

COVID-19

How hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic

Contents

3

Introduction

5

Summary

6

Findings and recommendations

7

Beliefs and attitudes

12

Behaviours and activities

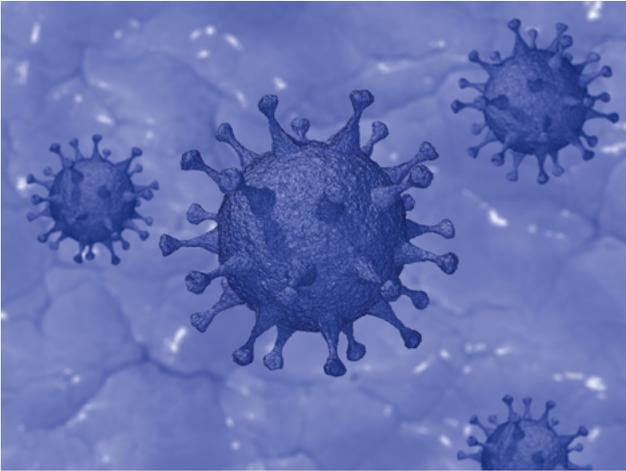
14

Harms

16

Conclusion and recommendations

Introduction



Since the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Commission for Countering Extremism has heard increasing reports of extremists exploiting the crisis to sow division and undermine the social fabric of our country.

We have heard reports of British Far Right activists and Neo-Nazi groups promoting anti-minority narratives by encouraging users to deliberately infect groups, including Jewish communities¹ and of Islamists propagating anti-democratic and anti-Western narratives, claiming that COVID-19 is divine punishment from Allah on the West for their alleged 'degeneracy'.² Islamists have also claimed

that COVID-19 is punishment on China for their treatment of Uighurs Muslims.³ Other conspiracy theories suggest the virus is part of a Jewish plot⁴ or that 5G is to blame.⁵ The latter has led to attacks on 5G masts and telecoms engineers.⁶ We are seeing many of these same narratives reoccur across a wide range of different ideologies.

Fake news about minority communities has circulated on social media in an attempt to whip up hatred. These include false claims that mosques have remained open during lockdown.⁷ Evidence has also shown that 'Far Right politicians and news agencies [...] capitalis[ed] on the virus to push forward their anti-immigrant and populist message'.⁸ Content such as this normalises Far Right attitudes and helps to reinforce intolerant and hateful views towards ethnic, racial or religious communities.

Practitioners have told us how some Islamist activists may be exploiting legitimate concerns regarding securitisation to deliberately drive a wedge between communities and the British state.⁹ Others told us about the difficulties of delivering vital counter-extremism work during lockdown.¹⁰ They told us how assessing

¹ Nikita Malik. 2020. 'Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism', *Foreign Policy*, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>>
² Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2020. 'Snapshot: How Extremist Groups are Responding to Covid-19', p.3, [accessed: 11 June 2020], <<https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-05/Snapshot%203%20COVID19%20V02.pdf>>
³ Nur Aziemah Azman. 2020. 'Divine Retribution': The Islamic State's COVID-19 Propaganda', *The Diplomat*, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/divine-retribution-the-islamic-states-covid-19-propaganda/>>
⁴ Community Security Trust. 2020. 'Coronavirus and the plague of Antisemitism', p.5, [accessed: 08 June 2020], <<https://cst.org.uk/data/file/d/9/Coronavirus%20and%20the%20plague%20of%20antisemitism.1586276450.pdf>>
⁵ Aidan Milan. 2020. 'Coronavirus UK: Why do people think 5G is responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic?', *Metro*, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/02/coronavirus-uk-people-think-5g-responsible-covid-19-pandemic-12500019/>>
⁶ Alex Hern. 2020. '5G conspiracy theories fuel attacks on telecoms workers', *The Guardian*, [accessed: 11 June 2020], <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/07/5g-conspiracy-theories-attacks-telecoms-covid>>
⁷ See: Community Security Trust. 2020. 'Coronavirus and the plague of Antisemitism' p.9, [accessed: 1 June 2020], <<https://cst.org.uk/data/file/d/9/Coronavirus%20and%20the%20plague%20of%20antisemitism.1586276450.pdf>> and Lizzie Dearden. 2020. 'Coronavirus: Government issues disinformation warning as extremists and conspiracy theorists exploit crisis', *The Independent*, [accessed: 11 June 2020], <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-warning-disinformation-uk-government-a9429101.html>>
⁸ Ofra Klein. 2020. 'How is the Far-Right Capitalising on COVID-19', Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, [accessed: 24 June 2020], <<http://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/04/10/how-is-the-far-right-capitalizing-covid-19/>>
⁹ CCE Meeting with practitioners 1 June 2020
¹⁰ CCE Meeting with practitioners 3 June 2020



the scale and impact of extremist content and developing counter-extremism interventions has become challenging now that extremists operate predominantly online.

