

Written evidence submitted by the Henry Jackson Society

The DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation – written evidence

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About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society (HJS) is a London-based international affairs think-tank.

Summary of Submission

- Pandemics, like other high-impact events that create uncertainty such as terrorism, provide non-state actors opportunities to peddle false narratives and conspiracy theories to new and existing audiences. In the online space, this has taken a variety of forms, and requires close intervention by social media companies.
- Hostile States, including China and Russia, are spreading disinformation about Covid-19 in order to further their own interests, including the creation of confusion and sowing of discord in Western societies. This is nothing new. Increasingly, however, these states are learning from each other. China's approach to its disinformation campaign has, for example, begun to reflect Russia's.
- The section describing Chinese disinformation emphasises the degree of control which the Chinese Communist Party led by Xi Jinping now exerts over the great majority of data emerging from China, so that the distinction between news, propaganda and disinformation is blurred and what appears to be spontaneous social media activity is significantly influenced by Party objectives.
- While much has been done online to promote Covid-19 education campaigns, such as those about the need for people to wash their hands, more must be done to counter disinformation from state and non-state actors, such as terrorists and extremists.

Introduction

1. Covid-19 is being exploited by State and non-state actors to spread disinformation and misinformation for various purposes. This submission provides case studies of three examples: the first focusing on non-state actors such as Islamic State; the second and third focusing on state actors such as China; and, Russia.

Terrorist Organisations

2. Terrorist organisations such as Islamic State have called for their followers to attack the infrastructure and systems of Western nations, as they are likely to be focused on dealing with the impact of COVID-19.
 - a. In the editorial of its weekly Al-Naba newspaper, for example, Islamic State described COVID-19 as a divinely ordained “painful torment” against “crusader” armies and security forces, which are overstretched as they struggle to support their own efforts to deal with the pandemic.¹ Given the group is restricting its deployment of jihadists abroad, it instructed supporters to take advantage of the epidemic to free prisoners from the “prisons of polytheists and the camps of humiliation.” Recently, police in Germany arrested four suspected members of the Islamic State group who alleged to be planning an attack on American military facilities, and whose alleged targets included United States air force bases in the country and individuals deemed critical of Islam.²
 - b. Copies of Al-Naba newspaper are largely circulated online, and while links to it have been effectively removed from open social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, it is still circulated widely on encrypted apps such as Telegram and justpaste.it. As such, the importance of multi-party efforts such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) cannot be understated, and will be essential in guiding smaller platforms such as justpaste.it on ensuring guidance from terrorist organisations is not given wide coverage online.³
3. COVID-19 has allowed non-state actors in developing countries, which are suffering from a gap of governance due to the pandemic, with an opportunity to provide essential services.
 - a. Islamist groups have sought to exploit natural disasters in the past. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, for example, held an urgent meeting to discuss the COVID-19, where senior commanders warned Muslims to take precautions against the disease.⁴ Like Islamic State, Al-Shabaab blamed “the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them”.⁵
 - b. In Afghanistan, the Taliban indicated they will help humanitarian organisations aiding those affected by the virus or assisting in stopping its spread.⁶ The Taliban has also distributed images of its own medics giving out essential goods such as soap, masks, and gloves in the eastern province of Nangarhar, and lecturing community leaders on precautions to stop the spread of the disease.⁷

¹ Sanders, L. & Allison, T., ‘Coronavirus: ‘Islamic State’ seeks to profit from pandemic’, *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2020, available from: www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-islamic-state-seeks-to-profit-from-pandemic/a-52886753

² ‘Germany arrests 4 IS suspects planning attacks on US bases’, *Associated Press News*, 15 April 2020, available from: www.apnews.com/9be617fe2ae41dbd4df22e18215711d6

³ ‘Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism’, *GIFCT*, available from: www.gifct.org/

⁴ Burke, J., ‘Opportunity or threat? How Islamic extremists are reacting to coronavirus’, *The Guardian Online*, 16 April 2020, available from: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/opportunity-or-threat-how-islamic-extremists-reacting-coronavirus

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ ‘Afghanistan’, *The Guardian Online*, available from: www.theguardian.com/world/afghanistan

