

COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1

27th March 2020

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This is the first in a series of briefings from ISD's Digital Research Unit on the information ecosystem around COVID-19. This first briefing compiles research from ISD's own analysis of online platforms, as well as summarising recent investigations and research on the state of play of disinformation around COVID-19.

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Top Lines

- Both state-sponsored media and extremist movements are exploiting the COVID-19 situation to spread harmful and hateful messaging on social media;
- Anti-migrant and far-right networks are exploiting the COVID-19 situation to spread disinformation targeting migrants, refugees and other vulnerable populations on- and offline, as well as explicit threats of violence/harm to non-white populations from white supremacist groups online;
- Crisis points like COVID-19 are playing into “accelerationism” on the extreme right, which promotes the idea that democracy is a failure and that groups should accelerate its end through mobilising social conflict and violence;
- Misinformation about cures or treatments for coronavirus continue to circulate widely on Twitter and Facebook, often amplified by politicians and news media, and has contributed to fatal offline incidents;
- Notwithstanding technology platforms’ efforts to address disinformation on COVID-19, we are still seeing platforms both large and small are hosting conspiracy theories that could undermine efforts to deal with the crisis and its growth, including those disputing the reality of the virus and its impacts on health and life, which are particularly prevalent in closed groups and chat channels;
- There are some attempts to profiteer off the coronavirus pandemic through online platforms and advertising, despite platforms banning such practices.

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Conspiracy theories and COVID-19

State Actors Online: The blame game

Conspiracy narratives are proliferating on social media platforms, bolstered by the state-sponsored blame game playing out between propaganda machineries of Iran, Russia and China. Conspiracies that promote the idea of the virus as a bioweapon have come straight from official sources, in many instances. In recent days, direct insinuations have come from a Chinese government Information Department spokesperson that COVID-19 may have started in the US and that the US Army may have taken it to China. An investigation by ProPublica tracked more than 10,000 suspected fake Twitter accounts involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government since August 2019. Some of those hacked accounts are now being used to post propaganda and disinformation about the coronavirus. Accounts include 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.

In Iran, the official Twitter account of the Foreign Ministry this week began to promote the idea that the virus was created in the United States. In an example of the interconnectedness of disinformation narratives launched by states in the current context, the link in their tweet uses an article based on Chinese state media reporting as its evidence. With eyes on Russia, the EU's East StratCom Task Force has collected over 110 corona-related disinformation cases from Kremlin-supported

or pro-Kremlin media sources as of 19th March, which are stored in the public EUvs-Disinfo database. The instances include articles and TV clips claiming that COVID-19 is 'a fake' and man-made.

Conspiracy theories at large

In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that broader conspiracy theories are flourishing. The general use of the term 'coronavirus' for this specific outbreak has fed many conspiracy theorists, as the term is actually broadly used in epidemiology for a family of viruses, meaning that references and patents relating to 'coronavirus' existed well before this specific outbreak in 2019-2020.

Conspiratorial narratives that remain frequent on platforms including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube include:

1. Coronavirus is a bioweapon, with the Wuhan facility funded by the 'Deep State', Bill Gates, or George Soros;
2. Coronavirus is a conspiracy to lock people up or impose military/totalitarian rule;
3. The virus is a direct attempt to interfere with the Presidential Election in the US ("Every election year has a disease")
4. Migrants caused the outbreak of the virus
5. The coronavirus was planned and has been registered as a patent by the British Crown
6. Coronavirus is linked to 5G, due to Wuhan's use as a 5G testing ground
7. The coronavirus is a hoax.

