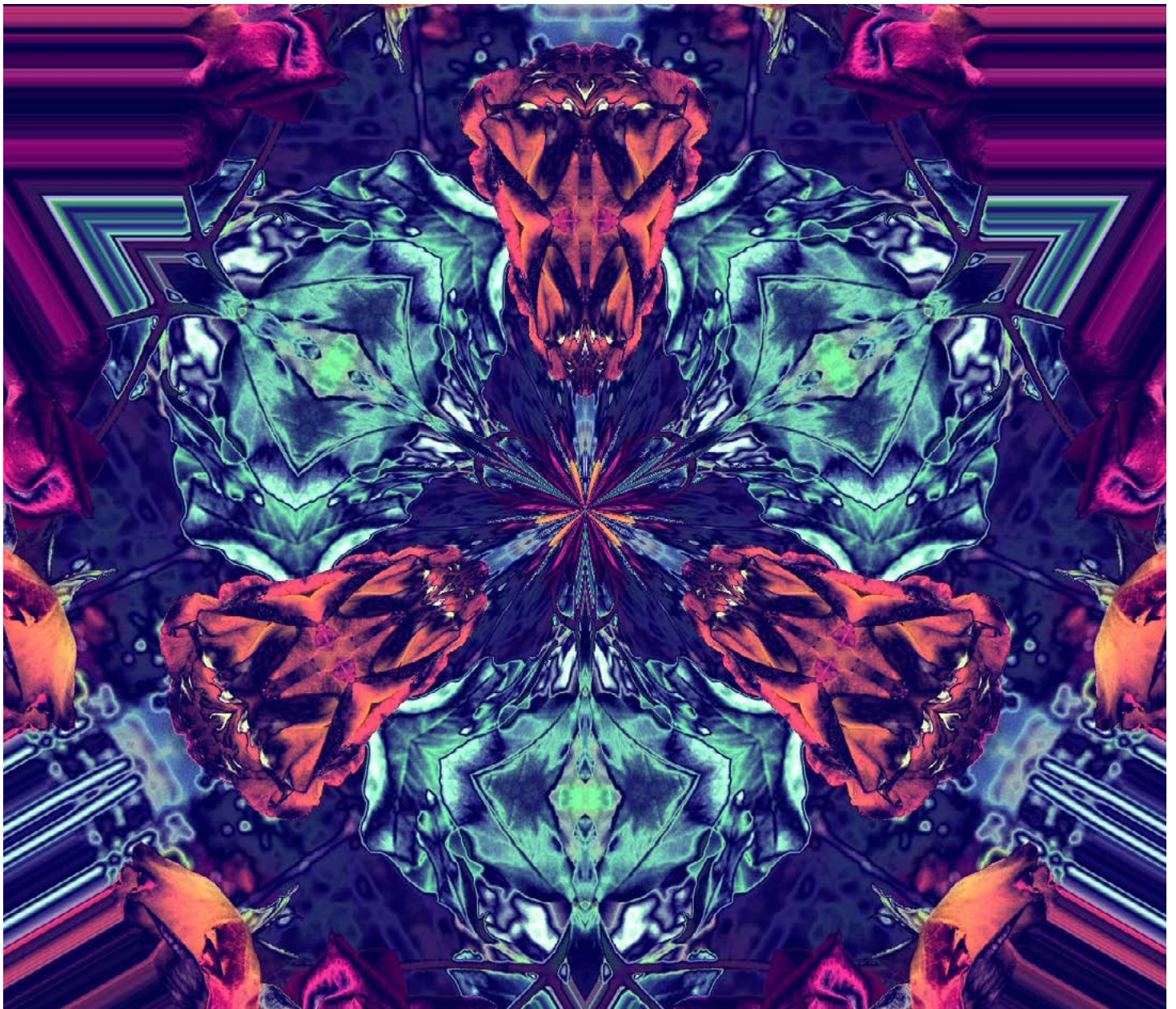


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UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF
CONSPIRACY THEORY BELIEF



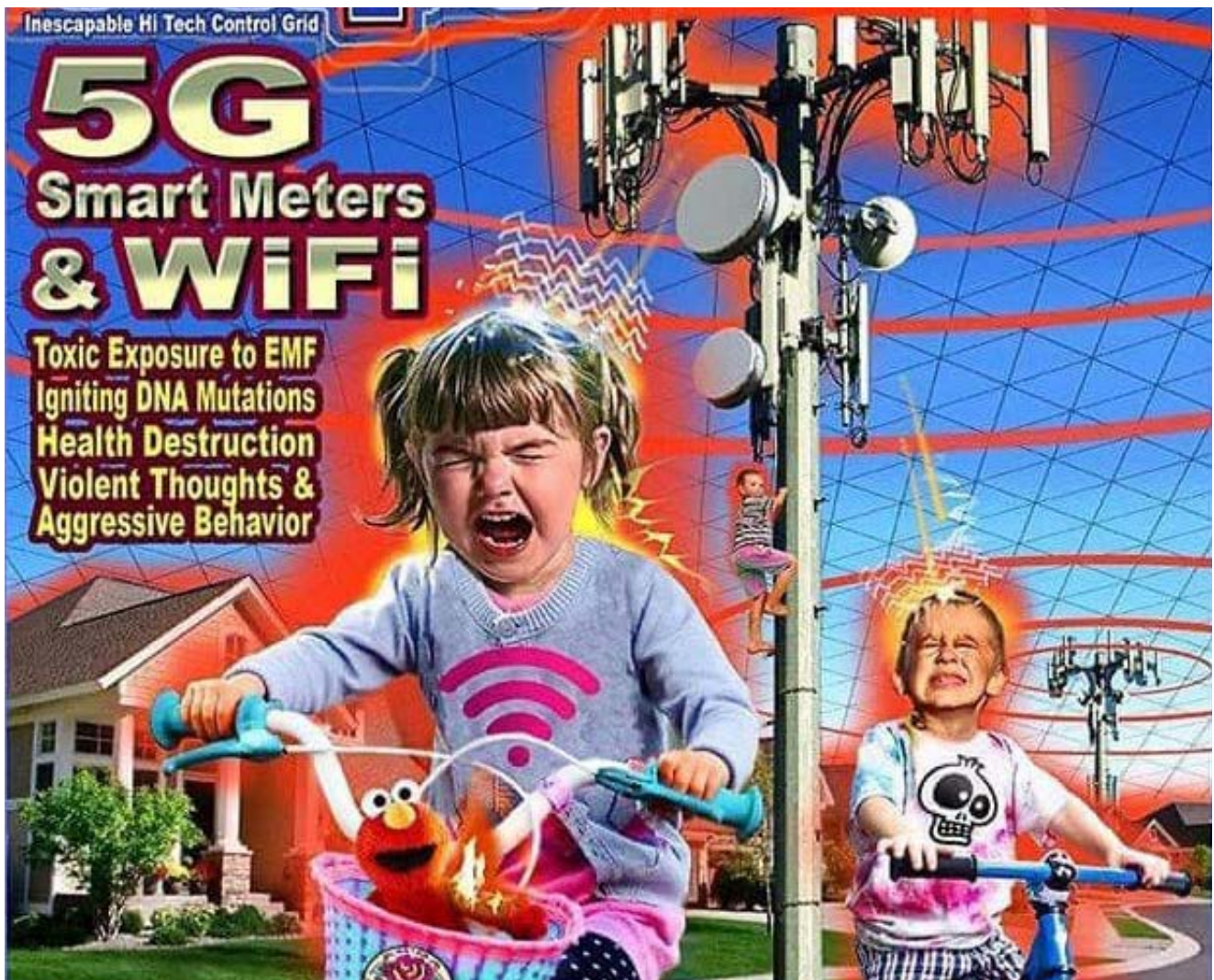
TRUST NO ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF CONSPIRACY THEORY BELIEF

By Patrik Hermansson

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INTRODUCTION

Few situations highlight the need for accurate information as much as a global pandemic. Unfortunately, tumultuous times are also the times when misinformation and conspiracy theories spread the fastest. Over recent weeks many dozens of phone masts across the UK have been burned or sabotaged after a conspiracy theory linked the new technology to people falling sick in covid-19. As outlandish as these ideas seem polling conducted for this report shows that 37% of the population is aware of this conspiracy theory and many have read about other alleged conspiracies related to the coronavirus. For example, 21% had read or seen social media content related to the conspiracy theory that the virus is a “depopulation” plan concocted by the UN. While not everyone believes in the theories themselves, the large amount of attention the ideas are getting is worrying and sometimes even dangerous; a mobile phone mast that served the emergency NHS Nightingale hospital in Birmingham was recently targeted by arsonists.

This report looks deeper into the British population’s belief in conspiracy theory. Based on a new segmentation defined by different views on conspiracy theory we look closer, not just at what kind of conspiracy theories people are most likely to believe in, but what unites conspiracy theorists and what sets them apart from those who are critical of conspiracy theory. While most people are likely to hold at least one conspiracy theory to be true, we find that a certain segment of the population is more prone to believe in conspiracy theory and is likely to agree with most of the conspiracy theories we query them on.

