

# SPOTLIGHT

DEC 2021

CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES  
& DISINFORMATION

F

A

K  
C

E  
T

10 YEARS OF  
RAN



Annemarie VAN DE WEERT



Bettina ROTTWEILER



Fabian WICHMANN



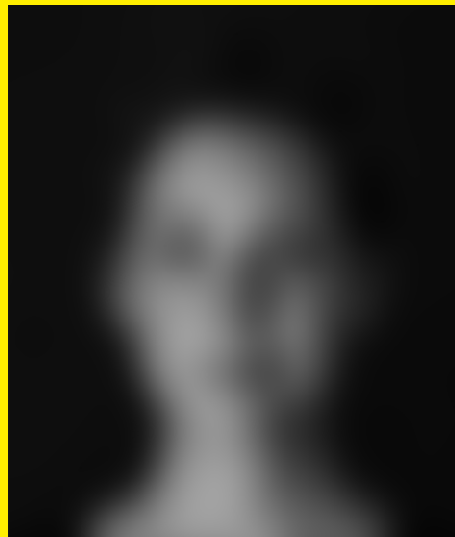
Francesco FARINELLI



Paul GILL



Stephan LEWANDOWSKY



Moonshot ANALYST

---

**EDITORIAL**

The propagation and proliferation of conspiracy narratives and disinformation is not a new phenomenon. It is an ongoing and systemic risk. However, in recent years, terrorist and extremist groups have increasingly utilised conspiracy ideologies as a tool for the radicalisation and recruitment of vulnerable individuals, exploiting their fears, uncertainties and doubts.

RAN practitioners are already aware of the ability of conspiracy narratives and disinformation to enhance the appeal of extremist narratives by providing 'black and white' explanations of polarising events, eroding the trust between people and governments, spreading hate speech, questioning the respect for expert analysis and in some cases, inciting and encouraging violence.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the propagation of conspiracy narratives and disinformation. Not only have there been a plethora of conspiracies and disinformation relating to the virus and the vaccines that have been developed to combat it, but the digital transformation that has been brought about by the pandemic has instigated an algorithmic accelerationism which has enabled conspiracy narratives to reach more and more people online.

In this Spotlight, RAN Practitioners, Working Group leads and academic experts share their views, insights about and their work in understanding and tackling conspiracy narratives and disinformation. Many of these topics have been addressed by RAN Practitioners through Working Group and small-scale meetings during 2021 and at the recent RAN High Level Conference and the RAN Practitioners Plenary.

The collection of articles and interviews in this month's Spotlight do not attempt to provide a definitive explanation or indeed, solution, for tackling this enormous area of P/CVE work. However, the magazine attempts to highlight a number of dynamics, individuals, organisations and projects addressing the challenge, and add to the understanding of practitioners that are having to work harder than ever to cut through the noise created by these narratives.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you would like to contribute to future editions of Spotlight, or if you have ideas for an article, interview or feature, please get in touch with the RAN Practitioners communications team at [ran@radaradvies.nl](mailto:ran@radaradvies.nl)

**The RAN Staff**

---

F

A

K  
C

E  
T

# Contents

03

EDITORIAL  
**Digital transformation**

08

ARTICLE  
**Disinformation as a gateway to extremist agendas**

14

PAPER  
**Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism**

16

FILM  
**Conspiracy narratives and disinformation**

18

ARTICLE  
**The impact of Covid-19**

26

PAPER  
**The conspiracy theory handbook**

28

ARTICLE  
**'The nexus between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism**

34

PAPER  
**Impact of conspiracy narratives on VRWE and LWE narratives**

36

ARTICLE  
**The pathway from conspiracy narratives to Inceldom**

44

ARTICLE  
**The role of conspiracy narratives in right-wing extremism**

50

PAPER  
**Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures**

52

FEATURE  
**Moonshot CVE**

56

FEATURE  
**École Citoyenne**

60

INTERVIEW  
**Non-violent actors and freedom of expression**

66

HIGHLIGHTS  
**RAN activity on conspiracy narratives and disinformation**

# ARTICLE: **Disinformation as a gateway to extremist agendas**



**Francesco  
FARINELLI**

**Whilst news-focused historians have noted that accusations around ‘fake news’ date back to the advent of newspapers themselves in the seventeenth century, the current threats posed by disinformation in EU communities appear to have been strengthened by the growth of the internet, taking on an additional degree of intensity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought about a new wave of fear, anxiety and doubt as it endangered people’s lives, affecting everything from job security to social interactions and health concerns. In this environment, disinformation and its effects on radicalisation processes have spread almost as quickly as the virus itself...**

### Crowd-Sourced Disinformation

When discussing disinformation, it is important to note why people can be fooled into believing false narratives. As humans, we are more likely to believe stories that confirm or reinforce our perception of the world, as noted by researcher Roy Brotherton:

Conspiracy narratives resonate with some of our brain's built-in biases and shortcuts, and tap into some of our deepest desires, fears, and assumptions about the world and the people in it. We have innately suspicious minds. We are all natural-born conspiracy theorists.

Although disinformation campaigns are not sufficiently powerful enough on their own to push people to conduct acts of extreme violence, they can be seductive to certain members of the public, feeding into a person's pre-existing extremist ideologies, doubts, or beliefs, producing destabilising effects. In this regard, disinformation can be an exceptionally powerful recruitment tool used by extremist groups to undermine facts, weaken the trust between people and governments, promote hate speech, and incite violence. Equally, a person's extremist ideologies are beneficial to the spreading of disinformation. Indeed, political or politico-religious extremism and the tendency to believe disinformation both relate to similar mindsets aimed at making sense of society and the way it functions. In this context, as people believing in conspiracy narratives and other forms of disinformation strive to make sense of new occurrences in a way that fits with their core beliefs, many false narratives may be extended and adapted by followers themselves. This aspect of "crowd-sourced knowledge" is frequent in narratives that encourage followers to "do their own investigation" to discover the truth. This feature appears particularly relevant with QAnon, where followers are directed to take interpretation and action into their own hands, rather than following Q's explicit instructions. In this framework, the online dimension plays a fundamental role. Indeed, the Internet not only magnifies the replicability component of the writings that circulate on it, but it also encourages personalisation and reinterpretation, thus enhancing both the user's involvement and agency. Furthermore, this mechanism

multiplies the difficulty of verifying the information since the narratives circulate from one group of like-minded people to another, adapting and re-shaping part of their content according to momentary needs.

The COVID-19 crisis confirmed this key characteristic of disinformation: adaptability. From the beginning of the pandemic, there was abundant fake news and conspiracy narratives about the very existence, the origin, and preventative measures for the virus. A number of these narratives took on outright racist stance, blaming the virus on everyone from Jews to Muslims, immigrants and Asian communities. As the pandemic unfolded, disinformation stories were used by extremist groups to stir up anger and fear and to undermine trust in democracy, institutions, and science. These stories demonstrate the pick-and-choose nature of disinformation, as audiences are able to decide what narratives to buy into, no matter how baseless their claims.

Conspiracy narratives and extremist groups  
According to existing literature, the use and the spread of conspiracy narratives can play an important social role for extremist groups, especially by delegitimising dissident voices as being part of the conspiracy, enhancing the appeal of extremist ideologies, producing feelings of victimisation in their followers, adding a sense of urgency to fight for the 'right thing', and exacerbating an "Us vs Them" perspective. As written by John M. Berger, extremists' most prevalent crisis narratives contain conspiracies and, in particular, the binary assumption that "out-groups are engaged in secret actions to control in-group outcomes". Furthermore, presenting such "theories" as revelations, reinforce a sense of unicity in groups and individuals who embrace this belief.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated a further element of disinformation: fake news and conspiracy narratives are possible gateways for pushing further agendas once they have achieved buy-in from the public. The anti-vaccine movement, for instance, has taken on its own new spin during the current pandemic by being able, in some cases, to link together different stories

relating to the vaccine, to 5G chips, and micro-tracking among others. Right-wing extremists mixed different conspiratorial thoughts about the COVID-19 virus with racist and apocalyptic anti-migrant narratives as well as other hoaxes for political gain. Islamist extremists claimed that the coronavirus is a soldier of Allah, linking this statement to anti-Western narratives, especially against the US and its allies. Left-wing and anarchist extremists have been reportedly participating in protest movements against COVID-19 containment measures, the construction of telecommunication infrastructures, and environmental issues in several EU countries together with a wide range of other militants and activists, including people affiliated with opposite strands of extremist groups. Finally, the coronavirus pandemic demonstrated how hostile non-governmental foreign actors can use the uncertainties of a crisis to discredit Western democracies through disinformation campaigns, conspiracy narratives, and other harmful content aimed at fostering division among the EU Member States and their political allies.

