

5th June 2020

Contact Tracing Under Siege: Conspiracy Theories and Violent Threats Seek to Undermine America's Safe Return to Normality

Elise Thomas & Cooper Gatewood

Multiple states across the US are launching or scaling up [mass contact tracing campaigns](#)¹ as part of their preparations to reopen society. On 1 May, the [H.R.6666 – Covid-19 Testing, Reaching, And Contacting Everyone \(TRACE\) bill](#)² was introduced to Congress by Representative Bobby Rush. This bill would allow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to award \$100 billion in grants for testing, contact tracing, monitoring, and other activities to address COVID-19.

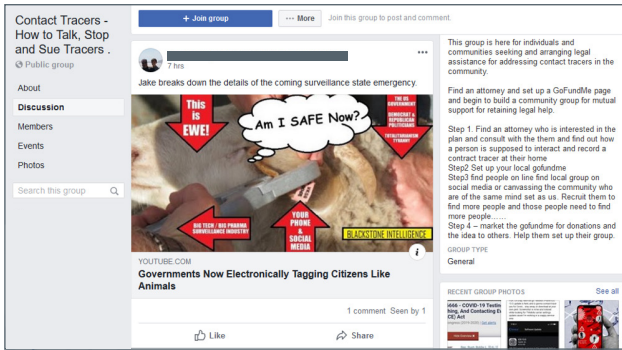
Both the H.R 6666 legislation and state-based contact-tracing efforts more broadly have become the focus of significant suspicion, hostility and opposition within some social media communities, particularly among pro-gun and conspiracy-theory groups. This dynamic is being generated both by individual social media users and by key influencers in conspiratorial communities.

This has contributed to a rapid increase in conspiratorial narratives, mis- or disinformation, and direct threats to the safety of contact tracers. It has also seen widespread sharing of petitions and other efforts to galvanise political action against contact tracing. As detailed below, videos containing disinformation and conspiracy theories relevant to contact tracing are receiving more than 300,000 views each on YouTube and are being shared tens of thousands of times across public Facebook pages and groups. These present a clear and present danger to the public health efforts of states and health workers attempting to support the transition from lockdown in the US.

Threats to contact tracers

Explicit and implicit threats to the personal safety of contact tracers have been made on social media, including on individual profiles. They have also been shared into conspiracy and ReOpen groups, formed in response to states' directives to stay home and prevent public gatherings. Some specific groups have been set up in opposition to contact tracers, for example, ['Contact Tracers - How to Talk, Stop and Sue Tracers'](#)³, which is intended to personally target contact tracers with lawsuits.

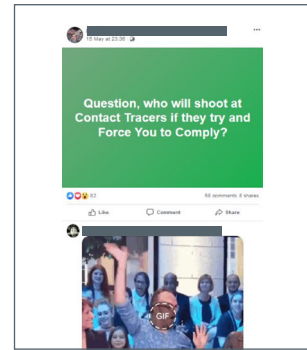
Other threats directly imply the use of physical violence against contact tracers.



Screenshot of Facebook group: Contact Tracers – How to Talk, Stop and Sue Tracers



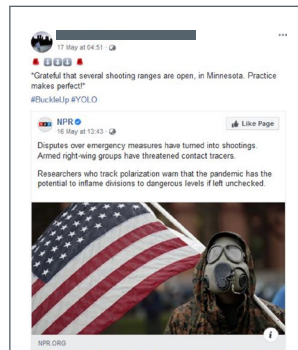
A Facebook post in the re-open Missouri group;



A Facebook post by an individual user.



A post in the North/K/ Carolina group calling for people to "stay strapped" in response to the "new Gestapo" contact tracers.



A Facebook post implying "[shooting] practice makes perfect" in response to contact tracers.

Key conspiratorial narratives and influencers

Opposition and hostility to contact tracing is being further fuelled by a range of disinformation, misinformation and conspiratorial narratives. These narratives are likely to heighten the risks of violence or other forms of hostility to contact tracers, for example by convincing people that contact tracing poses a threat to their freedom, security, or the safety of their children. They also drive political opposition to H.R 6666 based on false information about the purpose and function of the legislation.

It is important to note that these narratives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Conspiracy theories are highly dynamic, and many individuals may engage with a combination of overlapping conspiratorial strands.