One of the fundamental aspects of conspiracy theory is mistrust. Our polling shows that the most conspiracy theory minded individuals are also those that mistrust the state and the political system the most. 86% of the group most prone to conspiracy theory also think that the political system is broken.

Even seemingly apolitical stories, such as questioning whether the moon landings took place, direct suspicion against the intention of the US government. Therefore, while there might be a desire to laugh at and attribute conspiracy to irrational thinking, it misses the point that conspiracy theories might help to contextualise an already existing distrust and that some

conspiracy theories might actually feel more in-line with one’s own experience than the official story.

The role of social media in spreading conspiracy theory is however also important. In the last weeks, conspiracy theory related groups have grown significantly on Facebook, some adding thousands of new members per day. Social media companies provide a platform for conspiracy theorists that would not have otherwise had a large audience and have been a boon for the conspiracy propaganda. This is not inconsequential, HOPE not hate’s research has shown how 5G conspiracy theory groups can unite this seemingly quite innocuous theory based on criticism of new technology with antisemitism. Users in these groups also egg each other on to sabotage the phone masts across the country.

Solutions to the issue of conspiracy theory belief, therefore, need to counter both the ways these ideas spread and the role that social media platforms play in contributing to this spread. At the same time, we must not look at this solely as an issue of misinformation but as a larger systemic issue of trust and the feeling of being able to have a say.

RESULTS SUMMARY

- Lack of trust in the system is higher amongst those who are most prone to believe in the conspiracy theory. They are less likely to have voted in the last General Election and 86% of them say that the political system is broken.
- The public's exposure to conspiracy theory related to the ongoing pandemic is high. 37% have heard about the 5G conspiracy theory and almost a third of people do not dismiss it: 8% believe it to be true, while 19% are unsure.
- 45% of the population believes that the coronavirus is a man-made creation.
- However, amongst the groups least prone to conspiracy theories it was Islamophobic and anti-immigration conspiracy theories that were most likely to be held. 30% of this group answers 'definitely or probably true' on whether the government lies about how many immigrants are living in this country.
- Anti-vaccination conspiracy theory holds a not-insignificant amount of support with 18% of the overall population agreeing that they have hidden harmful effects.
- Worryingly, the classic antisemitic conspiracy theory that Jews have undue control of the banking system is given support by 13% of the total overall population, 54% disagree and the remaining 32% neither agree nor disagree.
- Alternative news sites have significantly higher readership among believers in conspiracy theory than the population overall. Of those who think that 5G is connected to the coronavirus, 30% said they had read one alternative news site in the last six months compared to 8% among those who don't subscribe to the theory.
- David Icke is the most well-known conspiracy theorist in the UK. 51% of the respondents answered that they had heard about him and 12% of those had read a text by Icke or watched one of his videos in the last six months.



CONSPIRACY THEORY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

We are currently observing what appears to be a rise in conspiracy theory thinking in the UK. Facebook groups dedicated to anti-vaccination and anti-5G conspiracy theories are growing by the thousands, and people across the country have been so motivated by their ideas that they have taken to sabotaging phone masts, fearing that they are the cause of the ongoing pandemic. The 5G conspiracy theory is just one among many that have followed the pandemic; belief in the virus as a bio-weapon released intentionally by the Chinese state, or that it is part of a plan to depopulate the planet by the UN, are other ideas that are currently circulating.

Support for conspiracy theories tends to rise in volatile and uncertain times like the one we are in. These ideas can provide solace by providing someone or something to blame and give a form of explanation to people's hardship. When large, world-changing events take place we seek meaning, and often intent behind what is going on. Simple accidents often do not suffice as explanations. At the same time, the current conditions are easily exploited by conspiracy theorists for political or monetary purposes.

It is, however, a bitter irony that the time when accurate information and unity is needed the most is also the time when we are particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories. When all levels of society, from individuals to governments to corporations need to do what they can to stave off the spread of the virus, it is also a time when it is especially easy to make minorities into scapegoats.

However, while the specific fears of radio towers and Chinese bioweapons are clearly a product of the current pandemic, it would be disingenuous to argue that these feelings arose out of nowhere. Ultimately, much of the political cynicism, and the distrust in politicians, media and experts, was already there. The current situation does, however, exaggerate these existing problems.

It is only through a thorough understanding of both the threat and allure of conspiracy theory, alongside the reasons some are susceptible to it, that we can meaningfully begin to tackle it. For that reason, HOPE not hate has conducted a series of polls over the last months on the British populations' attitude towards conspiracy theories and trust in the political system.

WHAT IS CONSPIRACY THEORY

Michael Barkun defines a conspiracy theory as “the belief that an organisation made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end” in his book *A Culture of Conspiracy*. A brief look in a history book reveals many actual conspiracies, where small groups of people conspire in secret to cause harm or change society in a direction they prefer. Guy Fawkes' gunpowder plot or, more recently, the Watergate affair are two examples of real conspiracies. Believing that they happened does not make you a conspiracy theorist in most people's eyes; the the conspiracy theories we are concerned about are of a different sort. The fact that conspiracies have, and will likely continue to happen, makes drawing the line between problematic belief in conspiracies and legitimate doubt in the official story not entirely straightforward.

The conspiracy theories we are concerned with reject official versions of events and tend to assume that there is direct intent behind most major events and news stories. As such they tend to increase in popularity during times of turmoil as they are, at the core, built on a foundation of mistrust and look for meaning and connections between seemingly random events. At their worst, they find scapegoats for large structural issues in already vulnerable minorities.

Conspiracy theories are notoriously difficult to disprove because of what Harvard professors Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule call their “self-sealing quality”. In other words, attempts to debunk a conspiracy theory are often perceived as covert attempts to undermine the “truth”. It allows conspiracy theorists to take evidence that seems to disprove the theory, and turn it into support for it instead. Attempts by academics and mainstream media to counter the theory reaffirms the idea that the conspiracy theorists are victims of a conspiracy seeking to silence them. To use elitist institutions would, after all, be exactly what the conspirators would do in order to suppress dissent.

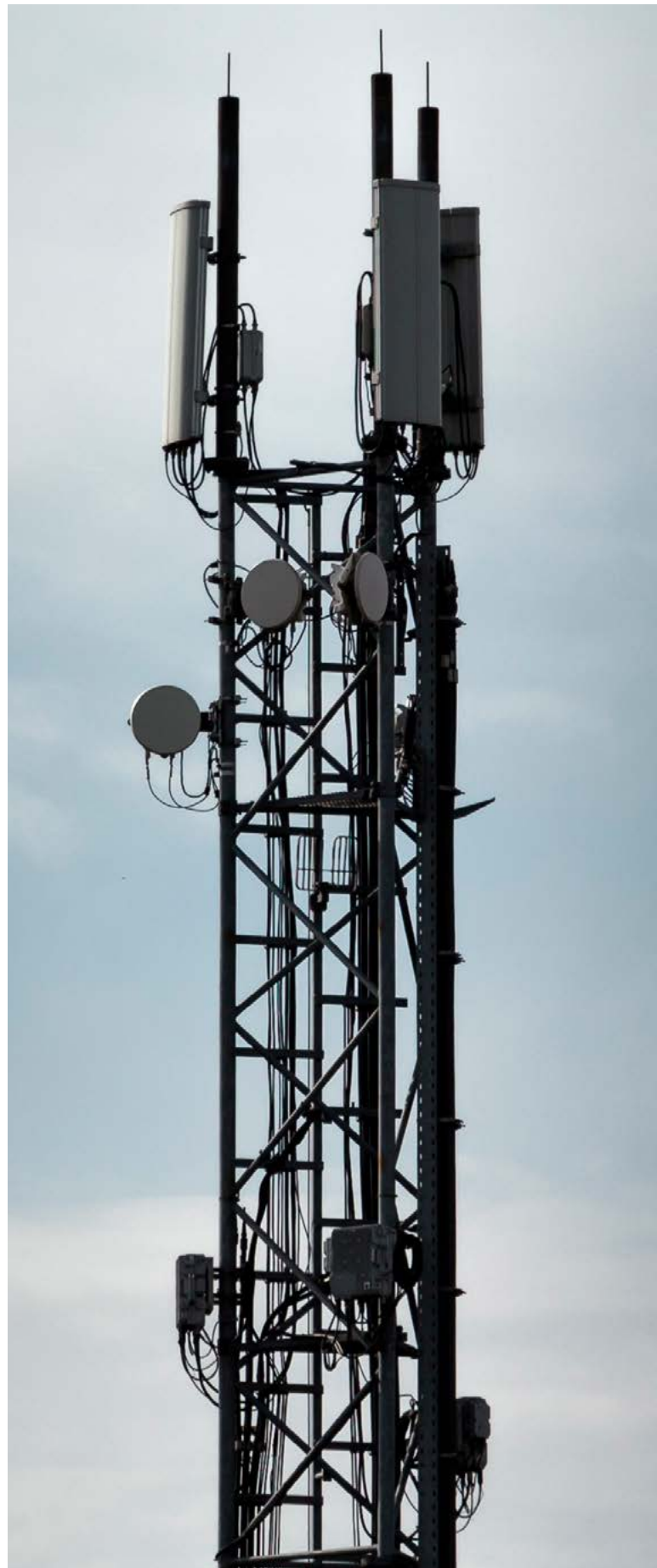
A well-executed conspiracy should by definition not leave evidence. This opens up for the possibility of reading intent and meaning into seemingly unrelated bits of information and, according to Quassim Cassam, Professor of

Philosophy at the University of Warwick, it is a common bias for conspiracy theorists. When big, world-changing events take place we are prone to seek out proportionally large explanations and clear intent, rather than being the result of a chaotic and messy world where most events are often best explained by a series of intertwined chances and mistakes. For example, the ongoing pandemic has been explained by conspiracy theorists in various ways: a Chinese bio-weapon, as a part of the Agenda 21 “depopulation” plan orchestrated by the UN, or as an effect of the new 5G network. These are vastly different theories, but they are joined by the premise there is an intent behind the pandemic.

