

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a healthcare worker in a white coat and gloves administering a vaccine to a person wearing a plaid shirt. The image is overlaid with a solid magenta color.

ISD

Powering solutions  
to extremism  
and polarisation

# The Conspiracy Consortium

Examining Discussions of COVID-19 Among  
Right-Wing Extremist Telegram Channels

Ciarán O'Connor

### **About this paper**

COVID-19 has given rise to the development of a hybrid threat landscape, merging misinformation, conspiracy theories, hate, harassment and extremism. Drawing on data analysed from over 200 Telegram channels between January 2020 - June 2021, this report provides fresh insight into the role of right-wing extremist communities within this nexus, in particular their role amplifying and spreading COVID-19 conspiracy content and misinformation on Telegram. The report features a detailed case study that explores the evolution of an influential Telegram channel that operates as a COVID-19 conspiracy hub and illustrates how extremist actors are converging on COVID-19 conspiracy content.

### **About ISD**

Founded in 2006, ISD is now the leading global 'think and do' tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

### **About the Author**

Ciarán O'Connor is an analyst and investigator on ISD's Digital Analysis Unit. He focuses on the intersection of extremism and technology, with specific expertise on the far-right and disinformation environment online and use of open-source research methodologies. Before joining ISD, Ciarán worked with Storyful news agency. He has an MSc in Political Communication Science from the University of Amsterdam.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was made possible thanks to the support, advice and encouragement of numerous members of the team in ISD, especially Jacob Davey, Tim Squirrel, Melanie Smith and Sarah Kennedy for their helpful feedback and revisions.

© ISD, 2021

London | Washington DC | Beirut | Toronto

This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from ISD.

In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented. ISD does not generally take positions on policy issues. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.

Designed by forster.co.uk. Typeset by Danny Arter.



## Executive Summary

**Since the outset of COVID-19, governments, researchers and security officials have warned of the potential for extremist actors to capitalise on the pandemic. The UK's top counter terrorism police official warned that COVID-related isolation has created a "perfect storm" for extremist radicalisation, while in the US the FBI warned that extreme right-wing groups were encouraging followers to deliberately spread the coronavirus to Jewish people and police officers.<sup>1 2</sup> The situation is similar online.**

Research from ISD has tracked how right-wing extremist groups have used online platforms to exploit people's anxieties about COVID-19 by amplifying misinformation about the response to the pandemic, inciting hatred against minorities and "elites" in government and using conspiracies to normalise and popularise extremist anti-government sentiments.<sup>3 4</sup>

Even prior to COVID-19, research and reports examining the intersection of misinformation, conspiracy theories, hate, harassment and extremism noted an increasingly hybrid threat landscape.<sup>5 6</sup> Now, research that examines how COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for conspiracy theories, misinformation and the wider extremist nexus is fundamental to understanding how extremist actors are using this crisis to grow their influence and expand their audience.

To do so, ISD monitored a sample of 239 Telegram channels that have previously used the platform to post and promote content in support of right-wing extremist groups, individuals, conspiracies or political and social belief systems. This cohort includes far-right and extreme right-wing communities such as white supremacist channels, misogynistic, Groyper and anti-Muslim channels, as well as more general conspiracy channels that have previously shared far-right material on Telegram.

Of these 239 channels, 167 actively discussed COVID-19 between January 2020 and June 2021, including 133 white supremacist channels. ISD found consistent crossover in topic relevancy between white supremacist and conspiracy communities on Telegram when discussing COVID-19, particularly around discussions that downplayed the severity of COVID-19, spread spurious conspiracies about lockdown or restrictions and disseminated baseless claims suggesting vaccines are deadly.

This report focuses on the role of right-wing extremist communities in amplifying and spreading COVID-19 conspiracy content and misinformation on Telegram. Such channels legitimise false and dubious information about COVID-19 by promoting misleading content and claims that obscure or obfuscate the original source, and/or which frame the pandemic in alarmist and sinister terms. Specifically, we examine the COVID-19 narratives and sources of information favoured by white supremacist communities on Telegram.

The report concludes with a detailed case study that explores the evolution of Channel C, the title we're using for a Telegram channel that operates as a COVID-19 conspiracy hub and illustrates how extremist actors are converging on COVID-19 conspiracy content, which represents a troubling nexus serving to distort people's understanding of COVID-19.

## Key Findings

**Almost 5% of all messages posted by right-wing extremist (RWE) Telegram channels were related to COVID-19.** ISD's original sample of 239 Telegram channels posted 489,215 total messages between January 2020 and June 2021. Using keyword analysis to isolate COVID-19 related messages, ISD surfaced 22,404 messages from a set of 167 Telegram channels that used these terms, meaning 4.57% of all RWE Telegram activity in the period examined was related to COVID-19.

**Right-wing extremist channels frequently promote anti-vaccine conspiracy content.** Almost 30% of all messages relating to COVID-19 reference vaccines, primarily misinformation, false claims and conspiracies framing vaccines as unsafe for humans. Discussions also promoted mistrust of pharmaceutical companies tasked with manufacturing vaccines; 9 of the 10 most-viewed Telegram messages in our sample referenced vaccines in this manner.

