amid the COVID-19 crisis as a shrewd propaganda and PR move. In a [letter](#) to the President of the European Commission on April 3, 2020, several members of the European Parliament stated that the Kremlin's recent assistance to Italy may be an attempt to have E.U. sanctions on Russia "reviewed or lifted." The motives behind Russian aid are also called into question in the light of a recent [European External Action Service report](#) stating that the Kremlin is sowing coronavirus-related disinformation in the West. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) Bolsonaro Supporters Amplify Positive COVID-19 Narratives on Facebook: Articles about patients who recovered from COVID-19 and pieces arguing the pandemic will end sooner than expected are among the most engaged-with content about the pandemic on Facebook in Brazil. Rather than simply indicating that Brazilians are interacting with optimistic news about the crisis, the data suggests that articles supporting the argument made by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro that the disease is not that serious are getting more traction than those expressing more concern about the pandemic. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) 4/29 Reporting

(U) Trolls and Bots are Flooding Social Media with Disinformation Encouraging States to End Quarantine: Christopher Bouzy, the founder of bot tracking platform [Bot Sentinel](#), conducted a Twitter analysis for Business Insider and found bots and trolls are using hashtags like [#ReOpenNC](#), [#ReopenAmericaNow](#), [#StopTheMadness](#), [#ENDTHESHUTDOWN](#), and [#OperationGridlock](#) to spread disinformation. According to Bouzy, the bots and trolls are spreading conspiracy theories about Democrats wanting to hurt the economy to make Trump look bad, Democrats trying to take away

people's civil liberties, and Democrats trying to prevent people from voting. The accounts are also using [false data](#) to underplay the threat of the coronavirus.

"Inauthentic accounts are amplifying disinformation and inaccurate statistics and sharing false information as a reason to reopen the country," Bouzy says. "Many of these accounts are also spreading bizarre conspiracy theories about Democrats using COVID-19 as a way to take away American freedoms and prevent Americans from voting."

When reached for comment, a Twitter spokesperson disputed the idea that the company is allowing bots and trolls to spread disinformation on its platform, and criticized Bot Sentinel's methodology, which uses publicly available information from the company. Ironically, Twitter pointed to its bi-yearly ["transparency report,"](#) which supposedly uses unreleased private data, as a superior indicator of bot activity, but it only provides general figures on how many spam challenges and reports the platform sees. (Source: Business Insider, Bot Sentinel)

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

- States across the nation are in various stages of reopening or continuing to stay-at-home. This continues to cause some concern over the lack of consistency in policies and procedures being used to reopen state economies. While people are cautiously optimistic about some stay-at-home orders being lifted, local officials caution that strict social distancing and hand washing guidance must still be followed to avoid future outbreaks.
- There continues to be wide discussion about masks, similar to the stay-at-home orders each state and city is handling the wearing of masks and face coverings differently. Most people support wearing them in public, but some locations are stopping short of making it a requirement.
- Traditional media is strongly interested in how the general public is adhering or dismissing social distancing guidelines, following certain states loosening stay-at-home guidelines. News discussion continues to highlight recent projection models that warn of a possible second surge in positive cases due to states' limited ability to conducting mass testing on a frequent basis.
- Traditional press is equally focused on potential pork, poultry, and beef shortages due to meat-processing plant closings and employee illnesses. There is mixed reaction from federal officials, economists, and farmers on if the food supply chain is vulnerable.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- As more states make announcements about their reopening, there are growing concerns about mixed messaging between federal, state, and local guidance on reopening.
 - Many feel some states are moving ahead of federal guidelines and reopening too soon.
 - With many states entering regional pacts with neighboring states, some question if federal guidelines will be followed or if states will create their own.

- A growing number are worried that political and economic factors have more influence on these decisions than public safety and health data.
- Parents strongly disagree with comments made during yesterday's call with state governors that indicate states should begin to consider reopening schools before the summer.
 - Many people understand this would improve childcare issues and make returning to work easier. However, most would prefer to keep children at home longer out of an abundance of caution and concern for their safety.
- The conversation about mass testing continues to increase following yesterday's White House press briefing. Most are in favor of more testing and demand increased federal support.

Several national media outlets are reporting that the administration received more than a dozen warnings about COVID-19 in January and February. Many are responding to the news with outrage and distrust of the federal response, saying the administration downplayed the threat of COVID-19 during those months. (example 1, example 2, example 3)

- Concerns about the mental health safety of front line workers have resurfaced after news that a New York ER doctor committed suicide. People are expressing concern that frontline healthcare workers do not have enough access to mental health resources and are not being given enough support.
- National media outlets report that the Vice President did not wear a mask when touring the Mayo Clinic. The news coverage and public reaction are critical of this action and point out that it goes against CDC guidance and the hospital's policy on mask use.

(U) Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report on Covid-19 Disinformation: Bowing to heavy pressure from Beijing, European Union officials softened their criticism of China this week in a report documenting how governments push disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, according to documents, emails and interviews.

Worried about the repercussions, European officials first delayed and then rewrote the document in ways that diluted the focus on China, a vital trading partner — taking a very different approach than the confrontational stance adopted by the Trump administration.

The initial European Union report, obtained by The New York Times, was not particularly strident: a routine roundup of publicly available information and news reports.

It cited Beijing's efforts to curtail mentions of the virus's origins in China, in part by blaming the United States for spreading the disease internationally. It noted that Beijing had criticized France as slow to respond to the pandemic and had pushed false accusations that French politicians used racist slurs against the head of the World Health Organization. The report also highlighted Russian efforts to promote false health information and sow distrust in Western institutions.

"China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image," the initial report said. "Both overt and covert tactics have been observed."

But China moved quickly to block the document's release, and the European Union pulled back. The report had been on the verge of publication, until senior officials ordered revisions to soften the language. (Source: The New York Times)

(U) **YouTube Expands Fact-Check Panels to US Amid Widespread Coronavirus Misinformation:** Amid the onslaught of [coronavirus](#) misinformation, YouTube announced on Tuesday an expansion of its fact-check panels to the United States.

The video-sharing platform owned by [Google](#) launched the service last year in Brazil and India. It provides verified, third-party fact-checked information panels and articles regarding pertinent topics. The fact checks only show up when people search for specific claims. For example, a query such as "Does ibuprofen treat COVID-19?" would turn up a fact check, but something general about the drug itself probably would not. (Source: Fox News, YouTube)

(U) **Groups Spread Misinformation About Coronavirus Vaccine Before One Even Exists:** A coronavirus vaccine is still months or years away, but groups that peddle misinformation about immunizations are already taking aim, potentially eroding confidence in what could be humanity's best chance to defeat the virus.

In recent weeks, vaccine opponents have made several unsubstantiated claims, including allegations that vaccine trials will be dangerously rushed or that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious diseases expert, is blocking cures to enrich vaccine makers. They've also falsely claimed that Microsoft founder Bill Gates wants to use a vaccine to inject microchips into people — or to cull 15% of the world's population.

From the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, vaccine skeptics have tailored several long-standing claims about vaccine safety to fit the current outbreak. When the first U.S. case was announced in January, some alleged the coronavirus was manufactured and that patents for it could be found online. Thousands of deaths later, vaccine opponents are endorsing unapproved treatments, second-guessing medical experts and pushing fears about mandatory vaccinations. They've also latched onto protests against stay-at-home orders in the U.S.

Last week, an anti-vaccine activist was arrested in Idaho after repeatedly refusing police orders to leave a playground closed because of the pandemic. The woman, who was there with other families, is affiliated with two groups that protested at the Idaho Statehouse against stay-at-home orders. Facebook groups formed to organize the protests have been peppered with vaccine hoaxes and myths. Perhaps no one plays a bigger role in the conspiracy theories than Gates, who is funding vaccine research. The online movement has centered concerns around a COVID-19 vaccine on false claims that Gates is planning to microchip people with the vaccine or use it to reduce the world's population. (Source: CBS Boston)

(U) 4/28 Reporting

(U) **Covid-19 5G Theories Are Most Common Misinformation in UK:** Unfounded theories linking Covid-19 to 5G technology are the most common example of online misinformation in the UK, an Ofcom survey suggests.

The media regulator said 50% of respondents had seen some examples of misinformation during the third week of lockdown - up from 46% in week one.

Of those, half had seen the disproven 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory, it said. There are concerns the false claims prompted people to set communication masts set on fire across the UK.

A spokesman for industry body Mobile UK told BBC News there had been "more than 50" of these arson attacks but fewer in recent days. Claims 5G spreads coronavirus or weakens people's immune systems, making them susceptible to it, have been denounced as "complete rubbish" by scientists.

There will likely be a flood of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories if and when a vaccine for coronavirus is made available. (Source: BBC)

(U//FOUO) European External Action Service Disinformation on COVID-19 Information Environment Assessment

(U//FOUO) Key findings

- COVID-19-related disinformation continues to proliferate widely on social media, with increasing numbers of reports highlighting direct harm to the health of citizens and public security.
- Russian official sources and state-controlled media and social media channels have been running a coordinated campaign across EU Member States and neighbouring regions promoting false health information and disinformation about the EU and its partners
- Reports indicate that China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image. Both overt and covert tactics have been observed.
- Disinformation networks linked to the Iranian Government have been exploiting the pandemic to frame "the West" and attack international sanctions.
- Analysis by EEAS Stratcom and external groups shows that highly harmful disinformation about COVID-19 is going particularly viral in smaller media markets within and outside the EU, where tech companies face lower incentives to take adequate counter-measures.
- The EU working with international partners, both inside the EU and globally, to step up its response to malign influence campaigns and COVID-19-related disinformation, including in the context of the EU Rapid Alert System.

(U//FOUO) **Russia:** EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Official Russian sources and state media continue running a coordinated campaign with the twofold aim of undermining in the EU and its crisis response, and to sow confusion about the origins health implications of COVID-19.
- The campaign mostly builds on open source media and social media channels, with some indications of covert behavior.
- The campaign exposes coordination across EU Member States and the wider Neighborhood.
- Kremlin-backed disinformation on covid-19 continues to proliferate widely on social media even if it contradicts official WHO guidance and the content policies of social media companies.
- Potential harm is assessed to be high, as conspiracy theories and false health information have been proven to negatively impact health behavior.

(U//FOUO) Russian state-sponsored media and related outlets continue to share misleading and deceptive health information around COVID-19 with international audiences. Much of this disinformation directly contradicts the WHO's official guidance, as well as the content policies of online platforms. Nonetheless, most of the health-endangering content EEAS Stratcom identified continues to proliferate widely on social media services such as Twitter and Facebook. Google and other ads-delivery services continue to monetize and incentivize harmful health disinformation by hosting paid ads on respective websites. The most common narratives include,

- Disinformation around disease prevention, including anti-vaccination narratives
- Disinformation around COVID-19 cures
- Disinformation seeking to downplay the pandemic

(U//FOUO) **China:** EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Continued and coordinated push by official Chinese sources to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic
- High level of coordination between different parts of the Chinese system in messaging and amplification of messages across different languages and communication channels
- Use of both overt and covert tactics
- Continued assertiveness by Chinese officials, including direct targeting of the French Government with disinformation messages
- New domestic restrictions on COVID-19 related research in China
- Potential harm is assessed as medium, as the larger share of Chinese propaganda and disinformation efforts has received scrutiny in international media. However, polls in certain countries show China is perceived as more helpful in fighting the pandemic than the EU.
(Source: EEAS)

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

- Discussions about state and local reopenings remained the dominant topic of traditional and social media conversations. Many are concerned about reopening too soon and continue to call

for widespread testing, but financial pressure has many eager to return to work despite worries of COVID-19 exposure.

- An increasing number of individuals and news outlets are discussing economic issues and worries following concerns of mixed messaging from two White House economic advisors. Many are doubtful that the economy will bounce back quickly and fear worsening financial conditions for businesses, individuals, and governments.
- FEMA conversation has increased significantly and is being driven by a national news outlet reporting that FEMA diverted a PPE shipment that was badly needed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Reactions are almost entirely negative, with many expressing strong distrust of the agency and asking for an explanation as to why so many similar reports keep emerging regarding FEMA's role in seizures and diverted supplies.
- Traditional news media has increasingly focused on food supply chain stability, following warnings from a major food supply company.
- National broadcast news media is highly focused on states' economic conditions as some governors resume limited economic activity. There is particular focus on what mitigation measures, testing supplies, and assurance is needed in order to safely reopen.

(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

- Across the country, many local news outlets are trying to take the pulse of their communities through informal social media polls to better understand how people are feeling about actions being taken by state and local officials. These polls are drawing an enormous amount of engagement as they provide a forum for people to share their concerns about reopenings or mask orders.
- Many are reacting with concern and confusion following different economic predictions from two senior White House economic advisors. One shared a more concerning outlook, predicted unemployment rates as high as 16% and made comparisons to the Great Depression.
- The other described the situation more optimistically by predicting the economy could reopen in May and June, and that the economy would "really bounce back" in Q3.
- People are concerned about their finances – worried about being out of work but also worried that if businesses reopen too soon they will have to choose between work and exposure.
 - Many are also voicing frustration about the status of their stimulus checks, with people expressing confusion about the timelines and process.
- There are increasing concerns about the integrity of the food supply chain as Tyson Foods warns that "millions of pounds of meat" will disappear from the supply chain as processing plants are forced to close.
- Many first responders who have recovered from COVID-19 have started returning to work, with fears about whether or not they are immune to SARS-CoV-2, and what reinfection might look like.

(U) **WhatsApp Viral Message Forwarding Drops 70% After New Limits To Stop Coronavirus**

Misinformation: WhatsApp has seen a 70% drop in the number of viral forwarded messages being sent, three weeks after the Facebook-own messaging app imposed a limit on shared messages to halt the spread of coronavirus misinformation.

WhatsApp imposed a Highly Forwarded Message limit on April 7, in response to a "significant increase" in the number of forwarded messages, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. The limit means

people can only forward these viral messages to just one chat, instead of five, to curtail false information being spread widely about the virus. (Source: Forbes)

(U) **Pro-China Trolls Use Fake Accounts to Hound Foreign Media Over Coronavirus:** Patriotic Chinese trolls have been using fake Twitter accounts to hound foreign media companies about their reporting of the coronavirus outbreak.

According to an analysis of social media trends released on Thursday by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a network of bloggers operating independently of the Chinese government have targeted outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, BBC and the US government-funded non-profit Radio Free Asia with a barrage of criticism and fake news.

The Twitter accounts have also apparently sought to increase tensions between Taiwan and Beijing. Although many media outlets were being trolled by Chinese accounts well before 2020, “the main campaign appears to have picked up steam around mid-March as a loose network of Twitter accounts designed to mimic and harass Western media”, according to the Institute's researchers

Some troll accounts appear to have been mocked up to resemble the Chinese-language accounts of outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and the BBC, the researchers concluded.



Co-ordinated 'apologies' from troll accounts posing as Taiwanese users. ASPI

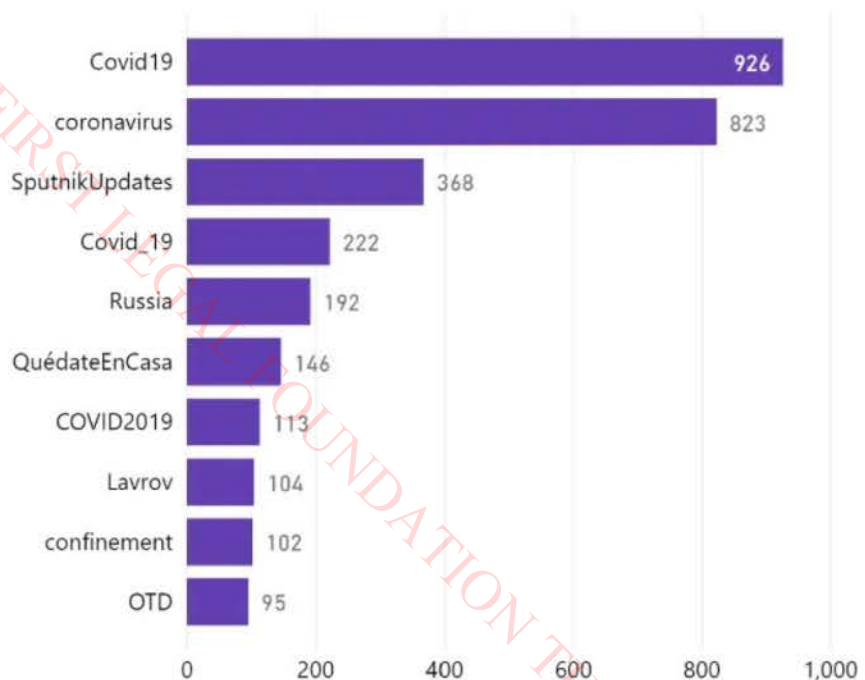
(Source: The Age, Australian Strategic Policy Institute)

(U) **Russia-State Media Toplines:** The leading topic of the Russian media ecosystem last week was once again the coronavirus. The virus has now occupied this position for 14 straight weeks. Basic news updates on the pandemic accounted for much of this coverage. Some content addressed anti-lockdown protests around the world, coming down on both sides of the issue—RT in particular focused on the perspectives of the protestors themselves. In non-coronavirus output, articles on U.S.-Iran tensions saw significant engagement on websites, while the steady drip of updates related to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on RT YouTube channels continued.

Twitter

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — April 18-24:



The three accounts that tend to receive very high engagement regardless of topic (@actualidadrt, @rtultimahora, and @sputnik_tr) posted all but one of the top overall tweets by engagement metrics, mainly providing basic news about the coronavirus and oil prices.

The top overall tweets from accounts—besides the three high engagement accounts—included four related to anti-lockdown protests or lockdown violations in the West. These posts included one from Redfish, a Berlin-based media company [supported by the Kremlin](#), featuring a video compilation of clips from anti-lockdown protests across the United States and asked if the people shown were a “capitalist death cult.” RT seemed to focus on the sentiments of the protestors, while left-leaning Redfish took the opportunity to make systemic critiques of problems in the United States, characterizing the protestors as the embodiment of these issues. RT also covered reports of overzealous police responses in Europe:

-  **redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 20
Is this what a capitalist death cult looks like? <https://t.co/Y1si2WR7pR>
701 1,255
-  **RT** @rt_com • Apr 22
The anti-lockdown sentiment is beginning to spread like #COVID19 itself. On Monday, 300 people gathered in front of a Karl Marx monument in #Chemnitz, #Germany, to show the authorities how angry they are about the stay-at-home measures <https://t.co/XymZRCGfQh>
399 523
-  **RT** @rt_com • Apr 19
Heavy-handed #German police clashed with angry protesters in #Berlin over the government's #COVID19 lockdown measures MORE: <https://t.co/5MWFH1DKI>
<https://t.co/1j5UKPoSEp>
360 460
-  **RT** @rt_com • Apr 20
Spanish police point gun at two women during arrest of a man for allegedly violating #lockdown The officers have been placed under investigation #COVID19 #Spain
<https://t.co/FEBWcDdo68>
270 420

Around 270 tweets directly mentioned protests, demonstrations, or rallies during this period (note that this tally excludes tweets that reference such events more obliquely or through images, and it may include some false positives like diplomatic protests). Examples included:

-  **RT en Español** @actualidadrt • Apr 19
Demonstrators took to the streets of Berlin to denounce the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus despite the ban on mass meetings <https://t.co/7VJ15Qn8s8>
415 518
-
-  **redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 20
Epic photos of nurses in Denver blocking right-wing anti-lockdown protesters. (Photos by Alyson McClaran/Reuters) <https://t.co/GG9g3fD8XO>
253 474
-  **redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 20
Spot the difference. Top left photo of Native Americans protesting Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. Top right photo of African Americans protesting for their lives to matter in 2016. Bottom photo of right-wing anti-lockdown protests in the US in 2020. <https://t.co/c8p6qlwKGg>
189 354

(The above tweet sought to draw attention to police responses to the listed protests.)

Russian government-funded websites:

Out of about 1,300 articles from Russian government-funded news websites collected on the dashboard last week, a little over 700 mentioned “virus” in the first 200 words. Continuing a trend, much of this content consisted of basic news updates. However, two of the top four stories based on Facebook shares covered heightened [tensions](#) between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf, including the top story.

Other top stories and opinion pieces highlighted studies questioning the timeline and mortality rate of the coronavirus pandemic and anti-lockdown protests in the United States, and they criticized U.S. officials’ “legitimiz[ation of] Covid-19’s China lab origins conspiracy theory.” RT appeared to focus heavily on the protestors’ anger. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Russian-Backed Media Coverage of “Liberate” Protests:** About 30 articles covered protests around the world related to the coronavirus, primarily anti-lockdown demonstrations. Notable articles on U.S. protests included:

“‘Open the economy – I need to feed my family!’ Will lockdown fatigue spiral into destructive mass protests?” Op-ed, RT, April 22, 2020.

“As the world races against time to beat Covid-19, many feel the lockdown has been unfair and over-the-top. Now, anger and frustration threatens to snowball into something that makes a pandemic look like a picnic by comparison. For many Westerners, many of whom are living paycheck to paycheck, the ‘shelter-at-home’ order in response to the coronavirus feels like a death sentence, especially if accompanied by the loss of a job. Now, many people, despite lockdown orders, are beginning to vent their anger on the streets.”

“US Anti-Quarantine Protests Win Billionaire Support as Bludgeon Against the Left – Professor,” Opinion, Sputnik News, April 21, 2020.

“Protests last week in several US states against what residents claimed to be draconian measures imposed by Democratic governors to curb the spread of COVID-19 have gotten support from high places as a right-wing weapon against a perceived threat of left-wing ideas, political science professor Jodi Dean told Sputnik.”

“Facebook CENSORS anti-quarantine protests in US as ‘harmful misinformation,’” RT, April 20, 2020.

“Americans protesting their states’ coronavirus lockdown measures won’t be able to organize protests on Facebook any longer, after the Silicon Valley firm declared them ‘harmful misinformation.’”

Sputnik also put out several radio shows that commented on the U.S. protests, with titles such as **“Trump Eggs on Anti-Government Protests”** and **“As Leftists Uplift Essential Workers, the Right Works to Endanger Them,”** both from April 20.

In reporting on other countries’ protests, the most noteworthy articles included one detailing what was described as a “strong police response” to protests in Berlin and, a bit unusually, two on protests in Russia:

“WATCH Berlin police forcefully disperse unsanctioned protest against coronavirus lockdown,” RT, April 18, 2020.

“Hundreds of activists gathered in central Berlin, defying government Covid-19 lockdown measures and arguing the state is heading for “authoritarian rule.” The gathering was met with a strong police response.”

“Russians ‘take to the streets’ ONLINE in protest over coronavirus measures,” Russia Beyond, April 22, 2020.

“The recent ban on public gatherings, social distancing and self-isolation rules in Russia has people protesting by way of Yandex’s satellite navigation app. Modern problems require modern solutions, they

say. At least, that's what some people across Russia decided having had enough of the government's self-isolation regime. The citizens of more than 10 Russian cities took to 'Yandex.Navigator' and 'Yandex.Maps' – the Russian search giant's GPS apps – to create huge chat sessions and mark every protester on the map, together with a small comment."

"Protesters gather in Russia's N. Ossetia-Alania to demand cancellation of self-isolation rules," RT, April 20, 2020.

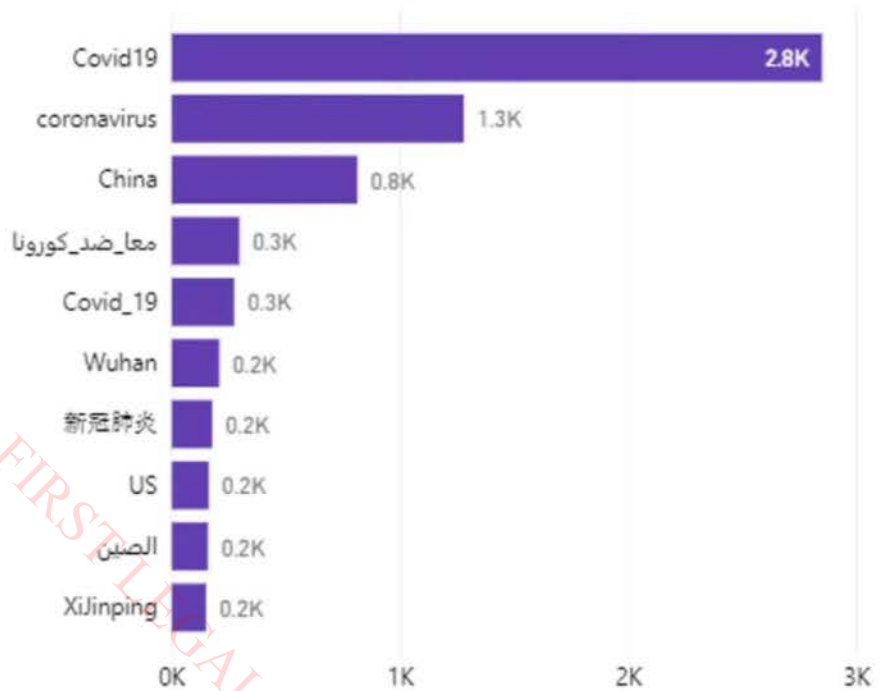
"Hundreds of protesters – most of them unmasked – gathered on Monday in Vladikavkaz, the capital of the southern Russian Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, to demand the cancellation of the self-isolation regime. The unauthorized meeting took place near the building of the local government despite restrictions, which will last till April 30." (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **China-State Media Toplines:** Chinese state media outlets continue to focus on the coronavirus epidemic. As the war of words between China and the United States has escalated, Chinese state media has focused increasingly on deflecting blame onto the United States and highlighting what it characterizes as the United States's failure to respond effectively to the virus. This included messaging contrasting China's embrace of a multilateral, WHO-centered approach with what state media characterized as U.S. attacks on the organization and multilateralism itself. Many tweets and state media pieces also spotlighted pain, dissatisfaction, and dissent in the United States caused by the epidemic, with a particular focus on protests over coronavirus lockdowns.

Twitter





Chinese state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags – April 18-24:



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 18-24 (figures as of 3pm April 24). The coronavirus continued to dominate all top hashtags; every top hashtag was either directly related to the virus or promoted epidemic-related coverage (“XiJinping”, for example, covered the Chinese Communist Party leader’s virus-related messaging).

Many of the most engaged-with tweets for the past week sought to cast the United States’ coronavirus response in a negative light.

