The evolving consequences of the coronavirus 'infodemic'

How viral false coronavirus-related information affects people and societies across the world

SUMMARY

Massive waves of information, including extensive amounts of false information have accompanied the coronavirus pandemic. False information is being spread by a number of different actors for various reasons. Deliberately deceptive (geo-)political disinformation campaigns to undermine democracies – including the European Union (EU) – have been spread by authoritarian state actors and their proxies. Extremist groups have exploited the situation to spread their messaging. Others have propagated misleading information for financial gain.

At the same time, a combination of widespread anxiety as well as increased use of social media during lockdowns in many countries have provide fertile ground for ‘organic’ false information and conspiracy theories by individual users who do not intentionally want to deceive anyone, but inadvertently become part of the problem by spreading and/or amplifying misleading messages.

The repercussions of the ‘infodemic’ are still evolving, but have impacted the ability of authorities to effectively deal with the pandemic, with the infodemic is aggravating the spread of the virus itself. Different regions of the world have been challenged by a variety of types of false information and both general and region-specific narratives – many of which have impacted public health, the economy, geopolitics and societal stability.

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As the coronavirus outbreak continues to increase in severity, the volume of information regarding the virus has been growing. In February 2020, as the disease began to take hold across the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that it had been accompanied by an 'infodemic' – 'an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it'. At the same time, people are worried about their own health, the wellbeing of relatives and the (financial, economic and societal) repercussions of the pandemic. Changing knowledge about the virus has also resulted in sometimes confusing guidelines. Moreover, there has been uncertainty about the appropriateness of government action as well as questions about the role of the WHO itself. All this has led to confusion over what is truth and what is fiction and, as many people are especially emotionally vulnerable during the pandemic, has also made many more susceptible to online false information, including false rumours and conspiracy theories spread unknowingly by people who mean well; online or phone scams that exploit people’s emotional vulnerabilities, hoaxes claiming to offer a cure to the virus, as well as disinformation spread by malign actors. The infodemic is impacting the ability of authorities across the world to effectively deal with the virus outbreak, jeopardising lives, and increasing people’s vulnerability to divisive content. Growing internet usage, notably by young people during lockdowns, has exposed them to false, sometimes manipulated and manipulative information, including on social media and gaming platforms. Some state and non-state actors have exploited the crisis to boost their impact.

Types of false information

The situation has sparked significant global growth in fact-checks regarding the coronavirus; the number of English language fact-checks increased by more than 900% from January to March 2020, according to the Reuters Institute. The infodemic has made it even clearer that the global ‘information disorder’ – diagnosed in a 2017 report published by the Council of Europe – entails not only deliberately deceptive disinformation by foreign actors, but also misinformation (without the intent to deceive), as well as various mal-information such as leaks, harassment and hate speech (see Figure 1). Most experts agree that viral false information is far from always completely fabricated; more often than not containing at least a kernel of truth. In the context of the infodemic, experts from the Reuters Institute found that 59% of the false information they analysed involved different types of ‘reconfigurated’ information; existing and often true information that is ‘spun, twisted, recontextualised, or reworked’. Of the false information they looked at, 38% was completely fabricated. Despite concern over ‘deepfakes’ – videos altered using machine learning techniques – this type of false information was largely absent. Instead, the analysed videos were manipulated with simpler tools (‘cheapfakes’).
Reconfigured content saw higher engagement than fabricated content during the infodemic. Moreover, a significant number of coronavirus-related hoaxes and scams have been circulating, attempting to lure people into buying fake or non-existent products (consumer fraud), or stealing user data (cybercrime). The pandemic has reportedly sparked a 6 000 % increase in Covid-19 related spam.

False Covid-19 claims: Common denominators

The WHO maintains a list of themes of misinformation regarding the pandemic, including claims that drinking bleach or pure alcohol can cure or prevent infections; that 5G mobile networks spread the virus; that cold weather and snow can kill Covid-19; and that mosquitoes can spread the virus. In the physical realm, there is concern that anti-lockdown protests are working as superspreading events not only for the virus itself, but also for radical ideologies and anti-elite/anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. A June 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that belief in conspiracy theories about Covid-19 was linked to the educational level of respondents: 48 % of Americans with a high school diploma or less education said that the theory that the pandemic was planned is probably or definitely true. In comparison, 24 % of those with a bachelor’s degree and 15 % of people with a postgraduate degree believed the theory is probably or definitely true. Party affiliation also played a role; with Republicans being more susceptible to this theory than Democrats.

