

Understanding the #pandemic: Core framings on Twitter and what this tells us about countering online far right COVID-19 conspiracies

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Abstract

This paper examines the need and possibility for developing online resilience-based approaches in response to COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies, often linked to the far right. Examining three datasets collected between December 2020 and April 2021, this paper details conspiracy narratives that have developed around COVID-19 vaccines, with specific focus on understanding the deployment of the idea of a planned pandemic or so-called '#pandemic'. This is then used to consider where existing resilience-based approaches to countering off-line polarisation and extremism might posit an appropriate online response. The article identifies four key #pandemic framings of COVID-19 vaccines — as control, as reset, as unnecessary and as unsafe — and analyses how these themes are constructed, to find that they are often created through hostile and confrontational interaction with other users. Based on these findings, the conclusion suggests companies shift their focus away from 'negative' approaches to content moderation (e.g., content removal) and towards resilience-building responses that cultivate flexible individual identities, build community support networks, and/or engage users with national and supranational democratic structures, as a more effective response to the sharing of online conspiracies.

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Introduction

At time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause death and disruption on a global scale. Whilst the initial spread of the virus led to the closing of many international — and even some internal — borders, by the end of 2020, the West's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic had shifted from immediate crisis management towards researching, producing, and actioning a sustainable vaccine programme. By early 2021, European countries had authorised several vaccines, marking the start of national rollouts. Whilst a key task in managing the COVID-19 pandemic has been to ensure that states and health care systems have access to effective vaccines, ventilators, and oxygen, the polarisation of discussion around both the virus and governmental responses has demonstrated the need to also adequately ensure that citizens are properly informed of the dangers of misinformation, particularly conspiratorial content. The high levels of political partisanship surrounding responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to groups and movements questioning the existence of the virus, health benefits of masks, legitimacy of lockdowns and restrictions, as well as engaging in conspiracies around vaccination programmes (Marone, 2022; McNeil-Willson, 2020).

Conspiracy theories are described by historian Geoffrey Cubitt as 'a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism' [1]. As such, they rely on beliefs such as events being planned rather than occurring as a matter of course or coincidence; said events supposedly being carried out by a nefarious oft-élite out-group that must be challenged by an in-group comprised of the victims of their misdeeds; and the alleged conspirators being shrouded in such mystery that their work may never be fully revealed — even after they have potentially realised their goals. As such, within conspiracies: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected [2].

There is significant evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a fertile breeding ground for the alignment of several different conspiracies, combining traditional and long-standing tropes on immigration, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism with the international health crisis. This has been particularly evident within far right milieus, which have a history of linking international movement of people and the spread of disease (Kraut, 1995; Markel and Stern, 2002). Concepts of 'globalism' and 'anti-éliteism' have also become key components in conspiracy around the pandemic terminology often deployed as thinly veiled antisemitism (O'Donnell, 2019). The growth of these conspiracies does not necessarily imply a stronger or more robust Far Right, but it has led to growing concern as to the impact that such patterns of discourse may have on the relationship between individuals and their communities, society, or democratic government (Gerrand, 2020a, 2020b).

Understanding how these conspiracies operate online and their wider impact has become a contemporary imperative. Belief in such conspiracies has been shown in early studies to create society-wide health issues, negatively affecting the likelihood that individuals will adhere to safety guidelines and participate in vaccination programmes and potentially exposing others to harm and enabling the spread of the virus. One study finds that exposure to harmful information may make people more vulnerable by discouraging appropriate protective actions, promoting the use of false remedies, misrepresenting transmission mechanisms, downplaying risks, tricking people into buying fake protection, and victimising alleged spreaders (Hansson, *et al.*, 2021). They suggested developing a set of "risk communication plans" to address "information-related vulnerabilities", such as those evident on social media platforms [3].

Other studies have suggested the need for more holistic approaches to COVID-19 conspiracies specifically, finding that belief in such theories may be boosted by low levels of trust and low levels of comprehensive, accessible information [4]. Such findings have identified an urgent need for researchers to develop interventions, with the potential to (re)establish mechanisms of trust in governmental and health-related authorities. Reports and commentary have tended to strongly link conspiracy theories with movements such as QAnon, with a recent report analysing QAnon Twitter hashtags finding that one third of tweets were centred on coronavirus denial, with one in five involving anti-semitic, Islamophobic or anti-immigrant rhetoric [5].