⁷ Ghazi, Z., ‘Locals Unsatisfied with Afghan Taliban COVID Awareness Campaign’, *VOA News*, 31 March 2020, available from: www.voanews.com/episode/locals-unsatisfied-afghan-taliban-covid-awareness-campaign-4241841

Burke, J., ‘Opportunity or threat? How Islamic extremists are reacting to coronavirus’, *The Guardian Online*, 16 April 2020, available from:

- c. There is a risk that such efforts will be coupled with extremist theories on the lack of legitimacy of ‘crusader forces’ and existing state governance, which will allow terrorist organisations to fill the void. It is unclear whether such information is being spread online, but images and information on these efforts feed into a wider ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative which is crucial to sustaining extremism.
- 4. Public platforms such as YouTube have witnessed a spike in doomsday, crusader, and jihadist videos featuring “Mahdi,” a messianic deliverer anticipated to appear before the Day of Judgment and rid the world of evil.
 - a. For Islamist extremists, this rhetoric is coupled with long lectures featuring speakers discussing how COVID-19 is a punishment from Allah.⁸ During a live Facebook session, for example, New York-based and Muslim Brotherhood supporter Bahgat Saber called on Egyptians who have contracted coronavirus to exact revenge by intentionally infecting state officials and government employees.⁹
 - b. Some activists on the Islamist side explain that coronavirus is an American and Jewish plot to reduce the world population, or that Jews are more dangerous than coronavirus, AIDS, and cholera combined.
 - c. In addition to stirring up hate, religious videos often feature dangerous health misinformation; posts uploaded on social media in Iran this month show people licking holy shrines in defiance of COVID-19, ostensibly to “protect future pilgrims” to the shrines from contracting the virus.
- 5. A recent FBI memo describes how far-right extremists are urging the spread of coronavirus to Jews.¹⁰
 - a. Messages disseminated among the groups encourage their members to use “spray bottles” filled with infectious body fluids in order to attack police and to travel to any place Jews might congregate, including “markets, political offices, businesses, and places of worship”.¹¹
 - b. In the United Kingdom, a poster shared by the British National Socialist Movement on Facebook argues that if you get COVID-19, you should visit your local mosque or synagogue and spend time in diverse neighbourhoods where “increased exposure to diversity is clinically proven to provide short-term and long-term benefits to immune system function”.
 - c. On Telegram, alt-right personality Milo Yiannopoulos asked his followers in a poll which was the “biggest hoax of our lifetime: Acid Rain, Climate Change, Satanic Ritual Abuse, Coronavirus.”¹²
 - d. Far-right groups have used the opportunity to peddle conspiracy theories and incite racial abuse against Asian diaspora communities. Research by the Anti-Defamation League, for example, found online cartoons depicting an Asian “Winnie the Flu” and

www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/opportunity-or-threat-how-islamic-extremists-reacting-coronavirus

⁸ Malik, N., ‘Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism’, *Foreign Policy Online*, 26 March 2020, available from: www.foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/

⁹ ‘NY-Based Muslim Brotherhood Activist Urges Egyptians to Infect Government Officials with Coronavirus’, *MEMRI TV Videos [Youtube]*, 16 March 2020, available from: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY1C2WogWcw

¹⁰ Staff, T., ‘FBI says extremists are urging spread of coronavirus to Jews, police’, *The Times of Israel*, 17 April 2020, available from: www.timesofisrael.com/fbi-says-extremists-are-urging-spread-of-coronavirus-to-jews-police/

¹¹ The Jerusalem Post Staff, ‘Lauder: National Guard must protect Jews from neo-Nazi coronavirus threats’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 March 2020, available from: www.jpost.com/International/FBI-Neo-Nazi-groups-encouraging-spread-coronavirus-to-police-and-Jews-622006

¹² Wilson, J., ‘Disinformation and blame: how America’s far right is capitalizing on coronavirus’, *The Guardian Online*, 19 March 2020, available from: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/america-far-right-coronavirus-outbreak-trump-alex-jones

violent imagery against Asians on extremist-friendly platforms Telegram, 4chan, and Gab.¹³