Many organisations are doing important work to understand the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and extremism. By bringing existing information together and commissioning original research, these notes seek to provide an overview of some of the attitudes, beliefs and extremist activities that are taking place across England and Wales. It represents the first of a series of quarterly notes which will collate and analyse this information to help practitioners, civil society and policy makers understand the current and emerging picture around hateful extremism and work towards developing a more effective response.

Methodology

The independent Commission for Countering Extremism was established in March 2018 to support society to challenge all forms of extremism and provide impartial advice to the Government on new policies. In October 2019 we published the report, [Challenging Hateful Extremism](#).

We are presenting the data according to the three key pillars of hateful extremism identified in that report:

- Beliefs and attitudes
- Behaviours and activity
- Harms

Our summary of hateful extremism is:

- Behaviours that can incite and amplify hate, or engage in persistent hatred, or equivocate about and make the moral case for violence;
- And that draw on hateful, hostile or supremacist beliefs directed at an out-group who are perceived as a threat to the wellbeing, survival or success of an in-group;
- And that cause, or are likely to cause harm to individuals, communities or wider society.

The data collection period for this note is 1 March to 5 June 2020. The data used in this note is publicly available, but we have also included information directly sourced from practitioners who are working in local communities across the country. The data collected in this note is not an exhaustive list of extremist activity but seeks to provide an overview. There is limited data available to assess the scale and harm of extremist activity and we continue to encourage the Government to develop a strategy that seeks to address this.

As this note is the first in the series, we welcome feedback on what might be helpful to include in subsequent versions.¹¹

In addition to this we hope to include original research to identify hateful extremist narratives in our next note.

¹¹ Please email info@extremismcommission.independent.gov.uk to provide feedback

Summary

37%

of respondents had heard about the 5G conspiracy theory and almost a third of (those) people found it credible¹²

It was reported that

circa **50**

masts were targeted for arson and vandalism in the UK in April¹⁶

Far Right actors have sought to encourage other online users to deliberately infect Jews and Muslims¹⁷

There was a

21%

increase in hate crime toward East Asian and South East Asian individuals¹³



A fake post accusing Muslims of breaking lockdown rules was shared

2,700 times¹⁴

90.6% of posts containing misinformation were not acted on by social media companies after volunteers flagged them¹⁵

¹² Patrik Hermansson. 2020. 'Trust no one: Understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief', HOPE not hate, p.5, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/conspiracy-report-2020-04-v1-copy.pdf>>

¹³ Jamie Grierson. 2020. 'Anti-Asian hate crimes up 21% in UK during coronavirus crisis', *The Guardian*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/anti-asian-hate-crimes-up-21-in-uk-during-coronavirus-crisis>>

¹⁴ Reuters. 2020. 'False claim: British mosque remains open during coronavirus lockdown', (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-leeds-mosque/false-claim-british-mosque-remains-open-during-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKBN2113AX>>

¹⁵ Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2020. '#Will to Act: How social media giants have failed to live up to their claims on the Coronavirus "infodemic"', p.9, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/t4d9b9_17e9f74e84414524bbe9a5b45afdf77e.pdf>

¹⁶ Isobel Asher Hamilton. 2020. 'Here's what we know about the bizarre coronavirus 5G conspiracy theory that is leading people to set cellphone masts on fire', *Business Insider*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-5g-masts-fire-2020-4?r=US&IR=T#some-50-masts-have-now-been-targeted-by-arson-attacks-despite-appeals-from-the-government-and-mobile-companies-14>>

¹⁷ Rakib Ehsan. 2020. 'Weaponising COVID-19: Far-Right Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and United States', Henry Jackson Society, p.13, (accessed: 11 June 2020), <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HJS-COVID-19-Far-Right-Report.pdf>>



Findings and recommendations

Findings

- During the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen an increased visibility of conspiracy theories ranging from anti-vaccine, anti-establishment to anti-minority and antisemitic. They are not specific to any one ideology, but are used by the Far Right, Far Left and Islamists to further their own ideological aims.
- Hateful extremists have used the pandemic to engage in disinformation and fake news about minority groups which have been used by sympathisers to incite hatred, justify violence and to divide communities.
- The scale of extremist content online is vast. De-platforming Far Right actors has pushed many onto fringe platforms such as Telegram, VK and GAB.
- The short and long term impacts of the pandemic could create conditions conducive for extremism. Extremists will seek to capitalise on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 to cause further long term instability, fear and division in Britain.

