THE FAR-RIGHT AND COVID-19

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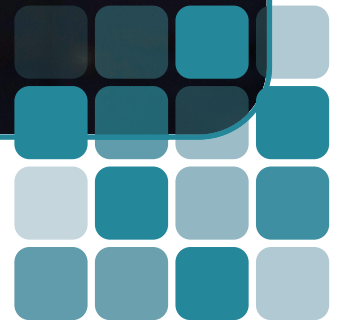
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Table Of Contents

Introduction

The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) that emerged first in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and claimed the lives of almost half a million people across the world, has become a threat to human health, national economies and national security all around the world. Scientists are working around the clock to develop a vaccine for the virus, but the prospects are still uncertain.

Covid-19 is now more than a health crisis and poses a security risk to all countries. For instance, cross-border criminal groups and far-right groups are using the pandemic as an opportunity. While criminal groups take this chance to steal medical equipment, sabotage online meetings or steal data, far-right groups use it to spread their propaganda, increase their visibility, and engender a "rally around the flag" effect.. This report will, thus examine how the far-right groups take advantage of the pandemic for their disinformation and propaganda efforts, the narratives and methods they employ and the measures and steps that can be taken to counter such efforts.

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Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right groups endeavored to take advantage of it to benefit their cause and push their agenda.

Far-right groups, widely sharing their common racist and populist tendencies, can also differ from each other with the specific ideas they add to this mix, including xenophobia, white supremacy, accelerationist, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and Neo-Nazism.[1] With violent and non-violent variations, these groups, in order to gain support and a foothold, usually capitalize on economic and political crises, the existence of marginalized and vulnerable communities, social fault lines and the gap between people and their governments. They also use protests and street violence when possible to spread their messages and to recruit new people.

Since the first emergence of Covid-19, far-right groups made the virus an important part of their agenda and propaganda efforts to increase the impact of their discourse and activities. When Covid-19 turned into a pandemic wreaking havoc around the world, these groups ramped up their conspiracy theories and panic and fear-fueled discourses to target certain ethnic and religious groups. To this end, they used online and offline propaganda materials, used social fault lines, and sought to spread disinformation to create wider chasms between different groups in the society. In the next section, this study will provide examples of such tactics by far-right groups and offer suggestions as to how these phenomena can be warded off.

The Covid-19 Narrative of the Far-right: Most Common Tactics

1. Online and Offline Propaganda: Channels and Discourse Used by the Far-right

The pandemic forced people all over the world to spend as much time as possible indoors and/or to maintain social distance amidst worldwide lockdowns, closed borders and a global isolation. Despite partial easing of the measures, the difficulties continue while the measures seems to be possibly hardened again in the short-term in the next months if not weeks.

In addition to being important sources of information, the internet and social media as popular means of daily activities like education, shopping among others, are also frequently exploited for the spread of disinformation, fear and panic and for data theft.

Global isolation brought about a 1215% increase in the use of the internet and social media all around the world, as both business and education spheres became almost entirely online and people started socializing more and more on social media.[2] Even before the pandemic, the internet had been widely exploited by many non-state armed actors, cross-border criminal groups and terror groups. With its low-costs and the ample opportunities to reach out to a wider range of audience in a short amount of time, it was a natural choice for the said groups. However, when the pandemic started and when people became more psychologically vulnerable, such opportunities for exploitation literally exploded.[3] According to a research study by the

> Hashtags that targeted China and Chinese people and encouraged violence skyrocketed by 300% (#CCPVirus, #ChinaLiedPeopleDied, #KungFlu, #Chinazi, #CoronaVirusCoverUp, #China_is_Terrorist, #Depopulation #HoldChinaAccountable, #DeepstateVirus). The most popular hashtags were #NukeChina, #BombChina and #DeathtoChina and clearly targeted China. 85%of the tweets in the past two months included #CCPVirus, #ChinaLiedPeopleDied hashtags.

Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), one telegram channel used by white supremacists
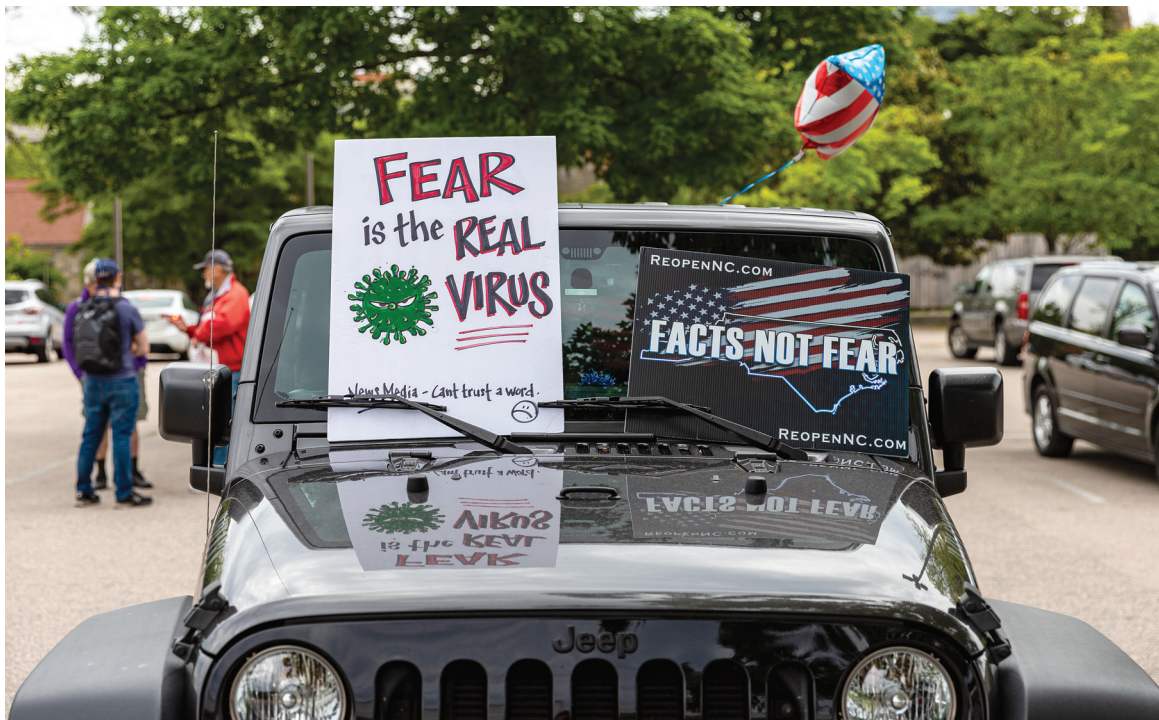
took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to increase the number of its subscribers from 300 to 2700.[4] In addition to channels like 4chan, 8ku, Telegram, Gab and BitChute, which are believed to have softer measures to prevent hate speech and violence-promotion of far-right groups, popular social media tools like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, were also deliberately used to spread disinformation about Covid-19 and the conspiracy theories that claimed that the virus was a biological weapon. Those groups used common hashtags to reach out to as many people as possible so that they can spread their discourse.

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According to a research study conducted by Moonshot CVE (Countering Violent Extremism), 676 million tweets were posted in two months between February and April with terms like "coronavirus" and "Covid-19." Two hundred thousand of those tweets with English hashtags were examined and it was concluded that the hashtags that targeted China and Chinese people and encouraged violence witnessed a significant increase by 300% (#CCPVirus, #ChinaLiedPeopleDied, #KungFlu, #Chinazi, #CoronaVirusCoverUp, #China_is_Terrorist, #Depopulation #HoldChinaAccountable, #DeepstateVirus). The most popular hashtags were #NukeChina, #BombChina and #DeathtoChina and clearly targeted China. 85% of the tweets in the past two months, included #CCPVirus, #ChinaLiedPeopleDied hashtags.[5]

Far-right groups seek to influence and alter both the behavior and views of individuals and societies to get new recruits, to gain a social foothold, and to take advantage of this fragility when people are both psychologically and economically more susceptible to outside influences especially online. To this end, they try to impose their ideas and foster and deepen fault lines within the societies. Additionally, for instance, US President Donald Trump's reference to Covid-19 as the "Chinese virus" and the Hungarian President Viktor Orban's blaming the immigrants can also feed into such a discourse, whether intentionally or not.[6]

Another tactical move by far-right groups amidst theCovid-19 pandemic has been their increased number of calls for attacks. They called on the people that tested positive to contaminate different ethnic and/or religious groups. For example, Facebook groups such as "Exposing Zionist Puppets Worldwide", businessman Paul Nehlen, radio host Rick Wiles, and former Wisconsin Sheriff David Clarke urged infected people to frequently visit their local synagogues and hug as many Jews as possible. Similarly, they hang posters that read things like "Cough on your local minority" and "Cough on your local transit system."[7]

2. Social Fault Lines and Efforts to Widen the Gap between Societies and their Governments

One of the most powerful tactics of far-right actors during the Covid-19 pandemic has been spreading conspiracy theories about the effects and results of the disease.[8] As a result of these conspiracy theories, the number of hate crimes and discourses especially against Chinese and Asian people in general, increased. The Human Rights Watch urged the world's governments to take precautions against racism, xenophobia, violence and discrimination after Covid-19-related attacks rose.

