



**Global
Health
Security
Network**

The COVID-19 pandemic vs Post-Truth



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Executive Summary



Conspiracy theories constitute a growing challenge to tackling COVID-19. Alongside the global spread of the pandemic itself, spurious allegations of hoaxes, cures and secret cabals circumnavigate the global information commons, poisoning debate, eroding community consensus and paralysing policymaking. Conspiratorial assertions challenging the severity of the virus, the need for mitigation efforts, and the motives of state and public health communities have moved from the dark corners of the Internet to Facebook page pages and even elected officials. These narratives undermine public health messages and measures. By eroding trust in institutions and creating confusion over facts, conspiracy theories stymie collective action and cooperation. Specifically, these conspiracy narratives not only compromise mitigation efforts such as masks and lockdowns, but the associated groups also attempt to overturn these public health mandates for others. Overall conspiracy theory groups threaten to derail current public health mitigation mandates as well as future vaccination efforts, with longer term impacts around the politicization of scientific organisations and personnel. When violence is rationalized to achieve these objectives, conspiracy theory groups can endanger both health security and national security.

Negative Impacts of Conspiracy theories around the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Undermining of mitigation efforts such as facemasks and lockdowns
- Encouraging lower vaccination rates (if or when a vaccine becomes available)
- Politicisation of scientific institutions, practitioners and researchers
- Launching political campaigns of conspiracy theorists

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation declared conspiracy theory groups a form of domestic terrorism. One group identified in the report, QAnon, has leveraged COVID conspiracy theories to recruit new members. The group now boasts more than 1 million members in the United States, with branches across 15 countries. Their global reach is accelerated by technological connectivity, their influence expanded by elite cues and partisan messaging. Such conspiracy groups are dangerous in that they posit that certain other groups or individuals are existential threats. Currently the targets of these narratives include the public health officials, state governors, scholars, researchers, philanthropists and other public figures on the front line of COVID-19 news. As these groups leverage their

popularity to run for electoral office, they may even come to directly influence policy-making and public funding.

Though the United States is the focus of this report, the impact of COVID-19 conspiracy theories is potentially global. As far away as Melbourne, Australia, demonstrators defied lockdown orders, shouting “Death to Bill Gates!” – a key figure in US-based conspiratorial assertions. Public discussion of the pandemic must take into account the viral spread of conspiracy theories surrounding it and the longer-term impacts of the ‘post-truth’ age in which it thrives.

Recommendations

1. Government, in concert with researchers, should work with technology companies and social media platforms to establish programs that actively monitor, target and take down conspiracy theories and associated user accounts for repeat offenders.
2. Governments should adapt the law enforcement mechanisms used to fight child pornography and domestic extremism, and introduce accompanying legislation or statutes to combat conspiracy groups that disseminate extremist content.
3. Professional associations should update their codes of conduct to include formal review and disciplinary processes for individuals in positions of public trust (e.g. licensed physicians) who endanger public health through promulgation of conspiracy theories.
4. Political parties could include in their election and policy platforms a commitment to professional code of conduct, with sanctions and removal of campaign support for candidates and members that fail to adhere to minimum standards around the dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories.
5. Civil society organisations and professional associations should mobilise their membership networks to target corporate advertising in outlets that promote or facilitate the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

Introduction

From pandemics to climate change, efforts to confront our greatest global challenges are impeded by the erosion of trust in science, experts and public institutions. Instead, alternative facts, misinformation and conspiracy theories pollute the information global commons, poisoning debate and paralysing collective action. Conspiracy theories represent a particularly potent strain of misinformation. Their global reach is accelerated by technological connectivity and their influence boosted by algorithms primed for engagement rather than accuracy. Alongside the global movement of the pandemic itself, conspiracy theories blaming technology, religious minorities, immigrants, secret cabals and entire countries are spread from the dark corners of the internet to family Facebook pages, and even public officials. These conspiracy theories threaten to derail public health mitigation mandates as well as vaccination efforts, and may endanger even endanger scientific communities and institutions. Conspiracy theories can be dangerous, positing that certain groups are existential threats who must be removed by violence. Thus discussion of the pandemic must take into account the viral spread of these groups along the virus itself, and the longer term impacts of the ‘post-truth’ age in which they thrive.

Scope:

This report examines some of the key challenges and implications of COVID-19 misinformation, focusing particularly on conspiracy theories. Drawing on insights from the field of security studies, this report is intended to augment rather than replicate extant public health and communication literature. The United States constitutes the main case study, both as a global hotspot of the pandemic and as an epicentre of misinformation, including serving as the home of technological platforms by which misinformation spreads globally. However, the challenges examined here are not limited to the United States, and will likely manifest in various countries to varying degrees. Some dynamics and narratives detailed herein will likely outlive the virus itself, particularly the threat to scientific communities and institutions. Thus these challenges should be explored with a view towards their durability and endurance both temporally and geographically.

Pollution of the Global Information Commons

“Post-Truth” was the word of the year in 2016,¹ recognising a growing public sentiment that facts are no longer persuasive, and that truth is malleable and subject to personal belief rather than evidence. If the Internet and traditional media constitutes part of the global information commons, the post-truth age signifies its growing contamination. Post-truth politics has been invoked in explanations for two major political events, the Brexit vote and the 2016 US Presidential campaign of Donald Trump.² In both, misinformation and disinformation campaigns spread through social media, from microtargeted political advertising to traditional media broadcasting, with significant political

implications. The same avenues and tactics are being activated to spread misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19, with significant consequences.

Conspiracy theories and alternative facts circulating in the information commons poison debate, erode consensus and paralyse policymaking. By undermining trust in institutions and creating confusion over facts, it also stymies collective action and cooperation both domestically and with international partners. The Deputy Secretary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Rose Gottemoeller called “alternative facts a threat to the alliance” as it undermines a sense of shared reality and a will to fight together against common challenges.³ As COVID-19 demonstrates, the post-truth age comes with a hefty price in both health and economic terms.

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.” —Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2020), Director-General of the World Health Organization

The United States, currently in the grips of what the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) described as an “epidemic and an infodemic”, has recently surpassed 180,000 COVID-19 related fatalities in August 2020 and nearly 6 million cases.⁴ As a result, the United States will likely be the last OECD country to get COVID-19 under control. In part, these poor outcomes have been exacerbated by the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and alternative facts. Conspiracy theories have helped to erode public support and effectiveness of mitigation efforts, undermine public trust in institutions involved in tackling the pandemic, and paved the way for conspiracy theorists to mount their own political campaigns. Throughout, blame has been weaponised, and attacks personalised against public health authorities, researchers, virologists and philanthropists.

In *Lexicon of Lies*, Dr. Carolyn Jack explores the categorization of “problematically inaccurate language that disrupts politics, business and culture.”⁵ Between misinformation and disinformation, intention is key, much in the same way that manslaughter and homicide are differentiated by intent but not the outcome – in both instances there is a dead body. Conspiracy theories fall within the gap. If they are fervently believed they are not intentionally false, but by their nature conspiracy theories are well outside the standards of evidence and credibility.