- 
Hu Xijin 胡锡进 @huxijin_gt • Apr 18
 President Trump couldn't understand why China's death toll is much lower than US's. It's because Chinese govt has adopted scientific&effective control measures.Loose political system of the US allows more than 4000 people die of pandemic every day. Americans are so good tempered.
 458 2,562
- 
Hua Chunying 华春莹 @spokespersonchn • Apr 20
 Right decisions can only be built on Facts. Some people in the US should know that their enemy is the virus, not China.
 323 2,359
- 
Hu Xijin 胡锡进 @huxijin_gt • Apr 18
 Daily COVID-19 deaths in the US have topped 4000, close to the global daily death toll barring the US. Trump administration has been seriously negligent in their duty and should be subject to criminal liability. Hope the US law won't condone such dereliction of duty.
 358 2,025
- 
CGTN @cgtnofficial • Apr 20
 - When H1N1 influenza in the U.S spread to 214 countries - When AIDS first found in the U.S. in the 1980s - When financial turmoil in the U.S. became a global crisis in 2008 Did anyone ask the U.S. to pay for it? Chinese FM spokesperson refutes the U.S. call for compensation <https://t.co/XOFsEITU5y>
 466 1,071

Two of China's top foreign ministry spokespeople, Zhao Lijian and Chunying Hua, also retweeted an article from U.S. outlet The GrayZone calling the theory of coronavirus escaping from a Wuhan research lab the "Trump administration's Iraqi WMD [moment]," a nearly identical take to the RT op-ed highlighted in the above Russia report.

Retweeted by Lijian Zhao 赵立坚

Hua Chunying 华春莹 @SpokespersonCHN • Apr 23



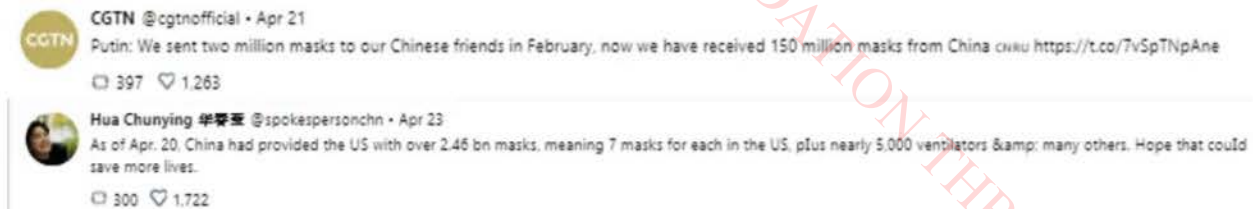
How a Trump media dump mainstreamed Chinese lab coronavirus cons...
 A conspiracy theory about Covid-19 escaping from the Wuhan Institute of Virology is the Trump administration's Iraqi WMD. And the...
thegrayzone.com

158 201 1.1K

Lijian amplifying a tweet criticizing U.S. officials for pushing a “conspiracy theory” about the Coronavirus escaping from a Chinese research lab is deeply ironic, given that Lijian previously tweeted a parallel theory that claimed the Coronavirus originated in a U.S. research lab.



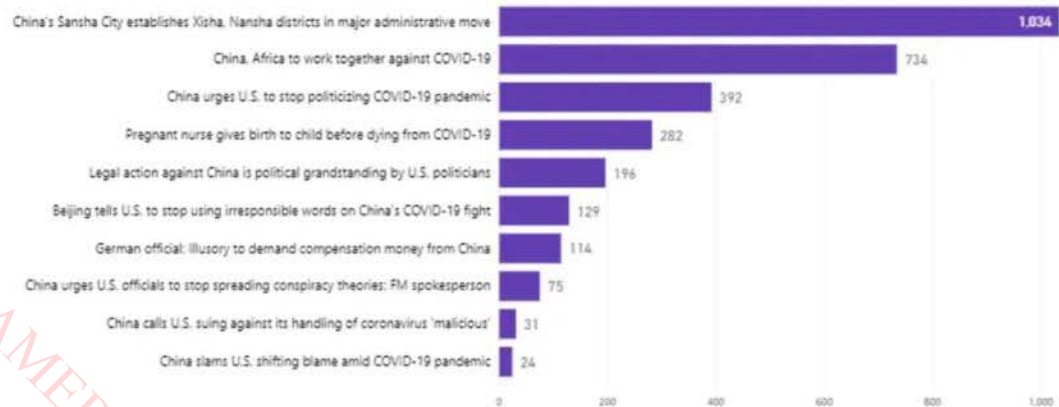
Other top tweets focused on other countries praising China for its assistance during the epidemic, including one highlighting praise from Vladimir Putin. Although the tweets frame this assistance as a gift, it is typically masks purchased on a commercial basis.



One important change from previous weeks was the appearance of Xi Jinping in the top hashtags. The Chinese Communist Party’s supreme leader made a public inspection tour of poverty alleviation work in Shaanxi Province on Tuesday. Significantly, he was not wearing a protective facemask, nor were any of the people in his staged photo shoots. This is a marked departure from Xi’s relatively few public appearances since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak.

Websites

Chinese government-funded websites:



(Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) **Russian Coronavirus Aid to Italy: The Mask Falls Off:** Since February of this year, as the coronavirus pandemic has swept the globe, China has been engaging in what media commentators are calling “**mask diplomacy**”—the sale or donation of medical supplies to countries battling the terrible disease. Russia seemed poised to do the same. On March 22, the Russian Ministry of Defense **announced** it would be sending medical specialists and supplies to hard-hit Italy as aid from the Russian people. As is often the case with the Russian government’s goodwill campaigns, Russia’s motives were not entirely altruistic. Russia’s aid mission to Italy was in reality a self-interested attempt to use such donations as fodder for information operations to exacerbate existing divisions within the European Union and NATO, portraying the two alliances as weak and uncaring about Italians’ suffering.

At first, things seemed to turn out quite well for the Kremlin. Far-right Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio hailed the aid, and front-page headlines in *La Repubblica* **proclaimed** that the crisis had “redrawn the map of Italy’s allies.” Russia had previously **invested** in its relationship with Italy, going so far as to attempt to surreptitiously **fund** a major Italian political party, and it considers the country a **weak point** both in NATO and in the EU. All this in mind, Russia saw the contribution of medical gear—during a time when the country appeared to have its own coronavirus epidemic **under control**—as a sound investment.

Things went quickly downhill, however, when the supplies arrived in Italy. According to unnamed high level sources **quoted** by *La Stampa*, 80 percent of the supplies were “useless,” and the shipments were “merely a pretext” to place a Russian **military presence** in Italy. This reporting by Coda Story and *La Stampa* caused a **furious backlash** in Russia, with Russian General Igor Konashenkov going so far as to issue a threatening statement against *La Stampa* journalist Jacopo Iacoboni on **Facebook**, quoting in Latin from **Ecclesiastes 10:8**, “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.”

This bluster highlights the **self-interested** aspects of the aid mission, which Sergio Germani of Gino Germani Institute for Social Sciences and Strategic Studies in Rome **called** “a half-propaganda, half-intelligence operation” meant to “to strengthen anti-EU feelings and to reinforce the impression that the EU is crumbling, to make propaganda gains and gather intelligence at the heart of NATO.” As ASD’s **Hamilton 2.0 tracker** has illustrated, Russian state media has made much of this aid to Italy, emphasizing, for example, local pro-Russia **politicians’** praise for the shipments and **criticism** of the **EU and NATO** as unwilling or unable to provide aid to one of their own member states.

Russia may continue to troll the West with these small shipments of aid, as it has done recently with the **United States**. Low-cost, high-reward information operations that exacerbate divisions in the EU and NATO have played a **consistent role** in Russia’s authoritarian playbook, and Russia’s response to the coronavirus pandemic crisis, and its ultimate goals, to drive a wedge between EU and NATO member states and aggravate existing divisions in the alliances, remain the same. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U) 4/27 Reporting

(U//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE): Suspected Arsonists Attempt to Damage 5G Cell Tower in Portland, OR. On 10 April 2020, suspected arsonists set fire to electrical conduit pipe and associated cell tower component metal cabinetry located at the base of a major cell phone carrier’s cell tower in Portland, Oregon. First responders found remnants of gas in empty water bottles at the scene. The fire did not compromise the structural integrity of the cell tower.

The incident comes amidst a global increase in conspiracy theories and online misinformation linking the COVID-19 pandemic to 5G infrastructure.

(U//FOUO) Incidents Nationwide Indicate Domestic Terrorists Also Using COVID-19 as an Impetus for Violence: To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has driven at least two individuals motivated in whole or in part by domestic terrorist ideologies to attempt or threaten violence in the Homeland. These incidents indicate that COVID-19 is serving as the impetus for some domestic terrorist plots.

(U//FOUO) Domestic terrorists and other violent extremist actors probably will continue to threaten violence in the Homeland in response to the COVID-19 pandemic until the virus is contained and the normal routine of US societal life resumes. As the COVID-19 threat expands throughout the United States, the violent extremist threat will also continue to evolve, potentially increasing in frequency and severity. The emphasis on social distancing, closures of many businesses, and cessation of popular leisure activities nationwide precludes most mass gathering events—historically appealing targets for both international and domestic terrorists. However, the pandemic has created a new source of anger and frustration for some individuals. As a result, violent extremist plots will likely involve individuals seeking targets symbolic to their personal grievances.

(U//FOUO) **Florida Incidents Highlight Potential for COVID-19 to Drive Violence as Pandemic**

Continues: Recent incidents and arrests nationwide illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic is driving violent actors—both non-ideologically and ideologically motivated—to threaten violence. Two non-ideological examples occurred in Florida where one individual exploited the pandemic to spread fear while targeting a seemingly random location, while the other individual threatened people or entities perceived as having a direct role in fighting the pandemic.

(U//FOUO) On 29 March, an individual in Jacksonville, Florida sprayed the entrance of a local business with an aerosol substance from a spray bottle labeled “COVID-19” and allegedly told employees and patrons that they were infected with the virus, according to a Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office press statement posted on social media.

(U//FOUO) The incident and motivation remain under law enforcement investigation. The individual was arrested on federal weapons of mass destruction-related charges and has been released from jail on a \$15,000 bond, according to the same sources.

(U) **Murder Threats Against UK Telecoms Engineers Over 5G:** Telecoms engineers have told Radio 1 Newsbeat they’re being threatened and harassed by people who believe they’re working on 5G, which has been wrongly linked to coronavirus.

But the union and trade body representing thousands of workers across the UK say they’ve had around 120 cases of abuse reported to them. The reports have included threats of extreme violence.

"We've actually had cases where people have been threatened with being stabbed, threatened with physical violence and in some cases actually threatened with murder," says Andy Kerr, deputy general secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). (Source: BBC)

(U) **Chlorine Manufacturer Peddles Dangerous COVID-19 Chlorine Treatment to NRM Chem Sector Partners:** The Chemical Sector notified the CFI TF about chlorine manufacturing company CONVE & AVS Inc’s. attempt to promote a potentially dangerous COVID-19 treatment to NRM chem sector partners. The company claims without evidence that they can treat COVID-19 via a chlorine-based inhalant. The company posted a corresponding video to YouTube of the alleged “treatment.”

The CFI TF has flagged the video for YouTube and Google for review. DHS and chem sector partners have notified HHS and the CDC.

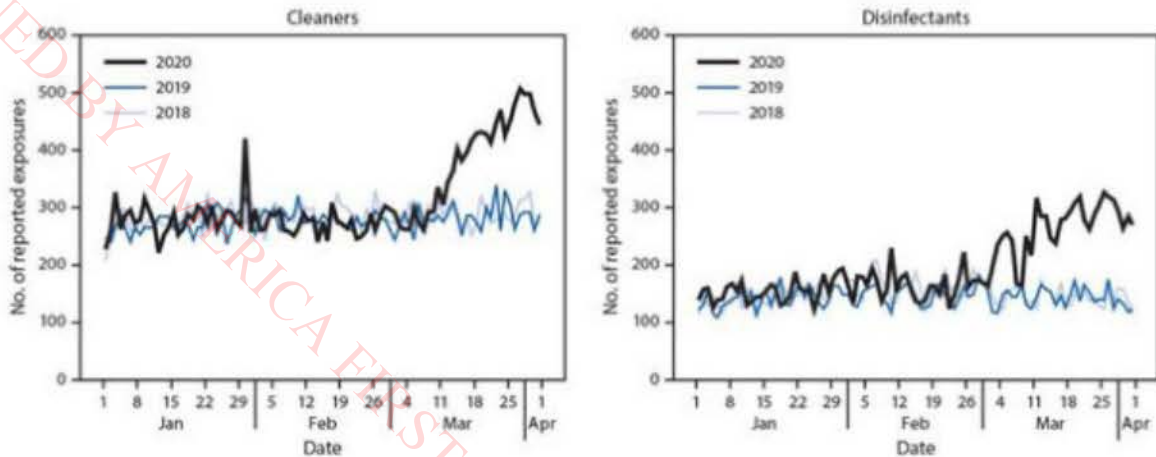
(U) **CDC Says Poison Hotlines See Spike From Cleaning Product Accidents Amid Virus:** From January to March, CDC said poison centers have received 45,550 exposure calls regarding cleaners and disinfectants. That represents a little over a 20% increase in calls from the same time period last year.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says [poison hotlines](#) have seen a spike from [cleaning product accidents](#) since the coronavirus outbreak.

CDC says although data doesn't provide a "definitive link" between exposures and COVID-19 cleaning efforts, "there appears to be a clear temporal association with increased use of these products."

(Source: CDC, ABC)

FIGURE. Number of daily exposures to cleaners and disinfectants reported to U.S. poison centers — United States, 2019, and 2020*†



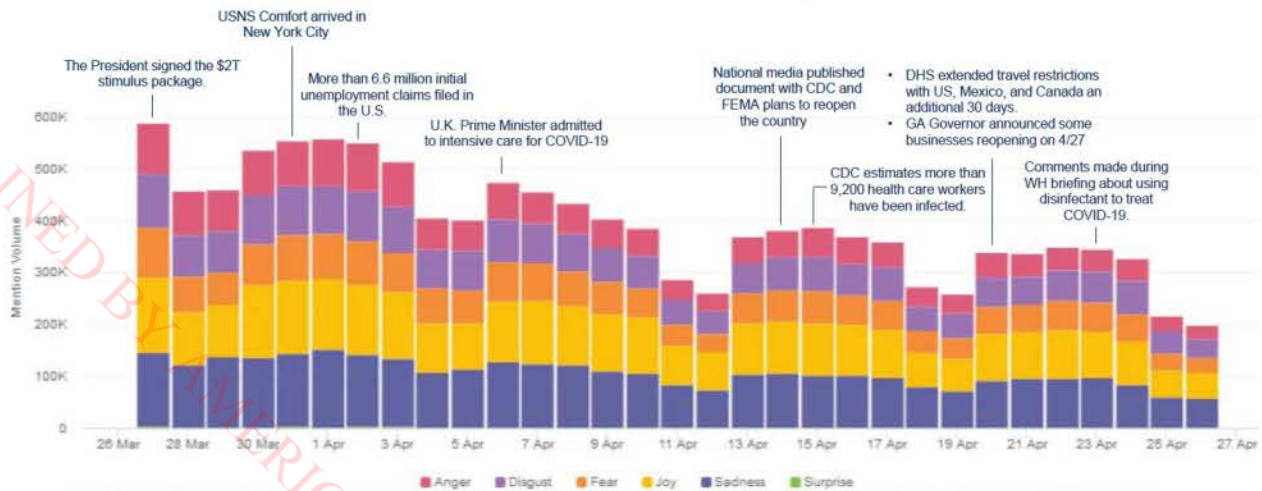
* Excluding February 29, 2020.

† Increase in exposures to cleaners on January 29, 2020, came from an unintentional exposure to a cleaning agent within a school.

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Public conversation around COVID-19 on social media has once again slightly decreased since last week. This is the fifth week in a row of decreasing conversation.
- Sadness continues to be the most commonly expressed emotion. This category captured public conversation around the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, especially for New York City. It also captured conversation about economic hardship resulting from the stay at home orders and social distancing
- The disgust category mostly captured public conversation around the suggestion during a White House briefing that injecting disinfectant might be an effective approach to treating COVID-19
- Some of the conversation within the anger category has surrounded the lack of testing capacity to safely reopen and loosen restrictions

COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Month



* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.

(Graphic U//FOUO)

COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Week



* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.

(Graphic U//FOUO)

(U) Posts Promoting Unproven Drugs Highlight Limits of Social Networks' Coronavirus Fight: Posts selling unproven drug therapies to treat the novel coronavirus continued to surface on social networks over the last week, despite the companies' promises to promote public health and crack down on misleading information.

On Facebook, one account peddled hydroxychloroquine, the anti-malarial drug. The page, which has since been removed, pushed people to text a WhatsApp number to place an order. It was still live **days after** a study found the anti-malarial had no benefit and was linked to higher rates of death for Veterans Affairs patients hospitalized with the novel coronavirus.

Meanwhile on YouTube, a video promoted the sale of raw materials to make the drug. And another promoted sales in the United States of Avigan, a flu treatment [being tested](#) against covid-19.

Researchers fear they're starting to see the effects of the companies' staffing limitations. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) **Hospitals Around the World Are Being Targeted by Conspiracy Theorists:** In the midst of a global pandemic, conspiracy theorists have found yet another way to spread dangerous [disinformation and misinformation](#) about COVID-19, sowing seeds of doubts about its severity and denying the very existence of the pandemic.

Since March 28, conspiracy theorists...aka "[coronavirus deniers](#)" have been using the hashtag #FilmYourHospital to [encourage people](#) to visit local hospitals to take pictures and videos to "prove" that the COVID-19 pandemic is an elaborate hoax.

The premise for this conspiracy theory rests on the baseless assumption that if hospital parking lots and waiting rooms are empty then the pandemic must not be real or is not as severe as reported by health authorities and the media.

Of course, in reality, there is a simple explanation for why some hospital parking lots and waiting rooms might have been empty. As part of pandemic planning, many hospitals have banned visitors and doctors have had to postpone or cancel elective and non-urgent procedures to free up medical staff and resources. This is in keeping with expert [advice from the CDC](#) and other health authorities.

This empty-hospital conspiracy theory joins a parade of [false, unproven and misleading claims](#) about the virus that have been making the rounds on social media including allegations that [5G wireless technology](#) somehow plays a role in the spread of the COVID-19 virus or taking cocaine and drinking bleach might prevent or cure you of the virus. (Source: COVID-19 Misinfo.org)

(U) 4/24 Reporting

(U) **COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Continue to Spread and Thrive on Social Media:** According to a [new report from network analysis firm Graphika](#), social media is being used to spread coronavirus-related misinformation and even disinformation – as well as use of "conspiratorial hashtags." Graphika noted that it had begun a systematic analysis of narratives designed to stoke geopolitical tensions.

"Initial insights into the messaging being propagated by pro-Kremlin voices in various geographies indicate a focus on undermining trust in global institutions and drawing attention to the failures of other governments, predominantly the Chinese response," the report explained.

Where social media gives misinformation and outright disinformation a boost is that the right hashtag can help these topics go viral almost as quickly as an actual virus can spread. Common conspiracy hashtags, such as #coronahoax or #covid19hoax, are being used by conspiracy theorists around the world. Added with the right subject line and these find an audience like a virus seeks out a host. (Source: [Forbes](#))

(U) **Malicious forces creating 'perfect storm' of coronavirus disinformation:** The coronavirus crisis has sparked a “perfect storm” of global online disinformation, cyber-espionage and disruption, involving up to a dozen states but most prominently Russia and China, experts have warned. During a pandemic that has killed tens of thousands of people, analysts have witnessed a sharp rise in deliberate misinformation campaigns on social media, which have occurred in parallel with attempts to hack international organizations at the forefront of the coronavirus response. Senior executives from Facebook, Google and Twitter are scheduled to appear before UK MPs next Thursday to answer questions about the spread of coronavirus disinformation.

A report published by the EU on Friday accused Russia and China of targeting European citizens, including Britons, during the pandemic, and provided a range of examples. Echoing other experts, the bloc’s foreign affairs wing, the European external action service, said there had been a “proliferation” during the month of April. “Despite their potentially grave impact on public health, official and state-backed sources from various governments, including Russia and – to a lesser extent – China, have continued to widely target conspiracy narratives and disinformation both at public audiences in the EU and the wider neighbourhood,” the report said. (Source: [The Guardian](#))

(U) **Nearly 50% of Twitter Accounts Talking about Coronavirus Might Be Bots:** Nearly half the “people” talking about the coronavirus pandemic on Twitter are not actually people, but bots, according to new research from Carnegie Mellon University. And many of those bots are rapidly feeding Twitter with harmful, false story lines about the pandemic, including some inspiring real-world activity, such as the theory that 5G towers cause COVID-19, or state-sponsored propaganda from Russia and China that falsely claims the U.S. developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon or that American politicians are issuing “mandatory” lockdowns.

“We do see that a lot of bots are acting in ways that are consistent with the story lines that are coming out of Russia or China,” said Kathleen Carley, professor at Carnegie Mellon’s School of Computer Science’s Institute for Software Research. Researchers there found that 45.5% of users tweeting about the coronavirus have the characteristics of bots, such as tweeting more frequently than is humanly possible, or appearing to be in one country and then another a few hours later. Carley says that’s a massive jump from the 20% she’d expected based on previous analyses of bot activity around other major global news events and national disasters.

The Carnegie Mellon team identified more than 100 false narratives relating to coronavirus worldwide, which they divided into six different categories: cures or preventative measures, weaponization of the

virus, emergency responses, the nature of the virus (like children being immune to it), self-diagnosis methods, and feel-good stories, like dolphins returning to Venice's canals. (Source: [Vice](#))

(U) **NJOHSP Leads New Jersey's Efforts to Combat Spread of COVID-19 Disinformation:** The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (NJOHSP) is leading New Jersey's efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation, rumors, and scams that may impact residents and businesses throughout the State. NJOHSP is collaborating with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, New Jersey Regional Operations Intelligence Center, and New Jersey State Police to provide the public with guidance regarding false and fraudulent information and activity stemming from the pandemic. A webpage, "COVID-19 Rumor Control and Disinformation Updates," launched in mid-March is updated as new information becomes available.

The [webpage](#) features unclassified intelligence products on COVID-19 disinformation, details about scams that New Jersey residents and visitors might be susceptible to, and cybersecurity alerts regarding potential threats to individuals and businesses caused by the pandemic. Multiple foreign nations are leveraging the pandemic to sow anti-US sentiment and undermine the credibility of the United States. This includes nation-state actors such as China and Russia using disinformation campaigns via multiple mediums to alter the views of individuals and distort facts. Additionally, individuals and groups domestically are using false or misleading information about COVID-19 to target their perceived adversaries and conduct scams. (Source: [Insider NJ](#))

(U) 4/23 Reporting

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media Supports Anti-Stay-at-Home Protest Narratives, Though Scale of Amplification Limited for Now:** Russian state outlets seem to take the sides of demonstrators and strive to convey the image of the protests as an action aimed to reverse overly restrictive measures that are undermining people's constitutional rights and strangling the economy. From this perspective, the articles continuously report the opinions and comments of protesters, while the views of those who criticize the demonstrations are rarely and only partially represented

Russian-state media reporting focuses on the allegedly "draconian" or "dictatorial" nature of the U.S.'s COVID-19 response, presenting distorted and one-sided analysis to support this narrative. Nevertheless, the current scale and narrative harmonization across the Russian disinformation ecosystem is more limited than other ongoing Russian-backed COVID 19 disinformation narratives, such as conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus. (Source: Eu vs. Disinfo; RT; Sputnik)

(U) **Facebook to Remove Some Anti-Stay-at-Home Protests:** Facebook will remove some posts on [anti-stay-at-home protests](#) being organized in California, New Jersey and Nebraska after consulting with officials in those states

Facebook is working to get answers from state governments in Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York as to whether anti-stay-at-home protests are also prohibited under their social distancing guidelines

"Unless government prohibits the event during this time, we allow it to be organized on Facebook," a Facebook spokesperson said. "For this same reason, events that defy government's guidance on social distancing aren't allowed on Facebook." (Source: CNN)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Engagement:** Recent cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation managed to generate a total of 36,534 shares, likes and comments on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit.

The most popular disinformation case this week was an article on RT Arabic, which tried to discredit the EU by making a wrong claim that it has not been helping its partners fight the coronavirus, while [China and Russia have rushed to help](#). This article received 9,900 likes on Facebook and its total volume of engagement was 10,400.

In second place came a pro-Kremlin article claiming that [Bill Gates might have had a hand in creating the coronavirus](#) and spreading the pandemic around the world, so that he could implant microchips in people's heads. The former Microsoft boss would do this to determine who has been tested for COVID-19 and to enforce mandatory vaccinations.

In third place landed a video published by a YouTube channel called [Ahí les Va](#). According to the video, a recent article in the *New York Times* used the Russian president as a scapegoat, claiming that he can be [blamed for problems of the US health system](#). However, the original piece in the *New York Times* only affirms that Russia has been promoting an anti-vaccination stance in the West. It also exposes the techniques the Kremlin has used to spread disinformation on health issues for over a decade. While this video received 4,400 engagements on Facebook and more than 800 engagements on Twitter, the YouTube video easily scored 296,542 views. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Twitter Will Remove Coronavirus Content that Could Lead to Offline Destruction of 5G**

Telecommunications Infrastructure: Ever since it first started rolling out, 5G skeptics have attempted to link the next-gen cellular technology to all manner of health issues. Most recently, it's become an easy scapegoat for the global COVID-19 pandemic, given the rapid rise of both.

Conspiracy theories have gained such a foothold that vigilantes have taken matters into their own hands by [destroying cell towers](#) in various European countries. In its latest bid to tamp down on the spread of false information pertaining to the novel coronavirus, Twitter today [expanded its COVID-19 guidance](#) to include the topic.

"We're prioritizing the removal of COVID-19 content when it has a call to action that could potentially cause harm," a spokesperson for the company told TechCrunch. "As we've said previously, we will not take enforcement action on every Tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about

COVID-19. Since introducing these new policies on March 18, we've removed more than 2,200 Tweets. As we've doubled down on tech, our automated systems have challenged more than 3.4 million accounts which were targeting discussions around COVID-19 with spammy or manipulative behaviors." (Source: Tech Crunch)

(U) **Fraudulent COVID-19 Contact Text Messages and Robocalls Circulate:** Fraudulent text messages saying people have come into contact with someone who's tested positive for Covid-19 are part of a nationwide scam currently circulating in multiple states. The fraudulent message then contains a website link that claims to provide information, but is embedded with malware, ransomware or other fraudulent methods to steal personal and financial information.

The FTC, the main national agency that tracks and responds to alleged consumer scams, [has already collected](#) more than 20,000 complaints from all 50 states related to coronavirus, according to data the agency released last week. Almost half of the complaints from consumers say they've lost money, at a midpoint of about \$560 per reported scam. (Source: CNN)

(U) **COVID-19 Misinformation Flourishes in Online Protest Groups:** Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of posts fly in the new Facebook groups daily.