Explaining disturbing but ultimately random events as though they fit into a greater narrative can be comforting and give a sense of control. Not only do even traumatic events become imbued with meaning, but the believer can convince themselves that they have understood something that others have not. There is empowerment in the belief that one has seen behind the curtain and knows how the puzzle fits together. In that sense there is an elitist streak in some conspiracists’ beliefs, although a definition of conspiracy theory is incomplete without discussing their anti-elitist elements as well.

One could imagine that in tumultuous and uncertain times most would turn away from conspiracy theory instead of towards it, discarding their suspicion of corruption among elites and instead putting their faith in the stability and consistency of the state. But as Rob Brotherton wrote in his book, *Suspicious Minds*: “The best conspiracy theories have all the trappings of a classic underdog story”. An important aspect of conspiracy theory is mistrust in elites and the political system. Even seemingly apolitical stories, such as questioning whether the Moon landings took place, direct suspicion against the intention of the US government.

In other words, a fundamental aspect of conspiracy theory is mistrust. As we will see in our polling, the most conspiracy theory-minded individuals are those that already mistrust the state and the political system the most. People who mistrust politics and feel left behind are more vulnerable to conspiracy theory belief. While there might be a desire to laugh at and attribute conspiracy to irrational thinking, it



Philanthropist George Soros is a frequent target of conspiracy theory online



misses the point that conspiracy theory helps contextualise an already existing lack of trust, and that some conspiracy theories might feel more in-line with one's own experience than the official story. This is likely further exaggerated when the topic of debate is as complex as a pandemic where we inevitably have to place our trust in experts and the official advice is subject to change.

THE HARM OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Some of the harm that conspiracy theories can cause are evidently clear in times of a pandemic. Similar to anti-vaccination conspiracy theories which prevent people and their children from getting protection for common diseases, ideas that COVID-19 is actually not a disease stemming from a virus but caused by radio waves or is a hoax entirely are clearly harmful. For example, there is evidence that refusal to take vaccines has led to measles outbreaks that would otherwise have been prevented. The fear of vaccines or a faulty idea of the cause of disease prevents people from seeking healthcare when they need it, which harms the individual and can cause the virus to spread faster. It also leads people to misdirect their anger and frustration. Harassing telecom workers and sabotaging cellphone towers across the UK, and therefore looking past genuine social ills, derails opportunities to affect real and beneficial change.

To paralyse social progress through sheer confusion and chaos is some of the more subtle, but still severe, harm done by conspiracy theory; their ability to misdirect action or incapacitate makes them into serious threats to our democratic society. In the age of social media, it also floods the news cycle with misinformation which obscures truth and hampers reasoned debate. This is why Peter Pomerantsev at the London School of Economics calls the spread of conspiracy theory a form of propaganda. Surrounding people with “so much cynicism that they lose faith in the possibility of an alternative” is a way to stave off dissent as “[t]he ultimate effect of this endless pile-up of conspiracies is that you, the little person, can never change anything”. While this might not be the intention behind the conspiracy theories discussed in this report - to suggest that would itself be a conspiracy theory - the effect remains.

Our polling for this report shows that conspiracy theorists rarely hold just one conspiracy theory to be true. Once trust in mainstream sources is low, a reasonable shift is to put the trust in oneself and one's own research, something the internet and social media are exceptionally well suited for. This feeling is already widespread: our polling shows that 42% of the respondents say that they prefer to find the truth out about Coronavirus themselves “rather than relying on

the Government and their experts”. As such, susceptibility to conspiracy thinking can be a gateway into darker territories, including more extreme ideas such as conspiratorial antisemitism.

This is also part of what makes conspiracy theories attractive. As David Lawrence from HOPE not hate writes “There is a frisson that accompanies uncovering supposedly forbidden information, and the sense that one is unravelling some hidden scheme can be addictive”.

Most worrying, however, is the use of conspiracy theories as a tool to attack minority groups. While the conspirators vary between different theories, there is one group in particular that has for centuries faced blame for an enormous variety of upheavals, tragedies and calamities, both historical and mythic. Antisemitism is central to conspiracy theory to such a degree that, sometimes, the role of the supposed Jewish conspirators is implicitly understood and does not need to be named. Implicit antisemitic undertones of a theory can therefore be discussed without risk of deterring those without the same understanding. That is not to say that outright Jew-hatred is hard to find. Antisemitic tropes are rarely far removed from a diverse array of conspiratorial notions concerning, for example, 9/11, the refugee crisis or even climate change, and made relatively clear in the conspiracy theories surrounding Jewish philanthropist George Soros and the Rothschild family.

The persistence of antisemitism within the 21st-century conspiracy scene partly stems from its status as a “taboo”. As Barkun writes, for many conspiracy theorists “the greater the stigma, the more attractive the source becomes, for the intensity of rejection is its truthfulness”.

COUNTERING CONSPIRACY THEORY

Always, and especially in times of crisis, it is vital that we can critique our leaders, to prevent these times turning into opportunities to limit our rights and freedoms - as has already been the case in Hungary. Conspiracy theory is however vastly different from reasoned critique and scrutiny and, if anything, risks standing in the way of rather than helping such an effort.

While it is easy to discard conspiracy theory as harmless and eccentric, its threat should not be taken lightly. Doing so requires us to look at belief in conspiracy theory in multiple different ways, from how it spreads to what could make one vulnerable to it. How to tackle conspiracy theory is not a question purely concerned with the transmission of information but with what conspiracy theory gives to people and why some find it more attractive than others. The role of conspiracy theory as a community and how it provides meaning and explanation in bewildering times are factors that need to be taken into account.

FINDINGS

For this report HOPE not hate conducted three polls between February and April 2020 to assess the British population's relationship with conspiracy theories, their trust in the media and public institutions and their attitudes to political participation. The polls included questions on a variety of established conspiracy theories, such as the death of Princess Diana and whether the moon landings were faked, but also more sinister antisemitic conspiracy theories about the Holocaust and the influence of Jewish people in media. Especially important in the midst of a global pandemic, we also examined belief in vaccine conspiracy theories.

Alongside conspiracy theory related questions, we also asked respondents questions on their outlook on life, their background, their trust in the political system and their view of the future. This allowed us to examine what people who believe in conspiracy theories have in common, and provide an understanding that can inform strategies to counter the spread of conspiracy theories.

This analysis has enabled us to develop a five-tiered segmentation, defined by differing views on conspiracy theory. At one extreme is a segment that is prone to believe almost all conspiracy theories we query them on and is likely to look at many aspects of society through a lens of potential conspiracy. At the other end of the spectrum, we find anti-conspiracy theorists who are clearly and decisively against conspiracy theories of all kinds. In between, we find groups that are less sure on their view of conspiracy theories or just support a certain set of ideas but not others.

We find that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories is not defined by loyalty to either the left or the right side of the political spectrum- our most conspiracy-minded groups are as likely to vote both Labour and Conservative party as our least conspiracy theory minded group. However, amongst the most conspiracy theory minded groups we find that a larger section does not feel represented by any of the parties, mistrusts the political system, is more anxious about immigration and is less hopeful about the future.