Key terminology:

- **Misinformation:** Unintentionally inaccurate or misinterpreted information.
- **Disinformation:** Deliberately false or misleading information.
- **Conspiracy theories:** False information that credits or blames covert and/or nefarious groups for significant events.

Alongside related phenomenon such as fake news and alternative facts, terms like misinformation or disinformation are often used interchangeably whether the motivations are financial, political or entertainment. The terminology is further complicated by diverse disciplinary connotations as well.

In security studies, disinformation is frequently analysed as a tactic of hostile foreign state actors, while misinformation may be approached in relation to domestic variables such as media ecosystems and politically polarised populations. Regardless of origin or intent, all of the above can be spread through vectors such as social media, celebrities and elected officials. Though only a small percentage of people may endorse conspiracy theories, the consequences affect us all. Similar to COVID-19, conspiracy theories threaten to overwhelm our systems, including health and political decision-making.

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are not new, but they have traditionally found fertile ground in times of great uncertainty in the wake of significant events. The weight and impact of major events such as 9/11, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the moon landing, or onset of climate change being such complex and significant phenomenon, that for some, only secret cabals and state orchestration could sufficiently explain them. Documentary filmmaker Michael Krik argues that conspiracy theories rise to the proportion and significance of the event.⁶

With growing unemployment and social isolation, there has been a increase both in the time that people have available, and the need for regularly updated information. The United States has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, with more than 40 million unemployment claims, and several million people losing their employer-provided health insurance along with their jobs. In the midst of health, financial, emotional and mental strain, popular platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter house pockets of conspiracy theorists ready with both answers (clarity) and community in a time of fear and isolation. Conspiracy theories are inherently adaptive, and the COVID-19 crisis has provided a captive audience to recruit from pre-existing narratives. Some are simply old tropes repackaged, such as the conspiracy theory that the “coronavirus is a tool for Jews to expand their global influence” or otherwise “profit” from it.⁷ Other online conspiracy groups such as QAnon, leverage concern about child shostages and Satanic cults to label COVID-19 a hoax and distraction from these issues.

In COVID-19, conspiracy theories cover various angles, from origin and severity, to the need and efficacy of public health responses and mitigation efforts, to the ulterior motives of officials and institutions. Some COVID-19 conspiracy theories in the United States are detailed below. Note that these conspiracy theories may vary from country to country. For instance, University of Oxford researchers documented slightly different several conspiracy theories based on public opinion surveys in England including that “Muslims are spreading the virus as an attack on Western values” and that “Politicians such as Boris Johnson have faked having coronavirus.”⁸ While not exhaustive, the main categories on the left offer a framework by which to classify future COVID-19 conspiracy theories as they emerge.



Table 1: Common COVID-19 Misinformation and Conspiracy theories in the US

(In each category, Moving left to right from misinformation to conspiracy theories)

Origin	Lab accident, to Chinese manufactured bio weapon
Severity	Hoax, “Just the flu” and mortality exaggerated, to lethally designed to cull populations
Institutions	Unprepared, to active part of Deep State or globalist WHO/UN plot
Mitigation Efforts	
Lockdowns	Unconstitutional, to orchestrated attack on economy and Trump’s re-election
Masks	Ineffective, to actively harmful to “God’s breathing system” ⁹
Vaccination	Unnecessary, a financial ploy, or a tracking mechanism using 5G

As demonstrated by Table 1, a consistent theme across several COVID conspiracy theories is the question of *motive*. As clinical psychologist and Professor Daniel Freeman explains, “The details of the conspiracy theories differ, and can even be contradictory, but there is a prevailing attitude of deep suspicion.”¹⁰ Are highly trusted professionals such as public health authorities, physicians and researchers working on behalf of the common interest? Or are they complicit or active participants of an orchestrated global plot for dominance by nefarious organisations? Is Bill Gates, a noted philanthropist who has been warning about pandemics for the last several years, trying to control humanity through microchipping and quantum technology?

As conspiracy theories tend to employ populist rhetoric about the pure ‘people’ and the corrupt ‘elite’, Ilya Yablokov argues that conspiracy theories function to “unite audiences as ‘the people’ against the ‘Other’ represented as a secretive power bloc.”¹¹ In this narrative, masks and lockdowns are subjugation and state control of ‘the people’, rather than reasonable measures to limit the spread of a contagious virus. By contrast, ‘the people’ - championed by a populist leader - may rationally resist these attacks on their liberty, with force if necessary. Where these restrictive measures are the advice of a scientific ‘elite’ in prestigious institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), WHO, or United Nations (UN) these institutions also now constitute a threat.

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified conspiracy theories as a form of domestic extremism in that they channel violence towards perceived enemies, writing that “these conspiracy theories very likely encourage the targeting of specific people, place and organisations”.¹² During COVID-19, conspiracy theories blaming technology, religious groups, immigrants, pharmaceutical companies and entire countries have spread from the dark corners of the Internet to Facebook group pages, to traditional media and public officials. These narratives implicitly identify targets of blame for a populace under great financial, emotional and mental strain. When elected officials indulge these divisive narratives, they further legitimise attacks. Already we have seen lower-level incidents including verbal abuse and harassment of groups targeted in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, including against Asian-Americans. According to the Asian Americans Advancing Justice organisation

which tracks hate crimes, more than 2,000 cases of assault were reported between March and June 2020,¹³ with perpetrators parroting the rhetoric of “KungFlu” or “China virus” used by certain elected officials and influencers. These incidents could escalate as the pandemic, and restrictions, drag on in the United States.

Social media provides further documentation of aggressive confrontation around mitigation efforts, anticipated vaccination programs, and the health authorities and institutions involved in both. Some of these negative impacts are summarised below.

Negative Impacts of Conspiracy theories around COVID-19

1. Undermining of mitigation efforts such as masks and lockdowns
 2. Encouraging lower vaccination rates (when a vaccine becomes available)
 3. Politicisation of scientific institutions, practitioners and researchers
 4. Launching political campaigns of conspiracy theorist community

The spread of conspiracy theories then undermines current and future public health measures around COVID-19. They also potentially place health authorities, practitioners and officials implementing public health measures directly at risk of harassment and violence. Already more than 27 senior health officials across 13 US States have resigned, retired or been fired from their post, due to violent harassment, strain or political clashes.¹⁴ Together with higher risk of infection to front-line health workers, such developments could result in a hollowing



out of expertise and practitioners when they are most needed. The concomitant attack on research institutes and public health organisations such as the CDC, WHO and even universities, point to



long-term problems of politicisation and funding. The weakening of these institutions provides more room for charlatans and conspiracy theorists to fill the vacuum and mount their own campaigns for power over decision-making.

1. Undermining Public Health Measures

Like the virus itself, conspiracy theories survive and are transmitted through hosts. Hosts with a particularly large platform, like celebrities and politicians, can potentially infect millions of others. In the case of the United States, one of the largest and earliest vectors of misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 was President Donald Trump. While much of the rest of the world was putting into place public health protection measures for its population, the President of the United States of America was downplaying the epidemic as a partisan “hoax.”¹⁵ When leaders sow division and distraction, sound policymaking suffers. In the case of the US, rhetoric from the White House directly undermined public health measures by pitting state and federal authorities against each other, and sowing confusion among the public about appropriate health measures to protect themselves and others.