Recommendations

Government needs to include clear plans to counter extremism in their response to this and future crises. It should also publish a new counter-extremism strategy urgently to ensure that it can strategically respond to the activities of extremists in our country. This strategy should include:

- An assessment of how extremism manifests locally, the harm it causes, the scale of support for extremist narratives and how best to pre-empt extremist activity. This should also include a mechanism to provide bespoke support to local authorities most affected.
- An assessment of who is most susceptible to extremist narratives and a plan of what interventions they will put in place to engage and support those people.
- Plans to work with researchers and practitioners to build a better understanding of 'what works' in relation to counter extremism online and offline.
- A commitment to ensure hateful extremism falls within the remit of the new online harms regulator and that existing laws on inciting hatred should be enforceable online.
- Plans to build an understanding of how conspiracy theories contribute to extremism. Including how they are utilised by extremists, what the scale, impact and harm is, and how to counter them. This should include a commitment to develop a system to classify dangerous conspiracy theories based on the harm they cause.
- Separately, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government must drive forward a COVID-19 cohesion strategy to help bring different communities together to prevent extremist narratives from having significant reach and influence.



Beliefs and attitudes

We have looked at several polls and identified three themes we consider to be relevant to hateful extremism:

- conspiracy theories
- blaming the 'other' and out-groups
- pro-social attitudes and resilience

The evidence gathered in this section seeks to highlight changes in attitudes during this period and concerning trends.

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have been a key tactic used by extremists to recruit and divide communities. Conspiracy theories are defined as 'attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors'.¹⁸ They are difficult to challenge as their proponents commonly respond to attempts to invalidate them by claiming that they are being censored. Moreover, social media companies can serve to fuel conspiracy theories as platforms can be slow to takedown content and some algorithms can push users towards more similar extremist content.¹⁹

During the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen an increased visibility of conspiracy theories ranging from anti-vaccine, anti-establishment to anti-minority and antisemitic. They are not specific to any one ideology, but are used by the Far Right, Far Left and Islamists to further their own ideological aims.

- Whilst many conspiracy theories may be considered harmless, some have resulted in very real-world consequences. The conspiracy theory that claimed 'faster 5G internet [was] either causing or accelerating the spread of the coronavirus' gained significant traction.²⁰ We know that extremists discussed this theory on fringe social media platforms such as Telegram. It was reported that circa 50 5G masts were targeted for arson and vandalism in the UK in April.²¹
- Although now largely debunked, 5G conspiracy theories permeated rapidly into the mainstream. Studies showed that 37% of respondents had heard about the 5G conspiracy theory and almost a third of (those) people found it credible.²²

¹⁸ Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Chichocka, Turkyay Nefes, Chee Siang Ang and Ferzani Deravi. 2019. 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 40:S1, p.4

¹⁹ Adam Smith. 2020. 'Facebook knew its algorithm made people turn against each other but stopped research', *The Independent*, (accessed: 10 June 2020), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/facebook-algorithm-bias-right-wing-feed-a9536396.html>>

²⁰ Isobel Asher Hamilton. 2020. 'Here's what we know about the bizarre coronavirus 5G conspiracy theory that is leading people to set cellphone masts on fire', *Business Insider*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-5g-masts-fire-2020-4?r=US&IR=T>>

²¹ Isobel Asher Hamilton. 2020. 'Here's what we know about the bizarre coronavirus 5G conspiracy theory that is leading people to set cellphone masts on fire', *Business Insider*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-5g-masts-fire-2020-4?r=US&IR=T#some-50-masts-have-now-been-targeted-by-arson-attacks-despite-appeals-from-the-government-and-mobile-companies-14>>

²² Patrik Hermansson. 2020. 'Trust no one: Understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief', HOPE not hate, p.5, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/conspiracy-report-2020-04-v1-copy.pdf>>