The power to manipulate people's fears and doubts is a potent element of disinformation, which can be used to the benefit of extremist groups seeking to radicalise individuals, insulate them from outside influences, justify hostility towards opponents and rationalise the need for extraordinary actions against their targets. Existing research mainly focuses on distinct national traditions from single discipline angles. To better understand the phenomenon and its impact on society, a systematic comparative approach that examines disinformation sources and manifestations in different countries and periods whilst drawing on multiple historical, cultural, political, sociological, anthropological, and psychological analyses is essential.

**Dr Francesco Farinelli** is a Programme Director at the European Foundation for Democracy. He is a member of the EU Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Expert Pool and cooperates with the RAN Policy Support as an expert on violent right-wing extremism. He is the author of essays in the field of terrorism and handbooks aimed at offering practical tools to first-line practitioners for the prevention of radicalisation. His expertise and publications include the study of fake news, propaganda and conspiracy ideologies in media narratives and their impact on society.

**“The power to manipulate people’s fears and doubts is a potent element of disinformation, which can be used to the benefit of extremist groups seeking to radicalise individuals, insulate them from outside influences, justify hostility towards opponents and rationalise the need for extraordinary actions against their targets.”**

A new paper, produced by RAN Practitioners in 2021, 'Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism - Insights and recommendations for P/CVE', aims at providing practitioners working in the field of prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism with a concise overview on basic mechanisms through which conspiracy theories support extremist narratives and may contribute to the use of violence as well as on linkages between conspiracy theories and right-wing extremist groups. You can read the paper in full [here](#).



## Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE

Radicalisation Awareness Network



Authored by Francesco Farinelli, RAN Expert Pool Member

### CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

- secretly conspiring to conquer and dominate the world through Masonic lodges;
- controlling the press and the media to discourage independent thinking and keep people under their rule;
- controlling international banks, manipulating the economy and promoting financial speculation;
- weakening the church and the state;
- having a tyrannical world view;
- controlling governments through elected officials;
- plotting to suspend democracy by exploiting a state of emergency to hold the power permanently.

It should be noted that the text of the Protocols is often cited as proof of Jewish machinations by many conspiracists, not only from the extreme-right-wing sphere. A strong overlap between right-wing, Islamist and left-wing extremism undoubtedly lies in the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In this regard, anti-Zionism may be used as a stand-in term for "Jews" in conspiracy theories, thus making it more difficult to unravel anti-Semitic malicious narratives on the alleged Jewish global power.

As we will see in the next sections, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a window of opportunity for extreme-right-wing conspiracy theories to flourish with reference to anti-Semitic sentiments.

#### Anti-establishment and anti-elite conspiracy theories

As outlined, conspiracy theories often rely on a fictionalised group of powerful and malevolent elites who want to take control with criminal ambitions. "QAnon" and "#Pizzagate" are two conspiracy theories falling precisely under this category. QAnon is an extreme-right-wing conspiracy theory with no apparent foundation in reality that asserts that a mysterious high-ranking military officer or a United States (US) official ("Q") would have revealed, through the online message board 4chan, some information about an alleged "deep state" run by politicians like Hillary Clinton and the Hollywood elite standing against President Donald Trump<sup>(48)</sup>.

What makes the theory even less reliable is the fact that it credits and mixes up its plot with other theories such as the one named #Pizzagate that went viral during the 2016 US presidential elections, especially when these messages and videos gained popularity within the Reddit community. This debunked conspiracy theory claims that the emails coming from the hacked account of Hillary Clinton's campaign manager contained some coded messages referring to child sex abuse and human trafficking. Since the email contained references to pizza and pizza restaurants, the alleged headquarter of the criminal activities was, according to this theory, the basement of a specific pizzeria in Washington D.C. The only truth in this story is **that a gunman fired an automatic rifle in this pizzeria after having entered to investigate the case he had read about online**<sup>(49)</sup>. Four years after the spread of this conspiracy theory, the #Pizzagate is still alive. Like a virus, the theory has morphed and mutated to survive, identifying different targets such as Justin Bieber and Bill Gates instead of Hillary Clinton. Once again, this happened some months before the new presidential elections.

#Pizzagate became a cornerstone of QAnon conspiracy theories whose influencers have also widely used the COVID-19 pandemic to spread disinformation and fake news that fuel polarisation in society and constitute a breeding ground for violence. While the QAnon theories may have originated in the US, **their narratives are believed to have no borders** and have already asserted their presence in Europe<sup>(50)</sup>. We will see the link between these theories and the COVID-19 pandemic in more detail in the next section.

<sup>(48)</sup> Zadrozny & Collins, How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked Qanon.

<sup>(49)</sup> Nelson, What is Pizzagate? The fake news scandal involving Hilary Clinton and Wikileaks explained - and why it's trending amid Epstein inquiry.

<sup>(50)</sup> Labbe et al., QAnon's Deep State conspiracies spread to Europe.



FILM:  
**CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND  
DISINFORMATION**

A short five-minute film, produced by RAN Practitioners, provides an introduction to the topic of conspiracy narratives and disinformation. We hear from four voices, including academic experts in the field, RAN Practitioners and Working Group Leads, who offer different perspectives on the challenge facing EU Member States today.

You can watch the programme in full [here](#).



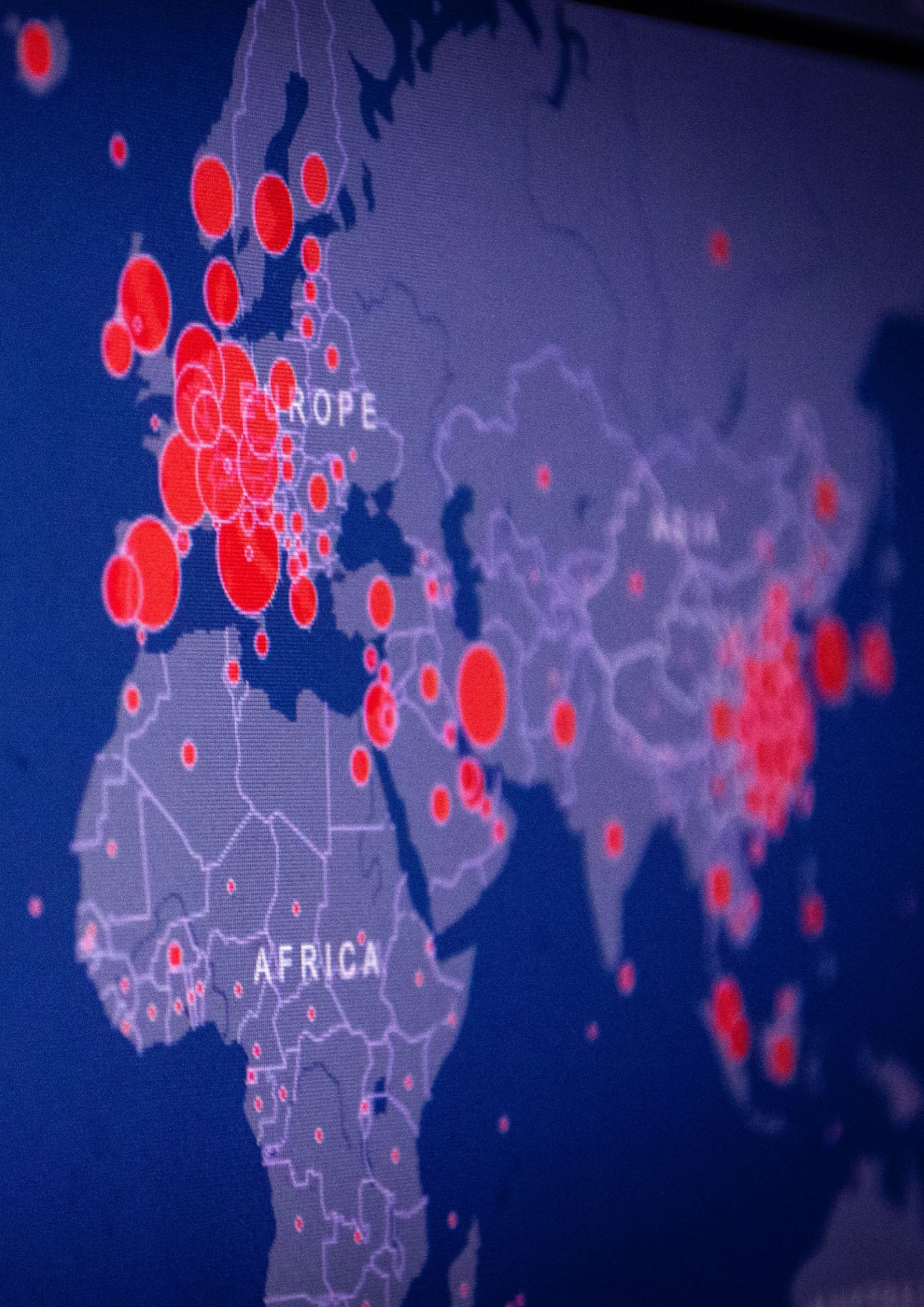
**We asked some experts to talk about conspiracy narratives**

