

12th May 2020

Far-right exploitation of COVID-19

ISD and BBC Click investigation

ISD and BBC Click Investigation analyses far right exploitation of Covid-19 disinformation and uncovers massive volumes of engagement with COVID-19 disinformation on Facebook.

Investigation Briefing note:

This week, ISD released a pioneering investigation with BBC Click, mapping the scale and nature of online disinformation around COVID-19 in the US, as well as its co-option by far right actors. The investigation was featured on BBC World's Click programme, as well as on the BBC News website.

ISD researchers found that **34 known disinformation-hosting websites gathered the staggeringly high volume of 80 million interactions** on public Facebook between January and April, 2020. For context, in the same time period, posts linking to the **WHO's website received 6.2 million interactions**, with the website of the **US Center for Disease Control (CDC) receiving 6.4 million interactions** through posts on public Facebook.

Our analysis – which revealed hundreds of thousands of far right posts around COVID-19 and millions of engagements with known disinformation sites – provides an important evidence base for understanding how extremist groups, disinformation actors and fringe medical communities are working to exploit the pandemic online, and highlights a **marked increase in conversations within far right circles about so-called 'elites' including Bill Gates, George Soros, the Rothschilds and Jeff Bezos** and false information about their role in the creation or spread of the virus. The conversations monitored by ISD researchers referenced the virus as a tool of social control, a purposeful plot to kill off certain populations, or a means to make money for these individuals and their institutions, all of which are unfounded claims. ISD's Digital Analysis Unit is working on an ongoing basis to expose and analyse hateful disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 and more broadly in the run up to the US 2020 election, informing grassroots and policy responses. Our research will continue to track how disinformation and weaponised hate is being used during the election to marginalise communities, push divisive narratives and undermine democracy, using a mix of data analytics, OSINT research and policy analysis.

Summarised below are the methodologies utilised by ISD researchers for this investigation, and the key findings of the research.

For more information on our ongoing research, including how you can get involved or support our work, please sign up to our mailing list, or get in touch at info@isdglobal.org.

Methodology I:

Understanding the far-right conversation around COVID-19 online

Firstly, in order to establish the proportional scale of far-right narratives around COVID-19 over time, expert analysts curated a list of relevant far-right public Facebook pages and groups and gathered all posts from 1st January to 12th April inclusive, using the Crowdtangle API. These pages and groups have been selected either based on affiliation with known hate groups operating in the USA, or on a review of whether the content they promote is relevant to far-right ideology. This includes the dissemination of hostile, hateful or othering narratives targeting minority groups, conspiracy theories, or disinformation which advances far-right talking points and ideology.

Crowdtangle data includes all posts from Facebook that are made by a public page, public group, or verified public person, which has ever (since 2014): had more than 110,000 likes; or has ever been added to a CrowdTangle list by any organisation using the platform; and is posted without the poster aiming content at a particular audience using Facebook's targeting and gating tools (eg. age-gating for alcohol pages, geo-gating if the content has country rights restrictions, etc.)

Through this process, researchers collected around 150,000 public Facebook posts sent by 38 far-right pages or groups since 1st January 2020. The only posts available for analysis are those created by page or groups, not individual users on those pages or groups. ISD analysts manually determined 18 central themes of interest in the content shared by these pages and groups over the three-month period.¹ Researchers created keyword lists for each theme, which were entered into a keyword annotator in order to parse the 150,000 messages into relevant thematic categories for analysis.

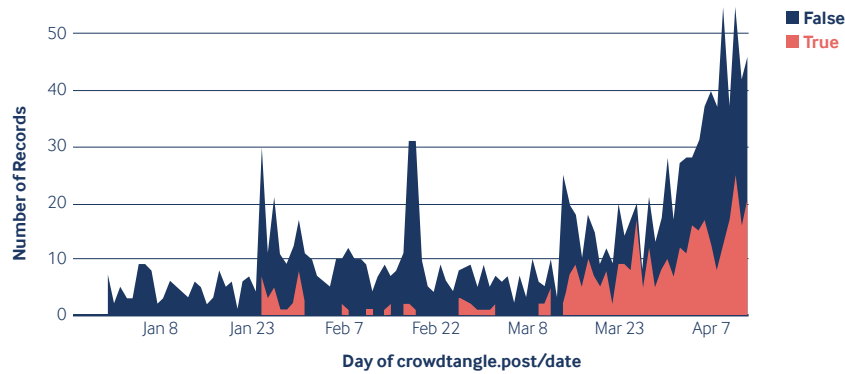
Each of these 18 collections were then cross-analysed with a keyword list comprised of words and phrases relating to COVID-19.² This allowed ISD to map the volume and relationship between salient far-right narratives and these same actors' attention to COVID-19 over the time period. ISD produced a graph for each of the 18 narrative themes, overlaying the proportion of each conversation that also mentioned one or more of the COVID-19 related keywords. A selection of those graphs are displayed below.

