

The Coronavirus Infowar: what went wrong ?

By Alex Connock

In Spring 2020, a large percentage of the UK population believed outlandish Covid19 conspiracies. Social media disinformation was powerful, and mainstream countering strategies insufficiently targeted social channels. But commercial sanctions on platforms could prove the winning strategy.

The British Army Field Manual, Volume 1, Part 10, Countering Insurgency, October 2009 provides a clear guide on how to fight and win a war against a guerrilla-style opponent.

It included telling quotes from senior officers, then dealing with intractable challenges in Afghanistan: "There has been a lot of talk about asymmetry. The true asymmetry of the campaign is that the Taliban rely on 90% psychology and 10% force, whereas we rely on 90% force and 10% psychology."¹

The same point can be made today about the war against coronavirus disinformation. The British state and media - in fact the global, facts-driven mainstream in general - failed to win the first major, asymmetric phases of its own psychological war against Covid19 conspiracy theories. They got the story right, but they fought the war in the wrong places.

A Social Media Guerilla Conflict

Information certainly matters. It matters to public health, public safety and the psychology of myriad family interactions. A pattern of global misinformation during Covid19 reached all the way up to the US President himself, who in April 2020 offered an idiosyncratic treatment option of his own: "And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?"

The consequences of such misinformation could be benchmarked in weaker adherence to public health announcements. An Oxford study² published in May in *Psychological Medicine*, showed 40% of the population believed the virus was a deliberate attempt by powerful people to gain control, an extraordinary measure of the failure by government and media to offer a convincing narrative. Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology, said: "Those who believe in conspiracy theories are less likely to follow government guidance, for example, staying home, not meeting with people outside their household, or staying 2m apart from other people when outside."

Perhaps the single point on which all political polarities of Spring 2020 could agree was that as the Covid 19 pandemic took hold, a global information war was being fought on social media – and that in many key engagements, early victory was to the extremists. Specific skirmishes were fought around the origins, transmission, treatment and vaccination

¹ Quoted by The Guardian, November 2009.

² Oxford Coronavirus Explanations, Attitudes, and Narratives Survey (OCEANS).

strategies of coronavirus, on all of which were thousands of memes offering alternative solutions to those proffered by the health establishment. By May, almost three out of five adults in England believed that the government was misleading the public about the cause of the virus³.

The mainstream also failed to defeat the *meta*, catch-all narrative behind Covid19. This told how a world elite of politics, business and entertainment personalities had advance information on the virus, trained the public on how to wear masks with prescient augmented-reality social filters, and planned to monetise vaccination programmes, artfully controlling the population by inserting microchips at scale.

The 2009 Army manual says: “Often, the most effective activities are in the psychological domain and are designed to persuade and influence target audiences using non-kinetic means.”

But in the UK, as elsewhere, state communications and mainstream media failed to counter false narratives in the specific channels they were being spread – the social platforms – as the 2009 counter-insurgency field manual would have advised. The UK failed to engage the social media enemy on its turf – Instagram – or with the same charismatic engagement and operational precision. Amongst 16-to-24 year olds, 45% said to a June 2020 King’s College/Ipsos survey that they got much of their information from YouTube, while nearly 40% of the under-35s said Facebook was a major source for them, yet the government’s press operation was still principally TV and newspaper engagement, and its social communication impact got insufficiently far beyond streaming the daily, afternoon press conferences on LADbible. Social media users were still more likely to both have heard at least a little about the conspiracy theory: 80%, vs. 68% of those who use social media for COVID-19 news less often. Nearly 20% of those who often rely on social media for coronavirus news (17%) said they watched at least part of it, compared with about 10% among those who used COVID-19 news on social media less often (9%).⁴

By May 2020, almost half the British population actually believed in that Covid19 was a “man-made creation. In research by King's College London and Ipsos Mori (over 2,000 people) 30% thought that the coronavirus was created in a lab, an *increase* from 25% in April as the peak virus moment was reached. A similar proportion thought the true death toll from Covid-19 was being hidden by the authorities. Some 13% believed that the pandemic was part of that global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated.

Losing the ground war

“When I turned on my computer this morning, I had over 2 million unique visitors searching for the truth.” So said Jude Law’s character Alan Krumwiede, avid conspiracy theorist in Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 thriller Contagion. “I’m a journalist, and there’s informed discussion on the blogosphere that this is a biological weapon.”

³ Daily Telegraph 22 May.

⁴ Journalism.org June 29 2020

It was a prescient piece of scriptwriting. The early months of Coronavirus saw a barrage of Facebook and Instagram memes, Whatsapp messages and YouTube videos, which offered conscious disinformation - potentially from foreign powers using routes to a billion social media accounts, on which my Oxford colleague Phil Howard wrote a useful book, *Lie Machines*. These posts were amplified by celebrity influencers (which Howard memorably calls a “gateway drug” for conspiracies) then by countless real life users – who were willing sharers, but unwitting participants in misinformation. (Definitions: disinformation is deliberate, misinformation is accidental.). Network virality of the stories was so powerful that it even targeted the networks themselves, by which the content was spread. On 25 April, research suggested that 8 per cent of people thought that 5G technology itself was spreading the virus⁵; 8% believed there was some connection between symptoms and radiation from 5G phone masts.