Emerging real-life consequences of the infodemic

Just as false information regarding the 2019 Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo sparked violence, mistrust, social unrest and attacks on healthcare providers, the evolving infodemic surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic is having real-life consequences across the world. Rumours, stigma – notably allegations that a specific population group is spreading the virus, leading to racist attacks – and conspiracy theories about Covid-19 can affect individual people’s health and safety. They can also have broader societal consequences, including for the healthcare system, as well as for trust in democracies, authorities, governments and institutions, ultimately exacerbating the likelihood of unrest. By manipulating public opinion, strategic disinformation related to Covid-19 exploits vulnerabilities in human cognition, allowing for malign state and non-state actors across the world to achieve ideological gains at the expense of democratic discourse. This contributes to further accelerating truth decay; the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life worldwide. Moreover, the fight against misleading information regarding the coronavirus has been exploited by many governments to further restrict freedoms, including media freedom and freedom of expression.

Increasing infodemic death toll

The infodemic is arguably ‘propelling the spread of the virus itself’. A May 2020 University of Oxford study found that people who hold conspiracy beliefs are less likely to follow social distancing guidelines, wear a facemask and/or accept a future vaccination; potentially endangering their own as well as other people’s lives. Even more concretely, a study published by the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (AJTMH) in August 2020 found evidence that some 800 people – persuaded by false claims online – died across the world during the first quarter of 2020 as a result of drinking methanol as an antidote. Over 5 800 people were hospitalised and 60 became blind.
Stigma leading to discrimination and violence

Coronavirus related stigmatisation of specific groups of people has led to violence across the world. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that 'the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering', urging governments to 'act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate'. AJTMH identified 26 stigma-related episodes. In April 2020, for example – exacerbating already existing tensions – three Muslim men were attacked in Delhi, India in separate incidents and beaten up following rumours that Muslims were spreading the virus. One man died and another was severely injured. Also in India, WhatsApp videos falsely claiming that healthy Muslims were being abducted by healthcare workers and injected with the virus resulted in attacks on doctors.

The pandemic has, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), prompted some government leaders and senior officials to directly or indirectly encourage hate crimes, racism, or xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric. HRW assessed that increases in racist rhetoric have coincided with increases in racist attacks. Since February 2020, Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to attacks and beatings, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appear linked to the pandemic. In the Middle East, foreign workers – who are typically of Asian descent – have been targeted with racist rhetoric following outbreaks in migrant ghettos. However, other population groups – typically minorities – are also being singled out, accused of spreading the virus. In early May 2020, the Malaysian authorities launched mass raids to arrest refugees and migrant workers, suggesting without evidence that the migrant community and Rohingya refugees were responsible for the spread of Covid-19. In China, African residents have been evicted by landlords and forced to sleep on the street after a campaign by authorities in the Guangdong province to forcibly test Africans for the coronavirus, ordering them to self-isolate or quarantine.

The 'global battle of narratives' and the image of great power rivals in Europe

As the situation continues to evolve, it is difficult to assess the concrete consequences, or even predict the long-term impact, of (geo-)political influence campaigns related to the pandemic. At the height of the first Covid-19 wave in Europe, there was widespread concern about the potential effect of the influence campaigns, particularly by China and Russia in Europe, with EU High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell in March 2020 cautioning against the ongoing 'global battle of narratives' related to the pandemic. Also in March, some commentators warned that China was 'winning the coronavirus propaganda war' with a combination of conspiracy theories and healthcare diplomacy. Later, others have asserted that China's wolf warrior diplomacy had backfired.

It remains to be seen if foreign influence campaigns related to the coronavirus will impact future decisions by Member States, for example regarding the contested rollout of 5G networks. However, while some early polls in Italy suggested that China's coronavirus diplomacy in the country improved China's standing amongst Italian respondents, other European surveys have indicated the opposite. A public opinion survey published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) on 20 July 2020 suggested that perceptions of China had 'worsened to a significant degree' during the crisis in eight of the nine countries covered. In France and Denmark, 62% of respondents said their perception of Beijing had worsened. Even in Italy – which received
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significantly publicised support from Beijing during the health emergency – almost 80% did not view China in a more positive way. At the same time, the USA also saw their image suffer, with 71% in Denmark, 70% in Portugal, 68% in France, 65% in Germany and 64% in Spain saying their view of the USA had worsened during the crisis. The ECFR assessed that negative perceptions of the USA should be seen as a response to ‘a US divided in its response to the present crisis’. The ECFR asserted that Europeans see a USA ‘that is, at best, a fair-weather friend; a China that remains a systemic rival; and a Russia that seems to be relatively marginal to many EU citizens’. A majority of all respondents said they did not want their country to take sides in favour of either the USA or China in a possible conflict between the two.