Such conspiracies have been shown to be instrumental in the continued growth of political and societal polarisation. Europe has become increasingly polarised in recent years, following new trends in identity and cultural politics, financial crises, new malicious political actors, and the rise of irregular forms of online media (McNeil-Willson, *et al.*, 2019). Studies indicate that political polarisation has been greatly accentuated by COVID-19 through the enabling of particularly far-right politics, which have used the crisis to normalise extreme narratives, off-line and online (Garcia-Mangano, *et al.*, 2021; Herath, *et al.*, 2021). Such conspiracies are overwhelmingly rooted in racism and xenophobia through their negative framing of elites (often as linked to 'globalist' Jewish conspiracies) and of migrant minorities (often blamed for the spread of the virus), and therefore often intersect with patterns of polarisation. With greater concern about the role polarisation plays in diminishing community cohesion, democratic practice, and potentially stoking violent extremism (christchurchcall.com, 2019), research is needed to support technology companies and governments to develop more sophisticated responses that utilise holistic approaches to polarisation and its impacts.

This article presents a small-scale and preliminary analysis of COVID-19 anti-vaccine conspiracy narratives about the theme of a 'planned' global pandemic. The following four central framings were inductively generated from the collected data: 1) vaccines as a form of governmental control; 2) vaccines as a form of societal reset; 3) vaccines as unnecessary; and 4) vaccines as unsafe. A representative sample dataset of 900 tweets, collected at intervals between December 2020 and April 2021, was then semi-manually analysed to offer a snapshot of how such concepts were being developed and deployed by users. The period analysed has particular relevance because it included not just the start of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout by several European states but also the start of a determined public effort by Twitter, from 16 December 2020, to "prioritise the removal of the most harmful misleading information" on COVID vaccines (Twitter, 2020). Analysis of the data found a high level of hostile and confrontational out-group building amongst users that deploy conspiracy narratives.

The development of responses to information-related vulnerabilities that support greater trust in human rights, rule of law and health-related authorities fits well within the scope of existing off-line Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) approaches currently taking place in Europe (*cf.*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2021) and elsewhere. By therefore examining previous CVE-linked resilience-based approaches — drawing on work conducted by Grossman, *et al.* (2000) as part of the BRAVE-14 resilience measures — this article details possibilities for creating communities online that are more resilient to conspiracy as a means of pre-emptively suppressing patterns of polarisation. In particular, it suggests that existing concepts of bridging capital and linking capital offer significant possibilities for developing responses to online conspiracy and are key for moving beyond 'negative' approaches, such as content removal and user blocking, currently prioritised by social media platforms, towards more 'positive' resilience-building approaches.

Resilience

Resilience as a means of countering violence and polarisation is a relatively recent addition to contemporary European policy and practice (Dunn Cavelty, *et al.*, 2015; Pospisil and Gruber, 2016). The term has, generally, been used more extensively beyond the European sphere (All-Party Parliamentary Group for the British Council, 2017) and where it has been used in the global north, has more traditionally focused on organisations and infrastructure (Carlson, *et al.*, 2012). However, recent studies, such as those undertaken in Melbourne (Grossman, *et al.*, 2020), Minnesota (Weine and Ahmed, 2012) and Canada (Joosse, *et al.*, 2015), are part of a wider push to utilise resilience-based approaches in a global north context as a means of creating long-term community-led responses to societal insecurity and political polarisation (Stephens and Sieckelmeck, 2019).

Resilience has been conceptualised as the ability of people to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on a variety of sources of strength and resources to maintain core functioning when met with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma (Kirmayer, *et al.*, 2009). Traditionally associated with individual psychological response mechanisms (Hall and Lamont, 2013), researchers have begun to pioneer a way to reframe it as a socio-ecological phenomenon (Mukherjee and Kumar, 2017). Resilience thus becomes a dynamic process, one that can be enhanced or diminished by the allocation and negotiation of interlinked personal, social and cultural resources (Munoz and Wynn, 2013; Singh, *et al.*, 2016; Wynn, 2009). Applying resilience theory and practices to countering extremist online activity offers a means for creating communities

contextual factors and social resources (Truman and Warren, 2015; Sippel, et al., 2015; Ungar, 2008). Analysing resilience risks and protections as opportunity structures offers a means for assessing communities' adaptability and transformative capacity in response to changes, challenges and adversities (Grossman, et al., 2017).

On this reading, resilience becomes 'relational, subjective and contextual' (Bottrell, 2009; Ungar, 2004), potentially involving a dynamic interplay of factors that can strengthen or weaken communities (Bonanno, 2005). In practice, resilience-building measures have tended to emphasise means of building trust in wider communities and with authorities, familiarity with one's cultural heritage(s) and a rejection of violence-related beliefs and behaviours. Such traits have formed the foundation of current polarisation measures, including the BRAVE-14, Diminishing Opportunities for Violent Extremism (DOVE) models and the Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRAVE) Polarisation Indicators (Grossman, et al., 2017; McNeil-Willson, et al., 2019; Weine, 2017).