The [coronavirus](#) numbers are fake, some of the social media videos claim. "Social distancing is the new way to control you, your family and your behavior," another commenter warns. Others say the pandemic is an overblown hoax.

The loose network of Facebook groups spurring protests of stay-at-home orders across the country have fast become a hotbed of misinformation, conspiracy theories and skepticism around the coronavirus pandemic.

Twitter users are also pushing YouTube video links that describe the coronavirus as a hoax or promoting farflung theories that it was created in a lab, using the hashtags ReOpen or Gridlock, said Kathleen Carley, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University's CyLab Security and Privacy Institute.

Nearly identical claims are also being posted across multiple platforms — from Twitter to Reddit to the Facebook groups — suggesting that the misinformation is orchestrated on some level, she added. (Source: Associated Press)

(U) **COVID-19 Related Scams Likely to Increase Alongside Federal Stimulus:** Justice Department officials are girding for another wave of digital scams connected with the trillions of dollars in aid the government is distributing to individuals, families and small businesses to manage through the pandemic. The department plans to deploy data analytic tools that it typically uses to spot health-care fraud to identify when people might be applying for benefits they don't deserve or are posing as someone else.

Scammers are already stealing people's identities to apply for stimulus checks in their names. There also has been a 6,000 percent increase in phishing and spam emails related to the virus just since March 11 when the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic, according to a [report](#) this morning from IBM's X-Force threat monitoring division.

(Source: Washington Post)

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

- State and local officials sharing their plans and priorities for keeping people safe while reopening businesses and services. Testing and tracing capacity continue to be a focal point of this discussion, as well as the need of many to work to generate income.
- There is an increase in mistrust from the public, reporters, and elected officials regarding how FEMA and the supply chain task force is gathering and distributing equipment to states in need. More people are questioning FEMA's messaging and ability to respond.
- National broadcast and print/online media remain focused on states' current mitigation measures and ability to safely resume economic activity. Following the CDC director's comments reported earlier this morning, there is also frequent commentary on how reopening state economies earlier than advised might counteract states' mitigation measures.

Public Sentiment

- Many people are discussing social distancing, stay-at-home orders and protests as people continue to share their views on if it is too soon for the loosening of restrictions and reopening by some states.
 - As orders are relaxed, local officials and lawmakers are urging people to continue practicing social distancing.
 - Many are concerned about more people becoming infected once people resume normal activities.
 - Some people feel that their civil liberties are being taken away with stay-at-home orders and are ready to return to normal.
 - In some states, health care professionals are attending protests to stand against those who want stay-at-home orders to be lifted.
- While many discuss reopening the economy, calls for more testing continue. People feel that this is vital for being able to successfully reopen without concern of spreading COVID-19. There is a growing desire for comprehensive national testing plan to be shared.
- A high volume of individuals and news outlets are sharing that the CDC Director issued a warning to expect a second, worse, wave of COVID-19 in the winter that will coincide with a heavy burden from seasonal flu. Many are reacting to this news with concern and fear.
 - The President tweeted that the CDC Director was misquoted and that he would be putting out a statement. In response many are sharing concerns that the Administration will pressure the CDC director to adopt a new position on the issue.
- Santa Clara County in California revealed autopsy results showing the first recorded COVID-19 death in the nation occurred on February 6th, weeks earlier than initially believed. Many are

sharing this news with reactions ranging from surprise to anger. Some are surprised to hear that the virus was here and went undetected for so long, while others blame the government and cite this as proof that action should have been taken sooner.

- News outlets and public health experts are raising concerns about the validity of recent California antibody studies. (Santa Clara County, Los Angeles County)
 - News media are reporting that case and fatality data from New York City appears to debunk the results and that the high failure rates of the test kits are not being taken into account.
 - Statisticians are questioning the accuracy of the studies, saying that the sample was unreliable. They feel the sample size was too small and skewed because of how participants were recruited and because symptomatic participants were incentivized by receiving a test.

(U) 4/22 Reporting

(U) Recent Media Reporting on WHO/NIH Hacking Misleading: Recent media reporting in the Washington Post and other mainstream media outlets on the alleged hacking of WHO/NIH emails and passwords is misleading. According to CS&C analysis, “the information is just recycled combinations of emails: passwords from different databases. Posting of this type of information can make it seem as if any organization has been hacked, so a lot of fake news is ahead of us.

All the emails listed are a compilation of information from old leaked databases. Password re-use is an issue on its own, but these organizations didn't get hacked.”

While SITE Intelligence was unable to verify whether the email addresses and passwords were authentic, the group said the information was released Sunday and Monday and almost immediately used to foment attempts at hacking and harassment by far-right extremists. (Source: Washington Post, CS&C)

(U) Chinese Intelligence Amplified Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., According to Unnamed Intelligence Officials: Beijing amplified recent fraudulent viral texts warning the public of an impending national shutdown in an apparent attempt to incite panic, according to anonymous intelligence officials who spoke with the New York Times:

“Since that wave of panic, United States intelligence agencies have assessed that Chinese operatives helped push the messages across platforms, according to six American officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to publicly discuss intelligence matters. The amplification techniques are alarming to officials because the disinformation showed up as texts on many Americans’ cellphones, a tactic that several of the officials said they had not seen before.”

The CFI Task Force and its partners were unable to immediately confirm this reporting through open source channels. (Source: The New York Times)

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

- Reopening the economy is the focus of social media discussion as people debate relaxing stay-at-home orders and speculate why some states are proceeding with reopening prior to May 1st. Public officials are concerned people will stop practicing social distancing once states reopen and are reminding residents to stay vigilant.
- While orders are being relaxed in various states, there is an increased desire for more testing and transparency regarding a nationwide plan.
- FEMA social and traditional media discussion is heavily focused on reports that FEMA seized 400,000 masks from a Delaware medical supplier.
- Traditional media coverage also focuses on the updated \$484 billion stimulus package, states' testing needs, and states planning to resume economic activity.

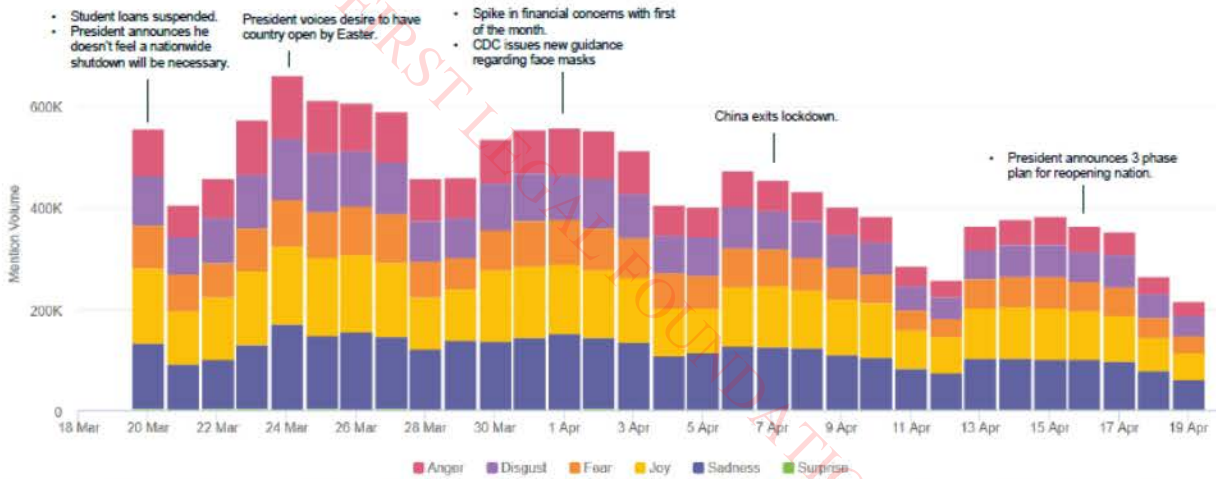
(U//FOUO) *Public Sentiment*

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 - Statisticians are questioning the accuracy of the studies, saying that the sample was unreliable. They feel the sample size was too small and skewed because of how participants were recruited and because symptomatic participants were incentivized by receiving a test.

(U//FOUO) HHS Public Sentiment Analysis:

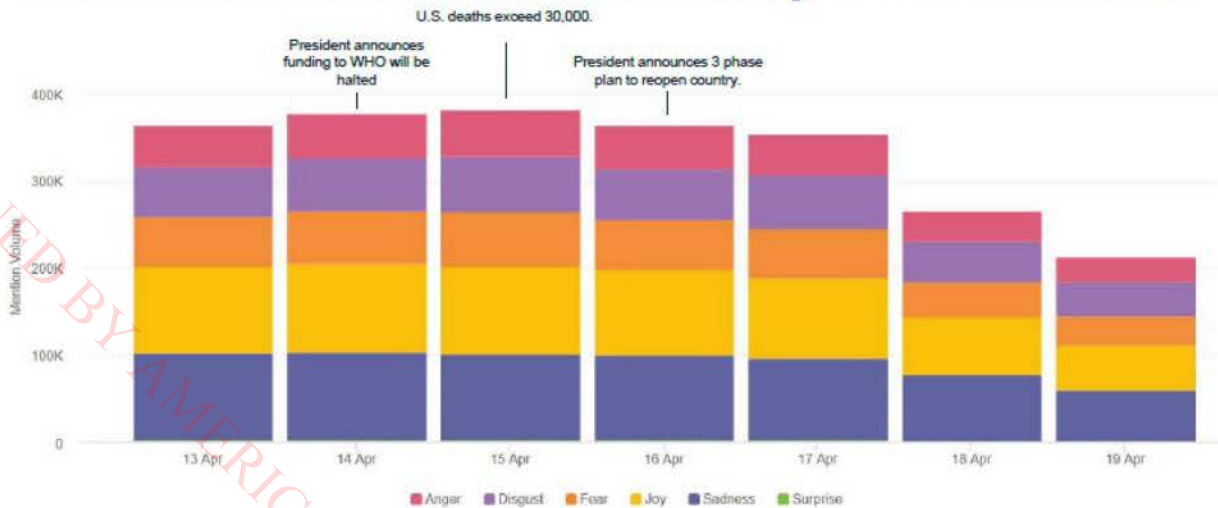
- Public conversation around COVID-19 on social media has slightly decreased again since last week. This is the fourth week in a row of decreasing conversation.
- Sadness was the most commonly expressed emotion again this past week, due in large part to social media users talking about the loss of a loved one to the virus, as well as missing daily routines (gym, hairdresser/barber, etc.)
- Sadness also captured increasing discussion of the inequitable impact of COVID-19 on Black and low-income communities compared to other demographics
- Joy was the second most commonly expressed emotion which captured social media users saluting those on the front lines including first responders, healthcare workers, drivers, grocery store workers, etc.

COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Month



* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories. (Graphic: U//FOUO)

COVID-19 Public Sentiment Analysis – Past Week



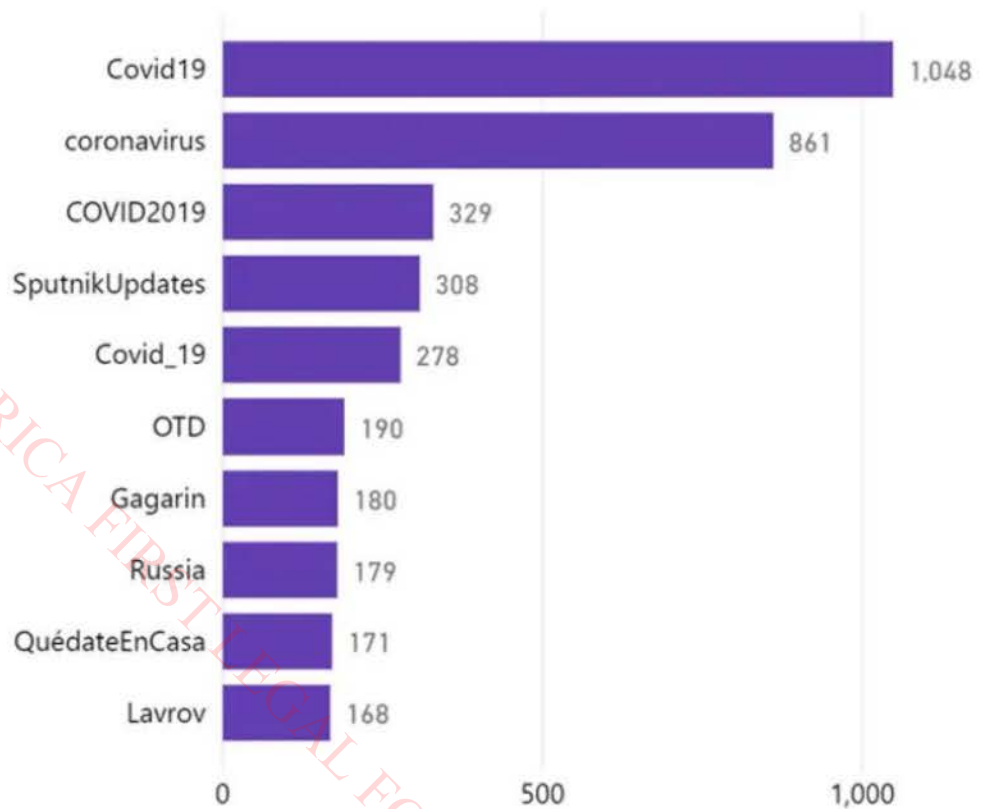
* Content categorized as **disgust** includes political discussion, rumors/misinformation, conspiracy theories.
(Graphic: U//FOUO)

(U) 4/21 Reporting

(U) **Iranian-Linked Group Spreads Disinformation on Facebook, Twitter Blaming the United States for Coronavirus:** Since late February, a group with close ties to the Iranian government has been spreading disinformation on Twitter and Facebook that promotes Iranian and Chinese interests, according to a new report by social media mapping firm Graphika. The propaganda group, known as the International Union of Virtual Media, seeded articles, videos, and memes accusing the United States of creating the coronavirus in order to remain a dominant global power. Other narratives praised the Iranian response to the outbreak and critiqued U.S. sanctions against Iran, which allegedly hurt the country's ability to combat the virus. Fellow for the Middle East Ariane Tabatabai has argued that Iran is attempting to shift blame away from its own inaction in preventing the spread of the virus to portray the United States as the irresponsible party, which also helps to widen the gulf between the United States and its Western allies. (Source: Forbes, Graphika, Tech Crunch, CyberScoop, The Verge, Twitter)

(U) **Russia Media Ecosystem COVID-19 Toplines:** For the thirteenth consecutive week, coronavirus coverage dominated the Russian media ecosystem last week, though to a slightly lesser extent than in previous weeks. As usual, much of this output consisted of basic news updates on the pandemic. One notable coronavirus theme across platforms involved criticism of various U.S. media outlets' coverage of the pandemic.

Top 10 Hashtags — April 11-17:



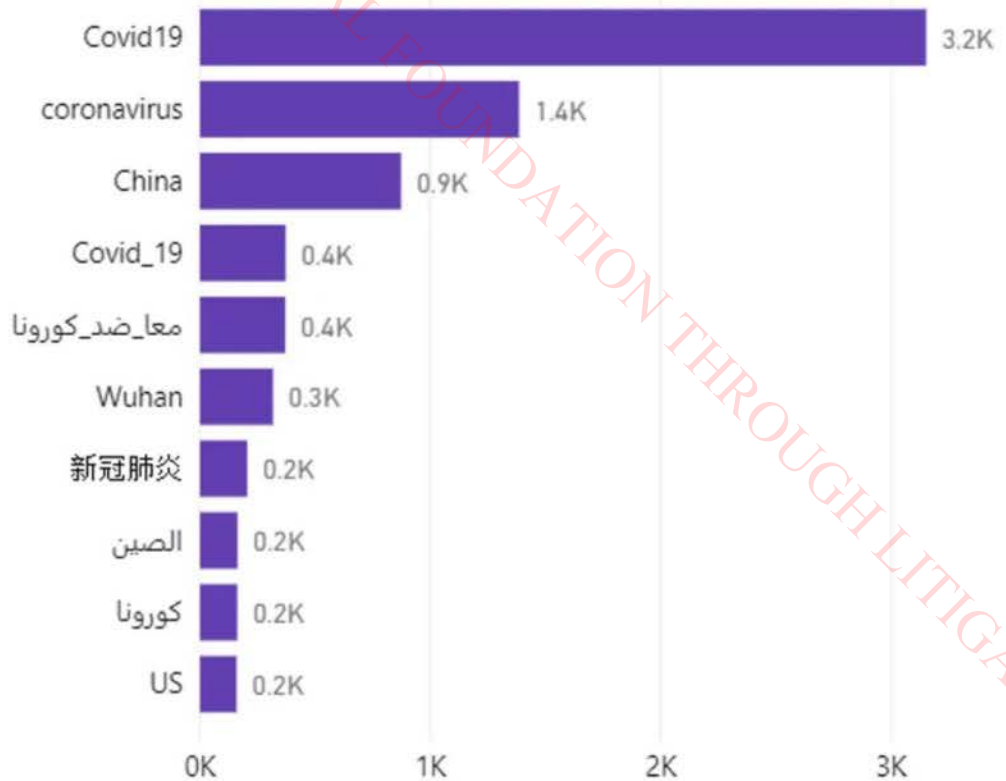
The Hamilton dashboard collected about 13,000 tweets from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 11-17 (figures as of 2pm April 10). A little over 4,300 tweets mentioned “virus,” “covid,” or both. Only half of the top ten hashtags were directly related to the pandemic this week (including #QuédateEnCasa, Spanish for “stay at home”), but the top two hashtags, which both referenced the coronavirus, saw more uses than the rest of the top ten combined.

Almost all of the top overall tweets by likes reported basic news updates from the three accounts that typically receive very high engagement regardless of topic (@actualidadrt, @rtultimahora, and @sputnik_tr). The dominance of these accounts may mask more widespread trends and excluding them yielded a more diverse set of top tweets. Notable tweets from this set included several tweets from the [Kremlin-supported](#) media outlet *Redfish*, which featured broad coronavirus-related criticism of capitalism in the United States, as well as tweets from the Russian embassy in Italy highlighting Russian medical assistance and *RT* describing lockdown-related violence in India. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 11
"Corona is the virus. Capitalism is the pandemic." Graffiti seen in Chicago, United States. <https://t.co/kEe6qxFGtl>
769 1,812
- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 14
"Make the rich pay for COVID19" Seen in Albuquerque, United States <https://t.co/dJa70gEVMY>
352 905
- Russian Embassy in Italy** @rusembitaly • Apr 14
RU 🇷🇺 To date, Russian specialists have sanitized 59 RSA in 55 Bergamo locations in close collaboration with their Italian colleagues. The 32 Russian doctors so far have treated 31 infected by the #Covid19 of which 8 are already discharged. <https://t.co/yMGLm5JO32> #DallaRussiaConAmore
351 834
- RT** @rt_com • Apr 15
When the #COVID19 lockdown turns violent. Police with batons charged hundreds of jobless migrants in #India after they crowded into a #Mumbai train station demanding special trains to take them home to their villages <https://t.co/cPwVv77JYI>
744 804
- redfish** @redfishstream • Apr 16
Remember how defenders of capitalism tried to scare people of socialism with the scenario of mass unemployment & bread lines. Today massive food bank lines are seen all over the United States & almost 22 million filed for unemployment, only 1 month into the economic downturn. <https://t.co/bksc5mHGKC>
522 728

(U) China Media Ecosystem COVID-19 Toplines:

Top 10 Hashtags — April 11-17:



The Hamilton dashboard collected about 14,000 tweets from Chinese state-funded media and government Twitter accounts the week of April 11-17 (figures as of 2pm April 17). Roughly 6,500 tweets mentioned “virus”, “covid”, “coronavirus”, or some combination of the three. Coronavirus-related content dominated the top hashtags.

Top tweets for the week were concentrated among state media outlets and Foreign Ministry spokespersons, and they concentrated on the competence of China’s response and China’s solidarity with countries affected by the coronavirus outbreak.



Overall, state media tweets of the COVID-19 pandemic have shifted focus from earlier weeks. As both Italy and Spain have bent their infection curves downwards, state-tied tweets have deemphasized China-led relief efforts there. Instead, more tweets have mentioned the United States and the United Kingdom, focusing on rising case totals in both countries.

Of the approximately 3,600 articles collected from China’s state-funded news websites last week, the top articles by shares on Facebook focused on defending China from mounting foreign criticism as COVID-19 spread to the rest of the world. Two of the top articles attacked the theory put forth by U.S. media and government officials that the virus may have escaped in an accidental release from a bioweapons laboratory in Wuhan. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- Financial concerns are becoming an increasingly hot topic both for the general public and for lawmakers. Many states are facing budget deficits as a result of losses suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are looking to the federal government to provide assistance in filling some of those gaps.
- Debate over the state and federal roles in building testing capacity continues to grow leaving the general public anxious about whether the country will be able to accomplish the necessary levels of testing to move forward.

- As case counts continue to grow at nursing homes across the country, CMS is preparing new requirements to improve reporting and communication with loved ones.
- In addition to different states' testing capacities, traditional media is increasingly interested in the results of today's call between White House and state governors.

Public Sentiment

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of discussion as people continue debating if it is too soon and discussing plans different states have for reopening.
 - This also includes continued discussion of [protests across the U.S.](#) with some pointing out some states recorded their highest case numbers on days that protests were held.
- A growing number of polls indicate the majority of Americans do not support lifting stay-at-home orders.
 - There is frustration among many mayors and [Congress members](#) that the next round of proposed stimulus funding will not provide direct support for cities. Additionally, the National Governor's Association is renewing a bipartisan call for \$500 billion in aid to states, as many states struggle to fill revenue shortfalls without federal assistance.
 - Multiple media outlets are sharing news of the bill introduced to cancel rent and mortgage payments during the pandemic. Many people expressing how it would help those who are having financial hardships, ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)) however some are concerned it could hurt those who depend on rent payments as [part of their income](#).
 - There is a growing conversation about [large restaurant chains that obtained loans](#) from the federal Paycheck Protection Program. After the program exhausted its funding limit, many feel it's unfair that funds weren't prioritized for small businesses.
- In response, restaurant chain Shake Shack announced they are [returning all \\$10 million it received from the program](#).
 - There is increasing concern about how the pandemic is affecting [migrant workers](#) following a 60-Minutes segment last night featuring former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate.
- Concerns are two-fold, people are worried those individuals are being forgotten and not provided for, and they worry this will lead to major food supply-chain issues.
 - Many are still worried about the impacts of COVID-19 on nursing homes and long-term care facilities, as new reports of high case and death counts continue to make headlines across the country.
 - There is a small discussion surrounding how life will change socially and financially after COVID-19. Some feel things will not be able to fully return to "normal" without a vaccine and that it will be a slow and frustrating process until then.

(U) 4/20 Reporting

(U) 5G-COVID 19 Conspiracy Theory Gains Traction Among Anti-Semitic Groups, Facebook Takes

Action: Facebook has stepped up efforts to stop the promotion of baseless conspiracy theories linking Covid-19 to 5G, after research highlighted a "toxic cocktail" of far-right-influenced groups pushing the idea alongside incitement to attack telecommunications infrastructure.

Groups in the UK promoting the conspiracy theory on [Facebook](#) – often linking it to explicitly antisemitic messages – have been growing at a significant rate, warned the campaign group Hope not Hate.

The largest group in the UK, Stop 5G UK, added almost 3,000 members in just 24 hours from 6-7 April while another, Direct Action Against [5G](#), gained more than 1,400 members in its first week after it was created on 31 March.

[Hope not Hate](#) warned that an ever-growing number of Facebook users are now accessing posts that not only encourages them to take illegal action against [5G infrastructure](#) but also contains potentially damaging misinformation about health and wellbeing.

Almost a third of British people say they can't rule out a link between coronavirus and 5G, according to new polling revealing the extent of the baseless conspiracy theory.

Some 8% believe there is a link, while 19% are unsure, according to the survey of 2,032 adults by the polling firm Focldata.

Facebook told the Guardian that it had removed the Stop 5G UK group following violations of its "promoting or publicizing" crime policies before it received the report from Hate not Hate and has since removed a Destroy 5G Save Our Children group. It also removed a number of other posts flagged by Hope not Hate.

It said it had begun removing false claims that 5G technology causes Covid-19: "We are taking aggressive steps to stop misinformation and harmful content from spreading on our platforms and connect people to accurate information from the NHS about coronavirus. Content encouraging attacks on 5G masts clearly violates our policies and we have removed a number of pages, groups and posts." (Source: The Guardian)

(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Media Listening:

- As reopening the economy remains the focal point of COVID-19 social media discussion, people debate whether or not it is too soon. Individuals are discussing states' plans for reopening, recent protests against stay-at-home orders and their views on keeping these orders in place. There is a small discussion about how the process for returning to normal will take a while and that a vaccine is needed to do so.
- FEMA social media mentions are mostly in relation to the President's comments about the agency's progress with Project Airbridge and California's announcement about partnering with FEMA for Project Roomkey. Smaller discussions include confusion over FEMA's rent suspension news release from last week, the Panthera contract and the agency's involvement with supply distribution to states.

- Besides small business loans and companies facing financial strain, traditional media remains focused on stay-at-home protests planned today, essential employees' working conditions, and states' pending challenges to reopen their economies.

Public Sentiment

- Reopening the economy remains the top topic of discussion as people continue debating if it is too soon and discussing plans different states have for reopening.
 - This also includes continued discussion of [protests across the U.S.](#) with some pointing out some states recorded their highest case numbers on days that protests were held.
 - A growing number of polls indicate the majority of Americans [do not support lifting stay-at-home orders.](#)
- There is growing concern about how the pandemic is affecting [migrant workers](#) following a 60-Minutes segment last night featuring former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate. Concerns are two-fold, people are worried those individuals are being forgotten and not provided for, and they worry this will lead to major food supply-chain issues.
- Many are still worried about the impacts of COVID-19 on nursing homes and long-term care facilities, as new [reports of high case and death counts](#) continue to make headlines across the country.
- There is a small discussion surrounding how life will change socially and financially [after COVID-19](#). Some feel things will not be able to fully return to "normal" without a vaccine and that it will be a slow and frustrating process until then.

(U) **Continued Increase in COVID-19 as a Lure for Digital Attacks:** The average number of coronavirus-themed digital attacks tracked each day by researchers at the cybersecurity firm Check Point has [increased sixfold](#) to 14,000. The attacks include:

- Malware-laced emails posing as information about pandemic stimulus efforts
- Phony stimulus-related domains to con users into giving up their personal information.