THE FIVE SEGMENTS

■ CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

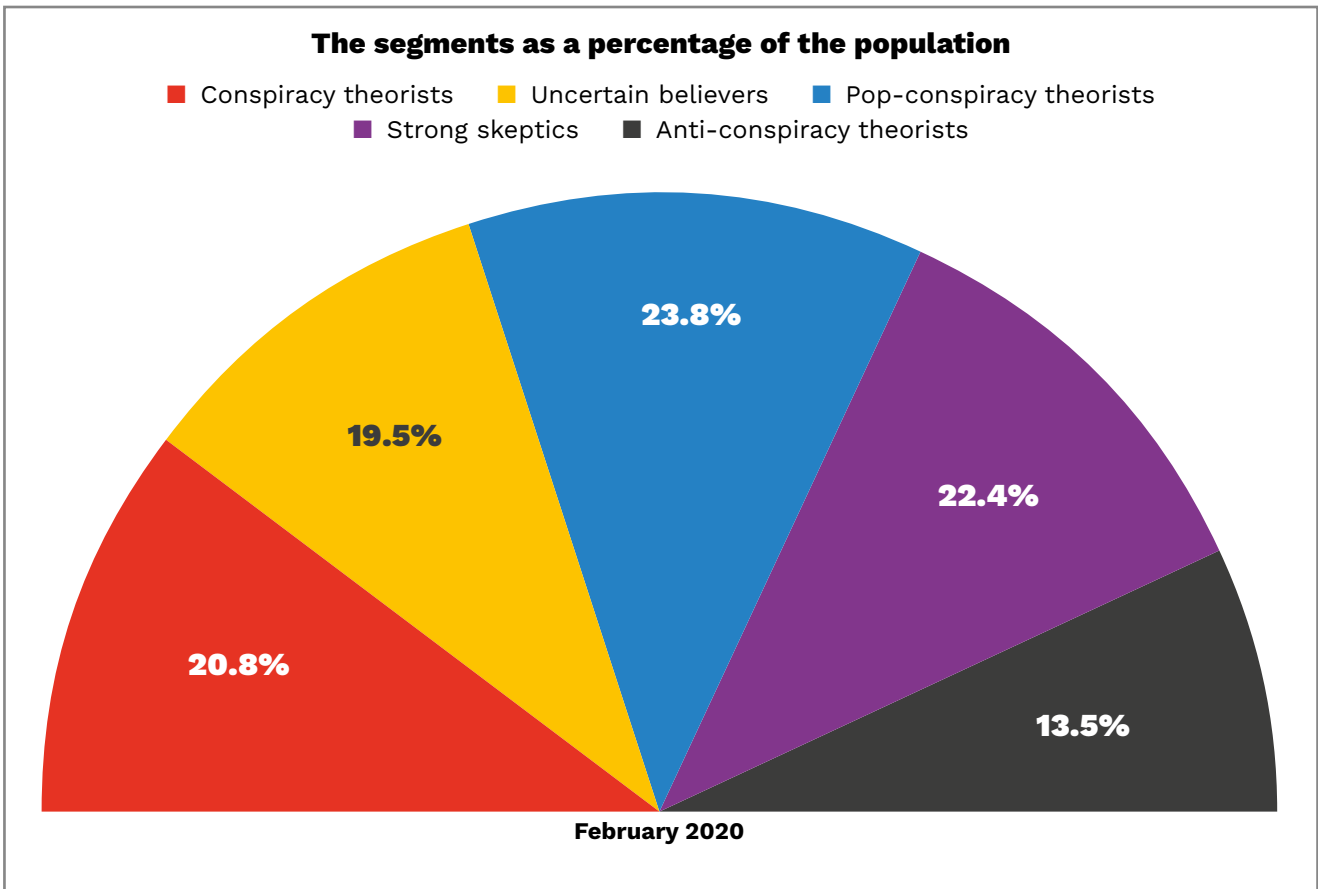
This group was most likely to say any of the conspiracy theories presented to them were true. Outside of their belief in specific conspiracy theories, people in this group were likely to hold the view that there are shadowy forces at work in many parts of society and express a feeling that they had little say in society. They tended to have a lower level of formal education, a lower income and were relatively young. This group are also the most likely to have voted leave in the 2016 EU referendum.

■ UNCERTAIN BELIEVERS

This group is significantly less likely than the Conspiracy Theorists to strongly believe in conspiracy theories whilst still giving positive, though qualified answers to most of the conspiracy theories polled, often answering "probably true". Like the Conspiracy Theorists, they are often manual workers, with a lower degree of formal education and earn less. Partially this can be attributed to the group being the youngest of the five.

■ POP-CONSPIRACY THEORIST

This group agrees with some conspiracy theorists while decisively rejecting others, separating them from our first two groups who are likely to show some support for all conspiracy theories. The pop-conspiracy theorists generally don't believe the more esoteric and extreme ideas, such as the moon landings were faked or that the Holocaust has been exaggerated, but support common far-right conspiracy ideas such as people living under Sharia law in some European cities and that the Government are lying about the number of immigrants. They also believed less harmful ones such as the idea that the death of Princess Diana was actually a murder. This group is older than other conspiracy theorists and are more likely to be retired.



STRONG SCEPTICS

This group rarely believed any conspiracy theories and answered “probably false” most. They are more likely to be women than the Anti-conspiracy Theorists. They are, for the most part, educated to at least degree level, skew towards being Conservative voters and are ambivalent about Brexit. Half the group voted leave and half remain in the 2016 EU referendum.

ANTI-CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

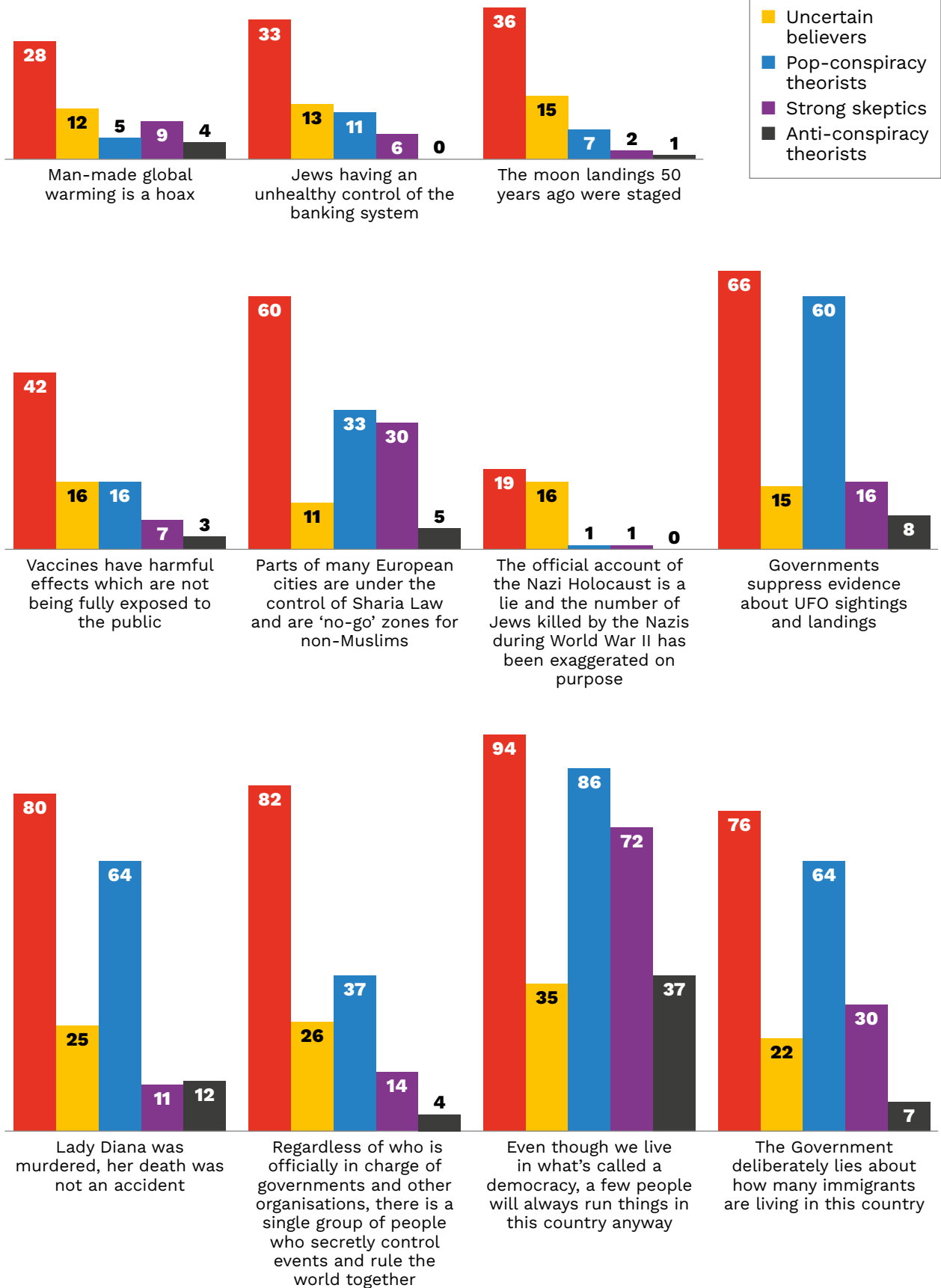
This group is defined by its active stance against conspiracy theories - they are most likely to answer “definitely false” on most conspiracy theory questions. This group has the highest income and education level. They are the least anxious about immigration and believe it has benefited the UK. They are also most likely to say they are content with their lives and are relatively more willing to sacrifice time and money to be environmentally friendly. Two-thirds voted to remain in the EU referendum in 2016 and are more likely to have voted Liberal Democrat in the 2016 General Election.