**There is a clear nexus between right-wing extremist communities and COVID-19 conspiracy content on Telegram.** ISD found consistent crossover in topic relevancy between white supremacist and conspiracy communities on Telegram when discussing COVID-19. Discussions related to vaccine production and restrictions/lockdowns were the most popular COVID-19 narratives among both communities. The most-shared external domain among white supremacist Telegram channels when discussing COVID-19 was Zerohedge, a site that has frequently published conspiratorial content about the pandemic.

**ISD links US right-wing extremist activists to a COVID-19 conspiracy hub.** ISD was able to link two usernames involved in running a Telegram COVID-19 conspiracy channel to two prominent US RWE activists, confirming the existence of a highly concerning overlap between RWE actors and COVID-19 conspiracy content. This Telegram channel was found to serve as a COVID-19 conspiracy hub for numerous conspiracy and extremist channels, including at least three white supremacist channels.

**Right-wing extremist Telegram communities rely heavily on image and video content.** ISD found that 29% of all data examined did not contain any text and was therefore outside the bounds of analysis. This finding tracks with previous ISD research on RWE Telegram communities and highlights the challenge for content moderation efforts that often struggle to capture non-text-based content, as well as implications for future research on Telegram, that may unwittingly omit a large portion of image/visual data.<sup>7</sup>



# Glossary

## Conspiracy theory

A theory which seeks to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. These conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Adherents to conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot.

## Far-right (FR)

ISD's definition of FR is in line with populism and FR expert Cas Mudde who defines the term as groups and individuals that support or endorse political or social belief systems that feature at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy.<sup>8</sup> Mudde's definition of "far-right" includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe that "inequalities between people are natural and positive", but have differing attitudes towards democracy. Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.<sup>9</sup>

## Groyper

Groypers are a loose network of alt-right activists, supporters and content creators who are supporters of American white nationalist Nick Fuentes.<sup>10</sup> Groypers advocate for 'America First' policies that generally oppose immigration, globalism and diversity and promote white American identities.<sup>11</sup>

## White supremacy

White supremacy is a system of belief promoted and practiced by formal or informal extreme right-wing groups or individuals that posits the superiority of whites over non-whites, and advocates that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. This can extend to a belief in the need for violence against, or even the genocide of, non-white people.

## Alt-right

The alternative-right, or alt-right, is a right-wing extremist ideological movement whose supporters believe that "white identity" is being threatened by multi-racial, ethnic and gender diversity and is characterised by the heavy use of social media and online memes.<sup>12</sup>

---

# Methodology

The overall objective of this research was to examine how and to what extent RWE communities on Telegram have discussed COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic.

## Sample Selection and Data Collection

This research was conducted on an **original sample** of 239 Telegram channels, primarily consisting of white supremacist Telegram channels, with smaller categories of Telegram channels that have also featured FR content in the past. The **original sample** was primarily developed using a database of Telegram channels that were identified or analysed in previous ISD research. These channels were classified using a spectrum of categories related to right-wing extremist activity including white supremacy, neo-Nazism, conspiracies, Groyper activism and more general RWE activism, described in further detail below.

231 of the total 239 Telegram channels analysed in this report were identified in 2020 by ISD researchers searching Telegram for public channels where names referred to hate groups and/or contained terminology associated with RWE content. That set was developed by creating a seed list of Telegram channels associated with RWE mobilisation and then expanding the data set using a snowball methodology to identify ideologically-related channels whose content was shared or forwarded by these channels. An additional eight Telegram channels that engage in similar activity were added to the sample prior to beginning this research in June 2021, creating a total sample of 239 channels, referred to as the **original sample** in this report.

ISD used Telegram’s API to first collect all messages posted by the 239 Telegram channels during our research period, 1 January 2020 to 1 June 2021, which amounted to 692,138 posts, which made up the **original sample** (202,923 messages which only featured image or video content but no text and 489,215 messages that featured text, including text captions on image or video posts). Using a list of 29 keywords featuring words and phrases related to COVID-19, ISD analysts used our bespoke digital capability, Beam, to train a keyword classifier to detect and later sort COVID-19 content from our **original sample** of text-based messages Telegram data.

It was not possible to perform this keyword analysis on visual-only content generated from the initial data capture, so our analysis is entirely based on text content. The resulting text-based dataset was our final COVID-19 sample, consisting of 22,404 Telegram posts posted on 167 Telegram channels, which forms the basis of the analysis in this report. For the sake of clarity, from here on, we refer to this as the **RWE [right-wing extremist] COVID-19 sample**.

**Table 1** Number of Telegram posts containing COVID-19 keywords and number of Telegram channels mentioning COVID-19 keywords during the analysed period.

Final data set	
Telegram posts	22,404
Telegram channels	167

The full breakdown of the number of channels and their related categories included in the **RWE COVID-19 sample** is:

- **133 white supremacist channels:** These channels have a history of posting content that promotes the superiority of whites over non-whites, advocates that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people, and expresses hatred and/or encourages violence against non-white people.
- **16 conspiracy channels:** These channels have a history of posting content that alleges governments, agencies or figures of authority are orchestrating sinister plots against the public. The channels included here have a history of extending this form of activity to promoting conspiracies in support of FR ideologies and beliefs.
- **8 general far-right channels:** These channels have a history of posting content that supports political or social belief systems that promote radical forms of nationalism, state advocacy and anti-democratic perspectives or endorse the use of racism or xenophobia.