Hackers are also increasingly posing as videoconferencing brands including Zoom and Webex, [researchers at Proofpoint found](#). They found:

- Hackers send emails posing as missed meeting alerts or telling users they need to reset their passwords to steal their log-in information.
- Some emails also come laced with information-stealing malware. (Source: Check Point)

(U) **Russian-State Backed Disinformation Operation Continues to Target Bill Gates:** Russian-state backed accusations against Mr. Gates follow two main tropes. One is that Bill Gates has pecuniary interests in the pandemic, and that his philanthropy is merely a front for ordinary capitalist greed. Making profits from peoples illness is, of course, bad; but the pro-Kremlin media is suggesting even worse reasons to Mr. Gates' activities in the field of global health: population reduction! According to pro-Kremlin sources, Bill Gates apparently has an interest in creating dire economic conditions that would lead to less people on the planet. We find this claim at the [above mentioned site](#), managed by the Russian Academy of Sciences:

“We may be looking at a complete collapse of our western economy, and growing misery- for the masses. – What will happen to these people, without jobs, without incomes, many of them may also lose their homes, as they will not be able to pay their mortgages or rents? – They may die from famine, diseases of all sorts, despair – the desired world population reduction that Bill Gates, Rockefeller and Co aspire. It may be part of and the beginning of their sinister eugenics plan.”

The trope of population reduction has surfaced strongly in the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem during the COVID-19 outbreak; but there are [similar cases](#) as early as 2016. The oldest case in our base concerning Bill Gates is also [referring to this sinister plan](#). 2017, broadcast by Russian State TV. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) Scammers Use WhatsApp Chain Message About COVID-19 and Fake Profiles to Harvest Personal Data in South Africa: Planet49, a Hong Kong-based digital marketing company with close associations with Asia Pacific Marketing Limited, targeted South African users with a digital marketing campaign intended to harvest their personal information. The campaign falsely presented a COVID-19 “relief promotion” by local grocery chains. In reality, it enticed WhatsApp users to not only share the promotion with several of their WhatsApp contacts, but also consent to Planet49 selling their personal information to third parties. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

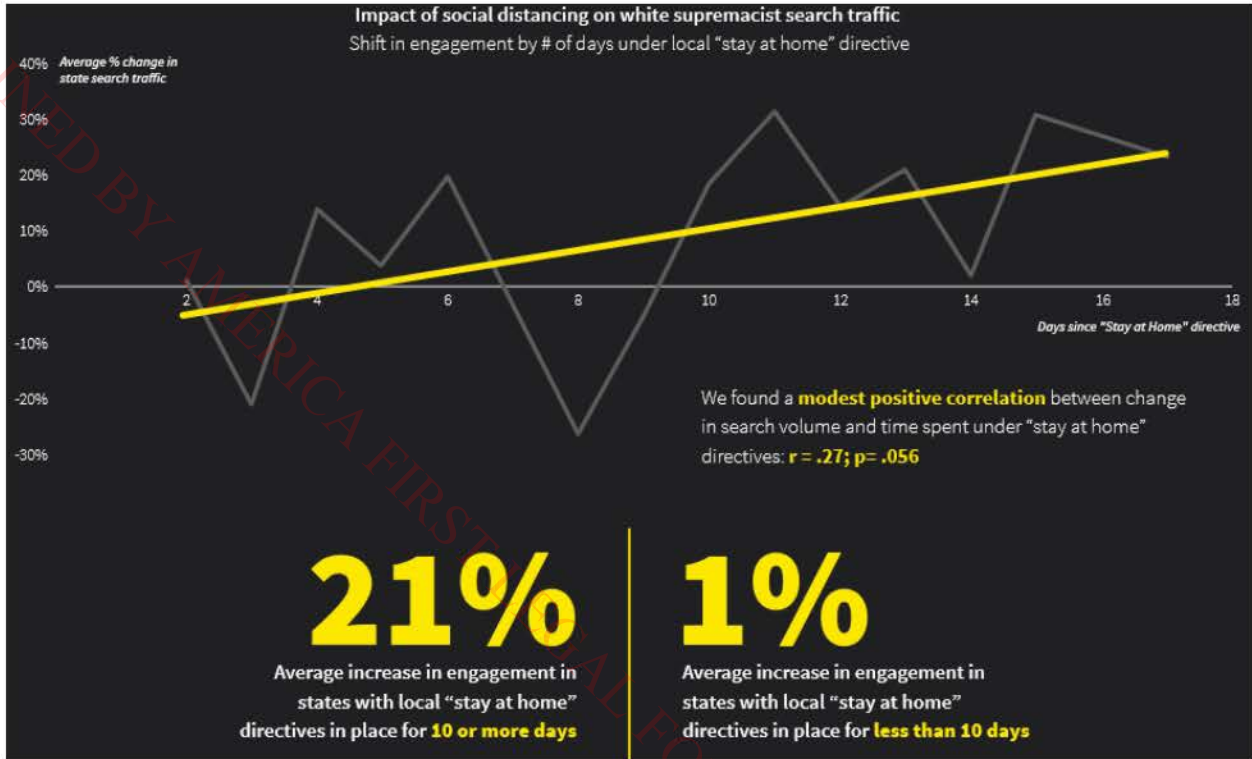
(U) 4/17 Reporting

(U//FOUO) COVID-19 and Other Environmental Factors Likely to Contribute to Domestic Extremism Attacks This Year: The FBI and DHS assess several current social and political factors likely will contribute to the radicalization and mobilization of individuals across Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) ideologies seeking to conduct increasingly lethal or sophisticated attacks. We base this assessment on motivating factors of recent DVE violence and a review of social and political indicators present during previous periods of heightened DVE activity. DVEs often perceive these social and political indicators as threatening their way of life and are frequently outlined in DVE manifestos and online threats.

(U//FOUO) Racial and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) who advocate for the superiority of the white race seek to exploit the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to bolster their narratives and encourage attacks against minorities, including Jewish and Asian Americans, according to open source reporting. Some DVEs are also probably influenced by online conspiracy theories describing the pandemic as a government-perpetrated hoax, according to open source and FBI reporting. Militia extremists particularly have an enduring concern about government overreach they believe could culminate in government-led mass firearm confiscations or the imposition of martial law. (Source: FBI, DHS)

(U) Nationwide Increase in Engagement with White Supremacist Content Coincides with Stay-at-Home Directives: Since March 30, when most states implemented stay at home orders, there has been a 13 percent nationwide increase in engagement with white supremacist content on Google. The below

graph shows average change in state search traffic between March 30th - April 5th 2020, based on the number of days each state was under "stay at home" directives. Please note these are early results and may shift over the coming weeks. (Source: Moonshot CVE)





(U//FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- The major topic of discussion on social media throughout the day has been the reopening of the economy. Elected officials are beginning to outline their plans for how they will approach the process. Some feel reopening the economy should be addressed as quickly as possible to avoid further economic consequences. Others feel it should be a slower process to avoid a resurgence of cases.
- As this debate carries on, people continue to share their overall fatigue regarding stay-at-home orders. There has been an increase in demonstrations and residents voicing their disagreement over the use of the orders.
- FEMA conversation remains highly focused on the distribution of PPE. People are frustrated with ongoing traditional media reports stating FEMA is diverting supplies from hospitals and contracting with a previously bankrupt company.
- Traditional media discussion remains strongly focused on debate regarding when to resume economic activity between elected officials, healthcare workers, academics, and news correspondents.

(U//FOUO) Sentiment Analysis

- There has been heated debate throughout the day regarding the reopening of the economy. Several governors and elected officials have cautioned that reopening the economy too fast would be 'dangerous' and result in a resurgence in cases, however there is growing concern that the economy cannot withstand further shutdowns and delays.
 - Emotions are high on both sides of the argument as all parties involved feel lives depend on the decisions be made.
- People are growing weary of stay-at-home orders causing some to begin to push back on state and local regulations. They are seeking more information on what a reopening strategy for their communities may look like.
 - There continues to be calls for widespread testing to be made available before major actions are taken to reopen the economy.
- An increasing number of medical professionals are protesting having to do their job without proper protective equipment. The general public is supportive of their endeavors and question why it has been so difficult to maintain supplies in hospitals.

(U) Increased Threats From Violent Extremist Groups Against Italian Journalists Critical of Russia's Faulty Medical Aid: Italian journalists who exposed faulty medical equipment provided by Russia to the country have experienced increased harassment from the Kremlin and threats of violence from Italian domestic violent extremist groups. It has been widely analyzed how the [Kremlin operates in Italy](#) for years through the use of [Trojan horses](#), a constellation of far-right groups, lobbies, and agents of influence, some of which are particularly active in this time of crises in campaigning to lift sanctions to Russia. Thus, while the attacks to the newspaper "La Stampa" comes publicly from Russian institutions, there is no reason not to believe the other attacks may have been conducted through the usual use of deniable proxies, and that more is yet to come. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) 4/16 Reporting

(U) Pro-Kremlin Media Increasingly Amplify Anti-Vaccination Narratives During COVID-19 Pandemic: Since January, pro-Kremlin media have increasingly amplified anti-vaccination narratives typically reserved for Russian-linked social media accounts. The goal is to increase popular acceptance of conspiracy theories and to erode faith in American public health experts and institutions, particularly dangerous during a pandemic.

Anti-vaxxers continue to find support in pro-Kremlin outlets. Common narratives include that Bill and Melinda Gates and the rest of the "shadow rulers" are scheming to introduce mandatory vaccination that will contain secret implants to control the world. We find the claim in [Russian, English](#) and [Georgian](#). We can note that, to date, Mr. Gates appears in [ten cases in the disinformation database](#) – eight of which have occurred in just the last few weeks, after the onset of the "COVID-19 outbreak.

The "Vaccine Scare" [has been present](#) in the pro-Kremlin disinformation network for a long time, usually in the "undergrowth" of the disinformation jungle, spreading through social media - notably [Twitter](#). The

New York Times describes in a recent article how Russia-based Twitter accounts influence the “anti-vaxxer community”, and already a year ago, in March 2019, US CBS News reported on [pro-Kremlin ties to a Twitter campaign](#) against vaccination. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)



(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Encourage Rioting in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic:** Disinformation narratives include outlandish conspiracy theories of mass government sponsored forced vaccination and microchipping. Pro-Kremlin media instructed followers how to best take to the streets to fight what they’re attempting to brand as “World War C.” (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) **5G Conspiracy Theories Spread on Tik Tok:** Conspiracy theories about the supposed dangers of 5G wireless networks are [spreading on the Chinese-owned TikTok](#) video-sharing service, promoted by a number of high-profile creators and accounts tied to the QAnon conspiracy group. The company’s guidelines prohibit “misinformation that could cause harm,” but some of the conspiracy theories that are being promoted may be tied to recent incidents in which 5G phone antennas have been burned down across the UK. (Source: iNews)

(U) **Trenton City Council Members Pushed to Ban 5G:** A faction of the Trenton, New Jersey city council pushed to ban 5G technology in the city, though the council members’ draft ordinance seems to have stalled. Recent conspiracy theories falsely linking 5G technology to COVID-19 have circulated on social media, amplified by Russian state-backed media and a potentially inauthentic social media disinformation campaign . (Source: The Trentonian; Bloomberg)

(FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening Report:**

- The main topic on social media is the lack of PPE and the federal government's handling of medical supply distribution. Local officials and the public are growing increasingly frustrated with FEMA's COVID-19 response, fueled by recent news about the agency's contract for N95 masks and resurfacing articles accusing the agency of confiscating supplies from states and hospitals. Additionally, FEMA is facing criticism for Project Airbridge, which people feel prioritizes some areas over others.
- As more health care professionals share about working without the proper PPE, FEMA's union president reportedly wrote a letter to Congress urging more access to PPE for frontline workers and first responders.
- People are tired of staying at home, which is causing them to disagree with stay-at-home orders. There are more calls for insight into plans for reopening and a push for more testing as an avenue for reopening.
- Traditional media remains focused on how White House and state governors plan to resume economic activity as unemployment claims grow. Multiple elected officials are interviewed for their perspective on reopening strategies.
- Newspaper front page headlines are increasingly citing county and state budget concerns and furloughed public employees.

(FOUO) Public Sentiment

- People are growing weary of stay-at-home orders causing some to begin to push back on state and local regulations. They are seeking more information on what a reopening strategy for their communities may look like.
 - There continues to be calls for widespread testing to be made available before major actions are taken to reopen the economy.
- An increasing number of medical professionals are protesting having to do their job without proper protective equipment. The general public is supportive of their endeavors and question why it has been so difficult to maintain supplies in hospitals.

(U) **Facebook COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts:** Hoping to stem the torrent of false cures and [conspiracy theories](#) about [COVID-19](#), Facebook announced Thursday it would begin informing users globally who have liked, commented on, or shared "harmful" [misinformation](#) about the coronavirus, pointing them instead in the direction of a reliable source.

Under Facebook's new policy, when a piece of "harmful" coronavirus-related misinformation has been debunked by its fact checkers, and removed from the site, all users who have interacted with it will be shown a message in their news feed directing them to the [WHO's list of debunked claims](#). People who have liked, commented on, or shared Facebook posts saying that drinking bleach can cure COVID-19, or that social distancing does not prevent the disease from spreading, will be among the first to see the new message "in the coming weeks," Rosen said.

The new policy only applies to false claims related to the coronavirus, but campaigners say the announcement could lay the groundwork for a breakthrough in the battle against [political disinformation](#) online.

(U) **Russian and Ukrainian Media Amplify Italian Anti-Vaxxer Fueling Doubt Over COVID-19 Danger in Russia and Ukraine:** Russian media picked up the interview of Italian anti-vaxxer Stefano Montanari, who claimed that only three people had died in Italy due to COVID-19. In reality, 3,405 people had died of COVID-19 by the time of the interview, according to [worldometers](#) data. The story received wide dissemination in social media and migrated to Ukrainian media as well. A group of Italian doctors had already [denounced](#) his claims, and even filed a criminal complaint against him.

This case demonstrates how a single source's ill-founded judgment may be recycled in other countries without reference to the source's background or proper vetting. Notably, the story was picked by mainstream media in Russia and fringe media in both Ukraine and Russia. It also received a boost from anti-vax communities on social media. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

Pro-Kremlin Outlets "Predict" Coronavirus-Driven Economic Collapse of the Baltic Countries: As the Baltic states went into quarantine, pro-Kremlin media predicted the crash of their economies.

Pro-Kremlin media outlets routinely push various [narratives](#) targeting the Baltic states; usually, these narratives accuse them of [Russophobia](#), or describe them [as aggressive](#). As COVID-19 puts pressure on the world's economic system, however, these outlets have shifted their attention, publishing stories that claim the coronavirus is going to destroy the Baltic economies and undo their decades of post-Soviet progress. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **QAnon Conspiracy Theorists Amplify COVID-19 Disinformation:** The QAnon community have also mobilized to advance a range of other conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19. The first significant mention of it occurred on 23 March, when a user of 8Kun claiming to be the mysterious 'Q' posted a screenshot of a 2007 research paper for the American Society of Microbiology entitled: "SARS and Coronavirus as an emerging and re-emerging infection".

In a highlighted section of the article, the author claimed: "the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb". The user went on to say that the Democrats were likely behind the virus release since it would allow them to destroy the Trump administration's economic record.

Interestingly, the day before the 'Q' user published this COVID-19 post, a screenshot of the same study was posted on the forum subreddit under 'r/interestingasfuck', where it received 50,000 upvotes and made its way to Reddit's main page. This highlights the interplay between the fringe QAnon community and content shared on more mainstream platforms, and demonstrates how extremist communities are skilled at appropriating content from elsewhere on the web. (source: ISD Global)

(U) 4/15 Reporting

(U) Iran-Linked Group Caught Spreading COVID-19 'Disinformation' On Facebook And Instagram:

Researchers from Graphika, a New York-based startup that analyzes social networks, claim the crew, referred to as the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), has been active on Facebook-owned platforms and Twitter as they try to spread disinformation about coronavirus. IUVM's modus operandi typically involves creating or copying news, cartoons or videos that amplify Iranian government narratives and spreading them across social media posing as journalists or official sources.

Amongst IUVM's latest narratives are suggestions that COVID-19 was a biological weapon created by the U.S. Other Facebook groups Graphika suspected of being created by IUVM included two that appeared to be focused on Africa, Ethiopianow and Durban Daily. Both were seen posting articles from Iranian state media without attribution. On Instagram, Graphika found IUVM created a western persona, which appeared to be a personal account, but posted much the same content as appeared on Facebook and other IUVM-linked sources. Outside of social media, IUVM has been using its own website and another apparent covert effort, to disseminate the same Iranian propaganda on COVID-19. (Source: [Forbes](#))

(U) False Claim: Johns Hopkins University Shared Bullet-point Coronavirus Tips: Social media users have been sharing a post online with what they claim to be a list of bullet points compiled by Johns Hopkins University to summarize best practice for avoiding the coronavirus. The post makes various claims about the virus and how to protect yourself from it. Other versions say the summary is provided by Dr. Irene Ken or her daughter, who is described as an assistant professor in infectious diseases at Johns Hopkins University.

Some posts advise people to eat more foods that are "above the pH level of the virus". They refer to an academic article that while it refers to coronaviruses, it was published in April 1991. The novel coronavirus was discovered in December 2019 and had never been seen in humans before. On April 3, 2020, Johns Hopkins University's news center "The Hub" wrote an article about this online misinformation. It confirmed the "message" or "summary" did not come from the university and advised readers to be cautious when evaluating information online. The university also tweeted about the fake summary and advised to get credible information from its website instead. (Source: [Reuters](#))

(U) Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe Covid-19 Was Made in a Lab: As news and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, many Americans have encountered conflicting narratives about how the new coronavirus originated. Scientists have determined the virus came about naturally, but there is some uncertainty about how it first infected people.

While a plurality of Americans (43%) say the new coronavirus most likely came about naturally, nearly three-in-ten (29%) say it most likely was created in a lab, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted from March 10 to 16, 2020. Around a quarter of adults (23%) say it is most likely that the current strain of coronavirus was developed intentionally in a lab; another 6% say it was most likely made accidentally in a lab. A quarter say they aren't sure where the virus originated.

Confusion surrounding these facts parallels Americans' overall experience with misinformation during the outbreak. About half of U.S. adults (48%) report having come across at least some news and information about COVID-19 that seemed completely made up, with 12% saying they have seen a lot of it and 35% saying they have seen some. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

(U) **Fact Checkers Under Strain:** Snopes has been overwhelmed with so many covid-19-related questions that the website can't keep up. The company has done something that seems counterintuitive: It has scaled back operations by publishing fewer stories. There have been no furloughs or layoffs. Readers submitted roughly 10,000 covid-related queries to Snopes during the last two weeks of March. Rather than trying to answer the avalanche of questions, Snopes said it will pick its targets and amplify credible sources, highlighting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and WHO in particular.

The avalanche at Snopes is mirrored in what's happening globally, especially as information is being spread not just on social media outlets but also platforms like WhatsApp. "So many organizations are overwhelmed by the number of requests they are receiving from their audiences," said Baybars Örsek, director of the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute.

The network, which includes more than 70 members, started a database of more than 3,000 fact-checks from around the world. It's "the largest collaboration among fact-checkers ever, and that by itself is a pretty strong indicator that the amount of misinformation around covid-19 is unprecedented," said Örsek, who estimates fact-checking organizations worldwide are seeing 10 times the number of requests than they usually do. (Source: [The Washington Post](#))

(U) 4/14 Reporting

(U) **U.N. Chief Targets 'Dangerous Epidemic of Misinformation' On Coronavirus:** The world is facing "a dangerous epidemic of misinformation" about COVID-19 — and the only vaccine is to reestablish public trust, the head of the United Nations said Tuesday. "Around the world, people are scared. They want to know what to do and where to turn for advice," said U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres. The distortion and willful ignorance of scientific facts is a "poison that is putting even more lives at risk" during the most challenging crisis since World War II, Guterres said.

With COVID-19 now responsible for more than 120,000 deaths and nearly 2 million cases worldwide, the U.N. is creating a special communications project to combat misinformation about the virus, the secretary general said. The U.N. head called on social media companies to do more to root out harmful and bogus claims about COVID-19. He also said people must be able to put their trust in institutions that are "grounded in responsive, responsible, evidence-based governance and leadership." (Source: [NPR](#))

(U) **Coronavirus Tests Science's Need for Speed Limits:** Preprint servers and peer-reviewed journals are seeing surging audiences, with many new readers not well versed in the limitations of the latest research findings. Since 2013, Dr. Inglis, executive director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press in

New York, has been helping manage a website called bioRxiv, pronounced “bio archive.” The site’s goal: improve communication between scientists by allowing them to share promising findings months before their research has gone through protracted peer review and official publication.

But the mess he was seeing on Twitter suggested a downside of the service provided by the site, known as a preprint server, during the emerging coronavirus pandemic. The social media platform was awash with conspiracy theories positing that the new coronavirus had been engineered by the Chinese government for population control. And the theorists’ latest evidence was a freshly submitted paper on bioRxiv from a team of Indian researchers that suggested an “uncanny similarity” between proteins in H.I.V. and the new virus.

Traditionally, the Indian researchers would have submitted a paper to a peer-reviewed journal, and their manuscript would be scrutinized by other scientists. But that process takes months, if not more than a year. BioRxiv, medRxiv — another site co-founded by Dr. Inglis — and other preprint servers function as temporary homes that freely disseminate new findings. For scientists on the front lines of the coronavirus response, early glimpses at others’ research helps with study of the virus. But there is a growing audience for these papers that are not yet fully baked, and those readers may not understand the studies’ limitations.

Views and downloads on medRxiv, for instance, have increased more than 100-fold since December, Dr. Inglis says. People with little scientific training, or none at all, are desperate for new knowledge to better inform their day-to-day decisions. The news media wants to keep readers and viewers updated with the latest developments. And agents of disinformation seek to fuel conspiratorial narratives. (Source: [The New York Times](#))

(U) Coronavirus Misinformation Reaching One in Two Adults: Almost half of adults online have come across false or misleading information about coronavirus in the last week, a study has found. A report by Ofcom says that 40% of people are finding it hard to know what is true or false about the virus, particularly younger people. Myths on avoiding the virus were the most common form of misinformation, with 35 per cent of online adults saying they had seen the untrue claim that drinking more water can flush out the infection. Nearly a quarter also said they had seen inaccurate claims that gargling saltwater or avoiding cold food and drink might also stop a person catching COVID-19. Among those who have been exposed to falsehoods, the report says, two-thirds are seeing it every day (Source: [Public Technology](#))

(U) Great, the Anti-Vaxxer Coronavirus Protests Are Here: On Easter Sunday, a group of around fourteen people, led by an anti-vaxxer and documented by a conspiracy vlogger, intentionally broke social distancing and took to the streets of Vancouver.

Videos show the group—which featured both older people and a child—holding a sign featuring an illustration of the coronavirus and the words “Fake News”. The rally even featured one grey-haired person wearing a Guy Fawkes mask with sunglasses over it. In photos and videos, the protesters seem to

pay no heed to the six feet rule experts have recommended to avoid the spread of COVID-19. Standfield-Spooner said she didn't even know most of the people at the rally—a 70-year-old woman helped organize the event. She said this march was just a trial run and bigger rallies are on the way.

Standfield-Spooner was only able to get a small group out in Vancouver but did inspire a similar rally in Vernon B.C. at the same time. The march was attended and promoted by Dan Dicks, a bit player in the Canadian conspiracy scene. Dicks had originally posted a longer video of the rally but it was removed by YouTube, which is cracking down on conspiracy videos. Dicks boasts a YouTube channel called Press for Truth with over 260,000 subscribers in which he posts mishmash of videos ranging from his more conspiracy-centric videos about globalists, wireless technology, and Trudeau's evil plans; to more far-right videos. Recently Dicks has turned his eye to COVID-19 and conspiracies surrounding that, with a focus on the "tyranny" of self-isolation. Experts have warned that during a pandemic, conspiracies can do real damage to real people. (Source: [Vice](#))

(U) 4/13 Reporting

(U) **"The COVID-19 Outbreak: A Window of Opportunity to Attack the Deep State":** "One World Think Tank" is an outlet, registered in Russia and managed by a member of the expert board of Russian State-owned University of People's Friendship. In a recent article, the site speculates on whether "colour revolution technology" should be employed to [curb the "Deep State's" attempt to take control of the world](#). What is strange is that a media outlet with ties to Russian state structures, albeit cautiously, suggests attacking a society struggling with saving peoples' lives at a time of a global pandemic.

Pro-Kremlin media produces narratives on the current COVID-19 outbreak that look contradictory. The "One World Think Tank" is, together with other Russia-based English language outlets suggesting a dark future, where the Deep State finally stomped out freedom. If nothing is done, we will be controlled with nano-chips, injected in our bodies, through force vaccination. This narrative resonates with an "alt-right" audience, always suspicious of anything that could be connected to "The GOVERNMENT", the shadow rulers, the Deep State. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Surprise, surprise: Anti-vaxxers are spreading false claims about cures for COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic has given some members of this faction an opportunity to spread more anti-vaccine propaganda, and it's starting to make its way to the mainstream. A new report from Yonder, a company that dissects popular social media interactions to understand trends, has found that stalwart anti-vaxxers are pushing [a narrative that vitamin C can prevent COVID-19](#). Yonder CEO Jonathon Morgan says conversations around vitamin C began on 4Chan, but anti-vaxxers have been able to drive that messaging to the broader media landscape. Morgan says the first time his company noticed the vitamin C narrative hitting mainstream news was when CNN published a piece debunking the idea that vitamin C can cure or prevent COVID-19.

Morgan says that while redressing misinformation is good, it can also have the unintended effect of amplifying the original messaging. Just take the replies to CNN's tweet sharing its story—there are

several arguments as to why CNN is wrong and vitamin C is helpful for fighting the coronavirus. Anti-vaxxers are not just falsely promoting the idea that vitamin C can prevent COVID-19. The group is also using reporting about actual COVID-19 treatments to further its agenda. A few outlets have reported that doctors in China and the U.S. are administering heavy doses of vitamin C intravenously as part of a treatment for COVID-19. The vitamin C is being used in combination with other drugs like hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin. While there is currently no evidence that vitamin C on its own can treat or prevent COVID-19 or pneumonia associated with COVID-19, these bits of information shared out of context by agenda-driven groups create the illusion that basic supplements might be the best answer to COVID-19. (Source: Fast Company)

(U) **Putin's Long War Against American Science:** On Feb. 3, soon after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus to be a global health emergency, an obscure Twitter account in Moscow began retweeting an American blog. It said the pathogen was a germ weapon designed to incapacitate and kill. The headline called the evidence "irrefutable" even though top scientists had already debunked that claim and declared the novel virus to be natural.