China

6. Since the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), State propaganda organs have been central to the exercise of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) authority.¹⁴ Their responsibilities include eulogy of Party virtue, criticism of opposition and dissemination of misinformation and disinformation for both purposes.
7. The same propaganda organs continue to exercise complete control over State media to a degree that their outputs can be regarded as disinformation channels.¹⁵ Other government entities likewise publish data that supports the CCP agenda and hence cannot be regarded as reliable sources. Circular reporting within the PRC establishment also gives an air of authenticity to spurious 'information'.
8. Overseas, Chinese officials, business personnel, visitors and students have been expected or tasked to support the spread of mainly positive disinformation about China.¹⁶ Others do so voluntarily to signal 'virtue' to the Chinese authorities. The CCP also makes use of sympathetic foreign regimes, organisations and individuals to reinforce its disinformation, as recently illustrated by the role played by the World Health Organisation (WHO) leadership in glossing over the CCP's failure to publicise the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁷ Chinese official media also provide platforms for sympathetic foreign commentators.¹⁸
9. The full range of propaganda techniques have been deployed in the course of the COVID-19 outbreak. Systematic propaganda campaigning to manage the emerging narrative in the Party's favour began in late January, under the direction of Xi Jinping. Details of his instructions were published in the text of a speech he reportedly made to the Politburo Standing Committee on 3 February. The release of such a text is a rare instance of propaganda designed to defend the authority of Xi, against suggestions that he had distanced himself from the crisis.¹⁹
10. At the other extreme of the Party hierarchy, thousands of lesser disinformation and influence operations have been carried out.
11. With almost universal access to social media in China, scope for the rapid dissemination of official information has increased greatly over recent years. In parallel, the CCP directs massive resources at monitoring, censoring and exploiting social media activity to help shape and manage public opinion. Outbursts of public outrage at CCP misdeeds – such as that which followed the official persecution and death of the Covid-19 whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang – are

¹³ Yang, A. & Greenblatt, J. A., 'Yang & Anti-Defamation League CEO: Avoid coronavirus racism and scapegoating', *USA Today*, 21 March 2020, available from: www.eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/03/20/yang-anti-defamation-league-ceo-avoid-coronavirus-scapegoating-racism-column/2877976001/

¹⁴ Schurmann, Franz (1966). *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁵ 'Xi Jinping asks for 'absolute loyalty' from Chinese state media', *The Guardian Online*, 19 February 2016, available from: www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty

¹⁶ Brady, A.M, 'China's foreign Propaganda Machine', *Wilson Center*, 26 October 2015, available from: www.wilsoncenter.org/article/chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine

¹⁷ Gilsinan, K., 'How China deceived WHO', *The Atlantic*, 12 April 2020, available from: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/world-health-organization-blame-pandemic-coronavirus/609820/

¹⁸ 'Capacity of state in China to deal with epidemic far more developed than Western govts: Martin Jacques', *China Daily*, 19 March 2020, available from: www.global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/19/WS5e72d148a31012821728052b.html

¹⁹ 'Rare Release of Xi's Speech on Virus Puzzles Top China Watchers', *Bloomberg*, 17 February 2020, available from: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-17/rare-release-of-xi-s-speech-on-virus-puzzles-top-china-watchers

rapidly suppressed²⁰. In that instance, the CCP soon afterwards tried to neutralise criticism by propaganda hailing Dr Li's heroic contribution and incorporating his anti-authoritarian protest into their Party-centred narrative.²¹

12. Since the early 2000s the Chinese government has directed large numbers of social media users to circulate disinformation.²² Recently organised groups of online activists are backed up by virtual-identity 'bots' and have spread disinformation about COVID-19.²³ These entities are active beyond China's borders, as attested by attempts attributed to a PRC-based online cell called Diba²⁴ to sow discord in Taiwan by claiming that the local authorities were concealing the true numbers of infections and deaths and should not be trusted. It is noteworthy that this wrongdoing falsely ascribed to the government of Taiwan remains a reality in the PRC.
13. A new pattern has emerged whereby the CCP gleans conspiracy theories from Chinese social media and then promulgates them using official spokesmen. A feature of this latter approach is that it appears to see no harm in disseminating contradictory messages.²⁵ The idea that COVID-19 came from the US, a fabrication promoted by the government, apparently originated in popular internet exchanges.²⁶ Other disinformation involves twisting the words of third parties. The claim that COVID-19 had appeared in Italy before it broke out in China exploited unintentionally ambiguous comments by an Italian pharmacologist.²⁷ In the same way, Chinese media have claimed that a British study proves that the genetic origins of COVID-19 are concentrated in the US, implying an American source for the pathogen, whereas the research draws no such inference.²⁸
14. Since their claim to have got over the worst of the outbreak inside China, the CCP has adopted a Russian-style disinformation campaign, characterised by aggressive criticism of the target.²⁹ Traditional CCP propaganda designed to minimise bad news, and then extol the Party's virtue in managing challenges³⁰ have been augmented by online and other negative disinformation