Antonio Guterres, General Secretary of the United Nations also called on countries to stop looking for a scapegoat and to take measures against the rise of hate and xenophobia. Lunaria, a civil society organization in Italy, which later became the epicenter of the pandemics, reported more than 50 media attacks, verbal harassment, bullying and discriminatory acts against Asian people since February. Similarly, human rights and civil society organizations in France, Australia and Russia have informed Human Rights Watch of increasing Covid-19-related attacks against people of Asian descent. Incidents of physical and verbal violence include the punching of people of Asian descent in the UK for supposedly spreading Covid-19 and the attack on Chinese students in Australia by two women who also insulted them and shouted at them to go back to China.[9]

The conspiracy theories and propaganda are aimed to create tension between the people and the governments and to further alienate people from their states. For example, anti-government protests started across Germany after measures against Covid-19 were announced. Although far-right groups dominated the protests, the spreading of conspiracy theories made other groups join as well. Former TV host and journalist Ken Jepsen, who attended the protests in Stuttgart, has a YouTube channel and a website "KenFM", where he broadcasts his conspiracy theories centered around anti-Semitism. He claims that Covid-19 measures violate the basic rights and freedoms granted by the German Constitution. He maintains that an elite society rules the world and that Bill Gates and Melinda Gates managed to gain control of the World Health Organization, the German government, and even the entire system of the world. According to him, Covid-19 is not more dangerous than regular flu and was supported by thousands of protesters who intentionally refused to comply with the rules about social distance or face masks.[10] As a result of these worrying developments, a Cabinet Commission against the far-right was formed in Germany in May. Horst Seehofer, the Internal Affairs

Minister, who is also a member of the Commission, said that the biggest danger against the democratic order was far-right, anti-Semitism and racism. [11]

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Accelerationist discourse followers, who are extreme rightists and thrive on violence, gladly welcomed the Covid-19 pandemic, thinking that it accelerates social collapse and brought them closer to their ultimate goal of a white-only state". Briefly, accelerationism is based on the idea that mass attacks or mass deaths will accelerate the collapse of social structures and help re-build a pure-race society. They believe that liberal order and globalization are not sustainable and that people should be manipulated during this time by means of their loneliness, economic concerns, worries about the future, fear and panic and the virus should be spread more. Accelerationists claimed on a YouTube channel that before Covid-19, the world was not sustainable with its mixed societies and globalized system, and that Covid-19 proved them right. Far-right groups hope that disorder will affect as many people as possible and seek to gain new recruits, but their ultimate goal is making the

far-right more aggressive, revolutionist and radicalized. [12] Famous American Neo-Nazi James Mason, who is also another accelerationist, declares that their view not only aims to kill the minorities but also to inflame the problems. Accelerationists consider the pandemic as a means to spread their propaganda and ideologies, and using their hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories which accuse Jews and immigrants of the outbreak and spread of Covid-19, take steps to create mayhem in societies in order to accelerate the so-called rebuilding of the society by the whites. Accelerationists explicitly call on the deportation or "elimination" of Jews and other ethnical minorities in their online conversations. [13]

3. Disinformation and Provocation by the Far-Right Groups

Disinformation is another method that the far-right extensively makes use of in order to benefit from the pandemic. For example, these groups hang up posters, which are also shared on the social media, where people are m,sled and encouraged to visit religious sites more and use mass transportation more. They are also used to deliberately mislead people about individual and social health and even in one instance, a poster was shared where this misleading information was wrongly attributed to Center for Disease Control (CDC). Members of these groups post messages on their Telegram channels, which have thousands of subscribers, where they encourage each other to infect minorities. [14]

Contact details and addresses, claimed to be owned by NIH, WHO and Gates Foundation, as well as the staff of the Wuhan Virology Institute, were shared on "4chan", which is frequently used by far-rightists, as well as on "Pastebin", which is a text storage site, in addition to various other far-right channels on Telegram and Twitter.

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This flow of disinformation and conspiracy theories unsurprisingly accompanied by a rise in the level of activity. For example, a man named Timothy Wilson was caught and killed by the FBI while preparing to attack a hospital in Kansas, USA where Covid-19 patients were being treated. The FBI was already keeping tabs on Wilson as a potentially violent extremist who might have planned to attack a mosque, a syna-gogue and a black majority school. A couple of hours before Wilson was killed, he shared anti-Semitic posts on two white-supremacist Telegram channels, frequently used by far-right groups.[15]

Moreover, email addresses and passwords, claimed to be belonging to the NIH, the WHO and the Gates Foundation were intercepted and posted on the internet. SITE, which is an intelligence organization that specializes in far-right and terrorist groups, confirmed that the passwords were posted on the internet. Contact details and addresses, claimed to be owned by the NIH, the WHO and the Gates Foundation, as well as the staff of the Wuhan Virology Institute, were shared on "4chan", which is frequently used by far-rightists, as well as on "Pastebin", which is a text storage site, in addition to various other far-right channels on Telegram and Twitter. These are important examples that show how the far-right is using Covid-19 to their advantage and the lengths they can go to in order to spread their conspiracy theories.[16]

