

CONSPIRACY



American Counterterrorism  
Targeting & Resilience Institute

Perspective

**Extremist Manifestation:  
Translation of Conspiracy Theories**

Ayan Mohammed, Amanda Garry,  
Rukaya Mohamed, and Antoine Andary

November 2020

[www.AmericanCTRI.org](http://www.AmericanCTRI.org)



The American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute (ACTRI) is a cross-disciplinary, nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right, extreme-left, and militant-jihadi political violence. We study the relationships between them and their effect on how ideologies emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

## **Abstract**

The surface-level risk behind conspiracy theories stems from the sheer distribution of misinformation. However, their ability to translate into continuous violence creates many concerns for P/CVE practitioners. Varying spectrums and degrees of extremists tend to cling to conspiracy theories as a means to push their political agendas during times of uncertainty as well as acquire newfound support. The following research paper seeks to not only uncover common conspiracy theories leveraged by extremists, but also the manifestations and implications of such theories when coupled with violence. Additionally, the role of social media and the internet as a mobilization tool for conspiracy theory rhetoric and countermeasures is examined. This research paper will also highlight the overarching need for additional resources and attention within the realm of extremist manipulation of conspiracy theories.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Technology and Social Media Roles.....	7
Qanon Conspiracy Theory.....	9
Online Manifestation.....	9
Offline Manifestation.....	10
WildFires.....	12
Save the Children.....	13
5G Theory.....	14
Online Presence 5G.....	15
Militant Jihadi.....	15
Hindutva.....	16
The Horseshoe Theory.....	17
Implications and Challenges.....	18
Limiting Factors.....	18
Medical Infrastructure.....	19
Economic Implications.....	20
Post-ElectionViolence in the US?.....	21
Conclusion.....	22

## Introduction

The rapid dissemination of information supported by the increased technological achievements has empowered and innovated the amplification of information sharing on a global scale. The shrinking arena of how information is shared can be attributed to globalization, which allows for faster, multidimensional transactions and transformations on how societies consume and respond to information. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have flooded social media, with right-wing, left-wing, militant jihadi and other extremist and violent extremist groups taking advantage of the confusion and panic by increasing their influence through proliferation of unbacked claims. Playing on the fear of the masses and the lack of a coherent or unitary strategy in addressing the pandemic, all parties have exploited the global health crisis to expand outreach and recruitment efforts. While most recent research has predominantly focused on the rise of militant jihadi recruitments during the pandemic, the authors will discuss various conspiracy theories among the far-right, far-left, and militant jihadi at global levels. Additionally, the authors will highlight how extremist groups manipulate and use online mediums and conspiracy theories to legitimize their causes and increase their support base.

## Conspiracy Theories in Context

Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> They usually resurface during a time of crisis and instability and are recycled to fit certain ideologies perpetuated by various extremist groups. With the advent of the global pandemic, there has been an increase in the diffusion of inaccurate, false, and misleading information. Efforts to curb the spread of false narratives have not fared too well and often face strong criticism depicted as a front to freedom of speech and expression. The heightened sensitivities towards disclaiming false news, particularly amidst the pandemic, have empowered conspiracy theories to be shared and spread.

COVID-19 caught the world by surprise, and to many governments' detriment, late preventative measures and the inability to understand the complexity of the virus and its implications have dented public confidence in state authorities. As a result, theories, and the perceived applications of core elements as they relate to global events, have gained a stronghold, resulting in mass groups organizing to act on their perceived interpretations of global trends. However, studies have shown that groups do not always organize on solely the basis of conspiracy theories, but rather act in tandem or complimentary to their pre-existing beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Recent research indicates that the dominant variables that characterize far-right and left wing extremist groups are often adopted due to certain social circumstances, grievances, and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Although at times its relation or link to a conspiracy may be apparent, such groups often try not to overtly associate or adopt positions directly related to the conspiracy, primarily because this increases the likelihood of their missions and objectives becoming discredited.



Therefore, in most instances, it may be that conspiracy theory elements will often reflect the messaging associated with extremist groups, but may not necessarily be directly linked to them, as the theory is perceived as a mere interpretation of those beliefs.

Conspiracy theories have adverse consequences on society, especially when they become dangerous enough to take the lives of innocent people. Similar to militant jihadi groups, right and left-wing extremist groups seek to expand their target groups during the pandemic to include political opposition groups, medical staff, and hospitals. As confidence in governments withers and sentiments rise, extremist groups become adept at exploiting people vulnerabilities. Case in point, groups such as “Qanon” and Antifa have gained a prominent platform in the U.S. recently, exploiting conspiracies such as the coronavirus origins, 5G radiation, deep state policies, and existential racial threats, to just name a few.

Studies mostly point to the ability of conspiracy theories to be shared widely and to infiltrate or embed thoughts and sentiments of far-right or left-wing extremist groups. While such line of contention may hold true, there also appears to be a stronger correlation between believing in certain conspiracies and having similar beliefs, backgrounds, social status, and political affiliations. This has often manifested in activism against global trends of migration, climate change, and conflict. These groups organize around concepts of defending beliefs that can translate into activism and protectionism and see their reactions as either supporting a weakening of state powers or against seemingly oppressive practices by the state. Nevertheless, the sustained veracity of unverifiable and false narratives creates an environment where groups are becoming less concerned with the credibility of the information or source, discounting it because of its amplification, reach and popularity, and at times see it as a clarion call to action for survival. Conspiracy theories also saturate media platforms and messaging apps, gaining traction when high value celebrities or officials are seen to subliminally allude to them as well. A sense of common belonging and identities are formed along these ideologies and take on elements of hubris, self-sacrifice, and protectionism.

## Technology and Social Media Roles

Technology has helped shape the way society operates to optimize efficiency, speed, and productivity. Its impact on people's personal and professional lives cannot be understated and is credited in the adoption of mobilizing society. From the corporate perspective, the basis of incorporating technological advances, however, has been to primarily address market needs and find ways to realize profit margins for markets. Considering the product is not a physical commodity, and is accessible to billions of people - allowing them to connect and interact with communities, families and friends - its design is then conceptualized to appeal to a psychological need and desire. Technological developmental trajectories usually mimic the needs of society and seek ways to enhance lives. Its success and complete adoption in society is credited by a reliance on intelligence collected on individual interaction and its ability to steer or dictate how these interactions manifest in everyday lives.<sup>4</sup>

We have shifted from relying on the internet for sheer accessibility of information to a more sinister and precarious situation where unverified material is consumed at levels never seen before, and without effective legislation aimed at curbing its spread. Major tech company executives have appeared before state legislative bodies to answer questions regarding measures implemented to stop the generation of misinformation.<sup>5</sup> At times, tech companies were accused of allowing, and even perpetuating, the spread of false information. There is a fear over online surveillance for commercial and investigative purposes, however, it is also evident that the engagement and behavioral patterns that emanate from continued use of certain technology is what is being monitored, which is necessary for the sustention of capital markets.<sup>6</sup> Psychosocial analytic tools are employed to evaluate the effectiveness of certain actions within a controlled environment or application. This in turn prompts sets of a sequence of operations designed to incorporate this new learned knowledge, and apply it to the content consumed.<sup>7</sup> This allows for a steady stream of similarly themed content and users to engage with, ultimately translating into actions seen beyond the digital space.

