

Social media
and messaging
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a source of
collective
discussion and
response to the
coronavirus
outbreak



INFOCUS

by Mariana Díaz García



INFODEMIC: RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST GROUPS AND THE RISK OF DISINFORMATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In December 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in the area. By March 2020, the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was classified as a pandemic, exponentially increasing the measures that governments took to limit the negative impact on the population, including lockdowns, curfews, and travel restrictions.

All around the world, factors such as home isolation, health

concerns about the virus and its socio-political and economic implications generated anxiety and fear. Social media and messaging apps became a source of collective discussion and response to the coronavirus outbreak. Surveys of social media users in different countries have shown an increase in the use of social platforms during the period of physical distancing at home.¹

In this scenario, right-wing extremist groups have adapted

1 [https://www.globalwebindex.com/hubfs/1.%20Coronavirus%20Research%20PDFs/GWI%20coronavirus%20findings%20March%202020%20-%20Multi-Market%20data%20\(Release%203\).pdf](https://www.globalwebindex.com/hubfs/1.%20Coronavirus%20Research%20PDFs/GWI%20coronavirus%20findings%20March%202020%20-%20Multi-Market%20data%20(Release%203).pdf)



their propaganda to the on-line dynamics created by the new extensive online forms of communication consumption generated by the pandemic. These right-wing extremist groups do not represent a coherent movement, yet as defined by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), they are rather a “shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements espousing different but related ideologies, often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities.”² Other actors, such as organized crime and extremist groups, such as those associated with the Islamic State

in Iraq and the Levant and Al-Qaida have also misused social media to pursue their objectives.³

The pandemic has created a global unprecedented social media landscape that enabled the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation. These theories were usually confined by context specific situations in times of crisis. During the global pandemic the impact of these theories have been amplified by the new communication paradigms driven by social media.⁴ In this context, extremist groups have found a fertile ground to enhance the impact of conspiracy theories and

disinformation to spread their narratives of to restructure their ideology, recruit, and

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Right-wing extremist groups have adapted their propaganda to the online dynamics created by the new extensive online forms of communication consumption generated by the pandemic

2 United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) (April 2020), Trends Alert “Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism”, p. 2. See also the updated version of July 2020.

3 http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/misuse_sm_0.pdf

4 <https://theconversation.com/conspiracy-theories-why-are-they-thriving-in-the-pandemic-153657>

incite violent actions during the pandemic. The conspiracy theories attribute the origin of COVID-19 to governments, religious or ethnic groups, secret networks, companies, or businessmen, who in this assumption, are believed to endorse secret agendas such as globalist depopulation, the control of the world or the generation of financial incomes through the sale of vaccines, medical equipment, and drug treatments.

The impact of the fast spread of disinformation was highlighted early by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) when he expressed that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” referring to fake news that “spreads faster and more easily than this virus.”⁵ COVID-19 conspiracy theories have had several consequences, including jeopardizing the government efforts to implement public health measures and vaccination campaigns, which were observed, for example, in the sabotage of 500 doses of vaccines by a pharmacist in Wisconsin and the infiltration of the far-right extremist groups in the anti-lockdown protests.⁶

The role of technology, particularly social media and messaging apps has been essential for the expansion of malicious activities



The role of technology, particularly social media and messaging apps has been essential for the expansion of malicious activities. Right-wing extremist groups have disseminated conspiracy theories by adapting them to their traditional anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and anti-government narratives with the objective of undermining the trust in the government and authorities, reinforcing extremist narratives, improving recruitment strategies, and motivating self-radicalized individuals to perpetrate real attacks.⁷ The groups are present on the main global social media platforms.

Some neo-Nazi group groups, have used conspiracy theories to disseminate disinformation and to incite the intentional spread of COVID-19 in Muslim and Jewish communities and have used social media to share hate speech and disinformation, including related to use of vaccines. These strategies adopt some conspiracy theories to engage online users in their ideology and activities. Groups also frequently use memes, videos, animations, and surveys to promote their content.