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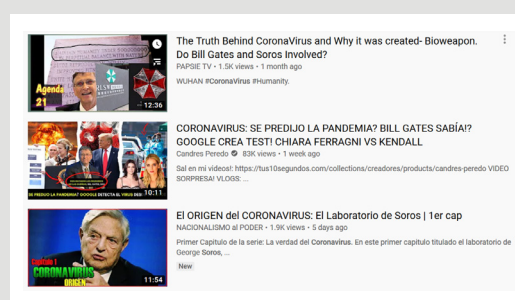


Facebook groups. Small but often very active closed Facebook groups are emerging as a key forum for conspiracy theory posts and outbound links to related conspiracy content on YouTube. Examples of these groups include Coronavirus The Real Truth and COVID-19 UPDATES (Wuhan Coronavirus). Groups like these host a mixture of conspiracy theory content, anti-Asian and anti-Chinese content, valid information, personal stories, and commercial adverts for masks, vitamins, hand sanitizer or false cures, often at inflated prices.

Mainstreaming conspiracies online. Celebrities, influencers and media outlets have picked up on instances of these conspiracy theories online and amplified them to wider audiences.

- Some online newspaper accounts have picked up individual's claims about George Soros and Bill Gates creating COVID-19 (above).
- A false letter purporting to share Bill Gates' thoughts on COVID-19 as having

a 'spiritual purpose' was amplified by model Naomi Campbell on Twitter, and the UK newspaper The Sun ran a story about the letter, both later removed.



YouTube: Videos and comment sections are a hub for coronavirus conspiracy theories. Not only are videos 'explaining' a number of prominent conspiracies still widely watched and available on the platform, but comments sections also remain saturated with conspiracy theory content and links to further videos.

- A fact-checker's interview on LBC Radio with almost 250,000 views is one example of YouTube's issue with comment-thread conspiracy theories, with popular comments providing further conspiratorial disinformation about Bill Gates, in particular.
- Comments sections are also sending viewers from one conspiracy to another on YouTube, with pinned links from Bill Gates/Soros conspiracy content to 5G conspiracy content, for example.
- Coronavirus conspiracy content from well-known US conspiracy theorists is still accessible on YouTube, despite the platform's attempts to ban such figures. Videos produced by Alex Jones, himself blocked from posting on YouTube, have been copied by fans and other users onto the site. Jones claims that the virus is a bioweapon, in line with many

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of the state-produced disinformation narratives explored above.

QAnon Conspiracies. Conspiracies specific to the conspiracy network QAnon have started to peak broader public curiosity, according to the volume of related public social media content.

- The conspiracy network's fixation on a chemical compound, Adrenochrome, which QAnon conspiracy theorists claim was being manufactured in Wuhan before the outbreak. These networks claim that a manufacturing plant in the region, owned and funded by, among others, George Soros, had been supplying the drug to a powerful 'elite' of politicians, celebrities and CEOs. The process required to produce this drug, they claim, requires the torturing and ritual sacrifice of children.
- Facebook data from public groups and public pages shows an increase in posts mentioning the adrenochrome drug, rising from just 749 between 1st Feb and 10th March 2020 to over 3,600 between 10th March and 23rd March 2020.

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Mobilising hate and extremism amid COVID-19

Crisis moments are ripe for exploitation by extremist movements and hate groups. These networks rely heavily on concepts of in-group out-group identity, heightened when an external 'threat' appears. In the context of COVID-19, extremist movements and hate groups are using online platforms both to blame vulnerable communities – migrants, refugees, Jews or Muslims – for the spread of coronavirus, as well as to mobilise violence and harm against them as targets.

Conspiracy theories like those laid out above are one of the ways extremist movements can use these moments to recruit audiences to their in-group / out-group worldview, preying on fear and gaps in information. Simplistic explanations of the threat, which scapegoat vulnerable groups, are a powerful propaganda tool for these movements. Disinformation and conspiracy theories can also fuel accelerationist extremist narratives and the subsequent possibility of violent action by ideologically driven extremists.

Initial ISD research has identified that, as elsewhere, COVID-19 is dominating discussion in extreme right channels. On the 'politically incorrect' message board on 4chan, which acts as a central hub for the proliferation of extreme right disinformation, 32.5% of discussion threads explicitly focussed on the pandemic on 26/03/2020. Observation of extreme right wing communities has identified a number of increasingly salient disinformation/ extremist narratives emerging around the pandemic:

Racist anti-minority narratives

Anti-Chinese rhetoric.