The convergence of real and non-real existences has blurred, particularly in the age of artificial intelligence and the rise of conspiracy theories. The ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not has increasingly become challenging and has pervaded every aspect of consumers' daily life. The often-unregulated content, and its increased use amongst communities, have resulted in detrimental effects to social cohesion, mental health, and stability.<sup>8</sup> Over the last few decades, increased use and dependence on video games that mimic real life combat theatres have desensitized much of the public to violence. The convergence of military real time combat experience and the heightened calls for individuals to be law enforcers has led to the combative war-like scenes witnessed today by the general public. Academic and professional discourses describe the postmodern war theatre as changing to a 'spectator sport.'<sup>9</sup> For decades, there has been a closer cooperation between culture, citizenry, and media that has drawn in citizens to participate in 'war' outside of the contemporary battlegrounds. This may have been the prelude to the fusing of social media and real-life realms as more people adopted the condition of an inactive combatant and are activated through this complex.<sup>10</sup>



The global health pandemic has impacted the world on a scale not experienced in over a hundred years. Despite having made tremendous strides in improving the lives of millions across the world, many countries, including the more industrialized, have been severely affected and unprepared in dealing with a crisis of this magnitude. The universally adopted strategy of dealing with the pandemic, with a society already heavily interconnected and reliant on communication, was one of isolation, instigating a wave of extreme sentiments. The loss of control and increased vulnerability and isolation drove populations to consume media at levels never seen before.

Therefore, it is only conceivable to also decipher that the people are spending more time in isolation, on social media and with online content, therefore having more exposure to the unrestrained spread of disinformation that has at times manifested into real life destabilizing behavior. The internet and all other social media applications have morphed into mechanisms that allow people to connect and enlighten oneself but have also become mediums that shape real life perceptions and actions, irrespective of its credibility. The convergence of the physical and metaphysical realms is fused and are shaping and fulfilling basic needs when analyzed from a sociological perspective. In essence, the way these technologies are designed and condition behavioral patterns can be described as methodical and unrestrained.<sup>11</sup> This can in part be attributed to the complexity in setting standards in the tech industry or the inability of industry protection standards to evolve at the same speed with technology and artificial intelligence.

The growing demand to be informed and be part of a familiar community – especially during times of great uncertainty- despite the verifiability of the source or information is also growing at immense rates, with greater potential to destabilize society. Reinforced echo chambers trigger complete negation of alternate narratives, feeding the cycle of disinformation and effectively becoming the new reality. Older demographics engage more with online social platforms as well, and although there are positive attributes to this, there have been negative impacts on younger generations. If members of their families engage with extremist groups and conspiracies and share their content online, it enhances feelings of polarization and disconnect within the family. This leaves the younger members of families embarrassed, or resentful, because of the way online behavior is open to interpretation in the offline world. Teenagers often feel embarrassed of their parents' online engagements and interaction with conspiracy groups, as it becomes a reflection on them. Similarly, because of digital networks and footprints they easily become isolated from their communities that embrace different beliefs. Statistics have shown that the increased isolation and the need to project an ideal image celebrated online - mostly physical and political - has left the younger demographic more desperate and resulting in higher suicide rates over the last decade.<sup>12</sup>

Extremist groups have been able to infiltrate the various levels of consciousness by understanding how various narratives penetrate certain sectors of society. Reality therefore becomes relative and takes on a new meaning influenced by new narratives and conspiracy that is aggressively defended. Conflicts are no longer fought in traditional concepts of a battleground. The new type of wars has been physically disarmed and has become more lethal because the neutralizing target is now a non-tangible feature within a highly susceptible and exposed individual: the mind.



## “Qanon” Conspiracy Theory

The Qanon conspiracy theory emerged in 2017 and now exemplifies a critical security threat that will continue to escalate to domestic terrorism if not delegitimized, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The Qanon conspiracy theory originated from a thread on 4chan known as *Calm Before the Storm*, after a user with the screenname Q alleged that “Hillary Clinton would be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on the morning of October 30th, 2017.”<sup>15</sup> The origins of Qanon can be traced back to the notorious Pizzagate conspiracy eluding to a child-sex trafficking ring among high-ranking Democrats. The theory is also based on the idea of a deep-state coup against President Trump.<sup>14</sup> Support for the unstructured movement circulates among far-right, anti-government, white-nationalist, and other neo-Nazi groups around the globe whom resort to violence to push their political agenda. Qanon has been able to expand its influence following the coronavirus pandemic by disseminating misinformation and promising non-scientific, questionable cures for the coronavirus.<sup>15</sup> Qanon supporters believe that the coronavirus was fabricated to lure attention away from the real issue of child sex trafficking.<sup>16</sup> Conspiracy theories paint a picture of explainable and solvable problems that can be alleviated through a direct course of action, which the public is likely to cling to in times of uncertainty. Conspiracy theorists are leveraging emotional appeal and appear to be supporting a “good cause” i.e., child sex trafficking conspiracy implemented by the Democrats, neglecting the fact that they are rather projecting a delusion and generating incessant violence.

### *Qanon: Offline Manifestation*

Tech giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have begun to tighten their policies regarding conspiracy theory content and their presence on mainstream media. Qanon’s ability to shift between networks, platforms, and audiences makes it increasingly difficult for practitioners to follow and anticipate their next move. Facebook has restricted Qanon and other right-wing conspiracy theory groups (militia and anarchists) that support violence by banning affiliated accounts and users. Facebook initially allowed content and rhetoric to be shared about the theories, granted hate speech, abuse, and other policies are not violated. This stance resulted in the removal of nearly 100 pages, 790 groups, and over 1500 ads affiliated with Qanon.<sup>17</sup> Content connected to militia groups like Antifa and violent protestors also sparked great interest among Facebook. The platform removed over 160 ads, 520 pages, and 980 groups suspected to be encouraging violent behavior. As of early October 2020, the platform was able to broaden its scope on content takedown and widen its parameters to include sheer representation of these groups, without the element of violence. This change allows for the rapid removal of more content that while not necessarily violent, contributes to the spread of misinformation among the general public. Facebook has now been able to remove over 1,500 pages and groups affiliated with Qanon, along with 6,500 pages and groups related to over 300 militarized social movements.<sup>18</sup>

Facebook’s “Dangerous Organizations Operations” team is proactively searching for content rather than relying on received referrals from online users as they have predominantly in the past. This approach is likely to have a greater chance for success to eliminate the spread of conspiracy theory related rhetoric. The main goal of the operations team is to remove their presence on Facebook, limit recommendations and fundraising, reduce ranking in newsfeeds, and remove related hashtags on Instagram.

To address the spread of Qanon affiliated content on Twitter, the tech giant has applied parameters that will block hyperlinks and websites that contain Qanon related rhetoric from the platform. This course of action has resulted in the removal of over 7,000 accounts along with the reduced visibility of 150,000 others.<sup>19</sup> While Twitter is grappling with this online manifestation and how to contain it, allowing conspiracy theory followers to repost and brand this content contributes to the never-ending cycle of disinformation and keeps the theory alive. Implications of failing to remove and restrict all content will still allow like-minded individuals to identify each other and connect in private chat rooms to further push their agenda.

Scientists and practitioners have begun to focus their efforts on infodemiology i.e., the spread and origins of conspiracy theories and fake news.<sup>20</sup> Noteworthy Qanon promoter, David Hayes, has over 800,000 followers on social media which researchers are beginning to trace and monitor to better understand the traffic and travel patterns of the rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> As mainstream tech giants begin to tighten their restrictions on Qanon related content, the network is expected to migrate toward more encrypted and underground platforms that will evade detection. This will make it much more difficult for tech companies to control their influence and track their movement. “Qanon” may also shift and mutate its rhetoric online as a way to surpass the algorithms set by tech giants. Practitioners have begun to produce “network maps” that identify origin accounts responsible for creating the misinformation along with who it is distributed to.<sup>22</sup> Tracking their movement will allow practitioners to identify common themes within their rhetoric, potential targets, meeting places, and enable the prediction of future behavior to suppress their influence moving forward.

