

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT?

This document provides an overview of **Anti-Vaccine Conspiracies** and is one in a series of extremism briefing notes produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) out of a long-running partnership with Microsoft*.

The purpose of these documents is to provide entry-level context and background about various extremist and conspiratorial narratives and movements. These are not intended as comprehensive deep dives. Rather, they present key concepts, theories, terminology and imagery deployed by the given movements or narratives. Further reading recommendations are provided at the end of each document, should readers want to learn more.

*Microsoft makes no statement as to the accuracy of the contents of this document. The contents herein are a product of ISD and are provided for informational purposes only.

Content Warning: this document contains material that may be harmful, triggering or traumatizing to some readers.

FAQ

How are these briefing notes produced?

They are informed by both literature review and digital research using publicly accessible websites, social media pages, channels and forums. This briefing note was published in July 2021 and is based on research conducted from January to June 2021.

What topics do they cover?

Topics span the ideological spectrum, covering prevalent extremist theories and narratives, as well as specific extremist movements. The scope ranges, with some briefing notes covering specific conspiracy theories like “The Great Replacement”, and others looking at broader, overarching issues like extreme misogyny online.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS? GET IN TOUCH WITH ISD AT INFO@ISDGLOBAL.ORG

ANTI-VACCINE CONSPIRACIES

COVID-19 anti-vaccine conspiracy theories promote misleading and baseless claims about COVID-19 vaccines. Claims include that the vaccines can cause injuries or death; that they are being used to control society or depopulate the earth; and that they will alter a person’s DNA. Followers of these conspiracies may develop, or are often already linked by, an ardent distrust of established institutions, which can have severe implications for public health responses to the pandemic.

While COVID-19 anti-vaccine conspiracies are a [global problem](#), this briefing note is based primarily on research ISD has conducted in specific national and regional contexts. See page 7 for more information.

Definitions

Anti-vaccine or anti-vax refers to an active opposition to vaccines and vaccination. The contemporary anti-vax movement [took root in the late 1990s and early 2000s](#), when it was hypothesised that a rise in autism was connected to the MMR vaccinations that people [received](#) as children. Anti-vax activism falls at the extreme end of vaccine hesitancy, which World Health Organisation (WHO) refers to as “the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccine services”. In 2019, the WHO identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten global health threats.

Conspiracy theories seek to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. Conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Conspiracy theorists usually see themselves as directly opposed to the powers they believe are orchestrating the plot, which are typically perceived to be governments or figures of authority.

Anti-vax conspiracy theories are used to spread misleading and false claims about vaccinations. They are neither exclusive to COVID-19 vaccines nor new. In the 19th century, the smallpox vaccination was [met with claims](#) that it was [a government measure to curb personal freedoms; would cause further illness](#); and that it was introduced to increase profits for those in the medical profession – but with the spread of COVID-19 and the digital nature of how we spread, find and consume information today, anti-vax conspiracy theories are being [spread at a scale](#) that has not been seen before. The WHO refers to this phenomenon as an [“infodemic”](#).

Key Narratives

The Center for Countering Digital Hate [reported](#) that “Online anti-vaxxers have organised themselves around a “master narrative” comprised of three key messages: COVID-19 is not dangerous, the vaccine is dangerous and vaccine advocates cannot be trusted”. Largely speaking, COVID-19 anti-vax conspiracy narratives fall under one of the following claims.



The vaccine will alter a person's DNA. Some COVID-19 vaccines use messenger [RNA \(mRNA\)](#) vaccine technology, which means they use genetic code instead of modified versions of the virus the vaccines seek to protect against. Supporters of this claim [suggest](#) that these vaccines will change a person's DNA and have been designed to transform humans into genetically modified beings who can be monitored and controlled by unspecified external forces. Related claims, which seek to undermine trust in the vaccine based on its composition, suggest there are [aborted foetal cells in the vaccine](#).