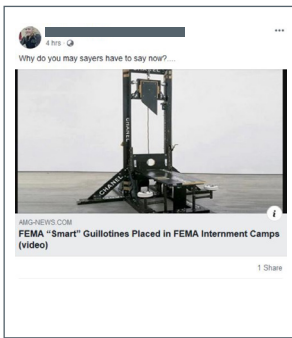
Some of these key narratives include:

Contact tracers will force people (especially children) into quarantine and/or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) camps:

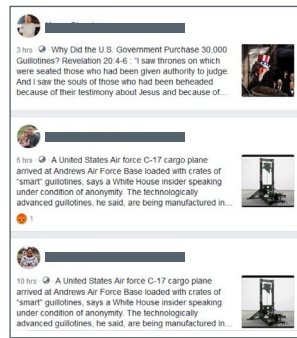
Conspiracy theories about planned quarantine centres have merged with pre-existing conspiracies about so-called "FEMA camps"⁴ into assertions that contact tracers will be used to identify people, in particular children, to force them into camps for ulterior or sinister purposes. This narrative appears to have been partially sparked⁵ by job ads for day-care workers at quarantine centres. It is likely to be particularly influential for several reasons: removing children is an inherently emotive issue; it builds on a pre-existing base of conspiratorial beliefs and content, and multiple active conspiracies including anti-vaxxers and QAnon are centred around the belief that government elites are seeking to harm children.

Other elements of the earlier FEMA conspiracy appear to have also been resurrected, for example, the idea that they have been stocked with "smart" guillotines, an idea which has been around since 2018⁶. This may

originally have been intended as a joke (the Chanel guillotine picture accompanying the article is of an art installation)⁷ but it appears to have been republished in May 2020 unironically⁸ and is being shared, again apparently without irony, on social media.



Screenshots of FEMA guillotine conspiracy being shared on Facebook.

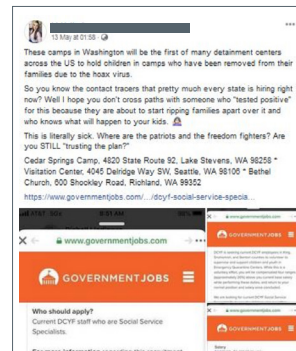
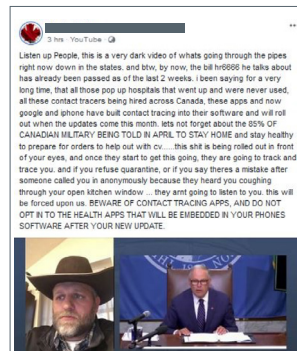


Some of the key influencers involved in promoting this conspiracy narrative online include:

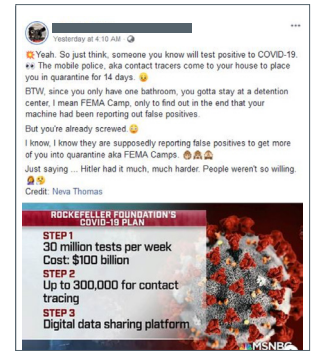
Ammon Bundy (who led an armed occupation of an Oregon wildlife refuge in 2016 and was involved in an armed stand-off with law enforcement at his father's Nevada ranch in 2014)⁹ posted a YouTube video on 13 May¹⁰ entitled "Children's Emergency Quarantine Centers". This video has since been shared widely, including being reposted multiple times on YouTube and other alternative platforms such as Bitchute¹¹. It appears to have played a significant role in sparking concern over this particular conspiracy. The YouTube video itself had more than 450,000 views at the time of writing.



Screenshots of Facebook posts sharing Bundy's video.



Facebook post about "detainment centres", sharing job ad for day-care workers



Facebook post about "mobile police" contact tracers reporting false positive Covid-19 tests to send people to FEMA camps.

Contact tracing as deep state, Satanic and/or elite conspiracy

A multitude of conspiratorial strands links contact tracing to figures such as George Soros, Bill Gates, the Clintons, the Obamas and others. Some of these strands are directly linked to QAnon or have heavily religious overtones, while others seem to draw more on a generalised suspicion of "elites".