“You cannot fight the pandemic with lies and disinformation any more than you can fight it with hate or incitement of hatred.” – German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel¹⁶

The Trump Administration has amplified and promoted many of the narratives outlined in Table 1. President Trump first downplayed the severity of the virus, using a rally in Charleston, South Carolina, on 29 February to call it a partisan “hoax” and blame increasing global concern on the media.¹⁷ In the same rally, Trump similarly described COVID-19 as “just like the flu”. On 27 February and 3 April, he repeated that COVID would “just disappear, like a miracle” without a vaccine, and insisted the virus would taper off with warmer weather.¹⁸ As COVID-19 eclipsed annual flu deaths, the President, speaking from the White House on 28 April, said “It is going to go away.... It has gone away.”¹⁹

When the temperature and death toll continued to rise, the Trump Administration indulged conspiracy theories about its origins, while scapegoating global health authorities. In April, White House Advisor, Kellyanne Conway said, “This is COVID-19, not COVID-1, folks!” falsely suggesting health researchers and public health organisations had multiple previous iterations to learn from.²⁰ Of course, COVID-19 was named for 2019, the year it was identified. Bad faith arguments would continue to be broadcast from President Trump’s prolific Twitter account, following a long and problematic pattern of boosting what the *New York Times* called “Conspiracy Mongers and Spies.”²¹

The Trump Administration would go on to intervene in state-ordered mitigation efforts, particularly mask mandates, lockdowns and bans on public gatherings. This was not limited to the President himself but key personnel in the national security space. For instance, on 13 April the Acting Director of National Intelligence, Richard Grenell, who coordinates 17 intelligence agencies, posted on his

public Instagram account a “Signed permission slip to leave your house” with a picture of the US Constitution.²²

When armed demonstrators followed this advice and defied stay-at-home orders by gathering illegally in front of courthouses and state legislatures, President Trump encouraged their actions. In April 2020, he tweeted to his 80 million followers, “Liberate Michigan! Liberate Virginia! Liberate Minnesota! They are trying to take your Second Amendment!”²³

Demonstrators carrying tactical weapons and wearing military style gear convened at the houses of policymakers. Outside the Kentucky governor’s mansion, one such group gathered for the “Patriot 2nd Day Amendment rally” strung up an effigy of the governor as young children looked on. The sign around the neck read “Sic semper tyrannis” or ‘Thus Always to Tyrants’.²⁴ In similar protests in Illinois the following week, anti-lockdown demonstrators used Nazi slogans to try to intimidate the Jewish governor, a tactic which drew the rebuke of the Auschwitz Museum, whose verified account posted on 2 May, “Arbeit macht frei” was a false, cynical illusion the SS gave to prisoners of #Auschwitz. Those words became one of the icons of human hatred. It’s painful to see this symbol instrumentalized & used again to spread hate. It’s a symptom of moral & intellectual degeneration”.²⁵ Defiance of lockdown measures included conspiracy signage around other mitigation efforts such as masks and vaccination.

By June, the United States had 25 per cent of the world’s cases, despite having only 4 per cent of the world’s population. As hotspots migrated from cities to rural areas, local officials tried to implement facemask mandates, lockdowns and bans on public gatherings. Flouting these local public health ordinances, the Trump White House resumed indoor political rallies in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Arizona despite local restrictions in both states. The attendant spike in COVID-19 in rally locations included the death of prominent member of the Republican party, Herman Cain, who encouraged others not to wear masks or social distance, tweeting “Masks will not be mandatory for the event, which will be attended by President Trump. PEOPLE ARE FED UP!”.²⁶ Cain died two weeks later of COVID-19. Trump’s actions thus stymed coordination between state and federal authorities, and his messages contributed to the longer-term radicalisation of the population against facts and those who proffer them.



Image caption: Arizona lockdown protestors hold up signs carrying anti-vaccine messages and promoting unproven treatments. Credit: Adam Waltz/ABC15 Arizona)<No intersecting link>

Using these elite cues, conspiracy theory and extremist groups have leveraged conflict over COVID-19 restrictions to organise and recruit. In late August, right-wing militia and anti-vaccine advocates stormed the Idaho’s special legislative session to protest masks mandates.²⁷ A Republican state lawmaker in Idaho, Heather Scott, had earlier compared the governor’s closure of nonessential businesses to Nazi Germany, saying, “I mean that’s no different than Nazi Germany where you had government telling people you were an essential worker or nonessential worker and the nonessential workers got put on a train”.²⁸ Allied nations report similar rhetoric. In Australia, the head of the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) warned that far right extremists were exploiting coronavirus to gather new members. As reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), “COVID-19 restrictions are being exploited by extreme right-wing narratives that paint the state as oppressive, and globalisation and democracy as flawed and failing”, the intelligence agency warned.... We assess the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced an extreme right-wing belief in the inevitability of societal collapse and a ‘race war’”.²⁹ ASIO’s Directly General had earlier in the year identified the far right as the fastest growing extremist group in Australia, “In Australia, the extreme right wing threat is real and it is growing. In suburbs around Australia, small cells regularly meet to salute Nazi flags, inspect weapons, train in combat and share their hateful ideology. These groups are more organised and security conscious than they were in previous years.”³⁰ At a COVID-19 related rally organised by far-right groups “Wake Up Australia” signs and speakers focused on 5G and anti-vaccination efforts.

2. Hampering Vaccination Efforts

Given the sometimes aggressive reaction to health measures such as temporary lockdowns and face-masks in public places, it is reasonable to assume refusal of other health measures that require individual effort and cooperation – namely, vaccines. With several trials underway for a COVID-19 vaccine, the next hurdle will be inoculating the population. This will prove challenging. According to an August 2020 Gallop poll, more than one third of Americans already say they won’t get vaccinated when it becomes available.³¹

One main challenge will not just be a refusal to take part in mitigation measures and vaccination programs, **but to prevent others from doing so**. In July, the Republican Governor of Georgia, Brian Kemp, intervened to eliminate local facemask mandates in the state. When the Mayor of Atlanta refused, the governor sued the mayor.³² Meanwhile, individuals continue to flout mask mandates and some even attempt to stop others from wearing their own.

On 6 August, a Florida man was arrested and fined after confronting a child wearing a facemask in a restaurant. As reported by the Associated Press (AP), after trying to pull off the minor’s facemask, the man spat in the child’s face telling him that he now had COVID.³³

Could vaccination face the same fate as facemask mandates, or perhaps become a target of sabotage like telecommunications infrastructure? COVID-19 conspiracy theorists focused on 5G have already attacked critical infrastructure across the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and the Netherlands. According to Mobile UK, there have been more than 90 arson attacks in the UK against mobile infrastructure, and more than 200 documented instances of abuse towards engineers since 30 March.³⁴ If so motivated, could conspiracy theorists could seek to disrupt vaccination efforts through attacks on critical infrastructure and transportation routes, storage or school delivery mechanisms? Additional security measures may be required to guard stocks and supplies, as well as drivers, doctors, researchers and perhaps even a certain philanthropist.