The vaccines are unsafe and can weaken your immune system, causing illness or death. COVID-19 conspiracy communities regularly promote claims like this, using alarmist language to provoke strong reactions and foster fear and hostility towards vaccines. Anti-vaxxers have singled out adverse effects from vaccine trials to allege that the vaccines are dangerous, while others have misused figures from official national databases that monitor adverse vaccine reactions. Other content focuses on the alleged serious and long-term side effects caused by the vaccination, including debunked claims that it causes [infertility](#), to enforce mistrust of the vaccine and to state that it is too soon to assess its impact.



The vaccine is designed to control you. A popular claim among conspiracy communities is that the vaccine contains a microchip that will allow corporations and/or governments to control and/or surveil those who have received it. Two of the most prominent narratives about the vaccine containing a microchip claim: 1) that large corporations can send signals to the microchip using 5G networks thereby controlling vaccinated people and 2) that the coronavirus pandemic was [a hoax designed by Bill Gates](#) to disguise [a plan to implant microchips in humans that will be used to track or control them](#).



"Big Pharma" is putting their own financial gain ahead of safety. COVID-19 conspiracy theorists also claim mainstream medicine providers deliberately try to keep people unwell for their own financial profit. Tied to this is the claim that health authorities, like the Center for Disease Control, [profit from vaccines](#) and that the integrity of certain politicians is compromised by the investments they receive from "Big Pharma," a term used to collectively refer to the global pharmaceutical industry. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Economic Forum, for example, are often targeted with accusations that they are run or funded by an unspecified "global elite" with malignant intentions to harm the public.

Anti-Vax, Right-Wing Extremism & Scapegoating

Anti-Establishment Narratives

Right-wing extremist organisations that are underpinned by anti-establishment ideologies, (such as the Boogaloo or the Proud Boys), have seized upon public uncertainties around

COVID -19 vaccines to foment and undermine trust in the US government and global institutions like the UN. This is typically done by [promoting false and alarmist disinformation](#) about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine [s](#) and presenting vaccines as emblematic of excessive government control. For example, in a Proud Boys Telegram channel, one post read: *“If less people get vaccinated then the system will have to use more aggressive force on the rest of us to make us get the shot”*.

Antisemitic Narratives

Over the past year, conspiracy theories that are popular with right-wing extremist actors - such as a New World Order*, the [Great Reset](#) and QAnon - have [converged around](#) a “common mistrust in liberal democratic institutions and theories of an alleged malignant global actor pulling the strings, propped up by the complicity of governments”.

Contemporary events, such as the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, have been incorporated into this overarching, “big tent” conspiracy narrative. The move towards a “big tent” conspiracy has resulted in the illusion of a “big tent” enemy among conspiracy theorists and extremists, often considered to be the Jewish community. Antisemitic tropes within the context of anti-vax conspiracies [include](#):

- ▶▶ Jewish people created the vaccine to sterilise other ethnic groups;
- ▶▶ Vaccine deaths are part of a depopulation plan orchestrated by a global Jewish elite;
- ▶▶ Jewish people created the vaccine as part of a wider plan to use the pandemic to establish a “Jew World Order” (a play on a “New World Order”) and gain global control;
- ▶▶ Jewish people invented the vaccine for extortive purposes and financial gain.

Narratives targeting individuals

As well as scapegoating Jewish people, antivax conspiracy narratives frequently target high profile individuals considered members of the “global elite”, such as George Soros or Bill Gates. Bill Gates in particular - as a leading global health philanthropist - has been at the center of a [number of baseless conspiracy theories](#) throughout the pandemic, with a [recent study into online COVID-19 vaccine](#) narratives finding that Gates was mentioned in 6% of all the online posts collected.

Prominent anti-vaxxers have explicitly alluded to broader conspiracies about Bill Gates in their online rhetoric, as well as theories about a “New World Order” and the “Great Reset”, which has made it easier for anti-vax conspiracy narratives to be integrated and adapted into existing conspiracy theories.

How Does Anti-Vax Tie into Other Conspiracy Theories?