A ‘known unknown’: Potential impact on vaccine acceptance

Although some of the consequences of false information about Covid-19 are evident right now, other potential impacts are less obvious. What remains unknown, but seemingly predictable, for example, is the potential for an increase in vaccine hesitancy, including in Africa. Many countries in Africa have historically faced challenges when it comes to vaccine hesitancy, and false information during the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic seem to have exploited underlying fears, attempting to convince people that any future Covid-19 vaccine is unsafe. Moreover, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had to deny rumours that Africa would be a coronavirus vaccine testing ground following a controversial suggestion by two French doctors in April 2020.

According to the preliminary results of a survey conducted by the Vaccine Confidence Project, which monitors public trust in vaccination programmes, between mid-March and mid-April 2020, some 20% of respondents in Switzerland, 18% in France, 16% in Austria and 9% in Germany would refuse a coronavirus vaccine. Another poll conducted by Associated Press-NORC poll and published in May 2020 indicated that 20% of Americans would say ‘no’ to being vaccinated against coronavirus, while one third were not sure, and 49% of respondents said ‘yes’. A similar survey conducted in Russia in April 2020 suggested that 24% of Russians would prefer not to be vaccinated against coronavirus. Widespread vaccine hesitancy could threaten future herd immunity.

There is mounting concern that the (geo-)politically motivated race to get a vaccine ready could potentially undermine public trust in the efficiency and safety of such vaccines. For example, US President Donald Trump’s claims that a vaccine will be ready ahead of the US Presidential elections has further increased criticism over politics trumping science, The August 2020 announcement that Russia would launch a Covid-19 vaccine without the final Phase 3 testing sparked concern among vaccine scientists over its safety, and prompted the WHO to urge Russia to follow international guidelines for producing a vaccine against Covid-19. At the same time, a popular Italian meme, falsely claiming that Russian President Vladimir Putin had said that ‘Pharmaceutical companies have asked us to delay the release of the vaccine! It’s not about economics. Russia does not think about money when it comes to the lives of millions of people’, appears to imply that criticism of the Russian vaccine could have a hidden agenda. Russian state TV claimed – without evidence – that it was ‘several-fold more effective’ than any ‘foreign’ vaccine. According to the Guardian, interactions on UK anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown Facebook posts increased from 12 000 in July 2020 to 42 000 in August, thus trebling in one month, sparking calls for action to counter conspiracy theories.

At the same time, vaccine scepticism in Brazil, which was significant even before the outbreak of Covid-19 (partly due to anti-vaccination messages spreading from the USA), with 59% in 2019 saying vaccines are unsafe, will likely be further fuelled by a public spat around the clinical trial of three vaccines in the country. President Jair Bolsonaro, who appears to favour one of three vaccines set to be tested in the country, is publicly criticising the vaccine favoured by São Paulo’s state governor. The disagreement involves xenophobia and conspiracy theories, such as claims that the Sinovac vaccine will contain ‘5G microchips’, shared by not only ‘anti-vaxxers’, but also by prominent politicians (who thereby promote anti-vaccination narratives and sentiments).
Examples of false information from actors in the United States of America

According to US international broadcaster Voice of America, President Donald Trump has come under scrutiny for sharing misinformation about a disproved drug for treating the coronavirus in videos that were taken down by Twitter and Facebook. President Trump has also called for the ‘liberation’ of some States from lockdowns, contradicting White House guidelines. In August 2020, Facebook and Twitter removed a video in which President Trump falsely claimed that children are ‘almost immune’ to Covid-19. On 22 August, President Trump claimed, without evidence, on Twitter that the ‘deep state’ ‘over at’ the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was delaying Covid-19 vaccine testing until after the election.

As health experts warn of potentially deadly consequences from easing restrictions too soon, an ‘alliance of big money business interests, religious freedom conservatives and small-government activists’ is reportedly amplifying efforts to revive the economy (see also box on the role of celebrities). In March 2020, the influential pro-gun National Rifle Association (NRA) partnered with BlazeTV, which has repeatedly played down the severity of the virus, blaming ‘panic’ and ‘hysteria’ for sparking the economic downturn.