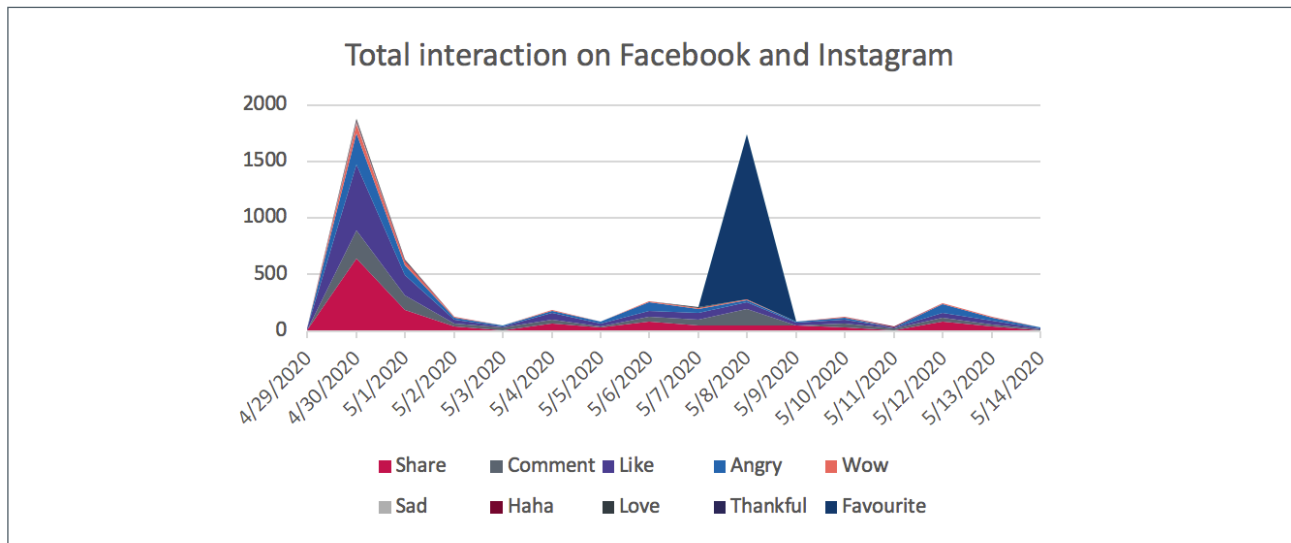
Some of the key influencers involved in promoting this conspiracy narrative online include:

"Amazing Polly", a Canadian¹² QAnon influencer¹³ who has previously gone by Polly Phemus and Polly St George, posted a video on YouTube on 29 April (the day before H.R 6666 was introduced) entitled "Beware the Contact Tracers"¹⁴, in which she talked about the "public-health mafia" and links between contact tracing programmes and figures including the Clintons and Bill Gates. The original upload of the video has been watched more than 300,000 times as of 27 May, but as there are now multiple uploads across multiple platforms, the true number of people reached by the video is likely to be significantly higher.

On Facebook and Instagram alone, between 29 April and 14 May 2020, the link to the original video and reposted copies on Bitchute received more than 16,000 interactions on public Facebook pages and groups, including 4,800 shares.

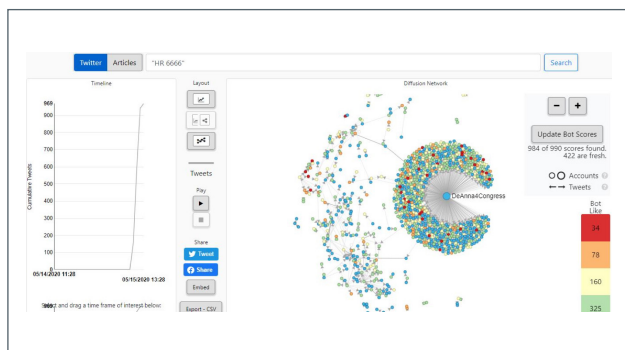
The graphic below shows interactions on Facebook with posts containing the phrase "Beware the contact tracers", which was the tagline for the video. The first spike in interactions is related to shares of the

original YouTube video across several Facebook pages that promote conspiracy theories. The second spike is related to a repost of the video on Instagram (via its new TV app, IGTV) by two conspiracy-theory accounts.

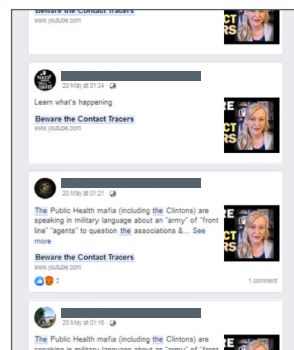


All interactions with content containing the phrase 'beware the contact tracers' on public Facebook and Instagram pages (source: CrowdTangle)

Another major influential voice in this narrative is failed Congressional candidate and QAnon follower DeAnna Lorraine, who tweeted a video about H.R 6666 and its supposed links to George Soros and the Clintons. She succeeded in at least temporarily dominating the Twitter conversation about the bill on 14-15 May.