### *Qanon: Offline Manifestation*

Qanon has surfaced in the physical realm on several occasions and continues to accept a violent call to action when expressing their viewpoints and furthering indoctrination. In February of 2020, a Qanon affiliated church, Omega Kingdom Ministries, was established to serve as a meeting place for religious indoctrination. Many sectors within Qanon have begun to rely on conspiracy theory as a framework to interpret the Bible. Connecting the ideals of the conspiracy theory to Bible scriptures allows the viewer to validate those beliefs and perhaps unknowingly consume misinformation.<sup>23</sup>

By pulling at the heartstrings of devoted Christians, the conspiracy theory is able to gain legitimacy and relevance to daily life, accelerating their rhetoric to other demographics. While the involvement with the ministry does not necessarily promote violence among Qanon supporters, nor is the practice of bringing spirituality or religion into mix by such and similar groups uncommon, it does provide like-minded individuals with a venue to exchange ideas that have the potential to accelerate into violence. As seen with the mobilization of Qanon through the internet and social media, bringing these individuals together will only further exacerbate the spread of misinformation and is likely to gain supporters that will feed into the conspiracy.

Due to Qanon's ability to gain legitimacy and support online, individuals have begun to translate the impact into real life violence, further stressing the need for intervention and adequate response measures among key stakeholders. As briefly mentioned in the preceding sections, in 2016, Edgar Welch from North Carolina opened fire in a pizza restaurant in Washington D.C., in an effort to free children who were allegedly locked in the basement as part of a sex-trafficking ring.<sup>24</sup> This theory is linked back to adherents of Qanon as narratives were spread across social media to further entrench this belief and translate it to violent action. A review of Welch's cell phone revealed he was exposed to several Pizzagate videos on YouTube that pushed the fake news of the sex trafficking scandal. The YouTube videos served as a final call to action for Welch and resulted in delegitimized violence.

In 2018, Matthew Philip-Wright from Nevada drove an armored truck onto the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge and blocked all lanes of traffic. He stood outside of the vehicle and displayed a sign that called for the OIG Report, an "apparent reference to the US Justice Department's internal watchdog report on the department's handling of the Hilary Clinton email probe."<sup>25</sup> Qanon adherents argue that the report highlights the governments extensive involvement in criminal activity, further pushing their anti-government beliefs. Wright fed into this rhetoric as well and led police on a pursuit until his vehicle succumbed to the tire strips that were deployed by law enforcement. Authorities uncovered assault-style rifles and handguns, indicating an inclination to violence on the part of Wright. He later sent a letter to President Trump featuring well-known Qanon phrases like *the Great Awakening and For Where We Go One, We Go All*.<sup>26</sup> The power of Qanon's rhetoric was potent enough to influence action and desired violence as a means to uphold and support the conspiracy.

In 2019, Anthony Comello shot and killed mafia leader Francesco Cali in Staten Island, New York. He was a longtime supporter of far-right conspiracy theories and allegedly became more interested following the election of President Trump, amplifying his dedication to the movement. Comello expressed the belief that the mafia and government were spying on him and that they were involved in a "deep state" with the Democrats.<sup>27</sup> He posted various far-right conspiracy theories on his Instagram page and frequently interacted with Qanon members directly until his call to action. While this phenomenon is not new, it highlights the fact that conspiracy theory supporters are also able to derive legitimacy for their cause by associating powerful figures to their belief system, further pushing their rhetoric into society.

In March of 2020, Eduardo Moreno derailed a train in San Pedro, California, to generate attention to a neighboring Mercy naval ship designated to assist with the coronavirus pandemic. Moreno was suspicious of the navy and the government, alleging they had an ulterior motive beyond just responding to the coronavirus. Similar to beliefs expressed on various Qanon platforms, Moreno expressed the idea that the virus was created in China to disrupt Trump's presidency and ensure Joe Biden takes office. Similar to the Great Awakening rhetoric pushed by many Qanon supporters, Moreno admitted to derailling the train in order to, as he had stated, "wake people up."<sup>28</sup>

In April of 2020, Jessica Prim drove her vehicle packed with knives onto a pier to get close to a US Navy ship treating patients with the coronavirus.<sup>29</sup> Prim livestreamed the event and threatened to kill Joe Biden due to his alleged involvement in a sex trafficking ring. She believed that the Naval ship was a part of the sex trafficking cult and that many children were being held hostage. According to social media timestamps and other available records, the pace of Prim's radicalization process had greatly accelerated, leading to varying concerns among Qanon's ability to swiftly rally support. Beginning with Prim's first inquiry about Qanon and the Pizzagate via a closed Facebook group on April 9th, 2020, nearly 20 days later she proposed threats of offline violence while commuting to New York.<sup>30</sup> On April 14th she posted a link to a documentary called "Out of Shadows," affiliated with Qanon beliefs, serving as a potential warning sign. Prior to April 2020, the history and patterns on Prim's social media do not indicate any involvement in political or societal conspiracy theories, illustrating the potency and depth of Qanon's influence.

In June of 2020, Alpalus Slyman drove an excess of 100 mph with his children in the back of the minivan to New Hampshire.<sup>31</sup> Slyman believed that the government was trying to kidnap his children and therefore set authorities on a high-speed chase. He recorded the event on a livestream Facebook account and warned his children that authorities were trying to kidnap them after being inspired by several other Qanon narratives. He also told his children that Hillary Clinton and other democrats were eating children's brains.<sup>32</sup> A few days prior to the event, Slyman had watched a YouTube video advocating for these theories. The chase ended in Slyman crashing his vehicle into a police cruiser and nearby tree. The manifestation of violence rooted in conspiracy theories continues to create an influx of danger within the community.

### *WildFires*

Law enforcement in Oregon have recently experienced an influx of calls from the public after a rumor by Qanon blaming Antifa for igniting the wildfires.<sup>33</sup> Antifa is a far-left extremist group with anti-fascist agenda that has resorted to both violent and non-violent means to influence political and policy reform. Qanon social media accounts posted a link to a tweet that contained a false claim of the Douglas County Sheriff's Office arresting six members of Antifa. 8Kun, an updated and more mainstream version of 8chan, was used to disseminate this posting.

The tweet was originally posted by former U.S. Senate candidate, Paul Romero Jr., who argued that although the tweet was not 100% accurate, it did contain some truth and highlighted the belief that conspiracy theories are responsible for the fires.<sup>34</sup> High profile individuals who outwardly support conspiracy theories tend to gain more traction and have a longer lasting impact within the community solely due to their relevance within the community. Efforts to validate or address these inconsistencies are met with blanket resistance and denial.

### *Save the Children*

Qanon's *Save the Children* movement endeavors to idolize President Trump and illustrates him as a savior of children as part of its campaign. The campaign stems from the belief that Hollywood elites and top Democrats like Hillary Clinton are involved in child sex trafficking.<sup>35</sup> It has captured audiences across the United States, including parents, teachers, healthcare workers, politicians, and survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This campaign has created a unity with groups from multiple sectors, without directly relating to Qanon. By some accounts, by mere virtue of using Save the Children logo, they have managed to boost their support by 3,000 percent, and as more started to join their cause due to its anti-child trafficking branding.<sup>36</sup> According to a 2002 study by the Department of Justice, roughly 800,000 children in the U.S. disappear each year.<sup>37</sup> Qanon supporters have manipulated this metric to push their rhetoric and gain sympathizers by masking their agenda and gaining legitimacy with the public. They have joined together to create a hashtag *#WheresOurChildren* in support of the movement.