These activities have generated impact beyond online dynamics. Inspired terrorism was observed when Timothy Wilson plotted to detonate a bomb in a hospital caring for coronavirus patients in Kansas City in 2020.⁸ He was active in at least two neo-Nazi social media channels. His last online comment was an anti-Semitic message regarding the origin of COVID-19.

On January 6, 2021, the U.S Capitol was stormed. FBI Director Wray confirmed that advocates of the QAnon conspiracy theory were placed in custody.⁹ Jacob Angeli Chansley, “QAnon Shaman”, was

5 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-infodemic-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>

6 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-pharmacist/wisconsin-pharmacist-arrested-on-charges-of-sabotaging-covid-vaccine-doses-idUSKBN2961YE>
<https://riskline.com/party-crashers-the-far-right-at-anti-lockdown-protests/>

7 http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/misuse_sm_0.pdf

8 <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fbi-learned-coronavirus-inspired-bomb-plotter-radicalized-us/story?id=69818116>

9 <https://www.dw.com/en/us-qanon-followers-tied-to-capitol-riot-arrested-fbi-says/a-57205833>

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among the at least 34 QAnon adherents that participated in the siege, while 32 other followers committed ideologically motivated crimes

before and after the Capitol insurrection, for a total of 66 who engaged in criminal conduct.¹⁰ Months before the siege, research showed that

these groups were motivating their followers to infiltrate anti-lockdown protests and to fabricate homemade weapons to carry them there.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://start.umd.edu/publication/qanon-offenders-united-states>

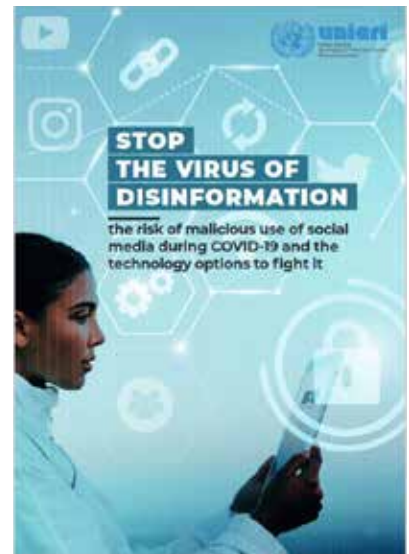
¹¹ http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/misuse_sm_0.pdf

Conspiracy theories and disinformation that are shared by these groups and other actors have other consequences. According to the “Stop AAPI Hate” report, 3,795 anti-Asian racist incidents were reported between March 2020 and February 2021, with 503 incidents in 2021.¹² Furthermore, the convergence of conspiracy theories can have a multiplier effect, reinforcing intergroup polarization and, resulting in jeopardizing government guidance and increasing the risks of terrorist attacks against people or against infrastructures that are connected to COVID-19.¹³

The right-wing extremist groups have tried to use the pandemic to reinforce their narratives, incite potential ter-

rorist attacks, and to recruit new members or increase their followers. The complexity of conspiracy theories, the improvement of diffusion techniques, and the evolution of technology are factors that might increase the threat of disinformation. New social media channels and platforms are also starting to be exploited by these groups.¹⁴

To fight disinformation, it is important to create counter-narratives and to raise awareness about its consequences, as well as using and developing technology tools and adequate strategies to combat it. Some technology options have been implemented, but the human factor must be included to make a change.¹⁵



For more information see:
[“Stop the virus of disinformation: the malicious use of social media by terrorist, violent extremist and criminal groups during the COVID-19 pandemic.”](#)

THE AUTHOR

Mariana Díaz García is currently working as a Fellow in United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) under the framework of the Knowledge Center Security through Research, Technology and Innovation (SIRIO). Her research has focused on the malicious use of social media by extremist groups, technology strategies to improve chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) defense, as well as ideology, radicalization, and legitimization of armed groups.

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12 <https://securereservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>

13 http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/misuse_sm_0.pdf

14 <https://medium.com/dfirlab/op-ed-the-next-big-wave-of-disinformation-will-be-heard-not-seen-70507fcbf79a>

15 http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/misuse_sm_0.pdf