Although there has been some early research into the construction and use of resilience in off-line Countering Violent Extremism policy and practice, relatively little exists on its possible role in online P/CVE arenas, such as its potential for countering extremism on social media platforms. The Internet and social media, and their role in promoting or enabling polarising content, has been a concern since the early days of the Internet, with far right groups some of the first to instrumentalise the new communication possibilities (Conway, et al., 2019). Debate continues around the extent of the Internet's role in acts of violence and researchers have cautioned against over-emphasising the roles of social media platforms in (violent) extremism processes without also accounting for off-line interactions and wider political contexts (von Behr, et al., 2013; Gill, et al., 2017; Gill, et al., 2015; Rogan, 2006; Schlegel, 2018). However, specific concerns have been raised about the impact that social media has had on mainstreaming more extreme views and entrenching patterns of polarisation in societies [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought fresh urgency to understanding how online spaces can be strengthened against polarisation, conspiracy and other malicious forms of misinformation, as well as the potential role(s) for resilience-based concepts within this.

Methods

For this study, Twitter was chosen as the site of research because it is a highly public-facing platform that has already developed responses to harmful online content and misinformation; for instance, coordinated removal of QAnon-related content and the community-based Birdwatch initiative (Coleman, 2021). Downloads of Twitter data were carried out using NODEXL and coding conducted using the program MAXQDA, with datasets gathered in December 2020, February 2021 and April 2021. An exploratory Boolean search, conducted using the terms 'COVID-19' AND 'vaccine', created an initial dataset of 27,311 tweets which, through exploratory analysis, pointed to the term 'plandemic' being a prominent feature of conspiratorial tweets.

The framing of the COVID-19 pandemic as planned fits within existing understandings of conspiracy. Definitions of conspiracies as encompassing intentionalism, dualism and occultism are found in the suggestions that the arrival and spread of the pandemic was not coincidental, was conducted by elites and was carried out as part of a malicious, hidden agenda. Other recent studies in COVID-19 conspiracies have also highlighted the importance of the plandemic narrative, with de Smedt and Rupar (2020) finding that '#plandemic' was the conspiracy hashtag used most frequently by QAnon-linked accounts, evident in 29.4 percent of conspiracy-related tweets, more than other ideas such as the 'Deep State', the 'Great Replacement' or movement hashtags such as #QAnon, #MEGA or #MAGA [7]. The term 'plandemic' thus forms a handy point of departure for understanding how specific conspiracy theories develop around and intersect with COVID-19 vaccines. By isolating these terms, a more focussed set of three time-separated datasets were collected.

The datasets

Focussing on the concept of a planned pandemic, three datasets were collected by conducting Boolean searches using the terms 'COVID-19 vaccine' and 'plandemic', scheduled at intervals to allow for greater representation of narratives across several months. The first dataset was collected between 30 November and 7 December 2020, the second between 11 February and 18 February 2021, and the third between 12 April and 19 April 2021. These datasets were then cleaned, including removal of non-English language tweets, instances of 'hashtag hijacking' and other instances where the search terms were deployed without any wider context. A total of 2,992 tweets were collected from the three downloads, from which representative samples were generated for manual analysis. Nine hundred tweets were sampled from the original dataset — roughly 30 percent of its total — and weighted based on the size of the datasets. See Table 1 for details.

Dataset	Dates collected	Number of tweets	Percentage of total	Representative sample size
1	30/11/20–07/12/20	1,281	43	387
2	11/02/21–18/02/21	952	32	288
3	12/04/21–19/04/21	759	25	225
Total		2,992	100	900

Two-step coding

The datasets then underwent a two-step analysis, to determine their content and intent respectively. This involved a semi-manual analysis, in which the data was coded using MAXQDA to highlight prominent themes evident in the tweets, as well as their purposes, such as sharing information, engaging in conversation or encouraging action.

Firstly, a coding of the language within the tweets was carried out, to determine the frames being used. From Dataset 1, the tweets were coded to create an overview of the kinds of concepts that were being associated with COVID-19 vaccines and the 'plandemic' at the start of December 2020. This resulted in an initial 21 frames being identified which, were then re-coded, with overlapping frames absorbed into one another (for instance, the frames *Governmental Power* and *Monitoring* were absorbed to create the singular frame *Vaccines as Control*; frames such as *Faulty Vaccine* or *Untested* were absorbed into the singular frame *Vaccines as Unsafe*). Several checks were added to this process, with content undergoing external coding checks by academic peers to ensure the data was not being misinterpreted or misrepresented. A series of Harel-Koren visualisations of the most commonly occurring word groupings within the datasets were also constructed, to confirm these terms were prominent within a wider narrative context (Harel and Koren, 2001).

The second coding step was designed to determine how these conspiracies were being deployed. Drawing upon previous studies on how individuals use Twitter to engage in conversation (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012), tweets were manually coded on the basis of the following typology: 1) information-sharing; 2) in-group community building; 3) out-group community building; or 4) action-taking. This process aimed to determine how 'plandemic' conspiracy narratives were being shared, how in- and out-group communities were being constructed, and if and how action-taking was encouraged. This two-step process allowed for consideration of tweets both within their narrative context, as well as the roles they were playing in online communities.

