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'First global crisis in which false information can spread worldwide'

With Covid-19 came the conspiracy theorists. Julia Ebner, an extremism researcher, on the threat they pose on- and offline

Read this interview in German or Russian.

The time of the coronavirus pandemic is also the time for conspiracy theories. Which ones are currently making the rounds on- and offline?

We can identify different trends. In the far-right ideological spectrum, well-known conspiracy theories and ideologies are being linked to the coronavirus crisis. Especially in right-wing and identitarian circles, migration is strongly linked to the coronavirus. Conspiracy theories and false reports are scapegoating migrants for the outbreak and spread of the coronavirus in Europe. In recent weeks there have also been claims that migrants and Muslims are violating coronavirus quarantine rules and entire districts of migrants are exempt from lockdown regulations. It's all about migration.

Very often, neo-Nazi and more extreme channels also include antisemitic conspiracy theories: 'Jewish elites' are responsible for the coronavirus outbreak. That's another conspiracy theory that's been around a long time: During the Plague, Jews were blamed for epidemics and health crises. Today's accusation is linked to the widespread anti-Bill-Gates and anti-World-Health-Organization (WHO) conspiracy theories. Some far-rightwing conspiracy theorists say that Bill Gates is Jewish and he is leading the Jews of the world in an artificially engineered pandemic that economically benefits their elites.

There are also violent far-rightwing channels that discuss how to use the coronavirus as a biological weapon against migrants, for example by smearing saliva on the door handles of refugee hostels and police stations.

What about other extremist circles?

Anti-Western conspiracy theories are being spread in Islamist circles. But they mostly concern taking advantage of the chaos and accelerating the Day of Judgement.

Then there are the conspiracy theories that maintain the virus was artificially created to control everyone or to introduce social control and totalitarian systems. These conspiracy theories are found across the ideological spectrum. Incidentally, this is true of conspiracy theories regarding the WHO. There are also loads of anti-China conspiracy theories that claim China artificially produced the virus to be a weapon in a laboratory. One of the most absurd conspiracy theories claims that China's 5G cellular technology spreads the virus and kills people: Not the coronavirus, but rather cell phone towers are responsible for the deaths. All over Europe, cell phone towers have been set on fire.

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Finally, one theory that's gaining traction claims the pandemic doesn't even exist, that there have been no deaths and all reports to the contrary are just fake news. Since the danger is invisible, everywhere and in a way, *no*where, even this absurd theory is relatively widespread: *Everything is simply not true.* Demonstrations in the US show that some people really believe there is no virus.

Are these conspiracy theories found all through society?

Yes, although in the US and online you can clearly see that more conservatives – people close to the Trump camp – believe in them than Democrats. In Europe, too, supporters of these theories come more from right-wing than from left-liberal circles.

Are these theories mostly harmless, crazy talk or do they actually threaten democracy and society?

Some of the conspiracy theories definitely do pose immediate risks by inciting violence. On one hand, as I've mentioned, we've already seen lots of vandalism to 5G cell phone towers. On the other hand, conspiracy theories always demonise, and sometimes even dehumanise, groups of people. We've seen in the past how this can lead to terrorist attacks and hate crimes.

At the beginning we observed a great deal of anti-China racism and rising numbers of hate crimes, especially against Asians. One great danger is that easing the lockdown could lead to an increase in racist

hate crimes. It could inspire terrorist attacks.

What is the effect of such theories beyond the groups you've named? In the current situation, are people who usually have nothing to do with extremists also receptive to them?

At this time, we are all much more susceptible to conspiracy theories and disinformation that fill the huge void of information and provide answers to the uncertainty. We are open to the simple solutions offered because the "facts" we have are ambiguous and there is great confusion.

In addition, most people are now online more. They are spending hours on end in echo chambers and begin to believe more and more in these ideologies and conspiracy theories because they're repeated so often and reinforced through content from the most varied sources.

In light of this, how do you assess the role of politics, science and the media?

These days, even politicians and other influential people occasionally spread false reports or at least give them impetus. Take Trump, for example, who tears apart the WHO, or Bolsonaro, who denies the virus even exists – or at least, doesn't consider it a serious risk. Influencers are stirring up hatred of Bill Gates and the WHO. Often these people have huge coverage so conspiracy theories are reaching those who previously were not receptive. This is only possible because the topic is so pervasive and a huge question mark is dangling: What's behind it? What the hell are we dealing with? So many questions need to be answered in very little time. Science is always a step behind, while disinformation spreads even faster than the virus.