As of 2019, nearly 421,394 missing-child incidents were reported to the FBI, demonstrating to the public that child abduction is critical problem that must be addressed. Qanon leverages this notion and embeds it into their strategy to further pull at the heart strings of those who advocate for child safety. The adoption of the "Save the Children" campaign is seen as a well thought out move, as it is likely to generate increased support from all target audiences. Contrarily, some have interpreted this approach as a political tactic by Qanon to gain supporters and then rapidly push conspiracy theories through social media groups that are likely to be accepted. Research also shows that Qanon started gaining supporters on social media through groups of anti-trafficking, and this increased since the airing of the Netflix movie 'Cuties.'<sup>38</sup> In this movie, Netflix was accused of promoting the sexualization of children, which Qanon used to their advantage in their campaigns by creating protests, petitions, and supporters.



## 5G Theory

The latest resistance to 5G technology is perhaps attributed to its timing with the outbreak of the global pandemic. Conspiracy theorists have framed this as a link to the pandemic and the containment measures as an effort to subdue any public resistance to its installation in certain countries. This theory is not new. In fact, concerns regarding radio waves and the health impacts surfaced in the 1990s.<sup>39</sup> The coronavirus and the traction of 5G network installation are both linked to China, where the virus is believed to have emerged and seen as an attempt to use this technology to proliferate the spread of the virus.<sup>40</sup>

In 2017, a group of scientists and doctors signed an appeal to the European Union (EU) warning of potential serious health effects of 5G and requested a moratorium on 5G's rollout until the effects of its radiation and electromagnetic fields (EMFs) could be fully investigated.<sup>41</sup> Conspiracy theorists also argue that 5G technology directly transmits the coronavirus. This belief has grown to target global elites like Bill Gates or George Soros whom allegedly strive to "institute mandatory worldwide vaccinations that would include tracking chips, which would then be activated by 5G radio waves."<sup>42</sup>

The United Kingdom as well as much of Europe has been consumed by violence rooted in conspiracy theories related to 5G cellular networks. Proponents of this conspiracy theory believe that 5G has negative effects on the immune system and can make the population susceptible to the coronavirus. Others believe that droplets which transmit the virus can be spread through 5G airwaves. The theory has translated itself from online mediums to real-life violence.

The European Telecommunications Network Operators Association reported 87 arson attacks in the UK and 30 arson attacks in the Netherlands from January to June.<sup>43</sup> Additional attacks were reported in Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, Germany, and France. Threats and harassment to the tech industry as well as workers have become commonplace following the spread of false rhetoric.

Celebrities are also contributing to the spread of disinformation, attracting new followers and believers every day. A report conducted in April of 2020 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford revealed that 20% of the disinformation surrounding the 5G-coronavirus link was pushed by celebrities, politicians, and other credible figures.<sup>44</sup> Since high profile individuals are boasting this information, users who idolize these individuals are more likely to accept this rhetoric and promote it to others. Michael Whitty of the United Kingdom was engaged in discussions on social media and various chat rooms that further pushed the 5G narrative after various celebrities commented on the conspiracy theory. He was compelled to set fire to a phone mast and was ultimately arrested. This event was 1 out of 13 arson attacks in the country.<sup>45</sup>

### *Online Presence 5G*

5G towers are being targeted, vandalized, and destroyed by those who have been exposed to disinformation on various social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and the pro-Kremlin Russian channel RT. In a 7-day timeframe, nearly 54,000 posts were published on Facebook containing 5G-COVID19 rhetoric, leading to over 2 million interactions.<sup>46</sup> One of the most popular content features a photo of Bill Gates with devil horns that has received more than 4,600 comments and shares. Platforms and experts within the tech field have struggled to debunk this theory in a manner that will be received by the targeted audience, as they are constantly receiving disinformation. Technology, coupled with unrest and divide during the pandemic has exacerbated the consumption and dissemination of conspiracy theories in the European Union.<sup>47</sup> Extremist organizations in Belgium are exploiting social media to manipulate the spread of fake news related to COVID-19, turning various populations against each other. Belgium's State Security Service also warned the public to be aware of misinformation and fake news stemming from extremist related accounts on social media.<sup>48</sup> Justice ministers discussed the strategies to be adopted against conspiracy theory phenomena such as the digital services package launched by the European Commission. As part of the European Digital Strategy, the European Commission has announced a Digital Services Act Package aimed at modernizing legal practices that address the concerns and risk factors associated with social media. Additionally, it strives to protect their rights and keep them protected from online radicalization, to strengthen the European online environment.<sup>49</sup> According to experts from the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), "Social media provides connectivity, virtual participation and an echo-chamber for like-minded extremist views."<sup>50</sup> This serves as a mobilization tool for terrorism to spread and bring individuals from all over the world together. RAN has focused recently on propaganda, arguing that it should be paired with fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories.

### **Militant Jihadi**

Al Qaeda has leveraged conspiracy theories relating to the coronavirus as a new tactic to acquire recruits and sympathizers. Al Qaeda's senior leadership issued a statement on social media attributing the coronavirus to a religious and devotional failure. The group argued that the "pandemic is a punishment from the Lord of the Worlds for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims specifically and mankind generally by the governments you elect," further pushing the notion that converting to Islam will save them from contracting the coronavirus.<sup>51</sup> This misleading rhetoric continues to generate traction among the various communities that are trying to make sense of the confusion and unknown surrounding the coronavirus. ISIS has also pushed false rhetoric claiming that the virus is a punishment from Allah against the Chinese government for their oppression toward the Uighur Muslim community. While both groups are pulling on the heart strings of devoted Muslims and those seeking to convert and recruit, their strategies continue to build off one another and spread tailored conspiracy theories for their personal gain. Invoking more sentiment and sharing similar theories continues to create a sense of confusion among the public coupled with desperation for answers. These beliefs are translating into violence as followers of both ISIS and Al Qaeda have acted out to purposely infect others with the virus by targeting places of worship, healthcare facilities, public spaces, and minority groups allegedly responsible for its inception.<sup>52</sup>



## Hindutva

Misinformation and false narratives have proven to be a catalyst in fueling conflict between communities. These trends have also gained traction in other parts of the world as well and are manifesting in violent confrontation amongst citizens. In India, Hindutva extremist groups and a mobilized communal paramilitary group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (RSS), closely aligned with the Indian governing party, have been accused of carrying out attacks towards religious communities, particularly Muslims. Although conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims is not new, the violent rhetoric against the largest minority group appears to be increasing in the wake of the global pandemic. The spread of the coronavirus set off widespread panic and confusion globally, forcing governments to implement measures in an attempt to stem the spread. Despite having some measures in place, members of society did not always adhere to them. In March 2020, members of Tabligh al Jamat held an event that brought together thousands of participants for a religious event in Delhi.<sup>53</sup> As outbreaks began rising, conspiracy theories surfaced, directly linking this event to the spread, and took on a destructive element. Notwithstanding other gatherings having taken place across the country, this event was singled out as having been the hotbed for the spread throughout India.<sup>54</sup>

‘Corona Jihad,’ a conspiracy theory targeting the Indian Muslim population as trying to carry out a new form of terrorism, also turned violent, resulting in accounts of deaths, denial of services, and destruction to property.<sup>55</sup> These acts of aggression are bringing underlying social tensions between Hindu and Muslims communities to the surface, namely by exploiting the conspiracy to drum out support. Other conspiracies related to the corona jihad that have surfaced allege Indian Muslims and China have partnered to spread the corona virus to unsuspecting citizens as a means of waging war on India.<sup>56</sup> Political party officials affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have participated in the propagation of false narratives by sharing inflammatory messages that have generally been interpreted as a supportive gesture for the continued aggression.<sup>57</sup>