Findings 1: The main #plandemic conspiracies

Identifying the conspiracy frames

Using Dataset 1, four key frames were identified (see Table 2). Several of these frames were found in more than one tweet and were therefore sometimes overlapping in their use.

Number	Framing	Prominent related hashtags
1	Vaccine as Control	id2020; quantum tattoo; Bill Gates; Medical Tyranny; COVID1984; monitoring
2	Vaccine as Reset	great reset; operation lockstep; population genocide; New World Order; depopulation
3	Vaccine as Unnecessary	Virus; Deadly; False Positives; Common Flu
4	Vaccine as Unsafe	false positive covid tests; faulty; untested

The first framing identified was that of *Vaccines as Control*, which was based on the idea that COVID-19 vaccines represent a means by governments to exercise undue control over individuals, bound within concepts of liberty and/or libertarianism. One specific element of this was the suggestion that individuals can be tracked or identified following receipt of COVID-19 vaccinations. Within this framing existed the sub-framing that there was some form of identifying marker built into vaccines — an idea propounded by users who drew upon and shared a select few scientific papers that had raised the idea of incorporating dye into vaccinations to identify individuals who have had them (McHugh, et al., 2019). Whilst most of the papers cited and shared were published prior to the pandemic, only one paper explicitly mentions the possibility of dye being used in conjunction with the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations (Manivannan and Ponnuchamy, 2020), and there has been no suggestion of this actually being done by vaccine producers. Dyes have only been tested on animal skin to date and researchers' discussions are focussed on their potential in the global south, where limited infrastructure means it may be more difficult to determine if certain communities have received important vaccinations (Weise, 2020). As one user stated:

They have never been able to develop a vaccine against coronavirus. It was designed to issue a digital vaccination passport to scan track trace and control your every movements. [sic]

This framing is often linked to concepts of 'globalism', whereby capitalist inequality is recast in a conspiratorial guise. In this instance, it was routinely focussed on figures such as Bill Gates and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, suggesting that their role in vaccine development and supporting rollout in less wealthy countries enabled the microchipping of individuals who received the vaccine (gatesfoundation.org, 2020). This inclusion of Bill Gates is somewhat similar to the framing of George Soros as an equally malign global spectre. This implication of such figures in a global conspiracy is a common trope of far right groups protesting governmental control (cf., Hart, 2020; O'Donnell, 2019):

The second framing identified was the idea of *Vaccines as Reset*, a framing which emphasised more millenarian aspects than the first. It envisioned COVID-19 as orchestrated by a cadre of high-profile figures in politics and business as a means of fundamentally altering existing economic and political systems via the pandemic. This allegedly included attacks on nationalism and nation states to allow the conditions for an elite-led revolution against the rest of humanity. The origins of the term ‘Great Reset’ lie in a sustainable development impact summit, run by the World Economic Forum on 21–24 September 2020, to consider ways for ‘stakeholders to cooperate in simultaneously managing the direct consequences of the COVID-19 crisis’ (weforum.org, 2020). A follow-up event in January 2021 led the WEF to adopt ‘the Great Reset’ and incorporate global youth leaders into the initiative through a global summit (Bandarage, 2020). Whilst the use of the term by the World Economic Forum is benign, it has been given a darker vision by some conspiracy theorists, who have incorporated existing, racialised far right conspiracies (O’Connor, 2021). One example is the concept of the ‘Great Replacement’, in which elites are attempting to remove ‘white majorities’ from Western countries (Beckett, 2018; Gullestad, 2017; Lavandera and Hanna, 2019; Murdoch and Mulhall, 2019);

the WEF agenda ... The Plandemic/Vaccine business is part of the funding for the Great Reset ...

One ‘Great Reset’ sub-theory, articulated in the dataset, is called ‘Operation Lockstop’, which cast the COVID pandemic as conceived in a 2010 scenario-planning exercise by the Rockefeller Foundation. The actual event envisioned how hypothetical future crises could impact on the development of technology, with one scenario envisioning a global “weaponized SARS/HIV/MERS virus” (Evon, 2020). This conspiracy framed the COVID-19 pandemic as planned well in advance of 2019, with proponents ‘finding’ evidence for this claim in many, often mundane, events or happenings, including the 2012 London Olympics (Reuters, 2020). Within this framing, vaccines were an integral part of the ‘reset’, paving the way for technological and market integration through social media, artificial intelligence and biotechnology to continue and grow in ways that disadvantage and disenfranchise most of the world’s population, whilst advantaging an often hazily constructed global elite (Bandarage, 2020):

The plandemic is absolute bs. The vaccine isn’t one, it’s an experimental mRNA gene therapy. This is all for the reset.

