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to extremism, hate  
and disinformation

THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM

BETWEEN CONSPIRACY  
AND EXTREMISM:  
A LONG COVID THREAT?  
INTRODUCTORY  
PAPER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beyond its immediate public health impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic has driven a spectrum of harmful activity both online and offline. One of the most prominent examples of this has been what the World Health Organization has dubbed the ‘infodemic’,<sup>1</sup> the mass proliferation of false and misleading information which has led to mistrust in health authorities and undermined the public health response. The spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories has helped fuel anti-vaccine narratives which have become well established globally over a number of decades,<sup>2</sup> and has manifested in targeted conspiracy theories which have advanced anti-minority hatred.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, extremist movements have also capitalised on the pandemic, using it as an opportunity to mobilise and call for action.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the promotion of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and the advancement of existing violent extremist movements, the pandemic has also ignited protest movements globally. Cohorts of activists have taken to the streets in response to what they see as authoritarian overreach by governments in their response to the pandemic. While concerns about government overreach are reasonable during a pandemic which has seen a range of authoritarian responses globally, individuals associated with these movements have also been involved in a range of harmful activity, including attempted terrorist attacks and killings.

To better understand the nature of these movements ISD has developed a series of briefings analysing the make-up and activities of anti-lockdown activists across Europe and North America. Importantly, this work compares these phenomena across borders, identifying commonalities between these contexts. Our analysis identifies how mobilisation against COVID restrictions has brought together a broad-church of activists, with right-wing extremists rubbing shoulders with New Age spiritualists and alternative health practitioners.

Although there is a lack of ideological coherence across these movements, we have found that across countries they are consistently engaged in harmful activity of different types, including the amplification of disinformation, harassment, hate speech, and threats of violence. This research also demonstrates how the individuals and groups involved in this activity often extend beyond more established extremist movements. By exploring the eclectic, and wide ranging nature of these communities, we frame the challenge in terms of increasingly *hybrid threats* to public safety, which will require a new generation of responses, going beyond current counter-extremism policy paradigms.

This overview paper introduces these briefings, presents key trends in anti-lockdown activism from across country contexts and explores the policy implications of these trends.

## Key Trends

Across this series of briefings, we examine protest movements responding to COVID restrictions in the USA, Canada, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy. Analysts qualitatively assessed anti-lockdown activity in each country through a combination of open source assessments of reporting around protests against COVID restrictions and ethnographic exploration of social media activity. Through this approach we sought to better understand the makeup of these protest movements; the extent to which they were engaged in potentially harmful activity including threats of violence, hate speech, and the promotion of conspiracy theories; and the groups and individuals they target.

Although there are differences between country contexts we were able to identify commonalities which align these movements across borders:

- **Protest movements mobilising against COVID restrictions commonly connect anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, anti-government actors, and extreme right-wing movements.** Although the constituent parts of these movements consist of a wide-range of highly localised groups, the involvement of these core communities was near universal in the countries we monitored. These actors are often motivated by shared narratives, including ‘New World Order’ conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine sentiment. Additionally, well-established extremist figures and groups from the far-right were involved in these movements in all countries analysed, using them as opportunities to agitate around anti-government talking points. This suggests there is an international pattern of reactions to COVID restrictions, where these polarising policies act as a nexus which brings together a diverse and opportunistic community of actors.
- **A strong online dimension to offline mobilisation constitutes a unifying trend across the movements.** Social media platforms commonly used by these movements include

Facebook, YouTube and Telegram. These platforms are used to disseminate the conspiracy theories and disinformation which draw people into these movements, act as an amplifier for key influencers and figureheads, and act as community hubs for movements to organise and plan demonstrations and activism.

- **Communities mobilising against COVID restrictions engage in a range of harmful activities.** Across countries we found extremist fringes present in all movements using anti-lockdown activity as an opportunity to mobilise against police and governments as well as minority communities. More broadly we identified commonalities in harmful activity across the country contexts investigated:

- Constituent groups involved in anti-lockdown activity have promoted anti-minority hatred in all country contexts we examined;
- Movements in all countries are heavily involved in the promotion of disinformation and conspiracy theories;
- Members of these movements have been involved in harassment, threats and intimidation in all contexts analysed;
- The most common target of hostility across these different contexts are politicians;
- Violence at protests or calls for violence against groups including politicians, police and journalists have been observed in all of the countries analysed.