- People’s beliefs about the causes of the pandemic are influencing their behaviour. Another analysis found that those who believed that COVID-19 was created in a lab were over twice as likely to have met up with friends during lockdown, and to believe ‘too much fuss is being made about coronavirus’.²³
- A study from the University of Oxford found that people who held coronavirus conspiracy beliefs were less likely to comply with social distancing guidelines or take up future vaccines. They tested conspiracy theories which claimed that the virus is a bioweapon developed by China to destroy the West; that Muslims are spreading the virus as an attack on Western values and that Bill Gates created the virus to reduce the world population.²⁴
- The scale of online extremist content and engagement with such material is deeply concerning. Research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found hundreds of thousands of Far Right posts around COVID-19 and millions of engagements with known disinformation sites.²⁵ They found that there was a marked increase in conversations within Far Right circles about ‘elites’ such as Bill Gates, George Soros, the Rothschilds and Jeff Bezos and false information about their role in the creation of the virus.²⁶
- Despite the scale of conspiracy theories online, social media companies are not doing enough to tackle this problem. The Center for Countering Digital Hate looked at misinformation online and showed that only 9% of the posts flagged to companies were met with meaningful action.²⁷ This study demonstrates that despite efforts from social media companies, harmful content is still spreading on their platforms.



Blaming the ‘other’ or out-groups

As we showed in our report and in line with social movement theory,²⁸ extremists promote hostile and supremacist beliefs towards a group of people who are perceived as a threat to the wellbeing, survival or success of a defined ‘in-group’. Who is seen as the ‘out-group’ depends on the ideological worldview of extremists, but it often includes

²³ Bobby Duffy, Daniel Allington, Kelly Beaver, Christoph Meyer et al. 2020. ‘Life under lockdown: Coronavirus in the UK’, The Policy Institute, King’s College London, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/coronavirus-in-the-uk.pdf>>

²⁴ University of Oxford. 2020. ‘Conspiracy beliefs reduce the following of government coronavirus advice’, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-05-22-conspiracy-beliefs-reduces-following-government-coronavirus-guidance>>

²⁵ Study focused predominantly on the US

²⁶ Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2020. ‘COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.3’, (accessed 8 June 2020), <<https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-3/>>

²⁷ Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2020. ‘#Will to Act: How social media giants have failed to live up to their claims on the Coronavirus ‘infodemic’’, p.3, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_17e9f74e84414524bbe9a5b45afd77e.pdf>

²⁸ J.M. Berger. 2018. Extremism, London: MIT Press



people with a protected characteristic, or people who possess different racial, ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds which are then perceived to be 'alien' and a threat.²⁹

Hateful extremists often look for someone to blame in times of crisis and we have heard how disinformation and fake news targeted at different 'out-groups' and minorities can be used to incite hatred, justify violence and divide communities.

Anti-Western

- Islamist extremists have used the COVID-19 pandemic to pursue their own ideological agendas and objectives. ISIS celebrated the impact of COVID-19 on Western militaries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.³⁰ Analysis of their weekly newsletter showed that ISIS see the pandemic as beneficial to their terrorist aims as defence and security resources in Western countries are reallocated to combat the pandemic.³¹

Antisemitism

- Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, five dangerous categories of conspiracy theories aimed at blaming the Jewish community emerged. These

are that the virus is fake and part of a Jewish plot to mislead the public, that it's real and was deliberately created for malevolent purposes, that Jews are the primary spreaders of the virus, that Jewish people are dying in disproportionately higher numbers and posts that incite others to deliberately spread the virus to Jews.³² Research has shown how similar antisemitic narratives can gain traction within the UK and the US.³³

- Research has shown how individuals such as David Icke play a significant role in spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories linked to COVID-19. One of Icke's most popular videos claimed that 'the Rothschilds' are key players in a global plot to use the disease as a pretence to impose a totalitarian world government. This video was viewed over 5.9 million times.³⁴ Although Icke was successfully de-platformed from Youtube and Facebook³⁵, the scale and reach of his antisemitic conspiracy theories remains extremely concerning.

Anti-Muslim hatred

- In an attempt to whip up anti-Muslim hatred, fake news and false narratives showing British Muslims flouting social distancing rules were promoted. In one

²⁹ J.M. Berger. 2018. *Extremism*, London: MIT Press

³⁰ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2020. 'Snapshot: How Extremist Groups are Responding to Covid-19', p.3, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-05/Snapshot%203%20COVID19%20V02.pdf>>

³¹ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2020. 'Snapshot: How Extremist Groups are Responding to Covid-19', p.3, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-05/Snapshot%203%20COVID19%20V02.pdf>>

³² Community Security Trust. 2020. 'Coronavirus and the plague of Antisemitism', (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://cst.org.uk/data/file/d/9/Coronavirus%20and%20the%20plague%20of%20antisemitism.1586276450.pdf>>

³³ Rakib Ehsan. 2020. 'Weaponising COVID-19: Far-Right Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and United States', Henry Jackson Society, (accessed: 12 June 2020), <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HJS-COVID-19-Far-Right-Report.pdf>>