The third identified framing, of *Vaccines as Unnecessary*, tied into wider scepticism around the dangers — or even the existence — of the COVID-19 virus. Ideas included ‘virus-99%-survival’ and ‘deadly-[as]common-flu’, suggesting that vaccines were unnecessary due to, for instance, a low overall mortality rate, or a lack of degree of connection by users to individuals who had been infected by the virus. It was built upon a belief prevalent from the outset of the pandemic that the manufacturing of fear around COVID-19 was integral to the process of control and/or reset by authorities, and that a key part of challenging increasing governmental control should involve a rejection of such fear of the virus:

They’ve already filled the gen-pop with fear, whatever happens from here is down to stupidity from the public and a driven agenda that’s been clear from day 1 of lockdown. #Plandemic

Users circulating this framing also suggested that the numbers of individuals recorded as dying from COVID-19 had been vastly inflated by authorities, a process involving governments, healthcare staff, pharmaceutical companies and national and international media bodies, all of whom were imagined to have interests in maintaining high levels of fear around COVID-19.

The fourth and last framing was of *Vaccines as Unsafe*, due to their having been inadequately tested or developed within a very short timeframe. Terms derived from the Harel-Koren visualisation included repetitive use of phrases ‘Vaccine-being-rushed’, ‘faulty-tests’ and ‘pushing-untested-vaccine’. This framing suggests that there was a grave danger around the use of vaccines and — whilst not necessarily denying the existence and danger of COVID nor implying any necessary malign intent on the part of authorities — this framing centred on concerns over the speed with which the vaccine was developed and nationwide rollouts implemented.

In order to do so, they will be required to inject a lethal vaccine!????? I still call bullshit and not convince that this plandemic is legit! [sic]

Example tweets included those claiming vaccines would result in severe long-term side effects, that there were dangerous elements within vaccines that altered human DNA, that vaccines were inadequately tested, as well as sharing anecdotes about individuals who had supposedly been vaccinated and been made permanently ill or died as a result. Often, it was suggested that information about incidents involving individuals who had supposedly been killed or injured by vaccines was being deliberately and maliciously suppressed by authorities to ensure continued participation in vaccination programmes:

“[Her] liver, kidneys and heart shut down.” Utah mom [Name Redacted] dies four days after second dose of Moderna

Development of conspiracy frames

Once the above four frames were identified, Datasets 1, 2 and 3 were coded to determine the extent to which these frames were still evident throughout the period of study. Tracking whether certain conspiracy frames persisted over the period December 2020 to April 2021 could demonstrate either their traction and longevity or deteriorating salience within online vaccine misinformation networks throughout the period of study. This also helps us to consider how seriously we need to take concerns over specific frames in maintaining the ‘plandemic’ narrative.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), there was a significant decline in the number of tweets linked to COVID-19 vaccines and the concept of a #plandemic between December 2020 and April 2021. One explanation for this is that the active takedown of misinformation started by Twitter in mid-December 2020 impacted on the number of #plandemic tweets collected.

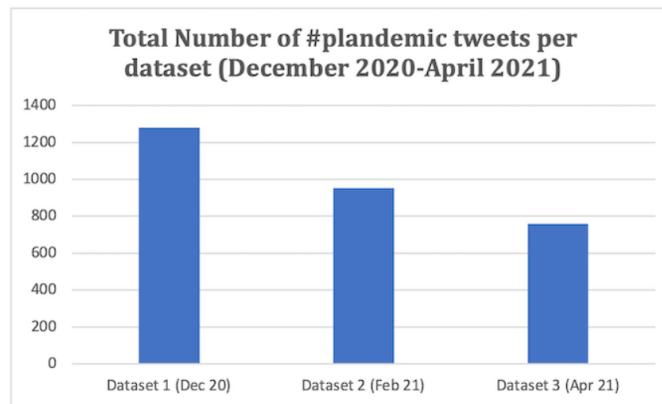


Figure 1: Number of #plandemic tweets per dataset.

Along with this decline in the total number of #plandemic tweets, the number of times that the four #plandemic conspiracy frames occurred were also recorded. Evidence was found of a general decline of the frames across the three datasets, with all four recording lower instances in April 2021 than in December 2020. See [Table 3](#) for a breakdown of these results.

Table 3: Number of #plandemic conspiracy tweets and core framings.				
Framing	Dataset 1 (Dec-20)	Dataset 2 (Feb-21)	Dataset 3 (Apr-21)	Total
As Control	77	47	27	151
As Reset	54	18	39	111
As Unnecessary	54	27	32	113
As Unsafe	57	64	40	161

These findings suggest that there was marked overall decline in the sharing of #plandemic conspiracies in the period studied, with the decline most notable around *Vaccines as Control*. However, tweets about vaccine safety remained relatively constant, as did framing of vaccines as part of a global ‘reset’. This suggests that, whilst take-downs had some impact, this was patchy, with the four key frames still evident in online milieus linked to discussions on #plandemic. All four frames were still evident across the dataset at the end of the data collection period in April 2021, recorded in 12 percent to 17.3 percent of #plandemic tweets coded. Thus, it can be concluded that the concept of a ‘planned’ pandemic was affected in terms of the number of tweets, but certainly not nullified by Twitter’s attempts to remove conspiracy-related content and users.