The Great Reset

First promoted in 2020 among extreme-right influencers online, supporters of the [“Great Reset” conspiracy](#) believe that a [World Economic Forum initiative called “The Great Reset”](#) is proof that global elites are using the COVID-19 pandemic to dismantle the capitalist economy

and enforce radical social change at the expense of personal freedoms. Anti-vax conspiracies tie into the “Great Reset” through the belief that pandemic’s overarching purpose is to warrant a vaccine that will be used as a means of depopulation or [social control](#).

New World Order

This conspiracy theory is popular among extreme-right and anti-government extremists. Proponents of this conspiracy believe that global elites are secretly conspiring to replace sovereign nation states with a [tyrannical “one-world” government](#), which will rule the world with a globalist agenda. Jewish people are often scapegoated as the masterminds behind this shadowy cabal.

One way in which conspiracy theorists believe the “New World Order” will be implemented is through a series of global “false flag” events designed to act as a cover for implementing repressive measures against people. COVID-19 anti-vax sentiments have been incorporated into the “New World Order” conspiracy through the [claim](#) that COVID-19 is a scam being used to initiate global control through forcing people to submit to repressive government measures (including vaccinations and lockdowns) - thus ushering in the “New World Order”.

QAnon

The anti-vax movement has significantly overlapped with the [QAnon conspiracy movement](#), which is popular amongst the American right, and whose adherents see vaccination as part of a plot by the “deep state” to control humanity. Online anti-vax communities have [increasingly become radicalization pipelines](#) that assist in bringing people into the QAnon movement.

ISD’s Anti-Vax Research Insights

Canada

Canadian COVID-19 vaccine **misinformation communities on Facebook grew by 48%** between September 2020 and March 2021. Vaccine disinformation influencers in Canada were found to **use Facebook groups to share deceptive claims in a coordinated manner**, reaching broad audiences with identical misleading content.

France

Internal research by ISD found that the most popular anti-vax content on Facebook and Twitter in France **presents the COVID-19 vaccination campaign as instrumental to the establishment of a “health dictatorship”** by the French government, accused of being in the pay of pharmaceutical companies. On Facebook, some of the most active accounts involved in promoting anti-vax conspiracy theories were **affiliated with the Yellow Vest movement**.

Germany

Overarching narratives about COVID-19 and vaccines are interpreted very differently by online communities in Germany. In the medical misinformation community, this content builds on established narratives in which **diseases are relativised and the body’s own healing power is overstated**.

In contrast, **conspiracy theorists build on known narratives of secret elites and world domination plans**, of which the pandemic and the vaccines are merely one chapter. Discussions within right-wing extremist groups focus especially on whether or not the **pandemic and pandemic mitigation strategies can be used to mobilize and recruit supporters**.

Ireland

Anti-vax conspiracy communities are on the rise in Ireland. Between July 2020 and February 2021, ISD analysts found a **90% increase** in the number of users in COVID-19 conspiracy and misinformation Facebook groups. Unfounded **claims that COVID-19 vaccines lead to injury or death appear frequently** in Irish COVID-19 conspiracy communities.

The Middle East & North Africa

Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation pages on Facebook regularly **amplify COVID-19 misinformation coming from the West**, using Arabic subtitling or voiceovers often unencumbered by fact-checking efforts. Distinct themes and issues are used to frame vaccine and pandemic conspiracies, such as **narratives about a coming apocalypse and antisemitic tropes**.

The Netherlands

Dutch COVID-19 misinformation communities on Facebook **grew by 63%** between October 2020 and April 2021. **National databases for monitoring adverse vaccine reactions are being misused to fuel anti-vax anxiety**. Analysts observed signs that Dutch Facebook COVID-19 conspiracy communities are used as a space to promote and advertise Telegram channels and group chats that feature more explicit and extremist anti-vax discussions.

Further Reading

[Where Anti-Vaccine Propaganda Went When YouTube Banned It](#) – Slate Magazine

[The Vaccine-Hesitant Man of Europe](#) – The Atlantic

[The Anti-Vax Playbook](#) – The Center for Countering Digital Hate

[BBC Anti-Vax Files](#) – BBC

[Under the surface: Covid-19 vaccine narratives, misinformation and data deficits on social media](#) – First Draft News