Divisive messages in the international ether can cause violence and destruction far from their point of origin. “Arrest Bill Gates!” the crowd chanted.³⁵ The conspiracy theory which claims Bill Gates planned to use the coronavirus vaccine as a ploy to monitor people through injected microchips or quantum technology started circulating in March. Soon after, a YouTube video on the conspiracy theory was viewed 2 million times.³⁶ When a former political advisor to President Trump, Roger Stone, discussed the theory on a radio show, adding that he’d never trust a coronavirus vaccine that Gates had funded, the interview was covered by traditional outlets, and gained worldwide audiences.³⁷ Weeks later conspiracy theory groups based in the US have led to the “Arrest Bill Gates” chants as far away as Melbourne, Australia. More disturbingly, previous conspiracy fixations on former President Obama, Secretary Clinton and George Soros have since expanded to include Bill Gates and Dr. Anthony Fauci that have now metastasized into other forms of attack as well.

3. Politicisation of Scientific Communities and Institutions

Conspiratorial assertions disseminated for the interlocking purposes of politics, profit and entertainment, successfully degrade authoritative sources of information as they become more powerful. For scholars of information warfare, the pattern resembles key tactics of disinformation. Scholars such as Kate Starbird argue that disinformation is best understood as a campaign, a suite of information actions, deployed to mislead for a strategic, political purpose. A former Soviet disinformation officer defined disinformation as “a carefully constructed false message leaked to an opponent’s communication system in order to deceive the decision-making elite or the public.”³⁸ One tactic is to erode trust and credibility, the purpose of which is to create doubt about the facts and sources of those facts. In this, the threshold of success is not necessarily to convince but rather to confuse. This is one of the key activities in what are known as Russian Active Measures.³⁹

Active Measures

- Create general distrust or confusion over information sources by blurring the lines between fact and fiction
- Foment and Exacerbate divisive political fissures
- Undermine citizen confidence in democratic governance
- Erode trust between citizens and elected officials and their institutions

One of the most comprehensive reports to date on the tactics, methods and goals of disinformation campaigns to be ever produced was released by the US Senate Intelligence Committee following their investigation into Russian interference in the US 2016 election.⁴⁰ The five volumes detail the Kremlin’s use of conspiracy narratives such as voter fraud in order to erode trust in electoral infrastructure and democratic processes. It would appear that similar tactics have been used by conspiracy theorists that have called into question the integrity and independence of key institutions involved in the COVID-19 response, such as the World Health Organisation. These tactics have also led to real-world consequences, such as President Trump’s decision to order a halt to the WHO’s

funding claiming a virus ‘cover up’, followed by a notice to formally withdraw the United States from the international organisation.⁴¹

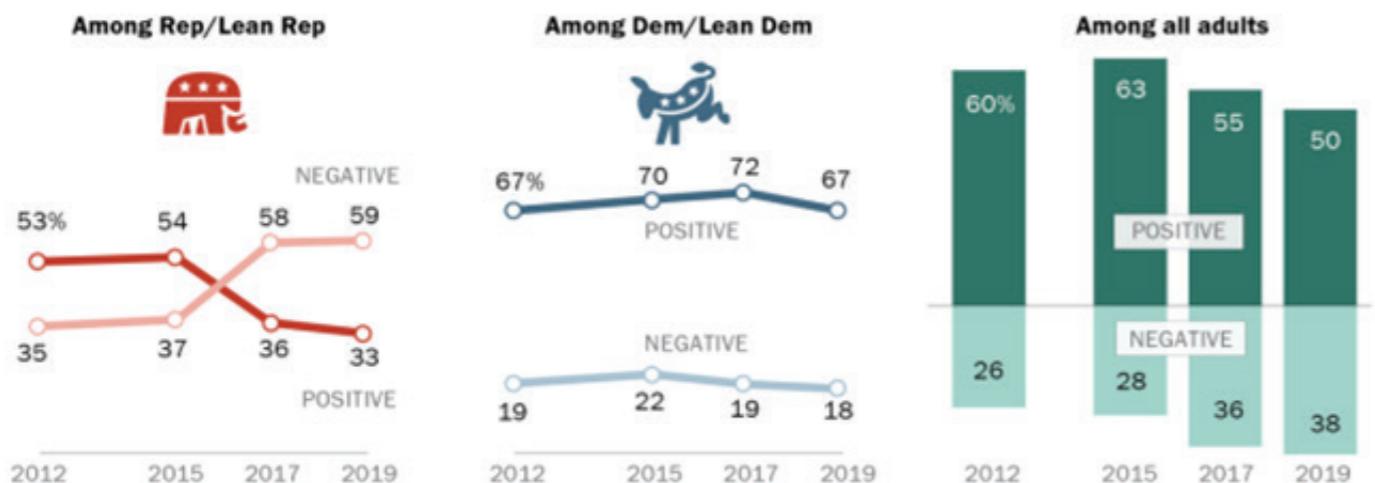
National security scholars and public health researchers have documented on-going disinformation campaigns around public health issues. One study examined the role of hostile foreign actors in undermining social media discourse around vaccines, with Russian bots and trolls promoting confusion and discord. Broniatowski et al concluded that Russian “accounts masquerading as legitimate users create false equivalency, eroding public consensus on vaccination”.⁴² Similarly, an August 2020 report from the US State Department confirms Kremlin-linked sites are boosting conspiracy theories that allege COVID-19 was created in a lab as a bioweapon, that billionaire Bill Gates is plotting to use the pandemic as an excuse to microchip people, and that plans for the vaccine are a well orchestrated money grab by pharmaceutical companies.⁴³

Management of the world’s largest public health emergency relies on successful communication between public health professionals and the wider community. Unfortunately at a time when the population remains exposed to the twin viruses of the pandemic and conspiracy theories, our body politics’ immune system is being weakened. Erosion of trust in key institutions and professions such as the scientific institutions, universities and the free press impacts the general public’s ability to respond to the pandemic with implementing evidence-based policies. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this problem into sharp focus, it is not entirely new.

Indeed, the increasing gap between scientists and the general public has been widely documented in public opinion polling and studies on scientific communication. Recognition of the problem even spurred the creation of a new scholarly journal in 2014, *Public Understanding of Science*. Public opinion polls have tracked Americans’ gradual loss of trust in public institutions such as courts, law enforcement, and legislative bodies. The most disturbing trends suggest a partisan divide, which is a much more recent phenomenon. For example, a 2019 Pew report on higher education found that the majority of Republicans surveyed identifying universities as a threat to the nation’s well-being, shot up from 37 per cent in 2015 to 58 per cent in 2017, exemplified by the statement that, “universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country”.⁴⁴

Increase in the share of Americans saying colleges have a negative effect on the U.S. is driven by Republicans' changing views

% saying colleges and universities have a positive/negative effect on the way things are going in the country



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center surveys of U.S. adults conducted by telephone July 10-15, 2019, June 8-18, 2017, Sept. 16-Oct. 4, 2015, and Feb. 8-12, 2012.