# ARTICLE: **The Impact of COVID-19**



**Stephan  
LEWANDOWSKY**

**The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world during the last two years, and although the global vaccination drive may finally bring the pandemic under control, the global community will have to cope with the damage for a long time to come. The pandemic not only caused the death of millions while severely disrupting the world's economy, but it is also leaving behind a toxic legacy of misinformation and conspiracy narratives that have mobilised opposition to any attempts to deal with the crisis, from social distancing to mask-wearing and now to vaccinations....**



**The emergence of this “infodemic” from the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps concerning, but it is unsurprising based on findings from cognitive science. When people suffer a loss of control over their lives or feel threatened, they invariably become more vulnerable to believing conspiracies. And if there is one thing a pandemic is good at, it is to create fear and loss of control. That is why the Black Death in the 14th century inspired anti-Semitic hysteria, and why the Russian cholera epidemics in the 19th century caused rioters to target doctors because they were thought to be responsible for the outbreak.**

The reason some people resort to conspiracy narratives when they are fearful is because these “theories” provide a seemingly orderly, if flawed, edifice to explain frightening events. Accepting that an out-of-control virus causes a dangerous disease is more challenging to some people than believing that an evil cabal of telephone companies is spreading the disease through their 5G broadband installations. Being able to blame someone can offer psychological comfort because it allows for the possibility that the world could be a better place if only those evil conspirators acted differently — a counterfactual that is much harder to entertain with an airborne virus that has neither intentions nor agency.

Although not everyone who articulates a conspiracy narrative is a firm and committed believer, conspiracy narratives have several attributes that can have adverse consequences for society, as we have seen very clearly in the case of COVID-19.

The first attribute is that conspiracy narratives evolve and transition over time, ultimately forming a kaleidoscope of incoherence. For example, the conspiracy that blamed COVID-19 on the 5G broadband system, which was popular in 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic, encompassed several different strains. Initially it was claimed that 5G alters people’s immune system, then it was said to change people’s DNA, thus making them more susceptible to infection. Then the idea emerged that secret messages about 5G and coronavirus were hidden in the design of the new £20 note in the UK. In reality, 5G relates to viruses and

bank notes as much as the tooth fairy relates to ornithology – not at all. This did not stop some people to take this conspiracy so seriously that they set [5G towers in the UK on fire](#) and threatened [broadband engineers](#).

The 5G theory gradually faded from public view, in part because of a vigorous corrective effort by authorities and media in the UK, only to be replaced by numerous other conspiracies such as the claim that Bill Gates is using vaccines to implant microchips into people to track the population, or that vaccines alter people's DNAs and that the government is hiding thousands of deaths from the COVID-19 vaccines.

Although the incoherence of conspiracies, and the ease with which they can typically be shown to be wrong, offer opportunities to debunk them, committed believers in them are not easily swayed and may ultimately resort to violence: it was not just 5G installations that were subject to attacks in the UK, but more recently there has been an increase in intimidation and threats of violence against healthcare personnel in many countries. In the UK, [police are now protecting](#) some mobile vaccination stations, and in Germany a man attacked healthcare workers because they [refused to issue him a vaccination certificate](#) without giving him the shot. In the U.S., [violence against teachers](#) who enforce mask mandates is increasing. The International Red Cross recorded more than [600 acts of hostility against healthcare workers](#) during the first six months of the pandemic alone.

Perhaps most concerningly, there are growing signs that anti-vaccination campaigners have [joined forces with the extreme right and other conspiracy believers](#), creating a larger pool of people willing to resort to violence to achieve their goals. The storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 serves as a clear signal of the potential for violence among believers in conspiracy ideologies — such as the baseless claim that Donald Trump won the 2020 election. The fusion of extreme right conspiracy narratives, such as QAnon, with anti-vaccination sentiments is thus best not [dismissed as a fringe event](#).

Given these risks, what is the appropriate response to conspiracy ideologies and narratives?

On one level, communicating the science and debunking conspiracies is at least partially effective, and [several guides](#) for

**“Although the incoherence of conspiracies, and the ease with which they can typically be shown to be wrong, offer opportunities to debunk them, committed believers in them are not easily swayed and may ultimately resort to violence: it was not just 5G installations that were subject to attacks in the UK.”**

practitioners exist. However, given the volume of misinformation circulating on social media, corrective efforts by themselves are insufficient. We must also explore other avenues, such as “deplatforming” of known disinformers and the removal of particularly damaging content from large social media platforms. Although such measures are themselves risky because, when misapplied, they amount to illegitimate censorship, it is important to understand their effectiveness.

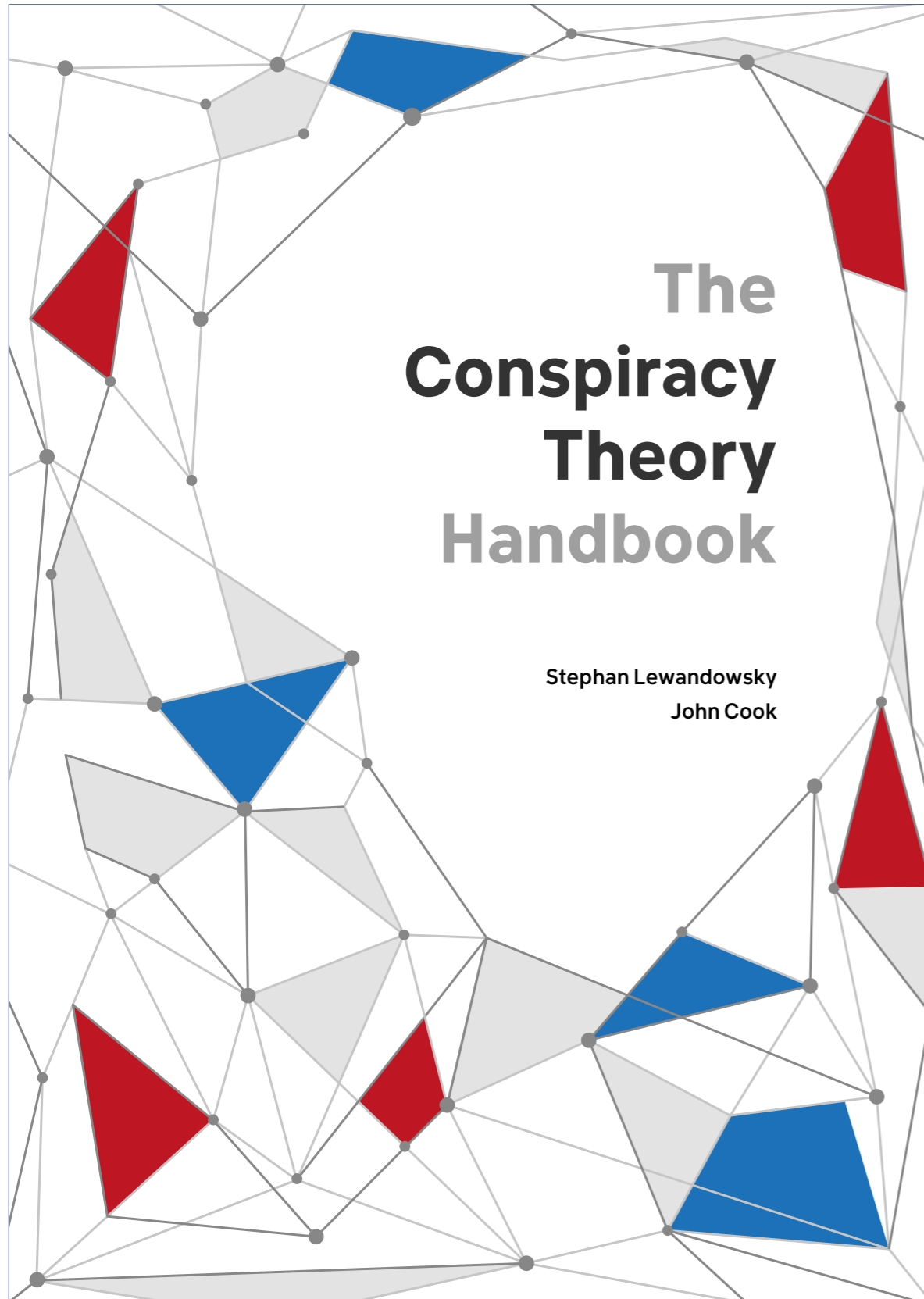
To illustrate, during the early stages of the pandemic, a conspiratorial [video went viral](#) under the name “Plandemic”. The video was a collage of misinformation and conspiracies that was repeatedly debunked by reputable outlets such as [Science](#), [Politifact](#) and [FactCheck](#). What put an end to the video’s impact, however, was not repeated debunkings but its removal from YouTube. A Google Trends analysis shows that within two weeks of the video’s removal, public interest (measured by the number of worldwide Google searches for the term “Plandemic”) had [declined by 90%](#). When a sequel of the video was released a few months later, which never made it onto YouTube because of the platform’s policy not to permit misinformation about COVID-19, [public interest was barely discernible](#) in Google Trends. Contrary to the concern that deplatforming merely drives content underground without diminishing its reach, these data suggest otherwise.

