

Chapter 9.

Reason vs. Treason?

In banning the extremes from social platforms are we doing the right thing? Alex Connock, of Oxford University, investigates.

In ‘Coronavirus Infowar: What Went Wrong’ – published in *The Virus and the Media* (Bite-Sized, June, 2020) – I posited radical steps against dangerous, pervasive disinformation around vaccines. These included even deploying counterinsurgency-style intervention into the info-war that was unavoidably underway.

Seven months later, that intervention has not only actually happened – but it has also, as part of a suite of measures, started to work. Its success puts the debate around social media freedoms at the heart of both medical public safety and wider politics. It also raises a question and a threat. If we had acted sooner, could lives have been saved? And will disinformation simply go further underground?

The Edge of Reason

The *Ivanhorod Einsatzgruppen* photograph is an horrifically singular image, even in the grimly-stocked category of unthinkable Holocaust documents.

It shows a soldier firing a rifle, barely a few feet away from a woman, who is instinctively trying to protect a child with her body. All of this is captured in motion, as in the most visceral of 1940s photojournalism. It was taken in the Ukraine in 1942. The picture itself – one assumes not its subjects – escaped via the Warsaw resistance and a photographer’s chance rescue, to become an iconic image and an emblem of the asymmetric, industrialised murder of six million Jews.

In January 2021, the picture was in the media again – this time as a widely-circulated Instagram meme. Here it was in a brand new context – depicting the removal of anti-vaxxer content by social media firms. The caption ‘BIG

TECH’ was added over the Nazi soldier, and ‘FREE SPEECH’ over the victims.

What is QAnon? What do they believe?

The kind of desensitisation to the true meaning of words, facts and images which such a manipulation exemplifies is a simple case study in how far we came in 2020. It also epitomises a persistent undercurrent of clear anti-semitism in the sprawling *oeuvre* of QAnon, the cultish anti-vaxx movement and its far-right fellow travellers in the pandemic year. Another widely circulated Instagram meme, encapsulating the indifference to outside opinion of fact which is the hallmark of the movement, presented the caption: ‘You are not crazy. You are awake in an insane world.’ It showed a single individual staring in one direction, surrounded by a sea of men wearing hats of the kind favoured by Hassidic Jews.

These are facets in the brick-by-brick construction of a much wider, fully alternative value system which is too easily and too often lampooned because it is deadly serious. The overarching proposition includes a global child abuse conspiracy formed around ‘Pizzagate’, and the creation by authoritarian players of the pandemic as a pre-programmed, wider scheme of social intervention. ‘They know who you are. They plan these distractions in advance to see who takes the bait.’

The cultish belief system incorporates metal placed in vaccines to facilitate exploitation by 5G phone networks (the irony of proponents’ own massive mobile telephony usage notwithstanding) and much more. ‘People getting sick from 5G radiation covered up with Covid ... 5G in schools causing it to appear that Covid is now increasingly affecting children.’

These single points of ‘theory’ have formed a tapestry of powerful and sinister material, protests and demonstrations against the lockdowns and vaccination – which have been as highly effective as they were preposterous. (An IPSOS/Mori NHS reforms poll is discredited (by meme) on the basis that *ipsos mori* is Latin for ‘they die’).

True Believers?

All of this is dressed up with the righteous and dismissive certainty of the believer. Another ‘awakening’ meme reads ‘NEVER WORRY about who will be offended if you speak the TRUTH. Worry about who will be misled, deceived and destroyed if you don’t.’ It’s a philosophy driven by apophenia – the tendency to perceive a connection or meaningful pattern between unrelated or random things, such as objects or ideas. ‘QAnon grows on the wild misinterpretation of random data,’ wrote game designer Reed

Berkowitz in an excellent *Medium* article about its similarity with role-playing video games.