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Used with permission. "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education" Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (August 2019) https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education/psdt_08-19-19_high-ed-00-01/

The result has been the politicisation of emergency relief departments, and scientific institutions, including partisan interference in their operation. In the United States, it started with the National Stockpile at the Department of Health and Human Services. When Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law and head of a COVID-19 task force claimed that the federal stockpile of critical personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators was "*our stockpile, it's not supposed to be states' stockpile*",⁴⁵ the corresponding department's website was duly changed hours later. According to the Wayback Machine, that morning the Department of Health and Human Services said:

*"Strategic National Stockpile is the nation's largest supply of life-saving pharmaceuticals and medical supplies for use in a public health emergency ... When state, local, tribal, and territorial responders request federal assistance to support their response efforts, the stockpile ensures that the right medicines and supplies get to those who need them most during an emergency."*⁴⁶

The website was then changed to match what Kushner said, that the federal stockpile exists to supplement state supplies:

*"The Strategic National Stockpile's role is to supplement state and local supplies during public health emergencies."*⁴⁷

As Governors protested that they were having to compete against the federal government in securing supplies, New York Senator Chuck Schumer pleaded for utilisation of the *Defence Production Act* to bolster production and distribution of critical supplies. In response, President Trump tweeted, "Somebody please explain to Cryin' Chuck Schumer that we do have a military man in charge of distributing goods, a very talented Admiral, in fact. New York has gotten far more than any other State, including hospitals & a hospital ship, but no matter what, always complaining".⁴⁸

Alongside the Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC has shown signs of political tampering. The initial CDC guidance released in May stated that a full reopening of schools would pose the "highest risk" to students and staff unless all precautions were taken to protect them, and that "virtual-only classes, activities and events" offered the the "lowest risk".⁴⁹ President Trump tweeted his disagreement, "I disagree with the @CDCGov on their very tough and expensive guidelines for opening school... I will be meeting with them!"⁵⁰ After Vice President Mike Pence proclaimed that the "We don't want CDC guidance to be a reason why people don't reopen their schools",⁵¹ CDC officials duly amended their safety recommendations.⁵² Indeed, the CDC's new guidelines, released 23 July and titled "*The Importance of Reopening America's Schools this Fall*", began on the uplifting note that "Death rates among school-aged children are much lower than among adults".⁵³ This capitulation to political pressure not only compromised the health and safety of the nation's children and educators but also eroded the agency's scientific reputation. By mid-July, the White House had bypassed the CDC completely with the Trump Administration ordering hospitals to cease reporting COVID-19 cases to the CDC as public information, and instead direct all information to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.⁵⁴

When crucial information is politicised and public health measures such as lockdowns and facemasks are publicly denigrated by officials and influencers, health officials are not only sidelined but undermined. At the *March for Science* in 2017, one protestor's sign read "At the start of every disaster movie, there's a scientist being ignored." In 2020, the trend appears to be that in every disaster there is a scientist being harassed and defunded. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump has threatened to withhold federal funds from research universities and schools alike.⁵⁵ In Australia, universities suffering from AUD\$1 billion in government funding cuts over the last 5 years,⁵⁶ have been specifically excluded from COVID-19 financial packages to save business and public services, leading to massive layoffs of researchers and teachers in higher education.⁵⁷ Scientists and researchers now must contend with rising job insecurity, unstable funding, attempts at political meddling, and also harassment.

As noted above, the *Associated Press* reported that 27 high level state and local health leaders across 13 states had resigned, retired or been fired between April and mid-June.⁵⁸ In addition to various US public health officials resigning in the face of harassment or losing their positions when the data they published proved unflattering,⁵⁹ medical professionals, nurses and virologists celebrated for their heroism have become the objects of public abuse and threats. Dr Anthony Fauci announced in early August that he has had to hire security for his daughters after his family received death threats.⁶⁰

Ohio's state health director resigned after armed protestors came to her house.⁶¹ Departures also includes North Carolina's 2017 Health Director of the Year, and other key public health officials in both major cities and rural areas.

The longer term implications of the politicization of institutions and health/science professions is difficult to quantify. Alongside people leaving the field, we may see would-be entrants deterred from joining it. With funding cuts to universities and schools, and research and development cuts in the private sectors, job opportunities for researchers will likely shrink, and with it, the scientific and technological innovation that drives modern economies. While the economic impacts of lockdowns are frequently cited by critics of mitigation efforts, the largest enduring economic consequence could be the loss of key expertise and the industries on which it depends.

4. Launching Political Campaigns of Conspiracy Candidates

Conspiracy theory groups are leveraging their newfound spotlight to bid for political power and elected office. This section focuses on QAnon, the fastest growing online conspiracy theory community in the United States, and the likely winner of two Congressional seats in the 2020 November election.

According to West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, QAnon "represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology," which "finds resonance with other far-right extremist movements, such as the various militant, anti-government, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi extremist organizations across the United States."⁶² The FBI named QAnon a domestic terror threat and motivator of violence.⁶³ One year on from the report, President Trump would celebrate QAnon as "people who love America" before affirming the group's core belief that he is "saving the world."⁶⁴

QAnon evolved from the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. Those who subscribe to the QAnon conspiracy theory believe that an anonymous insider posted on 4Chan under the name "Q" has information on a secret cabal of globalists and celebrities who control America. It is a loose web of narratives centering on child hostages, pedophiles and Satanic cults whom they link to the Democratic party and the "Deep State."⁶⁵ Part 'Trump fan fic' and reminiscent of the 'Satanic panic' of the 1980s, QAnon holds that President Trump is dismantling these networks behind the scenes.⁶⁶ Anticipating an impending clash known as the "Storm" between Trump and this cabal of deep-state sex-traffickers, QAnon claims that the struggle will culminate in the arrests of the guilty and the return of JFK Jr to lead them.⁶⁷

Notably, QAnon has already led to violence. In one early incident, an armed gunman descended on a pizza parlour he believed to be the base for a child sex trafficking operation. After consuming the QAnon/Pizzagate conspiracy theory online, he had travelled to Washington, D.C. armed with an AR-15 weapon to 'Save the Children'.⁶⁸ Instead, he terrorised a child's birthday party and was sentenced to four years in prison in 2017.⁶⁹ According to court documents, the pace of radicalisation was rapid. Edgar Maddison Welch, 28, spent three days reading and watching videos about the Pizzagate conspiracy theory before packing his car with firearms and ammunition, and driving to Washington, DC.⁷⁰ As reported by *NPR*, sentencing papers document that "the defendant took it upon himself to act in what he believed would be a violent confrontation at the restaurant" which would involve

"sacrificing [sic] the lives of a few for the lives of many."⁷¹ Since then, QAnon conspiracy theories have been linked to other acts of violence.

In 2019, an unclassified FBI *Intelligence Bulletin* from 30 May 2019 documented kidnappings and attempted bombings linked to QAnon.⁷² In March 2020 the *Washington Post* reported an alleged murder by a member of QAnon.⁷³ In June 2020, a US man was arrested after he took his young family hostage on a high-speed police car chase while he livestreamed QAnon theories that COVID-19 was manmade, that JFK Jr would return to lead them, and that Donald Trump would save him.⁷⁴ QAnon is a creature of the Internet in that it has exploited the virtues of social media – engagement, virality, community – to connect users, validate their viewpoints, spread misinformation and recruit. But it has proven to have serious consequences in the offline world.