Deplatforming and removal of content thus constitute powerful tools to protect the public from misinformation and conspiracy narratives at a time of crisis. They are also powerful tools to undermine democratic discourse. One of the major political battles of the 21st century will be to resolve this conundrum so we can preserve democracy by safeguarding free speech while also protecting the public against “infodemics”.

**Professor Stephan Lewandowsky** is a cognitive scientist at the University of Bristol. His research examines people’s memory, decision making, and knowledge structures, with a particular emphasis on how people update their memories if information they believe turn out to be false. This has led him to examine the persistence of misinformation and spread of “fake news” in society, including conspiracy ideologies. He is particularly interested in the variables that determine whether or not people accept scientific evidence, for example surrounding vaccinations or climate science.

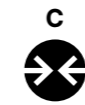
**“To illustrate, during the early stages of the pandemic, a conspiratorial video went viral under the name “Plandemic”. The video was a collage of misinformation and conspiracies that was repeatedly debunked by reputable outlets such as Science, Politifact and FactCheck.”**

This paper, authored by Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook for the Centre for Climate Change Communication in 2020, explains why conspiracy narratives are so popular, how to identify the traits of conspiratorial thinking, and what are effective response strategies. Conspiracy narratives attempt to explain events as the secretive plots of powerful people. While conspiracy narratives are not typically supported by evidence, this doesn't stop them from blossoming. Conspiracy narratives damage society in a number of ways. To help minimise these harmful effects, The Conspiracy Theory Handbook provides a highly useful guide to practitioners working in this space. You can read the paper in full [here](#).



## CONSPIR: The seven traits of conspiratorial thinking

There are seven traits of conspiratorial thinking<sup>29</sup>, summarized (and more easily remembered) with the acronym **CONSPIR**:



Contradictory



Overriding suspicion



Nefarious Intent



Something Must Be Wrong



Persecuted Victim



Immune to Evidence



Re-interpreting Randomness

### Contradictory



Conspiracy theorists can simultaneously believe in ideas that are mutually contradictory. For example, believing the theory that Princess Diana was murdered but also believing that she faked her own death.<sup>30</sup> This is because the theorists' commitment to disbelieving the "official" account is so absolute, it doesn't matter if their belief system is incoherent.

### Overriding suspicion



Conspiratorial thinking involves a nihilistic degree of skepticism towards the official account.<sup>31</sup> This extreme degree of suspicion prevents belief in anything that doesn't fit into the conspiracy theory.

### Nefarious intent



The motivations behind any presumed conspiracy are invariably assumed to be nefarious.<sup>31</sup> Conspiracy theories never propose that the presumed conspirators have benign motivations.

# ARTICLE: **The nexus between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism**



**Bettina  
ROTTWEILER  
& Paul GILL**

**Increasingly, we are witnessing a seeming convergence between belief in conspiracy narratives and ideological extremes. This is most clearly evidenced by recent right-wing terrorist attacks in Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway. Each perpetrator's manifesto referenced conspiracy narratives such as the 'great replacement theory' or white genocide. This is further highlighted by the US Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, which demonstrated an increasing synergy between far-right extremist groups and QAnon adherents engaging side-by-side in anti-government violence...**

**On an intuitive level, extremist and conspiracy beliefs have much in common. Both greatly benefited from the internet and social media's rise which created a stark increase of disinformation as well as opportunities to engage with co-believers. Both have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, both extremism and conspiracy narratives are underpinned by a deep distrust of the existing political and social infrastructure, sometimes for overlapping reasons, sometimes not.**

From a psychological perspective, conspiracy myths and extremist ideologies are both fundamentally rooted in sense-making processes that aim to structure the world in a clear-cut manner and intend to reduce feelings of uncertainty amongst adherents. Both offer prescriptive and action-relevant guidance, with clearly defined values and morals.

Research in these two areas however largely remains siloed. Consequently, there is a dearth of empirical research on the relationship between conspiracy narratives and violent extremism.

In a German nationally representative phone survey (n = 1502), we sought to investigate this relationship in detail.

We asked each participant about the degree to which they agreed with:

1. Five generic themes that re-occur in different conspiracy narratives (e.g. secret organisations greatly influence political decisions), and
2. The scenarios under which they would be willing to engage in illegal and violent actions on behalf of a group they identify with.

In the German sample, almost 32% of respondents showed conspiracy beliefs and 8% held self-reported violent extremist intentions. As an aside, we asked the same questions in the U.K. in summer 2020, and 37% reported a conspiracy mentality and 12% demonstrated violent extremist intentions.

A structural equation model of German survey data confirms that stronger conspiracy beliefs lead to increased violent extremist intentions. However, moderator analyses demonstrate this

relationship is contingent on several individual differences which renders people differentially vulnerable to the effects of conspiracy beliefs. The findings suggest that perceiving the world as ruled by malevolent and illegitimate forces may be driving extremist violence particularly among those individuals exhibiting lower self-control, holding weaker law-related morality, and scoring higher in self-efficacy. Conversely, when stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower.

### **High self-efficacy isn't always positive**

Self-efficacy is typically associated with positive outcomes as well as prosocial intentions and behaviours. Here, we find the opposite. Individuals scoring highly in both conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy may feel more capable of taking violent action to redress grievances. This is important for P/CVE interventions that focus on self-efficacy to make individuals more resilient to violent extremism but also has implications for interventions focusing on mitigating the adverse effects of conspiratorial thinking. Such interventions need to simultaneously tackle underlying grievances, such as belief in conspiracy narratives, as otherwise individuals might use their newly gained self-efficacy beliefs to act upon those strains.

### **High self-control and high law-related morality mitigates risk of conspiracy beliefs**

For individuals with a high conspiracy mentality, both low self-control and low law-related morality constitute risk factors for violent extremism. But the inverse is also true. High self-control and high law-related morality mitigate violent extremist intentions, even when high conspiracy beliefs are present. This has major implications for how we think about protective factors in regard to the adverse effects of beliefs in conspiracy narratives on violent extremism. Both high self-control and high law-related morality can be defined as "interactive" or "buffering" protective factors that provide insurance when conspiratorial beliefs are present. Therefore, strategies focused upon high self-control and a strong law-related morality in conspiracy believing communities should dampen the risk of escalation to violence.



### **Individualised interventions needed to encourage prevention**

Our findings suggest that preventing individuals with high conspiracy beliefs from becoming violently radicalised necessitates tailored, rather than broadly generalised policies. If multiple trajectories into violent extremism exist, there should be multiple policies to encourage prevention. Not all policies will have relevance to all individuals with similar conspiracy mentalities, as their constellation of other risk and protective factors likely differs.

*Dr Bettina Rottweiler* is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London. Her research examines risk and protective factors for violent extremism with a specific focus on the effects of conspiracy narratives and violent misogyny.

*Professor Paul Gill* is a Professor of Security and Crime Science at University College London. His research examines the behavioural underpinnings of terrorism and terrorist attacks.

**“For individuals with a high conspiracy mentality, both low self-control and low law-related morality constitute risk factors for violent extremism. But the inverse is also true. High self-control and high law-related morality mitigate violent extremist intentions, even when high conspiracy beliefs are present.”**

A paper, produced by RAN Practitioners in 2020, 'Impact of conspiracy narratives on VRWE and LWE narratives', provides practitioners with an understanding of how conspiracy narratives have moved to the forefront of global public discourse and acted as a catalyst for extremist movements of all kinds, including VRWE and VLWE. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

Radicalisation Awareness Network

Webpage: [ec.europa.eu/ran](http://ec.europa.eu/ran)

twitter | facebook | linkedin | youtube

25/01/2021

## CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN C&N event -  
24 and 25 November 2020  
Digital meeting

# The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives

### Introduction

Conspiracy narratives, defined as “an account of events as the deliberate product of a powerful few, regardless of the evidence”<sup>(1)</sup> are not novel; they have driven political movements and extremism for hundreds of years. Supercharged by social media and further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy narratives have moved to the forefront of global public discourse and act as a catalyst for radicalisation. This recent surge of conspiracy narratives has impacted extremist movements of all kinds, including violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) and violent left-wing extremism (VLWE). Throughout this conclusion paper we will use the term “conspiracy narratives” rather than the more commonly used term “conspiracy theories” to refer to this form of thinking. This is an effort to deny this form of thinking the legitimacy of being referred to as theories. In addition to this, conspiracy narratives differ from genuine conspiracies, which relate to an agreement between two or more people who aim to commit an act against something or someone.