Extreme right communities are advancing anti-Chinese racism following the pandemic, with a number of specific calls for violence to be enacted against Chinese people. Common trope used to justify this include:

- Unverified footage of Chinese people bulk-buying emergency supplies, with the suggestion that Chinese communities are acting as a fifth column and deliberately trying to subvert countries struggling with the pandemic;
- Unverified footage apparently showing Chinese people deliberately spreading the virus, including spitting on fresh produce in supermarkets and wiping saliva on door handles and public benches;
- Reports of Chinese businesses acting unethically in the crisis, including the suggestion that they are selling faulty masks to western nations.
- ISD analysed 155,705 tweets in the past 4 weeks that use the hashtag #ChineseCoronavirus and found that 3 of the top 10 hashtags used most commonly in those posts relate to QAnon (#QAnon, #QAnon2020 and #QAnon2018).

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Anti-Semitic tropes.

Extreme right communities are repackaging a number of common anti-Semitic conspiracy theories to accommodate the virus, including:

- The suggestion that the virus has been advanced by Jewish people as a means of manipulating the market;
- The suggestion that the virus has been advanced by Jewish people as a means of killing white people and advancing demographic change in Europe and North America.

Anti-migrant narratives.

- Suggestions that migrant routes, and in particular the ongoing situation on the Greece/Turkey border in Europe or the Mexico border in the US, will act as a vector for the virus to spread.
- Speculation that immigrant and minority communities in major cities will use the virus as an opportunity to riot.
- In Europe, known anti-migrant content purveyor Voice of Europe has claimed that 'asylum seekers' are rioting against quarantine and flying ISIS flags, as well as claims that migrants specifically are 'ignoring' coronavirus lockdown rules in Italy. English language posts about the migration crisis on the Greek border are using the crisis to fuel anti-migrant sentiment, stating that these individuals are trying to 'invade the country' during the 'time of war' against coronavirus, and receiving over 1,000 shares on Facebook.
- In the US, Facebook pages are being used to frame migrants as more of a coronavirus threat than non-migrants, for example on the page for The National Pulse.

Anti-government narratives.

- Conspiracy theories suggesting that the government has helped advance the virus as a means of rolling back civil liberties.
- Pro-authoritarian tropes using the pandemic as an opportunity to promote the merits of authoritarian rule.

Terrorist tropes

- Accelerationism: A number of communities supporting white supremacist accelerationist terror are using the crisis as an opportunity to call for attacks in the hope that this will overwhelm emergency services and hasten societal collapse.
- A man in Missouri has died after a shoot-out with the FBI, who have announced that he was suspected of plotting a domestic terror attack on a hospital. Officials said the man was motivated by racist and anti-government beliefs. Wilson had previously considered attacking a school with a large number of black students, a mosque and a synagogue, according to the FBI.
- US Federal investigators have learned that white supremacists discussed plans to use the coronavirus as a bioweapon, as reported by Yahoo News. Explicit threats to 'nonwhite people', Jewish and Muslim communities and places of worship demonstrate the intersection of COVID-19 information operations and the potential for real-world harm. Many of these plans were coordinated on messaging app Telegram.

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Risks to public health: Fake symptoms and fake cures

Influencers with hundreds of thousands of followers are promoting unsubstantiated 'cures' and treatments on Facebook and YouTube: [this video](#) with over 35,000 views claims remedies like 'drinking tea', taking zinc and eating seeded fruits can help prevent coronavirus. The same page still hosts videos with over 3,000 shares that claim that 'natural minerals' such as colloidal silver can help 'resolve' coronavirus. The use of colloidal silver as a cure for COVID-19 has been debunked by [fact checkers](#). Specific 'alternative treatment' pages and groups are hubs for misleading or false 'cures', promoting the use of [basil](#) or [potassium](#).