	Violence at protests	Spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories	Threats and intimidation	Calls for violence	Anti-minority hatred	Arson/bombing /armed attacks
Ireland	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
UK	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Italy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Canada	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
USA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Figure 1. Overview of harmful activity across contexts

- **These heterogeneous movements reflect an increasingly hybrid digital threat landscape.** In analysis of online harms in the context of COVID and elsewhere, we have identified how boundaries between disinformation, hate speech and harassment, conspiracy theories, and extremist mobilisation have become increasingly blurred.<sup>5</sup> Through the networking afforded by fringe and mainstream social media these phenomena, and the communities driving them, have become entangled. In the protest movements emerging around COVID we see a physical manifestation of this hybrid online threat landscape, whereby disparate groups of actors running from New Age spiritualists to conspiracy theorists are coordinating and converging with more established extremist movements. This hybrid threat landscape poses a number of policy challenges and implications for future work addressing extremism.

## Policy implications

This hybrid threat landscape represents a new face of extremism. Through the leveraging of broader grievances, anti-lockdown activism provides opportunities for new audiences who are not primarily motivated by exclusionary and supremacist ideologies to be brought into the sphere of influence of extremists, and also prompted to engage in harmful activity. Counter-extremism responses developed for fringe extremist movements challenges are poorly equipped for this more mainstreamed threat, where audiences for extremist messaging and groups engaged in harmful activity extend beyond traditional movements.

Effectively addressing this challenge will require a new generation of strategies, both in policy and proactive programming. This includes the need for **a new conceptual framework** for dealing with expansive, conspiracy driven threats; **a new generation of interventions** for countering the messaging of these loose movements and bringing people out of their folds; **international collaboration to address this** threat; and **more effective social media regulation** which focusses on the platform design problems which facilitate the growth of these movements. Further discussion of these recommendations is provided below.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 24<sup>th</sup> 2021 former nurse Kate Shemirani addressed a crowd of thousands of people in Trafalgar Square, London, comparing doctors and nurses working to stem the COVID-19 pandemic to those in the Nazi regime.<sup>6</sup> The crowd she addressed was part of a 'Worldwide rally for freedom', a coordinated global event linked to online conspiracy communities.<sup>7</sup> Attendees included a mixture of ardent conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists and far-right figures, gathered to protest COVID-19 restrictions and countermeasures.<sup>8</sup> Just under a year earlier, a similarly mixed crowd of anti-government activists, conspiracy theorists and white supremacists attempted to storm Germany's parliament in protest against lockdown measures.<sup>9</sup>

These scenes bear stark similarity to hundreds of others across Europe and North America. From London, to Berlin, to Toronto a burgeoning movement is making its presence felt. These movements are reacting to pandemic responses with fiery rhetoric, street protests, threats of violence, and in some cases violent acts, such as the killing of a 20-year-old clerk in the western German town of Idar-Oberstein in Rhineland-Palatinate on 18 September 2021.<sup>10</sup>

This trend in concerning anti-lockdown activism is the most tangible result of a global surge in conspiracy theories and disinformation around the pandemic opposing COVID responses including mask mandates, lockdowns and vaccinations.<sup>16</sup> More broadly these movements evidence a radicalising trajectory, with elements using the pandemic as an opportunity to promote hatred against minorities and advocate for the use of extreme violence against politicians, journalists and health officials who are seen as their opponents.

Although this activity differs on a country by country basis common threads emerge. Rather than a cohesive organisation, these protest groups can better be understood as loose movements connected by their outrage at the curbing of civil liberties resulting from government responses to the pandemic. Concerns about government overreach and creeping authoritarianism are of course justified, and protest should always be a cornerstone of free, democratic societies. However, there is a global trend whereby parts of these movements engage in harmful activities, in the most extreme instances leading to loss of life.

Importantly while these movements have been treated as extremist in some contexts, their membership extends beyond traditional extremist communities. Instead, they represent a hybrid threat where anti-establishment street protests, established extremist movements and conspiracy theories opportunistically align.

## A CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

It is clear that these loose movements reacting to COVID restrictions are providing a vehicle for more established far-right extremist movements. Such mobilisation is to be expected, and previous ISD analysis has demonstrated how far-right extremists are opportunistic, seizing on crises to expand their reach and audience.<sup>17</sup> However, the presence of far-right actors does not mean that these entire movements are extremist. At ISD we understand extremism to be:

“ *The advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based ‘in-group’ over all ‘out-groups.’ It advances a dehumanising ‘othering’ mind-set incompatible with pluralism and universal Human Rights.* ”<sup>18</sup>

The movements analysed here contain constituent groups which have a long track record of dehumanising activity targeting identity-based out-groups, such as the Groypers,<sup>19</sup> the Canadian National Party,<sup>20</sup> Forza Nuova,<sup>21</sup> and Identitäre Bewegung.<sup>22</sup> But these movements also contain New Age health enthusiasts, conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists, and individual protestors who do not so easily fit the definition of extremism. Whilst the activity engaged in by some of these groups such as the blockading of hospitals<sup>23</sup> is dangerous in the extreme and shows a disregard for human life, it does not target one group of people based on their identity, and thus doesn't easily fit our working definition of extremism.