Why do extremists have it so easy these days?

For a start, uncertainty and fears like this have probably never before been so widespread. Add to that social media. This is the first global crisis in which false information can spread worldwide so rapidly. Extremists can exploit the situation very well. They combine or link their ideologies and conspiracy theories to the coronavirus and suddenly everything in their worldview makes sense. They can also selectively choose those parts of fake news that affirm their ideologies.

For years, conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones have been demanding that borders be closed and warning about the apocalypse. They have created more and more fears amongst Survivalists, who also include some *Reichsbürger* [people who deny the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and reject its legal system]. Now they can say:

See? I've been warning you the whole time! One problem is that such people are becoming more credible as a result of the crisis. Extremist groups can take full advantage of the fact that everything – from governments to security authorities and the media – is being questioned. Public trust continues to decline, exacerbated by the economic crisis. People are either losing their jobs or are afraid they will. Extremists are great at taking advantage of these fears and using them to target a common bogeyman. What's more, most of them have quite slick online campaigns.

In this crisis, wherever right-wing parties are no longer running countries, they have fallen behind: Their approval ratings are dropping. In the medium term, could they still benefit from trends like those you've mentioned?

That's incredibly hard to predict. It very much depends on how the situation develops and how much the population continues to trust government. Or if attitudes change the way they did during the migration crisis: At the beginning Merkel was praised, but gradually hatred and anger grew out of the sense that she was no longer in control. Once a government loses control of a situation, it can quickly develop in other directions, with fringe parties or more extreme voices gaining credibility and legitimacy.

So you are not optimistic that when the pandemic recedes, the conspiracy theories will also subside?

I'm in two minds. Since we are all afflicted by a collective global crisis, it's possible that more solidarity and trust in democracy can be generated. Some days I feel optimistic about that. All over the world we have seen a growth in empathy for those in one's proximity as well as solidarity with all of society. However, this can also go in the opposite direction. The past shows that health and economic crises often fuel hatred and exacerbate social tensions and that governments, and especially more radical parties, can use this for their own ends. The same goes for extremist groups.

I think another great danger is of a nationalist or tech-based totalitarian or authoritarian regime being elected to political office. In some countries, that has already happened. Authoritarian systems like those in Hungary and China are not having any image problems at the moment. What they are doing appears to be effective and besides, people are distracted and less vigilant.

What particular recommendations do you have for politicians, as well as for civil society and the media? Which mistakes must be avoided in

order not to nurture the right?

It is extremely important to transparently and consistently communicate developments. Any additional confusion or uncertainty can create a huge backlash. The worst thing a government could do right now is create even more insecurity. It's crucial to establish that everything is under control and everything possible is being done to limit the economic consequences.

It's equally important to create hope and point to the light at the end of the tunnel. This includes bolstering the mental and emotional health of those who are especially suffering from loneliness or overwhelming fears.

With reference to social media – can they be influenced?

Absolutely. The coronavirus crisis has showed that the big tech platforms – Facebook and Twitter – can react very quickly to remove disinformation. While the quantity of fake news has assumed proportions that make it harder to control, we have seen very rapid responses in terms of removing false claims for Covid-19 remedies and regulating social media. That shows they are very capable of dealing with radical content and radicalisation campaigns. It used to take much longer for anything to be done. It turns out that big tech companies have significantly more control over social media content and that much more can be done to eliminate radicalising content and campaigns.

Are you optimistic that there will be lasting change in dealing with online hate speech after the pandemic?

It's hard to say. We're not always forced to deal with a danger that's as obvious as bogus remedies that can actually kill people. Radical and hate-filled content is often almost legal. That's why I think there will be more discussion about what really should and can be removed. Although the Network Enforcement Act is being revised, there's still a lot of room for improvement – especially regarding the small alternative platforms that continue to spread conspiracy theories about the coronavirus crisis. Unfortunately, there's too little intervention there.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



Julia Ebner

London

Julia Ebner is a bestselling book author and extremism researcher at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London.