ISD worked with investigators and journalists to identify and analyse posts with hundreds of thousands of likes/shares on Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp that promote false information about coronavirus symptoms and 'cures'. In [this BuzzFeed investigation](#), ISD provide commentary on the failure of Facebook to address viral disinformation about 'cures' to coronavirus in non-English languages. ISD provided background for [this Politico piece](#), identifying viral disinformation content about links between ibuprofen and coronavirus on WhatsApp across various countries.

Some disinformation perpetrators spreading health disinformation claim to be getting around platforms' terms of service about Coronavirus by using abbreviations and other shortcuts in their content. [Bellingcat's investigation](#) found YouTube influencers explicitly listing the ways that they attempt to navigate the

now AI-heavy content moderation around COVID-19, including 'saying "CV" for "coronavirus", "CH" for China, "the WHO" for the World Health Organization, and so on'.

Chloroquine

In the wake of comments by President Trump that chloroquine may be an effective treatment for COVID-19, platforms are hosting misinformation about chloroquine, with claims that chloroquine is "100% effective" in curing this strain of coronavirus being widely circulated. Mentions of chloroquine have increased sharply on Twitter in the US in the last two days, and the second most shared piece of content alongside mentions of chloroquine on Twitter is a [misleading article](#) from the Gateway Pundit, claiming in its title that "3 International Studies Find Chloroquine with Azithromycin Shows 100% Success Rate in Treating Coronavirus in 6 Days". The article references an interview on Fox News as a basis for this claim. A [report by Media Matters for America](#) has detailed the disinformation promoted by Fox News, including its coverage of hydroxychloroquine on the 16th March and 18th March 2020. The [tragic death](#) of a man from the Phoenix area after he and his wife consumed chloroquine phosphate in an apparent attempt to self-medicate for coronavirus speaks to the dangers of unsubstantiated or misleading 'cures' circulating online and through the media ecosystem.

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Other worrying fake cures and circulating on social media include:

- Garlic as a cure.
- “Medical freedom” groups on Facebook claiming that colloidal silver kills the virus (Facebook has since marked some of these posts with a fact checking warning).
- Drinking water every 15 minutes as a cure to ‘wash’ coronavirus out of the mouth (an Arabic language version has been shared more than 250,000 times)
- A fake UNICEF post on Facebook suggested that drinking hot water, exposure to sunlight, and avoiding ice-cream would protect from the virus
- Content on YouTube and Facebook claiming that hand sanitizer does not help kill the COVID-19 virus
- Claims that HEPA filters will remove the virus from the air.

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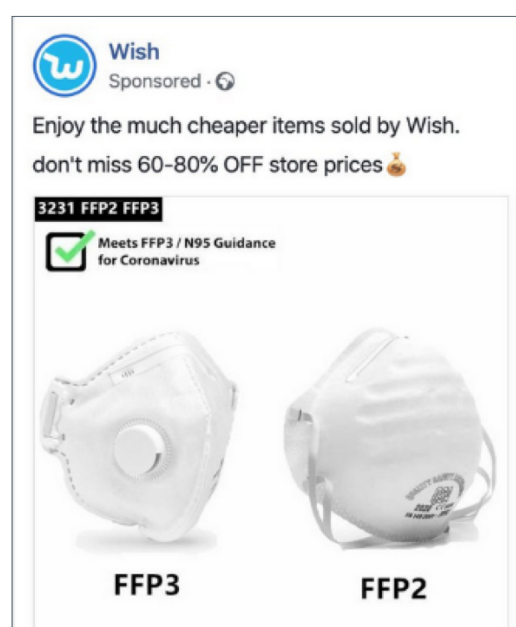
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Commercialisation of COVID-19

There is evidence that platforms are allowing actors to capitalise on the COVID-19 crisis by profiting through advertising and commercial products sold at inflated prices. There are currently over 21,000 ads on Facebook related to coronavirus and over 7,000 referencing COVID-19. While the majority of coronavirus-related adverts are produced by legitimate media organisations, some organisations with dubious credentials are promoting unverified material.