A University of Chicago study looked at the potential impact that Covid-19 disinformation on Fox News had on infection rates in the USA. Researchers compared the Sean Hannity show, which had consistently pushed Covid-19 misinformation narratives, and the Tucker Carlson show, which generally warned of the risks of the virus. The study showed that areas where more people watched Hannity’s show had a higher local infection and death rate than areas in which more viewers watched the Carlson show.

QAnon, a ‘meta conspiracy theory’ propagated by anonymous poster ‘Q’, is providing an umbrella narrative for a wide spectrum of related conspiracy theories. Experts liken QAnon to a cult or even religion, and some say it is as addictive as an alternate-reality game. QAnon alleges that a ‘deep-state’ network run by global elites, business leaders and celebrities is trying to undermine President Trump (who himself has reportedly retweeted accounts promoting QAnon at least 200 times). During the pandemic, QAnon supporters have claimed that the virus is a plot, a hoax and/or a Chinese bio-weapon. In August 2020, preliminary results of an internal Facebook investigation revealed thousands of pro-QAnon groups and pages. The top 10 of these groups contained more than 1 million members but went unnoticed, as most were private. The investigation comes amid growing pressure on Facebook from advertisers and lawmakers to act against false information and hate speech. Facebook staff have voiced concern that QAnon could influence the 2020 US election. In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation specifically singled out QAnon in a memo labelling conspiracy theories as potential domestic terrorism threats. The movement, which uses online platforms (Facebook, YouTube) to spread content, provides a bridge between anonymous message boards like 4Chan, mainstream media like Fox News, and right-wing media.

Right-wing online platform Breitbart news posted a video on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in July 2020. In the video, members of the science-sceptic group America’s Frontline Doctors promoted the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a cure for Covid-19. WHO has said there is no proof for the effectiveness of the drug. The video was viewed over 17 million times on Facebook and shared on Twitter by President Trump and his son, Donald Jr., before it was removed.

The Plandemic video – featuring a discredited American scientist – echoed a number of prevalent Covid-19 disinformation narratives, primarily the idea that Covid-19 was created by global elites to help them obtain more power, as well as claiming that wearing a mask will ‘activate’ the virus. The video also attacks Dr Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Promoted by anti-vaccinators, QAnon and activists from the Reopen America movement, the video was viewed over eight million times on YouTube and Facebook before it was removed.

The Plandemic video encourages people to try ineffective or dangerous treatments for Covid-19, encourage them to ignore public health guidelines and/or amplify physical protests (potential superspreader events) and unrest. The impact of these narratives is demonstrated by a May 2020 YouGov poll showing that 44% of Republican voters believe the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates planned to use a Covid-19 vaccine to implant microchips in humans worldwide. Another narrative mentioned in the Plandemic video, the claim that the virus is being used as a pretext to curtail personal freedoms, has led to often violent protests across the USA. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has accused conservative non-profit organisation the Michigan Freedom Fund of organising and funding such protests in the state.
Impact of coronavirus on media freedom

As the consequences of the infodemic continue to unfold, the crisis also presents a significant threat to media freedom, which was already under severe pressure prior to Covid-19. Media freedom watchdogs are voicing concern that governments across the world are using the fight against false information about the coronavirus as a pretext for the implementation of new, draconian restrictions on free expression, as well as to increase press censorship. In some cases, intense information suppression and narrative control seem to be aimed at covering up government failures. In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) argues that some states have used the crisis to impose media restrictions that would ordinarily be impossible. The Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalists has warned that the fresh assault on media freedom amid the pandemic has worsened an already gloomy global media freedom outlook, with many countries introducing new ‘fake news’ laws that threaten journalists with jail for contradicting the official line.

Who are the key (dis-)infodemic state actors?

Whilst much Covid-19 misinformation has been spread organically by real users, some of the most visible malign narratives have been propagated via concerted disinformation campaigns carried out by hostile state actors. According to a European External Action Service (EEAS) special report on Covid-19 disinformation, both the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are engaged in state-sponsored global disinformation campaigns regarding the pandemic. In addition to Moscow and Beijing, the US State Department’s Global Engagement Centre has accused the Iranian regime of peddling state-sponsored Covid-19 disinformation. There is also evidence of orchestrated influence campaigns from Turkey.

As researchers rely heavily on the information to which online platforms grant access – platforms often criticised for not providing independent researchers with sufficient access to data on disinformation – it is hard to assess the true extent of the problem. Moreover, it can be difficult to attribute information campaigns to specific state actors, as coordinated disinformation operations are typically covert, although they often go hand in hand with overt influence campaigns. Thus, experts often refer to such campaigns as 'pro-CCP' or 'pro-Kremlin', for example.