Resilience-based responses may alleviate such limitations within current takedown approaches. In considering where resilience-based approaches may be best deployed however, it is necessary not just to consider the narratives constructed but also their purposes. Therefore, having detailed the main framings of ‘plandemic’ vaccine conspiracies, the datasets were analysed to determine the purposes of these tweets.

Findings 2: The deployment of #plandemic conspiracies

The next task carried out was a coding of the representative sample datasets, to determine the way the identified four frames were being deployed by Twitter users. Drawing upon existing research into how tweets are used to spread narratives and engagement (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012), all tweets in Datasets 1, 2, and 3 were manually coded on the basis of type, using the following typology: 1) information-sharing; 2) in-group community building; 3) out-group community building; or 4) action-taking. Through this coding process, a significant number of tweets were found to be focussed on out-group community-building and written as a form of negative interaction with other Twitter users.

Purpose of tweet	Number of tweets	As percentage (%)
Information sharing	220	24.4
In-group community-building	138	15.3
Out-group community-building	421	46.8
Action taking	900	100

Information-sharing involved the sharing of external links, designed to shape other users' perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines, and included the linking of relevant news, facts, reports and events. In this instance, a tweet's primary purpose was to inform, rather than to encourage any specific mobilisation or active response, using one-way interaction from the author and without attempted interaction with other users. Such tweets did not directly deploy @username kinds of direct engagement and were posted not as part of a conversation but as a means of pushing information out onto the platform to followers or individuals who searched specific hashtags. Previous research into instances of information-sharing have suggested that this often represents the primary focus of tweets by, for instance, non-governmental organisations and civil society groups, who are seeking to engage individuals and communities in their activism (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012). An example from the dataset reads:

Criminal Pfizer Inc. Wins COVID Vaccine Race? Hundreds of Millions of Doses Expected to be Ready Within Weeks Read more: <https://t.co/cH6v102iE6> #CovidVaccine #CovidHoax #Plandemic #MedicalTyranny #HealthFreedom <https://t.co/l2H6k130>

Of 900 tweets, 220 or 24.4 percent of the total dataset were recorded as having information-sharing as their primary purpose. These often included external links to research papers, articles or media that supported conspiracy narratives, as well as use of relevant hashtags to attract users who may be less likely to engage with the 'plandemic' conspiracy narratives — such as those who were likely not members of Twitter's 'plandemic' community:

Study: Proper Levels of Vitamin D will Prevent COVID — Vaccine not Needed: <https://t.co/naaFdXR0d9> #VitaminD #Plandemic #CovidHoax #CovidVaccine #InformedConsent #MedicalTyranny #BigPhARMA

The second purpose coded for, in-group community-building, involved direct engagement with other users in an effort at positive dialogue or communication. This in-group community-building would either be horizontal, in the form of conversation with specific users as part of an existing conversation, or vertical, as an attempt to initiate conversation with a group of users who were thought to be sympathetic to a user's aims, with authors sometimes adding several Twitter handles to the start or end of their tweet. Understanding the extent to which in-group community-building occurred helps in assessment of the extent to which similar minded or sympathetic individuals were in communication or attempting to communicate with each other in the datasets and thus engaging in forms of online community-building. One example of vertical in-group building was demonstrated in the below tweet, in which the author attempted to initiate discussion with conspiracy-sympathetic media groups and public personalities:

Hmmm ... Wonder if the Certification Of Vaccine IDentification (Literal COVID Acronym) Plandemic will be NEXT?
#PatriotRodSteel @DrCharlieWard1? @OSSRobertSteele?? @OANN?? @newsmax?? @seanhannity?? @TuckerCarlson??
@RevDrNeilThomas? @dru_morales

Of the 900 manually coded tweets, 138 were coded as having as their core purpose in-group community-building, representing 15.3 percent of the dataset. This suggests that relatively few tweets were addressed towards those who already believed in or were sympathetic towards conspiracy theories.

The third purpose of tweets, based on Lovejoy and Saxton's typology, is out-group community building. These were tweets that directly addressed individual users identified as hostile by the tweet author. Overwhelmingly, these were accounts run by governmental structures, scientists, members of national or regional parliaments or individuals linked to vaccine development. A significant theme identified was distrust towards an identified government, governments generally or elected representatives (such as MPs or political parties). Of the 262 instances of outgroup community building, 105 were addressed towards governmental actors or politicians, suggesting they were implicated in some form of 'plandemic'. Notably, the dataset was not divided along partisan lines: 39 instances were recorded of users addressing politicians associated with left, centre-left, or traditionally left-leaning parties, such as Justin Trudeau, Keir Starmer, Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton; 37 tweets engaged politicians of right-wing or right-leaning parties, such as Boris Johnson or Matt Hancock. An additional 17 instances were recorded where members of the British Royal Family were addressed as planning the pandemic, as well as several towards governmental bodies or departments. As such, this finding suggests that distrust of authorities (over and above political allegiance) is a notable feature of such tweets.