³⁴ Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2020. '#DeplatformIcke: How Big Tech powers and profits from David Icke's lies and hate, and why it must stop', p.4, (accessed: 23 June 2020), <https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_db8ff469f6914534ac02309bb488f948.pdf>

³⁵ Hope Not hate. 2020. 'Coronavirus & the Far Right: Weekly Round Up', (accessed: 23 June 2020), <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/05/07/covid-19-the-far-right-weekly-round-up-6/>>

particular case a picture taken outside of a Leeds mosque appeared to show Muslims breaking the rules. Although quickly refuted by West Yorkshire police, and shown to be false, it had already gained traction on social media.³⁶ Reports showed that it was shared 2,700 times on Facebook and was subsequently removed.³⁷

- Whilst there is no evidence that Muslims have been less assiduous about social distancing than other communities, research also showed that 20% of respondents had read or seen articles relating to 'British Muslims keeping mosques open in contravention of the Government's lockdown rules'.³⁸
- An account purporting to be Far Right actor Stephen Yaxley-Lennon shared posts that branded infected Muslims as 'corona bombs' to his followers on Telegram, using #GermJihad.³⁹

Anti-Chinese hatred

- There has also been a worrying rise in hate crime and hate incidents towards Chinese people. L1ght, an AI-based start-up that detects and filters toxic online content, reported that there was a 900% increase in hashtags identified as hateful towards Chinese people on Twitter.⁴⁰

Pro-social and resilience

Pro-social attitudes can reduce the impact of extremist narratives. In contrast, research indicates that a 'lack of trust in the system is generally higher amongst those who are most prone to believing conspiracy theories'.⁴¹

At the start of lockdown, many polls suggested that pro-social attitudes were higher than normal, indicating that people felt that the UK Government's handling of the pandemic was better than other countries.

- On 14 April Kekst reported that people in the UK were more likely to have gained confidence in their government, key institutions and businesses compared with people in the US, Germany, or Sweden.⁴²
- In April King's College London found that there was near-universal support (89%) for the current measures, and 68% strongly agreed with them.⁴³

Whilst support for the Government at the beginning of the outbreak remained strong, this did not remain the case for long.

At the peak infection rate on 27 March, YouGov reported that 72% of the public believed the Government was handling the

³⁶ Professor Imran Awan and Roxana Khan-Williams. 2020. 'Coronavirus, fear and how Islamophobia Spreads on social media', p.5, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://antimuslimhatredworkinggrouphome.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/research-briefing-report-7-1.pdf>>

³⁷ Reuters. 2020. 'False claim: British mosque remains open during coronavirus lockdown', [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-leeds-mosque/false-claim-british-mosque-remains-open-during-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKBN21I3AX>>

³⁸ Patrik Hermansson. 2020. 'Trust no one: Understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief', HOPE not hate, p.16, [accessed: 8 June 2020] <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/conspiracy-report-2020-04-v1-copy.pdf>>

³⁹ Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2020. 'British far-right adopts Indian hate campaign blaming Muslims for coronavirus', [accessed: 23 June 2020], <<https://www.counterhate.co.uk/post/british-far-right-adopts-indian-hate-campaign-blaming-muslims-for-coronavirus>>

⁴⁰ L1ght. 2020. 'Rising Levels of Hate Speech & Online Toxicity During This Time of Crisis', [accessed: 8 June 2020], <https://l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf?fbclid=IwAR12yPh-Gli1Ur1qwwZoCuu4nP2zG5dLxs590Exti5UXYORQCWp3w_ko1MQ>

⁴¹ Patrik Hermansson. 2020. 'Trust no one: Understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief', HOPE not hate, p.5, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/conspiracy-report-2020-04-v1-copy.pdf>>

⁴² Kekst. 2020. 'COVID-19 Opinion Tracker', [accessed 8 June 2020], <<https://www.kekstcnc.com/media/2568/kekst-report-16apr2020.pdf>>

⁴³ Bobby Duffy, Daniel Allington, Kelly Beaver, Christoph Meyer et al. 2020. 'Life under lockdown: Coronavirus in the UK', The Policy Institute, King's College London, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/coronavirus-in-the-uk.pdf>>



issue of COVID-19 'very' or 'somewhat' well. Nine weeks later, on 29 May, this dropped to 41% indicating that the public is rapidly losing trust in the Government.⁴⁴

A reduction of trust in the Government and state institutions can be exploited by extremists to spread their hateful and divisive narratives.