The aim of the RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (C&N) meeting held on 24 and 25 November 2020 was to explore this topic with practitioners, industry representatives and experts. During the first day of the meeting, practitioners and experts discussed emerging conspiracy narrative trends, and how these intersect with extremism. Participants offered practical insights on how to engage with individuals who either believe in conspiracy narratives or are prone to them. On the second day, participants analysed the Great Replacement and QAnon through the lens of the GAMMMA+ model and provided pragmatic recommendations to practitioners on how to counter conspiracy narratives. This paper summarises the discussions, highlights key points and recommends practical next steps.

<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. (2010) *The power of unreason. Conspiracy, theories, extremism and counter-terrorism.* [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Conspiracy\\_theories\\_paper.pdf](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Conspiracy_theories_paper.pdf)

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network  
**(RAN)**

European Commission

Radicalisation Awareness Network

CONCLUSION PAPER  
IMPACT OF CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES ON VIOLENT RWE & LWE NARRATIVES  
Page 4 of 6

|  | THE GREAT REPLACEMENT  | QANON  |
|--|--|--|
| <div style="background-color: #800040; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>1</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">G</span><br/>                     [ GOAL ]                 </div>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Civil war;</li> <li>Polarisation;</li> <li>Divide and conquer;</li> <li>Dehumanise;</li> <li>Sense of identity;</li> <li>Keep the “traditional” community;</li> <li>White ethnostate.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defeat evil;</li> <li>To provide psychological comfort to their confusion in a complex world / understanding confusing reality;</li> <li>Restore an enchanted world;</li> <li>Trump presidency.</li> </ul>                                  |
| <div style="background-color: #c00000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>2</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">A</span><br/>                     [ AUDIENCE ]                 </div>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People who experience a sense of loss / grieved individuals;</li> <li>Working class;</li> <li>The supposed “elites”;</li> <li>Conservatives.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alt-right / patriots;</li> <li>Ordinary people (mothers and fathers; men and women);</li> <li>People who are wrestling with the complexities of the world: searching for meaning.</li> </ul>  |
| <div style="background-color: #ff4500; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>3</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">M</span><br/>                     [ MESSAGE ]                 </div>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“We are under attack”;</li> <li>“It is now or never” / “We have to defend ourselves”;</li> <li>“Destruction of traditional family is reason for decline of EU populations”;</li> <li>“Immigrants are invaders”;</li> <li>“Mistrust of mainstream media”.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“The elite ruling is the evil” / “Everything you know is a lie”;</li> <li>“Good, ordinary people are victims”;</li> <li>“Your situation is the product of intentional plans by others”;</li> <li>“Your liberty is under threat”.</li> </ul> |
| <div style="background-color: #ff8c00; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>4</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">M</span><br/>                     [ MESSENGER ]                 </div>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influencers / self-proclaimed political figures / academics / journalists;</li> <li>Terrorists / extremists;</li> <li>Religious leaders;</li> <li>Alternative media;</li> <li>Social media bots;</li> <li>Accelerationists.</li> </ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q;</li> <li>Alternative media;</li> <li>Individuals claiming to be “red-pilled”;</li> <li>Influencers;</li> <li>Echo chambers / every follower is a messenger.</li> </ul>   |
| <div style="background-color: #ffa500; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>5</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">M</span><br/>                     [ MEDIUM ]                 </div>                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fringe platforms: Gab, 4chan, 8kun;</li> <li>Mainstream platforms: TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Telegram;</li> <li>Print media: stickers and posters;</li> <li>Live streams / video games;</li> <li>Real-life events.</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large social media platforms;</li> <li>Fringe social media platforms;</li> <li>Memes / live streams;</li> <li>The Dark Web.</li> </ul>  |
| <div style="background-color: #ffd700; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>6</b><br/> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">A</span><br/>                     [ ACTION ]<br/>                     (CALL TO)                 </div> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political action: Change the system from the inside / overthrow of government;</li> <li>Raise awareness / protesting;</li> <li>Promote conflict of truth / violence;</li> <li>Red-pilling.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spread the message;</li> <li>Protest / riot;</li> <li>Prepare for violence against immoral other / prepare for martial law.</li> </ul>  |

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network  
**(RAN)**

European Commission

ARTICLE:  
**The pathway  
from conspiracy  
narratives to  
inceldom**



**ANALYST from  
Moonshot CVE**

**Conspiracy myths and narratives provide a black-and-white framework for understanding real world events and society at large, often basing ideas on facts that are exaggerated or manipulated to suit a particular narrative. Extremist groups weaponise these narratives to produce vicious circles of internally consistent explanations and analogies that support their worldviews...**

Online misogynistic communities often draw upon conspiracy narratives about women's sexual behaviour and the biological bases of male/female social interactions. Involuntary celibates (incels), in particular, have an ideology that is based on a number of conspiracies. The incel community relies upon carefully selected scientific research to support their assertions - referred to as blackpill science.

Incel ideology revolves in part around conspiracies like blackpill philosophy and hypergamy, explored below. The conspiratorial logic and content of these ideas are critical to their justifications for targeting women with violence and hate.

#### **Incels' vulnerabilities to conspiracy ideologies and narratives**

Individuals engaging with the incel ideology exhibit a range of vulnerabilities which align with factors identified as contributing to a belief in conspiracy myths and narratives.

#### **Feelings of powerlessness**

Incels are involuntarily celibate. They want to engage in sexual relationships with women, but except through acts of sexual violence or coercion, or by soliciting sex workers, they are unable to find women willing to engage in sex with them. An incel's 'condition' is therefore dependent on the choices and behaviour of women, who they believe have no vested interest in altering incels' position in society. This creates a significant feeling of powerlessness, as despite having the will to do so, incels are unable to end their celibacy.

#### **Coping with threats**

"Aggrieved entitlement" is the "existential state of fear about having [one's] 'rightful place' as a man questioned." Conceptions of masculinity, particularly in European countries, is in large part tied to a man's ability to access sex with women - or at the very least to not be a virgin. For incels, being unable to access sex threatens their position as a man within society and amongst their peers.

#### **Explaining unlikely events**

Access to contraception and the sex positivity movement has created an environment where adults are able to engage in sexual behaviour outside marriage. In many cultures, casual sex is common and is frequently represented in popular mainstream media. Therefore, incels who are unable to engage in sexual

**“Incel ideology revolves in part around conspiracies like blackpill philosophy and hypergamy, explored below. The conspiratorial logic and content of these ideas are critical to their justifications for targeting women with violence and hate.”**

relationships view their position as an unlikely outcome within a sexually liberated society.

### Disputing mainstream politics

While misogyny and patriarchy continue to be a problem within mainstream society, the emancipation of women is generally considered to have had a positive impact on society in many countries. Incels dispute this narrative because they believe women's equality and freedom of choice has impacted what they view as conventionally unattractive men's ability to access sex.

### Incel Conspiracy Ideology

Incel ideology contains a number of conspiracy myths and narratives about the role and behaviour of women in society. Three overarching conspiracies underpin their ideological framework.

#### 1. The Blackpill

"The blackpill philosophy states that an individual's dating success is determined wholly by their physical attractiveness, and thus determined at birth."

Incels believe the blackpill philosophy is an objective truth. Therefore, any suggestion that a man's dating success is affected by traits other than their physical attractiveness - such as his personality, self-esteem or treatment of women - are dismissed. Incels believe the majority of society is unaware or unwilling to accept the blackpill philosophy, and exist in a state of ignorance referred to as the bluepill. Incels believe the number of men who are incels is much larger than is self-reported, but that a majority of these men are unwilling to accept the nihilistic and hopeless truth of the blackpill.

This philosophy is a powerful recruitment tool for violent misogynistic incel communities. The blackpill is a clear, easily understood explanation for complex social dynamics that identifies a clear in-group and out-group. It provides its adherents with a sense of pride and community by suggesting they are capable of perceiving and accepting a universal truth that their peers cannot. Finally, it places incels in the role of 'victim' while absolving them of any responsibility for their position.

