

9th April 2020

COVID-19 disinformation briefing no. 2

Far-right mobilisation

This is the second in a series of briefings from ISD's Digital Research Unit on the information ecosystem around coronavirus (COVID-19). These briefings expose how technology platforms are being used to promote disinformation, hate, extremism and authoritarianism in the context of COVID-19. It is based on ISD's mixture of natural language processing, network analysis and ethnographic online research. This briefing focuses on the way far-right groups and individuals are mobilising around COVID-19 in the US. The first briefing in the series can be found on ISD's website.

Top Lines

Far-right groups and individuals are opportunistically using the ongoing pandemic to advance their movements and ideologies:

- COVID-19 is an increasingly important topic within far-right communities. Mentions of 'corona-chan', a slang term for COVID-19 popular with far-right groups and individuals have increased significantly across mainstream and fringe social media platforms.
- COVID-19 is being used as a 'wedge issue' to promote conspiracy theories, target minority communities, and call for extreme violence.

COVID-19 is being used to advance calls for the 'boogaloo' – an extreme right-wing meme referring to an impending civil war:

- While some of these calls appear to be ironic, others should be recognised as legitimate security threats.
- Discussions of the 'boogaloo' are increasingly pivoting towards the ways the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for violence.
- This conversation is taking place across mainstream and fringe social media.
- This trend has already manifested into real-world violence, with one alleged white supremacist terrorist dying after shootouts with the FBI.

Antisemitic speech and ideas are being adapted to incorporate COVID-19:

- Old antisemitic tropes of 'blood libel' relating to false claims of ritualistic sacrifice are being fused with a wide range of conspiracy theories which are emerging around COVID-19.
- This discussion has grown significantly throughout the pandemic.

QAnon conspiracy theorists are capitalising on the pandemic:

- QAnon influencers are using the pandemic to increase their reach online.
- Proponents of the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory are advancing a wide range of different narratives off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the idea that the pandemic is being orchestrated to manipulate US politics; is a bioweapon; that there is a hidden cure for the virus; and that it is being utilised to implement martial law.

Increased importance of discussion around COVID-19

Across a range of platforms there has been increased discussion of the term corona-chan. Corona-chan is a meme relating to the pandemic which has entered the vernacular of the extreme right. It first appeared on the anonymous 4chan imageboard website. Although not all mentions of the term are extreme, this points towards the increased importance of fringe internet culture relating to COVID-19, and repeatedly we have found this term linked to explicit calls for violence. Increased mobilisation related to the term has been noted across Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and 4chan:

4Chan

Between February and March, the term corona-chan was used

13,000x

Reddit

On Reddit, there was a

↑375%

increase in interactions with corona-chan related posts from February to March.

Facebook

In March, Facebook witnessed an increase of

↑1920%

interactions with the term.

Instagram

There were already growing interactions with the phrase throughout February, mentions of corona-chan increased in March by