@MattHancock Remind us all again why we need a vaccine for a virus that has a 99.99% survival and recovery rate??? ??
#Plandemic #Agenda21 #ID2020 #Operationlockstep #Quantumtatoo #Coronavirus #Covid19 #Greatreset

Another key group addressed in tweets was those involved in health care or vaccine development, including pharmaceutical companies, doctors and health services, representing 105 instances found within the representative dataset. The greatest number of these were those linked to Bill Gates and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with 40 tweets framing Gates as involved in or benefitting from a planned pandemic, whilst 32 were addressed to pharmaceutical companies. A further group addressed in out-group building was transnational organisations, making up 16 instances within the dataset, and including the World Health Organisation, World Economic Forum, United Nations, World Bank, and European Commission, amongst others. Other targets included national media or social media platforms, which were addressed in 13 tweets, as well as accounts run by banks or other businesses, such as Amazon and Netflix.

Guess who won through this plandemic? @amazon @Walmart @SamsClub @Disney @netflix Guess who lost? Every small business!! All of them! Fuck the new normal! We're all rebels now baby!

There was a notable level of targeting of Jewish individuals or addressing individuals using coded Antisemitism. Sixty-four instances of negative targeting of Jewish individuals or groups were recorded, which often included references to traditional anti-Semitic conspiracy tropes such as 'globalism', George Soros, the Bilderberg group and the Rockefeller Foundation as attempting to control societies through the vaccine.

In the representative sample dataset, 421 negative interactions were found, representing 46.8 percent of recorded 'plandemic' engagements. Overall, therefore, it was found that interactions around #plandemic on Twitter in the period studied were largely oppositional in nature.

The last tweet purpose coded for was that of action-taking, which did not engage individual users nor direct them towards specific information, but rather attempted to encourage readers to take specific actions. Often these actions were vague in their potential execution — such as asking readers to 'wake up', but others included specific requests to share information and arguments, or to retweet certain ideas. Some more specific action-taking statements included requests for users to familiarise themselves with national and local laws on non-compliance with healthcare and COVID regulations, as well as Twitter activity identifying individuals perceived as hostile to anti-vaccination communities:

"Don't even think. Just take the 1st #CoronaVaccine." See, they're telling u themselves — only mindless zombies take vaccines. Make a list of these bio terrorist docs/scientist. Now is the time to know who's the enemy.

Even with most requested actions vague in their formulations, this was still the smallest number of tweets, with just 121 or 13.4 percent labelled as encouraging action-taking.

Overall, nearly two-thirds of tweets in the dataset (62.1 percent) had some form of direct engagement with other users (46.8 percent as out-group building, 15.3 percent as in-group building). This represents a high level of engagement by these tweeters with communities and individuals outside of their own, but ones that were conducted through largely oppositional processes. Meanwhile, there was very limited use of action-orientated tweets (13.4 percent) but, at nearly a quarter of all tweets, many more instances of information-sharing (24.4 percent). The findings from both the coding of the conspiracy narratives and the way the narratives were deployed point to the potential utility of responses that specifically tackle the oppositional way in which the conspiracy frames identified were formed and deployed.

Resilience response

This final section draws upon existing approaches towards resilience most notably the work of Grossman, *et al.* (2020), who developed the BRAVE resilience measures — to consider how resilience-based approaches could form part of a response to online conspiracies. The BRAVE measures are based upon five key concepts: 1) Cultural identity and connectedness; 2) Bridging capital; 3) Linking capital; 4) Violence-related behaviours; and 5) Violence-related beliefs. They were designed to focus on the 'key socio-cultural assets that facilitate a personal sense of wellbeing and security, group-level acceptance and belonging, and interaction between different socio-cultural groups, communities, institutions or authorities' [8]. This section considers how these five resilience-based concepts could point to workable responses to the four 'plandemic' conspiracy frames identified in the datasets, particularly in reference to the specific ways in which the 'plandemic' frames were found to be developed and deployed.

Cultural identity and connectedness highlight the importance of cultural traditions, familiarity with culture and centrality of cultural identity in developing community resilience against polarisation. However, within the three datasets from December 2020, February 2021 and April 2021, there was a prevalence of oppositional engagement with out-groups — evident in 46.8 percent of tweets analysed. With the largest coded set of tweets focussed on outgroup building through hostile forms of engagement, identity may have been constructed within the dataset through means that were negative and oppositional. In addition, relatively limited levels of in-group community-building (*i.e.*, 15.3 percent of individual tweets) was observed too. Thus, the BRAVE resilience factor of 'connectedness' may have some relevance here, as community- and identity-building was being undertaken in a way contrary to resilience practice and conducive to polarisation.