- **6 Groyper channels:** These channels have a history of posting content that supports American white nationalist Nick Fuentes and/or anti-immigration, isolationist America First policies.
- **3 misogynist channels:** These channels have a history of posting content that expresses hatred, contempt or prejudice against women and which targets them based on their gender or sex.
- **1 anti-Muslim channel:** This channel has a history of posting content that expresses hatred, contempt or prejudice against Muslims and which targets them based on their religious beliefs.
- **Alternative cures:** Mentions of terms of keywords, individuals or groups associated with procedures or substances touted as legitimate treatments for COVID-19 or promotion of the same. Example terms: Hydroxychloroquine, Ivermectin and bleach.
- **China:** Mentions of terms linked to China as they related to discussions over the origins of the virus. Example terms: Wuhan, China AND virus, and Chinese Communist Party.
- **Antisemitism:** Mentions of terms linked to discussions of COVID-19 as they relate to antisemitic claims or conspiracies alleging the virus was either fabricated or orchestrated by Jewish people or groups. Example terms available on request.

### **Narrative Analysis Methodology**

ISD was interested in examining the **RWE COVID-19 sample** to explore what narratives and categories linked to COVID-19 were most popular among RWE Telegram channels. We first manually assessed the data set to better understand the categories present and identify broad trends. We then used a keyword classifier to perform a keyword analysis and sort content from the **RWE COVID-19 sample** into various narratives.

ISD used a variety of additional analyses to gain a better understanding of the nature of content posted and discussed within the communities in question. These included inspecting post volume over time, investigating domains being used as sources of COVID-19 content and ranking messages to isolate the most-viewed Telegram posts across the set. The findings of these subsequent analyses are included in later sections.

The categories identified were:

- **Vaccine production:** Mentions of terms associated with the pharmaceutical companies responsible for producing COVID-19 vaccines. Example terms: Pfizer, Moderna and Astrazeneca.
  - **Vaccine conspiracies and misinformation:** Mentions of terms that are linked to widely-shared instances of conspiracies and misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines. Example terms: Depopulation, cytokine storm and 5G.
  - **Restrictions:** Mentions of terms or keywords associated with restrictions brought in to curb the spread of COVID-19 and reopen society in ways that mitigate against COVID-19 too. Example terms: Lockdown, reopen and quarantine.
-



## Findings

The following sections detail the findings of our quantitative analyses of the **RWE COVID-19 sample**. In particular, these sections outline how white supremacist communities favour discussions about vaccines over other topics related to COVID-19. White supremacist channels, alongside conspiracy communities, sought to frame vaccines as dangerous and pharmaceutical companies as mistrustful.

### Narrative Analysis

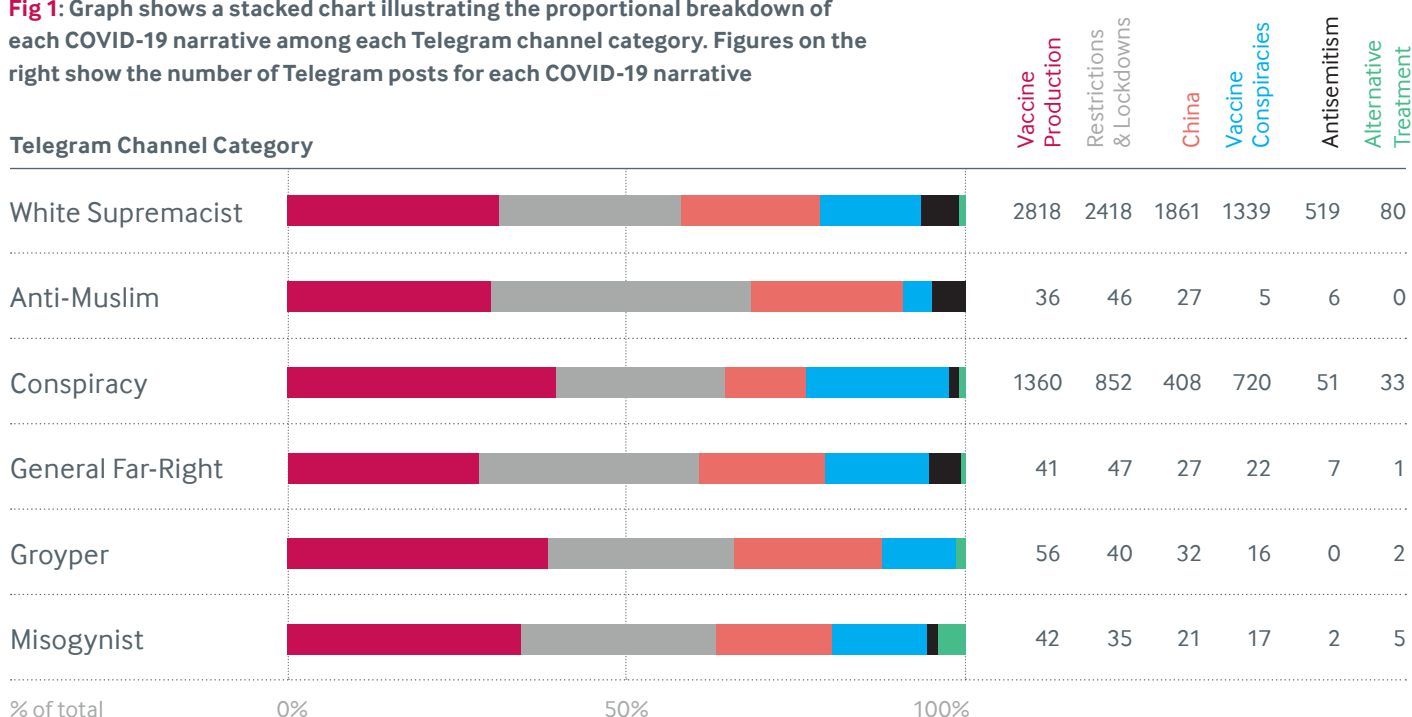
To explore what narratives were the most popular within our **RWE COVID-19 sample**, we performed a narrative analysis on the 22,404 Telegram posts collected, identifying posts containing keywords related to a variety of categories (noted in greater detail in the methods section). 13,073 posts were found to contain one or more of the narratives listed below, accounting for 58% of the entire **RWE COVID-19 sample**, as detailed below. The breakdown of Telegram posts by category is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Table shows the COVID-19 narrative breakdown among FR Telegram channels.