↑21.5%

Calls for violence

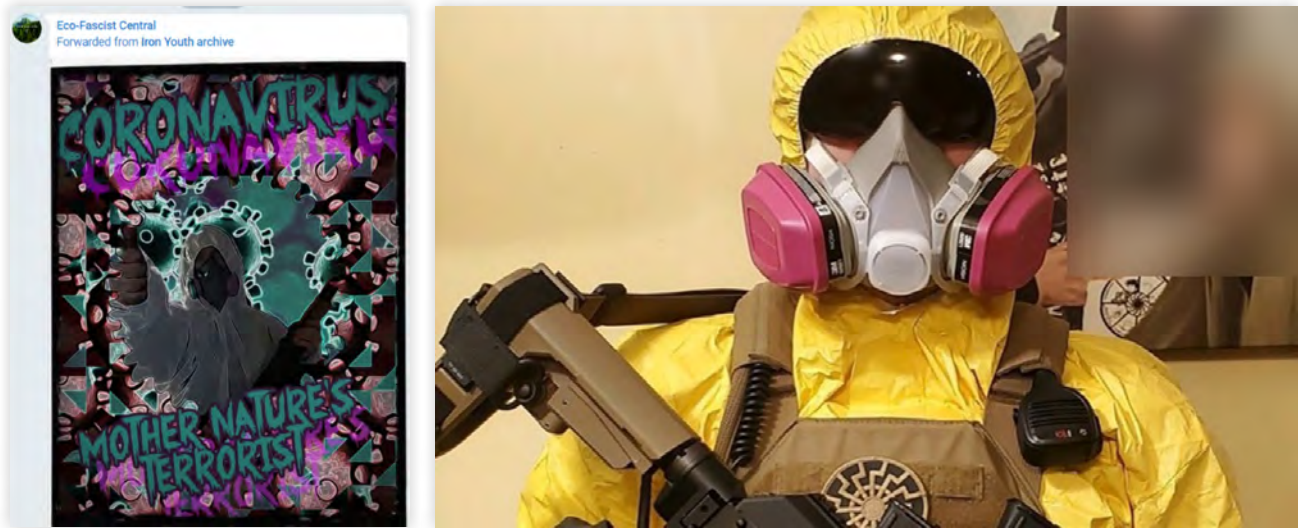
COVID-19 has been seized by far-right groups as an opportunity to call for extreme violence. This includes mobilisation by white supremacist communities as well as the increased prevalence of memes which semi-ironically promote insurrectional violence across a range of social media platforms.

White supremacist communities

White supremacist groups largely operating on the encrypted messaging app Telegram are using the pandemic to promote explicit violence. Many of these groups and individuals are 'accelerationists', meaning they hold the belief that the state's collapse should be hastened by terrorist violence, enabling the waging of a race war and the building of a white ethnostate. This idea is highly influential on contemporary extreme right terrorism, and was referenced by the terrorist who carried out the attack on Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, as well as the neo-Nazi terror group Atomwaffen.

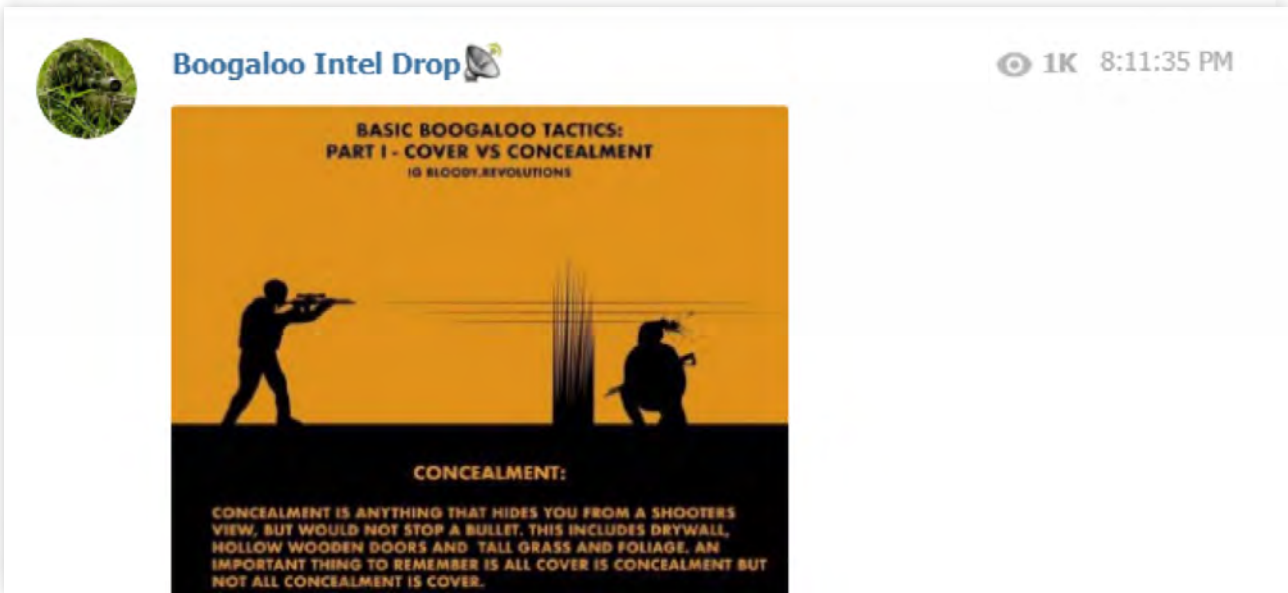
Mobilisation by white supremacist communities includes:

- The creation and dissemination of COVID-19-related content.
- Suggestions that white supremacists infected with the virus should turn themselves into bioweapons, deliberately spreading it to their political enemies.
- Calls for individuals to capitalise on the strain the virus is putting on public services and launch attacks on soft targets such as hospitals.



Left: an example of content circulated by white supremacist groups on Twitter.

Right: a user of these groups posing in protective equipment, holding an assault rifle in front of a picture of the Christchurch attacker.

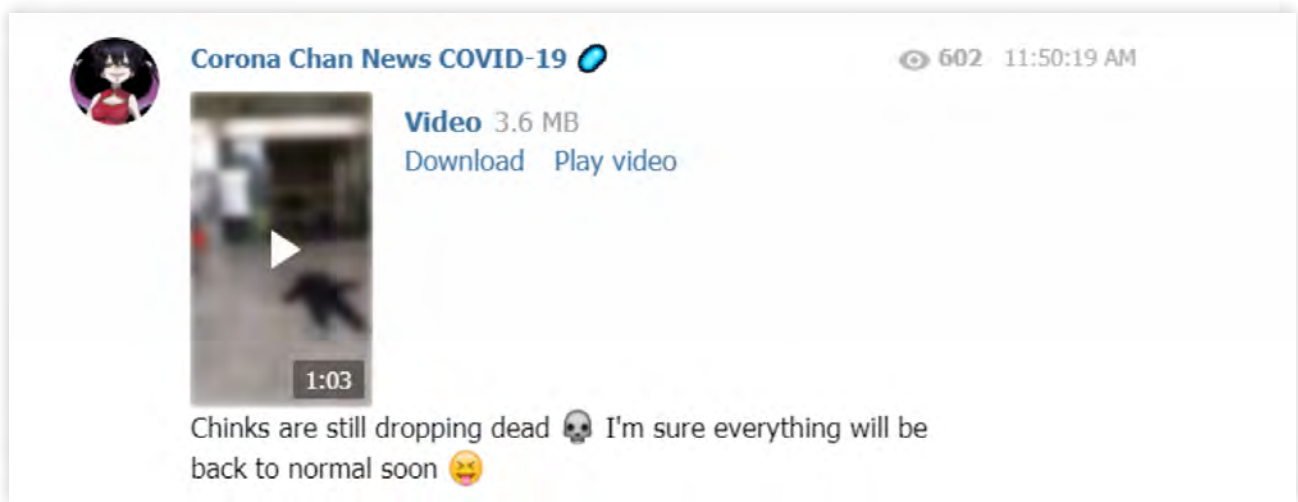


Above: material providing tactical guidance for gun fighting.

Exploration of Telegram has revealed how far-right groups are setting up a range of channels specifically to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic. One such channel is 'Corona-chan news', which was specifically created as a content aggregator for disinformation promoting a racist outlook on the pandemic. The channel is named after 4chan's term for COVID-19, which has now been widely adopted by far-right communities, and attracted an audience of 2,300 users throughout March.

Channel name/handle	Subscribers	Growth	Total reach	Average post reach	Engagement rate
Corona-chan news / @CoronaChanNews	2.3k	+2.2k	528.4k (+455,379%)	855k	37.0%

Above: Increase of 'corona-chan news' user base during March.