Despite pessimism towards the Government, research showed that more people believed that Britain will be more united and kinder following the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, than it was before the pandemic.⁴⁵



⁴⁴ YouGov. 2020. 'YouGov COVID-19 tracker: government handling', [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/perception-government-handling-covid-19>>

⁴⁵ Office for National Statistics. 2020. *Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 14 May 2020*, [accessed: 30 June 2020], <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/14may2020#understanding-the-impact-on-society>>

Behaviours and activities

We have seen a range of concerning behaviours across the ideological spectrum of extremism.

Far Right

- The British National Socialist Movement,⁴⁶ encouraged other Telegram users who had COVID-19 to deliberately infect Jews and Muslims.⁴⁷
- ISD found that the COVID-19 pandemic is playing into 'accelerationism' on the extreme right. Accelerationism promotes the idea that democracy is a failure and that Far Right groups should accelerate its end through inciting social conflict and violence.⁴⁸
- Social Media platform TikTok banned Far Right actors Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (Tommy Robinson) and Britain First for hate speech violations in April, however their combined videos had already amassed almost a million views.⁴⁹ Deplatforming has pushed many Far Right actors and groups onto fringe platforms such as Telegram, VK and GAB.⁵⁰

An account purporting to be well known Far Right actor, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, has amassed circa 36,000 followers on Telegram.⁵¹

- A Telegram account purporting to be Jayda Fransen, former deputy leader of Britain First, was seen promoting conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and China on her Telegram channel to circa 2,000 followers.



⁴⁶ The British National Socialist Movement is a group that espouses Neo-Nazi views, including comments about Hitler. See: Rakib Ehsan. 2020. 'Weaponising COVID-19: Far-Right Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and United States', Henry Jackson Society, p.9, (accessed: 11 June 2020), <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HJS-COVID-19-Far-Right-Report.pdf>>

⁴⁷ Rakib Ehsan. 2020. 'Weaponising COVID-19: Far-Right Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and United States', Henry Jackson Society, p.13, (accessed: 11 June 2020), <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HJS-COVID-19-Far-Right-Report.pdf>>

⁴⁸ Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2020. 'COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1', p.2, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Briefing-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf>>

⁴⁹ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2020. 'How extremist groups are responding to COVID-19', p.8, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-05/Snapshot%203%20COVID19%20V02.pdf>>

⁵⁰ Telegram describes itself as 'a messaging app with a focus on speed and security'. VK is a Russian online social media and social networking service with offices based in Saint Petersburg. VK is available in multiple languages but it is predominantly used by Russian-speakers. GAB describes itself as, 'A social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online'. See: Ryan Greer. 2020. 'Weighing the Value and Risks of Deplatforming' *Global Network on Extremism & Terrorism*, (accessed: 11 June 2020), <https://gnet-research.org/2020/05/11/weighing-the-value-and-risks-of-deplatforming/?utm_source=Tech+Against+Terrorism&utm_campaign=1235ee09e6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_24_07_51_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cb464fdb7d-1235ee09e6-141624359>

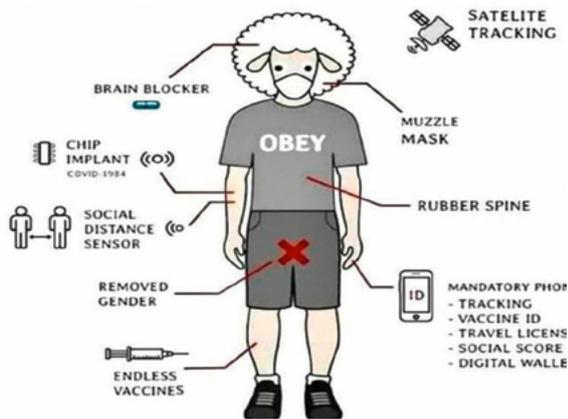
⁵¹ As of 8 June 2020



- In the UK, users of multiple Far Right Telegram channels, attempted to organise a lockdown protest. One announced a ‘March against a vaccine and lockdown’ in May.⁵² On Saturday 16 May we saw a small protest against the lockdown in London, similar to those seen in the US.⁵³ People attended for many different reasons, however media reports seemed to suggest protestors were generally distrustful of Government and the media.

Islamist

- In the UK, Islamist extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir⁵⁴ have used the COVID-19 pandemic to further their anti-democratic narratives by calling for the establishment of the Khilafah (Caliphate) as ‘both a political and theological necessity for which no sacrifice is too small’.⁵⁵



- Practitioners told us how some Islamist activists may be exploiting legitimate concerns regarding securitisation to further drive a wedge between communities and the Government. This has taken the form of conspiracy theories on social media accusing the Government of attempting to use future vaccines to deliberately harm minority communities and that COVID-19 is a conspiracy used to control the population.⁵⁶
- Some memes are used by groups to further their ideological aims. The image to the left uses the phrase ‘Sheeple’ which is a popular phrase amongst Far Right actors and was featured on the US website Infowars. It is a contraction of ‘sheep’ and ‘people’. In this context it refers to people who are easily led and docile. The image itself references many conspiracy theories such as that the Government and/or an elite is planning to use COVID-19 to justify planting tracking chips in people. Although popular with the Far Right, it has also circulated amongst other communities.