The Hindutva groups bear significant resemblance with elements across left, right, and militant jihadi groups. Most extremist groups look up to certain figures that represent their ideologies and become followers of these figures. Hindutva bears a similar characteristic in that it has an ability to garner transnational reach and support, and has a veneration of Veer Savarkar - the founder of Hindu nationalist ideals. Just as ‘Q’ is held in great regard to Qanon followers and Bin Laden to Al Qaeda. Belief in the teachings and aspirations of these type of figures appear to legitimize and inform their ideologies and practices. The rhetoric used has shown to have potential to spread as accounts linked to Hindutva extremists and RSS have been shut down in the Gulf States.<sup>58</sup> Some governments have spoken out against the developments in India, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – that hosts a large Indian diaspora community - warning of deportation of individuals linked to accounts spreading of false hateful messages linked to corona jihad.<sup>59</sup>

The RSS is said to have over 500 chapters globally in over 30 countries, indicating its reach and potential to influence action beyond its borders.<sup>60</sup> As stressed earlier, social tension between the Indian Hindu and Muslim communities are not new, however, there appears to be an attempt to restructure the social fabric of the country based on an ideology that is discriminatory to other non-Hindu religious groups that live there.<sup>61</sup> Corona related conspiracies – like corona jihad—have been weaponized to distort the real causes behind the violence, hijacking any real efforts to address grievances thereof. The implications of the rise in extremist groups - whether religious, nationalist, or political—pose a significant threat to all states, but more so to nations that are fragile and struggle with social cohesion challenges. Increased rhetoric that foments social and political instability has potential to gain traction at formidable speeds with implications on stabilization efforts. Conspiracy theories and insurgent groups exploit areas of weakness, particularly in vulnerable societies as tools for recruitment and coercion. The ability to create misleading and false narratives face little resistance today, and the ability to determine reality and falsehood is becoming increasingly difficult. Global ramifications are compounded by the threat of conspiracy theories in addition to others that arise from other threats.

### **The Horseshoe Theory**

While the far-right and far-left share varying beliefs in politics, their position of the coronavirus tends to overlap. The Horseshoe theory suggests the political spectrum is shaped like a horseshoe, rather than a straight line, indicating that while both viewpoints greatly diverge at each end of the horseshoe, they bend toward each other and contain similarities to some degree.<sup>62</sup> Pushing racist sentiment along with government and elite opposition are very common among both sides of the spectrum; while their roots and destination may differ, the way in which they strive to achieve their desired outcome is highly paralleled. Islamist extremism also contains anti-Semitic rhetoric, focusing on dehumanizing those with different beliefs or ethnicities.<sup>65</sup> Victimization and portrayal as a disgruntled faction is also a common manipulation tactic that can be seen by both parties. Far-right, for example, tends to blame migrants and refugees for economic misfortune whereas the far-left highlights the inequalities among various populations. Far-right groups in Europe blame migrants and refugees for the spread of the coronavirus whereas far-left groups in the United States blame the healthcare, or lack thereof, system. Both parties have also translated their beliefs into violence, featuring far-right protests against government lockdowns and far-left protests supporting the rights of healthcare workers in France, for example. They are building off of each other's call to action and mimicking strategies to achieve their own agenda.

## Implications and Challenges

There are also challenges of addressing conspiracy theories when major events occur. Scholars have suggested that a process of framing conspiracy theories with certain events or issues occur and to organize around them. To lend credibility to these causes, sophisticated forms of organization, often aligning with decentralized approaches and funding and activism, are employed. There may be a relationship between conspiracy theories and the activities of certain groups, however, there is also a tendency to weave the conspiracy elements into social and global issues, as opposed to overtly subscribe to them, ultimately becoming more pronounced.

### *Limiting Factors*

A major challenge in curbing the rise of conspiracy-linked extremism remains the limited research available in understanding the applicability of the theory as to how it manifests in events and activities. Problematic is also the fact that right and left-wing extremist groups are often portrayed as just groups by the media, rather than extremist entities, particularly where loss of lives and destruction to property is concerned. There has, however, been an emphasis on categorizing groups that are seen as challenging core elements of legislative institutions based on often legitimate claims of bias or entrenched grievances - whether social, racial, or economical- as extremists. Left wing groups tend to fall in this category, and although the core messaging is often framed as one of social justice, co-optation of their mandates by arsonists and violence discredit their message.<sup>64</sup> The unwillingness to classify any and all groups, or one as opposed to another that causes death and destruction with a real ability to sow social discord - regardless of the goals trying to be attained - is problematic. This undermines the stance of institutions to enforce law and order and distorts the meaning these groups seek to exemplify. Encouraging often emboldens such groups to continue with dangerous and destabilizing activities that have negative impacts on society. For example, a 17-year-old in Kenosha fatally shot two protestors, and reports indicate that he may have been a member of the Boogaloo Bois militia.<sup>65</sup> While many states allow for the right to openly carry weapons, affiliation with armed groups that are not part of the command structure of the security apparatus is illegal.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the ambiguity in defining the parameters of how right and left-wing fit into extremist groups, extremist activity, and how they organize leaves room for their reinforcement and inflaming these sensational conspiracy theories that polarize society, posing a very real threat to safety and security. Conspiracy groups and movements continue to be more visibly showcased as the violent epitome of the US' profoundly partisan politics, including as dangerous by the federal law enforcement.<sup>67</sup> However, efforts to enact comprehensive laws that would sanction the activities of such groups remain challenging.<sup>68</sup>

### *Medical Infrastructure*

European Union Counterterrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove recently warned of a global security crisis following the coronavirus pandemic. Boost in morale among extremists along with cumulative conspiracy theory rhetoric is likely to emerge and undermine counterterrorism efforts. Various groups are already hard at work to motivate their supporters through disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories, according to Mr. de Kerchove. Gilles de Kerchove cites the health sector as a potential new target for terrorists which should be monitored following the pandemic.<sup>69</sup>

In the West, right-wing extremists and militant jihadis might regard attacks on medical personnel and medical infrastructure as very effective, as they can cripple society. Militant group tactics include bombings, explosives, and chemical attacks of medical hospitals. In 2017, for example, ISIS was allegedly responsible for 12 attacks on medical facilities in Iraq, whereby hospitals were bombed and medical staff were killed.<sup>70</sup> The Islamic State also maintained control of over 7 hospitals and 1 medical building in Mosul while exerting their efforts to burn down Ibn al-Athir Hospital along with 12 medical warehouses. Overall, ISIS attacked 27 medical facilities in Iraq using explosions during this time.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, on March 24, 2020, the FBI Kansas City disrupted a plan by a lone actor to attack a medical center using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in furtherance of the subject's domestic racially motivated violent extremist ideology.<sup>72</sup> The perpetrator was a racially motivated violent extremist who wanted to attack the medical center because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the increased media attention the attack would gain due to the target being a healthcare facility.

Although violent extremist groups in the US may be motivated to attack medical staff and facilities, they are largely focused on conducting cyber-attacks. This is evident in a recent major hospital chain hit in what appeared to be one of the largest medical cyber-attacks in United States history.<sup>73</sup> Computer systems for Universal Health Services, which has more than 400 locations, primarily in the U.S., were disrupted and inaccessible for several days. The hospital was targeted by a ransomware attack, designed to encrypt files and demand payment for their release. While the consequences appear to impact finances and operations, it can also lead to loss of life. In September of this year, for example, a patient died after a ransomware attack against a German hospital required her to be moved to a different hospital where she passed away during transit.<sup>74</sup>

Conspiracy theories are usually formed on unsubstantiated evidence and predicated on rumors, hence the dangers in aligning to this. Misinformation has been deemed as one of the biggest threats to the safety and security of state institutions and overall social welfare. Further nuances are needed to further comprehend the level of impact conspiracy theory has - in as far as its direct causal relationship with extremism - although groups associated with them are gaining traction and gaining momentum during times of great social distress and confusion.