Narrative	Number of Telegram posts	Percentage of RWE COVID-19 sample
Vaccine production	4,354	19.4%
COVID-19 restrictions & lockdowns	3,438	15.4%
China	2,376	10.6%
Vaccine conspiracies	2,119	9.5%
Alternative treatments and cures	121	0.5%
Antisemitism	585	2.6%

ISD was interested in assessing saliency of the topics among channels in our **RWE COVID-19 sample** with varying ideological emphases. As shown below, white supremacist Telegram channels were found to be the communities most engaged with each narrative. This is not surprising, owing to the large presence of white supremacist channels in the **RWE COVID-19 sample** and overall focus of our report, yet the results do help to illustrate the topic saliency of certain narratives among white supremacist channels, as they do for conspiracy channels, the second-largest channel category.

**Fig 1:** Graph shows a stacked chart illustrating the proportional breakdown of each COVID-19 narrative among each Telegram channel category. Figures on the right show the number of Telegram posts for each COVID-19 narrative

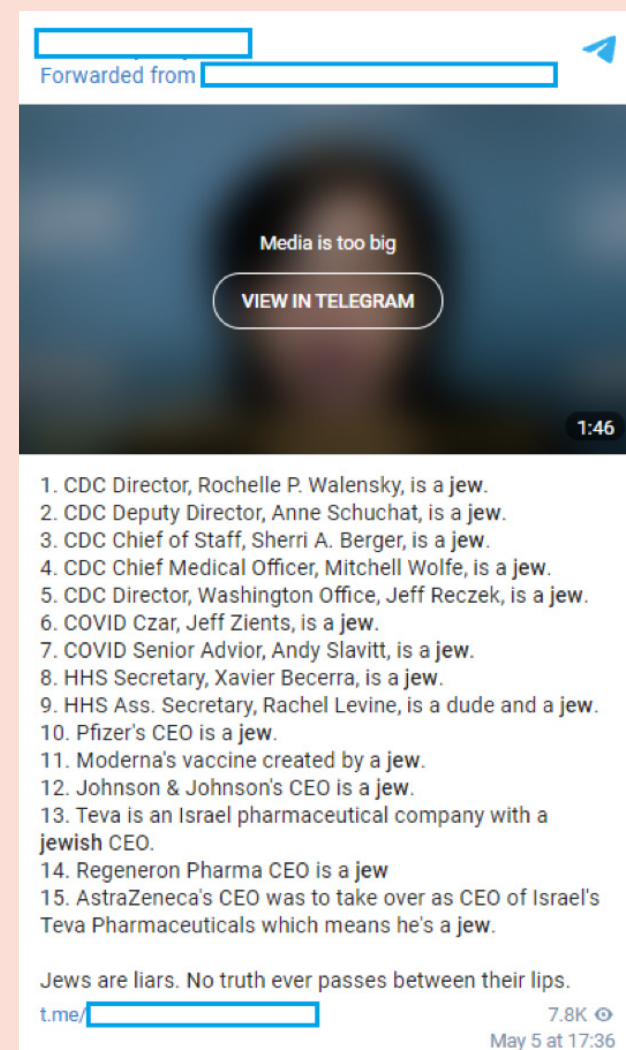


The discussion of vaccines, both in terms of vaccine production and vaccine conspiracies, was highly popular among both white supremacist and conspiracy Telegram channels, as was discussion of China, as well as lockdowns and restrictions. There were many commonalities in the COVID-19 content posted by white supremacist channels and conspiracy channels.

To explore this crossover further, ISD analysed a randomised sample of 200 posts featuring the most popular narrative - vaccine production. We found that hostility towards and mistrust of vaccine manufacturers, government agencies and public health officials was common. In some cases, as seen in Figure 2, this was combined with antisemitic narratives. This was particularly the case for white supremacist channels which commonly used conspiracies about vaccine manufacturers to invoke older forms of antisemitic stereotypes about powerful elites using money and influence to alter society for their own supposedly malevolent benefit. This random sample also included content that frequently referenced lawsuits or incidents of suspected malpractice involving vaccine manufacturers, with Telegram captions used to present these companies as irresponsible and a danger to the public.