Although the above-mentioned state actors often pursue different goals, they share an interest in undermining liberal democracies. According to the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), their politicisation of health news and information are characterised by the following common denominators:

- criticising democracies as corrupt and incompetent
- praising their own global leadership and/or achievements in medical research and aid
- spreading conspiracy theories about the origins of the coronavirus and the policies of international public health agencies.

The Alliance for Securing Democracy identifies five main common messaging frames used by authoritarian state actors: seeking to rehabilitate the regime’s image; sowing doubt about the virus’ origins; shifting the blame; highlighting failures in democracies; and promoting authoritarianism.

Another commonality is that these governments have imposed draconian restrictions on media freedom and freedom of speech at home, typically suppressing information about the spread of the virus, while exploiting the freedoms of the targeted democracies to spread their messages. Some of these governments have effectively banned or censored the social media platforms that they are using to promote false information abroad. For example, Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, while Iranian authorities have restricted access to the same platforms. Several of these social media platforms are effectively banned within countries where governments are producing content for those same platforms. Turkey and Russia allow access to these social media platforms but have tight censorship measures, significantly limiting freedom of expression on these platforms. Moscow has ordered internet platforms to remove coronavirus ‘fake news’, including alleged inaccurate numbers.
of people infected with coronavirus in Russia. In May 2020, 510 people in Turkey were reportedly detained for questioning over sharing ‘provocative’ coronavirus posts on social media.

**Moscow's information suppression, campaigns and vehicles**

**Information suppression**

As the International Press Institute (IPI) notes, the criminalisation of ‘fake news’ can work as a weapon to control information and suppress critical media; a phenomenon that has become increasingly visible during the pandemic. The Kremlin was quick to order the removal of ‘fake news’ on the government’s response to Covid-19, with a number of independent media organisations being forced to take down articles critical of the government or face fines or imprisonment. A ‘fake news’ division was formed in the Kremlin's coronavirus task force, and another group set up under Russia's Investigative Committee to counter alleged disinformation. As of 1 April 2020, anyone who spreads false information about Covid-19 risks fines of up to €23 000 or prison of up to five years. Media outlets risk fines of €118 000 for spreading disinformation. On 22 April 2020, Russia's Supreme Court specified that the penalties also apply to people who 'not only use mass media and telecommunication networks, but also speak at meetings, rallies, distribute leaflets and hang posters'. In Chechnya, President Ramzan Kadyrov issued death threats against journalist Elena Milashina over her reporting about human rights violations in Chechnya, under the pretext of combating the pandemic. Furthermore, RSF ranks Russia 149th out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

**Disinformation campaigns and narratives**

EU leaders, including HR/VP Josep Borrell, have repeatedly called out the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, including on Covid-19, which are well documented by the EU's counter-disinformation team, EUvsDisinfo, including in their special Covid-19 reports, available in six languages. EUvsDisinfo have also published a detailed timeline of the Kremlin's narratives regarding the pandemic, including conspiracy theories claiming that the virus was developed in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) biolabs (January 2020) or that the USA will start chipping all American citizens in October (June 2020). In June 2020, the Oxford Internet Institute assessed that Russian outlets working in French and German consistently emphasise weak democratic institutions and civil disorder in Europe, but offer different kinds of conspiracy theories about the pandemic.

The Kremlin consistently denies engaging in disinformation campaigns. However, a report released by the US State Department in August 2020 pointed out that high-ranking officers from Moscow's military intelligence service (GRU) are engaged in spreading disinformation about the pandemic via English-language proxy websites (such as SouthFront, Global Research and New Eastern Outlook), in an effort to reach US and Western audiences and exploit crises, including the coronavirus crisis, in the USA in the run-up to the November 2020 presidential elections. The report asserts that the Kremlin's use of proxy sites to amplify disinformation during the pandemic – which it has used as a 'hook to push longstanding disinformation and propaganda narratives' – is an example of its opportunistic utilisation of multiple platforms and multiple messaging. The proxy websites allow the Kremlin to deny involvement while still injecting malicious information into the infosphere.

Such messages include claims that 'one of the reasons why Covid-19 mortality rates are very low in Russia is that many Russians do not get flu vaccinations imported from the West'; that Covid-19 is a 'plot by transnational capital against Donald Trump on the eve of the presidential election'; and that Covid-19 related restrictive measures in Western societies amount to 'total surveillance of the population' that will 'gradually become permanent', marking the establishment of 'dictatorships throughout the world' that will be 'harsher than Nazi and Soviet concentration camps'. Moreover, NATO has been the subject of a number of specific disinformation attacks during the Covid-19 lockdowns in many of its member states between March and June 2020.