²⁰ Cachero, P., 'The next Tiananmen Square? Chinese citizens are demanding increased free speech after the death of a coronavirus whistleblower doctor. China is censoring their calls', *Business Insider*, 7 February 2020, available from: www.businessinsider.com/calls-free-speech-online-doctor-li-wenliang-death-censored-china-2020-2?r=US&IR=T

²¹ Wong, C. H., 'China Rescinds Penalty for Late Doctor Who Warned About Coronavirus', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 March 2020, available from: www.wsj.com/articles/china-rescinds-penalty-for-late-doctor-who-warned-about-coronavirus-11584637545

²² King, G., Pan, J. and Roberts, M.E., 'How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument', *American political science review*, 9 April 2017, 111(3), pp.484-501, available from: <https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/50c.pdf> and Cook, S., 'China's growing army of paid internet commentators', *Freedom House*, 11 October 2011, available from: www.web.archive.org/web/20111013195601/http://blog.freedomhouse.org/weblog/2011/10/chinas-growing-army-of-paid-internet-commentators.html

²³ Bechis, F. & Carrer, G., 'How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy', *Formiche*, available from: www.formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/

²⁴ Silverman, C., 'Chinese Trolls Are Spreading Coronavirus Disinformation In Taiwan', *Buzzfeed News*, 5 March 2020, available from: www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/chinese-trolls-coronavirus-disinformation-taiwan

²⁵ Weinland, D., 'China goes on the offensive to control global coronavirus narrative', *Financial Times*, 14 March 2020, available from: www.ft.com/content/d420ce18-641f-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5

²⁶ Tuo, Yuanyu., 'Why does Wuhan have to rely on the PLA for this plague?', *SZHG*, 30 January 2020, available from: www.szhgh.com/Article/opinion/zatan/2020-01-30/221836.html

²⁷ Thomson, B., 'Chinese state media links the origin of coronavirus with ITALY after Milan professor said doctors there remembered seeing 'very strange' pneumonia last year', *Mail Online*, 25 March 2020, available from: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8150589/Chinese-state-media-suggests-coronavirus-pandemic-originated-Italy.html

²⁸ 'COVID-19: genetic network analyst provides 'snapshot' of pandemic origins', *University of Cambridge*, 9 April 2020, available from: www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/covid-19-genetic-network-analysis-provides-snapshot-of-pandemic-origins

²⁹ Yatsyk, A., 'Russia's Anti-American Propaganda in the Euromaidan Era', *PONARS Eurasia*, March 2018, available from: www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-anti-american-propaganda-euromaidan-era

³⁰ Auslin, M., 'Beijing Fears COVID-19 Is Turning Point for China, Globalization', *RealClearPolitics*, 18 March 2020, available from: www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/03/18/beijing_fears_covid-19_is_turning_point_for_china_globalization_142686.html

campaigns. Such material paints a picture of chaos and misery in the West in the wake of the pandemic, contrasted with fictitious accounts of Chinese success in controlling it.

15. In this way, the objectives of PRC's disinformation campaigns now include three main strands; first, to play down or contradict factual reporting which reflects badly on the CCP; second, to extol the merits of China's role in managing the pandemic as a model of excellence for the world to be grateful for and emulate; and third, to create doubt, confusion and fear among the target audience. The aim of all three strands is to increase the CCP's power and influence at a juncture when much of the world is distracted by the pandemic. It is important to understand that almost all public data from China concerning the current pandemic is intended to serve these purposes.