Government spokespeople and law enforcement have also used different terminology to describe these movements, but extremism is not a universally used framing. The Verfassungsschutz, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, has formed a new category to describe this activity, calling it “Delegitimization of the State Relevant to the Protection of the Constitution”,<sup>24</sup> essentialising the movement by its anti-democratic tendencies. AIVD, the Dutch national security service, has stated that the intimidation, threats and violence stemming from these groups represents a “breeding ground” for extremism.<sup>25</sup> In Canada, The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians' annual report for 2020, while not addressing the anti-lockdown movement itself, acknowledged that lockdown measures have the potential to further radicalise people.<sup>26</sup> UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson used less nuanced language, describing members of the movement as “thugs”, and calling harassment of journalists an attack on the “lifeblood of our democracy”.<sup>27</sup> In Ireland government officials have

focussed on the public health risk posed by these groups,<sup>28</sup> whilst in the Netherlands and Italy individual constituents of these broader movements have been investigated by police for potential terrorist activity after a pipe-bomb blast at a testing centre in Bovenkarspel, Netherlands, and plans were uncovered which supposedly pointed towards anti-vaccine activist planning attacks across Italy.<sup>29</sup>

These movements clearly pose a conceptual challenge. Although there are strong similarities between these movements across borders, analytical frameworks to describe and accordingly respond to them are currently lacking. Whilst their constituent parts often contain extremist elements, the movements themselves transcend extremism. Categorising these movements as terrorist or extremist based on the activity of some of their constituent parts would not only be inaccurate but also dangerous, opening up the door for disproportionate responses and potentially accelerating their radicalisation. So, how should these anti-lockdown activists be conceptualised?

Central to these anti-lockdown movements is a conspiracy theorist mind-set which misdirects concerns about the pandemic into hate, harassment, and violence. This conspiracy theorist mind-set acts as the glue connecting extremists, conspiracy theorists, anti-government actors and other communities. This bears strong similarities to the contemporary online harms landscape, where the lines between hate, extremism and disinformation are often blurred.

The hybrid ecosystem which has evolved around COVID restrictions bears similarity to other threats which have recently arisen including the global QAnon movement, and the ‘Stop the Steal’ community which helped drive the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in 2021.<sup>30</sup> All have been fundamentally shaped by the mass proliferation of harmful conspiracy theories online,<sup>31</sup> resulting in loose coalitions of individuals and movements which extend beyond more established extremist circles, and lack an ideological coherency.<sup>32</sup> It is perhaps through this lens, of loose movements characterised by the collision and hybridisation of a number of threats, that anti-COVID activism can best be understood.



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Although the loose coalitions which have formed globally around COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories might dissipate when restrictions are eventually lifted, it remains possible that they will provide new lifeblood to the extremist and conspiracy theorist constituents which have capitalised on these movements. However, perhaps the bigger challenge raised by these coalitions are the broader structural issues arising around hybrid threats. Given the rise of similar movements in response to domestic disinformation campaigns in the USA it remains likely that these hybrid communities of conspiracy theorists and extremists will define threats to democracy and public safety for years to come.

This hybrid threat landscape represents a novel challenge, where harmful activity is promoted to much broader swathes of society than traditional extremist groups. Responding to this mainstreamed challenge, where support for and involvement with harmful hybrid movements is commonly driven by the mass proliferation of conspiracy theories and disinformation is something which current counter-terrorism and counter-extremism infrastructure is poorly equipped to respond to. If these trends continue to become the new face of extremism, it will be essential to establish new policy and response paradigms.



## THE ROAD TO A HYBRID THREAT LANDSCAPE

This collision of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and extremism is not new, and has been especially present in anti-government extremism in the USA for decades.<sup>33</sup> However it has accelerated over the past five years. When considering what responses are needed to this hybrid threat landscape it is helpful to consider the dynamics which have shaped its formation and will continue to accelerate it.