Where we found the most crossover among white supremacist and conspiracy channels was in posting content promoting unsubstantiated videos, devoid of context, of people supposedly experiencing alleged adverse reactions to vaccines. Often these channels post such content and invite others to share the videos and post similar clips online themselves, effectively serving to crowdsource unverified COVID-19 content. Such videos are frequently shared among conspiracy communities across platforms and often become the subject of fact check articles.<sup>13 14</sup> The popularity of these videos among white supremacist channels, who seem intent on amplifying such clips to present vaccines as dangerous, is clear.

**Fig 2:** Image is a screenshot from a Telegram channel directing hatred towards public health and pharmaceutical officials.



## Message Activity and Performance

### Volume Over Time

ISD tracked the discussion about COVID-19 among RWE Telegram channels between January 2020 and June 2021 and found the number of messages posted each day rose dramatically in the first few months of the analysed period. The average number of posts went from less than 10 per day in January 2020 to the largest spike in activity between mid to late March 2020, when there were on average 100 posts per day. The busiest day in this entire period came on 19 March with a peak of 146 messages (see the circle labelled 1 in Figure 3). This period coincided with the beginning of the pandemic and introduction of COVID-19-related restrictions in the US and Europe.

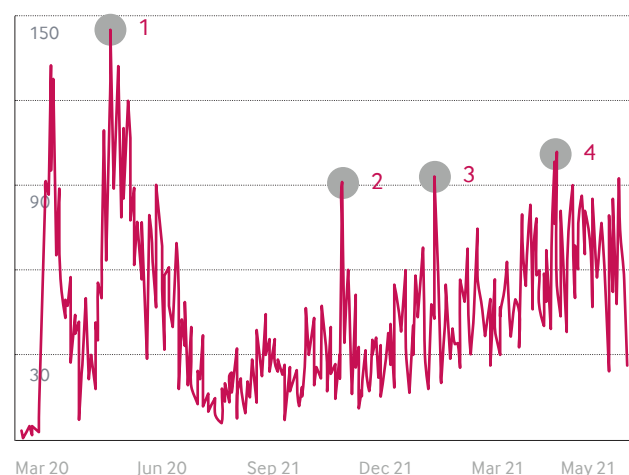
Following this there was a clear downward trend in activity until roughly July/August 2020 when the level of discussion began to rise again and continued to climb consistently until the end of the analysis period in June 2021. This period also saw a number of spikes that coincide with significant periods in the COVID-19 outbreak in the US. For example, a spike noticeable on 2 October 2020 (labelled 2 in Figure 3) corresponds to the day President Trump announced he and his wife, Melania, had tested positive for COVID-19. On this date, many Telegram channels captured in our RWE COVID-19 sample posted to claim that the President did not in fact have COVID-19, highlighting a clear trend of scepticism running through these communities.

Another spike seen on 21 December 2020 (labelled 3 in Figure 3) coincided with the passing of the long-awaited COVID-19 relief bill by US Congress. Many white supremacist channels capitalised on this development to spread misinformation about Israel, claiming the bill included “\$500 million for Israel”. The funding for Israel was in fact part of a broader year-end package and unrelated to COVID-19 relief.<sup>15</sup> These incidents of misinformation demonstrate again how white supremacists used COVID-19 opportunistically to launder misleading, conspiratorial and harmful claims.

One last spike was seen between March 31 - April 2 (labelled 4 in Figure 3), which coincided with the announcement of an initiative between the US government and private companies to develop standardised methods of credentials that provide proof of vaccination as businesses try to reopen, otherwise referred to as “vaccine passports.”<sup>16</sup> Discussions among white supremacist channels rejected outright the introduction of vaccine passports, with a number of channels equating such certificates to “slavery” and a collaboration between “Big tech, big health and big government... to ensure the success of the global trace-and-track regime.” Hostility to vaccine passports was common across the **RWE COVID-19 sample**.

**Fig 3:** Graph showing the volume of COVID-19 posts over time between January 2020 - June 2021.

### COVID-related messages Number of messages per day vs date of message





## Domains & URLs

### Most-Shared Domains

Overall, 1,395 unique domains were captured within the dataset. Unsurprisingly, domains linked to prominent social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube were among the most-shared. The media website shared the most regularly by Telegram channels in our **RWE COVID-19 sample** was, by a considerable distance, Infowars.com. The website is run by conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and was cited most often by a combination of predominantly conspiracy Telegram channels, followed by white supremacist channels. Three of the ten most-shared domains are run by Infowars, including Banned.video and Newswars. Summit.news, another of the most-shared domains, is also run by a content creator who is regularly published by Infowars too.

**Table 3** Table listing the most-shared domains captured in the sample

Website	Notes	No. of posts linking to this domain
infowars.com	Conspiracy website	1,454
twitter.com	Social media platform	863
zerohedge.com	Conspiracy website	583
vdare.com	White nationalist news website	471
banned.video	Video platform run by Infowars	313
summit.news	Conspiracy website	305
youtube.com	Social media platform	297
dailymail.co.uk	Tabloid news website	287
nypost.com	Tabloid news website	238
newswars.com	Aggregator site run by Infowars	194

ISD sought to examine what domains were shared the most specifically among white supremacist Telegram channels. When we isolated this cluster of domains we found that the most-shared domain among white supremacist channels, featured in 555 Telegram posts, belonged to Zerohedge. According to reports, this site frequently promotes disinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>17 18</sup> Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Zerohedge has published and amplified conspiratorial content about the origins of the virus, described it as a “bioweapon” and vaccines as “experimental gene” products, along with other alarmist and misleading claims, as reported by Business Insider and the Associated Press.<sup>19 20</sup>

Other websites among those most-shared by white supremacist channels belong to Russian state-owned media outlets RT and Sputnik, shared in 160 and 129 posts respectively, which both have repeatedly published misinformation throughout the pandemic, according to reports.<sup>21</sup> Overall, this activity illustrates a notable overlap between white supremacist communities and sources that frequently traffic in COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories.