Going forward we expect to see an increase in anti-Government conspiracy theories, particularly pushing the narrative of the deliberate securitisation of particular communities. We have already seen these themes emerge across the ideological spectrum.

⁵² Hope Not hate. 2020. ‘Coronavirus & the Far Right: Weekly Round Up’, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/04/24/covid-19-the-far-right-weekly-round-up-4/>>

⁵³ Lizzie Dearden. 2020. ‘Coronavirus: Inside the UK’s biggest anti-lockdown protest’, *The Independent*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-lockdown-protests-uk-london-hyde-park-5g-conspiracy-theories-a9518506.html>>; BBC. 2020. ‘Coronavirus lockdown protest: What’s behind the US demonstrations’, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52359100>>

⁵⁴ An organisation that seeks to establish a theocratic Islamic state

⁵⁵ Editor. 2020. ‘COVID-19: Is this the end of Liberalism’, Hizb UT-Tahrir, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<http://www.hizb.org.uk/viewpoint/covid-19-is-this-the-end-of-liberalism/>>

⁵⁶ CCE meeting with practitioners, 1 June 2020



Harms

Our report identified six categories of harm from extremism which is having an impact across the whole of society. These include:

- social division and intolerance
- crime, violence and harassment
- mental health and wellbeing
- censorship and restriction of freedom
- delegitimising authority/undermining democracy
- economic harms

Despite this there still exists insufficient research on these harms more generally and specifically as a result of the pandemic. During the first few months of the pandemic however, practitioners shared concerns about young people and early indications of hate crime statistics can serve as a useful proxy.

Vulnerability

We have drawn particular attention to young people as vulnerable to extremism. However, not enough is known about who specifically is susceptible to extremist narratives and more should be done to assess who may require more support.

In our report, we highlighted that a crucial element to building resilience to extremism in young people is the provision of youth services. We highlighted the negative effect of funding cuts and the related increases in the risk of young people becoming involved in anti-social activity and potentially extremism.⁵⁷

- The degradation of social support may result in younger people becoming more vulnerable to extremist narratives, and it is also making it less likely that risk factors would be noticed, hence Prevent and Channel⁵⁸ referrals are down by 50%.⁵⁹
- Chief Superintendent Nik Adams, national coordinator for Prevent, also warned that the impact of COVID-19 and social isolation may 'exacerbate grievances that make people more vulnerable to radicalisation.' He further argued that 'extremists and radicalisers [...] will look to exploit any opportunity to lead those people into harm, often using topical issues as hooks to lure them in'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Commission for Countering Extremism. 2019. *Challenging Hateful Extremism*, p.106, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf>

⁵⁸ The aim of the Prevent strategy is to reduce the threat to the UK from terrorism by stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. Channel forms part of the Prevent strategy. The process is a multi-agency approach to identify and provide support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism. See: Home Office. 2011. Prevent Strategy, p.23, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf>

⁵⁹ Vikram Dodd. 2020. 'Fears of rise in UK terrorist recruits as anti-radicalisation referrals collapse', *The Guardian*, (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/22/fears-of-rise-in-uk-terrorism-recruits-after-anti-radicalisation-referrals-collapse-coronavirus>>

⁶⁰ Counter Terrorism Police. 2020. 'CTP warn about greater risk of radicalisation during COVID-19 lockdown', (accessed: 8 June 2020), <<https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/ctp-look-to-bolster-prevent-referrals-during-lockdown/>>



Hate Crime

It was reported that hate crime directed at South and East Asian communities has increased by 21% during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶¹ Official figures have not yet been released and it is not clear how the Government plans to tackle this.