QAnon has recently adapted its message to appeal to a broader audience. Its narratives now cast a wide net snaring the wellness community, and spiritual and religious groups, coopting concerns about everything from COVID-19 mitigation efforts to child trafficking. QAnon messages increasingly appear in offline spaces. A television advertisement on Fox News for "Trumpy bears" that aired in July, began with the signature QAnon phrase "the storm is coming."⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, the Texas Republican party was forced to defend its newly adopted slogan, 'We are the Storm.'⁷⁶ Similar messages were visible at the nearly 200 "Save the Children" QAnon rallies on 22 August.⁷⁷ In an earlier march in California, demonstrators defaced the Hollywood star of Tom Hanks, one of the first high-profile celebrities to become inflected with COVID-19.⁷⁸ As the pandemic is seen to be a cover for global sex trafficking, the actor, along with other Hollywood names have become smeared as participants in a child hostage ring.⁷⁹

Alarmingly, QAnon is growing in recognition and political prestige. High profile adherents include President Trump's former National Security Advisor and now convicted felon, General Mike Flynn.⁸⁰ In the run up to the 2016 election, General Flynn promoted conspiracy theories about sex trafficking and globalist plots led by Hilary Clinton about whom he led 'Lock Her Up' chants at Trump rallies.⁸¹ On 4 July 2020, US Independence Day, Mike Flynn posted a video of himself and others taking the QAnon oath along with the hashtag #WWG1WGA (Where We Go One We Go All).⁸²

Though Mike Flynn is now out of government, other Trump- appointed officials use similar talking points. John Gibbs, the Trump nominee for the head of Personal Management Office that oversees the government's civilian workforce of over 5,000 personnel, spread conspiracy theories about Democrats taking part in Satanic rituals.⁸³ *Politico* investigations document that White House deputy communications director Dan Scavino, Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani, and Eric Trump have all posted QAnon content.⁸⁴ In a July 2020 interview on *Fox News*, the Head of the New York Police Department Union posed with a QAnon-themed mug.⁸⁵ President Trump, himself, has retweeted QAnon Twitter accounts to his 80 million followers more than 150 times.⁸⁶

President Trump formally endorsed a QAnon-linked Congressional candidate, Marjorie Greene, in August, calling her a "future Republican star",⁸⁷ and inviting her to the White House for the Republican National Convention.⁸⁸ It potentially heralds the adoption of QAnon conspiracy theories (Greene is also a 9/11 conspiracy theorist) into the mainstream Republican party. Of course, Pres-

ident Trump is no stranger to conspiracy theories himself, launching a political campaign on the back of the birther conspiracy theory that falsely questioned President Obama's citizenship and eligibility, and promoting a similar conspiracy regarding Kamala Harris upon her nomination for Vice President.⁸⁹ The birther theory, which sought to discredit President Obama, was described by one national security scholar as a "Choose Your Own Adventure" of Islamophobia or racism or nativism".⁹⁰ In the much the same way, QAnon offers a broad tent for those worried about everything from COVID-19 responses to child abuse. In one example, a social media researcher on Facebook was "recommended" a QAnon group after she joined (for research purposes) an anti-lock down group.⁹¹

In her video, Georgia candidate and QAnon theorist Marjorie Taylor Greene said of her candidacy, "There's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take this global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles out".⁹² By smearing political opponents as pedophiles and Satanists, cooperation or compromise is not possible. Thus this rhetoric undermines basic democratic functioning. Congressional gridlock may deepen as conspiracy theorists gain political decision-making and funding power. In the context of COVID-19, the risk of such developments could mean that even fewer dollars reserved for mitigation efforts, vaccination research or inoculation programs.

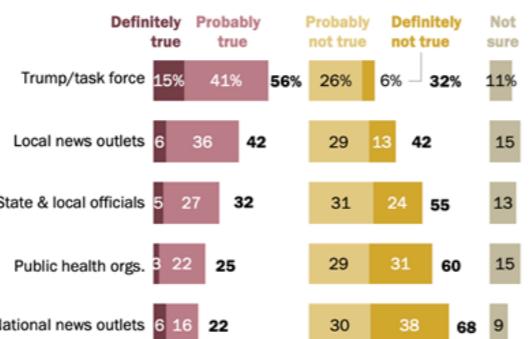
Vectors of Misinformation, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

A recent study published in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* identified some of the main factors complicating COVID-19 responses in the United States including "partisan cueing, conflicting science, downplayed threats, emotional arousal, fragmented media and Trump's messaging".⁹³ These have led to divergent responses from policymakers and the public alike, amplifying geographic variation and inequities in COVID-19 outcomes.

What are the vectors of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories on COVID-19 and beyond? Platforms have been at the centre of discussion, including social media but also cable television news, broadsheets, online-only news sites, and radio. Some media sources such as Fox person-

Those who rely on Trump and task force for COVID-19 news more likely to give credence to the conspiracy theory that outbreak was planned by powerful people

Among U.S. adults who rely on each source the most for news about the coronavirus outbreak AND have heard about the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak, % who think the theory is ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.

"Three Months In, Many Americans See Exaggeration, Conspiracy Theories and Partisanship in COVID-19 News"

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alities (television), and Rush Limbaugh (radio host), have been implicated in recent studies discussed below but the phenomenon is far larger. As Political scientist Professor Tom Nichols also presciently warned in his book, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*,

"Dismissing learning and expertise is now a habit of mind that is crippling the ability of millions of citizens in democratic nations to exercise even basic civil and social responsibilities in their communities... In the wake of a global pandemic or nuclear conflict, there may be no path back left at all".⁹⁴

A hostility to expertise and even scientific consensus on key issues appears to be backed up by public opinion polls, and with a partisan slant. A 2019 poll by *ScienceCivic* found that 72 per cent of Republican-supporting respondents agreed with the statement, "Arabic numerals shouldn't be taught in schools" (compared to 40 per cent for Democratic leaning respondents).⁹⁵ Similarly, a Pew research study found the partisan divide over COVID-19 is increasing. Between April and June, the percentage of Republicans who said that the coronavirus was "overblown" actually increased.⁹⁶

Recent studies have attempted to measure the deleterious impact of certain television and radio sources on their audiences' willingness to take actions to protect themselves and others against COVID-19. "We are receiving an incredible number of studies and solid data showing that consuming far-right media and social media content was strongly associated with low concern about the virus at the onset of the pandemic," said Irene Pasquetto, chief editor of the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review.⁹⁷ In one study using a US national probability-based survey, Jamieson and Albarracin found that people who received most of their information from mainstream print (i.e. *The New York Times*) and broadcast outlets (e.g. NBC) tended to have an accurate assessment of the severity of the pandemic and their risks of infection. However, consumers of conservative sources, such as Fox News and Rush Limbaugh were more likely to believe conspiracy theories, including that the Chinese government had created the virus, and that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had exaggerated the pandemic's threat "to damage the Trump presidency."⁹⁸

Across radio, television and radio, conservative media undermined messages on the lethality of the virus and the efficacy of mitigation efforts. Rush Limbaugh described masks as a "symbol of fear" and mask wearers as "freaks",⁹⁹ dismissed closures and social distancing by saying, "Let the young and the healthy go out and live their lives...and spread herd immunity",¹⁰⁰ a strategy that Dr Marybeth Sexton, assistant professor medicine at Emory University, estimated would needlessly sacrifice 2 million American lives.¹⁰¹ Rush Limbaugh also falsely claimed there were no shutdowns during the pandemic of 1918 (churches, cinemas, etc were shut), and suggested that American millennials should adapt "like the Donner party", infamous pioneers who turned to cannibalism.¹⁰² Rush Limbaugh, a Trump-nominated recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, has been on the radio for more than 30 years and boasts audiences of more than 20 million.