#### 2. Hypergamy

"Incels believe that women are evolutionarily predetermined to seek out mates through a process called hypergamy. Hypergamy

is premised on the belief that women are more sexually selective, have a narrow view of attractiveness, and lower levels of promiscuity than men. This means women deliberately seek out the most conventionally 'attractive' mate, reject less attractive men, and remain single when an ideal mate is unavailable."

'Hypergamy' is a social science term used to describe the process of marrying an individual from a higher social status. Incel ideology reworks this definition to the point of a conspiracy "theory". For incels, hypergamy is an innate, evolutionary behaviour in women that leads them to continuously seek out more physically attractive sexual partners. As a result, incels believe women are unable to be monogamous or loyal to a single partner because they are constantly seeking out 'alpha' men for sexual relationships. When confronted with examples of married women who are partnered with men who are not conventionally attractive, incels claim these women are either incapable of loving their partners or are engaging in extramarital affairs with more attractive men. Incels' claim that this is an evolutionary and biological response and therefore women cannot control this behaviour, only externally imposed societal structures can successfully tackle women's hypergamous behaviour.

This conspiracy narrative is powerful, helping incels to justify the production of violent misogynistic content. Women as a class are identified as the key perpetrator of incel oppression, and therefore are a justified target of violence and hate. Women's personal agency is dismissed because their behaviour is dictated by a perceived 'evolutionary response'. This lack of agency and control helps to justify incel ideological arguments to remove their legal, financial and reproductive health rights in order to control hypergamous behaviour.

The claim that women are incapable of loyalty or love, and the dismissal of contradictory evidence (such as women engaged in happy, healthy relationships with conventionally unattractive partners) actively dehumanises women, and helps to justify violence inflicted against them. It is also an example of conspiratorial thinking which dismisses any counter-evidence, and places undue weight on research that supports their worldview.

#### 3. Gynocentrism

Gynocentrism is the belief that society is structured to benefit women and oppress men, specifically men who are not deemed

attractive by women. For incels, this means feminist and progressive arguments in society and the media that claim men hold privileged positions are lies used by women to maintain these gynocentric systems and suppress information on inceldom.

This is a structural conspiracy narrative that argues women as a class are power brokers within society and are actively working behind the scenes and through government and media institutions to oppress incels and conceal the blackpill. This undermines incels' confidence in institutions and exacerbates their "us vs. them" mentality. It creates an environment where the only safe space for incels is within their isolated online communities, further embedding them in a violent misogynistic culture. This all-encompassing conspiracy also means that any support, intervention or counter-content is viewed by incels as being in the service of a gynocentric society, and is therefore rejected.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike many extremist communities, the incel ecosystem does not have a hierarchical structure or key influential personalities who disseminate the conspiratorial narratives to their community. Incels are instead a collection of individuals united by their "condition" of involuntary celibacy. The core incel conspiracy narratives help to unite these individuals in opposition to a society that they view as oppressive and wilfully ignorant of the "truth" of the blackpill. Women act behind the scenes from positions of power while deceptively presenting themselves as the wronged party. This is a powerful narrative that provides an easy answer and enemy for men who feel they have been denied their right to sex, and also a powerful recruitment tool for disenfranchised men who struggle to access sexual relationships.

### **Recommendations**

Create alternative spaces for men and boys to discuss masculinity and share any concerns and grievances related to sexual relationships. In many ways, the online incel communities take the role of an emotional support group where men share their insecurities about lack of sexual experience. If conducted in a safe and monitored environment, these conversations can help build resilience to the harmful messages shared by the incel community.

Promote digital and media literacy focused on misogynistic conspiracy ideologies and narratives, in particular those shared by the incel community. Increasing critical thinking skills may help at-risk individuals identify how their personal grievances are weaponised through messaging and narratives used by the incel community. At-risk individuals may find incel conspiracy ideologies and narratives less appealing if they are better able to recognise the exploitative tactics in play.

for more information please see:

**<https://moonshotteam.com>**

# ARTICLE: The role and function of conspiracy narratives in right-wing extremism



Fabian  
WICHMANN

With the strengthening of social polarisation and social crises, conspiracy narratives or conspiracy ideologies are also experiencing a boost. Various studies have shown that people who believe in conspiracy narratives do not only believe in one of these narratives, but are receptive to many more diverse narratives. This is one explanation for the perceptible scattering effect that these narratives develop independently of phenomenal areas and milieus...

### **It is not about facts**

These narratives, which are unverified or unproven explanations for social occurrences or developments, can be described as the representation and explanation of events that are defined as the result of deliberate actions by a small powerful elite, without any evidence. They are belief systems that are criticism-resistant and self-contained. Nevertheless, some of these narratives have a strong social anchor. For example, a 2016 study showed that one-in-two Americans believed in at least one conspiracy myth. A more recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 15 per cent of all US citizens believe in QAnon conspiracy narratives. The development of alternative systems of thought and interpretations, in the case of a perceived or real loss of control, offer their supporters stability and orientation, especially in crises. In the process, conspiracy narratives combine partially unrelated incidents and information into a pattern and reduce complex realities. Conspiracy ideologies thereby have multiple functions for the sender and the receiver. The functions that conspiracy ideologies have in right-wing extremism will be described in the following with examples.

### **Explaining and legitimising**

In addition to explaining these incidents or developments, they often serve to legitimise political or ideological actions. But the phenomenon and the instrumentalisation for a political purpose is not new. During National Socialism, conspiracy narratives served to establish victim and enemy narratives, whilst Anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives played a decisive role in National Socialism. The narrative of a Jewish world conspiracy became the basis of argumentation for their cruel and eliminatory anti-Semitism. The core of this kind of anti-Semitism was, and is, that there is an inferior culture due to resources and framework conditions, which is opposed to an economically and structurally superior power. In the thinking of the right-wing extremism conspiracy ideology, it was, and is, Judaism. In doing so, National Socialism, as well as the current right-wing extremism, ties in with the claim, widespread in the early 20th century, that the Jews were striving for world domination. “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” were used as “proof”. Even this contrived evidence turned out to be false, as it was satire, like Joly’s work “The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu” and other fictional narratives. This illustrates very clearly how incoherent information is constructed into a system and explanation. Nevertheless, these “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” still serve today as ‘proof’ of a Jewish world

**“These narratives, which are unverified or unproven explanations for social occurrences or developments, can be described as the representation and explanation of events that are defined as the result of deliberate actions by a small powerful elite, without any evidence.”**



conspiracy. Although they have already been proven several times to be a fake, they unfolded a terrible effect. In this way, they use constructions of the concept of the enemy to legitimise violence or, in principle, the struggle of supporters against the declared enemy and deligitimise politics or defined systems and values.

### **Exoneration, exaggeration and steering**

Through the under-complex representation of reality, conspiracy ideologies are able to exonerate their adherents. This means that the supporters in this interpretation are not responsible for certain circumstances or developments. They are victims of circumstances and face an overpowering force. This function of conspiracy ideologies is founded in particular in the denial of the Holocaust. Although it has been meticulously researched, described by surviving contemporary witnesses, and proven in many places by crime scenes and findings, it is constantly denied. According to this narrative, the genocide is a lie, invented by the Allies to harm Germany. However, there are also other narratives that are intended to have a guiding effect in accordance with political ideology and, in addition, establish the victimhood narrative. It is suggested that the Shoah was invented so that “the Jews” can always demand reparations. This example illustrates how conspiracy narratives align the behaviour and perception of their adherents. It is oriented towards a goal or a defined enemy and suggests a “salvation” or solution. In another example Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” doctrine was a description of problems of the time. Anti-Semitism and the associated knowledge of a suggested conspiracy against the Germans was the solution Hitler offered. We know today what a terrible development this story took. Another central element is the exaggeration of one’s own role or group with reference to society or current events. The individual exaggeration is fed by the belief in conspiracy ideology. It is thus the search for enhancement and the expression of a generalised mistrust of social institutions or groups.

### **Thinking and acting**

Changing social developments have meant that the conspiracy narratives within violent right-wing extremism have also changed, as well as the overall appearance of right-wing extremism. At

the centre of these ideologies today are geopolitical or socio-political narratives of “The Great Replacement”, “The Great Reset”, migration as a weapon, anti-modernism or anti-feminism. It is not the modes of operation that have changed or modernised, but rather the narratives and images used.

The murderous effect of complexity reduction, deligitimisation, steering, and individual as well as group-related exaggeration is made clear not least by the terrible acts of perpetrators. For the adherents of these narratives, the perception of having recognised the truth and being confronted with an overpowering opponent legitimises self-empowerment. In this perception, self-empowerment also legitimises violence, as it is a logical consequence for the perpetrator in terms of self-defence. As the last few years have shown in a frightening way, they refer to anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives and legitimise their actions with them, with tragic examples seen Utøya, Halle and elsewhere.