That wider value system of nonsensical misunderstandings of reality, with QAnon merging into the far-right movement which eventually saw the invasion of the US Capitol and an imminent, seditious threat to American democracy, was the context of the struggle around pandemic disinformation. Because of their wilful self-exclusion from the mainstream media, their proselytising articulacy and the facility of social media distribution, anti-vaxxers and their confederates were all but immune to conversion by reasoned argument alone around coronavirus.

Anti-Vaxxers Get Their Message Through?

As we observed in the June 2020 book *The Pandemic and the Virus*, by May 2020, almost half the British population believed in Covid-19 as a ‘man-made creation’. King’s College London research then showed 30 per cent thought coronavirus was lab-created, an *increase* from 25 per cent in April as the peak virus moment was reached.

The Centre for Countering Digital Hate published a survey, quoted in the *Lancet*ⁱ in October 2020, setting out in stark terms the effectiveness of anti-vaxx campaigns. Some 29 per cent of US adults probably or definitely would not take a coronavirus vaccine once it was available. A further 17 per cent did not know what they would do, combining to a total of 46 per cent of the US population who were ‘vaccine hesitant’, up from 41 per cent just three months earlier. The figures were worse amongst minorities: 58 per cent of African Americans were vaccine-hesitant.ⁱⁱ This was part of a disinformation environment: around a third of people in a Reuters Institute survey said they had seen ‘a lot or a great deal of false or misleading’ information about Covid in the previous week.ⁱⁱⁱ

How to debunk?

Responsible myth-debunking sites – like the BBC – were simply not in the frame of reference of true-believers or their acolytes. Even a US government economic relief programme unwittingly helped five anti-vaccine organisations with loans totalling \$850,000, according to the *Washington Post*.^{iv}

And there was a substantial bias amongst believers of disinformation towards historic Trump voting (55 per cent) vs Clinton (29 per cent). Mary McCord, a former federal prosecutor now at Georgetown University, told National Public Radio on 15 December 2020 that the widespread embrace of conspiracy and disinformation amounts to a ‘mass radicalisation’. President Trump’s 272 tweets on coronavirus by 1 May 2020 – described by

Brian Ott and Greg Dickinson in *Political Science Quarterly* as ‘narcissism, nastiness and deception’^v – added fuel to a raging fire.

Treason in the Air

So what is the solution to all of this? It became clear in the last six months that factual arguments have not damaged the traction of anti-vaxxer lies during the pandemic year 2020 anywhere near as successfully as simply taking down their accounts and shutting down their network access.

I suggested in our mid-2020 book that a tightening by social media platforms, thanks to commercial pressure, was likely to have a noticeable effect on the traction of falsehoods in the social market place.

Herd Immunity against Conspiracy Theories?

As we said then, the struggle against a virus, the information war against conspiracy theories and any real war against a guerrilla insurgency are all won by the same process: a form of herd immunity. Convince the majority of the population to take your side and they will represent what the *Atlantic*^{vi} called a ‘firewall’ against conspiracy theories, a natural limit. Reaching that limit will be critical to the future protection of public health.

The final few months of 2020 and, in particular, January 2021, saw a dramatic sea-change in the combating of disinformation. The process began in June 2020, with Facebook, a distributor (if unwitting) of posts and memes by virtue of its additional ownership of Instagram and WhatsApp, being hit by a temporary but PR-damaging ban by major brands including Unilever, Diageo, Starbucks and Levis who withdrew advertising, citing dissatisfaction with adjacency to unknown content. (Some of them specifically cited Facebook, but others did not, and expressed concerns with digital advertising placement in general.) Facebook made some adjustment to the coding, and its diversified client base (some 3 million advertisers) protected it from economic loss.

What changed the balance of power was the removal of disinformation from social channels. In my June 2020 article I suggested that the army’s counterinsurgency warfare manual was a relevant document for the strategy. In November 2020, the army’s 77th Brigade information unit was actually called into help Whitehall officials identify the worst foreign-originated anti-vaxx propaganda and manage it through national security methodologies.^{vii}

The Anti-vaxx Message Fades?