In addition to the above, other pro-Kremlin narratives that overlap with those pushing the CCP's agenda include claims that western democracies have been ineffective when it comes to combating
the virus, especially in comparison to (authoritarian states) Russia and China. Already before the Covid-19 outbreak, the Kremlin had amplified health-related wedge issues, such as the debate on vaccinations. During the pandemic, the increased focus on vaccines was picked up and further fuelled by pro-Kremlin media, with EUvsDisinfo detailing how such narratives seemingly prepared resistance against a future coronavirus vaccine. In March 2020, for example, pro-Kremlin media published an article by the Canada-based conspiracist website Global Research, alleging the pandemic is a pretext for forced vaccination with the hidden purpose of injecting nano-chips with a view to gaining 'total control'. This common narrative has been spread not only by pro-Kremlin media in different languages, but also by (US) 'anti-vaxxers' and politicians (see below).

Russia's, China's and Iran's narratives appear to overlap and replicate each other: EUvsDisinfo has described how in April 2020, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson cited 'concerns of the local people' over US biological labs in former Soviet Union countries, with direct references to claims made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Chinese state-controlled extensively covered the accompanying calls on the USA to 'address the concerns of the international community'. Subsequently, the Russian edition of RT highlighted Chinese concerns over the 'US biolabs' on Russia's borders. State media RT has also quoted matching conspiracy theories pronounced by the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards (see chapter on Iran).

Vehicles: State media, proxy websites and web brigades

In addition to using proxy websites, state-sponsored disinformation related to Covid-19 is often disseminated or amplified by state media with global reach. Russian state media RT and Sputnik have been spreading disinformation during the pandemic, particularly in Europe and Latin America, where they have a significant presence. The RT global news network includes RT UK, RT France and RT Spain. Sputnik operates radio broadcasts in eight languages in addition to Russian (Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Serbian and Turkish) as well as over 30 language versions of its online news. Moreover, organisations such as the Saint Petersburg Internet Research Agency (also known as the 'troll factory') use fake or automated accounts to amplify stories.

Beijing's information suppression, campaigns and vehicles

Information suppression

The Chinese government has also ramped up censorship in the wake of the virus. China expelled a number of American journalists from the country after they reported on the potential economic impact of Covid-19 on the Chinese economy (Beijing argued that the decision was retaliation for the US decision to reduce the number of Chinese nationals allowed to work for China's state-run media in the USA). Similarly, Chinese whistleblowers, including citizen journalists who contradicted the official Chinese government position during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, appear to have been either silenced or detained outright by the authorities. Accompanying its domestic suppression of information about the outbreak, Beijing launched a global disinformation campaign – including a wave of conspiracy theories – to restore its image both at home and abroad, export the blame for the outbreak and distract from its own failings. China is ranked 177th out of 180 countries in the RSF 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

(Dis)information campaigns and narratives

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has, similar to the Kremlin, a long tradition of manipulating information to advance its interests abroad and solidify its power grip at home. After years of keeping a relatively clean profile in the foreign information space, President Xi Jinping only recently began using similar tactics to the Kremlin in CCP information campaigns against western rivals. In the same vein, China's aggressive 'wolf warrior diplomacy', assertively confrontational rhetoric and behaviour by Chinese diplomats, which has become increasingly visible in Australia, Scandinavia and Canada in recent years – made international headlines during the pandemic.
In addition to Chinese state media outlets propagating pro-CCP narratives during the pandemic, Chinese diplomats and embassies began creating active accounts on Twitter in early 2019, despite (as already noted), the fact that Twitter is banned in China. A number of high-ranking staff from Chinese state media also have active accounts on Twitter. Some of the official CCP-affiliated accounts have a significant number of followers, such as Foreign Ministry of Information Department Director Hua Chunying, who had 618,900 followers as of August 2020. Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs renowned for his combative commentary on the USA, had 749,600 followers as of August 2020.

In response to US President Donald Trump’s use of the notions ‘Chinese coronavirus’ and ‘Wuhan flu’, Zhao tweeted: ‘CDC [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!’ in March 2020. Similarly, in April 2020, a Chinese diplomat at the Chinese Embassy in Paris published a French-language post on the Embassy’s website, accusing western caretakers in nursing homes of abandoning patients and leaving them to die. After French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian summoned the Chinese ambassador, the embassy removed the article. Another post from 26 April asserted that ‘Some in the West are beginning to distrust liberal democracy. In the response to the epidemic, socialism with Chinese characteristics has demonstrated its ability to concentrate resources in the service of great achievements’.