As the pandemic has swept the globe, it has been accompanied by a dangerous surge of false information — an "infodemic," according to the World Health Organization. Analysts say that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has played a principal role in [the spread of false information as part of his wider effort to discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within.](#)

An investigation by The New York Times — involving scores of interviews as well as a review of scholarly papers, news reports, and Russian documents, tweets and TV shows — found that Mr. Putin has spread misinformation on issues of personal health for more than a decade. His agents have repeatedly planted and spread the idea that viral epidemics — including flu outbreaks, Ebola and now the coronavirus — were sown by American scientists. The disinformers have also sought to undermine faith in the safety of vaccines, a triumph of public health that Mr. Putin himself promotes at home. (Source: The New York Times)

(U) **Coronavirus conspiracies like that bogus 5G claim are racing across the internet:** As the U.S. and much of the world hunkers down to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, some virus-related conspiracy theories are having a heyday. Specifically, [a conspiratorial false claim that 5G technology is linked to COVID-19 gained ground,](#) accelerating from obscurity into the rattled mainstream by way of conspiracy theorists who'd been chattering about 5G conspiracies for years.

According to Yonder conspiracies that would normally remain in fringe groups are traveling to the mainstream faster during the epidemic. While the company estimates that it would normally take six to eight months for a "fringe narrative" to make its way from the edges of the internet into the mainstream, that interval looks like three to 14 days in the midst of COVID-19. "In the current infodemic, we've seen conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation spread across the internet at an unprecedented velocity," Yonder Chief Innovation Officer Ryan Fox told TechCrunch. He believes that

the trend represents the outsized influence of “small groups of hyper passionate individuals” in driving misinformation, like the 5G claims. (Source: Tech Crunch)

(U) 4/10 Reporting

(U) Rumors about helicopters spraying chemicals go viral globally alongside COVID-19: A rumor that helicopters would spray disinfectant to kill the coronavirus in Italy made its way across social networks and messaging platforms before changing into different strains as it spread across the globe. Different versions appeared in South Africa, the U.S. and Russia, varying in terms of the timing of the spraying, where it will take place, the type of helicopters involved and their number. There were also differences in what substance would be sprayed. Some iterations in the U.S. and Italy emphasized the use of disinfectants, while some Russian versions referenced medicine. In Malaysia, it was pesticides. **While the DFRLab could not determine the original source of the rumor**, they confirmed it spread to more than 30 other countries over the course of two weeks. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) China Pushes Viral Messages to Shape Coronavirus Narrative: China has been buying up ads on U.S. social-media sites and adopting online tactics reminiscent of Russian disinformation campaigns in an **apparent attempt to shape the story internationally about the coronavirus response**, according to researchers analyzing the activity. The efforts include ad purchases on Facebook promoting the English-language arms of Chinese state-media outlets, as well as posts there and on Twitter’s platform that in some cases disparage U.S. efforts to fight the global pandemic. From mid-February until early March, social-media sites linked to Chinese state media posted more than 3,300 times a day, triple the normal rate, according to Recorded Future.

China has bought more than 200 political ads on Facebook since the end of 2018, but more than a third have been purchased in the past two months, said Vanessa Molter, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory, a cyber-policy institute. Most of the recent ads focused on trying to shape global perception around China’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak. The Chinese tweets, researchers say, evoke Russia’s tactics, which involved spreading messages that can incite doubt and stir anger about basic facts and sometimes promote fictitious claims. Russia also leaned heavily on state media to spread its message online. (Source: WSJ)

(U) Far-right groups may try to take advantage of pandemic, watchdogs warn: Far-right groups across North America are seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic by **"weaponizing the virus" and spreading disinformation**. As a result of physical-distancing measures related to the coronavirus outbreak, many organizations have moved to video-conferencing apps like Zoom. The FBI has issued a warning about "Zoom-bombing," where online video meetings are hijacked by virtual intruders who post racist or pornographic content, yell hateful slurs or utter threats.

A New York Times report documented networks of accounts involved in coordinating Zoom attacks — including one group chat on Discord. While it's not always clear who is behind these intrusions or their motivations, at least of some of the attacks have been linked to white supremacists or are being

coordinated on platforms and channels favored by the far right, like Discord and anonymous message boards.

"There's nothing the far right likes more ... than a crisis," said Barbara Perry, director of the Centre of Hate, Bias and Extremism at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Perry said she is currently seeing online activity that falls under three main categories: conspiracy theories, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes and so-called accelerationist rhetoric. The conspiracy theories in this case often focus on the origin of the new coronavirus, insisting that it was created in a lab (it wasn't) and let loose by powers-that-be in order to profit somehow or control people. (Source: CBC)

(U) Russian Trolls Hype Coronavirus and Giuliani Conspiracies: Working with researchers from the disinformation-tracking firm Graphika, The Daily Beast found [at least 20 fake news articles pushed by over 40 suspected Kremlin-backed personas across dozens of social media networks](#) like Facebook, Reddit, Medium, and smaller web forums.

"This looks like a Russian disinformation operation we call 'Secondary Infektion' that's been running for years," said Ben Nimmo, director of investigations at Graphika, who has been investigating the operation since Facebook exposed a first set of accounts in May 2019. "It uses blogging platforms as the soft underbelly of the internet, planting false stories based on forged documents or leaks that never happened. The fakes mostly appear designed to trigger tensions between European countries, or between Europe and the United States, but they were generally too clumsy to be believed."

The story, posted to Russian-language blogs and Reddit by multiple fake personas, tries to pin the blame on the COVID-19 outbreak on the U.S. and Kazakhstan by casting the virus as the byproduct of a U.S. nonproliferation program in the country. The trolls pointed to social media posts by a group of hackers calling themselves "Anonymous Kazakhstan." (Source: The Daily Beast)

(U) 4/9 Reporting

(U) Cybercriminals Buying Domain Names of Potential COVID-19 Drug Websites: Cybercriminals are buying up domains related to COVID-19 related drugs they can use to hack unwitting victims, [researchers at the cybersecurity company NormShield found](#). The number of suspicious domains mentioning the drug hydroxychloroquine has quadrupled since the Administration first mentioned it was being investigated as a treatment, researchers found. Overall, the NormShield team found 362 new suspicious web domains referencing 10 possible coronavirus cures including hydroxychloroquine in the first three months of 2020.

Some of the domains researchers examined referred users to a checkout page that would capture their credit or debit card information. Many of the domains were registered by the same person, researchers said, which makes them even more suspicious. Hackers often buy up domains in bulk so they can quickly shut them down once they've reached a certain number of customers to avoid detection.

Researchers at the cybersecurity firm Check Point also **uncovered** hackers registering tens of thousands of domains that advertise coronavirus-related Android apps that are actually designed to steal users' personal information from their text messages, microphone and camera (Source: NormShield; Checkpoint)

(FOUO) **FEMA Social Listening Report**

- Discussion of PPE continues to dominate the online landscape as elected officials use social media and traditional media platforms to voice their frustrations with the process. There is an increasing need among the general public and elected officials for some form of accountability at the federal level.
- The financial implications of these response are becoming more clear as cities and states are forced to adjust their spending and share updates on predicted revenues losses.
- Concerns for mental health remain one of the most common topics of discussion on social media as people become more fatigued, however many are looking to stories of recovery for hope and positivity.

Public Sentiment

- Distrust in the administration and the federal response continues to grow amid the news that the Acting Inspector General of the Department of Defense was removed over PPE supply chain issues.
- People are growing concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic is putting the long-term mental health of front line medical workers at risk.
- There is growing concern that child abuse could be on the rise despite decreasing numbers being reported. Many worry that the decline in numbers is because children are having less interaction with adults outside their own homes.
- Reports of the CDC possibly loosening guidelines for self-isolation have residents angry, as they believe self-isolation is critical in preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- As people are fatigued from growing numbers of cases and deaths, they are expressing joy for the news of virus recovery counts increasing. They prefer this type of information over death counts.
- There a lot of discussion surrounding yesterday's comments about the World Health Organization in the White House Press briefings as people debate whether not to defund the WHO.

(U) **Likely Increase in Cyberattacks Targeting Healthcare Workers:** CISA and top cybersecurity agencies in the United States and United Kingdom are **warning about** a surge in cyberattacks during the pandemic targeting health-care workers and employees working from home.

The attackers are posing as doctors and even World Health Organization officials to trick users into opening messages that then infect their computers with malware, steal personal information and lock up computer files to hold them for ransom. The report included a list of over 2,500 domains tied to known coronavirus scams. (Source: CISA)

(U) **Russian Information Operation Targets U.S., EU with Fraudulent Documents:** Insikt Group recently identified with high confidence an ongoing covert information operation targeting governments in the United States and Europe and believed to originate from Russia.

The investigation revealed previously undisclosed, attempts to plant false documents targeting U.S. officials and U.S. political organizations' relationships with international policymakers and governmental bodies. It appears that these fraudulent documents attempt to emulate confidential correspondences on sensitive international issues in Eastern Europe to make them seem to be authentic leaked information on the topics. The age of these documents range from January to June 2019.

This activity shared significant overlap with previously reported tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), namely the use of self-publisher blogs with single-use personas, Reddit promotion, and multilingual obfuscation. Distinct TTPs overlapping include the following:

- The use of forged letters and email correspondence
- Targeting of geopolitical incidents in the greater CIS
- Language errors that are characteristic of native-Russian speakers
- Seeding on self-publisher websites to include homment.com, as well as self-publishers based within Russia's "near abroad" (Source: Recorded Future)

(U) **The Echo-Chamber of Russia's COVID-19 Disinformation Operation:** The pro-Kremlin disinformation operation can be divided into five distinct branches – three of them present in this week's caseload of disinformation:

- Sites openly belonging to, or affiliated with, Russian state structures. In this group we find this week [RT](#), [Sputnik](#), [Pervy Kanal](#), and [rubaltic.ru](#);
- Sites registered in Russia and with open and obvious connection to pro-Kremlin circles. Examples this week are [geopolitica.ru](#) and [News Front](#);
- Sites registered in Russia, but without manifest connections to the Kremlin or other Russian structures. Here we find [Strategic Culture Foundation](#), [South Front](#) and [One World](#);

The two other categories function as multipliers and sources. A large proportion of the content of the above-mentioned sites is shared with, or brought to, the following types of sites:

- Sites registered outside Russia and with no apparent ties to Russian state or oligarch structures, but devoted mainly to Russian topics and with an openly pro-Kremlin agenda: e.g., [Russia-Insider](#), [Russian-Faith](#), [The Duran](#), [The Saker](#);
- And sites registered outside Russia that support pro-Kremlin narratives while having no apparent ties to Russia, and also report on a wider range of issues: e.g., [Global Research](#), [Unz Review](#), [Veterans Today](#), [The Alt World](#), and more...

These sites create a kind of echo-chamber of disinformation. They share content and contributors, views, and narratives. Claims are repeated and adapted for new audiences. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

Social Media Companies Takedown Inauthentic UAE and Saudi-Linked Accounts Publishing COVID-19

Disinformation: Inauthentic social media accounts and bot networks promoting Saudi and UAE interests pivoted to amplifying COVID-19 disinformation since the start of the pandemic. Twitter has taken down a network of more than [9,000 Twitter bots](#) that published inauthentic posts promoting the political interests of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This “astroturfing” network criticized Turkey’s intervention in Libya — a shared interest of both governments — by targeting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In addition, social media companies took down 5,350 Twitter accounts, 164 Facebook pages, accounts and groups, and 76 Instagram accounts inauthentically amplifying similar messaging.

WhatsApp Disinformation Mitigation: In January, WhatsApp [limited how often messages can be forwarded](#)—to only five groups instead of 20—in an attempt to slow the spread of disinformation. (They had previously limited it to 20 from 256.) [New research](#) suggests that the change is working, but more can still be done.

They found that changing the forwarding limit to five slowed down the spread of information by roughly an order of magnitude. Under the new limit, 80% of messages died within two days, but 20% were still very viral and reached the full network during this time, according to Garimella. The result isn’t perfect because, again, it only uses public data, but it shows what seemingly small fixes can do. (Source: MIT)

(U) 4/8 Reporting

(U) Social Media Bots Amplify China’s Propaganda in Italy: Between March 11 and 23, as China was delivering [much-needed medical supplies](#) to Italy, bots pushed two pro-China, Italian-language hashtags, according to a March 30 [investigation](#) published by Italian news outlet Formiche.

The big picture: 46.3% of tweets using the peppy-sounding hashtag #forzaCinaeItalia, which means “come on China and Italy,” were bots, according to an analysis performed by Alkemy in partnership with Formiche.

- The other hashtag was #grazieCina, which means “Thank you China.” 37.1% of tweets using this hashtag were bots.
- Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts, including the account belonging to the [Chinese Embassy in Italy](#), used these hashtags. (Source: Axios)

(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening Report:

- People feel social distancing is working after New York, New Jersey and Louisiana reported lower numbers of new cases when compared to previous days. More people are also now discussing the use of masks, where to acquire one, and how to make one, as people closely follow local officials and CDC latest guidelines.

- Elected officials and governors continue sharing in traditional and social media the requests and needs of their communities and states. There is ongoing interest regarding FEMA's process for distributing medical supplies, its priorities and the logistics.
- There remains significant national media and public interest on emergency medical supply needs, state governors' updates on their respective responses and difficult working conditions in medical facilities.
- There has been a high-volume of people wanting to make positive contributions to combat the pandemic by taking care of themselves and supplying local medical centers with additional resources. Many are posting "how-to" videos on YouTube for how to make various types of DIY face masks.
- There is increasing concern for healthcare workers at risk of contracting COVID-19 while on the job, especially in hard hit areas like Detroit and New York.
 - People are expressing frustration at that healthcare workers have not had access to proper PPE, leading many to place blame on the federal government for not distributing supplies.
- There is growing concern that poor and/or minority lead communities are the ones being the most affected by the pandemic in the United States.
- As many people are beginning to feel like each day is groundhog day they are leaning on friends and loved ones through social media for emotional support.
- Amid reports of some hospitals becoming overwhelmed, there are reports of other hospitals being forced to furlough or layoff employees due to drastic revenue losses. This is leading people to question what the current reality is for the American hospital system.

(U) **Increase in COVID-19 Lures for Digital Scams:** Hackers have used the dark web and encrypted messaging groups to spread scams selling face masks — and even blood from a person who allegedly recovered from the virus and might be immune. Hackers have hit the health-care sector, followed by finance and education, the hardest.

McAfee Labs found several malicious Android applications with names like "Corona Safety mask" that contained spyware and ransomware. Researchers also noticed an increase in coronavirus-themed documents that were being sent to victims and contained malware that would steal their personal information. (Source: McAfee Labs)

(U) **Psychology Behind the Spread of COVID-19 Disinformation:** The belief that an individual is privy to forbidden knowledge offers feelings of certainty and control amid a crisis that has turned the world upside down. And sharing that "knowledge" may give people something that is hard to come by after weeks of lockdowns and death: a sense of agency

Rumors and patently unbelievable claims are spread by everyday people whose critical faculties have simply been overwhelmed, psychologists say, by feelings of confusion and helplessness.

The conspiracy theories all carry a common message: The only protection comes from possessing the secret truths that "they" don't want you to hear.

People are drawn to conspiracies because they promise to satisfy certain psychological motives that are important to people. Chief among them: command of the facts, autonomy over one's well-being and a sense of control.

If the truth does not fill those needs, we humans have an incredible capacity to invent stories that will, even when some part of us knows they are false. A [recent study](#) found that people are significantly likelier to share false coronavirus information than they are to believe it." (Source: The New York Times).

(U) 4/7 Reporting

(U) Cell Towers Attacked in UK Amid 5G-Covid 19 Conspiracy Theories: Several cell towers in the U.K. have been set on fire and engineers harassed amid the spread of online conspiracy theories that link 5G technology with the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

Four of [Vodafone's](#) mobile phone masts were attacked in the last 24 hours, a spokesperson for the British carrier told CNBC Sunday. It's unclear whether the sites affected were used for 5G.

There are floods of posts on Facebook claiming the coronavirus outbreak was caused by 5G, the fifth generation of mobile internet. Many of the claims center on the idea that the virus originated in Wuhan because the Chinese city had deployed 5G networks last year. (Source: NBC)

(U) YouTube Moves to Limit Spread of False Coronavirus 5G Theory: YouTube will reduce the amount of content spreading conspiracy theories about links between 5G technology and coronavirus that it recommends to users, it has said, as four more attacks were recorded on phone masts within 24 hours. The online video company will actively remove videos that breach its policies, it said. But content that is simply conspiratorial about 5G mobile communications networks, without mentioning coronavirus, is still allowed on the site.

YouTube said those videos may be considered "borderline content" and subjected to suppression, including loss of advertising revenue and being removed from search results on the platform. (Source: The Guardian)

(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- Conversation about COVID-19 today included various topics as different states grapple with different needs. States with a high amount of confirmed cases continue to deal with personnel and supply shortages, leading to healthcare workers rationing equipment or making life/death decisions. Other states are adding checkpoints at their borders and implementing more rigorous safety measures and economic assistance for those affected.
- Hydroxychloroquine was also a major subject of interest among the general public, as many share first-hand experiences regarding its effectiveness and possible side effects. Increased discussion about convalescent plasma trials are a new hope for many as well after initial testing has shown promising results on COVID-19 patients.

- FEMA conversation remains centered on the agency's role within the federal response, with many elected officials continuing to publicly request for more federal assistance. Many continue to share news of the federal government seizing supplies. A smaller number are discussing the installation of field hospitals.







(FOUO) *Sentiment Analysis*

- The emotional toll of this experience is weighing on people as there is an increase in people being hospitalized and deaths affecting families.
- Individuals in high-risk categories and front line workers are discussing getting their affairs in order. Many are discussing updating wills, reviewing wills and insurance policies with loved ones and making arrangements for dependents.
- News of a tiger in the Bronx zoo testing positive for COVID-19 has produced wide volumes of conversation, fueling debate about whether animals can transmit the virus to humans and vice versa. This is creating increased feelings of mistrust among many members of the public who feel they were misled to believe the virus could not be transmitted between humans and animals.
- Frustration is increasing between individuals and airline companies regarding reimbursement for canceled flights. Federal Officials are holding companies accountable for refunds after consumer complaints
- Healthcare workers are using social media to instruct citizens on how to properly wear a mask, and the do's and don'ts when wearing one.

(U) **Russia COVID-19 Narrative Analysis:** For the eleventh week in a row, coverage of the coronavirus dominated the Russian media ecosystem last week. As has become the norm, much of this content relayed basic news updates on various aspects of the pandemic. However, one important theme this week emphasized Russia's medical aid to other countries, particularly the United States. A few articles also highlighted areas of geopolitical tension that the pandemic has exacerbated, such as the transatlantic relationship and the divide between the West and authoritarian regimes.

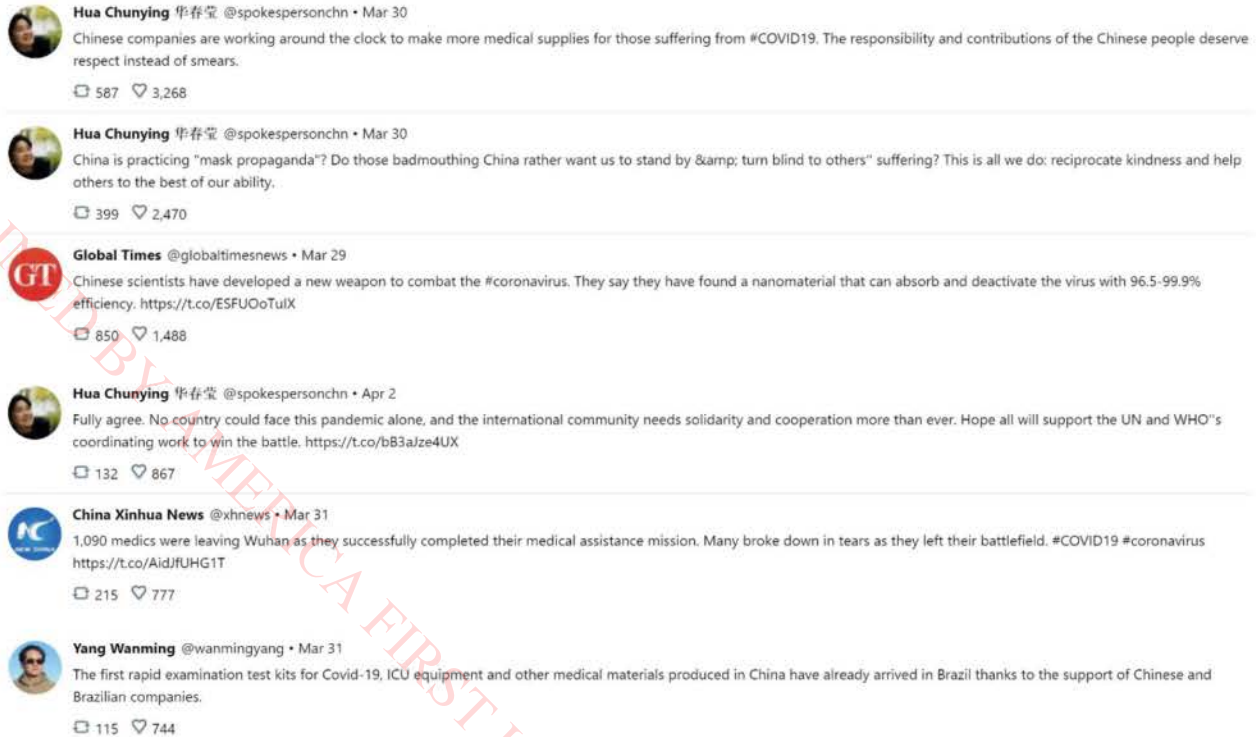
Out of a little more than 1,500 articles collected from Russian government-funded news websites last week, about 1,050 mentioned "virus" in the first 200 words, including all of the top ten articles as measured by Facebook engagement (reactions, comments, and shares; each ranking contained the same ten articles). Four of these top articles dealt with Russian or Chinese medical aid to the West, and another covered China's reaction to criticism of its efforts to contain the virus in Wuhan. Examples included

(Source: German Marshall Fund)

-  **Ruptly** @ruptly • Apr 1
BREAKING: Plane with #Russian humanitarian aid lands in #NewYork
198 413
-  **MFA Russia** ru @mfa_russia • Apr 1
rus Following phone talk between Presidents #Putin & @realDonaldTrump #Russia sends largest cargo aircraft An-124 Ruslan ✈️ with 🧰 medical supplies (masks + equipment) to #US to help fight #COVID19 pandemic, save lives of American citizens. ❤️ The plane is en route #RussiaHelps <https://t.co/efeSK78cuB>
316 565
-  **redfish** @redfishstream • Mar 30
"Italia got more solidarity from China and Cuba than it got from Europe." Irish Member of the European Parliament Mick Wallace condemning the European political elite for how it has dealt with the #coronavirus pandemic. <https://t.co/xiBSaV7JqI>
279 533
-  **RT** @rt.com • Mar 31
BREAKING: Russian Covid-19 plane aid to US: Putin asked Trump if he needed help & he accepted MORE: <https://t.co/ipcpTTNpxc> <https://t.co/roeeQMbQLo>
287 468
-  **Russia in USA** ru @rusembusa • 22h
#Putin and @AVucic agreed on the provision of humanitarian aid to #Serbia in order to #StopCovid19 in the spirit of traditional friendly rusbilateral relations. This aid, including sending experts, will mostly be provided by the Russian Defence Ministry <https://t.co/mtJpe8wkj> <https://t.co/NFp6NWyAzP>
314 417
-  **Ruptly** @ruptly • Apr 1
BREAKING: Plane with #Russian humanitarian aid lands in #NewYork
198 413

(U) **China COVID-19 Narrative Analysis:** The coronavirus was the most prominent topic by far within the Chinese media ecosystem last week. Much of this coverage consisted of basic news updates, but China's humanitarian aid to other countries facing outbreaks received significant emphasis. At the same time, output also heavily disputed any suggestions of problems with Chinese medical equipment donations or China's response to the outbreak more generally, often firing back with criticism of Western countries and officials making these suggestions. As has been the case since the beginning of the outbreak, Chinese media outlets this week continued their efforts to portray China as a benevolent global leader in this time of crisis.

Hashtags associated with China's medical aid to other countries included #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos (Spanish for "We stop this virus together": 11 uses) and #ForzaCinaeItalia (Italian for "Come on China and Italy": 9 uses). According to [media reports](#), bot networks may have helped boost the popularity of these hashtags. (Source: German Marshall Fund)



(U) **COVID-19 Disinformation Major Concern for Political Campaigns:** U.S. officials, including DHS, **have accused Russia, China and Iran of exploiting the global health crisis** to spread misinformation about the disease and the United States' response to the pandemic. This could extend to the political space as the election draws near — especially as virtual and phone campaigning open up the door for pranksters to pose as candidates.

Scams targeting voters or campaign workers could also pose a threat. Agari, an email security firm, has seen a nearly 600 percent increase of coronavirus-themed attacks against the private sector. While so far there has been no similar uptick in phishing scams using coronavirus-themed bait to steal personal information from campaigns, that could change as November approaches. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) 4/6 Reporting

(U) FEMA Social Listening:

- Many are struggling to adapt to the new normal and the realization that things will soon get worse is weighing heavily on many. Statements from federal officials suggesting the situation will get worse this week coupled with the extension of many state stay-at-home orders are contributing to the anxiety and fear many are feeling.
- Frustration regarding the PPE supply chain continues, much of this is being driven by several governors who continue to refer to their attempts to compete with the federal government on

the open market as a “bidding war”. Many are expressing concern about FEMA’s management of PPE distribution.

- Traditional media is speculating about a predicted food shortage based on a FEMA Senior Leadership Brief that was shared with press. The public worries these reports will lead to further hoarding issues.

(U) Violent extremist groups have taken to social media and encrypted applications to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19, in an effort to motivate individuals to take violent actions: Federal law enforcement agencies have alerted state and local police forces of white supremacists’ interest in weaponizing the pandemic. While improbable that a white supremacist group can successfully carry out even a low-scale WMD attack, much more likely during the pandemic would be small-arms and critical infrastructure attacks. (Source: The Soufan Center)

White supremacists are blaming Jews, Israel, and China for the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging those infected to spread the virus: Conspiracy theories in white supremacist circles are claiming that COVID-19 was the result of an accidental release of a Chinese bio-weapon. Other theories claim that the virus originated in Israel and was intentionally spread by Jews, while others have accused immigrants. Memes were also found on the messaging app Telegram encouraging infected individuals to spread the virus on public transport and infect religious and racial minorities. While considered by some as a poor attempt at humor, the memes invoke genocidal fantasies of white supremacists. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

(U) Once Accurate COVID 19 Data Becomes Misinformation With Age: Given the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic even valid data might be misused simply by being published or amplified several days or weeks after its initial release date. Once-accurate information can become misinformation as it ages, leading to erroneous conclusions and misinterpretation of the current situation.