In one example, an organisation called Urban Lawn, which presents itself as a wedding venue, has sponsored a recording of an alleged Australian paediatrician through Facebook ads. While the authenticity of the recording could not be verified, the tone of the post (#thehospitalbecameinfected appears to be misleading.

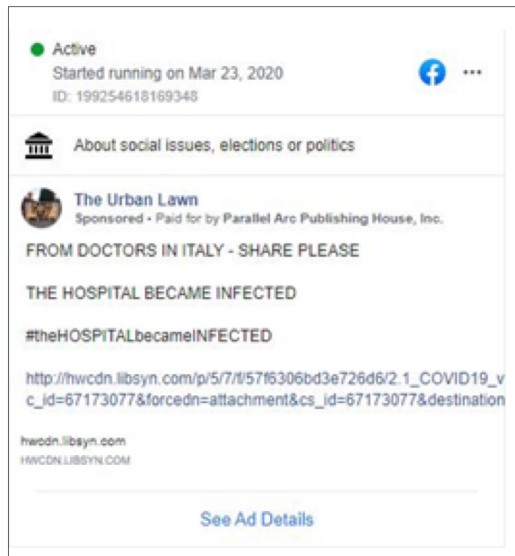
There continue to be pages and ads dedicated to selling COVID-19 masks at inflated prices on Facebook and Google. A highly active account posting about COVID-19 on Twitter this week was @COVID19Masks, linking to a recently established website selling masks for \$40 a pack to US audiences. The website leads to accounts on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Pinterest](#). It looks like a previous account on [LinkedIn](#) has been removed, and the link to a YouTube channel instead now leads to a [reputable news story](#) from ABC News about Coronavirus. The reach of this network seems extremely small, but was very easy to find based on simple searches for 'covid19' on Twitter.



Similar accounts are appearing and old accounts being repurposed to appear as established information channels about coronavirus, often linking to dubious health websites and blogs. Several accounts following @COVID19Masks appear to fit that description, including @donadoni111, which links to a [blog](#) providing advice on how to boost someone's immune system throughout COVID-19, and featuring advertising for vitamins. An [investigation by The Daily Beast](#) explored the rebrand of a known white nationalist supporter to a 'coronavirus expert', using platforms like Amazon to sell a book about surviving the virus, among other things.

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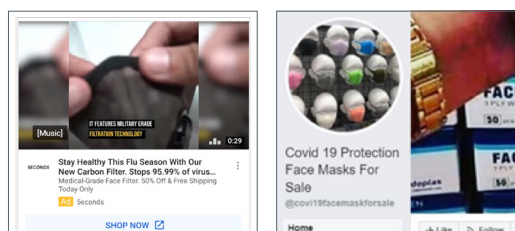
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YouTube influencers. ISD provided commentary on research showing that YouTube is still being used to promote conspiracy theories and disinformation about coronavirus, including for profit. The videos have been viewed by millions of people, and include false information about 'cures' like Vitamin C and 'essential oils', or falsely warning that hand sanitizer can cause illness. Jordan Sather, well-known YouTube influencer with hundreds of thousands of followers across social platforms, continues to plug the "miracle mineral supplement" through his content, claiming that it kills coronavirus. In fact, it is a dangerous substance containing bleach, warned against by the FDA and others.



The FTC has also been keeping an eye on Coronavirus-related scams online. Their reporting has covered cases of undelivered purchased goods, fake charities, fake emails or texts and phishing. A federal court in Texas saw the first judicial action taken against pandemic-related fraud, blocking a website that was selling 'fake coronavirus vaccine kits', according to a statement from the Justice Department.



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COVID-19 Disinformation: Further Reading

For information on how to discuss and report on Coronavirus and disinformation responsibly, see both [First Draft](#) and [Poynter's](#) new resources. The best answer to disinformation on health issues is to flood the information space with evidence-based accurate information in digestible formats.