## Case Study - Channel C, the Telegram COVID-19 Right-Wing Extremist Conspiracy Hub

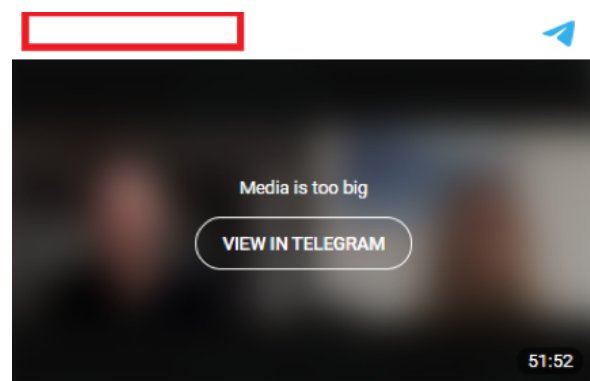
Over the course of this analysis, one Telegram channel stood out as being one of the most-active channels, experiencing the biggest jump in subscriber numbers and lying at the heart of a hub of extremist and conspiracy Telegram channels. Channel C (a title we're using to avoid naming the channel and potentially amplifying its reach) was created in August 2019. Channel C's evolution from general conspiracy, FR and antisemitic content into a hub of COVID-19 conspiracy content exemplifies how RWE communities have opportunistically used the pandemic to grow their influence and expand their audience by way of constantly sharing and amplifying false, misleading and alarmist material about the coronavirus.

ISD was able to connect two of the usernames listed as authors on posts and administrators on the channel to two prominent US RWE activists. ISD has chosen to not disclose the names of these individuals in order to avoid amplifying their profiles. One is based in the US and was a scheduled speaker at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was identified by tracking their username across various online forums, social media sites and news reports. The other, who is not based in the US, was identified in videos in which they discussed their online persona. They have been a frequent supporter and promoter of white supremacist and antisemitic ideologies for a number of years and have said they are a former member of the Proud Boys. It is possible that other administrators of Channel C have a similar background.

In its first week, Channel C's administrator(s) posted content related to documentaries about aliens before quickly moving to videos about the Pizzagate conspiracy. Pizzagate is regarded as a precursor to the QAnon conspiracy and alleges that Democratic party officials, celebrities and government officials are involved in a global child sex trafficking ring. From there the channel started to promote antisemitic conspiracies and targeted harassment of Jewish celebrities and media professionals, and now regularly posts content in support of white supremacy.

Between 1 January 2020 and 1 June 2021, Channel C posted 1,355 messages related to COVID-19, many of which were among the most-viewed posts in our **RWE COVID-19 sample**. (The true figure is likely even higher as our analysis only captured text-based content). A review of Channel C's COVID-19 content shows that the administrator(s) predominantly posted messages that featured misleading claims about the virus, including allegations that face masks contained "parasitic face worms," also known as Morgellons, which is a recurring false COVID-19 claim that posits that fact masks contain living nanoparticles and is associated with an unproven skin condition. The channel also repeatedly promoted conspiracies alleging the pandemic was orchestrated or planned by world governments and/or billionaires, and the channel published numerous posts naming specific individuals and describing them as Jewish, highlighting the antisemitic nature of this conspiratorial content.<sup>22</sup>

**Fig 4: Screenshot of Channel C Telegram post about supposed "parasitic worms"**



**URGENT: DOCTOR CONFIRMS PARASITIC WORMS ON FACEMASKS**

There are parasitic worms on facemasks and Covid-Swabs, which is now confirmed to the absolute horror of a medical doctor. After seeing numerous videos on the internet, the doctor decided to take a look under the microscope, and to her shock every mask she tested was contaminated with parasites.

@ [redacted]  
t.me/[redacted]

147.5K  
Apr 18 at 05:57

The channel frequently forwarded content from other FR and white supremacist Telegram channels and also had its own content forwarded by similar channels.”. This could indicate that Channel C is part of a larger network of coordinated channels.

### White Supremacist Amplification

ISD uncovered evidence from Channel C and a cluster of three white supremacist Telegram channels in our **RWE COVID-19 sample** that points towards the possible existence of a network of Telegram users/channels working together to post and promote misleading and conspiratorial claims about COVID-19. In total, ISD found evidence that as many as 263 posts, or 19%, of Channel C’s COVID-19 content was forwarded among the same three white supremacist channels, often within minutes of it being posted.

In one example, in November 2020, Channel C published a post that warned of a “New World Order” using a crisis period like the pandemic to seize power across the world. Within seven minutes, one channel within the cluster (which forwards almost every Channel C post) forwarded this post, followed by a second channel one minute later, and the third white supremacist channel, 44 minutes later, increasing the reach of the post across Telegram.

In a second example, again in November 2020, a post published by Channel C (see Figure 5) linked to a YouTube video titled “Do Not Take the Vaccine” and claimed Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci conspired together to push the “Frankenstein jab” on the US as a means of population control. Two minutes later, one of the white supremacist channels forwarded the post and a second white supremacist channel followed 16 minutes later.