In the middle of March 2020, multiple websites began sharing an article called “You are more likely to win the lottery than getting coronavirus.” The story was based on a now-deleted Facebook [post](#) of Veso Yolov, a Bulgarian doctor from the Medical Institute of Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mr. Yolov allegedly claimed that most COVID-19 cases were occurring in China and that the mortality rate for people younger than 50 is so low so that it is easier to win the lottery than die from it if you had not visited China. Moreover, the article provided mortality statistics from February 10 as “one of the worst days for now,” with 108 COVID-related deaths in China, comparing the stats favorably to mortality rates from other situations like cancer, heart disease, and even insect bites.

While the date of the now-deleted Facebook post is unclear, the articles citing it appeared in [Bulgaria](#) on March 10 and in Russian [media](#) on March 11, giving the post’s publication date as ranging somewhere between February 10 and March 10. The author provided data suggesting that around 100,000 people were sick at the moment, which according to Johns Hopkins [tracking data](#), potentially narrowing down the publication date to approximately March 3–4, when the official tally surpassed 100,000 positive

cases. However, if the article was written in early March, it ignored that fact that several other days since February 10 had actually been [worse](#), including 158 people dying on February 23.

The post also began to circulate on fringe media and social media. The main spreader of this news in the Russian language was *GoodHouse.ru*, which [published](#) it on March 11; at the time of publishing, this article had been shared on Facebook 57,443 times. At the same time, other sources like aggregator [golbis.com](#), fringe media [from-ua.info](#), and Kyrgyz National News Agency [Kabar.kg](#) republished the article. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **COVID-19 Likely to Increase Global Terrorism Threat:** As COVID-19 spreads and negatively impacts the stability of fragile states where terrorist organizations operate, the pandemic will also undermine security cooperation aimed at combatting international terrorism: "It is almost certainly correct that COVID-19 will handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation, allowing the jihadists to better prepare spectacular terror attacks." (International Crisis Group; Washington Post)

(U) **Forged Statement About Gates Foundation Vaccine Investments Goes Viral:** Tech billionaire and philanthropist Bill Gates reached the third spot on South Africa's Twitter trends on March 31, with over 35,000 tweets mentioning his name. An overwhelming number of the accounts that tweeted his name claimed Africa should not accept a vaccination for COVID-19 from Bill Gates, even though no vaccination is currently available. Tracing the content of the tweets revealed a fake message claiming to be from a French doctor that hopped from Facebook to Twitter, making its way from France to the U.S. to South Africa.

Gates has been the target of multiple conspiracy theories about the spread of the new coronavirus. One of the first theories, started by QAnon supporter Jordan Sather, [claimed](#) the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave funding to an institute that patented a coronavirus vaccination, thus somehow implying Gates started the virus so he could sell vaccinations. The theory was debunked after it was proven the funding in question had gone to avian coronavirus research, not COVID-19. Nonetheless, its online spread demonstrates how disinformation can quickly travel across languages, countries and internet platforms. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) **Fake Pop-Up COVID 19 Testing Site Scam:** State and local officials in Kentucky are warning against "pop-up" COVID-19 testing sites which offer quick results for cash. A self-proclaimed medical marketing company set up makeshift testing sites outside various churches in Louisville with workers dressed head to toe in hazmat gear. Local officials said the scammers are charging more than \$200 a test and using people's DNA and personal information. (Source: ABC News)

(U) **Defective Chinese Medical Supplies Belie China's Disinformation Campaign:** As the coronavirus rages across Europe, a growing number of countries are reporting that millions of pieces of medical equipment donated by, or purchased from, China to defeat the pandemic are defective and unusable. The revelations are fueling distrust of a public relations effort by Chinese President Xi Jinping and his

Communist Party to [portray](#) China as the world's new humanitarian superpower. (Source: Gatestone Institute)

(U) 4/2 Reporting

(FOUO) FEMA Social Listening:

- State and local officials are battling to get residents to follow stay-at-home guidelines. There continue to be reports of people holding gatherings or crowds forming in public areas. This is leading some officials to shut down more public spaces and enforce stricter rules including curfews in some area.
- Throughout the day the general public and elected officials remained highly critical of the current process for the procurement and distribution of essential medical supplies. There continues to be intense frustration with FEMA over this process.
- There is growing anxiety over hospital capacity issues in major urban areas. As traditional media reports on the number of available beds many worry that hospitals will be too quickly overwhelmed.

(U) **Russia Exploits Italian Coronavirus Outbreak to Expand its Influence:** *From Russia, with love:* that is how the Kremlin has branded its shipment of medical supplies and experts to Italy to help the latter deal with the COVID-19 crisis. From March 23 onward, pro-Kremlin outlets and Russian officials introduced supporting narratives that quickly spread across social media in both Russia and Italy.

(U) A [video on Youtube](#) titled "Russia tries to help Italy. But is someone mysteriously boycotting it?" was watched by more than 250,00 people and liked over 8,000 times. On social media, pro-Russian Italians started circulating similar [images showing a Russian cargo plane's trajectory](#) to insinuate that EU countries are posing obstacles to the countries that send help, such as Russia. The image was often combined with angry slogans against Poland and the rest of the European Union, as well as the hashtags #italexit and #uscITA, both in support of Italy leaving the EU.

Videos, memes, and images of Italians replacing the E.U. flag with the Russian flag also started circulating online. One [particular video](#), posted on March 23, went viral on Facebook. In less than one week, it gained 567,000 views, 10,000 likes, and was shared by 44,000 users. These social media posts were amplified by Russian-state backed media. (Source: Atlantic Council)

(U) **Top Five Russian COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives:** EU vs Disinfo has recorded 215 cases of Russian-state backed media COVID-19 disinformation. Comparing the cases on the coronavirus published between January 22 and March 25 with the caseload from this week alone, it appears that the anti-American vibe is still going strong. In total, we have collected 39 cases claiming that the US created the coronavirus.

(U) The second most common narrative is that the EU is failing to cope with the crisis and is disintegrating as a result, together with the border-free Schengen area. In particular, this narrative of failure and lack of EU solidarity is trending after the delivery of Russian aid to Italy – we have added [26 new disinformation cases to the database](#).

(U) The narrative that the virus is being used as a weapon against China and its economy comes in third place with 24 cases.

(U) And in fourth place is the rather creative notion that the whole coronavirus crisis is a secret plan of the global elite, with 17 cases and counting.

(U) Rounding out our top five is a group of messages targeting Ukraine in the context of the coronavirus crisis, with the pro-Kremlin media successfully managing to mix in accusations of Nazism. Total cases: 13. (Source: EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Most Engaged with Russian COVID-19 Disinformation Narrative:** While the pro-Kremlin media has been pushing all sorts of different and often contradictory narratives – ranging from bizarre conspiracy theories, to Ukraine responding inadequately to the pandemic, to the West either failing to react or reacting hysterically – the articles that saw the biggest engagement numbers all claimed that the virus was manufactured by the United States.

If 68,700 likes, shares, and comments across different social media platforms doesn't seem like much, the 263,902 engagements for all those 152 coronavirus-related disinformation articles looks somewhat more worrying. Especially since this is a topic where disinformation can bring life-threatening consequences. (EU vs Disinfo)

(U) **Pro-Kremlin Media Spins Story of U.S. Military Transporting COVID-19 Test Swabs From Italy:** In a continuing attempt to discredit the U.S. and the West amid the coronavirus pandemic, pro-Kremlin outlets put a misleading spin on the news that the U.S. military had transported 500,000 COVID-19 test swabs from Italy to the United States to meet increased U.S. demand. The outlets framed the operation as if the United States was taking tests away from “suffering” Italians. This story emerged as pro-Kremlin media and social media actors made efforts to draw positive attention to Russia's humanitarian shipment of supplies to Italy, both in English-language [information environments](#) as well as [domestic Russian-language media outlets](#).

(U) Pro-Kremlin media seized the opportunity to smear NATO, the United States, the European Union, and other rivals experiencing the coronavirus pandemic. It has been particularly active in Italy, one of the world's hardest-hit countries: the DFRLab has previously reported on how pro-Kremlin and fringe outlets spread an anti-NATO narrative suggesting that U.S. troops in Italy may have been infected by the virus, and thus posed a health risk to other NATO forces. (Source: Atlantic Council)

(U) **Iranian-Linked Hackers Attempt to Break into WHO Email:** Hackers working in the interests of the Iranian government have attempted to break into the personal email accounts of staff at the World Health Organization. It is not clear if any accounts were compromised, but the attacks show how the WHO and other organizations at the center of a global effort to contain the coronavirus have come under a sustained digital bombardment by hackers seeking information about the outbreak. (Source: Reuters)

(U) **Russian Telegram Rumor Claiming Smoking Protects from Coronavirus Spreads to Ukraine:** Ukrainian media picked up an incorrect interpretation of a scientific article claiming that smoking decreases the chances of falling ill with COVID-19. The story received wide dissemination in social media, despite being wrong from the very beginning. The original report traced back to Russian fringe media and was subsequently deleted from the website without any correction.

(U) The story can be traced to the Telegram channel *Tolkovatel* ('Expositor'), which has 22,406 members. The [post](#) was viewed 20,100 times. *Tolkovatel* was founded by Dmitry Tkachev, a former editor-in-chief of *Russian Planet* who [censored](#) reports from Crimea, ultimately leading to five journalists resigning in protest. (Source: Atlantic Council)

(U) 4/1 Reporting

EU Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic: Disinformation and misinformation around COVID-19 continue to proliferate around the world, with potentially harmful consequences for public health and effective crisis communication. In the EU and elsewhere, coordinated disinformation messaging seeks to frame vulnerable minorities as the cause of the pandemic and to fuel distrust in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver effective responses. Some state and state-backed actors seek to exploit the public health crisis to advance geopolitical interests, often by directly challenging the credibility of the European Union and its partners.

- Global: Claims that the EU is disintegrating in the face of COVID-19 are trending on social media in all analyzed regions. Among COVID-19-related content published by RT and Sputnik, articles covering conspiracy narratives such as that "the virus was man-made" or intentionally spread, typically received more social engagement than other stories.
- EU: Disinformation and false health advice on COVID-19 continues to circulate on social media, in contradiction to the WHO's official guidance and the internal policies of online platforms. For instance, Sputnik Deutschland promotes the claim on Facebook and Twitter that "washing hands does not help". Evidence shows that online platforms continue to monetize COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Africa: Hate campaigns against social and ethnic groups are going viral in some countries. China's proactive communication around support delivery creates reputational challenges for other donors.
- China: state media and government officials promote not proven theories about the origin of COVID-19. Chinese coverage highlights displays of gratitude by some European leaders in response to Chinese aid.

- MENA: Daesh encourages militants to exploit chaos and confusion around COVID-19, while framing the pandemic as a “painful torment” against “crusader nations”. The Syrian regime is using COVID-19 to attack EU sanctions. EU Member States are portrayed as unable to help each other or stealing resources meant for local use.
- Russia: More than 150 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation on COVID-19 have been recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database (since January 22). Russian state-controlled media outlets have shifted their focus to highlight Russia’s preparedness to tackle the outbreak. Russian aid to Italy was extensively covered.
- Turkey: False and distorted health information continues to circulate widely in the social media, while COVID-19 is nurturing anti-EU discourses and criticism towards the EU, also more publicly.
- Western Balkans: conspiracy theories suggesting the virus is a US bioweapon or pretext for a foreign invasion continue trending. The COVID crisis is linked to the existing narrative that the EU is “turning its back” on the Western Balkans. (Source: EEAS; EU vs Disinfo)

(FOUO) **Terrorists Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic in an Attempt to Incite Violence** Violent extremists probably are seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, intimidate targets, and promote their ideologies, and we assess these efforts will intensify in the coming months. Since early March, violent extremists have used online platforms to spread misinformation related to federal, state, and local government mitigation efforts and, in some cases, infected individuals with COVID-19. Increased travel restrictions and social distancing possibly will complicate violent extremist efforts to operationalize attacks against more traditional terrorist targets in the Homeland, and we have no information indicating any active plotting is underway.

(FOUO) Other social media users are sharing and discussing perceived threats associated with the US Government response to the outbreak, specifically tied to social media rumors and fears of martial law and gun confiscation. Some domestic terrorism-related activity in the United States historically has been driven by similar conspiracy theories, increasing our concern that a violent extremist could seek to conduct an attack based on this misinformation. (Source: DHS)

(U) **Most Identified Disinformation Websites Pivot to COVID-19 Disinfo:** Website identified by the German Marshall Fund as known purveyors of disinformation have pivoted to promoting false information on COVID-19. Many are self-described “wellness” sites that publish content on false COVID-19 treatment or promote false narratives on the origin of the pandemic. Russian-state backed disinformation websites are also included.

8 out of top 10 sites that repeatedly publish false or misleading information are now pushing coronavirus content

Why coronavirus is a punishment from God that should lead to repentance

God intends His punishments to be medicinal. They are to stimulate us to repent and help us grow in holiness.

Thu Mar 12, 2020 · 7:57 am EST



STUDY: 6 Chinese Herbs "Directly Inhibit" Coronavirus Infection

March 12, 2020 at 12:00 PM

Chinese-government-funded researchers have identified 26 herbs with a "high probability" of preventing coronavirus infection, 6 of them prevented infection by an earlier version of coronavirus in ALL study participants!



(Source: German Marshall Fund)

COVID-19 Scams: The number of emails that used phony information about the virus to trick people into infecting their phones and computers has **increased by 14,000 percent** in just two weeks, according to a report from IBM's X-Force research division.

Palo Alto Networks **logged over 100,000** new potentially phony Web domains registered with words including "covid," "virus" and "corona" in their names, in just the past few weeks. And that doesn't count phony sites that claim to sell protective gear such as masks and hand sanitizer.

The explosion of scams includes robocalls, texts, and emails posing as government officials or businesses offering refunds for missed vacations or virus-testing kits. **The average loss for a consumer duped by one of these scams is nearly \$600, the agency reported, which adds up to nearly \$5 million nationwide.**

(U) **Private Social Media Groups and COVID-19 Disinformation:** Private groups, along with fringe sites that link to the mainstream platforms, are "where unsavory narratives ferment and are spread, often with directions about how to achieve maximum impact." These private groups and smaller platforms with looser rules provide avenues for recruiting and radicalizing extremists and for harassment, especially of women (through doxxing and revenge porn), immigrant, and minority group members. Despite Facebook policies banning content that could cause harm, in private groups users are sharing stories claiming that the coronavirus was created by the pharmaceutical industry to sell expensive drugs. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

(U) 3/31 Reporting

(U) Increased Chinese-State Back COVID-19 Disinformation: Twitter accounts linked to China's ambassadors, embassies and consulates grew by more than 250 percent since this time last year, when political protests in Hong Kong first erupted. Official Chinese accounts frequently retweeted news outlets funded by the Iranian or Russian governments – three of the top five non-Chinese, most-retweeted news outlets were backed by Tehran or Moscow, according to the German Marshall Fund.

The analysis also showed a marked evolution in the type of content Chinese accounts shared since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. While early messaging focused on Beijing's efforts to stem the virus' spread, those messages grew more overtly hostile in February and March, as cases proliferated outside of China. Some of those accounts shared conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus and attacked Western officials for criticizing China's role.



(Source: German Marshall Fund)

(U) Social Media COVID-19 Disinformation Mitigation Efforts—Mixed Results: Implementation of these aggressive new policies has been uneven due to a lack of uniform enforcement and greater reliance on automation — both challenges that extend to disinformation beyond COVID-19. Despite the strongly-worded policy to the contrary, ads for face masks continued to surface through [Google's advertising platform](#) and on [Facebook](#). And Twitter [refused to remove a tweet](#) from Elon Musk incorrectly calling children “essentially immune” from the virus — even as its policy earlier directly cited an example of

claiming the virus did not infect children as a prohibited denial of established facts. It has also left up [conspiracy theories](#) from Chinese state officials and media about the origins of the virus itself. On Facebook, [a bug in its anti-spam](#) filter designed to remove coronavirus disinformation also removed posts linking to legitimate sources — including *The Guardian*, *Dallas Morning News*, and the European Union's coronavirus guidance.

Where platforms have been more successful is in prioritizing quality information — a crucial element of a counter-disinformation strategy that should remain beyond this crisis. Google search displays authoritative information from mainstream media outlets and prominently offers links to sources such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO). On [Instagram](#), a pop-up banner linking to information from the WHO greets all users. Google and Facebook are also launching hubs for trusted coronavirus information. Even platforms relatively new to the challenge of disinformation, like [Pinterest](#), now send coronavirus searches to sparse pages with WHO content. WhatsApp, which has been criticized for allowing viral disinformation to flourish under the radar in encrypted and group chats, has taken the initiative to provide special accounts for users to [forward suspect information](#) for verification. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

(U) COVID-19 Related Scams

- Hackers are creating bogus sites that claim to have information about stimulus cash for citizens recently approved by Congress but that actually contain information-stealing malware, [researchers at Cisco Talos say](#).
- Hackers have posed as officials with the U.S. Small Business Administration to seed struggling business owners with malware, [IBM X-Force researchers found](#). In just the past 14 days, the researchers have seen a 14,000 percent increase in spam related to covid-19, they said.
- The number of suspicious domains and files referring to the teleconferencing company Zoom have also increased, [researchers at Check Point observed](#).
 - (Source: Washington Post)

(U) Egypt's State Media Amplifies Russian, Chinese, Iranian COVID-19 Disinformation: Egypt's pro-government media is amplifying Chinese, Russian, and Iranian COVID-19 disinformation that coronavirus is a lab-manufactured biological weapon to destroy the Chinese economy. Advocates of this conspiracy theory made no mention of where the virus may have originated. TV presenter Basma Wahba devoted an episode of her daily show on the ONE channel to biological warfare in early February. "Machine guns and cannons are no longer the weapons used in today's wars. Some countries resort to bio-weapons to target the economies of other states," she said. (Source: Al-Monitor)

(U) 3/30 Reporting

(FOUO) No Indication Fraudulent Text Messages Result of Communications Network Infiltration: AT&T and other telecoms industry representatives confirmed to the CFI TF that recent fraudulent COVID-19 text messages are not a result of infiltration of telecoms networks. The texts are most likely viral spam texts.

(FOUO) **Disruption of a Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist’s Plot to Attack a Missouri Medical Center** The recently disrupted Racial/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist plot to attack a hospital in Missouri is indicative of the persistent threat posed by RMVEs and the potential for world events to influence the timing and location of an attack. Wilson’s target selection—while a hospital is novel for RMVEs—reflects the current trend of RMVEs seeking to maximize their audience and the dissemination of their message. Law enforcement activities have identified RMVE actors often desire to promulgate ideology through enhanced media attention, including live streaming attacks, publicized manifestos, or engaging social media platforms. Additionally, an offender may select a target based on the perceived response from media outlets, and subsequent messaging/attention that could spark sympathetic dialogue or action. The FBI and DHS urge state and local authorities, as well as private sector security partners, to promptly report suspicious activities related to potential RMVE violence. (Source: FBI-DHS Joint Intelligence Bulletin)

(U) **Anti-Vax and Conspiracy Social Media Groups Spreading COVID-19 Disinformation:** Two weeks ago an anti-vaccine Facebook group called ‘We Brought Vaxxed to the UK’ started to disseminate a new and dangerous contagion: misinformation about Covid-19. Its posts promote xenophobia, conspiracy theories and erroneous medical information about the disease and how it might be treated.

One post claimed China was using the outbreak to cull the elderly, another suggested hand sanitiser causes cancer and a “probiotic yogurt suppository” was recommended as a cure.

The group is just one of some 50 social media accounts being tracked by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a charity dedicated to preventing false and divisive lies and myths spreading across the web.

“I took our file on these groups to Facebook executives to express our deep concern”, said CCDH chief executive Imran Ahmed. “But nearly two weeks later, they have still not taken action to enforce their own policies and remove them.” (Source: CCDH; The Telegraph)

(U) **Digital Forensic Research Lab COVID-19 Mitigation Recommendations:** The Atlantic Council’s DFR lab issued the following public recommendations for fighting COVID-19 related disinformation:

1. CHECK YOUR OWN BIASES.

- a. Our brains repeat patterns in order to make decisions more quickly, and they selectively seek out information that confirms what we already believe. These mental shortcuts don’t always lead to accurate conclusions. We all have beliefs we hold dear, and we tend to trust others who share those beliefs—which means that we often find ourselves caught in echo chambers or [filter bubbles](#).

2. ASK YOURSELF IF YOU’RE BEING CONSTRUCTIVE.

- a. Before you share something, ask yourself if doing so is constructive for everyone who might see or hear it. Even if you intend to share something with only your immediate friends or family, they might share it as well, and their followers might share it too.

Before you share a Facebook status or send a tweet, picture yourself standing at your local PTA, church, or community meeting. Is what you're about to share constructive for those folks, or will it make the situation worse?

3. **BE EMPHATIC, BUT ALSO EMPATHETIC.**

- a. If you've followed the steps above, you know the facts. And you're right to be emphatic about those facts, but that's not always enough. **To quote** the late social psychologist Leon Festinger, when you present someone who has a strong conviction with evidence that he's wrong, "The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before." In other words, your goal shouldn't be to be *right*, but to be *helpful*. Allow the people around you to discover the facts for themselves, even if—and especially when—they have your guidance.

4. **REMEMBER THAT ANXIETY IS NATURAL, BUT IT'S ALSO VIRAL.**

- a. Anxiety compounds. As the public-health expert Judson Brewer recently **wrote** in the *Harvard Business Review*, "[W]hen anxiety is spread by social contagion—defined as the spread of affect from one person to another—it can lead to something even more problematic: panic."
- b. When we conduct fire drills, the guidance is to remain calm and file out of the building in an orderly fashion. We are trained to make sure that our response doesn't worsen the situation. The same applies to navigating the online information space and personal communications—especially during a crisis. Your tone matters. And **screaming into the void** online or at someone in particular isn't likely to make things better.

Be patient, kind, deliberate, and fact-based. More people will listen.

We're in this together. It's our civic duty to ensure we're all making the smartest decisions and not allowing rumors or conspiracy theories to take seed. We all have a role to play. You don't have to become an epidemiology expert—the medical professionals and journalists will do their jobs. You do have to make an effort to not spread rumors or falsehoods, or anything else that could make a public-health response harder for those around you.

Lives depend on it. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)

(U) 3/27 Reporting

Chinese-State Backed Covert COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign: Since August 2019, ProPublica has tracked more than 10,000 suspected fake Twitter accounts involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government. Among those are the hacked accounts of users from around the world that now post propaganda and disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak, the Hong Kong protests and other topics of state interest. They included **a professor in North Carolina; a graphic artist and a mother in Massachusetts; a web designer in the U.K.; and a business analyst in Australia.** (It is unclear whether the current fake account holders hacked the accounts themselves or purchased them from elsewhere.) Suspected Chinese operatives have stepped up their efforts in recent

days, according to private messages shared with ProPublica, offering influential Chinese-speaking Twitter users cash for favorable posts.

These efforts appear to be aimed at disparate audiences outside of China. Most of the posts uncovered are in Chinese and appear aimed at influencing the millions of ethnic Chinese who live outside of China's borders. Others are in English.

ProPublica's research tracked how the government-linked influence accounts that had targeted political dissidents and the Hong Kong protests turned their focus to the coronavirus outbreak. During the height of the epidemic in China, many of them became cheerleaders for the government, calling on citizens to unite in support of efforts to fight the epidemic and urging them to "dispel online rumors."

Another post in English trumpeted aid the Chinese government recently provided to Italy. It came from the Twitter handle @RNA_Chinese, an account that appears to have been an attempt to fool the casual reader into believing it was coming from the U.S. government-funded broadcaster Radio Free Asia (@RFA_Chinese).

Others accounts have taken a darker turn in response to the pandemic, using it as a vehicle for disinformation and attacks on Beijing's usual political opponents.



Recent coronavirus propaganda posts made by Chinese government-linked fake Twitter accounts.



Now-suspended Twitter user Melinda Butler posted about the coronavirus and the Hong Kong protesters, sometimes in a mix of traditional and simplified Chinese characters. Shown in the People's Daily graphic: Dominic Raab, Marco Rubio, State Department employee Julie Eadeh, Nancy Pelosi, Mitt Romney, Mike Pompeo, Eliot Engel and Tom Cotton.



Radio Free Asia's Twitter profile (@RFA_Chinese) compared with that of the Chinese government-linked impersonator (@RNA_Chinese).

(U) Online Extremists Exploit COVID-19 to Inspire Supporters: White supremacist extremists are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for the theory of accelerationism. The theory states that participating in mass attacks or creating other forms of chaos will accelerate the imminent and necessary collapse of society in order to build a racially pure nation. A neo-Nazi media group that promotes this theory has encouraged supporters to incite panic while people are practicing social isolation during the COVID-19 outbreak, which includes discharging firearms in cities and putting bullet-sized holes into car windows. (Source: State of New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness)

As more Americans have been reported as infected in the past few days and stock exchanges have fallen, the administrators of these chats and channels seem to have realized that this is a moment to increase their calls for disorder and advocacy for violence, whether it is against the government, against people of color, or against Jews and Muslims. While this is online chatter, the fact that it's seeking to take advantage of and exacerbate a crisis is alarming. (Counter Extremism Project; Vice)

(U) Self-Isolation May Facilitate Radicalization Process: With the spread of COVID-19, people are being instructed to stay at home, and rightly so. Unfortunately, this risks increasing the consumption of fake news, conspiracy theories, and extremist material online, as people try to make sense of the crisis surrounding them. While governments have made major efforts to provide accurate information about COVID-19 online, there are two areas where social media companies will have to remain vigilant: the rise of conspiracy theories and the role this plays in calls to increase targeted violence against at-risk communities. The first often leads to the second.

Disinformation campaigns are helped by such state actors as [China](#)—to deflect blame of government actions—and [Russia](#), which is looking to increase divisions, sow distrust, and exacerbate crisis situations. (Source: Foreign Policy)

Hackers target mobile users in Italy and Spain, taking advantage of coronavirus hot spots: Coronavirus-themed scams show no signs of letting up as hackers have tried to breach mobile phone users in Italy and Spain, the two countries with the most deaths from the virus.