The CPS reported on a number of successful prosecutions across England relating to hate crime and COVID-19 specifically.⁶² CPS West Midlands Magistrates' Court unit successfully prosecuted 78 COVID-19-related cases from March to May including incidents of emergency workers and key workers being assaulted, threatened, coughed at and spat on by people claiming to have COVID-19.⁶³



⁶¹ Jamie Grierson. 2020. 'Anti-Asian hate crimes up 21% in UK during coronavirus crisis', *The Guardian*, [accessed: 8 June 2020], <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/anti-asian-hate-crimes-up-21-in-uk-during-coronavirus-crisis>>

⁶² Crown Prosecution Service. 2020. 'CPS Hate Crime Newsletter, Issue 25', [accessed 11 June 2020], <<https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/cps-hate-crime-newsletter-issue-25>><https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/cps-hate-crime-newsletter-issue-25>

⁶³ Crown Prosecution Service. 2020. 'CPS West Midlands: Successful COVID-19 prosecutions – March to May 2020', [accessed: 11 June 2020], <<https://www.cps.gov.uk/west-midlands/news/west-midlands-successful-covid-19-prosecutions-march-may-2020>><https://www.cps.gov.uk/west-midlands/news/west-midlands-successful-covid-19-prosecutions-march-may-2020>



Conclusion and recommendations

We have brought together data to present an emerging picture of extremism within England and Wales at the start and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not simply a British problem, as U.N. secretary general António Guterres stated, 'We are seeing stigma, hate speech, and white supremacists and other extremists seeking to exploit the situation'.⁶⁴ Extremists across the globe will always exploit crises to spread their hateful narratives and sow division within communities. It is crucial therefore that the Government always include clear plans to counter and prevent extremism as part of their response to this and future crises.

Whilst lockdown rules are gradually eased, it will take some time before life returns to normal. The short- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic could create conditions conducive for extremism. Extremists will seek to capitalise on this to cause further long-term instability, fear and division in Britain. The socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will present significant extremism risks, both in scale and impact and it is vital that the Government refocuses its efforts to counter extremism. To mitigate against extremist activity, the Government should publish a new counter-extremism strategy urgently to ensure it is on the front foot in pre-empting and strategically responding to the activity of extremists in our country.

We judge that the Government should seek to tackle these emerging issues before they escalate and cause further damage to society.

The Commission will continue to gather and publish relevant COVID-19 extremism information to help inform policy makers, public bodies and practitioners.

Conspiracy theories

We have drawn attention to a variety of conspiracy theories that exist around the COVID-19 pandemic but it is vital that we build an understanding of how conspiracy theories contribute to extremism, and how extremists utilise them. This also includes understanding better the scale, impact and harms of extremist related conspiracy theories. More research on what is successful in countering dangerous conspiracy theories is required.

Policy makers should look to develop a system to classify dangerous conspiracy theories based on the harm they cause. This will help practitioners and social media platforms better identify harmful conspiracy theories before they escalate.

Vulnerability and harm

We have shown how the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to impact young people in particular. However, not enough is known

⁶⁴ United Nations Secretary-General. 2020. 'Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 Pandemic [as delivered]', [accessed: 23 June 2020], <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered>>



about who is most at risk especially in the long-term. In the new counter-extremism strategy, the Government needs to be clear about who is most at risk from hateful extremist narratives and what interventions they will put in place to engage and support those people.

Government also needs to work with local authority partners to understand better differing extremist trends across the country, the harm they are causing, scale of support for extremist narratives; and how best to pre-empt extremist activity and provide support to local authorities most affected. For example, an understanding of local anti-vaccine sentiment would need to guide future vaccine roll out to ensure that people are not afraid to receive the vaccine.

Government needs to ensure it has the right levers and tools to hold social media companies to account for the content that is posted on their platforms. Platforms need to take firmer steps to remove content and users who post abusive content, taking better account of the victims who are often repeatedly targeted by the same people. A regulator with real power, as suggested by the Online Harms White Paper, could make a significant difference. But their remit must include online hateful extremism and our existing laws on inciting hatred also need to be enforceable online.

Counter-extremism interventions

Lockdown has proved challenging to those delivering counter-extremism interventions.

Those working in research and the counter-extremism sector need to support and work with practitioners to help develop new and effective online counter-extremism interventions. The scale and ease of access to online extremist driven content is proving to be particularly difficult to counter. Policy makers and researchers need to prioritise this work.

Government needs to invest in building a better understanding of ‘what works’ in relation to counter-extremism. This continues to be critical.

Strengthening local cohesion

Extremists seek to foster division within our towns and cities. Delivering events, campaigns and projects based on inclusion, shared values and community cohesion – both online, and where possible offline – are vital to help build resilience to extremism and to prevent extremists from gaining a foothold. These projects are often seen as a nice-to-have, but they are powerful ways to reduce the impact of extremism. Local communities are a key partner in helping to challenge extremism and in promoting an inclusive Britain.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government needs to drive forward a COVID-19 cohesion strategy to help bring different and diverse communities together and to prevent hateful extremist narratives from having significant reach and influence.