Vehicles: State media and cyber troops

A report by the Hoover Institution asserts that ‘China maintains a unique, parallel information environment in which the Party-state communicates to an international audience on popular global social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, while its own residents almost exclusively participate in CCP-approved communities (such as Weibo and WeChat)’. According to the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), the most important amplifiers of pro-CCP messaging are the state-backed outlets the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Daily, China Plus, the People’s Daily and Xinhua. Of these, Xinhua has the largest distribution network – the sum of all unique Twitter accounts and Facebook groups/pages sharing the content – with a reach of over 250 million social media users, including 75 million from Xinhua’s own Facebook page.

The CCP’s significant covert influence capabilities include content ‘mills’, paid commenter brigades (such as the ‘50 cents army’), as well as fake social media accounts, to spread unattributed messages. Already in September 2019, Oxford University’s Computational Propaganda Project found that China had the biggest cyber troop capacity in the world, with an estimated 300,000-2,000,000 people working in local and regional offices on a permanent basis. It is not known if Chinese authorities have expanded these capabilities during the pandemic. However, an August 2020 report published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and the Alliance for Securing Democracy found that a large number of accounts in a network of suspicious Twitter accounts spreading pro-CCP narratives were created in March 2020, focusing on issues that include Covid-19 conspiracy theories (as well as Taiwan, the Hong Kong protests and antiracist protests in the USA).

A Stanford University analysis of a June 2020 Twitter take-down of 23,750 accounts attributed to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) found that Covid-19 activity increased sharply in January 2020 and spiked in late March. Whereas some of these accounts were created as early as September 2019, remaining dormant for months, most were created just weeks before they began tweeting in late January. Stanford’s researchers concluded that narratives around Covid-19, much in line with the above-mentioned examples, include praising China’s response to the virus, occasionally contrasting China’s response with that of the US government or Taiwan’s response. The analysis found overlaps with other topics, including in Hong Kong related tweets, some praising the Hong Kong Police for protecting the city against the virus and asking how the protestors could undermine Hong Kong-China unity during an epidemic, referring to the dual struggle of epidemics and protests.
Teheran’s information suppression, campaigns and vehicles

Information suppression

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Teheran's instinct to suppress negative news is having disastrous public health consequences. The CPJ asserts that, although Iranian authorities announced the outbreak on 19 February 2020, they 'covered up the rapid spread of the outbreak to ensure that citizens would turn out for February 21 parliamentary elections'. Iran is ranked 173th out of 180 countries in the RSF 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

(Dis)information campaigns and narratives

The US State Department lists the following disinformation activities by Iranian officials amid the severe outbreak in the country, in a seeming attempt to divert blame for mismanagement:

- On 5 March 2020, the head of Iran's cyber police announced the arrest of 121 Iranians for 'spreading rumours' about the coronavirus. Moreover, the regime reportedly warned medical staff against revealing accurate statistics of coronavirus cases and deaths.
- In March, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claimed the spread of Covid-19 in Iran might be due to a US biological attack. On 12 March, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei falsely claimed there was evidence that Covid-19 might be a 'biological attack'.

According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the campaign's goals were to deepen divisions between the USA and its allies and to pressure the USA to suspend its sanctions (similarly, the Kremlin has unsuccessfully asked for a moratorium on sanctions against it amid the pandemic). The US State Department's Global Engagement Center has warned that Russia, China and Iran are pushing overlapping narratives, including that these three countries are handling the crisis efficiently and that the virus was a US bioweapon.

Vehicles: State media, proxies and cyber troops

In addition to officials and state-sponsored media outlets such as Mehr News and Press TV, pro-regime and anti-US/Western conspiracy theories have also been spread by proxy networks. Researchers from Graphika have found evidence of pro-Iranian regime disinformation campaigns related to the pandemic. The analysed Teheran-based network, the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), creates or copies content promoting Iranian government narratives, and then posts it to social media accounts that pose as independent news outlets or journalists, with a view to injecting Iranian government narratives into the western infosphere. During the pandemic, the IUVM focused on praising the Iranian people’s resilience, creativity, unity and leaders, while accusing the USA of creating the virus and hampering Iran's efforts to curb the outbreak with sanctions. Both Twitter and Facebook have taken down a significant number of IUVM-linked accounts since the network was exposed in 2018. In May 2020, Facebook said it had removed 118 pages, 389 accounts, 27 groups, as well as 6 Instagram accounts. Some had links to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB), whose head is appointed directly by Ayatollah Khamenei.