Attackers laced mobile apps with malware to try to steal data from, or otherwise compromise, Italian and Spanish residents looking for updates on the pandemic, according to Slovakian antivirus firm [ESET](#). The phony apps posed as legitimate ones offering updates on the spread of the novel coronavirus and how to assess your risk of infection. (Source: Cyberscoop)

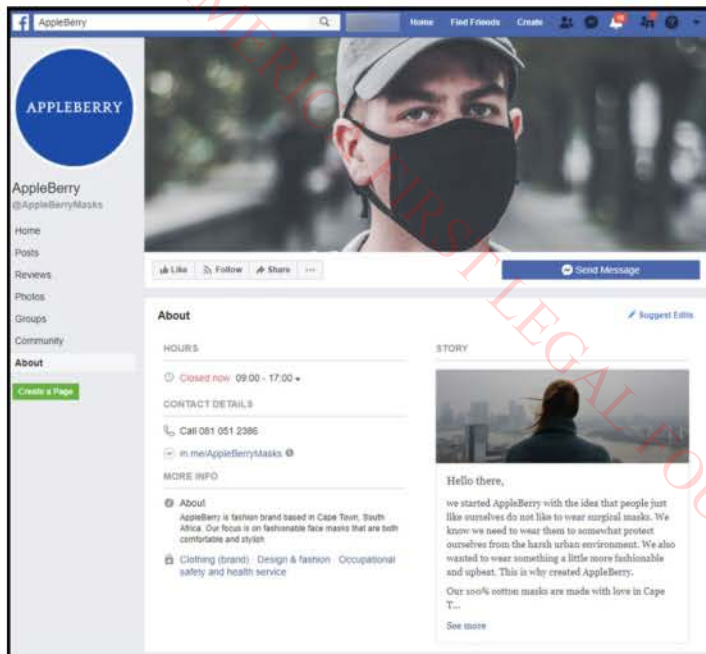
FBI arrests COVID-19 Scammer: The FBI arrested a Southern California man for soliciting investments for a fake coronavirus vaccine and cure. It's the first arrest that the Justice Department has made since Attorney General William Barr promised earlier this month to crack down on cyber criminals exploiting coronavirus fears.

The accused scammer, Keith Lawrence Middlebrook, claimed in social media posts that he'd developed pills to prevent coronavirus infections and a serum that would cure people already infected with the virus. The videos racked up over half a million views on YouTube and 1 million views on Instagram before his arrest.

South Africa-based Facebook groups stoked coronavirus fears to sell non-medical face masks: A Facebook page linked to Cape Town-based digital marketing firm Fansgate created at least 33 Facebook groups between January and March 2020 that leveraged fears around the novel coronavirus to build their respective audiences. Fansgate's director subsequently used a separate but related entity called AppleBerry to exploit these fears and market non-medical face masks to the members of these groups.

Fangate's for-profit venture had an unintended consequence: in commercializing coronavirus-related fears of group members to market its product, it also created a platform for the propagation of misinformation. The Facebook groups quickly became vectors for the spread of coronavirus mis- and disinformation after the administrator seemingly abandoned them to volunteer moderators.

In response to the DFRLab's investigation, Facebook took action against the companies hosting the groups. "We removed these Pages and Groups for misleading people about their purpose and attempting to evade our [prohibition on the sale of medical equipment](#)," a Facebook company spokesperson said in a statement. (Source: Atlantic Council, DFR Lab)



Screenshot from the Facebook page @AppleBerryMasks, indicating the page's marketing blurb added on February 12, 2020. (Source: [Facebook](#))

(U) 3/26 Reporting

(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist Who Planned to Bomb Hospital Amid Pandemic Dies in Incident With FBI: A domestic terrorism suspect in Belton, Missouri who allegedly planned to car bomb a hospital struggling with the coronavirus pandemic died while the FBI was trying to arrest him on March 24, the agency confirmed. The FBI described what happened next as an "agent-involved shooting" but declined to say whether Wilson was shot by an agent or someone else or whether he killed himself.

The news comes at a time when [counterterrorism experts](#) have warned neo-Nazi extremists adhering to 'accelerationism'—a hyper violent doctrine among REMVE groups seeking to hasten the collapse of

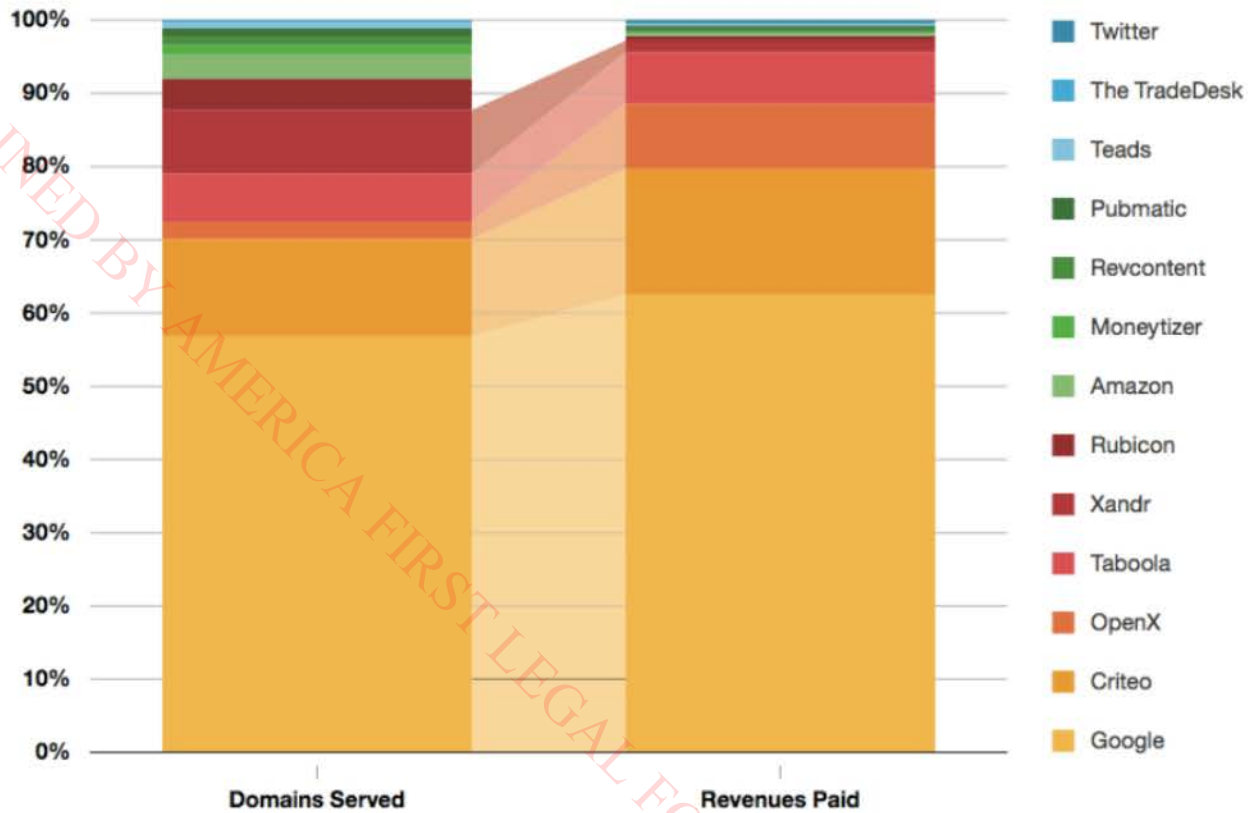
society through terrorist acts—have discussed using the global COVID-19 pandemic to spur the disintegration of vulnerable governments dealing with the crisis. (Source: Vice; Washington Post)

(U) Limits of Social Media Platforms' Disinformation Mitigation: However, despite their publicly announced measures, evidence indicates that **platforms are continuing to host false and harmful ads** that for example propagate “numerical codes” as a cure for COVID-19 or misrepresent quarantine as the first step in imposing NATO rule over Europe. This suggests that platforms have difficulties adhering to their own published standards and public commitments on preventing the proliferation of dangerous coronavirus-related disinformation, despite allocating significant resources to this task. As a result, this raises concerns that the problem is not merely the prevalence of harmful speech online but rather a system of broken incentives which prevents internet platforms from adequately protecting the public interest. Moreover, the scope, impact, and success of the actions that platforms are taking is hard to assess independently, especially considering the restrictions on privacy-compliant access to public interest data for researchers. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

(U) \$76 Million in Annual Ad Revenue Goes to Disinformation Websites: New research by the **Global Disinformation Index** has produced the findings, estimating that more than \$76 million in ad revenues is inadvertently being spent annually on sites that spread disinformation by major corporations including Amazon Prime, Burger King, Mercedes Benz, Samsung, Spotify, and Volvo. Crucially, the placement of these ads is enabled by a number of equally prominent tech companies, with Google (Ad Services and DoubleClick) and Criteo leading the pack. These companies provide ads for each site based on each user's online data footprint and geolocation.

(U) The study found that Google provides ad services to 57% of the disinformation sites used in the sample, paying them 62% of the estimated total revenues – a whopping US\$48 million annually. GDI highlights that Google's market dominance with this problem in Europe “reflects its global role in serving ads to disinformation sites globally.” Second to Google, French ad tech company Criteo also serves up a significant portion of ads to European disinformation sites, providing 13% of them with ads that result in payments totaling US\$13 million annually (17% of overall revenues). (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

Figure 1. Share of EU disinformation domains served and revenues paid, by ad tech company



Source: Global Disinformation Index

(U) Six Reasons Russia has Launched a Coordinated COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign: The Kremlin's long-term strategic goal in the information sphere is enduring and stable: undermining Western unity while strengthening Kremlin influence. Pro-Kremlin information operations seize on high-profile and divisive issues, employing six complementary tactics to achieve that goal, and the ongoing disinformation campaign on COVID-19 is no exception.

1. Spread anti-US, anti-Western, and anti-NATO messages to weaken them
 - a. These messages aim to deepen anti-American, or more generally, anti-Western sentiment. The impact on an average consumer of these messages will be approximately the same: anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-U.S. feelings often go hand-in-hand in Europe.
2. Sow Chaos and Panic

- b. Russian disinformation campaigns aim to stoke and **exploit** emotions, among which fear is one of the strongest. An audience shaken by fear will be more irrational and more prone to further disinformation operations.
3. Undermine the target audience's trust in credible sources of information, be it traditional media or the government
 - c. Convincing people to believe bogus sources of information first requires persuading them that real sources of accurate information cannot be trusted.
4. Undermine trust in objective facts by spreading multiple contradictory messages
 - d. The aim here is not to persuade people to believe one particular version of events, but to persuade the average consumer that there are so many versions of events that the truth can never be found.
5. Spread conspiracies to facilitate the acceptance of other conspiracies
 - e. People who believe one conspiracy theory **are more likely** to accept others. If your job is to spread lies, it helps to promote other conspiracies as well. A global pandemic that naturally leads to rumor-mongering is an ideal opportunity to spread some additional unfounded beliefs.
6. Identify the channels which amplify Russian disinformation
 - f. In a time of crisis, when rumors spread faster and travel further than normal, a well-organized disinformation campaign can lend valuable insight into how an adversary's information environment is organized. This insight is extremely valuable for any future disinformation operations.

(U) Private Sector Mitigation Efforts: Web domain registrar Namecheap is blocking any new applications for web addresses that contain "coronavirus," "covid," and other words referring to the virus in an effort to crack down on scammers. The move comes after the Justice Department announced a restraining order against Namecheap on Sunday for hosting a website set up to sell fake coronavirus vaccines.

The company says it's working with authorities to prevent more scammers from using its services to exploit coronavirus fears. Companies can still request domains with the banned words, but Namecheap will review their requests manually. (Source: Washington Post)

(U) Secretary of State Pompeo Accuses China of Disinformation Campaign: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is accusing China of an "intentional disinformation campaign" by China on coronavirus, as the United States deals with its own growing outbreak.

In a news briefing on March 25, Pompeo said China was "the first country to know about the risk to the world from this virus. And they repeatedly delayed sharing that information with the globe." (Source: PBS)

(U) 3/25 Reporting

(FOUO) Wide Spread NC Elections Related SMS Spam: Between March 18 and March 19 North Carolina residents were targeted with fraudulent phone-based text messages instructing them to register to vote by visiting the link <http://nc-registrations.org> which redirects to <https://www.vote.org> (Vote), a known valid site. During this time the NC State Board of Elections (NCBSE) received numerous emails and phone calls asking about these messages. The NCSBE PIO reached out to contacts at Vote and confirmed that they did not register the site, set up the domain, or send the suspect text messages.

(FOUO) The inauthentic text messages come in the wake of fraudulent COVID-19 related text message campaigns in multiple states, and a viral text message earthquake warning in Utah erroneously citing information from FEMA.

(FOUO) The goal of the recent North Carolina election campaign could be to gather information on how many people may fall for a future malicious attack, gather IP data to improve the adversary's future attack, the owner of the link site could redirect to malicious content in the future, or gauge the response of election officials.

(FOUO) Gaps in current knowledge include,

- The entity responsible for sending text messages to NC residents.
- If this is a poorly planned method to attempt to help voters and voter registration or if this has malicious intent.
- The method used to send the text messages to NC residents.
- Whether messages were targeted to any groups or individuals.

Text Message Example:

- Voters are receiving a text message from 1-855-213-6019 with a message of "[MISSING RECORD] You need to register to vote in NC. Register to vote in 2 minutes here." LINKFOLLOWS
 - Voters receiving this text that reported they were already registered and did not need to take any action. (Source: North Carolina Board of Elections)

(U) China Hijacks U.S. Citizen Tweet to Advance COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign

(U) Chinese foreign ministry and communist party spokesman Lijian Zhao, who has been the most prominent figurehead for China's COVID-19 propaganda campaign, hijacked a New Mexico woman's tweet to amplify Beijing's disinformation narrative that COVID-19 did not start in Wuhan, but was instead a bioweapon designed in the U.S.



(Source: The Daily Beast)

(U) Social Media Platforms Mitigation for COVID-19 Disinformation: Mainstream social media platforms have taken steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 -related disinformation. For example, many platforms link all COVID-19/Coronavirus searches to official WHO or CDC information, take down content that poses a risk to public health, and offer expanded emergency response alerts for state and local governments.

- **(U) Facebook**
 - Created the “Coronavirus Information Center” to provide real time information about the pandemic to be placed at the top of the News Feed
 - Removing content posing a risk to public health
 - Expanding availability of local alerts for local and state governments and emergency response organizations to get information out better
- **(U) Twitter**
 - Placed a warning label linking to the CDC when people search for Coronavirus All
 - Searches for #coronavirus immediately see health information from credible sources
 - Broadened what is defined as harmful to include content that:
 - Denies health recommendations
 - Pushes treatments that are ineffective
 - Denies facts
 - Claims meant to manipulate behavior benefiting a 3rd party
 - Makes unverified claims meant to incite panicked action
 - Impersonates health officials
 - Gives false information regarding diagnosis criteria

- Makes claims on how to differentiating COVID19 and other diseases
 - Makes claims that groups are more/less susceptible to the virus
- Has partnered with health organizations around the world to help them navigate the platform, get experts verified, and to give Twitter counsel on how to mitigate harm
- Using increased automated moderation
- **(U) Google**
 - Promotes “Do the Five” Campaign on the homepage: 5 things to prevent the spread of the virus according to the WHO
 - Pushes out SOS Alerts with links to national health websites and maps of infected areas at the top of the search page
 - Blocking ads trying to capitalize on the virus
 - Google.com/covid19 is dedicated to information regarding the virus, including state information and prevention
- **(U) YouTube**
 - Continues to remove videos that spread virus misinformation, says this will increase as they rely more on automation as workers change environment
 - Will introduce a shelf/row of verified Coronavirus videos on its homepage
 - Demonetized (now slowly remonetized) videos related to the virus
 - Linking to the CDC website from the home page
 - Highlighting authoritative content when people search for COVID19
 - Linking to WHO at the top of the search bar
- **TikTok**
 - Actively encourages users to report content that includes misleading information
 - Includes a notice under the coronavirus hashtag encouraging users to verify facts and use trusted sources
 - Has partnered with WHO to create an informational page (present on the discover page, top of coronavirus searches, and a link on videos that could relate to the virus) and created a series of livestreams where users can ask questions
- **Reddit**
 - Created r/CoronaVirus sub-thread to house official information, sent out notification to users that this would be the place for updates and information
 - Workign to target threads that promote misinformation
 - Promoted r/AskScience on the front page, which is curated and includes verified experts¹
- **Instagram**
 - Adding an educational message connected to resources from WHO and other health organizations when Coronavirus or COVID19 is searched
 - Adding stickers to promote accurate information in stories, including reminders to wash hands and social distance
 - Adding a notice at the top of the feed with resources from trusted health organizations
 - Highlighting trusted health organization resources when people look at virus related hashtags

¹¹ <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/481956-reddit-enlists-users-to-combat-coronavirus-misinformation>

- Will remove COVID19 accounts from recommendations and some COVID19 content from explore (unless posted by a trusted source)
- Down-ranking content in feed/stories that has been deemed false by 3rd party fact checkers
 - Posts deemed false are already removed from explore and hashtags

(U) 3/24 Reporting

(U) COVID-19 Disinformation Risk Mitigation: To mitigate the risk of COVID-19, CISA and its partners advise citizens to recognize the risk of COVID-19 disinformation; rely on trusted sources such as the CDC, WHO, or HHS; slow down, think, and let emotions cool before sharing online content; be wary of emotional content attempting to spread fear, anger, or panic; and talk to friends and family about the risk of spreading disinformation. More information can be found at www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control

Tech companies such as [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have added banners and filters to fight or block coronavirus misinformation. (Source: Wired)

The U.S. Agency for Global Media continues to publish content refuting state backed COVID-19 disinformation, as well as debunking pseudoscientific fake virus treatments that have gained traction online. (Source: U.S. Agency for Global Media)

(U) Chinese-State Backed Twitter Disinformation: Misinformation about the coronavirus spread by Chinese government officials does not violate Twitter's policies, according to a spokesperson for the company.

In particular, tweets from Lijian Zhao, an official spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, insinuating that the U.S. military may have spread the coronavirus to Wuhan, China, will remain up.

Twitter's spokesperson pointed to the company's position of giving public figures broad exemptions to many of its policies. (Source: The Hill)

(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists Seek to Recruit Amidst Coronavirus and Economic Downturn: The leader of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), Simon Lindberg, recently posted a blog on the NRM website aiming to recruit members amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and economic hardships.

(U) Simon Lindberg, the leader of the neo-Nazi [Nordic Resistance Movement](#) (NRM) posted a blog on March 16 stating that long term effects of the coronavirus could benefit his group. While stating that he was sorry for the deaths caused by the coronavirus, and the economic damage to Scandinavian workers, Lindberg also expressed his "great excitement" regarding the effects of the coronavirus, including the

economic fallout, because it could lead to a “national uprising.” Further, he urged his readers to withdraw their money from banks and join the NRM. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

(U) ISIS COVID-19 Propaganda: ISIS online supporters on the RocketChat platform praised the coronavirus for killing Americans, Europeans, and Iranians. Users also stated that the coronavirus did not exist in ISIS controlled areas, implying that the group is impervious to infection. Official ISIS publications have warned their members of the coronavirus. (Source: Counter Extremism Project)

(U) Martial Law Disinformation: The Pentagon issued a statement to debunk conspiracy theories that the increased deployment of the National Guard to areas hardest hit by COVID-19 represents an impending declaration of Martial Law. The DoD suggested people visit www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control for the most current rebuttals to common COVID-19 disinformation.

(U) Russia Likely Behind Ukrainian Forged Health Ministry Emails: It is likely that Russian actors exploited uncertainty and fear around Ukraine’s coronavirus response to provoke protests and increase public distrust of the Ukrainian government: The disinformation campaign targeted specific Ukrainian cities with sanatoriums, especially Novi Sanzhary, the location of the quarantine site for evacuees from China. Tactics including a fake email supposedly from the Ministry of Health were intended to cause confusion and fear ahead of the arrival of evacuees, and the level of coordination suggests Kremlin involvement. Following the campaign, Russian media used the events to depict Ukraine, especially western Ukrainian “nationalists,” as disorganized, incompetent, “violent, lawless, and prone to ignorant village hysterics”. (Source: Institute for the Study of War)

(U) China is spinning Western responses to Coronavirus into anti-American and anti-Western propaganda: China has seized upon the various responses of Western countries to Coronavirus by using state-run media and ambassadors to Western states to upbraid Westerners for harboring deep-seated colonialist and xenophobic sentiment against people of Asian descent. Two Chinese media outlets, *Xinhua* and *the Global Times*, amplified accusations from the Foreign Minister’s office which claimed that the United States’ move to pull their consular staff out of Wuhan was “immoral but not surprising.” Russian media outlets including *RT* claimed that the virus is exposing racist Western sentiments against China. *RT* made note, however, of China’s largely relaxed and “calm” response to Russia closing its borders with China. (Source: German Marshall Fund)

(U) Secretary Pompeo Condemns Iranian COVID-19 Disinformation: The Department of State released a [Iran: COVID-19 DISINFORMATION FACT-SHEET](#) in response to Iran’s coordinated disinformation campaign on the pandemic. Iranian officials at the highest level of government have repeatedly claimed the spread of COVID-19 in Iran might be due to a U.S. biological attack, and an advisor to the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament claimed coronavirus was being used as biological warfare by the United States.

(U) 3/23 Reporting

(U) China's COVID-19 State-Backed Media Disinformation: Beijing is seeking to use the crisis to its advantage in a global propaganda push. A Chinese state spokesman, for example, tweeted a story from a Canadian-based disinformation site that claims COVID-19 originated in the US. That same website previously claimed flight MH17 was not shot down by a Russian missile over Ukraine.

(U) The Chinese account also tweeted video of a U.S. congressional testimony edited and framed to suggest COVID-19 didn't originate in Wuhan, but in the U.S. instead. (Source: Alliance for Securing Democracy; the Sydney Morning Herald)

(U) Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE) Weaponization of COVID-19: In an alert obtained by ABC News, the FBI's New York office reports that "members of extremist groups are encouraging one another to spread the virus, if contracted, through bodily fluids and personal interactions" to minorities and law enforcement.

(U) The FBI alert, which went out on March 19, told local police agencies that extremists want their followers to try to use spray bottles to spread bodily fluids to cops on the street. The extremists are also directing followers to spread the disease to Jews by going "any place they may be congregated, to include markets, political offices, businesses and places of worship." (ABC News)

(U) The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also reported that white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, VK, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media. (Anti-Defamation League)

(FOUO) The California State Threat Assessment Center assesses that some racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists and foreign terrorist organizations likely will continue using the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to promote their ideological narratives, spread misinformation, and encourage violence against certain minority groups, law enforcement, faith-based communities, and critical infrastructure. (Source: California State Threat Assessment Center)

(FOUO) On March 10, an unidentified REMVE Telegram account posted a fake CDC flyer encouraging infected individuals to visit religious centers, diverse neighborhoods, and use public transit. Other examples of misinformation shared by REMVEs include Telegram posts blaming Jews, Israel, China, or Chinese people for COVID-19. (Source: DHS)

(FOUO) On March 19, REMVE groups indicated a desire to spread COVID-19 to law enforcement officers, Jewish Americans, and other targeted groups through bodily fluids and personal interactions, according to the FBI. (Source: Vice.com)

(FOUO) On March 19, ISIS issued its weekly al-Naba newsletter, which contained calls for attacks in Western countries against healthcare systems that are strained by the COVID-19 pandemic. The newsletter also included directions for ISIS supporters to “kill [non-Muslims] wherever you find them,” according to DHS. (Source: Middle East Media Research Institute)

(FOUO) Foreign Influence and Racial and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists: The Countering Foreign Influence Task Force considers the bulk of REMVE propaganda efforts as an inherent foreign influence issue due to their increasingly transnational nature. As far as more specific foreign linkages, the CFI TF has not seen any open source information to suggest that foreign actors are directly involved in supporting the COVID-19 related threat vectors described by the FBI and FPS: intentionally spreading the virus to minorities and law enforcement. Nevertheless, the CFI TF does have open-source reporting on Russia providing support to the global REMVE movement and amplifying COVID-19 conspiracy theories, increasing the Kremlin’s complicity in any resulting REMVE violence.

(FOUO) At a broader Russian disinformation level, many REMVE/accelerationist narratives dovetail quite easily with Alexander Dugin’s (The Russian nationalist pseudo-philosopher sometimes referred to as Putin’s Rasputin, though his actual influence on policy is likely overstated) messaging on COVID-19. He has been highly influential with REMVE groups, particularly in Europe. According to EU vs. Disinfo, the following narrative has been amplified across Russia-state backed media. If past is prologue, then it is likely that Russian linked accounts are amplifying the same narrative on social media.

(U) “When pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets continue to create confusion and distrust, they are playing with peoples’ lives. The Russian Nationalist philosopher [Alexander Dugin](#) relishes on the disease, comparing it with the ancient gods’ punishments:

‘The coming of the plague allows for a complete renewal of societies. The epidemic has no logic and spares neither the noble nor the rich, nor the powerful. It destroys everyone indiscriminately, and brings people back to the simple fact of being. The plague gods are the fairest . . . The plague is an existential phenomenon. The Greeks called Apollo Smintheus “the Mouse god” and attributed to his arrows the power to bring plague . . .

That is what Apollo would do if he looked at modern mankind – bankers, bloggers, rappers, deputies, office workers, migrants, feminists... that’s about it.’”

(FOUO) Dog whistles permeate Dugin’s messaging on COVID-19, which could likely perk the ears of many REMVE actors. Note that he often uses “bankers” as a stand in for a “Jews.” (Source: EU vs. Disinfo; Soufan Center).

(U) Russia State-Backed Disinformation: By March 21, [110 examples](#) of pro-Kremlin disinformation concerning the coronavirus had been recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database, the majority propagated by Russia-state backed media.

(U) Covid-19 Scams and Cybercrime: The FBI has warned of a significant spike in coronavirus scams, adding to concerns about an ["unprecedented wave" of cyber-attacks](#) voiced by United States Attorney Scott Brady. According to the FBI Cyber Division, threat actors are primarily based outside of the U.S.

and are mainly targeting three states—Washington, New York, and California—Which have higher rates of COVID-19 infection. (Source: FBI Cyber Division interview with Forbes).

COVID-19 related scams will likely skyrocket, according to a new report from analysts at Moody's Investor Service, a division of the credit rating agency, especially as more employees work from home, straining their employers' digital protections. (Source: Moody's)

Scammers are also getting more creative. The cybersecurity firm Sophos found scammers threatening to infect victims and their families with coronavirus if they don't pay a \$4,000 ransom. It's a twist on a classic "sextortion scam," where hackers threaten to release alleged private videos or messages if the victim doesn't pay up. (Source: Sophos)

Cybersecurity firm Sentinel Labs has also noticed an uptick in coronavirus-themed scams, including malware-laced documents posing as important public-health information. Over the last few months the firm has seen aggressive use of COVID-19/Coronavirus as a lure all over the spectrum of sophistication. Campaigns range from run-of-the mill scams (selling supplies for BTC via .onion sites) to non-targeted spam campaigns (primarily for credential harvesting). The firm has even observed enterprising criminals selling COVID-19-specific malware/phishing 'kits' which can be customized and leveraged in downline attacks for a very small investment (less than \$1000 USD). (Source: Sentinel Labs)

(U) Recent Social Media COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives: Disinformation on social media circulated that one way to get tested for the virus is by donating blood, warning that mosquitoes can carry it, or that people can test themselves for the virus by holding their breaths. All are untrue. (Source: Associated Press)

(U) 3/21 Reporting

(U) COVID-19 Scams and Cybercrime

(U) Despite DOJ's actions, coronavirus-themed scams are unlikely to abate anytime soon. In fact, the scams probably will skyrocket, according to a new report from analysts at Moody's Investor Service, a division of the credit rating agency, especially as more employees work from home, straining their employers' digital protections.