¹ The categories determined for analysis were: Elites; 5G; anti-LGBT; Abortion; Pedophilia; Guns; Crime; Islam/Anti-muslim; Judaism/Anti-semitism; White supremacy; Anti-black; Anti-asian; immigration; QAnon/DeepState; Health; Environment; Politics - Democrats; Politics - Trump and Republicans.

² Search parameters were set to include sub-matches, so keywords like "corona" would match with all posts containing "coronavirus", for example. This ensured all references to coronavirus and COVID-19 were captured in analysis. The list of search parameters included: "corona; wuhan virus; wuhanvirus; covid; chinese virus; china virus; wuhan plague; mystery virus; lockdown; pandemic; wuhan; unidentified virus; virus scam; virus hype; virus panic; cancel everything".

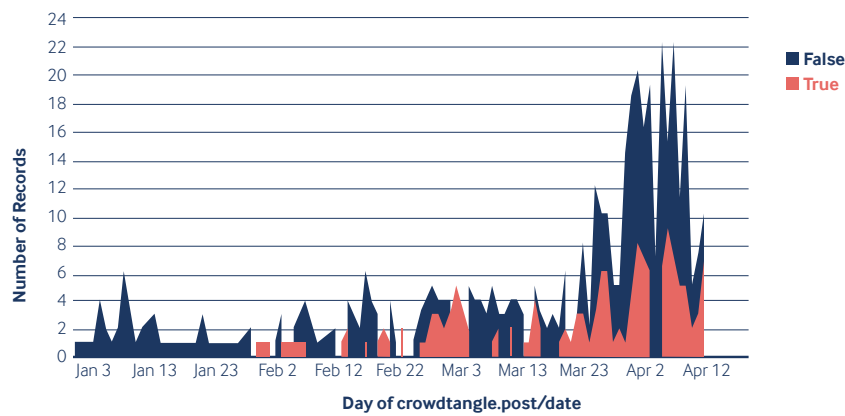
Graph N1:

Conversations relating to the 'Elites' theme, overlaid with conversation proportion relevant to COVID-19.



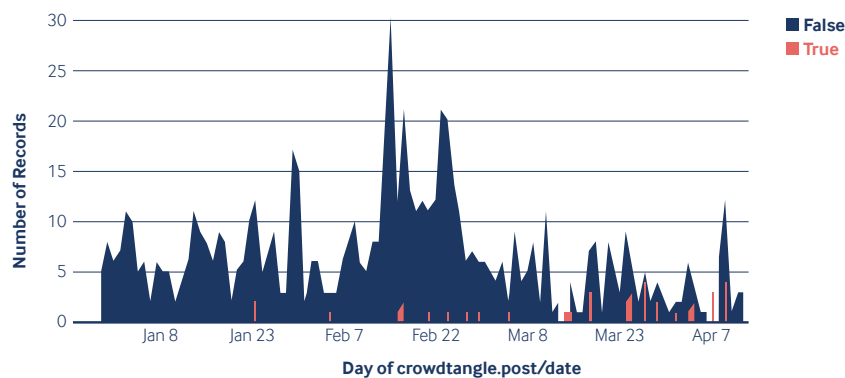
Graph N2:

Conversations relating to the '5G' theme, overlaid with conversation proportion relevant to COVID-19.