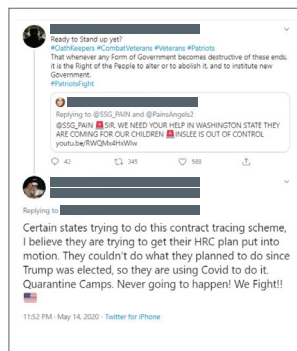
Hoaxy analysis of Twitter activity for the keyword "H.R. 6666" on 14-15 May 2020. Hoaxy is a Twitter data visualisation tool created by the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University. It visualises connections by the sharing of keywords, hashtags or articles.



Screenshot of "Beware the Contact Tracers" video being shared on Facebook.



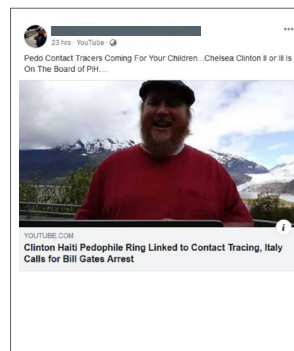
Screenshot of tweet by QAnon supporter DeAnna Lorraine.



QAnon conspiracy tweet about contact tracing as cover to abduct children in Washington State and put them into camps.



QAnon/Bill Gates/Satanic conspiracy tweet about H.R. 6666 as cover to force entry into homes and abduct children.



Screenshot of a Facebook post sharing a YouTube video about "Clinton Haiti Pedophile Ring Linked to Contact Tracing..."

Contact tracing as Nazism, fascism and/or authoritarianism

Many narrative strands try to connect contact tracing to Nazism, fascism or authoritarian dictatorships. This narrative appears to coincide with and feed into other conspiratorial narratives, particularly to the supposed quarantine camps.

The Nazi comparison is a predictable one and may well have occurred independently in many cases. However, it does appear to have been boosted by coverage from a mixture of state-funded media outlets, pro-gun channels in the US and international disinformation websites. This includes an article of 13 May from conspiracy outlet Global Research comparing contact tracers to Nazi brown shirts¹⁶ and YouTube videos from pro-gun influencer the YankeeMarshal¹⁷, and coverage by RT¹⁸.

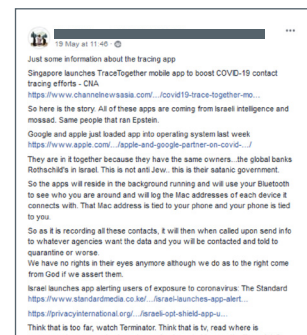
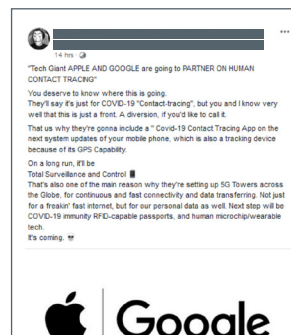


Left: post in "Collective Action Against Bill Gates. We Won't Be Vaccinated!!" Facebook group; Right: Facebook post sharing RT article "US states rush-recruiting Covid-19 contact tracers are overcompensating for their incompetence with authoritarianism"¹⁹.

Top: YankeeMarshal YouTube video captured 22 May 2020 (note: 20,522 views in two days). Above: Tim Truth YouTube video captured 22 May 2020.

Contact tracing and big tech

The release of the Apple/Google update to iOS and Android (which is intended to facilitate contact tracing apps to run Bluetooth in the background) has unsurprisingly met with considerable alarm and resistance from groups already suspicious of contact tracing. Some are sharing advice on how to disable automatic updates on their phones. These narratives are still developing, but seem to be growing among other conspiracy networks surrounding technology and Covid-19, including anti-5G and anti-Gates narratives.



Left: Facebook post positing anti-5G and anti-Gates related conspiracy connected to digital contact tracing; Right: Facebook post about anti-Semitic conspiracy connected to digital contact tracing.

Contact tracing as a Democratic effort to interfere with the US 2020 elections

A video released on 18 May by the One America News Network (OAN) entitled "Reports: Democrats push 'contact tracing' to affect 2020 elections"²⁰ appears to be trying to promote a conspiracy theory that Democrats will use contact tracing in an attempt to sway the November elections. The video appears to have been relatively popular in comparison to OAN's other videos, with more than 32,000 views as of 27 May. It has been shared across Facebook, receiving more than 36,000 interactions (6,800 shares and 5,700 comments).