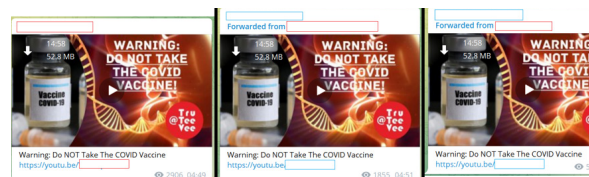
Of course, it must be acknowledged that the administrator(s) of these three white supremacist channels could simply be committed subscribers and supporters of Channel C’s content, choosing to frequently forward its posts organically when they’re posted. Yet, other evidence points towards connections between Channel C and the white supremacist channels.

One of the white supremacist channels that frequently forwards Channel C content uses the same username as the username of an administrator listed on Channel C, suggesting

they were potentially the same person and were amplifying their own post. The other forwarding channels display no clear links to Channel C. Yet, the repeated forwarding of content from Channel C raises the possibility that there exists some form of connection between the channels and may highlight how networks of Telegram channels are used by extremists to produce, promote and amplify their content in a systematic and opaque manner.

Analysis by ISD found that 263 posts from Channel C’s were forwarded among the same three white supremacist channels yet, there are possibly other channels operating in the same way to amplify Channel C content. Due to technical limitations, it is not possible to assess if other Telegram channels not included in our **RWE COVID-19 sample** may frequently forward and amplify Channel C content.

**Fig 5: Screenshot shows three Telegram posts published within minutes of each other, part of a possible network of white supremacist channels consistently sharing conspiracy content.**



### Channel Growth

Over time, Channel C has evolved. Alongside Channel C’s public channel that is used to promote content which contains misinformation and conspiracies, there is now a group chat for subscribers to send messages to one another, and a collections channel. This collections channel appears to use a Telegram bot to automatically index the main channel’s content into numerous topics including “AIDS/HIV hoax,” “crisis actors” and “Rothschild,” and these collections are then published as monthly round-ups for subscribers as a way of viewing all content related to one topic or, in practice, a way to group together all the channel’s posts about various conspiracies.<sup>23</sup>

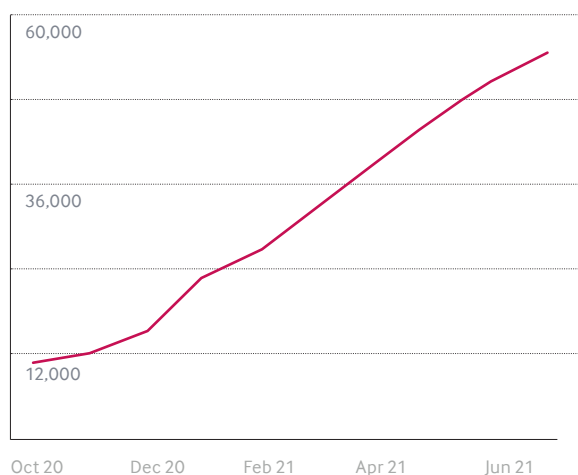
Channel C was the fifth most-active channel in our **RWE COVID-19 sample** and the channel grew at a rapid rate during this research period, growing



from its launch in August 2019 to October 2020 to 10,949 subscribers, only passing 5,000 subscribers in May 2020. Using the Telegram analysis tool TG Stats, which allowed ISD researchers to chart the Telegram channel's growth between October 2020 to July 2021, ISD determined that Channel C then grew to 54,587 by the end of our analysis period. This represents an increase of 198%, highlighting how this period was a highly successful time for the growth of the channel.

**Fig 6: Graph showing the increase in subscribers for Channel C, the Telegram COVID-19 conspiracy hub**

#### 'Channel C' Telegram Channel Subscriber Growth



Channel C is a public channel with many administrators/authors though it is not known how many people in total are involved in running it. Four months after the channel was created, the author of each post was added as viewable public data on each post. A review of over 20,000 posts published on the channel between 1 January, 2020 and 1 June, 2021 reveals there were at least 25 authors active in posting on the channel during this period. However, some of these 25 authors have near-identical usernames, suggesting the same person perhaps used slightly-modified usernames at various times.

In other instances, as one username stopped appearing as an author of channel C posts, other usernames would then become more active, suggesting that the channel administrators may be a smaller, more-concentrated group than 25

individuals, with the same people possibly using multiple usernames at different times. There was also variance in the level of activity of different usernames. Some authors were responsible for fewer than 10 messages in the 18 month period examined, while five usernames authored more than one thousand messages each, suggesting the person(s) behind these usernames are centrally involved in running Channel C.

The involvement of RWE figures in this Telegram conspiracy hub is a significant finding, confirming the existence of a highly concerning overlap between RWE actors and COVID-19 conspiracy content. In less than two years, Channel C has amassed over 50,000 subscribers and appears to lie at the heart of a collection of white supremacist channels on Telegram which regularly share Channel C's COVID-19 conspiracy content with their audiences. This constant forwarding of Channel C content has undoubtedly served to broaden its reach and increase its subscriber base; the possibility of this being a deliberate growth strategy cannot be ruled out.

The tactic has also served the white supremacist channels well. In effect, these actors are engaging in information laundering, using their channels to promote unsubstantiated conspiracy content first posted on Channel C. This in turn raises the profile and influence of Channel C, serving to expand its audience and make this conspiracy and extremist hub more influential on Telegram.