Russia

16. It should come as no surprise that Russia is spreading disinformation about Covid-19. For at least the last half a decade or so, Russia has been waging "political warfare" against the West. This form of warfare is a toxic cocktail of propaganda, influence-peddling, cyber-attacks, subversion, economic pressure, military sabre-rattling, and everything else short of actually military conflict.
17. While much of this "political warfare" is centrally controlled by the Kremlin, the propaganda part is not – or at least is not entirely. There does exist a single, disciplined "disinformation army" in the form of state-owned and state-backed media, including the propaganda channel RT. But there also exists a collection of enthusiasts and mercenaries who generate content that reflects both their own views and their assumptions about what the Kremlin would like to see. The Kremlin picks and chooses which lines fit its needs at any given time and then amplifies them accordingly.
18. For the Kremlin, Covid-19 is an opportunity as well as a crisis. Russia has long sought to subvert the rules-based international order by creating fractures within Western societies, or taking advantage of pre-existing ones. And it has honed its efforts through the annexation of Crimea, invasion of eastern Ukraine, destruction of MH17, interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election, and attempted murder of Sergei Skripal. Each was accompanied by a concerted disinformation campaign that sought to spread confusion and sow division.
19. Covid-19 is no different. Russia is attempting to exacerbate the already-existing health crisis by undermining public trust in Western institutions – and national healthcare systems, in particular.
20. Much of what Russia is currently doing mirrors what the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Then, as now, disinformation was an integral part of the Kremlin's political warfare – or "active measures" as it was called at the time. During the latter stages of the Cold War, the Soviets identified public health as a key area for disinformation and devoted significant resources to it.
21. In a campaign known as 'Operation Infektion', the Soviets sought to convince the world that the US had invented HIV/AIDS as part of a biological weapons research project at Fort Detrick, Maryland. The campaign began when an anonymous letter making this claim was published in a pro-Soviet newspaper in India in 1983. The claim was then repeated by other Left-leaning newspapers, and by 1987 it had received coverage in over 80 countries and in more than 30

languages. The operation was so successful that in 1987 the US State Department held a press conference to mark the launch of a report debunking the claim.³¹

22. The state-owned *RIA Novosti* news agency reported that Prime Minister Boris Johnson had been hospitalised in early April and that his health was in such poor state that he required emergency lung ventilation.³² This report was carried on the news agency's website and its social media accounts. State-owned media has also made the ludicrous claim that China is not responsible for Covid-19.³³ Other Kremlin-controlled media have highlighted the perceived shortcomings or errors of Western approaches to dealing with the outbreak³⁴, suggested that the outbreak will bring about the collapse of the European Union³⁵, and claimed that coronavirus was sent by God to punish environmentalists and homosexuals.³⁶
23. Pro-Kremlin media has promoted the narrative that the US is responsible for the outbreak of Covid-19.³⁷ Other pro-Kremlin media has amplified fringe Western media outlets to promote the narrative that Covid-19 is being weaponised by the West. According to one outlet, Covid-19 was created by a secretive global elite to introduce tyranny.³⁸ Authorities in Italy, another outlet claims, intentionally allowed the virus to spread so widely amongst its population because they expected an increase in EU funding.³⁹ One outlet suggests that Covid-19 is no more serious than a common flu.⁴⁰ Another, meanwhile, argues that Covid-19 does not actually exist at all.⁴¹
24. It is easy to get the impression that pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts are all over the place and are thus ineffective. But that would be wrong. The Kremlin does not seek to convince of one particular 'truth', but instead to confuse as to whether there is such a thing as 'truth'. Dozens of narratives exist simultaneously, and they are purposely contradictory.
25. The Kremlin's disinformation efforts are only effective because they find already fertile ground. A number of myths, scams, and conspiracy theories about Covid-19 have gone viral – including the suggestion that cocaine can kill the virus, and that eating garlic prevents infection – many of which will have next-to-no connection to the Kremlin. But precisely because they do find fertile

³¹ 'Soviet Influence', 29 September 1987, available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?3002-1/soviet-influence>. For the report, see 'Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-1987', U.S. Department of State, August 1987, available at: <https://jmw.typepad.com/files/state-department---a-report-on-active-measures-and-propaganda.pdf>