Above: screenshot from the corona-chan news Telegram channel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already proved a spark-point for offline violence. On March 27th, the FBI shot and killed a man in Belton, Missouri suspected of plotting an attack on a hospital treating COVID-19 patients. A few hours before being killed, the man had posted on Telegram about his belief that COVID-19 was orchestrated by 'Jews', and the language and tone of his messages are similar to that used by the communities outlined in this briefing paper.



Above: a screenshot of a Telegram comment from a user, real name Timothy Wilson, who was killed by the FBI for plotting a bomb attack in a hospital in the US.

Promotion of calls for civil war

Extreme right communities have recently adopted the term 'boogaloo' to refer to a second civil war in the United States¹. In recent months far-right groups have started articulating how COVID-19 could accelerate and enable this second civil war. ISD analysis of accelerationist discourse online shows how it is increasingly being dominated by discussion of the virus. From 1 February to 28 March we documented the following trends in discussion:

- Over 200,000 posts contained the word 'boogaloo' across social media, with 52% on Twitter, 22% on Reddit, 12% on Tumblr and 11% on 4Chan and Voat. The volume peaked on 13 March.
- The most popular hashtag used within boogaloo posts was #coronachan, a phrase created by 4Chan users which is commonly used to refer to COVID-19.
- 26% of references to boogaloo on 4chan relate to the coronavirus.
- Throughout February and March, a screenshot of a tweet from an account that promotes the hyper-libertarian social networking site Gab accrued more engagements on both Facebook and Instagram than any other post referencing the corona-chan meme. In it, the user suggests how COVID-19 has helped to raise awareness for gun rights, doomsday prepping, border control and the vulnerability of the Federal Reserve, all popular ideas relating to a second civil war.



Above: corona-chan tagged post drawing on civil war-related themes.

¹ This is an ironic reference to the 1984 film Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo, and the subsequent integration into the popular culture of the term 'Electric Boogaloo' to refer to a sequel (i.e. 'Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo').

The primary audiences on mainstream social media promoting a second civil war appear to be a highly active, loosely affiliated community of gun rights activists, libertarians and antigovernment nationalists. The central narratives from this community are:

- The US government overreaching its powers and infringing on public freedoms.
- The function of COVID-19 as a tool, used by the US government and law enforcement, to further infringe public freedoms under the guise of emergency response.
- The expectation or warning, broadly humoristic in tone, of a second civil war is inevitable.

The content within these narratives is evident in a growing number of memes and comments about:

- The stockpiling of weapons in preparation for the aforementioned second civil war.
- Content which gamifies violent action, detailing how 'players' can achieve 'points' during the civil war by carrying out violent acts.
- Calls for violence against a range of people including: US law enforcement, liberals, Muslims, Jews, Black Americans and other groups deemed as 'enemies'.



Above: a meme suggesting that users spread COVID-19 to help attack government institutions.

Numerous public Facebook groups are discussing the second civil war, with content ranging from satirical memes with violent implications to more explicitly extremist content. Public groups such as Big Igloo Bois (22k followers) and Boogaloo bois (6.5k followers) explicitly call for violent action and for followers to spread the message.

Both of these Facebook groups received significant increases in engagement over March as COVID-19 became a more prevalent topic. Big Igloo Bois received a 31% increase in interactions in February and an 88% increase in March with 127,089 interactions. Boogaloo bois received a 31% increase in February and a 215% increase in March with 6,111 interactions.

The antisemitic mobilisation around COVID-19

On 4Chan and other fringe online platforms such as 8Kun, Gab and BitChute, conspiracy theorists deciphering the global COVID-19 pandemic provide further evidence on how extremists rely on well-worn antisemitic tropes to ground their beliefs.

Conspiracies such as QAnon and #Pizzagate rely on a fictionalised group or cabal of powerful elites, often Jewish, who are controlling global events for criminal means. The billionaire investor George Soros and the Rothschild family are regular targets of these kinds of theories.

With regards to COVID-19, a popular conspiracy currently circulating online is that the virus was developed in a laboratory in Wuhan, which was also manufacturing a drug popular among the global elite, called adrenochrome. Conspiracy theorists explain that the production of the drug requires the ritualistic murder of children to harvest the necessary chemicals.