Footnotes

- 01 Temple, J., Why contact tracing may be a mess in America, MIT Technology Review, 16 May 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/05/16/1001787/why-contact-tracing-may-be-a-mess-in-america/>
- 02 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6666>
- 03 Contact Tracers - How to Talk, Stop and Sue Tracers, Facebook [Group Page], https://www.facebook.com/groups/2700193956751807/?ref=group_header
- 04 Mikkelson, D., Obama Quietly Orders Millions of Disposable Coffins?, Snopes, 13 October 2014, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/false-coffin-corner/>
- 05 Traber, B., Washing state hiring daycare workers for coronavirus quarantine centers, NOQ Report, 12 May 2020, <https://noqreport.com/2020/05/12/washington-state-hiring-daycare-workers-for-coronavirus-quarantine-centers/>
- 06 The Renegade Network, After Obama left office, FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security kept the smart guillotine... Facebook [Group Page], 25 September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/230443827585364/posts/after-obama-left-office-fema-and-the-department-of-homeland-security-kept-the-sm/243638289599251/>
- 07 <https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/chanel-guillotine>
- 08 Greere, M., FEMA "Smart" Guillotines Placed in FEMA Internment Camps (video), AMG-News.com, 23 May 2020, https://amg-news.com/fema-smart-guillotines-placed-in-fema-internment-camps/?fbclid=IwAR23b8gcRzDuoS4-lr-RZ8BI9Fv7xf4o_vyRzPpdTHHSGsjv9twfcy_7X_PE
- 09 The Associated Press, Ammon Bundy, who led Malheur occupation, pledges to defend Idahoans' rights under stay-home order, Oregon Live, 1 April 2020, <https://www.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/2020/04/ammon-bundy-who-led-malheur-occupation-now-organizing-against-idaho-stay-home-order.html>
- 10 Children's Emergency Quarantine Centers, YouTube, 13 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWQMx4HxWlw>
- 11 CHILDREN'S "EMERGENCY" QUARANTINE CENTERS FORMING NOW..SMH.., Bitchute, 18 May 2020, <https://www.bitchute.com/video/ysKvUIQE4kxq/>
- 12 Lamoureux, M., One of Canada's More Prominent Politicians Is Sharing QAnon YouTubers, Vice, 7 June 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/wjv7q5/one-of-canadas-more-prominent-politicians-is-sharing-qanon-youtubers
- 13 <https://twitter.com/99freemind>
- 14 Beware the Contact Tracers, YouTube, 29 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FizHg_2hrVQ
- 15 More information on Hoaxy is available at <https://hoaxy.iuni.iu.edu/faq.php>.
- 16 Guzman, T A., Return of the Brown Shirts? US Federal and State Governments to Hire Contact Tracers to Hunt Down New Covid-19 Cases, Global Research, 13 May 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/us-federal-state-governments-hire-contact-tracers-hunt-down-new-covid-19-cases/5712782>
- 17 Contact Tracers (The Career Formerly known as The Gestapo), YouTube, 20 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Nu7hoBJlro>
- 18 Buyniski, H., US states rush-recruiting Covid-19 contact tracers are overcompensating for their incompetence with authoritarianism, RT, 13 May 2020, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/488584-contact-tracing-police-state-incompetence/>
- 19 Ibid
- 20 Reports: Democrats push 'contact tracing' to affect 2020 elections, YouTube, 18 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7a_fLRiv31E

About ISD

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.

Over the past decade, we have watched hate groups and extremist movements deploy increasingly sophisticated international propaganda, influence and recruitment operations, skillfully leveraging digital technology, and often boosted by hostile state actors. Alongside an exponential spike in violence (conflict, hate crime, terrorism), societies around the world are being polarised. At ballot boxes, populists have made significant gains and authoritarian nationalism is on the rise.

If left unchecked, these trends will existentially threaten open, free and cohesive civic culture, undermine democratic institutions and put our communities at risk. Progress on the major global challenges of our time – climate change, migration, equality, public health – threatens to be derailed.

We can and must turn the tide. Help us build the infrastructure to safeguard democracy and human rights in the digital age.

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 30 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.



PO Box 75769 | London | SW1P 9ER | UK

www.isdglobal.org