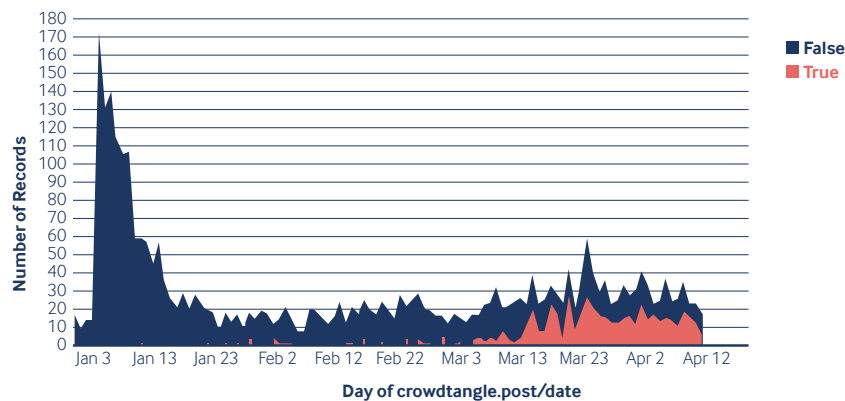
Graph N3:

Conversations relating to the 'Anti-LGBT' theme, overlaid with conversation proportion relevant to COVID-19.



Graph N8:

Conversations relating to the 'Islam/Anti-Muslim' theme, overlaid with conversation proportion relevant to COVID-19.



Key Findings I:

The far-right has dramatically increased its attention on certain topics in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The clearest pattern in the data is the increase in conversations about so-called 'elites', including Bill Gates, George Soros, the Rothschilds and Jeff Bezos. Qualitative analysis determined that these conversations contained references to the virus as a tool of social control, a purposeful plot to kill off certain populations, or as a route for these individuals or their related institutions to make money off the release of a virus, all of which are unfounded claims without verifiable evidence.

In addition to this focus, the far-right groups studied became more prolific in discussions about the following themes since the lockdown began:

- Conversations about elites, which included mentions of frequent far-right topics including a 'global cabal', George Soros, the Rothschilds, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates. These rose steadily from 13 March 2019, as well as a short peak in mid-February;
- Conversations about 5G, rising drastically in mid-March 2019 from very low levels prior to that point;
- Conversations about QAnon and the Deep State;
- Conversations about health, which included content relevant to vaccinations.

Others topics of interest to the far-right groups studied remained relatively steady in volume across the time period, including:

- Conversations about Islam/anti-Muslim tropes;
- Conversations about Judaism/anti-semitic tropes;
- Conversations about crime and concerns over crime rates;
- Conversations about immigration.

The themes that had the highest proportion of COVID-19 relevant discussion within them included:

- Conversations about elites;
- Conversations about 5G;
- Conversations about crime and concerns about crime rates;
- Conversations about Islam/anti-Muslim tropes;
- Conversations with anti-Asian tropes;
- Conversations about immigration;
- Conversations about health.

Methodology II: COVID-19 misinformation websites shared on Facebook

During the course of this research, ISD began to form a picture of the ecosystem of external sites many of these far-right groups were linking out to. To analyse this further, researchers used a list of 34 US websites publishing false information about the COVID-19 pandemic produced by NewsGuard, which rates the credibility of news and information websites.³ ISD set out to understand the scale of the presence of these sites on public Facebook pages and groups, the different kinds of agendas behind these misinformation sites, and their potential audiences on Facebook.

Analysts manually assessed each of these sites to understand better the nature of the content contained on each. The backgrounds of these pages vary, with a mixture of sites focusing on political or ideological content, discussion of health and alternative medicine, and some driven by commercial motives. These categories are not mutually exclusive: some sites may be mainly focused on politics, but also have dedicated health sections, or publish clickbait articles while operating extensive merchandise or alternative medicine stores, which would indicate a commercial motivation. Across these sites, conspiracy theories often seem to provide the gateway between political and health-focused pages.

Among the 34 websites:

- **21** of the websites include political or ideological content
- **24** of the websites include health and alternative medicine content
- **13** of the websites include commercial sales/appear to be driven by commercial motives

For those that were categorised by ISD as representing more than one of the three interests above:

- **8** of the websites contained a mixture of political and health-focused content
- **6** of the websites focused on health and additionally had a commercial arm (eg. selling alternative medical products)
- **4** of the websites were mainly political, but also operated extensive merchandise stores (eg. selling T-shirts, mugs, hats etc.).