The sacrifice of children has often played a role in conspiracies put forward by influential New Age conspiracy theorists such as David Icke. They are used to demonise the imagined secretive global elite and especially Jewish people. It also forms a key part of the QAnon and #Pizzagate mythologies, with a focus during the 2016 US election campaign on how Hilary Clinton practised the satanic and ritualistic killing of children. In relation to COVID-19, conspiracists across social media are suggesting that a manufacturing plant in Wuhan (funded by George Soros) was the main source of adrenochrome for the global elite.



Above: an example of antisemitic comments on 4chan made in a discussion of COVID-19.

On the surface, these claims of child murder and satanic rituals could appear simply gratuitous and deliberately provocative. However, an increase in focus on George Soros as a centrepiece of this conspiracy, and the consistent linkages to a Jewish cabal suggests a distinct antisemitic narrative.

In particular, this is a direct reference to 'blood libel', a historic antisemitic trope which entangles Judaism with ritualistic human sacrifice and remains pervasive to this day. It is evident in narratives promoted by neo-Nazi groups and white supremacists, and it highlights an overlap in messaging from fringe conspiracy theorists and violent extremist groups. The introduction of human sacrifice into contemporary global events such as COVID-19 allows these narratives and messaging to gain traction across the ecosystem of social media and amplify hateful and extremist narratives.

Analysis of mainstream social media data indicates that the Soros theory is gaining considerable appeal:

- Between February and March, Twitter saw a 750% increase in tweets linking George Soros with COVID-19. Looking at comparable data on forums and blogs, it is probable that this was driven by QAnon theorists speculating on whether the virus was being manufactured by Soros.
- Google Trends indicates a surge in searches for Soros' name in March, with the top four related search topics being 'Greta Thunberg', 'Laboratory', 'Wuhan' and 'Coronavirus'.

More broadly, mobilisation around adrenochrome, the chemical compound at the heart of this conspiracy theory has also been observed across social media. Since 1 February 2020, an analysis of tweets that specifically mentioned both COVID-19 and QAnon revealed a growing level of interest in the drug from the QAnon community. From 1 February to 9 March, just 0.03% of all analysed data referenced adrenochrome, but by 23 March this had risen to 10%.² Mentions of the topic were increasing on message boards and forums in this period and peaked on 14 March with approximately 3,000 references to the drug on Reddit alone. Subsequently, interest on mainstream platforms increased and it appears migrated from a small, active QAnon community to a wider audience.

Between 1 February and 13 March, there were 32,434 mentions of adrenochrome across Twitter (including retweets). Ten days later this had risen to 209,029 mentions, with 82.5% coming from the US (based on Twitter's geolocation criteria). This data is further supported by the use and engagement with #adrenochrome on Instagram and Facebook. After 14 March, interactions with the hashtag increased by 815% on Instagram and 694% on Facebook.



Above: the Facebook post mentioning the drug adrenochrome with the most interactions in February and March.

Below: public **Instagram** engagement with #adrenochrome

Date	Posts	Interactions
1 February to 13 March	24	18,991
14-23 March	239	173,800
% Change	+895%	+815%

Below: public **Facebook** engagement with #adrenochrome

Date	Posts	Interactions
1 February to 10 March	823	13,667
10-26 March	4,407	108,534
% Change	+435%	694%