By the period 22 December 2020 to 3 January 2021 there was a tangible increase in those in the UK who felt themselves likely or highly likely to have a vaccine, at 85 per cent^{viii}, compared with 78 per cent just two weeks before, and much lower figures in the summer (see above). But it was still

a problem. A shocking Oxford Internet Institute report^{ix} spoke of Facebook and Twitter taking steps to combat ‘cyber troops’ and private sector firms working with state actors to disseminate inaccurate information which was up 15 per cent in one year and visible in 81 surveyed countries. Some 317,000 accounts had been taken down in one year. The report’s author, Dr Samantha Bradshaw, said: ‘Cyber troop activity can look different in democracies compared to authoritarian regimes. Electoral authorities need to consider the broader ecosystem of disinformation and computational propaganda, including private firms and paid influencers, who are increasingly prominent actors in this space.’

Removal from Social Platforms

Then what really turned the tide wasn’t under-the-surface tweaks – even as factual and effective as the BBC’s ‘Covid: The truth behind videos of “empty” hospitals’ on 11 January 2021.^x It was the flat removal of accounts and the crackdown by Facebook and Twitter on anti-vaxx groups and memes.

That, of course, culminated with Trump himself being removed from Twitter after the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021, which Thierry Breton memorably called ‘the 9/11 moment of social media’ in *Politico*.^{xi} Misinformation plummeted when Trump’s account was taken down,^{xii} according to a key Signal Labs report quoted in the *Washington Post* (and elsewhere). There was a 73 per cent drop in online mis-information around electoral fraud, for instance. ‘Together, those actions will likely significantly reduce the amount of online misinformation in the near term,’ said Kate Starbird, disinformation researcher at the University of Washington. ‘What happens in the long term is still up in the air.’^{xiii}

Going Dark

‘Bottom line is that de-platforming, especially at the scale that occurred last week, rapidly curbs momentum and ability to reach new audiences,’ Graham Brookie, director of the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, which tracks misinformation, told the *Stanford Advocate*.

Going Underground

But the problem is that once you send the misinformation underground, it may have two unforeseen effects. Firstly, it invites you to intervene everywhere. ‘When I saw what the platforms did with Trump, I thought: “You should have done this before, and you should do this consistently in other countries around the world,”’ Javier Pallero, policy director at Access Now (a human rights group) told *The New York Times*.^{xiv}

Secondly, disinformation becomes still harder to track. Twitter and WhatsApp users are shifting to the more heavily encrypted Telegram

platform. Parler, seen by some as an unfettered home to anti-vaxx and other conspiracy material, having been de-platformed by Amazon Web Services, looks at the time of writing (January 2021) as if it may return with a Russian hosting solution.^{xv} Anti-vaxxer propagandists decoupled themselves and a wide slice of society from fact-based reality. By decoupling them from the public internet we may only be storing up a new problem for the future.

Notes

- ⁱ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/landig/article/PIIS2589-7500\(20\)30227-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/landig/article/PIIS2589-7500(20)30227-2/fulltext)
- ⁱⁱ https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_8d23c70f0a014b3c9e2cfc334d4472dc.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-04/Navigating%20the%20Coronavirus%20Infodemic%20FINAL.pdf>
- ^{iv} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/01/18/ppp-loans-anti-vaccine/>
- ^v <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/polq.13129>
- ^{vi} *The Atlantic*, 14 May 2020
- ^{vii} <https://www.ft.com/content/7502f1f1-e104-403d-975f-bedc6e518fe2>
- ^{viii} <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/8january2021>
- ^{ix} <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-01-13-social-media-manipulation-political-actors-industrial-scale-problem-oxford-report>
- ^x <https://www.bbc.com/news/55560714>
- ^{xi} <https://www.politico.eu/article/thierry-breton-social-media-capitol-hill-riot/>
- ^{xii} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter/>
- ^{xiii} *ibid*
- ^{xiv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/technology/trump-facebook-twitter.html>
- ^{xv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/technology/parler-russian-company.html>

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