To understand the sharing patterns of these domains on Facebook, researchers collected all public Facebook pages and groups that have created posts containing links to any of these domains via the Crowdtangle API from 1st January 2020 and 12th April 2020 and downloaded the resulting datasets for manual analysis with R. ISD calculated the number of interactions per domain by calculating the total interactions per post on Facebook, summing up the interactions for all posts that mentioned each domain. Interactions include the reactions, shares and comments per post.

³ 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'*).

Key Findings II:

The volume of interactions with these disinformation-hosting websites on public Facebook was extremely high. The 34 websites together gathered over 80 million interactions on public Facebook in the time period studied.

For context, in the same time period, posts linking to the WHO's website received 6.2 million interactions, with the website of the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) receiving 6.4 million interactions through posts on public Facebook. While these information sources certainly have a variety of different routes to reach users on the platform, in addition to links in page and group posts, the divergence in scale is a stark one.

The 80 million interactions with the websites studied included:

- almost **150,000** interactions for HumansAreFree.com, which has recently made claims that the "pandemic" had been prepared years before the outbreak.
- about **1.7 million** interactions for RealFarmacy.com, which falsely claims that personal ultraviolet lamps are a safe remedy for coronavirus.
- more than **48 million** interactions in this time period for posts linking to TheEpochTimes.com, a news site whose advertising was banned by Facebook, and which was accused of covert inauthentic activity by both Facebook and Twitter last year.⁴

ISD researchers additionally analysed how many interactions the different categories of websites received when their website was linked on public Facebook Pages and Groups: political misinformation websites; health misinformation websites; and commercial misinformation websites (below).

Both in terms of total interactions and interactions per post, political websites were more successful than health websites and commercial websites.

- Political websites on average gathered **377** interactions per post;
- Health websites on average gathered **346** interactions per post;
- Commercial websites were far behind with an average of **180** interactions per post.

Facebook responded to the data provided as part of the study with the following statement to BBC Click: "We have removed a number of links shared by BBC Click for violating our policies on hate speech and the spread of harmful misinformation ... Where a post does not violate our policies but is deemed by third party fact-checkers to be false, we reduce its distribution and show warning labels marking the post as false. When people see these warning labels, 95% of the time they do not go on to view the original content," it said. In a crisis where communication is key and information can save or cost lives, reactive and opaque responses to viral disinformation and hateful exploitation of the crisis are not enough. This research has exposed just a fraction of what is an emerging crisis in disinformation around COVID-19 on the world's largest technology platforms. There remains a lot more work to be done in order to stem the tide of harmful and potentially life-threatening intentional falsehoods online during this crisis.

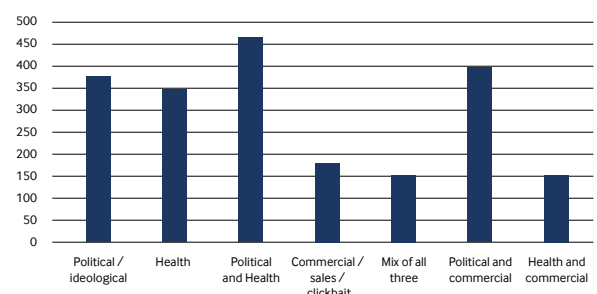


Fig.1: Average interactions per post on publicly available Facebook pages and groups for seven website categories for 34 disinformation-hosting websites (1 Jan 2020 – 12 April 2020)

⁴ Previous reporting on The Epoch Times' Facebook presence and activities can be found at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/trump-qanon-impending-judgment-day-behind-facebook-fueled-rise-epoch-n1044121>

Appendix 1: Total interactions on publically available Facebook pages and groups for posts linking to 34 disinformation-hosting domains (1 January 2020 – 12 April 2020)