White supremacist channels that engage in COVID-19 conspiracy content and gain considerable subscribers as a result can and do regularly revert to more explicit white supremacist and extremist material. Such activity has the effect of exposing audiences and people who were initially interested in perhaps lighter conspiracy content to more explicit material, which can foster radicalisation and recruitment risks. In this instance, a constellation of extremist actors is clearly converging on COVID-19 conspiracy content, which represents a troubling nexus serving to distort people's understanding of COVID-19.

## References

1. Mark White, "Right-wing extremism is UK's fastest growing threat, says top counter-terror cop," Sky News, 18 November 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/right-wing-extremism-fastest-growing-threat-says-uks-top-cop-in-counter-terrorism-12135071> (accessed 10 September 2021)
  2. Aris Foley, "FBI warns white supremacists encouraging members to spread coronavirus to law enforcement, Jews: report," The Hill, 22 March 2020, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/488919-fbi-white-supremacists-encouraging-members-to-spread> (accessed 13 September, 2021)
  3. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1," (27 March 2020) <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-Briefing-01-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  4. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "Far-right exploitation of Covid-19," (12 May 2020) <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/20200513-ISDG-Weekly-Briefing-3b.pdf> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  5. Johannes Baldauf, Julia Ebner and Jakob Guhl, "Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online," The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, June 2019, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ISD-Hate-Speech-and-Radicalisation-Online-English-Draft-2.pdf> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  6. Jana Winter, "Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat," Yahoo! News, 1 August 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html> (accessed 13 September, 2021)
  7. Jacob Davey and Jakob Guhl, "A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram", The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 26 June 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Safe-Space-to-Hate2.pdf> (accessed 2 November 2021)
  8. Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, (Oxford University Press, 2000) (accessed 13 September 2021)
  9. Cas Mudde, "The Far Right Today," (John Wiley & Sons, 2019) p. 5-7 (accessed 13 September 2021)
  10. Anti-Defamation League, "Nicholas J. Fuentes: Five Things to Know" (8 July 2021) <https://www.adl.org/blog/nicholas-j-fuentes-five-things-to-know> (Accessed 9 December 2021)
  11. Anti-Defamation League, "Groyper Army and 'America First'" (21 October 2021) <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/groyper-army-and-america-first> (accessed 1 November 2021)
  12. Southern Poverty Law Center, "ALT-RIGHT" (14 October 2017) <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right> (Accessed 9 December 2021)
  13. Samantha Putterman and Paul Specht, "The 'shaking' COVID-19 vaccine side-effect videos and what we know about them," Politifact, 20 January 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/jan/20/shaking-covid-vaccine-side-effect-videos-and-what/> (accessed 2 November, 2021)
  14. Gian Volpicelli, "They claimed the Covid-19 vaccine made them ill. Then they went viral," Wired, 23 January 2021, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/covid-vaccine-misinformation-facebook> (accessed 13 September 2021)
  15. Ben Samuels, "U.S. COVID-19 Relief Package Causes '\$500 Million for Israel' to Trend Online," Haaretz, 22 December 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-u-s-covid-19-relief-package-causes-500-million-for-israel-to-trend-online-1.9391940> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  16. Dan Diamond, Lena H. Sun and Isaac Stanley-Becker, "'Vaccine passports' are on the way, but developing them won't be easy," Washington Post, 28 March 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/03/28/vaccine-passports-for-work/> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  17. Adele-Momoko Fraser, "Google bans website ZeroHedge from its ad platform over comments on protest articles," NBC News, 16 June 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/google-bans-two-websites-its-ad-platform-over-protest-articles-n1231176> (accessed 2 November 2021)
  18. Reuters, "Twitter restores account of financial market website Zero Hedge" (13 June 2020) <https://web.archive.org/web/20210704073649/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-twitter-zerohedge-idUSKBN23K0H8> (accessed 3 November 2021)
-

19. Ellen Cranley, "Finance blog Zero Hedge was banned from Twitter for Wuhan coronavirus misinformation. It's not the first time the publication has raised eyebrows," Business Insider, 1 February 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/who-is-zero-hedge-finance-blog-that-spread-coronavirus-misinformation-2020-2> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  20. David Klepper, Farnoush Amiri and Beatrice Dupuy, "The superspreaders behind top COVID-19 conspiracies theories," The Associated Press, 15 February 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/conspiracy-theories-iran-only-on-ap-media-misinformation-bfca6d5b236a29d61c4dd38702495ffe> (accessed 14 September 2021)
  21. Sky News, "YouTube purges anti-vaccine misinformation and provokes ire of Russia," (29 September 2021) <https://news.sky.com/story/youtube-purges-anti-vaccine-misinformation-and-provokes-ire-of-russia-12421402> (accessed 1 November 2021)
  22. Reuters, "Fact check: A video of a swab used for COVID-19 tests does not show that the material is 'alive'" (20 January 2021) <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-swabs-idUSKBN29P2Q5> (accessed 2 November 2021)
  23. Louis Goddard and Dominic Kennedy, "Rothschild family 'runs the world': an age-old conspiracy theory" The Times, 11 October 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rothschild-family-runs-the-world-an-age-old-conspiracy-theory-mbl6n0cfh> (accessed 2 November 2021)
-





