CONTENT WARNING

This presentation engages with sensitive material, including descriptions of misinformation and conspiratorial content.

Your discretion is advised and encouraged.
The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.

World Health Organization (Feb. 2, 2020)

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.”

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus/WHO (Feb. 15, 2020)

The coronavirus is the first true social-media “infodemic”

Hao & Basu/MIT Technology Review (February 12, 2020)
In this module, we will examine:

1. The emerging alliance between seemingly disconnected groups ensnared in the infodemic
2. The basis and appeal of conspiracies that arise in a time of crisis
3. The role that social media plays in facilitating the spread of COVID-19 conspiracies
4. Strategies to mitigate the COVID-19 infodemic
Will a Covid-19 vaccine signal an end to the anti-vaccine movement?

Hewko & Hotez (June 1, 2020)

Coronavirus causing some anti-vaxxers to waver, experts say

Henley/The Guardian (April 21, 2020)

1820: *Plague*
1920: *Plague*
2020: *anti-vaxxers*

I bet anti-vaxxers will be real quiet when that corona vaccine comes out

Ethan Klein (@h3h3productions)

10:38 PM · Mar 29, 2020 · Twitter for Android

15.7K Retweets 473 Quote Tweets 137.8K Likes
Anti-Lockdown Protests

Josh Edelson/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Peter Zay/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images
Trump supporters

White supremacists

Militia groups

Vaccine hesitancy

QAnon

Conspiracy theories

Glen Stubbe/Star Tribune/Getty Images

Casey Weinstein/Twitter (2020)

Paul Sancya/AP Photo

picture-alliance/dpa/S. Barbour

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These groups are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.

Not all members in all groups can be described as extremist.
(The majority of Americans believe at least one conspiracy!)

Robust social media presence
Anti-Lockdown Protests

Perceived loss of civil liberties

Alternative health modalities

Erosion of institutional trust

Right-wing funders

Recruitment opportunity

Lockdown fatigue

White supremacists are using anti-lockdown protests to recruit new members

Boggioni/Salon (May 3, 2020)
“attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events as secret plots by powerful and malicious groups.”

“Why Conspiracy Theories Matter” (Douglas & Sutton 2018, 256)
CIA officials okayed mind experiments

WASHINGTON — The CIA Wednesday released documents showing that covert high agency operations, including MK-ULTRA, involved psychological experiments. The program was at least one university.

In 1973, the initials included they CIA directed Allen Dulles and senior aides Richard M. Howard, Jr., D.P. Tabei. Lyman Kirkpatrick, Lawrence Boulden, and Richard Betts, according to the releases.

An additional 2,100 pages of documents pertaining to the MK-ULTRA program were made public under terms of the Freedom of Information Act.

They allocated substances involving brainwashing and psychological experiments to the point where the recipient would be discredited in public.

The agency was also interested in a "knockout drug" which can be surreptitiously administered in drinks, food, or injection, as an aerosol, to produce a "mountain of amnesia" and a subjective amnesia which would always be discredited in public.

San Antonio Express (August 18, 1977)
The Psychology of Belief

**Confirmation bias**
Seeking out information that aligns with existing beliefs

**Cognitive dissonance**
Discounting incoming information that threatens our beliefs

**Motivated reasoning**
Evidence is more persuasive when it favors something we want to believe
Social Ecological Model

Individual
- Pattern recognition
- Emotional processing
- Desire to stand out

Interpersonal
- Social supports
- Social networks
- Group norms

Institutional
- Risk of exposure to misinformation
- Connectedness to work, religion, etc.

Policy
- Access to reliable information
- Laws, rules, regulations

Societal
- Uncertainty
- Response to COVID-19
- Connectedness to work, religion, etc.
- Culture
- Crises
- Alienation

Uncertainty
- Anxiety

Culture
- Alienation

Anxiety
- Crises

Alienation
- Culture
Conspiracies are an expected side effect of key historical events
(In that respect, the COVID-19 pandemic is no different!)

So what’s different now?

Political polarization + Speed of circulation on social media
Deep memetic frames

“what we believe in our bones to be true about the world.”

“They shape how we see and what we know (or think we know) so completely that we probably don’t even notice them.”

“Please, Please, Please Don’t Mock Conspiracy Theories” (Phillips/WIRED 2020)

“guide a person’s journey through life, but they don’t necessarily correspond to the actual topography of the land.”

You Are Here (Phillips & Milner 2020)
Boris Johnson learns no one is immune to Covid-19

Tennis champ Novak Djokovic tests positive for COVID-19, apologizes for holding tournament: 'We were wrong'

Ohio veteran, 37, who went viral for refusing to wear a mask, died of COVID-19

Herman Cain, ex-presidential candidate who refused to wear mask, dies after COVID-19 diagnosis
A Perfect Storm?