³² 'Istochnik: Dzhonsona podklyuchat k IVL' [Source: Johnson will be connected to mechanical ventilation], *RIA Novosti*, 6 April 2020, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200405221701/https://ria.ru/20200406/1569611571.html>

³³ Peter Koenig, 'China – Western China Bashing – vs. Western Bio-warfare?', *New Eastern Outlook*, 7 February 2020, available at: <https://journal-neo.org/2020/02/07/china-western-china-bashing-vs-western-bio-warfare/>

³⁴ "Very poorly equipped": UK facing dire scarcity of ventilators as Covid-19 cases increase, says largest manufacturer', *RT*, 18 March 2020, available at: <https://www.rt.com/uk/483452-ventilator-shortage-nhs-swiss-manufacturer/>

³⁵ Giulietto Chiesa, 'L'Unità Europea che non c'è mai stata [The European Unity that never existed]', *Sputnik.It*, 31 March 2020, available at: <https://it.sputniknews.com/opinioni/202003318922213-lunita-europea-che-non-ce-mai-stata/>

³⁶ 'Les homosexuels sont la cause de l'épidémie de Covid-19, affirme un conseiller auprès du cabinet de Trump [Gays are the cause of the Covid-19 epidemic, says advisor to the Trump cabinet]', *Sputnik.Fr*, 30 March 2020, available at: <https://fr.sputniknews.com/insolite/202003301043428566-les-homosexuels-sont-la-cause-de-lepidemie-de-covid-19-affirme-un-conseiller-aupres-du-cabinet-de/>

³⁷ 'Former Putin's Aide: Coronavirus is the US biological weapon', *Geopolitika.ru*, 13 March 2020, available at: <https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/news/former-putins-aide-coronavirus-us-biological-weapon>

³⁸ Gary D. Barnett, 'Panic Will End but Tyranny Will Not', *LewRockwell.com*, 14 March 2020, available at: <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2020/03/gary-d-barnett/panic-will-end-but-tyranny-will-not/>

³⁹ 'Coronavirus Hysteria Hits Russia As Europe Becomes Center Of Outbreak', 14 March 2020, available at: <https://southfront.org/coronavirus-hysteria-hits-russia-as-europe-becomes-center-of-outbreak/>

⁴⁰ Kampmark, B., 'The Viral Blame Game: Xenophobia, Attribution And Coronavirus', *OrientalReview.org*, 2 March 2020, available at: <https://orientalreview.org/2020/03/02/the-viral-blame-game-xenophobia-attribution-and-coronavirus/>

⁴¹ Peter Koenig, 'The Coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic: The Real Danger is "Agenda ID2020"', *GlobalResearch*, 12 March 2020, available at: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/coronavirus-causes-effects-real-danger-agenda-id2020/5706153>

ground, Russia pumps out lies in an attempt to exacerbate confusion and sow panic and fear over Covid-19. All of this is part of the Kremlin's broader efforts to undermine the West.

Recommendations

26. While much has been done online to push campaigns educating people about washing their hands, more must be done to counter non-state actors, such as terrorists and extremists who seek to spread their hateful agendas online, and state actors, who seek to undermine public trust in national institutions and otherwise sow confusion and division.
 - a. Health disinformation is an important grey area currently not covered by social media policy. Therefore, users can argue that COVID-19 is the result of homosexuality or blame other ethnic groups and religions to fit into broader existing conspiracy theories.
 - b. One way to address this quickly would be the creation of a new misinformation flag on YouTube and Facebook, which would allow users to pinpoint content that is factually incorrect or harmful.
 - c. Moreover, lessons learned from using counter-narratives to combat terrorism—where videos on the reality of Islamic State brutality ran alongside Islamic State propaganda—can also be used to extremist content that is spiking as a result of COVID-19. This will require a deliberate, coordinated, and proactive response from social media companies.
 - d. Social media companies should halt the spread of particularly dangerous or egregious conspiracy theories by disabling algorithmic feedback loops, wherein internet users search for / like / share conspiracy theories and these actions increase the theories' popularity to the point where the theories are suggested to more users.