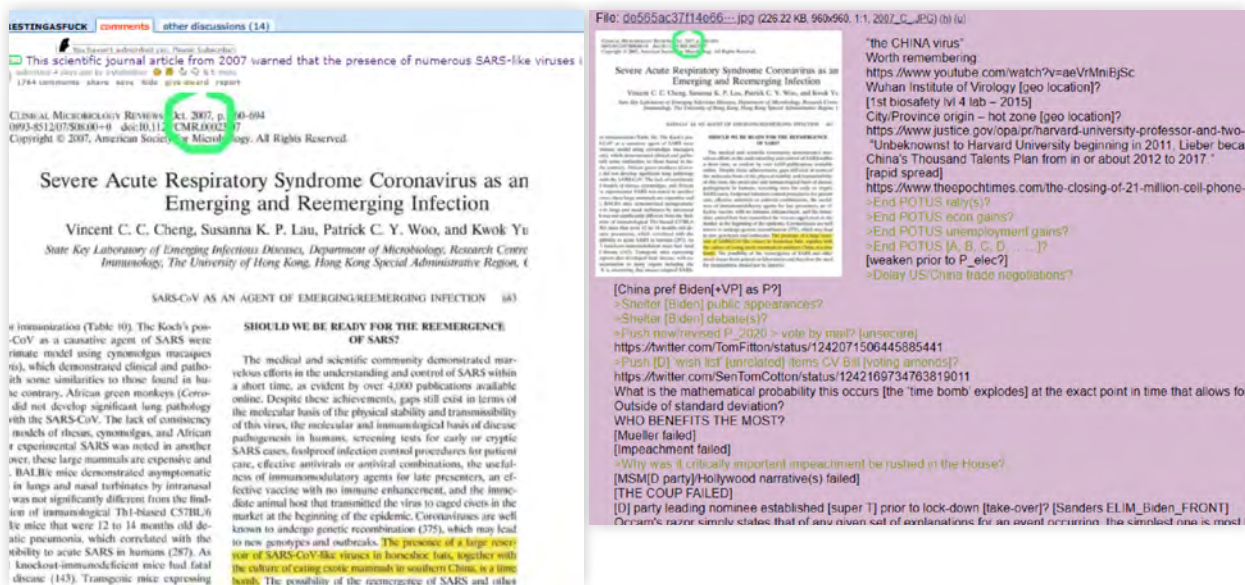
² Approximately 2,250 uses of #adrenochrome being used in conjunction with COVID-19 and QAnon related hashtags.

QAnon Mobilisation

In addition to the antisemitic tropes outlined above the far-right QAnon community have also mobilised to advance a range of other conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19. The first significant mention of it occurred on 23 March, when a user of 8Kun claiming to be the mysterious 'Q' posted a screenshot of a 2007 research paper for the American Society of Microbiology entitled: "SARS and Coronavirus as an emerging and re-emerging infection".

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

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

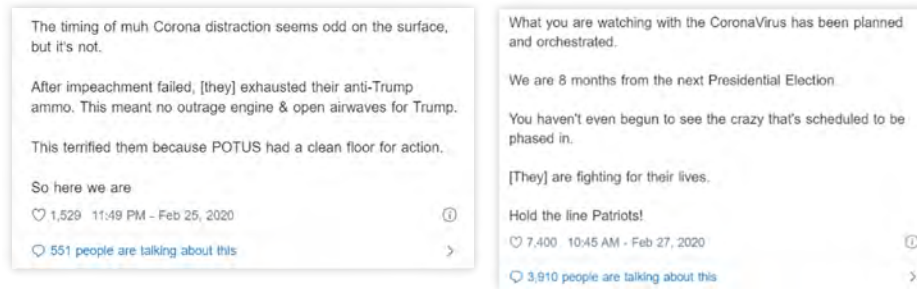


Above: A QAnon post on 8Kun (right) and the same study which was posted a day earlier on Reddit (left).

The QAnon community has also mobilised a range of other conspiracy theories linked to COVID-19 which appear to be gaining traction:

COVID-19 is a deep state plot

QAnon supporters are suggesting that the timing of the virus suggests it is a plot by the deep state to attack Donald Trump, QAnon supporters suggest that the panic surrounding the virus is orchestrated as a way of crashing the economy and harming Trump's re-election chances.



Above: QAnon supporters attempt to claim the virus is an effort to remove Trump.