In one of her first events as Joe Biden's running mate, Senator Kamala Harris called out Fox News for COVID-19 misinformation, "When other countries were following the science, Trump pushed miracle

cures he saw on Fox news. While other countries were flattening the curve, he said the virus would just –poof- go away".¹⁰³ In March 2020, primetime shows such as Jeanine Pirro, Trish Regan, Sean Hannity, Fox and Friends downplayed the virus as "just the flu" and encouraged people to travel. As per Figure x, on 10 March 2020, Fox Business host Trish Regan described COVID-19 as a Coronavirus Impeachment Scam."



This primacy effect proved hard to overcome later, especially as Trump's rhetoric conflicted with expert opinion. A July 2020 Pew Report found that those who rely most on Trump for COVID-19 news and information were more likely to believe the conspiracy theory that the outbreak was planned by powerful people.¹⁰⁴

When the news media covers Trump's announcements and press conferences, these conspiracy theories reach an even wider audience. As Ben Smith noted in the *New York Times*, "The Pro-Trump media is in the misinformation business with scale and energy that lacks parallel and in part because simply repeating the president often means spreading misinformation".¹⁰⁵ This media extends beyond television and radio to social media, where conspiracy theories find safe haven and new audiences.

Social media including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have been identified as significant vectors of misinformation and conspiracy theories on COVID-19. Conspiracy theories can be widely promulgated on social media through memes and videos. An April 2020 study of the 150 most viewed YouTube videos on COVID-19 found that over one quarter contained misleading information.¹⁰⁶ One such video was *Plandemic* by discredited medical researcher Judy Mikovitz, largely known as an anti-vaccine activist. In it, Mikovitz circulates the conspiracy theory that Dr Fauci and Bill Gates are leveraging the coronavirus pandemic for monetary and political gain.¹⁰⁷ Its sequel, *Plandemic: Indoctrination*, was

released on 18 August. The 75 minute video, which stresses that the media shouldn't be trusted, was quickly pulled by platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Tiktok but is still circulating on at least one site associated with Russian-state media, *RT*.¹⁰⁸

Of course, YouTube with some 400 million active users is dwarfed in comparison to Facebook, but then again, so are most countries. Facebook is estimated to currently have 1.7 billion daily active users,¹⁰⁹ compared to Twitter with 186 million.¹¹⁰ Facebook typically removes misinformation that could "lead to imminent physical harm"¹¹¹ like drinking bleach, and uses a combination of labels and warnings for the rest of the news feed. Through this process, Facebook reported that it displayed warnings on 40 million posts related to COVID-19 in March and 50 million pieces in April, and that 95% of the time, people did not view the original content.¹¹² However, conspiracy theories still circulate widely in groups.

While Facebook has taken steps to label problematic content on the news feed, it has done little to control similar messages spreading within Facebook groups. Facebook groups have long proven to be vectors of disinformation and conspiracy theories. The indictment of 13 Russian intelligence officers in *US v. Internet Research Agency* (2018) noted that Facebook groups were a favored delivery mechanism to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation to the American population in the lead up to the 2016 election.¹¹³ Without needing to pay for targeted ads, users can create groups for free and let others come to them. Making the same groups private thereafter helps to avoid public scrutiny.

In 2018, Facebook announced that groups, rather than the news feed, would be a core product focus to help reverse an unprecedented decline in active users in the US and Canada.¹¹⁴ As noted by *Buzzfeed* reporters at the time, "more than a billion users active in groups are being placed in collision course with hackers, trolls and other bad actors who will follow Facebook's lead and make groups even more a focus of their activities".¹¹⁵ Facebook's own documents report more than 1000 QAnon group pages, with more than 1 million members, 64% of whom arrived there after Facebook's recommendation to join.¹¹⁶ By the time Facebook moved to dislodge them in August 2020, QAnon groups had spread to 15 countries.¹¹⁷ As Richard Hornik argues in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Social media platforms in particular have been manipulated in ways that interfere with elections, fuel conspiracy theories that deepen ethnic and sectarian divisions and generally erode the ability of communities to have rational, fact-based discussions on topics of public interest".¹¹⁸ Through group recommendations to conspiracy theory communities, such rational, fact-based discussions and decision making become even more difficult.

In his acceptance speech for the Anti-Defamation League International Leadership Award, actor Sacha Baron Cohen, summarised the general zeitgeist,

*"Conspiracy theories once confined to the fringe are going mainstream. It's as if the Age of Reason—the era of evidential argument—is ending, and now knowledge is delegitimized and scientific consensus is dismissed. Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat, and autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march. Hate crimes are surging, as are murderous attacks on religious and ethnic minorities...All this hate and violence is being facilitated by a handful of internet companies that amount to the greatest propaganda machine in history."*¹¹⁹

So what do we do?

Defence against the Dark Arts

If we imagine the information sphere including television, radio and Internet (including social media), as a type of global commons, we see that the space is heavily polluted with fake news, alternative facts and conspiracy theories. Pollution in physical spaces has been tackled through a combination of regulation, penalties, education and cooperation. In online spaces, governments have worked with technology companies that have developed adaptive tools to tackle extremist and illegal content such as Islamic State recruitment and child pornography rings. These artificial intelligence tools could be adapted to countering public health misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

It is additionally important that search algorithms are coded to prioritise credible sources and information. Social media algorithms tend to be primed for engagement, not accuracy-and “BS is highly engaging”.¹²⁰ In the wake of the US election, algorithms primed for engagement led to top Google results being false results of the popular vote tally plucked from a conspiracy blog,¹²¹ and other autocomplete search results on the Holocaust that led to white nationalist websites.¹²² Lessons from 2016 have been applied to correct some of these problems. During COVID-19, the WHO coordinated closely with platforms such as Google to elevate factual COVID-19 information in the search results, and Google-owned YouTube banned coronavirus-related content that directly contradicts WHO advice.¹²³ In the US, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) set up as “Coronavirus Rumor Control” webpage.¹²⁴

These proactive measures are crucial, as corrective fact checking has a mixed record. Some studies show that fact-checks, content take-downs and flagging of problematic content only entrenches the conspiracy theory, ‘proving’ that powerful forces (such as tech companies, governments, universities) and other ‘Deep State’ actors are attempting to silence them. Similarly, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler identify the ‘backfire effect’ – when confronted with contrary information, ideologically motivated respondents simply double down and the initial error.¹²⁵

Just as the COVID-19 adapts, so too must our tools to fight it on multiple fronts, including in the information space. Where the tactics of disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories overlap, we may be able to apply research from the former. A report from the Oxford Internet Institute collected various Anti-Disinformation Initiatives from 19 countries.¹²⁶ All require coordination and consistency, but some, such as public information campaigns,¹²⁷ can be adapted to reach target audiences.