We’re more connected than ever in a digital environment that is not heavily regulated during a global pandemic that leaves us stranded at home in front of our computers.
“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes.”

THE CONVERSATION
The Victorians had the same concerns about technology as we do
Melissa Dickson/The Conversation (June 21, 2016)
How the ‘Plandemic’ Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online

Total Interactions on Facebook for recent popular videos

NEW: 25% of U.S. adults see at least some truth in the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was planned. But those shares differ by demographics and partisanship. (July 24, 2020)
If the virus is exposed to a temperature of 26-27 °C, it will be killed, as it does not live in hot regions. Also **drinking hot water and sun exposure** will do the trick. And **stay away from ice cream and eating cold** is important.

**Gargle with warm and salt water** kills the tonsils' germs and prevents them from leaking into the lungs.

Adherence to these instructions fulfills the purpose of preventing viruses.

UNICEF

WhatsApp/Al Jazeera (March 10, 2020)

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**BBC**

Coronavirus: World leaders' posts deleted over fake news

BBC (March 31, 2020)

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**BBC**

'Hundreds dead' because of Covid-19 misinformation

Alistair Coleman/BBC (August 12, 2020)
The Architecture of Networked Disinformation

**Political Clients**

- **Chief Architects of Networked Disinformation**
  - Elite advertising and PR strategists: they liaise with political clients and set campaign objectives.

- **Digital Influencers**
  - Anonymous Influencers: Anonymous operators of social media pages with humorous/inspirational/pop culture content; they translate campaign messages into viral posts.
  - Key Opinion Leaders: Celebrities and pundits with highly engaged fans and followers on social media; they carry core campaign messages.

- **Community-Level Fake Account Operators**
  - Precarious middle-class workers subcontracted by ad and PR strategists or hired by politicians’ chief-of-staff; they amplify reach and create “illusory mass”

**Grassroots Intermediaries**

- Politician’s fan page moderators, unpaid opinion leaders, volunteer political organizers

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**Findings**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Posts Reported</th>
<th>Group/account removed</th>
<th>Post removed</th>
<th>Flagged as false</th>
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<td>6.3%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
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#WillToAct (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2020, 9)
Facebook's Algorithm: A Major Threat to Public Health

Avaaz (August 19, 2020)

Facebook algorithm found to 'actively promote' Holocaust denial

Mark Townsend/The Guardian (August 16, 2020)

One in three Americans say they won't get coronavirus vaccine: poll

J. Edward Moreno/The Hill (August 14, 2020)

- Global health misinformation spreading networks spanning at least five countries generated an estimated 3.8 billion views on Facebook in the last year.
- Only 16% of all health misinformation analysed had a warning label from Facebook. Despite their content being fact-checked, the other 84% of articles and posts sampled in this report remain online without warnings.
“the relative magnitude of the misinformation problem on Facebook has declined since its peak.”

"Trends in the diffusion on social media" (Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu 2019, 1)
“The strain of living in this particular time, with a dragging, devastating pandemic and a global uprising against police brutality and racial injustice, crashing together at the highest speed, has accelerated something that’s been going on for years.

Call it the **conspiracy singularity**: the place where many conspiracy communities are suddenly meeting and merging, a melting pot of unimaginable density.”

Anna Merlan/Vice (July 17, 2020)
11 GOP congressional nominees support QAnon conspiracy

Jacob Knutson/Axios (July 12, 2020)

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Congratulations to future Republican Star Marjorie Taylor Greene on a big Congressional primary win in Georgia against a very tough and smart opponent. Marjorie is strong on everything and never gives up - a real WINNER!

5:29 AM - Aug 12, 2020

Marjorie Taylor Greene/YouTube (2020)

The Washington Post

‘Pizzagate’ gunman says he was foolish, reckless, mistaken — and sorry

Spencer S. Hsu/Washington Post (June 14, 2017)

Jack Posobiec
@JackPosobiec

False flag. Planted Comet Pizza Gunman will be used to push for censorship of independent news sources that are not corporate owned

2,097 2,764

4:40 PM - 4 Dec 2016
Social Ecological Model

**Individual**
- Improve digital literacy
- Engage with others strategically
- Humor over rumor
- Avoid mocking others’ beliefs
- Report harmful content

**Interpersonal**
- Engage with others strategically

**Institutional + Policy**
- Increased regulation
- “Flatten the curve” of misinformation
- Study infodemiology
- Promote science as evolving process
- Promote credible messengers
- Engage with underlying frames
- Reevaluate Enlightenment ideals

**Societal**
- "Flatten the curve" of misinformation
- "Study infodemiology"
“If facts aren’t how we got there, then facts won’t change our minds.”

You Are Here (Phillips & Milner 2020)