Weekly COVID-19 Disinformation and False Propaganda Report

FAS

Key Highlights

July 2, 2020

Based on our analysis[1] of social media activity on Twitter between June 25 and July 2, the tweet with widest reach that used the word virus was President Trump's claim that "cases up only because of our big number testing." The tweet reached 82.4 million users.

The claim is false. Although more testing in communities does uncover more cases, a major driver of the increase is increased circulation and spread of the virus -- particularly among younger populations. In fact we are currently experiencing higher positivity rates, or the percentage of tests being identified as positive, which is an indicator of greater spread.

Aggressive rhetoric against public health guidance for mask use also escalated in the last week. For instance, a group in Florida with an unusually high social media reach **claimed** that masks can "kill," echoing other messages by a number of other conspiracy theory websites.

Theories regarding the origin of COVID-19 (namely, claims that the virus was man made) continue to dominate headlines, such as **this tweet**, which reached 75.2K users since its publication on June 29. Although the issue continues to be examined by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), conspiracy sites continue to promote that notion that COVID-19 originated from a laboratory.

Minority communities are being targeted by disinformation campaigns, particularly on the subject of vaccines. Suggestions that vaccines are unsafe and that African American communities are being used as experiments are exacerbated by **existing challenges**, including **speculation** and **mistrust** among African Americans regarding medical research involving experimental drug trials.

The Pew Research Center **found** that 28% of American adults surveyed felt confident in their ability to fact-check COVID-19 related news. Comparing misinformation surrounding COVID-19 to that disseminated during the 2016 election, the following analysis **argues** that misinformation regarding COVID-19 is more easily digested due

1   Based on a search for tweets including the words ("COVID" OR "coronavirus" OR "the virus") AND ("testing" OR "cases") OR ("Vaccine" OR "treatment") OR ("mask" OR "masks").

to its nature as an emerging and complex infectious disease. This creates "a vacuum that is all too easily filled by conspiracy theories and misinformation," leaving Americans especially prone to what has been termed "a pandemic of misinformation."

Methodology

FAS evaluated the volume of social media interactions regarding coronavirus using Twitter posts and digital news articles published between 20-26 June. The breakdown of the following information was primarily focused on results in the United States, but also provided data from other English-speaking contexts, including Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. FAS analysts evaluated the volume of tweets that emerged over time, the reach of trending tweets, and overall public sentiment.

Key Trends

Our search[2] yielded 6.08M total mentions of coronavirus, including topic areas such as testing, treatment, and mask use (up 20% compared to the previous week). There was an average daily mention of 1.01M (also up 20% compared to the previous week). FAS applied a natural language processing (NLP) tool to assess the overall sentiment of online social media conversation regarding COVID. Approximately 70% of these conversations were provoking "negative" sentiments.

Increases in testing is leading to more cases

One of the most prominent headlines in the last week is President Trump's sweeping **claim** that surges in COVID-19 cases are the result of increases in testing, diluting other causes of COVID-19 spread and transmission. This messaging has been substantiated by **conservative media outlets**, leading to increased confusion and uncertainty regarding the causes of COVID-19 surges in particular states.

Donald J. Trump ✔
@realDonaldTrump

Cases up only because of our big number testing. Mortality rate way down!!!

Anti-mask movements

Rhetoric against public health guidance for mask use has escalated in the last week. A widely publicized testimony from county residents at a Palm Beach County meeting in Florida **claimed** masks were harmful, alluding to claims made by other conspiracy groups. Other trending messages focus on a narrative claiming mandated mask use is violation of personal freedoms.

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2   Boolean search terms included ("COVID" OR "coronavirus" OR "the virus") AND ("testing" OR "cases") OR ("Vaccine" OR "treatment") OR ("mask" OR "masks").

> Masks pose SERIOUS health risks & dangers, including impaired breathing, infections, increased viral load, exhaled air directed into eyes, heating of your own germs & bacteria which are then re-circulated back through your mouth and nasal passages, skin irritations, and defeat of innate immunity.
>
> Masks are a tool of
> control & obedience & submission.
>
> Mask-wearers are less likely to
> make eye contact, less likely to smile,
> and less likely to interact with others.
>
> The controllers are trying to abolish individuality.
> They want you to be fearful, suspicious, and distrustful
> and stay separated from others in public.
>
> It is not about a virus.
> It is not about a pandemic.
> It is about CONTROL.

The lack of mask usage was highlighted at multiple indoor rallies hosted by the President in **Tulsa** and Arizona. Disinformation regarding masks, like the one exemplified by Twitter users (image below), readily appears as a response to mandated use of masks.

Kevin McCarthy's Claim on Reduced Positive Rates

Our analysis identified **this tweet** by Leader Kevin McCarthy, claiming that positive COVID test rates are down. When retweeted by the President, the retweet reached 82.6 million Twitter users, having the widest reach of any tweet with the word 'virus' in it, this month.

Community Characteristics

Conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 "**play to our most base instincts and paranoias** – fears that dissolve logic and reason." The sensationalization of headlines, myths, and conspiracy theory related to COVID-19 and combative rhetoric towards the mainstream media attracts propagandists from across the internet and all over the world. Disinformation inevitably reaches the average internet user. A survey from Cornell University **showed** that 60% of Americans are unable to discern (or feel unsure about discerning) real headlines regarding COVID-19 from false headlines.

FAS Federation *of* American Scientists

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