### *Economic Implications*

Research shows that a lack of adequate employment opportunities for educated individuals fuels support for violent extremism among general population.<sup>75</sup> Loss of employment or lack of education has proven to push individuals to resort to extremism and are more likely to engage in such activities. Lack of secondary and tertiary education can serve as a risk factor that leads to a higher tendency to accept extremist rhetoric, especially when a person is unemployed or underemployed.<sup>76</sup> Research also shows that unemployment or underemployment increases the risk of radicalization amongst youth.<sup>77</sup>

Recent news articles indicate economic decline.<sup>78</sup> Although some critics blame the economic decline on the global pandemic, the violent protests and mass destruction of property stemming from conspiracy theories have also played a major role. According to the New York Times, U.S. gross domestic product shrank by 9.5 percent between April and June, representing the largest quarterly drop on record.<sup>79</sup> According to economic experts, the mass protests, violence, and destruction of property in the U.S will have a negative long-term impact on the economy, and will require an even longer time to recover.<sup>80</sup> This is similar to the 2019 Hong Kong protests which lasted for five months, and crashed the tourism and business sectors.<sup>81</sup> Investor confidence decreased and cost the economy approximately €5 billion.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, the global pandemic had also plummeted the U.S. financial markets into a recession. During the first month of the pandemic, 14 million Americans lost their jobs and were shoved onto unemployment rolls. Research shows that lack of economic opportunities in the form of unemployment, as opposed to the lack of secondary or tertiary education, is a driver of radicalization.<sup>83</sup> A scenario where millions of Americans are sitting at home, frustrated with the lack of income and employment opportunities, is where the extremist groups take the opportunity to spread conspiracy theories.

### *Post-Election Violence in the US? The Voter Fraud*

It is often suggested that the influence of Qanon and Antifa will likely lead to post-election violence in the United States. This argument is often made in light of the increased influences of both groups on social media and offline, but also given their mistrust of the government. American politics has historically been prone to spasms of conspiracy. With upcoming elections, extremist groups in the US are using this opportunity to fuel conspiracy theories to win the elections and possibly spark domestic violence and terrorism.

As the 2020 election approaches, conspiracy theories relating to voter fraud are circulating among various communities. Historical accounts show that voter fraud conspiracy theories remain a bipartisan issue and emerge from both the Republicans and Democrats alike. Some practitioners argue that “no matter who loses, about a quarter of those on the losing side will likely believe the election was rigged for one reason or another.”<sup>84</sup> With high unemployment rates, coronavirus restrictions, violent protests, and conspiracy theories fueling rage and mistrust of votes, post-election violence has become a cause for concern no matter which party wins. Conspiracy theories like voter fraud are often the seed of post-election violence. However, the FBI Director Christopher Wray had testified recently that “...we have not seen, historically, any kind of coordinated national voter fraud effort in a major election, whether it's by mail or otherwise.”<sup>85</sup> Such line of contention is likely to be disregarded by supporters of extremist groups like QAnon and Antifa.

Attempts by some to target the government and government officials has also been raised as a possible cause for concern. A noteworthy example of this can be seen by the recent attempted abduction of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.<sup>86</sup> Through the use of confidential informants and undercover agents, the FBI was able to identify and track various social media messages circulating among the conspirators.<sup>87</sup> Thirteen people were arrested, of which 7 were said to be affiliated with an extremist group known as the Wolverine Watchmen. These individuals sought to achieve a society collapse by undermining democratic power and plotting to capture additional government officials.<sup>88</sup> According to the FBI, these groups are highly organized and skilled, from conducting surveillance on politicians and law-makers, to collecting data on their current whereabouts, to holding meetings in basements without phones to avoid secret recordings.<sup>89</sup>



## Conclusion

The origins of conspiracy theories are often not identifiable. However, periods of uncertainty have potential to entrench differences and upend social stability, posing a real threat to state authorities. Extremist groups seek to discredit state institutions and align with various conspiracies to further their agenda and exploit situations of great chaos and weakness. Targeting vulnerable populations is a modus operandi and enables the spread of conspiracies because of the predatory nature of the two. Efforts at counteracting the unverifiable theories with opposing narratives have not always succeeded in swaying the public from its indoctrination. The speed at which information is also shared, and complexity of web-based networks, further complicates the process.

The interactive and trans-boundary nature of the internet has placed immense strain on governments and tech companies to implement practices that seek to address incidents that do not adhere to legislative and social guidelines. This is increasingly becoming challenging due to the abundance of networks, groups, and connections, as well as their ability to replicate quickly. What has become apparent is the need to implement mechanisms that seek to limit the ability of false narratives and conspiracy theories from disrupting social cohesion and stability.

Tackling the way misinformation spreads would require mimicking the spread of viruses or how addiction takes root in an individual. Normal pathways of how information can be shared or is usually disseminated underscores the confusion of how misinformation is shared quickly and may not be comprehensive enough in the hopes of tackling it. A model that employs psychological, technological, and sociological assessments is necessary to understand how and why conspiracies spread so quickly and take on violent extremes as well.

The global environment today can be described as being of one in great disarray and heightened geopolitical tension. Tackling internal challenges and addressing caveats that are forming as a result of a degradation in state apparatuses and the proliferation of false and misleading narratives is not only necessary but critical. Violent extremist actors view these weaknesses as opportunities to capitalize, and interference of this magnitude is nefarious and highly problematic. In order to stem this, a global call to action that stops the spread of false narratives is needed, in conjunction with a unitary approach that identifies groups that seek to disrupt peace and stability at the expense of the safety of others as extremists.

Given its real potential to spiral out of control, with fears of large-scale conflict possibilities, increased conspiracy driven violent events has raised alarm bells globally. Increased polarization stemming from the partisan nature of conspiracy theories threatens the very integrity of state institutions due to what appears as an apathetic attempt of arriving at a universally accepted definition of extremist factions.



In fact, the difference in the designations of left and right-wing extremist groups seeks to entrench insecurity and chaos, and discredits national institutions and possible governments. Deterrents or punitive measures are effective tools to limit or discourage interactions with socially unacceptable behavior, therefore perhaps incorporating legislation that acts as a deterrent may incentivize companies, groups, and people to not perpetuate the spread of misinformation.

Considering the fact that punitive measures do not always dissuade individuals from engaging in certain behavior, it is important to consider alternatives and to better understand the question of "why". Studies have shown "when people see information that confirms their belief in something that isn't true," dopamine is released in their brain, thus providing a sense of pleasure, validation, and approval.<sup>90</sup> The arguably addicting sensation also applies to conspiracy theory supporters who become hooked on controversial ideologies which, when supported, promote the release of dopamine. Conspiracy theories help provide a sense of meaning or explanation for occurrences that may not make sense, and fosters a sense of belonging among supporters.

As previously discussed, to exacerbate the urge to support Qanon, the network leverages topics that evoke strong emotional reactions such as pedophilia, child abduction or enslavement. This generates a strong grip of interest and continued support among the public due to its sensitive nature. Because supporters of various conspiracy theories are so passionate about each particular cause, there is no sense in solely trying to challenge their influence with facts; they simply will not be considered nor accepted because of how entrenched their beliefs are; rather, constructing alternative narratives that also pulls on the heart strings of supporters while simultaneously pushing facts and inspiring productivity rather than violence and division.

Currently, researchers are striving to construct emotionally potent narratives that not only combat the misinformation, but also have long-lasting impacts on the targeted audience. The challenge with delivering these narratives stems from the credibility and overarching need for reputable figures to promote it. Without acquiring supporters of conspiracy theories to push our cause, they are likely to be rejected. As practitioners strive to minimize the spread of conspiracy theory rhetoric and dissuade new viewers from latching on, new challenges will continue to hinder success until we have pioneered solutions far beyond the capabilities of our adversaries.