(U) Some scammers are also getting more creative. The cybersecurity firm Sophos found scammers threatening to infect victims and their families with coronavirus if they don't pay a \$4,000 ransom. It's a twist on a classic "sextortion scam," where hackers threaten to release alleged private videos or messages if the victim doesn't pay up.

(U) Cybersecurity firm Sentinel Labs has also noticed an uptick in coronavirus-themed scams, including malware-laced documents posing as important public-health information.

(U) 3/20 Reporting

(U) COVID-19 Election Disinfo: Viral posts on social media claim COVID-19 is no worse than other outbreaks that have occurred in “every election year,” suggesting that the new coronavirus is being “hyped” to interfere in the 2020 election. But most of the dates cited to defend those conclusions about previous outbreaks are misleading or incorrect.

(U) A viral image of a [whiteboard sign](#) claiming to have been “Posted at a Doctors office today” purportedly erroneously lists disease outbreaks that occurred in “every election year” since 2004. The image says the new coronavirus is “being hyped as The Black Plague.”

(U) But the dates listed for the outbreaks of most of the diseases are incorrect; the impact of those diseases was not widely felt in federal election years.

(U) The image, which appears in numerous [Facebook posts](#), shows a handwritten sign that reads, in part, “Every election year has a disease.” It then incorrectly lists: “SARS-2004 Avian-2008 Swine-2010 MERS-2012 Ebola-2014 Zika-2016 Ebola-2018 Corona-2020” (Source: Factcheck.org)

(U) China COVID-19 Propaganda: Chinese and U.S. media articles display different levels of both alarmism and optimism in their coverage of the global pandemic. Chinese outlets included many articles with a focus on positive stories such as the number of recovered patients and examples of successful treatments, while U.S. media reported on new cases of infections and trends in death. For example, Chinese state media reported on a coronavirus patient who gave birth to a healthy baby not infected with coronavirus, whereas the U.S. media told the story of a different [newborn](#) in Wuhan who had become the youngest coronavirus patient. [CNN](#) credited the story’s source as Chinese state media CCTV, yet no English-language Chinese state media posted this story on their Facebook pages. (Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)



Chinese state outlet China Daily (left) reports on a baby born to a coronavirus patient with no infection, whereas CNN (right) reports on a newborn baby becoming the youngest person diagnosed with coronavirus

(Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)



Words frequently used in connection with the word "patient" by Chinese media (left) and U.S. media (right); Exclude "patient" and the term "coronavirus" for better visibility of other terms. Chinese media use several recovery- and treatment-related terms.

(Source: Stanford University Cyber Policy Center)

(U) 3/19 Reporting

(U) Fraudulent COVID-19 Text Messages: There is currently no open-source evidence to suggest the COVID-19-related fake viral texts are part of a coordinated foreign influence operation. There is precedent for both adversarial nation states and online pranksters using text messages to spread a crisis hoax. In 2014, the Russian Internet Research Agency sent text messages to residents of St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, claiming that a **nearby chemical plant had exploded**. In January 2020, after the United States killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, a Youtube influencer likely triggered a spate of text messages warning Americans that they had been drafted into the military for the expected World War Three.

(Source: Graphika)

(U) The Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Lab splits reported activity thus far into two groups – scam texts and fake official texts:

- The scam texts include stuff like “my X works at the pentagon, and they said Y, so we should all go and do Z. PLS FORWARD”. In other words, a presentation of a false fact pattern and a call to action. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon via SMS, social media, or – originally – email! The saving grace of this behavior on SMS, is that there is more friction to forward the message than in other formats like WhatsApp or email because it requires the user to take more actions, like taking a screen shot and forwarding or copy/pasting the text and forwarding. On WhatsApp or email, you can just forward.
- The fake official texts are more pernicious. There were a number of reports of this in NYC, in which a text would say “Mayor De Blasio is shutting down the city, do X, Y, and Z before he does.” The vulnerability here is obviously panic, but also that it looks/feels more like an official government communication. DFR Lab has spent time recently clarifying the what the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (ipaws) is, and that there is no indication that it has been deployed during the COVID-19 response.

(Source: Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Lab)

(U) COVID-19 Text Disinformation Narratives:

(U) Example: “Here’s the intel! My friend sent me this: ‘Message from friend of mine, we should stock foods for 2 weeks: From a trusted source of mine: from a trusted friend connected to the UN in NY Please be advised, within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends up in DC who just got out of a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything. Please forward to your network.’”

(U) Example: “Please be advised, within 48 to 72 hours the President will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends up in DC who just got out of a two

hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything.”

My client....
Within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends in DC who had a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything.

9:51 PM · Mar 15, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

From a friend of a friend who works for Cleveland clinic. And Chris's work is confirming with their sources at Trump administration as well as my brother who works for the govt.

FRIENDS:

Please be advised, within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the Stafford act. Just got off the phone with some of my military friends down in DC who just got out of a two hour briefing. The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation. Stock up on whatever you guys need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything. Please forward to your network.

Btw take this with a grain of salt but this is from andrea's coworker: 2:49 PM

I hate to be alarmist but I would rather say something than not... I just heard from a friend whose partner is CIA. They're shutting everything down. We're going to get 48 hour notice today or tomorrow to get everything we need and then stay inside for a one month. Supposedly gov is sending everyone unemployment checks. This is getting bizarre.

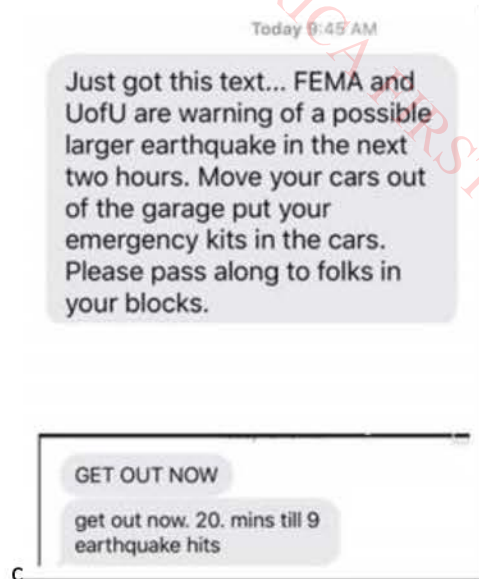
Get groceries and stuff ASAP. 2:49 PM

Screen captures of false information spread through text messages. via Twitter

- Example: Hoax Audio File:
https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F777022780&color=ff5500&auto_play=false&hide_related=false&visual=true&show_artwork=true

(U) **Utah Earthquake Disinfo:** On March 18, in the wake of a recent 5.7 magnitude earthquake, fraudulent viral text messages targeted Utah residents with a false FEMA warning about a large imminent earthquake, urging people to flee their homes as quickly as possible. The disinfo prompted the Utah Emergency Management service to issue a public rebuttal.

(U) The disinfo seems to mirror the tactic of recent fraudulent coronavirus texts that have circulated in cities across the country: cite a trusted source of authority and play to people's fears in order to incite panic. It's unclear at this time if the Utah texts are part of a broader coordinated disinformation campaign, or the work of local copycats. The use of local terminology like "UofU" indicates an actor with knowledge of area vernacular.



(FOUO) **Twitter:** Twitter has expanded its safety rules to include content that could place people at a higher risk of transmitting COVID-19. (This blog is updated in real-time)

To escalate accounts/content to Twitter for review under these rules, use civic-help@twitter.com, including additional context if possible.

(U) **Russian-State Backed Media Disinfo:** The outbreak is, not surprisingly, dominating this week's cases of disinformation. Approximately a third of the just under 90 cases this week is devoted to disinformation about the virus; its causes and spread. The pro-Kremlin outlets had their reliable [conspiracy theory](#) ready from the very beginning and have kept parroting the same line ever since: "The virus is created in NATO and/or laboratories". This week is no exception. We find the same claim, with small variations, this week: in [Russian](#), in [Arabic](#), in [Italian](#), in [English](#)... The Russian state-owned channel

RT's Spanish service has evolved into one of the world's largest domains by total social engagement on the COVID-19 outbreak.

(U) English language outlets tend to describe the COVID-19 outbreak in much darker, cynical terms. The virus is spread to **reduce the population** of planet Earth. The Global Elites are **using the outbreak to introduce tyranny**. There is no outbreak; just **common flu**, but the **Rothschilds et al** use it as a pretext to **introduce forced vaccination, injecting nano-chips** to control the people... And then there are recurrent claims that there is no outbreak. South Front, one leading, English language pro-Kremlin disinformation outlet, suggest that it is **all a scheme by the Italian government** to milk EU for money and relax stringent EU's budgetary rules.

(U) Pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts, targeting an International audience, aim at inducing distrust in national, European and International institutions; distrust in experts, the health care system and the individuals, engaged in the self-less work to help people affected by the virus. In a situation where trust, cooperation and persistence is essential, disinformation kills people. (Source: EU vs. Disinfo)

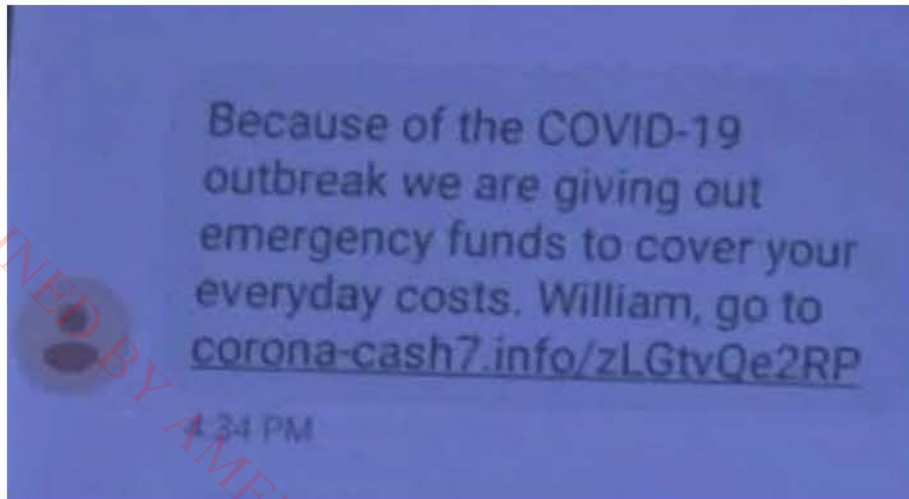
(U) 3/18 Reporting

(U) **Russia:** Russian media have deployed a "significant disinformation campaign" against the West to worsen the impact of the coronavirus, generate panic and sow distrust, according to a European Union document seen by Reuters. The EU document said the Russian campaign, pushing fake news online in English, Spanish, Italian, German and French, uses contradictory, confusing and malicious reports to make it harder for the EU to communicate its response to the pandemic. (Source: Reuters, EU/EEAS)

(U) "The overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries...in line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies," the document produced by the EU's foreign policy arm, the European External Action Service, said. (Source: Reuters, EU/EEAS)

(U) **Facebook:** Facebook falsely flagged posts from a number of legitimate news organizations as spam on March 17. The company issued a statement that the issue was due to an automated system error, and has since been resolved.

(U) **COVID-19 Stimulus Scam:** The FTC issues a public warning on fake texts and phishing scams related to COVID-19 stimulus payments. (Source: FTC; WTVR, Richmond)



(U) 3/17 Reporting

(U) Administration officials said that recent fraudulent text messages urging the public to stock up supplies in advance of a national quarantine is a deliberate effort by a foreign entity to sow fears of a nationwide quarantine amid the virus outbreak is underway, according to the Associated Press.

(U) In Europe, one viral video shared on WhatsApp claimed to show shoppers mobbing a store in the Netherlands. A version of the same clip put to music on TikTok, a popular China-based platform for short videos, was viewed more than 4 million times, according to a report last week by disinformation research group [Bellingcat](#), which determined the video was actually from an incident in Germany several years ago.

(U) China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian continues to spread disinformation that the U.S. military brought the virus to China to his nearly 300,000 twitter followers. Most recently, Zhao published out of context CDC Congressional testimony from February in support of this conspiracy theory. The video was also published to Twitter by other state media outlets, including national broadcaster CCTV and the popular Global Times tabloid.

(U) 3/16 Reporting

(U) The National Security Council issued a statement that text messages related to an impending national quarantine are fraudulent. Inauthentic text messages claiming to cite information from inside sources in the NYPD, UN, or DoD advising people to stock up on food, gas, and other supplies in advance on a national lockdown have circulated in recent days. In addition, hoax audio claiming to be from someone with sources at the Pentagon spread online and across group chats, according to COVID-19 social media disinformation analysis by BuzzFeed News. It mirrors the hoax texts attributed to other authorities disavowed by the NSC.

(U) Russian overt state-backed media are intentionally promoting contradictory narratives on COVID-19 in order to muddle and confuse the public discourse, according to EU vs. Disinfo. For example, [one pro-Kremlin outlet](#) reports that the coronavirus is less harmful than the seasonal influenza, while [another](#) claims that the virus will lead to the collapse of civilization.

(U) As COVID-19 cases drop in China, Beijing will likely utilize its increased bureaucratic capacity to ramp up COVID-19 related foreign propaganda efforts, according to Matt Schrader of the Alliance for Securing Democracy. The most likely narratives and strategy will be to contrast alleged Chinese success to contain the pandemic and assist other nations, with Western democracies' floundering response to the crisis. For example, a Peoples Republic of China spokesman has amplified doctored videos of Italians clapping alongside to the PRC national anthem while thanking Beijing for its support.

(U) A group of hackers based in China has leveraged the coronavirus crisis to attack the public and telecom sectors in Mongolia by impersonating the country's foreign ministry, according to cybersecurity firm Check Point. The attack, which researchers at Check Point dubbed "Panda-19," faked two documents from the Mongolian minister of foreign affairs. The documents were disguised as updates on the prevalence of coronavirus cases in Mongolia, but opening them would infect the target's computer with a tool called RoyalRoad, which would take over the devices without users' knowledge.

(U) A conspiracy theory channel on YouTube with more than 1 million subscribers has published 25 videos in less than 40 days spreading falsehoods and rumors about the incidence of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus in Latin America, according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab). The *Conciencia Radio* channel kept publishing — and people kept watching — false claims even after a fact-checking agency [debunked](#) the channel's content. The most-watched coronavirus video published by the channel claimed that the virus had been genetically engineered and contained DNA strands of HIV and Hepatitis-C. DFR analysis shows that most videos that received more than the average number of views were about the coronavirus, including the most watched video between January 27 and February 24, 2020.

(U) Mutually independent political experts in Russia, left-wing politicians in Germany, and an anonymous online persona from Latvia have attempted to spread a narrative suggesting that Defender Europe 20, the U.S.-led multinational military exercise including NATO participation will bring the COVID-19 novel coronavirus to the Baltic states, according to the DFR lab. The narrative has the hallmarks of [prior Russian attempts](#) to promote anti-NATO sentiment in Europe, though so far has failed to garner much engagement on social media. Regardless of engagement, however, the political opportunism of spreading fear and dislike of NATO in the context of coronavirus is a distraction from controlling the spread of a disease that ignores borders.

(U) EU vs. Disinfo identified harmonization across the pro-Kremlin media ecosystem to promote the false narrative that the EU is using the coronavirus pandemic to frame Russia in the upcoming trial on Russian involvement in the downing of flight MH17.

(U) EU vs. Disinfo assed the contradictory narratives pushed by pro-Kremlin media channels: “On the one hand, the coronavirus is presented as a tool of Western imperialism – an American biological weapon against China and other countries, an instrument of the West’s information war, even a tool of hybrid warfare waged by shadowy “world centres.” On the other hand, we’re told that Western governments are lying about the coronavirus and exaggerating the threat with help from mainstream media. Poor Russia is caught in the middle, with Western media claiming that the coronavirus is a ‘Kremlin project’. Meanwhile, NATO is using the virus for bioterrorism against the EU to fend off Russia – this is obviously why it’s being found in countries that want to cooperate with Russia.”

(U) The Secret Service warned of an increase in COVID-19 related phishing and fake charity scams, and an increase in scammers posing as medical or healthcare workers.

(U) The FTC and FDA have jointly issued warning letters to seven sellers of unapproved and misbranded products, claiming they can treat or prevent the Coronavirus. The companies’ products include teas, essential oils, and colloidal silver. The FTC says the companies have no evidence to back up their claims – as required by law. The FDA says there are no approved vaccines, drugs or investigational products currently available to treat or prevent the virus.

(U//FOUO) Principle Threat Actors:

(U//FOUO) Russia: Russia has identified the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to deploy its traditional information operations playbook with the goal of increasing polarization in the U.S. and allied nations, undermining public confidence in American institutions, advancing key Russian geopolitical interests such as countering NATO and the EU, and distorting the global information environment in order to delegitimize the very concept of objective truth. Russian disinformation efforts, which promote a constellation of often contradictory narratives and conspiracy theories on the pandemic, have the potential to undermine global cooperation and efforts to respond to the pandemic.

(U) Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE): Extremist and white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media, according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

(U//FOUO) Racist online dis/mis information on COVID-19 has the potential to motivate racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists to mobilize to violence, radicalize individuals engaging with REMVE narratives, and to inspire acts of targeted violence against racial and ethnic minorities.

(U) China: Chinese trolls launched a coordinated disinformation campaign against Taiwan, erroneously claiming that Taipei has lied about the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths, according to a high-confidence assessment from the Digital Intelligence Lab. Misinformation that the USG is also covering up

the severity of the outbreak also spread in Chinese on social media. These rumors appear to be separate from the Taiwan campaign, but all cite the same YouTube video falsely alleging that the CDC has covered up over 1,000 cases of the virus in the US.

(U) 3/10 Reporting

(U) The coronavirus continued to receive the most coverage of a single topic on monitored Russian state-owned media YouTube channels, according to the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy. Notable videos about the virus include discussion of the politicization of the virus in the United States and stigmatization of Chinese-Americans. On Twitter, the top overall hashtag for the approximately 9,400 tweets collected from Russian state-funded media and government Twitter accounts this week (Feb. 29-Mar. 6) is again #coronavirus, with #COVID19 also prominent for the first time. The most retweeted tweet about the virus contains commentary from a Russian virologist that appears aimed at calming panic. Russian disinformation narratives also claim that the U.S. is exaggerating the scale of the outbreak in order to undermine a rising China.

(U) Chinese trolls launched a coordinated disinformation campaign against Taiwan, erroneously claiming that Taipei has lied about the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths, according to a high-confidence assessment from the Digital Intelligence Lab. Misinformation that the USG is also covering up the severity of the outbreak also spread in Chinese on social media. These rumors appear to be separate from the Taiwan campaign, but all cite the same YouTube video falsely alleging that the CDC has covered up over 1,000 cases of the virus in the US.

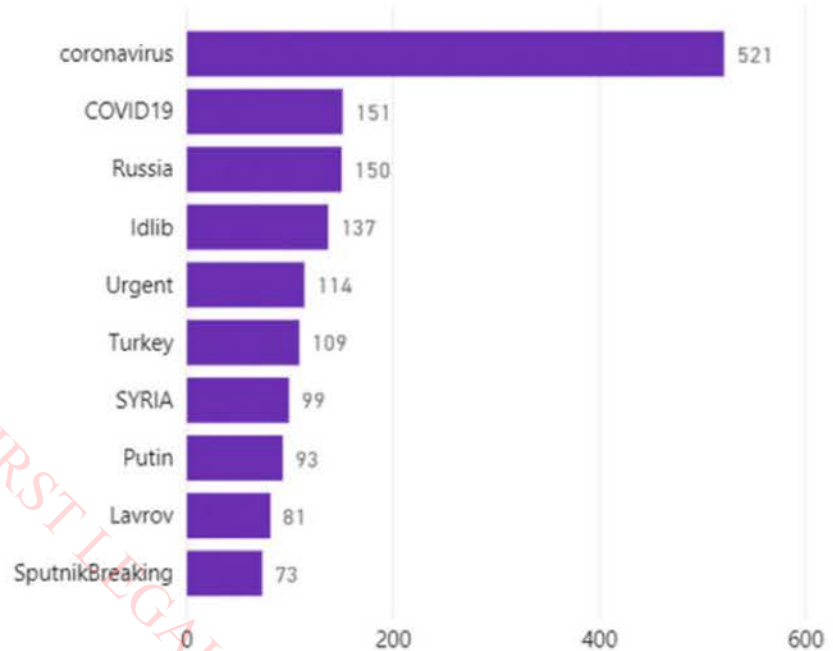
(U) Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have instituted pop up windows directing all coronavirus related searches to WHO and verifiable health sources. Facebook has also banned ads for products that claimed to cure or prevent Covid-19 or created a "sense of urgency" about the outbreak.

(U) The UK's National Health Service (NHS) unveiled a package of measures to combat coronavirus misinformation – working with Google, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – to help the public get easy access to accurate information. The measures include Google providing easy access to verified NHS guidance when someone searches for coronavirus, working with Twitter to suspend an account falsely posing as a hospital and tweeting inaccurate information, and publicly condemning erroneous health treatments.

Twitter

Russian state-funded media and government and diplomatic corps accounts:

Top 10 Hashtags — February 29-March 6:



Source: German Marshall Fund

(U) 2/18 Reporting

(U//FOUO) Twitter has seen an increase in content linking the virus to anti-Hispanic narratives, claiming that Hispanics and other immigrants are at risk to spread the virus to the U.S. There is no evidence of inauthentic social media amplification of this narrative at this time.

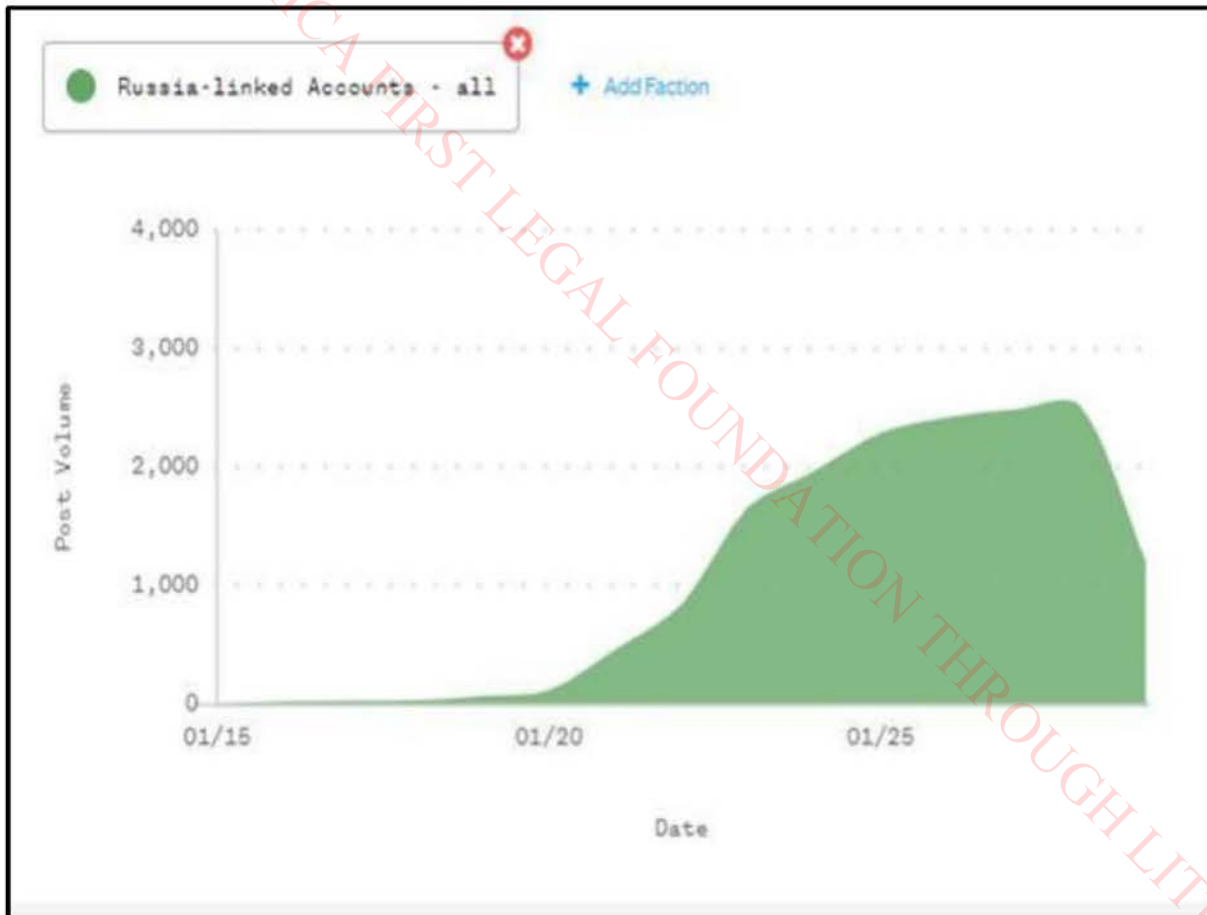
(U//FOUO) A constellation of virus related conspiracy theories continue to circulate on social media, including narratives on impending martial law, FEMA concentration camps, “big pharma” conspiracies, bioweapons, and anti-vaccination messaging.

(U) Extremist and white supremacist groups continue to post racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origin of the epidemic, encouraging infected persons to spread the virus to Jews, and using the virus to advance calls for a racial civil war. While this disinformation has primarily been advanced on more fringe social media sites such as Telegram, 4chan, and Gab, some of these conspiracy theories have been echoed on mainstream social media. (Source: Anti-Defamation League [ADL])

(U) Misinformation on false coronavirus treatments continue to circulate on social media, including drinking bleach or chlorine dioxide dubbed the Miracle Medical Solution (MMS), vitamin c, or boiled garlic can “cure” the virus.

(U//FOUO) Chinese state-backed media continue to promote content minimizing the threat of the coronavirus and amplifying narratives of an allegedly much deadlier “American flu” –the traditional seasonal flu virus. These narratives have also been amplified on Chinese social media platforms.

(U) The coronavirus, and sight of people wearing medical masks in public, has fueled a “racist backlash related to hysteria and misinformation,” according to the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (A3PCON).



(U) The drastic increase in Russia-linked covert social media posts about the coronavirus seen in the above graph is reflective of the global media’s coverage of the issue. Russia, following its known tactics, likely sees this as an opportunity to shape the global conversation against the United States and western countries.