Many conspiracy theories abound regarding the origins of the virus. Extreme rightist groups use the Covid-19 pandemic to foster anti-Semitism and anti-Chinese sentiments. According to those theories, a Chinese laboratory inadvertently released the virus while it was working on it to build a biological weapon. These groups also seek to benefit from Covid-19 to spread their anti-immigrant and anti-government sentiments and to encourage people to adopt xenophobia and political violence through their conspiracy theories. They also post xenophobic parodies that feature racist talks or that mock Chinese hygiene rules or cuisine.[17]

The most common conspiracy theories seen on far-right group channels like 4chan, 8ku, Telegram, are about "anti-Semitism". They tend to accuse Jews of everything from wars, to crises and pandemics. After theories surfaced that 5G technology towers and networks helped create and spread the virus, these groups claimed on 4Chan and Gab, platforms mostly used by extremists, and on Facebook and Twitter that Jews had that specific telecommunication technology and deliberately built those towers in non-Jewish zones.

For example, one Facebook user in Britain posted a message saying, "I wonder why there are no 5G towers in Jew-populated areas." The theories claim that Jews or Israel developed Covid-19 and then put the blame on China in an effort to start WWIII. There are also other theories which claim that Jewish businessmen first developed the virus and then planned to sell the vaccine for it. Many posts are shared where the virus is associated with Jews and symbols of Judaism.[18] Many far-right groups used hate speech on the internet and social media, claiming that Jews developed Covid-19 to sell vaccines for it in order to make money.[19]

Another conspiracy theorist, David Icke aired his misleading claims on a YouTube interview where he said that there was a connection between 5G networks and Covid-19. Half a million people watched that video, which was then shared on a conspiracy theory website called Bitchute.[20] Many tweets were posted with hashtags #burn5Gtowers, #stop5G, #5GCoronavirus, and some 5G base stations were attacked in UK, Holland, Belgium and Ireland.[21]

Even though they were not as popular as anti-China hashtags, many anti-Semitic hashtags were also used, (#SorosVirus, #IsraelVirus and #NWOVirus), with which people claimed that Jews used the virus to take the global economy under their control. Similarly, USA, CIA and Bill Gates were also accused of creating the virus and were targeted with hashtags like #GatesVirus, #CIAVirus, #AmericaVirus.[22] According to another conspiracy theory, USA and Israel developed the virus as a biological weapon to stop China and Iran.[23]

4. Preventing the Far-right from Capitalizing on Covid-19: The Danger of Extreme Far-right Discourse Becoming Mainstream

The Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to its obvious health-related dimension, will no doubt have effects on the future of our societies' economy and security. Even after a medical solution is found for Covid-19, it is likely that its social, psychological and economic effects will continue to linger for years to come. Such a development will surely provide new windows of opportunity to many radical groups, including far-right groups.

Within the wide reach of the far-right narrative, individuals and groups feed on the atmosphere of fear, panic and worry caused by the virus and the actions of the governments. Even though

far-right groups do not stage large-scale attacks so far, which might also well because of the more lone actor-type tactical preference of far-right attackers as seen in the last decade, as a direct result of their conspiracy theories, minorities and especially Jews and people of Asian descent, are increasingly being targeted through hate speech and hate crimes. According to a report by New Jersey's Homeland Security and Preparedness Office, far-right groups use the virus to radicalize and provoke people especially against minorities and immigrants. Far-right groups staged armed protests at least in twenty states in US after lockdowns, restrictions and other accompanying measures and precautions. According to the intelligence obtained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Neo-Nazis and white supremacists encourage infected people to infect police officers and Jews, and are planning to use spray bottles to spread their bodily fluids in crowded areas like marketplaces, places of worship etc. The police force is thought to be targeted as it represents the US authority.

Unlike many other radical ideologies or mind sets, the far-right is represented directly in politics in many countries and sometimes also by the political actors closer to the mainstream parties, which presents another risk that should be highlighted. ORSAM's "The Rise of Far-Right: Key Themes, Motivations and Mapping" report offers important details about player profiles and their progress over time in that context. Similarly, some mainstream parties even in the countries where far-right political actors do not have any vote potential, began to adopt far-right's narrative to expand their electoral base, especially after the increased support for the far-right after the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the refugee influx. With the Covid-19 pandemic, it is likely that the far-right, as much as any other radical group and even maybe more, will find a chance to get stronger and reach out to more people. For this reason, it is critical that regional, national and global players as well as international institutions take unbiased steps as strict as the stance against ISIS and Al-Qaeda. regardless of the extremist groups' motivations. as a unified front However wide-spread criticism online and offline that there is no such strong stance show that the struggle against the far-right has still yet to materialize. It is known that radical and extreme groups and narratives thrive on each other's presence and therefore it is clear that concrete action must be taken against all such structures which can become stronger by taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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