One of the most important dynamics behind the proliferation of hybrid threats in recent years has been the mainstreaming of harmful conspiracies, which both legitimises these ideas and allows them to reach an expanded audience. One of the most crucial dynamics behind mainstreaming has been the role of political actors in stoking fringe ideas. This is perhaps best illustrated by the Trump administration's whole-sale embrace of fringe talking points including the 'big lie'.<sup>34</sup> However it is a trend which has similarly been seen in a number of other contexts, including in Europe through the promotion of extremist anti-migrant talking points,<sup>35</sup> and also in anti-COVID activism in Canada, where the People's Party of Canada's leader Maxime Bernier has been present at anti-lockdown rallies.<sup>36</sup>

Related to domestic political engagement with conspiracy theories and extremist talking points has been the mass proliferation of disinformation. Hostile state information operations have played an important role in stoking extremist groups for several years.<sup>37</sup> However, the 'Putin Playbook' has similarly been adopted by a range of political actors, as well as domestic extremist groups, across North America and Western Europe as an effective way of levelling the playing field in online communications.<sup>38</sup> The normalisation of these disruptive behaviours has helped accelerate an increasingly atomised information system which helps fuel individual grievances and facilitate radicalisation.

This mass proliferation of disinformation and extremist rhetoric has been further facilitated by a constantly evolving information ecosystem. Major social media platforms provide expansive audiences for extremists and conspiracy theorists, and have been slow to respond to these challenges. Often the business models of these platforms themselves, which are geared to keep people on the platforms for as long as possible, facilitate this dynamic.<sup>39</sup>

Coupled with activity on major social media platforms we have seen the emergence of a range of fringe social media platforms with highly limited terms of service which act as hubs for the most fringe extremist and conspiracy theorist communities.<sup>40</sup> In particular the encrypted messaging application Telegram currently acts as a key organisational hub for both extremist movements and conspiracy theorists, and ISD's analysis in the Irish context demonstrates how this proximity allows for cross-pollination between these movements, with the extreme right wing acting as drivers of anti-lockdown activity.<sup>41</sup> This activity on social media has led to the proliferation of 'post-organisational' extremism, where extremist mobilisation is characterised by loose, largely online communities of actors rather than formalised hierarchical organisations.<sup>42</sup>

All of these dynamics have helped feed into an atomised, polluted and amorphous information ecosystem which has helped fuel hybrid movements which connect conspiracy, disinformation and extremism. Although these dynamics all precede COVID-19, the pandemic provided a perfect storm for this environment to give rise to anti-lockdown movements, with the mass proliferation of disinformation through the infodemic providing an opportunity for extremist movements to capitalise on, but also helping drive grass-roots conspiracy based communities which have coordinated with these established actors.

# RESPONDING TO HYBRID THREATS TO DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Responding to these hybrid threats will require a new generation of responses. Although these movements have some overlap with extremist movements and terrorism, the dynamics at play here overwhelmingly sit outside the realms of counter-terrorism and responding to them will require a more nuanced approach which goes beyond addressing violent radicalisation. There is the need for a new generation of responses primarily focussed on the broader mainstreaming of harmful conspiracy theories and related extremist ideologies. In particular, there is great need for:

- **A new language to describe the hybrid threat landscape.** This briefing details the types of communities which have converged around the COVID-19 pandemic and other crisis points, and highlights the convergence of extreme right wing actors with conspiracy theorists, anti-government communities, and other groups inflamed by disinformation. However, these loose, opportunistic communities range beyond traditional classifications of extremist or terrorist threat and addressing them as such would not only be inappropriate, but risk infringing on a wide range of civil liberties. Additionally, these movements are less hierarchical than traditional extremist groups, instead often being driven by the proliferation of disinformation online rather than a coherent ideology. Effectively defining this hybrid threat will be essential in laying the foundations for a proportional and effective response. To help move towards this new conceptual framework, ISD will be bringing together a working group of experts from across the research community to consider the implications for policymaking.
- **A next generation of interventions.** This hybrid threat landscape is inherently linked to the promotion and uptake of conspiracy theories from mainstream and fringe social media platforms. A growing field of online and offline interventions, which facilitate disengagement and de-radicalisation from extremist ideologies and which help disrupt extremist messaging has developed around established violent extremist threats – particularly right-wing extremism and Islamist movements.<sup>11</sup> One of the most popular tools in the countering violent extremism arsenal is the use of counter-narrative content designed to provide alternatives to extremist messaging,<sup>12</sup> often targeted to users based on their perceived interest in extremist themes using digital advertising techniques. Other digital approaches include the use of direct messaging designed to challenge individuals expressing

support for extremism, either between an 'intervention provider' such as a counsellor or former extremist, or between multiple activists and a single individual posting extremist content.<sup>13</sup> Offline initiatives include long-term interventions between an expert practitioner and an individual seeking to leave an extremist movement, or broader preventative programmes such as curriculums and community initiatives which are designed to raise awareness of and build resilience against extremism.