Non-state actors in and beyond Europe

Although some state actors have played a role in the Covid-19 infodemic, they are not the only source of such disinformation. Many non-state actors have been disseminating false information about the virus. This ranges from leading domestic political figures and political parties, over celebrities (see box) to domestic media outlets and partisan political organisations. Moreover, extremist groups and terrorist organisations such as ISIL/Da'esh have exploited the pandemic to further their goals.

In its June 2020 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), Europol warned that restrictions regarding the pandemic, as well as the economic and social aftermath could result in growing
terrorist radicalisation. Europol reports that both right and left-wing violence is growing, with the pandemic allowing extremists, including jihadist terrorist groups, to persuade and recruit followers.

Superstar super-spreaders: Celebrities outshine science

The Reuters Institute, drawing on First Draft fact-checks, found that messages from prominent public figures such as politicians and celebrities constituted only 20 % of the claims in the analysed material, but made up 69 % of the engagement. Some 80 % of the false information came from ordinary people, but generated far less engagement.

A number of celebrities with significant followings on social media have promoted conspiracy theories or other false information about Covid-19. US rapper Wiz Khalifa, Hollywood stars Woody Harrelson and John Cusack, British-Pakistani boxing champion Amir Khan and British rapper M.I.A., among others, have shared conspiracy theories about the non-existent link between 5G and Covid-19.

In the UK, the Community Security Trust said online anti-Semitic incidents rose by 4 % from January to June 2020, warning that the pandemic had sparked an 'explosion' of anti-Semitic discourses, including Neo-Nazis and far-right activists urging followers to 'deliberately infect' Jews and Muslims with coronavirus. Similarly, HRW noted an increase in anti-Semitic sentiments during anti-lockdown demonstrations. In a July 2020 report, Germany's domestic intelligence voiced concern over right-wing extremists exploiting such demonstrations to promote anti-Semitism.
EU actions to counter the infodemic

In light of the infodemic and in response to a European Council and EU Foreign Affairs Ministers call for action, as well as to European Parliament concerns; the European Commission and the HR/VP published a joint communication on tackling Covid-19 disinformation in June 2020. Building on the 2018 action plan against disinformation, it calls for ‘more coordinated action to address the risks for open societies’, in line with the EU’s democratic values. The immediate response to coronavirus disinformation includes work already under way, and concrete actions which can be launched quickly using existing resources. Most prominently, EUvsDisinfo (the European External Action Service (EEAS) team set up in 2015 to collect, analyse and publicise third-party disinformation, with a special focus on pro-Kremlin disinformation) has collected over 600 examples of coronavirus-related disinformation (as of August 2020). The rapid alert system launched in March 2019 among EU institutions and Member States to share information and coordinate responses to disinformation has been utilised during the pandemic.

The multifaceted nature of the infodemic has highlighted the need to counter malign disinformation actors, but as ordinary users play a key role in unwittingly spreading corrosive and potentially harmful messages, it has also underlined the importance of the key ‘soft’ components of the European response, such as fact-checking and media literacy. The EU will further increase support for fact-checkers and researchers, building on the new European Digital Media Observatory. Moreover, the Commission is urging online platforms to promote authoritative sources, demote content that is verifiably false or misleading, and take down illegal content or content that could cause physical harm. More platforms, such as the popular video-sharing app TikTok, have joined the voluntary Code of Practice agreed by key social networks, advertisers and the advertising industry in 2018.

In addition, the EU will assess fundamental challenges highlighted by the crisis to feed into the efforts to boost democracy as part of the action plan on human rights and democracy 2020-2024.

In its consistent push for a coordinated European response to disinformation, Parliament has used a mix of tools in recent years: non-legislative resolutions and hearings, as well as its budgetary power. The latter was instrumental in the allocation of the first real budget to the East StratCom Task Force. In a resolution adopted on 17 April 2020, Members stressed that disinformation about Covid-19 is a major public health problem, that everyone should have access to accurate and verified information, and that a free, independent and sufficiently funded media is necessary for democracy. On 30 April 2020, Parliament organised an exchange of view with HR/VP Borrell on an EEAS special report on the narratives and disinformation around the Covid-19 released earlier that month.
The evolving consequences of the coronavirus 'infodemic'

MAIN REFERENCES
Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling Covid-19 disinformation – getting the facts right, June 2020.

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