Policy Brief

Infodemic: Combatting Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories

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KEY INFO

Research question: What role have online conspiracy theories played in the Covid-19 pandemic, and what can be done about them?

Policy area or themes: Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change

Methods: Combination of digital methods and cultural studies analysis

Geographical area: English-language social media, focus on UK and US

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

Responding to the World Health Organisation's warning at the outset of the pandemic that misinformation related to Covid-19 constitutes an "infodemic" as dangerous the virus itself, this project studied how and why conspiracy theories spread in the online environment, and what can be done about them. We scraped millions of conspiracy theory posts on the main social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok) during the course of 2020. We then used digital methods to identify key themes and trends, and carried out detailed textual/visual analysis of representative samples.

The team combined cultural studies and digital humanities researchers from the University of Manchester, King's College London and the University of Amsterdam. We analysed the historical roots of the conspiracy theories that went viral, how they mutated during the pandemic, who has been promoting them, and why some theories have gained more traction than others. We also analysed the effectiveness of attempts by social media platforms to combat the infodemic.

Policy recommendations

1. Removing conspiracist misinformation and deplatforming superspreaders is important, but will never be enough to really combat the infodemic. We need to **consider the reasons for the demand for this content as much as mechanisms of supply**.

2. The increasing efforts at removing problematic content taken by social media giants during the pandemic is welcome; however, **self-regulation by the industry will never be sufficient**.

State regulation is necessary, but for there to be buy-in from distrustful communities, it needs to **work in partnership with civil society organisations**.

3. The infrastructure and business model of social media platforms have fuelled the spread of misinformation, including conspiracy theories. **Redesigning the infrastructure and incentives of social media companies** is needed to address the problem of misinformation.

Key findings

Our digital and cultural analysis of tens of millions of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic posted on social during the course of 2020 showed that:

1. Conspiracy theories are a particularly seductive type of misinformation. They are often connected to a deeply held sense of political identity, and online conspiracy communities reinforce that sense of belonging.
2. Unlike some other of kinds of misinformation, conspiracy theories cannot be combatted by fact checking and debunking alone. Asking a conspiracy theorist to change their mind in effect is asking them to change their sense of identity.
3. Conspiracy theories during the pandemic did not arise from a particular information pipeline. Although deplatforming and other methods of cutting off the supply are at times necessary, they fail to engage with the underlying reasons why people are attracted to conspiracy narratives.
4. The conspiracy narratives that emerged during the pandemic were not new. Most of the basic ideas had been around for a long time, but they were recombined in new ways. In addition, the pandemic produced an unusual convergence between right-wing extremists and lifestyle libertarians, meaning that conspiracy theories can't simply be blamed on a single political group.

Further information

Project website: http://infodemic.eu

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