When it comes to conspiracy theories, who are the target audiences? Thus far, recent studies have focused on fake news. Studies of social media have demonstrated that two groups are overrepresented in sharing fake content. Those over 65 years of age and ultraconservatives both spread more than seven times more fake news than any other group on Facebook.¹²⁸ The results similarly held for a study using Twitter data finding that individuals “most likely to engage with fake news sources were conservative, older and highly engaged with political news”.¹²⁹ As postulated by Grinberg et al, whether this is due to lower levels of digital literacy, a reliance on heuristics like elite cues, or the general effect of aging on memory particularly in an increasingly complex information environment, this group remains target audience for misinformation and disinformation.¹³⁰ But do they represent

the new growth in conspiracy theory communities like QAnon?

Given preliminary interview and investigative reporting, conspiracy theorists may not necessarily draw from the same target audiences of fake news. The largest growing online conspiracy theory group, QAnon, recruits heavily from the wellness community and alternative medicines, for instance, which tend to skew younger and in demographics with college degrees and presumed higher levels of digital skills. For those audiences, different approaches may be necessary whereby it is not just the message that must be attended to, but with a keen recognition of the sense of community and purpose that these groups provide.¹³¹

Recommendations

The following recommendations offer a starting point for governments, professional bodies and civil society groups to consider ways they can adapt current tools to meeting the growing challenge of combating conspiracy theories in the global information commons.

- 1. Government, in concert with researchers, should work with technology companies and social media platforms to establish programs that actively monitor, target and take down conspiracy theories and associated user accounts for repeat offenders.**

Governments, researchers and social media platforms have previously worked together to remove ISIS content and counter ISIS’ digital communications strategy. The techniques and approaches developed to fight online extremist content can be adapted to counter conspiracy theories, using both technical tools and counternarratives. From this body of research, counter-narratives worked best against ISIS when they were distributed through non-government channels, and when they featured true stories of people who experienced first-hand suffering as a result.¹³² Similar stories on the real and personal consequences of conspiracy theory groups are already emerging through court documents and investigative reporting. While governments will need to take the lead in coordinating with industry, researchers and experts in fields from computer science to social psychology should be included and funding through grant programs to further this work.

- 2. Governments should adapt the law enforcement mechanisms used to fight child pornography and domestic extremism, and introduce accompanying legislation or statutes to combat conspiracy groups that disseminate extremist content.**

To provide the legal basis for resourcing, staffing and coordination efforts across different government departments and jurisdictions, government action should be anchored in existing or updated legislation or statutes. As a starting point, the FBI’s designation of QAnon as a potential domestic terror threat, for instance, provides a path for monitoring and investigation of this emerging threat. When multiple governments recognize the threat, this can provide for larger cooperation between law enforcement agencies just as they do on other issues such as combatting child pornography.

- 3. Professional associations should update their codes of conduct to include formal review and disciplinary processes for individuals in positions of public trust (e.g. licensed physicians) who endanger public health through promulgation of conspiracy theories.**

Given the recent participation in COVID-19 conspiracy theories by public health practitioners and researchers, one approach could be to leverage professional memberships to enforce minimum standards on matters pertaining to their professional expertise. Codes of conduct, or codes of ethics can be utilized to set expectations and provide mechanisms for formal review and disciplinary action. For instance the Australian Psychological Association employs in its code of ethics a section on communication, in that psychologists “take reasonable steps to correct any misrepresentation made by them in their professional capacity within a reasonable amount of time after becoming aware of the misrepresentation” and cooperate with any ethics investigations and proceedings in relation to complaints.¹³³ Individuals in position of public trust must not be allowed to leverage the trust in their professions in order to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation particularly as it threatens public health.

4. Political parties could include in their election and policy platforms a commitment to professional code of conduct, with sanctions and removal of campaign support for candidates and members that fail to adhere to minimum standards around the dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

As demonstrated vividly by the pandemic, politicians and officials hold immense influence over the health and safety of others through their policymaking and rhetoric. Like professional codes of conduct, political parties could use their organisational documents to set expectations of conduct and ethics including the independent investigation of public complaints. Where potential candidates fail to meet these standards during an election campaign for example, the party may then draw upon this code to remove its support. For instance, when a Holocaust-denier attempted to run as Republican candidate in 2018, the party leadership in the state mobilised to disavow the candidate and field a contender for the party’s primary, even signaling it would endorse a competing party candidate.¹³⁴

5. Civil society organisations and professional associations mobilise their membership networks to target corporate advertising in outlets that promote or facilitate the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

A successful method of depriving revenue from sites that traffic in extremist and conspiratorial assertions was demonstrated by the US-based nonpartisan group, Sleeping Giants. Their ad-awareness campaign targeted the online-only “news” site, Breitbart, which regularly featured incendiary headlines such as “Bill Kristol, Republican spoiler, Renegade Jew”, “Would you rather your child had Feminism or Cancer”, and “Gay rights have made us dumber, it’s time to go back in the closet”.¹³⁵ When Sleeping Giants noticed that household brands were inadvertently running ads on Breitbart, they crowd-sourced an ad awareness campaign designed to leverage corporate protection of their brand. Using a volunteer army on social media, Sleeping Giant instructed users to take screenshots of consumer brands advertised alongside bigoted and extremist content, and tag the company in a polite note. As co-founder Nandini Jammi explained to ABC, “We present information to the brands and we ask them if it aligns with their values. If it doesn’t we ask them what they will do about it. It is their decision, but we use our leverage to create pressure so the decision is totally visible”.¹³⁶ Former chairman of Breitbart, Steve Bannon - who was arrested on fraud charges in August 2020¹³⁷ – was caught on video confirming that Breitbart’s revenues were down 90 per cent since the advertising boycott.¹³⁸ This example could be adapted to challenge the revenue model of websites, television and radio programs that traffic in conspiracy theories and extremist content.

Conclusion

No country is immune to pandemics nor conspiracy theories. In much the same way that a virus moves, conspiracy theories can spread far from their points of origin, adapt to different environments and spread through hosts and superspreaders. Similar to COVID-19, these conspiracy theories threaten to overwhelm our systems, including health systems and political decision-making. Thus the challenge involves confronting two viruses: COVID-19 and the insidious spread of misinformation. As we can see vividly from US coverage, misinformation spread from social media to corporate broadcasters to elected officials can mean the difference between life and death. Our defences against the pandemic are based in science, research and expertise. We underestimate conspiracy theories and their political power at our peril.

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The COVID-19 pandemic vs Post-Truth



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