## **Ayan Mohammed**

Research Fellow - Ayan Mohammed has experience working in Somalia and the Middle East, with much of her focus on political dynamics, preventing conflict and violent extremist (P/CVE), gender and education sectors. She completed a MSc. degree in International Security and Global Governance and has a bachelor's degree specializing in International development studies, with a minor in economics and political science. Ayan recently co-authored an article for the Foreign Policy Magazine – 'We are used to a Virus Called Bombs'- that addresses the structural and socio-economic challenges Somalia faces in light of Covid-19. At ACTRI, Ayan researches conflict drivers of violent extremism and politics within the geopolitical context of East Africa, with a distinct focus on Somalia. Ayan's interests also lie in analyzing the dimensions technology plays in non-conventional warfare and the implications and dynamism it will have in the near future.

## **Amanda Garry**

Research Fellow - Amanda has previous experience in counterterrorism research and intelligence analysis. Amanda graduated from Nichols College in 2018 and 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Science in Counterterrorism degree, respectively. She has explored roles in criminal justice including security, fraud, and risk mitigation. Her interests include examining terrorist recruitment, radicalization, and rehabilitation, and she strives to counter terrorism on a global scale with primary research, actionable recommendations, and consistent program evaluation. At ACTRI, Amanda researches both far-right and militant jihadi radicalization, recruitment, rehabilitation, communication platforms, and technology. She also looks at structural, psychological, and social processes associated with domestic terrorism and targeted violence in the United States.

## **Rukaya Mohamed**

Research Fellow - Rukaya has engaged in research and CVE efforts in East Africa and the Middle East, working on projects that address the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, socio-economic exclusion, and unequal development. She has also done monitoring, evaluation, and policy design aimed at empowering marginalized groups. Rukaya also worked in Countering Piracy in the Horn of Africa (Doha, Qatar) in 2016. She obtained her Master's degree in Foreign Policy and Diplomacy and a Bachelor's of Arts in International Relations. She co-authored, 'Violent Nonstate Actors in Somalia: al-Shabab and Pirates', in Violent Radical Movements in the Arab World. At ACTRI, Rukaya researches the potential impact of Kenya-Somalia political tensions and COVID-19 on violent extremism in Kenya and Somalia. She is also exploring disengagement and rehabilitation efforts aimed at al-Shabab in Somalia.

## **Antoine Andary**

Research Fellow - Antoine is a Communication, Conflict, Security and Crime Analyst, Researcher and Associate Member at the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS) for the SRC Conflict, Security & Crime Committee. Formerly, he served as Communication, Representative Ambassador & Recruiter at Amnesty International. Antoine holds a master's degree in Political Communication & International Affairs and bachelor's in Communication Sciences. He also holds certificates in Terrorism and Counterterrorism from Georgetown University, Counter-Intelligence Awareness and Reporting from U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies from Harvard University, and Advanced Anti-Corruption and Prevention of Corruption from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). At ACTRI, Antoine researches crime-terror nexus in the context of both militant jihadi and right-wing violent extremist and terrorist groups in the EU. Antoine also assists with ACTRI's digital communication content and outreach activities.

## Endnotes

- 1- 12 of the most popular conspiracy theories in American history. (2020, June). World Atlas. Retrieved from <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/12-of-the-most-popular-conspiracy-theories-in-american-history.html>
- 2- Uscinski, Joseph E., et al. What drives conspiratorial beliefs? The role of informational cues and predispositions.
- 3- Ibid
- 4- Orłowski, J., Rhodes, L., (2020, September). The Social Dilemma - Netflix
- 5- Google accused of spreading fake news. (2017). The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/06/google-accused-spreading-fake-news>
- 6- Kelly, M. (2020). All the ways Congress is taking on the tech industry. The Verge. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/3/21153117/congress-tech-regulation-privacy-bill-coppa-ads-laws-legislators>
- 7- Orłowski, J., Rhodes, L., (2020, September). The Social Dilemma - Netflix
- 8- Mir, E., Novas, C., Seymour, M., Social media and adolescents' and young adults' mental health. National Centre for Health Research. Retrieved from <https://www.center4research.org/social-media-affects-mental-health>
- 9- Mead, W. R., & Bacevich, A. J. (2005). The new American militarism: How Americans are seduced by war. Foreign Affairs (Council on Foreign Relations), 84(5), 174.
- 10- Militainment, Inc.: war, media, and popular culture. (2010). Choice (Chicago, Ill.), 47(12), 47-6692-47-6692.
- 11- Orłowski, J., Rhodes, L., (September 2020) The Social Dilemma - Netflix
- 12 - Latifi, F., (October 2020). Qanon Conspiracy Theories Are Driving Families Apart. Teen Vogue. Retrieved from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/qanon-conspiracy-theories-social-media-teens>
- 13- What is the Qanon conspiracy theory? (2020). Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTC-SENTINEL-072020.pdf>
- 14- Ibid.
- 15- McCarthy, B. (2020). QAnon hoax has been linked to violence. Tampa Bay Times. Retrieved from <https://www.tampabay.com/florida-politics/buzz/2020/08/26/politifact-qanon-hoax-has-been-linked-to-violence-fox-news-greg-gutfeld-falsely-claimed-it-hasnt>
- 16- Facebook bans some, but not all, Qanon groups, accounts. (2020). Telegram. Retrieved from <https://www.telegram.com/zz/news/20200819/facebook-bans-some-but-not-all-qanon-groups-accounts/1>
- 17- Twitter says its cracking down on Qanon conspiracy theory. (2020). The Chronicle. Retrieved from <https://chroniclet.com/news/229129/twitter-says-its-cracking-down-on-qanon-conspiracy-theory>
- 18- An Update to How We Address Movements and Organizations Tied to Violence. (2020). Facebook. Retrieved from <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence>
- 19- Twitter says its cracking down on Qanon conspiracy theory. (2020). The Chronicle.
- 20- Qanon conspiracy theories draw new believers, scientists take aim at misinformation pandemic. (2020, October). Newsweek. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/2020/10/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-draw-new-believers-scientists-take-aim-misinformation-pandemic-1538901.html>
- 21- Ibid.
- 22- Ibid.
- 23- What is the Qanon conspiracy theory? (2020). Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTC-SENTINEL-072020.pdf>
- 24- Ibid.
- 25- Ibid.
- 26- Ibid.
- 27- Ibid.
- 28- Ibid.
- 29- Ibid.
- 30- Sommer, W. (2020). The far-right fringe group infamous for promoting nutjob conspiracy theories about pedophile rings has moved on to criminally meddling in child custody cases. The Daily Beast. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-promotes-pedo-ring-conspiracy-theories-now-theyre-stealing-kids>
- 31- How Covid-19 myths are merging with the Qanon conspiracy theory. (2020). BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>
- 32- Ibid.
- 33- QAnon spreads fake claims about real fires in Oregon. (2020). CNN. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/11/tech/qanon-oregon-fire-conspiracy-theory/index.html>