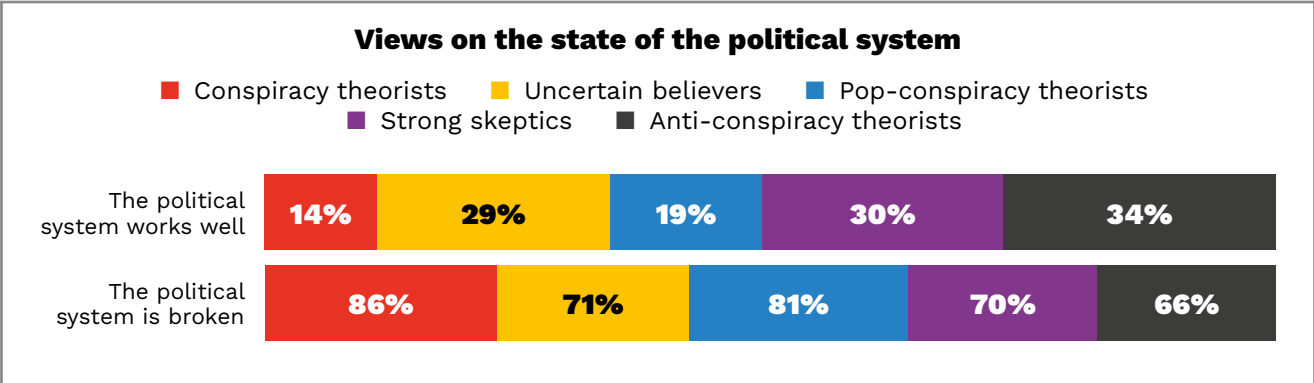
THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

We asked our respondents if they believed in a range of different conspiracy theories. These included very specific conspiracy theories, such as whether the 9/11 attack was really committed by Al-Qaeda and whether vaccines are actually harmful to broader ones about a secretive group controlling governments and world events. Some explicitly define “the Government” as the conspirator while others point out a Jewish minority or no-one in particular. Some are more esoteric and less political, such as whether there is a cover-up of UFO visits but we also include clearly politicised conspiracy theories.

Various different world views, experiences and ideological conviction make some groups more or less prone to agree with certain conspiracy theories. For example, might those who are critical of the US government be more prone to answer that it is likely that the US government had prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, theories regarding immigration and Islam are commonly spread by the far-right and are forms of propaganda aimed at spreading antipathy. Those who consume far-right content are already likely to be critical of immigration and might therefore also be more likely to answer that they believe in these theories.

Support for 11 conspiracy theories by segment (%)





More broadly defined ideas, such as the perception that a small group of people will always “run things in this country”, are unsurprisingly also those that receive the largest amount of support across all our groups, even in the groups that are generally critical of conspiracy theories. This likely has to do with the possibility of interpreting this question differently. Some might make an antisemitic interpretation and see this as a common conspiracy theory about undue Jewish influence, others might mean that an elite, or people of similar backgrounds, are running this country.

POLITICAL CYNICISM

Our different groups’ political outlooks and voting intentions reveal important differences. While Conspiracy Theorists do not differ significantly from Anti-conspiracy Theorists in terms of their propensity to vote Conservative or Labour, there are many other important differences. 40% of Conspiracy Theorists and 50% for Uncertain Believers (the two groups most open to conspiracy theory) identify themselves just left of centre when asked about how they define themselves politically on a scale of 0-10 (0 meaning very left-wing and 10 very right-wing). This is the largest political tendency in both groups. However, although smaller in proportion, those who identify as right-wing in these groups, are significantly more likely than in any other group to put themselves at the very right of the spectrum.

The Conspiracy Theorist segment is less well-off in terms of income, has less formal education and is more likely to be in manual jobs - factors that could lead to greater sensitivity to questions of power, fairness and opportunity. A cynical outlook on politics is, according to previous research described in the first section of this report, could make one more prone to belief in conspiracy theories as such beliefs often include narratives that power is being robbed from the masses.

The urge to participate in electoral politics by voting is therefore likely lower, which is borne

out in this poll. The two groups most likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Conspiracy Theorists and Uncertain Believers) were three times more (11% and 13% respectively) likely to have not voted in the 2019 General election than the Anti-conspiracy Theorist group (3%). Uncertain Believers were also more likely (5%) to answer that they weren’t registered to vote than any other group.

Further highlighting this cynical outlook on electoral politics is the fact that the Conspiracy Theorist group was also significantly more likely (86%) to answer that the political system is broken compared to all other groups. A lower proportion (66%) answer that they are happy with their life in general, compared to 80% in the two least conspiracy-minded groups. Several questions revealed anxieties about immigration and hope for the future in the most conspiracy-oriented group and the reverse for the anti-conspiracy segment which was more confident about the future and had a stronger belief in the political system. Conspiracy Theorists voted leave to a significantly higher degree and were more critical of immigration.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-IMMIGRATION

While our polling found that the different segments generally had internally similar attitudes to the conspiracy theories we presented, ideas that contained an Islamophobic or anti-migrant element defied this trend. Correlating with previous opinion research by HOPE not hate where we have observed a hardening of opinions towards Muslims across the political spectrum, with this pattern also bearing out in our conspiracy segmentation.

When asked whether “European cities are under the control of Sharia Law and are ‘no-go’ zones for non-Muslims”, 6% of the Strong Sceptics answered that this is “definitely true” and 24% “probably true”. Similarly, 30% of this group felt it was definitely or probably true that the government lies about how many immigrants are living in the UK. While this is lower than for

Motivation who find that Islam is generally a threat to the British way of life

Islam breeds intolerance for free speech and calls for violent actions against those who mock, criticise or depict the religion in ways they believe are offensive	38%
Islam promotes discrimination of and the physical abuse of women, for example the grooming of white British girls	38%
Muslims do not want to integrate	28%
Muslim populations are growing at a rate many times faster than non-Muslim and will replace white British people	28%
Islam seeks to replace British law with Sharia law	23%
International terrorism reflects Islam as a violent political ideology	16%
Other	1%
Don't know	3%

the conspiracy theorists, of which 31% answer “definitely true” and 45% “probably true” on this question, these ideas garner a notable amount of support from a group that is otherwise critical of conspiracy theories.

Respondents were also asked whether they believed that Islam is “generally compatible with the British way of life”, to which 38% of all respondents answered that Islam is incompatible, reflecting that a relatively large group of the population is concerned about immigration and Islam. In the Conspiracy Theorist segment, 50% thought it was a threat, among the Strong Sceptics 39% think so and 20% of the anti-Conspiracy theorists. This question does not on its own reveals support for Islamophobic conspiracy theory, integration has become a concern around which many have hung broader resentments such as cultural anxieties and a feeling of unfairness, of being left behind.

However, in a follow-up question, the respondents who found Islam to be a threat were asked to articulate why they thought so. Some of these answers reveal fears related to terrorism which is not directly conspiracy theory related. But the answers also reveal viewpoints built on conspiracy theories. 23% (11% of the total population) answer that the Muslim population will “replace white British people” due to higher growth rates. This echoes the conspiracy theory commonly espoused

by far-right anti-Muslim activists under the label of “The Great Replacement”. Support for this statement was higher among conspiracy theorists. Furthermore, 24% (9% of the total population) responded that “Islam seeks to replace British law with Sharia law”, another myth often expressed by far-right activists. That 51% of those who find Islam a threat and 19% of the total population, argue that Sharia law will be introduced in the UK or that the white British population is going to be “replaced” is worrying and shows that far-right conspiracy theories have become relatively mainstream anti-muslim views in the UK.

This result should be seen as an indication of how already existing fear and racism can both incubate and mainstream conspiracy theories on related topics. Conversely, a positive outlook towards immigration is found to be related with belonging to the Anti-conspiracy Theorists, which are also generally speaking more well off and more content with their lives. This group was markedly more likely to believe that a sharp reduction in immigration after the UK leaves the EU will have an adverse effect on the economy.

ANTISEMITISM

While conspiracy theories do not inherently have to be antisemitic, it is remarkable how often Jewish people are explicitly or implicitly identified as the conspirators. As academic Jovan Byford observed: “for a substantial portion of its history, the conspiracy tradition was dominated by the idea of a Jewish plot to take over the world”. This is still the case today - our observations on Islamophobia and immigration notwithstanding, it is antisemitic ideas, more so than any other form of racism, that form the basis of modern conspiracy theories. The idea of Jews having undue control over the media and banking systems are some of the most well-known conspiracy theories. These also provide some of the most poignant examples of the harm that conspiracy theories can cause, having been used to justify mass murder.