Just one of the thousands of Instagram feeds shared by UK celebrities was @wearewakinup, which argued against masks in memes such as “even doctors are saying Masks are really bad for us, when are Ye going to listen and even do a simple Google search to see the known dangers.” Another Instagram feed said: “I read today the NHS had to admit that staff have contracted pleurisy due to prolonged wearing of masks that they tried to cover up as Covid-19.” Meanwhile in Italy, one video, viewed more than 700,000 times on Facebook, claimed that the pandemic was entirely “invented”. The narrator of the clip claimed the end goal was to get everyone vaccinated: “This is a sensational hoax, but a very successful one.”

Platforms failed to take content down. *Plandemic The Movie*, a 26 minute film including the allegation that death figures were being fabricated in order to control the population, went globally viral including 7.1 million views on YouTube before it was taken down. Conspiracies travelled “further and faster than ever before,” said Oxford University Clinical Psychologist Dr Sinéad Lambe⁶: “Our survey indicates that people who hold such beliefs share them; social media provides a ready-made platform.”

Underpinning all of this global disinformation was a vast hinterland of total nonsense. The hard-right Infowars compared coronavirus lockdowns to “what the Nazis did.”⁷ QAnon, whose believers circulate the “mole children” theory⁸, posited that the virus was a ploy to arrest members of the satanic “deep state” (various celebrities) and to release their hostages (sex-slave children) from underneath Central Park. This dovetailed with the fantastical Pizzagate, a theory involving Democratic elites, a pizza restaurant, a cover up of epic proportions, generating 800,000 Likes on Facebook and 600,000 on Instagram.

Responses Mistargeted

How to counter the certitudes of conspiracy theorists, whose psychological roadmap turns any challenge into automatic verification of a deeper plot, is already one of the great challenges of the 21st century. This is because they have switched focus from harmless

⁵ The Independent

⁶ Oxford Coronavirus Explanations, Attitudes, and Narratives Survey (OCEANS), May 2020

⁷ The Sun, 19 April 2020

⁸ The Atlantic 14 May 2020

theories about UFO abductions and the Duke of Edinburgh being a lizard (factcheck: he's not a lizard), to theses directly inimical to real-world public health in the worst pandemic since 1919.

Sometimes, the responses of the centre ground went badly awry. For instance, Twitter put a COVID-19 label on tweets about 5G, thereby algorithmically linking them, and offering potential encouragement to conspiracy spread about the link.

Other responses were punchy and useful. The BBC allocated website space to cogent demolitions of key conspiracy tropes. On 30 May it looked at widespread claims that the coronavirus pandemic was cover for a dastardly scheme to implant trackable microchips via vaccination, which the Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates was allegedly backing. A former adviser to Donald Trump had also allegedly said Bill Gates and others were using the virus for microchipping people.⁹ The BBC put the facts straight: "We've found no evidence to support these claims....The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation told the BBC the claim was "false". And of course it is: it's utter nonsense. The Gates Foundation didn't create or spread the virus, doesn't have schemes to microchip people, has lead the world on vaccination research, and donated \$45 billion.

But the counter-insurgency was still a misfire. The BBC advice – stop and think, check your source, could it be a fake, don't share, check each fact, individually – was strong, but in the wrong places. It put the onus on the individual to find it and wilfully avoid the guerrilla war. The BBC didn't devote so much space on its conventional news programmes to directly addressing the theories in ways that consumers of populist memes would be likely to see. It didn't have the social media traction to make the denials as viral as the conspiracies were going. Neither the BBC nor the government used charismatic influencers or memes to deflate conspiracy theories as effectively as the opposition used to create them.

In other words, in the 90/10 equation of the psychological vs kinetic set out by the Army's 2009 counter-insurgency manual, the balance was still favouring the enemy, as it had in Afghanistan.

Fightback

Then a partial solution came, from another quarter entirely: business. In late June 2020, Facebook, a distributor (if unwitting) of posts and memes by virtue of its additional ownership of Instagram and Whatsapp, was hit 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 importantly others did not and expressed concerns with digital advertising placement in general).

Facebook denied the linkage, but quickly made some adjustment to the coding. Facebook's diversified client base (some 3 million advertisers) protected it from economic loss. But such is its economic traction that the brands might find it tougher: in July 2020 my Oxford colleagues Andrew Stephen, Jason Bell and Felipe Thomaz produced research on cross-

⁹ Daily Mail 13 April 2020

media effectiveness (in collaboration with Kantar) to quantify the consequence of this action to these brands in terms of ad effectiveness. “In general, boycotting brands should expect a drop in Saliency (-6.16%), Association (-3%), and Intent to Purchase (-8.66%). However, the true extent of the costs borne by brands will depend on their industry as well as their reliance on the digital world.”

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Donald Trump was troubled, perhaps for the first time, by effective digital counter-insurgency. Sophisticated scaled-up operators like the Republican-backed Lincoln Project, whose founders included former New Hampshire Republican party chief Jennifer Horn successfully taunted him with “Mourning in America”, a video that suggested he ignored Covid-19, which had by then killed 60,000 people in the country. It was a pun on the optimistic “Morning in America” advert that former president Ronald Reagan used in 1984.

Public opinion was swinging a little, too. On June 29, Journalism.org reported that the counter-factual narrative was being undermined by the actual facts. Now 64% of U.S. adults said the Centre for Disease Control CDC mostly got the facts about the outbreak *right* to just 30% saying the same of the Trump administration.

There remains a long fight ahead – one reaching from individual users to the might of major states and even political systems.

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* called a “firewall” against conspiracy theories, a natural limit. Reaching that limit will be critical to the future protection of public health