This also has implications for the second BRAVE factor, bridging capital, which examines the level of trust individuals have in persons outside their own community or networks, support from persons outside their community and engagement with diverse others. Whilst engagement with a diverse set of other users was observable in the overall dataset, this was largely being carried out in an antagonistic manner. In particular, low levels of trust were demonstrated towards persons perceived as holding different opinions. As the BRAVE measures find, “there is an association between the absence of bridging capital and enhanced vulnerability to the appeal of violent extremism” [9]. Reading the findings described in the previous section through the lens of bridging capital, poor trust was displayed towards out-groups demonstrated in hostile engagement with them. These findings suggest that increasing bridging capital on social media platforms may have a positive outcome with respect to also increasing resilience.


The BRAVE factor of linking capital also seems to be a key site for online resilience-building. In contrast to bridging capital — which focuses on horizontal links between different communities — linking capital examines vertical links between individuals and authorities, focussing on levels of trust shown between individuals or communities and law enforcement agencies, as well as public feelings of confidence in democratic practice or engagement with authorities [10]. Identifying the framings of the ‘pandemic’ conspiracy narratives shows that distrust of authorities is high amongst those propounding such conspiracy theories. However, the displayed distrust was not just towards governments and politicians, but healthcare, media and other societal structures. Notably, a high level of out-group and oppositional tweets suggest that there was engagement with authorities taking place, but that users felt they were not being heard or that there were limited means by which individuals could engage authorities positively regarding their concerns.

Finally, the analysis shows that the levels of violence-related beliefs and behaviours were low within the dataset; very few individual tweets or interactions displayed action-oriented behaviours, and there was no explicit mention of or support for actual violence. The low level of action-oriented tweets may be related to takedown activity by Twitter — both around misinformation since December 2020 and threats/incitement to violence generally — which may plausibly have ensured that overtly threatening language had either been moderated by the platform or avoided by users to prevent being flagged for removal. However, whilst violence is not openly accepted, the volume of tweets aimed at high profile individuals and the high level of anti-Semitism was notable, pointing to a need to consider how this area of the resilience-building model can be recast to consider wider conceptualisations of harm.

Conclusion

This study was small scale and preliminary and the findings should thus be considered exploratory. The two-step analysis process nonetheless strongly suggested that Twitter users who propounded some of the more extreme conspiracy theories were highly distrustful of authorities, as would be expected. However, also demonstrated was that there were some attempts at engagement by these users with authorities and other communities, even if it was as part of a process of out-group building. By understanding not just the kinds of conspiracies that were being circulated, but also the purposes of the tweets in which they were contained, this article sought to offer some tentative suggestions as to how social media platforms may develop further online resilience-building tools and approaches.

Connecting the findings from the tweet analysis with resilience-building models suggests that linking and bridging capital may be key in developing stronger online communities and responses. Firstly, it is recommended that social media companies could focus more on how to better enable online interaction between those who may be sympathetic towards aspects of conspiracy theories and other groups and networks who may not be, as well as how to engage with alternative resources through this process. This would help to move those who could develop more extreme views away from Twitter communities that push conspiracy theories at an early stage. Secondly, and perhaps even more critically, resilience-based online approaches should consider how to support online and off-line programmes that develop better engagement with authorities, such as government agencies, including healthcare, political representatives and the national media — or else find more positive, legitimate means of political expression and engagement.

The findings suggest that there was an attempt by users who believed that the pandemic was planned and were sceptical about the vaccine to engage with authorities, but that this was overwhelmingly being carried out in a hostile manner. As such, whilst takedowns may be diminishing the number of #pandemic tweets and potentially reducing overt threats, less overt threats are not being responded to adequately. Resilience-based approaches and methods that inform users about, or link them to, political structures and democratic practices such as online information on democratic engagement, knowledge training in running campaigns, or practices supporting positive interactions with elected officials, for instance — are potentially more refined than takedowns in tackling conspiracy-led online polarisation and extremism around COVID-19 vaccines. 

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Notes

1. Butter and Knight, 2020, p. 1; Cubitt, 1989, p. 13.
2. Barkun, 2013, pp. 3–4.
3. Hansson, *et al.*, 2021, p. 380.
4. van Mulukom, *et al.*, 2022, pp. 3–4.
5. de Smedt and Rugar, 2020, p. 6.
6. Barber, *et al.*, 2017, pp. 26 and 47–28; Karlsen, *et al.*, 2017; O’Callaghan, *et al.*, 2014; Sardoé and Deželan, 2018, p. 6 and 33.
7. de Smedt and Rugar, 2020, p. 19.
8. Grossman, *et al.*, 2020, p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Grossman, *et al.*, 2020, p. 15.

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Understanding the #pandemic: Core framings on Twitter and what this tells us about countering online far right COVID-19 conspiracies

by Richard McNeil-Willson.

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