We asked two questions to measure the spread of antisemitic conspiracy theories for this report: whether the ‘official’ narrative of the Holocaust was exaggerated and whether Jews have an “unhealthy control of the banking system”. However, other statements that we tested, such as “Even though we live in what’s called a democracy, a few people will always run things in this country anyway” can be interpreted by some as referring to the antisemitic idea of undue control or specifically to the “Zionist Occupation Government” conspiracy theory which claims that Jews secretly control most governments.

In our sample overall a small but not insignificant minority of our respondents (13%), agreed that Jewish people have an unhealthy amount of

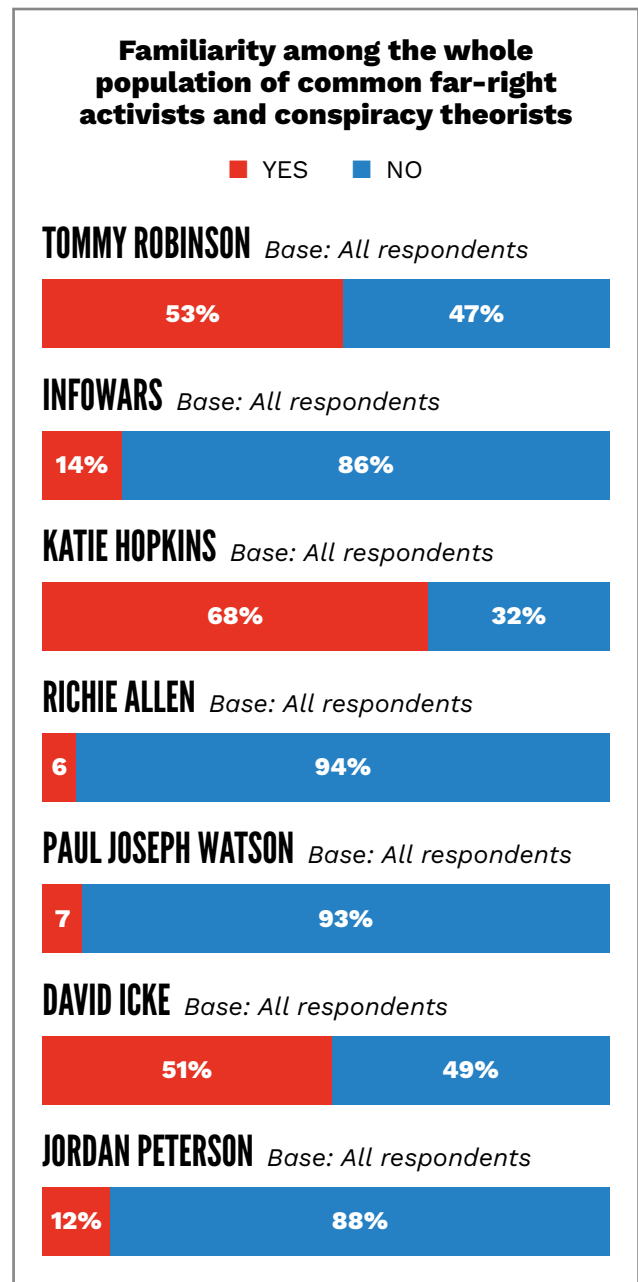
control over the world’s banking system. 51% answered that this was not true. The remaining 38% couldn’t say that this was either true or false or answered that they didn’t know. Within our segmentation, the two most conspiracy-minded groups (Conspiracy Theorists and Uncertain Believers) only 7% and 8% respectively answered that it is “definitely false”. The differences in support between groups however was clear. The most conspiracy theory minded segment contained the vast majority of the outright support for this theory, with 11% answering “definitely true”, versus 0-2% in the remaining segments. The Pop-conspiracy Theorists are unlikely to support antisemitic conspiracy theories, clearly separating these ideas from other theories despite being among the most likely groups to support Islamophobic and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories.

When queried on whether “the official account of the Nazi Holocaust is a lie and the number of Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II has been exaggerated on purpose”, a similar picture emerges. The two most conspiracy theory minded groups contain almost all support for this idea, though it is only a minority of even these segments that actually give the theory any credibility. 6% of the Conspiracy theorists answer “definitely true” and 3% of the Uncertain Believers. However, 13% of both segments answer “probably true”.

CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND ALTERNATIVE NEWS SITES

Conspiracy theories can spread in multiple ways, through word-of-mouth, mass media and, importantly nowadays, via conspiracy-oriented social media groups on mainstream platforms and websites. HOPE not hate has in a previous report released in February 2020 also focused on the conspiracy theory group Keep Talking that meet regularly offline in London. However, social media is vital for modern conspiracy theory. On social media platforms and alternative news sites, conspiracy theorists who are unlikely to gain entry to traditional media outlets can get a platform. In our poll conducted between April 7-9th, we asked whether respondents had read any common alternative news sites and if they knew about, and had consumed, material produced by important far-right and conspiracy theory figures. Whilst the general knowledge of alternative news sites was low, some elements stood out including knowledge of conspiracy theorist activists.

David Icke, who spreads a variety of conspiracy theories including several that contain clearly antisemitic tropes, stood out as the most well-known conspiracy theorist in the UK. 51% of the respondents answered that they have heard about him and 12% of those had read a text by Icke or



watched one of his videos in the last six months. This is significantly ahead of notorious American conspiracy outlet InfoWars which was known by 14% of the respondents. Only a small minority of those who knew about Icke, argued that they actually agreed with him, a majority (59%) strongly disagreed with his views, whilst 23% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Katie Hopkins and Tommy Robinson, far-right activists who are not solely focused on conspiracy theories but do regularly spread misinformation, particularly about Muslims, are somewhat more recognisable than Icke with 68% and 53% of all respondents answering that they recognised them.

Alternative news sites have a small readership in the UK, no single site had more than 3% of our

Over the last four weeks can you remember reading any articles or seeing any videos relating to the following stories?

■ YES ■ NO ■ NOT SURE

Coronavirus is not a virus but rather people are actually getting sick because of 5G radio waves.

Base: All respondents 2032 (2032)



Coronavirus has been intentionally released as part of a “depopulation” plan (Agenda21) orchestrated by the UN or New World Order.

Base: All respondents 2032 (2032)



British Muslims are keeping mosques open in contravention of the Government’s lockdown rules.

Base: All respondents 2032 (2032)



The global elite are using Coronavirus to reshape world order.

Base: All respondents 2032 (2032)



respondents visiting it in the last six months. This is partially explained by there being a very large number of alternative news sites and therefore having to limit our poll to a smaller subset of the most high profile sites. However, when we examine the respondents who agreed with the currently popular conspiracy theory that 5G is the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic, these numbers change significantly. In this group, almost a third (30%) had read one of the listed alternative news sites in the last six months, compared with just 8% amongst those who didn’t subscribe to the 5G theory. The alternative news site most popular amongst 5G conspiracists was the personal site of David Icke, ahead of well known far-right site Breitbart News and left-wing sites such as The Canary. As David Icke has been vocal on the current pandemic and has stated multiple times that it is greatly exaggerated, his prominence in our findings is a matter of concern.