i	Frequency	comment Count	share Count	like Count	angry Count	wow Count	sad Count	haha Count	love Count	interactions Count
1 Intellihub.com	902	2394	16156	3751	1019	1980	643	354	52	26349
2 BigLeaguePolitics.com	3333	16799	26787	22029	29889	3935	1906	5958	3179	110482
3 SOTT.net	3796	11128	98412	35833	7411	8217	2545	2161	3333	169040
4 WND.com	16719	678379	1619637	1692712	727718	96819	95998	341727	228020	5481010
5 DCClothesline.com	1756	2760	7484	5388	5029	1243	549	857	622	23932
6 GreenMedInfo.com	3294	16843	99445	108554	8497	7865	5724	3287	12411	262626
7 RealFarmacy.com	5155	60900	951447	461244	18869	40333	36588	6271	119657	1695309
8 InfoWars.com	8273	17410	27543	29818	16121	4670	2310	6849	3410	108131
9 GNews.org	1306	2945	9438	14999	3897	4087	1321	671	226	37584
10 HealthImpactNews.com	2137	12141	129792	72607	7587	5099	3698	268	17404	248596
11 DCDirtyLaundry.com	1827	3254	9868	6796	6169	1520	592	915	873	29987
12 HealthNutNews.com	1029	22780	36285	44859	9967	10286	15253	2708	7651	149789
13 BeforeItsNews.com	1584	2697	6688	5445	1848	1615	549	240	401	19483
14 AmericanThinker.com	17078	155759	489660	411051	143349	30436	22180	64109	58667	1375211
15 HumansAreFree.com	3198	13011	88148	23651	15526	3869	2641	1614	1371	149831
16 WakingTimes.com	4513	39727	263591	167341	54631	14207	17870	6548	18747	582662
17 ActivistPost.com	4589	13382	54096	34132	10650	4129	2595	2481	2140	123605
18 ZeroHedge.com	21965	68281	151633	141807	50845	24780	11715	31019	9916	489996
19 Mercola.com	9274	55539	673675	599149	12461	32140	13924	2499	54728	1444115
20 SonsOfLibertyMedia.com	3489	40887	112952	107233	66960	7688	9415	8843	7427	361405
21 TheEpochTimes.com	86105	5301219	10960831	18601383	2910668	1152958	3162075	1465865	4512084	48067083
22 TheMindUnleashed.com	13257	441636	3350125	2615722	366279	234278	320217	138470	899146	8365873
23 NowTheEndBegins.com	6546	68746	160794	97385	51182	15724	16105	6227	9863	426026
24 JimHumble.co	32	107	103	184	5	3	1	1	26	430
25 Medicine-Today.net	111	3156	9187	8704	313	1705	451	5505	221	29242
26 JimBakkerShow.com	173	3614	2848	8336	149	573	730	465	1018	17733
27 NaturalHealth365.com	630	981	6388	5005	120	339	145	28	331	13337
28 RedStateWatcher.com	7599	1675971	621286	2793937	1037939	131264	155373	859909	354282	7629961
29 TheTruthAboutCancer.com	1241	15960	106593	98094	3476	4387	4353	387	8344	241594
30 TheBL.com	42	86	68	726	4	12	2	1	200	1099
31 WorldHealth.net	531	839	6091	6751	85	179	67	25	525	14562
32 StopMandatoryVaccination.com	960	4995	28236	12736	5082	1091	17488	244	1365	71237
33 WorldNewsDailyReport.com	2750	33721	160371	36939	3843	16565	2638	69090	3259	326426
34 RushLimbaugh.com	4930	455784	451965	2355800	172669	60393	155891	235111	437703	4325316

About the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

We are a global team of data analysts, researchers, innovators, policy-experts, practitioners and activists - powering solutions to extremism, hate and polarisation.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent nonprofit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising global tide of hate, extremism and polarisation.

We combine sector-leading expertise in global extremist movements with advanced digital analysis of disinformation and weaponised hate to deliver innovative, tailor-made policy and operational responses to these threats.

ISD draws on fifteen years of anthropological research, leading expertise in global extremist movements, state-of-the-art digital analysis and a track record of trust and delivery in over 40 countries around the world to:

- Support central and local governments in designing and delivering evidence-based policies and programmes in response to hate, extremism, terrorism, polarisation and disinformation
- Empower youth, practitioners and community influencers through innovative education, technology and communications programmes.
- Advise governments and tech companies on policies and strategies to mitigate the online harms we face today and achieve a 'Good Web' that reflects our liberal democratic values

Only in collaboration with all of these groups can we hope to outcompete the extremist mobilization of our time and build safe, free and resilient societies for generations to come.

All of ISD's programmes are delivered with the support of donations and grants. We have the data on what works. We now need your help to scale our efforts.

Support our work: isdglobal.org/donate

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to extremism
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