COVID-19 is a cover for celebrity arrests

On Wednesday 18 March, Oprah Winfrey was the top trending name on Twitter in the US after a QAnon Facebook post claimed that police were excavating Oprah Winfrey's house in Florida, where she is not a resident.³ A previous QAnon Facebook post had claimed that COVID-19 is a military cover-up for an operation bringing justice to celebrities who are deemed to be part of a shadowy elite group controlling the government. Conspiracy theorist Liz Crokin has suggested that QAnon supporters tainted celebrities' drug supply with COVID-19.⁴ Other QAnon supporters have begun to make a running list of "elites" who have reported sick.⁵

COVID-19 is a Chinese bioweapon

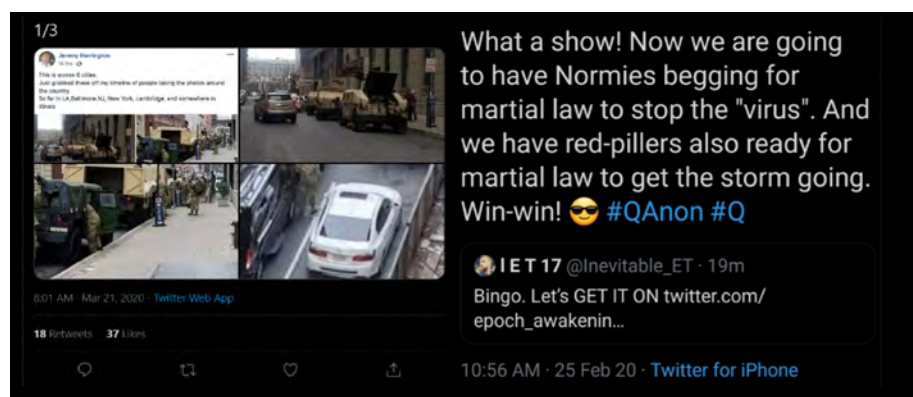
This theory is part of a wider right-wing conspiracy which some QAnon supporters have adopted. It claims that COVID-19 didn't emerge from a food market in Wuhan but was rather engineered in a nearby laboratory and then released, either deliberately or accidentally. The main piece of evidence to support this claim is that China's only Biosafety Level 4 lab (the maximum safety level used to deal with highly dangerous pathogens) is also located in Wuhan,⁶ and conservative media has repeatedly highlighted the connection,⁷ despite experts saying that there is absolutely no scientific evidence that the genome is man-made.⁸

The super-rich have a cure

A common QAnon narrative is that the super-rich has access to advanced medical technology and are hiding from the general population. In this case, QAnon influencer Jordan Sather claimed that there was a patent filed in 2015 by the Pirbright Institute in England, which covered a potential vaccine for COVID-19. The Institute had previously received a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, so Sather concluded that the super-rich had advanced warning of COVID-19 and are hiding a cure.

Martial Law

Another key tenant of QAnon conspiracies is that, eventually, Trump will declare martial law to help facilitate the arrest of the deep state cabal during what is referred to by supporters as "The Storm". The fact that the National Guard members and military have begun to be deployed in several US states to assist with COVID-19 relief efforts has galvanised QAnon followers, who see it as evidence that "The Storm" is finally arriving. Followers have excitedly shared screenshots of the deployment, alluding to what comes next.



Above: screenshots showing QAnon supporters welcoming the deployment of the National Guard.

³ The Washington Post, 'NOT TRUE': Oprah Winfrey debunks bizarre QAnon conspiracy theory spreading across the Internet (18 March 2020), [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁴ Right Wing Watch, Liz Crokin Claims Celebrities Are Getting Coronavirus From Tainted 'Adenochrome Supply' (18 March 2020), [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁵ Twitter, [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁶ News in Focus, [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁷ Washington Examine, Tom Cotton says coronavirus may have originated in Wuhan 'super laboratory' (30 January 2020), [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁸ The Washington Post, Experts debunk fringe theory linking China's coronavirus to weapons research (29 January 2020), [Accessed 06/04/2020].

⁹ BuzzFeed News, QAnon Supporters And Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading A Hoax That Bill Gates Created The Coronavirus (23 January 2020), [Accessed 06/04/2020].

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