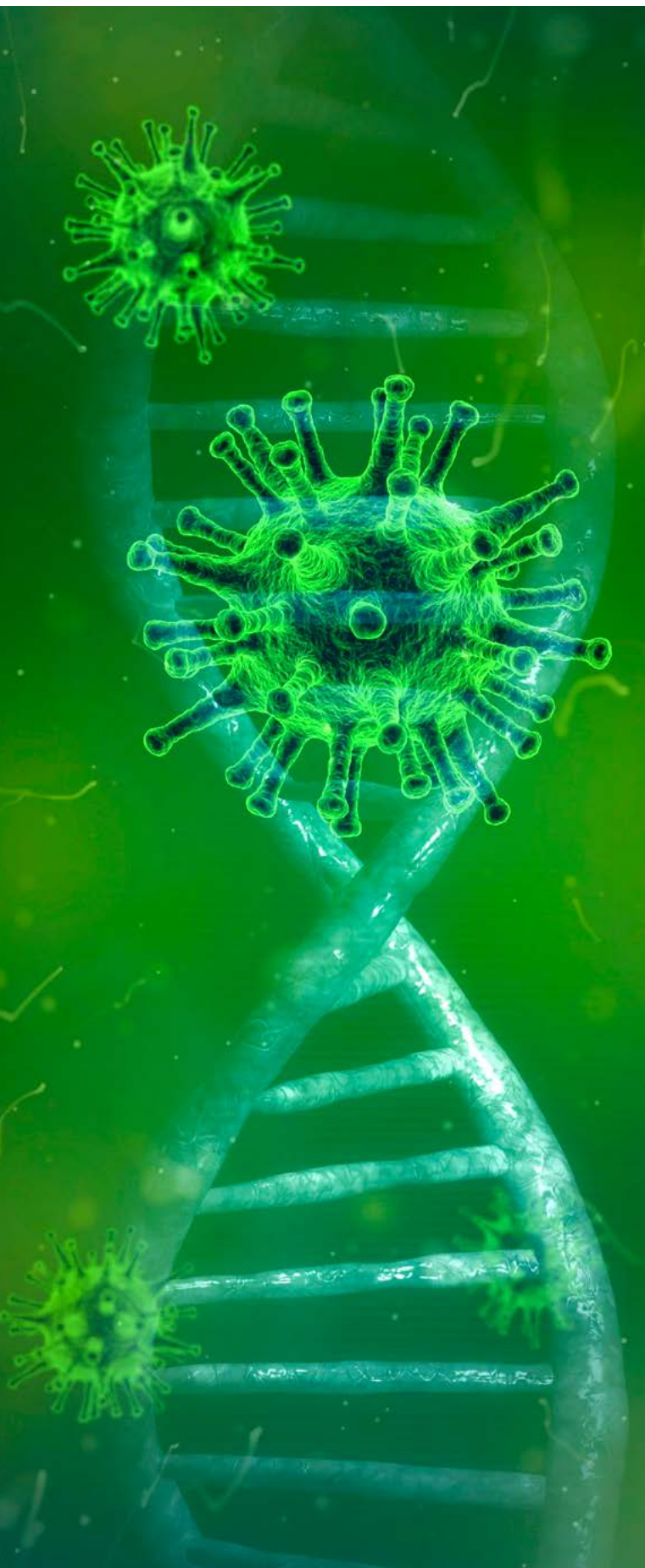
CORONA AND 5G

The ongoing corona pandemic has provided ample material for the growth of conspiracy theories. So many different conspiracy theories and cases of pandemic related misinformation have circulated that there are too many to investigate individually so for this report, we focused our polling on the most prominent ideas.

Overall, almost a third of our sample didn’t rule out a link between coronavirus and 5G: 8% believed that 5G technology was contributing to the spread of Coronavirus, and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed. This idea has attracted a significant amount of attention in the last few weeks as multiple 5G transmitters have been sabotaged. Even more concerning was that 45% of people believed that the coronavirus is a man-made creation, showing a potential openness to conspiracy thinking.

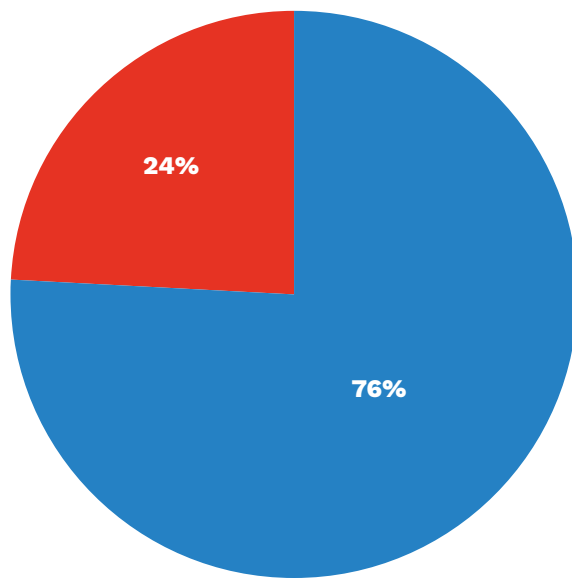
Asking whether respondents had seen videos or read articles containing conspiracy theories related to Corona over the last four weeks revealed that a large part of the population has been exposed to esoteric explanations for the current pandemic. Material arguing that 5G caused the Covid-19 disease had been consumed by 37% and similarly 35% had engaged with material arguing that Coronavirus is a bio-weapon spread intentionally by the Chinese state.

Revealing similar patterns to previously discussed in this report, people who agreed with the 5G conspiracy theory were also significantly more likely to agree with any other conspiracy theories we presented. A higher proportion (28%) believed in antisemitic ideas, such as that the extent of the Holocaust has been exaggerated, compared with only 3% of those who disagreed with the



Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

- I trust the information I get from the BBC on Coronavirus
- I do not trust the information I get from the BBC on Coronavirus



Base: All respondents

5G theory. They were also more likely to believe vaccines are harmful and twice as likely to believe in the existence of Sharia law controlled “no-go zones”. This highlights the risk that engaging with relatively ‘benign’ conspiracy theories, i.e. that do not rest on scapegoating minority groups, can end up leading people with conspiratorial propensities towards more esoteric and hateful ideas.

Having conducted two polls, two weeks apart, one between March 20-23rd 2020 and one between April 7-9th 2020 we did however, observe some positive developments. Whereas 19% said that “coronavirus is not as serious as the government and media makes it out to be” in our March poll, two weeks later the number had fallen to 11%, indicating that a larger part of the population took the coronavirus seriously and accepted the mainstream narrative.

SOCIAL MEDIA: PLATFORMING CONSPIRACY THEORY

Conspiracy theory thrives on social media. Inevitably contentious by their nature, they attract attention from both believers and those determined to debunk the ideas. Then there are those who simply find them entertaining, consuming and sharing conspiracy theory content as they would anything else that they found engaging. One of the world's most famous conspiracy theories, and the editor of InfoWars, Alex Jones, is an eccentric character whose rants and unbelievable theories provide a regular stream of shareable content. A quick search on his name will provide multiple articles with headlines such as "Alex Jones' 5 most disturbing and ridiculous conspiracy theories" originating from reputable sources.

Conspiracy theories and those who spread them are, in other words, often well-suited for the age of social media. The side effect is that characters like Alex Jones are given much bigger platforms than they should and with it, the ability to reach ardent believers. All of the large social media platforms aim to maximise the time users spend on their platform, leading techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci to conclude that attention is "the crucial resource of the digital economy". Algorithms mediate our communication on social media platforms and prioritise content that is attention-grabbing, even though it is this type of content that is often in direct conflict with accuracy.

Conspiracy theory-oriented groups and channels are easily found on most of the major social media platforms and many contain incredibly active communities with hundreds of posts per day from all over the world, discussing and sharing new ideas in the world of conspiracy theory. In the last weeks, conspiracy theory groups related to the ongoing pandemic have attracted a significant number of new members on Facebook. The largest 5G conspiracy group in the UK, STOP 5G UK, added almost three thousand members in just 24 hours between the 6th and 7th of April and had almost 60,000 prior to its deletion by Facebook.

A related conspiracy theory, that the coronavirus is actually a hoax became the centre of a #FilmYourHospital campaign that urged people to film outside their local hospitals. The intent was to use the possible lack of activity as proof that the coronavirus was not in-fact real, neglecting that much other routine activity at hospitals



(above) David Icke's interview with London Real was shown on London Live in April 2020 Source: London Real

(below) British conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson



has been suspended and that care for patients doesn't generally take place in hospital' car parks. The resulting videos of nothing happening have been widely shared amongst groups sceptical about the current pandemic.

HALF-WAY IS NOT ENOUGH

It is true that mainstream news outlets have on occasion provided a platform for conspiracy theorists and allowed them to amplify their conspiratorial worldview. David Icke is an example of a conspiracy theorist that in recent years has been featured on outlets such as Talkradio multiple times. Recently, e was featured in a one hour and 45-minute interview on Freeview channel London Live as late as last week to suggest the corona pandemic is a hoax. However, it is nevertheless true that by and large the

What if in Wuhan there wasn't any real virus but they put the 5G frequency so high that killed people and they invented the virus to explain the deaths?

gatekeepers and editorial standards of traditional outlets have blocked these routes for conspiracy sowers, and so it is social media outlets that have given them a platform to an even greater extent.

Social media outlets provide a way for even the most obscure and harmful conspiracy theory to get a platform. British far-right conspiracist Paul Joseph Watson, for example, spread harmful ideas about Muslims, the Sandy Hook mass shooting and was one of the individuals that popularised the idea that the bushfires in Australia 2019 was predominantly caused by people intentionally lighting fires. He has multiple times denied climate change, suggesting that global warming is not caused by humans. Watson has 1.8 million subscribers on YouTube and 1.1 million followers on Twitter.

The large number of followers of a character like Watson is an indication that the steps taken to tackle misinformation by social media platforms are far from enough. Their moderation practices let a significant amount of content through and fails to recognise the harm caused by conspiracy theories. Although YouTube, for example, has made attempts to limit the spread of conspiracy theories such as modifying its algorithm to avoid recommending the most extreme videos and supplying links to accurate information from Wikipedia, the videos often remain on their platform. The attention-grabbing aspects of conspiracy ideas mean they are still shared extensively in the comments section and on other sites.

The pandemic has however provided an indication that the platforms themselves are aware that their current moderation practices are not enough



and how a hands-off approach to the spread of information has its limitations. Searches on Google for “coronavirus” now presents a curated search results page with information from health authorities rather than an algorithmically generated list of search results and ads. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube are also showing modified search results, banners directing users to public health advice next to content related to the virus and prompts for users to socially distance and seek advice from relevant authorities.