- 34- Murray, K., O' Sullivan D., & Silverman, H. (2020, September 14). Facebook Says it's Removing False Claims about Who Started Oregon Wildfires. Retrieved from <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/science/2020/09/14/Facebook-removing-false-claims-conspiracy-who-started-Oregon-wildfires/stories/202009140060>
- 35- How save the children is keeping Qanon alive. (n.d.). The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/technology/save-the-children-qanon.html>
- 36- Ibid.
- 37- National estimates of missing children: an overview. (2002). National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, and Thrownaway Children. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/196465.pdf>
- 38- How save the children is keeping Qanon alive. (n.d.). The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/technology/save-the-children-qanon.html>
- 39- Four Experts investigate how the 5G conspiracy theory began, June 11 2020 - retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/four-experts-investigate-how-the-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-began-139137>
- 40- Gallagher, R. (2020, April 10). 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Driven by Coordinated Effort. Retrieved from AlJazeera News <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/4/10/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-driven-by-coordinated-effort>
- 41- Carpenter, Alice. (2020, June 11). How the 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Began. Retrieved from Aspioneer <https://aspioneer.com/how-the-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-began>
- 42- Ibid
- 43- Braw, E. (2020). The imagined threats of 5g conspiracy theorists are causing real-world harm. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/29/the-imagined-threats-of-5g-conspiracy-theorists-are-causing-real-world-harm>
- 44- Coronavirus: 5G conspiracy theorist jailed for setting fire to phone mast. (2020). Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/coronavirus-5g-conspiracy-theory-jail-michael-whitty-fire-merseyside-a9554696.html>
- 45- Ibid
- 46- Temperton, J. The 5g coronavirus conspiracy theory just took a really dark turn. (2020). Wired. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-attacks>
- 47- From Awareness to Prevention. (n.d.). European Union. Retrieved from [https://europa.eu/euprotects/our-safety/awareness-prevention-how-eu-combating-radicalisation-across-europe\\_en](https://europa.eu/euprotects/our-safety/awareness-prevention-how-eu-combating-radicalisation-across-europe_en)
- 48- Extremist groups are using coronavirus to push fake news on social media, report warns. (2020, May). The Brussels Times. Retrieved from <https://www.brusselstimes.com/all-news/belgium-all-news/123215/flemish-corona-commission-has-95-recommendations-for-government>
- 49- European Commission Strategy Shaping Europe's Digital Future Policies. (2020, June 22). European Commission. The Digital Services Act package, E-commerce and Platforms. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-services-act-package>
- 50- Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda in the classroom. (2017, November 30). The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN). Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran\\_edu/docs/ran\\_edu\\_dealing\\_fake\\_news\\_conspiracy\\_theories\\_propaganda\\_classroom\\_29-30\\_11\\_2017.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran_edu/docs/ran_edu_dealing_fake_news_conspiracy_theories_propaganda_classroom_29-30_11_2017.pdf)
- 51- Joscelyn, T. How jihadists are reacting to the coronavirus pandemic. (2020). FDD. Retrieved from <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic>
- 52- Islamic State calls for followers to spread coronavirus, exploit pandemic and protests. (2020). The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/islamic-state-calls-for-followers-to-spread-coronavirus-exploit-pandemic-and-protests-136224>
- 53- Coronavirus Conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India. (2020, April). The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theoriestargeting-muslims-spread-in-india>
- 54- Ibid.
- 55- Ibid.
- 56- Corona Jihad is Only the latest manifestation: Islamophobia in India has been years in the making. (2020, May). Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/01/coronajihad-only-latest-manifestation-islamophobia-india-has-been-years-making>
- 57- From India Islamophobia Goes Global. (2020, July). Foreign Policy. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/india-islamophobia-global-bjp-hindu-nationalism-canada>
- 58- Ibid.
- 59- Ibid.
- 60- How Hindu supremacists are tearing India apart. (2020, February). The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>

- 61- Horseshoe theory and covid-19. (2020). E-International Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.eir.info/2020/07/23/horseshoe-theory-and-covid-19>
- 62- Wegener, F. (2020). Striking similarities between Islamist terrorism and violent right-wing extremism. Global Network on Extremism & Technology. Retrieved from <https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/18/striking-similarities-between-islamist-terrorism-and-violent-right-wing-extremism>
- 63- Chang, J., Austin Activist: Militant group co-opts Black Lives Matter protests, skews message. (June 7, 2020). Statesman News. Retrieved from <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200607/austin-activists-militant-group-co-opts-black-lives-matter-protests-skews-message>
- 64- Barton, G; Vielmetti, B. (2020, August 26). Kyle Rittenhouse, 17-year-old charged in Kenosha protest shootings, considered himself militia, social media posts show. USA Today. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/08/26/kyle-rittenhouse-charged-kenosha-shootings-militia/5636473002>
- 65- Kyle Rittenhouse and his militia defense ignores that private paramilitaries are illegal. (2020, September). NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/kyle-rittenhouse-his-militia-defense-ignores-private-paramilitaries-are-illegal-ncna1239397>
- 66- Bump, Philip. (2020, October 15). Rather than Condemn the Qanon Conspiracy Theory, Trump Elevates its Dangerous Central Assertion. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/15/rather-than-condemn-qanon-conspiracy-theory-trump-elevates-its-dangerous-central-assertion>
- 67- Ibid.
- 68- EU officials warn of extremists exploiting virus outbreak. (2020, May). AP NEWS. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/b7775b649b945bb548f097d65cd3d2d6>
- 69- Iraq. (n.d.). Safeguarding Health in Conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.safeguardinghealth.org/iraq>
- LXIX- Ibid
- 70- Johnson, B. (2020, March 31). White Supremacist in COVID-19 Hospital Bomb Plot Allegedly Wanted to Attack Power Grid. Retrieved from <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/infrastructure-security/white-supremacist-in-covid-19-hospital-attack-plot-allegedly-discussed-targeting-power-grid-minority-schoolkids>
- 71- Major hospital system hit with cyberattack, potentially largest in U.S. history. (2020, September). NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/cyberattack-hits-major-u-s-hospital-system-n1241254>
- 72- Ibid
- 73- How do education and unemployment affect support for violent extremism? (n.d.). Global Economy and Development at Brookings. Retrieved from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global\\_20170322\\_violent-extremism.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global_20170322_violent-extremism.pdf)
- 74- Ibid
- 75- Ibid
- 76- Ibid
- 77- Gross domestic product, second quarter 2020. (2020). Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from [https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/gdp2q20\\_adv\\_0.pdf](https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/gdp2q20_adv_0.pdf)
- 78- Ibid
- 78- Ibid
- 80- By Harrison, V. (2019, October 31). How Protests Pushed Hong Kong to the Recession Brink. Retrieved from BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-50204696>
- 81- Ibid
- 82- Abdel Jelil, Mohamed; Bhatia, Kartika; Brockmeyer, Anne; Do, Quy-Toan; Joubert, Clement. (2018). Unemployment and violent extremism: evidence from daesh foreign recruits. World Bank. Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29561>
- 83- The effect of conspiratorial thinking and motivating reasoning on belief in election fraud. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://www.joescinski.com/uploads/7/1/9/5/71957435/uscinski\\_et\\_al.\\_apsa\\_conspiracy\\_submission.pdf](http://www.joescinski.com/uploads/7/1/9/5/71957435/uscinski_et_al._apsa_conspiracy_submission.pdf)
- 84- Goldman, A; Kanno-Youngs, A. (2020, September 24). F.B.I. Director Sees No Evidence of National Mail Voting Fraud Effort. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/us/politics/fbi-director-voter-fraud.html>
- 85- Bogel-Burroughs, N; Dewan, S.; and Gray, K. (2020, October 8). F.B.I. Says Michigan Anti Government Group Plotted to Kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/us/gretchen-whitmer-michigan-militia.html>
- 86- Ibid
- 87- Ibid
- 88- Ibid
- 89- Qanon conspiracy theories draw new believers, scientists take aim at misinformation pandemic. (2020, October). Newsweek. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/2020/10/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-draw-new-believers-scientists-take-aim-misinformation-pandemic-1538901.html>
- 90- Qanon conspiracy theories draw new believers, scientists take aim at misinformation pandemic. (2020, October). Newsweek. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/2020/10/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-draw-new-believers-scientists-take-aim-misinformation-pandemic-1538901.html>