State-backed disinformation campaigns

China

[China is Avoiding Blame by Trolling the World](#) [The Atlantic](#)

[Timeline: The Early Days of China's Coronavirus Outbreak and Cover-up](#) [Axios](#)

[China Media Bulletin No. 142: Coronavirus-era Repression, Propaganda, Censorship, Surveillance and More](#) [Freedom House](#)

[Censored Contagion: How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media](#) [Citizen Lab](#)

[How Chinese Propaganda is Reframing the Coronavirus Narrative](#) [Deutsche Welle](#)

[Taiwan Accuses Chinese Internet Trolls of Sowing Coronavirus Panic](#) [The Straits Times](#)

[Chinese State Media Spread A False Image Of A Hospital For Coronavirus Patients In Wuhan](#) [Buzzfeed](#)

Russia

[EU warns of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign on coronavirus](#) [Financial Times](#)

[A US-Funded Lab in Tbilisi, Georgia Fights COVID-19 – and Russian Propaganda](#) [Coda Story](#)

[US Says Russia Behind Disinformation Campaign](#) [The Guardian](#)

[Russia Isn't the Only Country Pushing Coronavirus Disinformation](#) [Mother Jones](#)

[The Kremlin and disinformation about coronavirus](#) [EU vs Disinfo](#)

Extremist movements and hate groups

[Disinformation and Blame: How America's Far-Right is Capitalizing on Coronavirus](#) [The Guardian](#)

[White supremacists discussed using the coronavirus as a bioweapon, explosive internal document reveals](#) [Business Insider](#)

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Experts Say Neo-Nazi 'Accelerationists' Discuss Taking Advantage of Coronavirus Crisis [Vice](#)
White supremacists encouraging their members to spread coronavirus to cops, Jews, FBI says [ABC News](#)
Disinformation and blame: how America's far right is capitalizing on coronavirus [The Guardian](#)
The Rise of Coronavirus Hate Crimes [The New Yorker](#)
Coronavirus-Related Crimes Capitalize on Global Fear and the Urge to Blame [Time](#)
A White Nationalist Has Rebranded Himself as Coronavirus Expert.
And People Are Flocking to Him [The Daily Beast](#)

Conspiracy Theories

Here Are Some Of The Coronavirus Hoaxes That Spread In The First Few Weeks [Buzzfeed](#)
Why conspiracy theories spread faster than coronavirus [The Guardian](#)
The Coronavirus Is an Exciting Opportunity for Conspiracy Theorists [Vice](#)
Iran leader refuses US help; cites coronavirus conspiracy theory [Al Jazeera](#)
Chinese diplomat promotes conspiracy theory that US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan [CNN](#)
Coronavirus Crisis Elevates Antisemitic, Racist Tropes [ADL](#)
"The Jews invented coronavirus": Antisemites waste no time blaming the Jews for COVID-19
and say the proof will be if Israel is first to develop vaccine [Campaign Against Antisemitism](#)
Online claims that Chinese scientists stole coronavirus from Winnipeg lab have "no factual basis" [CBC](#)
QAnon Supporters And Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading A Hoax That Bill Gates Created The Coronavirus [Buzzfeed](#)

Commercialisation of disinformation

Coronavirus: Warning of spike in scams linked to crisis [BBC News](#)
This Website Has Been Scamming People Desperate For Coronavirus Masks [Buzzfeed](#)
Coronavirus scammers targeting vulnerable older people, say police [The Guardian](#)
Amazon struggles to halt tide of coronavirus profiteers [The Guardian](#)
Facebook will ban certain ads to prevent efforts to exploit coronavirus fears [The Guardian](#)
Amazon Sellers 'Hijack' Listings to Sell Face Masks Despite New Rules [Wired](#)
How Coronavirus Scammers Hide On Facebook And YouTube [Bellingcat](#)
FEMA's Fight Against Disinformation, From National Lockdown Rumors To Stockpiling [NPR](#)
FG alerts Nigerians to existence of coronavirus ransomware [The Guardian](#) [Nigeria](#)