**Fabian Wichmann** works for Exit Germany in exit consulting and social media management and specialises in the phenomenon of right-wing extremism. He is co-initiator of the multiple award-winning initiatives Right Against Right and #HassHilft, as well as the “Trojan T-Shirt”. Fabian Wichmann is co-chair of the Working Group “Communication and Narratives (RAN C&N)” of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN Practitioners).

This paper, produced by RAN Practitioners in 2020, 'Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures', argues that in order to efficiently plan P/CVE interventions, it is necessary to understand which conspiratorial narratives could constitute a danger to the individuals believing in them and, by extension, to society. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

Radicalisation Awareness Network

Webpage: [ec.europa.eu/ran](http://ec.europa.eu/ran)

Twitter | Facebook | LinkedIn | YouTube

02/10/2020

**CONCLUSION PAPER**

RAN small-scale expert meeting 'The role of conspiracy theories in radicalisation processes'

28 September 2020

Online

# HARMFUL CONSPIRACY MYTHS AND EFFECTIVE P/CVE COUNTERMEASURES

## Summary

Conspiracy theories, which should rather be called conspiracy myths due to their anti- or pseudoscientific narratives, continue to pose a key challenge for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) in Europe, since they play vital roles within extremist ideologies and recruitment and radicalisation. In order to efficiently plan P/CVE interventions, it is necessary to understand which conspiratorial narratives could constitute a danger to the individuals believing in them and, by extension, to society. Fixed indicators are difficult to define, but three main types of narratives, when believed in combination, may help practitioners identify if a person is on a potentially dangerous path:

- 1) Us vs Them: "We are superior, only we know the truth!"
- 2) Them vs Us: "We are victims, we are being threatened by evil forces!"
- 3) Apocalyptic dimension: "The threat to us is existential, hence violence is legitimate!"

If the biographical or social context of a person gives further indications of them being at risk, an intervention might be warranted. While much research on how conspiracy myths can best be prevented or countered is still necessary, some key advice can already be identified:

- Focus on building skill sets like critical thinking, tolerance of ambiguity and media literacy. These classic competencies have proven to be amongst the most effective resilience factors.
- Pre-bunking (or inoculation) in an educational setting, aiming to explore and demystify the underlying manipulation mechanisms of conspiracy myths, is likely to increase resilience.

- 2) Which indicators can be identified to detect harmful conspiracy myths?
- 3) What are the individual benefits of believing in conspiracies? What is the psychological functionality that leads individuals from all ways of life to believe fringe ideas? What keeps individuals believing in narratives they might know are false?
- 4) How can resilience towards potentially dangerous conspiracy myths be strengthened and how can practitioners be supported to counter conspiracy myths effectively?

The following section takes a look at some preliminary conclusions and outcomes related to these questions.

## Key outcomes

### Individual & psychological benefits of believing in conspiracy myths

The three main benefits resulting from believing in conspiracy myths discussed during the expert meeting were:

#### 1) Psychological relief:

Conspiracy myths can be attractive because they are simple and flattering, while the truth, or better, the quest for it, is complicated and painful. Personal crisis, for example after losing a partner or a job, or feeling excluded and irrelevant, can create an urgent psychological need (cognitive opening) for a ready-made solution that makes a person feel better. In that sense, conspiracy myths can feel like a tool of self-empowerment, since they promise clarity, belonging and status. Respectively, they offer a means for blaming everything that is wrong with a person's life, and the world in total, on, for example, a minority or a supposed all-powerful hidden elite. In many cases, anti-Semitic stereotypes are at the core of conspiracy myths.

#### 2) Pragmatism:

While some people might use conspiracy myths as a form of (destructive) coping mechanism, conspiratorial belief can also be used much more pragmatically to reject notions that would threaten internalised beliefs, their world view or profits, or serve as an opportunity to make money.

#### 3) Satisfaction of psychological or personal disposition:

Research indicates that some people are prone to conspiratorial thinking, for example due to certain personality traits <sup>(4)</sup>.

### Indicator categories for potentially harmful conspiracy myths

The narratives forming the core of all conspiracy myths almost always follow a similar pattern. Three main beliefs form any conspiracy myth's centre, according to Farinelli <sup>(5)</sup>:

- 1) "Nothing happens by accident."
- 2) "Nothing is as it seems."
- 3) "Everything is connected."

In addition to these, the European Commission also includes elements such as: a clear **division into good and bad** (black and white world views), often based on a **clear designation of people to blame, or "scapegoats"** <sup>(6)</sup>, and Lewandowsky and Cook present factors such as: **nefarious intent of the conspiracy**, the possibility to accept **contradictory beliefs**, an **immunity to evidence** (which is believed to form part of the conspiracy) and, importantly, **the idea that the people who believe in the conspiracy are being persecuted** and victimised <sup>(7)</sup>.

<sup>(4)</sup> Darwin et al., 'Belief in conspiracy theories'.

<sup>(5)</sup> Francesco Farinelli, Presentation at the RAN small-scale expert meeting on 'The role of conspiracy myths in radicalisation processes'.

<sup>(6)</sup> European Commission, *What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish?*

<sup>(7)</sup> Lewandowsky & Cook, *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, pp. 6-7.



**FEATURE**

# Antisemitism within Anti-Vaccination Conspiracy Ideology

MOONSHOT CVE

**Moonshot conducted an initial investigation into the presence of antisemitism within discourses surrounding anti-vaccination conspiracy narratives, based on data collected since the onset of the pandemic in January 2020.**

## **Moonshot conducted an initial investigation into the presence of antisemitism within discourses surrounding anti-vaccination conspiracy narratives, based on data collected since the onset of the pandemic in January 2020.**

Moonshot’s custom suite of open source intelligence tools and techniques were used to quantify and catalogue instances of antisemitic language used in conjunction with discussions of COVID-19 vaccines. They analysed relevant global English language posts from 4chan, BitChute and Twitter, along with UK-specific English language content on Gab and Telegram. Dates for data collection differed by platform, but all data was gathered between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021.

One of the most prevalent narratives to emerge from the content we analysed is the belief that “Jews” created COVID-19 vaccines for nefarious purposes. Our research found evidence of users on Gab, Telegram and 4chan promoting conspiracies that the COVID-19 vaccine was invented by the Jewish community to “sterilise” other groups, with a popular post on Telegram calling the vaccine “the final solution to the White European problem”.

A number of further antisemitic themes emerged within our research, relating to the COVID-19 pandemic more broadly. Among these were expressions of “The Great Reset”, a popular conspiracy theory alleging that “governments, corporations and international institutions” are “conspiring” in a “globalist plot” to take “control” of the global economy and establish a “New World Order” at the expense of individual liberty and national sovereignty. Tracking global mentions of the term “Jew World Order” on Twitter from January 2020 to March 2021 peaked during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and North America.

A surge in antisemitic discourse within the context of anti-vaccination sentiment was observed on 4chan in December 2020. This was primarily driven by the approval of a number of COVID-19 vaccines across the world. The Pfizer vaccine was the most widely discussed, particularly allegations that “PFIZER’S CEO IS ALBERT BOURLA. BOURLA IS JEWISH.” The peak in discourse on Gab in July 2020 was also analysed and significant volumes of antisemitism were identified in response to reports surrounding the clinical trials of COVID-19 vaccines around the world.

Additional research into the overlap of antisemitic and anti-vaccination discourse on the ‘/pol/’ board of 4chan identified users sharing links to BitChute and YouTube channels, including ‘The Corbett Report’ and influential alt-right figure Alex Jones’ ‘Infowars’. A video shared from Infowars’ ‘BANNED.VIDEO’ BitChute

channel states that “Jeffrey Epstein’s friend and lawyer Alan Dershowitz” is “coming with your vaccine, telling me I will submit, you’re assaulting me”. In the video, Jones repeatedly compares the “coerced administration of the COVID-19 vaccine” to “rape.”

Our research also found evidence that the expression of antisemitic and anti-vaccination conspiracy narratives motivated violent discourse. This included the claim that “dangerous [COVID-19] vaccines... are jewish weapons that will change our dna”, and calls to action on the basis of this conspiracy. Despite Gab accounting for a lower overall volume of posts, our analysis found that users on the platform were twice as likely to express violent sentiment when sharing antisemitic views within the context of anti-vaccination conspiracies than users on 4chan.

### **About Moonshot**

Moonshot is a social enterprise working to end online harms, applying evidence, ethics and human rights. Our team of analysts, engineers and project managers use fresh thinking and decades of cross-sector experience to respond to some of the world’s toughest problems with effective, scalable solutions. We are industry leaders in executing campaigns that provide real alternatives to populations vulnerable to exploitation, radicalisation and crime. Working to end online harms means making communities safer, both online and off, around the world.