However, the deployment of these approaches are not without challenges, not least for addressing the rapidly changing threat landscape outlined in this report. Online intervention initiatives are often focussed on mainstream digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Google search, with the result that they don't currently reach fringe social media platforms where many extremists and other actors involved in the promotion of conspiracy theories gather. Evaluating the impact and potential for behavioural change from counter-narratives has also long proved challenging, and there remains the risk that such programmes might be counter-productive.<sup>14</sup> Offline programmes are also stymied by a small pool of intervention providers, who in a number of contexts – most notably the USA – operate with very little support.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of these hybridised conspiracy threats, there is clearly the potential to adapt and trial the toolkit of programmes which have been built to counter extremism over the past ten years. However, it should not be assumed that these established programmes and intervention providers will be effective in countering the hybrid threats described in this document and focus should be given to carefully building and evaluating programmes which seek to replicate these methodologies. Additionally, it is essential that thought is given to identifying new models and delivery mechanisms for a new generation of interventions. Current programming too often relies on well-trodden approaches, but there is great potential for innovation in this space, particularly through the deployment of new messengers, delivery mechanism, and in the online space through operation on a broader swathe of digital platforms.

- **Encouraging transnational collaboration to address these threats.** The briefing papers in this series detail how similar hybrid threat dynamics can be observed across a wide range of different countries. Although the groups and individual which drive these threats differ depending on country, there are similarities which cut across borders, particularly the merging of conspiracy

- theorist communities with more established extremist movements. Whilst these different countries have different legal frameworks which will shape what government-led responses to these threats look like it is nevertheless clear that the commonalities between these movements mean that disruption models and efforts to counter these threats may be effectively replicated in different country contexts. As this hybrid threat movement is still emerging, conceptualisations of what it represents from law enforcement and policy makers are still taking shape, as are play-books for effective response. Encouraging greater international collaboration between policy makers in defining the threat, and the sharing of lessons learned in countering it have the potential to significantly improve national level responses to this new hybrid threat environment.
- **Pursuing social media regulation which focuses on systemic risk mitigation and transparency rather than content removal.** From COVID to QAnon, social media has played an essential role in the incubation and amplification of the conspiracy theorist communities central to the contemporary hybrid threat landscape. However, discussion around regulation and broader policy responses globally are primarily focussed on the removal of content that breaches platform terms of service or national laws. Focusing solely on content removal efforts is insufficient to deal with the systematic ways in which platforms affect these new types of online threat, which often involve activity by loose post-organisational networks promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation. Accordingly, platform regulation should focus on the role that platform design has in enabling, amplifying and targeting certain types of behaviour and content over others, rather than on identifying individual instances of violating content. Proposals should include robust requirements for algorithmic auditing to ensure transparency on the reasons that certain types of material flourish and thrive online and others do not, and so to better inform safety by design. This will also require radical new approaches to mandated transparency on the policies, processes and outcomes of platform decision about content and behaviour on their sites. Echoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the authoritarian response to online harms is one of total control and censorship, the liberal democratic response must be rooted in the principles of transparency and accountability, delivered through effective democratic oversight, helping to promote an open, democratic and safe internet.<sup>43</sup>

Over the coming weeks ISD will be releasing a series of briefings which provide in-depth overviews of the anti-lockdown movements in the USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Germany and Italy.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 [https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1)
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- 17 <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Fringe-Insurgency-221017.pdf>
- 18 <https://www.isdglobal.org/extremism/>
- 19 The Groyper movement is a network of white nationalists originating in the USA which follow the 'America First' podcaster Nick Fuentes, and engage in trolling activity against more mainstream conservative organisations. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/groyper-army>
- 20 The Canadian Nationalist Party is a far-right Canadian political party whose leader has been banned from Facebook for hate speech. <https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/canada/facebook-pulls-down-page-of-far-right-partys-sask-based-leader-for-alleged-hate-speech-338932/>
- 21 Forza Nuova is an Italian neo-Fascist party. <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/forza-nuova>
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- 32 <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/yoga-disinformation-qanon-conspiracy-wellness>
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- 34 The 'big lie' is the term given to the rejection of the results of the 2020 US presidential election by President Trump and his followers, and the promotion of the conspiracy theory that the election was in some way fraudulently won by President Biden. For more information see: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00257-y>
- 35 <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>
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