DIRECT MESSAGING APPS

Although, debate often focuses on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube as the main purveyors of misinformation a sometimes-overlooked factor in the UK is the role of messaging apps. The reason is simple, platforms such as Youtube and Twitter are effective broadcasting platforms where a message can reach large audiences with no cost to the broadcaster. This is how British conspiracy

theorists like Paul Joseph Watson have garnered a large following.

Whatsapp is one of the most used social media apps in the UK but works quite differently from the previously mentioned platforms. The largest group supported on Whatsapp is 256 people, compared to the unlimited follower count a user can have on YouTube and Twitter or group size in Facebook. It is not a broadcasting platform but an intimate communications platform for the people you likely already know or have some connection to in real life. It might be family members, work, a sports club, neighbours or people engaged in the same hobby as yourself.

Despite this, Whatsapp has over the last years been used to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation. In India, the platform has been the subject of an investigation after viral messages have spread across private groups, accusing individuals and groups of abducting and harming children. In July 2018 five people were killed in Maharashtra after a message identified them as alleged child kidnappers in the village of Rainpada. It motivated a mob to attack and murder them in broad daylight. The messages had been spread by people manually forwarding the original message through many, relatively small, Whatsapp groups. Following similar attacks, Whatsapp limited the ability to forward messages



in the app to no more than 5 groups in India and 20 in the rest of the world.

On April 7, Whatsapp announced that they would impose even stricter limits to stave the spread of conspiracy theories related to the coronavirus. Users can now not forward a message to more than one group at the time world wide.

On Whatsapp, users have a different form of relationship to that of a subscriber and producer, such as on YouTube, although every platform allows two-way communication through direct messages and comments. This relationship is fundamentally unequal in that a creator with a large number of followers might receive hundreds or thousands of messages from subscribers. On Whatsapp, most users already know each other and generally trust each other to a higher degree which makes their influence more potent.



INTERNET CULTURE

Unfortunately, it is incredibly hard to counter conspiracy theories online. Issues relating to the way platforms function and what content they recommend intersect with issues of tech literacy and issues in the offline world. While many major platforms have to some degree attempted to respond to false information and conspiracy theories, the structure of the platforms continues to promote the spread of information rather than the quality of it, which contributes to an environment where the difference between true and false is increasingly hard to determine.

Tech literacy is therefore also a relevant issue. We are often naive on platforms that we do not completely understand and we expect it to work similarly to in the real world, although it often does not. It is harder to know the intention of someone online. The effect is that it is easy to share something that is false and it makes it difficult to determine the right approach to argue against ideas online, as people might sincerely believe what they share, or might do it simply to upset and cause outrage. Without knowledge of intent, a response could mistakenly serve to entrench the idea further, or give it unnecessary attention.

FROM 5G TO ANTISEMITISM

Many dozens of acts of vandalism and arson against mobile phone masts in the UK have taken place in April, instigated by a widespread conspiracy theory that links a variety of health problems to the rollout of 5G internet technology. The theory has existed for a number of years but has received significantly higher attention in recent months due to the coronavirus epidemic and claims that it is either caused by 5G radiation or is a hoax to conceal its effects.

An investigation by HOPE not hate found that people seeking out information on the 5G controversy in Facebook groups soon find themselves exposed to any number of alternative conspiracy theories, many only tangentially related to 5G, that incite mistrust not just of the government but of healthcare providers, scientists and public institutions. Many of these theories are implicitly or explicitly antisemitic, with the rollout of 5G and many other alleged crimes being laid at the feet of prominent Jewish individuals or organisations.

“This [5G rollout] is more scary than the nuclear bomb because people will be living zombies and slaves to zionist rich Ruling class“

Post from the 5G & Microwave Radiation group

Many of these groups are growing at a significant rate. The largest group we looked at, STOP 5G UK, added almost three thousand members in just 24 hours between the 6th and 7th of April and had almost 60,000 prior to its deletion for breaking the Facebook’s community guidelines. One of the smaller groups, Direct Action Against 5G, was created on March 31st and gained over 1400 members in its first week. It directly urges users to take action against 5G and sabotage phone masts.

The 5G conspiracy theories might have once seemed an eccentric but innocuous conspiracy theory, simply suspicious of a new form of technology, but recent developments have shown how it has gotten out of control and lead into darker, dangerous territory. An ever-growing number of Facebook users are accessing posts that either promote antisemitic conspiracy theories or criminal actions or sometimes both. The easy way someone simply interested in 5G and Corona conspiracy theories can easily get into contact with more hateful antisemitic ideas.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

In this report we have outlined some of the many harms that conspiracy theories have on individuals and on society at large. Our polling has also given an overview of why some segments of the population are overrepresented among believers in conspiracy theory. The inevitable conclusion is that conspiracy theory is a complex problem which requires multiple different solutions.

To completely stop the spread of all forms of conspiracy theory is probably not a realistic endeavour. There are many reasons for the attraction and spread of conspiracy theory and elements intrinsic to it makes attempts to debunk and debate it hard. Mistrust in government, experts and media make it likely that those challenging ideas are turned on their head and perversely end up reinforcing rather than weakening a conspiracy theorist's conviction. However, there are urgent steps that could be taken to stave at least some of the spread.

The solutions come in two broad areas, those aiming to stem the spread of misinformation promoting conspiracy theories and those that address the deeper causes which fuel the attraction to conspiracy theories.

HAMPERING THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION

While certain experiences might make someone prone to believe in conspiracy theories, it is people and organisations that give this sentiment both direction and fuel.

Though some might be spurred by a genuine though erroneous belief in a theory, there are also both ideological and monetary reasons to propagate conspiracy theories. British conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson is currently selling Vitamin D “enhancers” alongside his videos covering the corona pandemic, and his InfoWars colleague Alex Jones was marketing his “Nano Silver” toothpaste as a cure of Covid-19 before he was ordered to stop by the New York State attorney general and the US Food and Drug Administration. There is profit to be made from conspiracy theory.

Social media platforms need to take the danger of conspiracy theory seriously and go beyond

flagging it with warning texts. While YouTube, for example, has made some attempts to limit the spread of conspiracy theories through attempting to avoid recommending its most extreme videos and by supplying links with accurate information to Wikipedia, the videos often remain on the platform they can continue to be shared extensively by users.

Similarly, while some conspiracy theory material is already demonetised on YouTube – meaning that the creator is not getting any advertising revenue, as the example of Watson shows – conspiracy theorists can still advertise to sell items outside of YouTube. Only removing the content and conspiracy theorists from the website will stop this effectively which in turn will lower the incentives to spread conspiracy theory propaganda.

Moreover, this type of fact-checking can easily feed into the attraction of the conspiracy theory itself by creating the feeling of taboo and transgressive excitement, making the potential believer more convinced that the information they are trying to access is being suppressed by the powers that be.

Currently, content propagating the idea that the coronavirus is a hoax, provides a clear example of how conspiracy theory can cause real harm by discouraging people from accessing health care services and observing social distancing guidelines. Alongside this, many conspiracy theories scapegoat minority groups, risking their safety and breeding racism. Social media platforms moderation guidelines need to start to consider more kinds of conspiracy theory harmful and actively prevent its spread through tougher moderation.

Decisive moderation of conspiracy theory material will inevitably spark a feeling of being repressed for those who already believe in conspiracy theory but this is a small minority compared to everyone a virtual conspiracy theory video will reach. We must, therefore, prioritise stopping the spread.

To focus solely on social media platforms would however also miss other contributors. Mainstream media outlets continue to platform conspiracy theorists like David Icke and give credence to misinformation about minorities and the current pandemic. A recent example is the ITV presenter Eamonn Holmes giving credence to 5G conspiracy

theories by saying that criticism towards it “suits the state narrative”. Mainstream media also has a responsibility to hamper the spread of conspiracy theory by not giving it a platform.

THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

We can not expect conspiracy theory to go away without giving an alternative to those who believe in it. Conspiracy theory fills a purpose. It gives a sense of belonging to those in conspiracy theory communities and it provides explanations in a chaotic world. It is not a coincidence that those who have the lowest income and least belief that the political system acts in their interests are also those that are most prone to conspiracy theory.

This is more complicated than staving the spread of conspiracy theory propaganda but as crucial. Countering peoples belief through fact-checking and debunking is an approach that most likely to resonant with the typology of the anti-conspiracists rather than the typology of the Conspiracy theorist and Uncertain Believer. Anti-conspiracy interventions that are emphatic, does not impose a singular “correct” view but seek out new ways to contextualise hardship through accurate information, and come from actors that already have some level of trust will be important.

Conspiracy theory is in some ways a symptom as much as a cause of cynical outlook on politics and society at large. In-part being a product of a cynical outlook on politics as well as enforcing the feeling that actions have little chance of affecting change. It is all a setup. These are issues that call for deep changes. Any solution will require engagement and serious structural, political and financial commitment.

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