FEATURE

# ÉCOLE CITOYENNE

## **Active citizenship schools to affiliate students with democratic principles.**

Behind the attraction to conspiracy and disinformation discourses, there is a relational dimension. The more the young are in tension with our system and with the educational institution, the easier they become targets for alternative and potentially manipulative discourses. That is why, in reaction, it is very useful to harvest (at school) a concrete bond with civic values and with principles of our society. The intention of the citizenship school project is allowing young people to experience the benefits of civic principles at school, understanding their relevance and their effectiveness as well as becoming their ambassadors by other young people.

### **Working on rules and justice at school**

By working on the rules with young people, it is possible to demonstrate the important role that rules play in a community. It is also possible to use these principles in daily life, especially to solve problems between people. This is the logic of restorative school justice, one of the main principles of the citizenship school. Through the establishment of this conflict resolution strategy, young people weave their relationship with the principles of justice, rules and fairness, and realise its usefulness.

### **Valuing behaviours**

Valuing school success and diplomas is not enough. It is also important to value the students' behaviours with respect to their learning, in following the collective rules, and especially in relation to other students. The civic school system offers tools that gives an important place to the way in which a young person experiences school and interacts with others in this given environment.

### **Working on cooperation and delegation**

At school, we learn too little about the benefits of cooperation and collective action. Contrarily, the citizenship school provides talking circles in the classroom as well as spaces for consultation between student representatives and adults. The challenge is for young people to understand that it is possible to identify solutions and collective projects, and most importantly, to experience the transition from discussion to action. In this way, not only do they learn the virtues of this dimension of the democratic system but also understand that they actually have an impact on the world in which they live, that they have a place and that they can play a role.

### **Working on the journalistic posture**

Journalism is another important dimension of any proper democracy. The latest is necessary in order to build a quality public debate and, because of the explosion of social networks, it has become a common task among ordinary people. Consequently, educating to constructive journalistic approaches has now become a necessity: learning to always remain critical when doing research as well as learning to play a role in the public debate.

### **Debating and speaking as main solutions**

Here comes what is perhaps the centre of the citizenship school in terms of tools against hate or disinformation speeches: the art of expression and debate. Through the different dimensions of the citizenship school, the young people learn that there are times for expression but also good ways for doing so. Above all, they learn that it is through listening to others and expressing their own positions that, through empathy, creates solutions to challenges.

More information on:

**[www.écolécitoyenne.org](http://www.écolécitoyenne.org) & [www.ambassadeurs.org](http://www.ambassadeurs.org)**

# Interview: Non-violent actors & freedom of expression



**Annemarie  
VAN DE WEERT  
MSC**

**Annemarie van de Weert** is a researcher at the Research Centre for Social Innovation. For the Research group Access to Justice, she mapped out the process of early detection of youth extremism by primary care professionals.  
<https://www.internationalhu.com/research/researchers/annemarie-van-de-weert>

## **What are the lines between freedom of expression and disruptive behaviour?**

Terrorism experts emphasise that it is not derailed individuals — or radical persons — that we should look for, but people who do not accept the values that underpin a democracy, such as the basic principle of equality for all people. This is easier said than done because preventive approaches focus on attitudes that deviate from democratic norms rather than on action or on concrete criminal acts.

However, in hate speech, incitement to violence or discrimination that limits of the rule of law for threats and abuse are also overstepped. Although constitutional documents and fundamental rights guarantee the freedom of all to be entitled to their own opinions, in most European nations, there are limitations on how these opinions might be expressed in the public arena. The limitations mostly concern seeking to limit the freedom of others, which might in fact constitute a breach of fundamental freedoms and be deemed unlawful.

It is important to directly address the drivers of extremist environments. This is because extreme ideology is oftentimes driven by a certain state of mind. For example, the C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism of the University of Oslo, distinguishes between five ideal types of participants who join extreme movements: Ideologists, followers, adventurers, the angry and frustrated, and traditionalists. You first need to know what motivates people (e.g. to participate in online chat-groups) to know why they accept certain violating ideas.

## **Your research states that there is no real framework for detecting radicalisation processes from freedom of expression into violent extremism. With that in mind, what tips would you give to practitioners who are juggling with this?**

It is not the job of the first-line practitioner to track how “extreme” a person’s world view or belief system could be. The goal is to diminish beliefs and world views that facilitate or cause violent actions. Furthermore, when talking P/CVE,

people tend to think about reactive measures on an individual level. But in the grey area of non-violent extremism it is more recommended to take a proactive approach focusing on group-dynamics.

**You suggest in your research that people are strongly influenced by their environment and that social interactions largely determine our attitudes and behaviours, rather than ideology. You apply this as an explanation as to why people can fall into circles of radicalisation. How would you apply this to conspiracy narratives?**

Well, people like to scapegoat and demonise. That is an unfortunate bias of the thinking mind. To explain the pathway, I always like to refer to the 4-stage model which was developed by forensic psychologist Randy Borum for the State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training (SLATT). The training was later used by the FBI. We all sometimes think something is not fair and not right. And the feeling of injustice affects us; we might complain about it towards friends and family. That ventilation has a function and is even beneficial to a certain extent. But a person also likes to believe that they are right, or at least hear that they are right. That's why we love like-minded people. Nowadays you can look for that confirmation on the internet. And unfortunately, there is not always a filter on the information that they are then offered. But what you deal with you get infected by.

Dr. Bouhana wrote a very interesting paper about this for The independent Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), called: The moral ecology of extremism: a systemic perspective. It explains that a person can be receptive to certain beliefs, but as long as they do not come into direct contact with others feeding your frustrations, you will do little with your ideas. c

**Looking post-COVID as more people return to their lives and away from the digital screen, what tips would you provide to those P/CVE practitioners working in the offline space, who will perhaps be hearing conspiracy narratives first-hand from individuals that have been behind a digital screen for the best part of 2 years?**

Research by the New York University's Center for Global Affairs has proven that effective commitment, based on emotions associated with reward and belonging, can lead to increased participation in a radical group. This works both ways, so that disappointing emotions — connected to reward and belonging — could lead to decreased participation. This gives the following scheme for success in countering extremism:

- Push and pull factors for leaving extremism behind can be clustered into doubts in the ideology (normative commitment),

**“Well, people like to scapegoat and demonise. That is an unfortunate bias of the thinking mind. To explain the pathway, I always like to refer to the 4-stage model which was developed by forensic psychologist Randy Borum for the State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training (SLATT).”**



doubts in (group) behaviour (and leadership) (affective commitment), as well as doubts related to personal and practical issues such as the expected costs, e.g. social, economic (continuance commitment).

- Each field of doubt might cause a crisis in the related commitment and corrode the individually perceived bond to the belief system and/or with a group.
- Targeted interventions therefore need to include working on three levels: 1. affective, 2. pragmatic and 3. ideological.
- Focusing on one form of commitment only tends to be insufficient (e.g. through theological and political debate).

In conclusion the advice would be that emotions matter more than facts. It may sound manufactured, but it is important to portray 'the other' as 'just like us' and by doing, that undermining the 'them and us' narrative of many forms of extremism and almost all conspiracy narratives.

**“However, if you come into a certain toxic environment of people, you can quickly be sucked in a direction of an increasingly extreme worldview. Some people are more resistant to this than others. This has to do with a lot of factors, including, for example, personal resilience through self-confidence.”**

## Highlights: **RAN activity on Conspiracy Narratives & Disinformation**

To participate, get involved or simply find out more information about RAN Practitioners' work on Conspiracy Narratives & Disinformation, please find further information below.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the foreseen activities will take place online. The insights and outcomes gathered from these meetings will be published in the RAN Practitioners Update and on the RAN website. Stay tuned for updates on RAN social media channels.

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN website [here](#).



### **C&N Working Group**

The working group will gather insights on the content of these narratives, its target audiences, the credible messengers and the varying ways of dissemination.

[READ MORE](#)



### **Paper**

Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors.

[READ MORE](#)



### **Small scale expert meeting**

Lone actors: Making use of needs and risk assessment tools in P/CVE.

[READ MORE](#)

# LIBRARY: DISCOVER MORE

IF you would like to discover more about the topic of youth engagement you can get in touch with the RAN Staff, take a look at the [RAN Collection of Inspiring Practices](#) or read through some of the latest [RAN papers](#). We have included some of these papers in a carefully selected collection of interesting and relevant articles below.

RAN (2021)  
[‘Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE’](#)

RAN (2020)  
[‘The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives’](#)

RAN (2019)  
[‘Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures’](#)



This publication has been commissioned by the European Commission and has been prepared by REOC Communications on behalf of RadarEurope, a subsidiary of RadarGroup.