

Honours Thesis (Due Apr 13)

The Honours Thesis is your final research paper for this class. With the volatile covid19 situation and research policy regulations, we likely won't have the opportunity to gather empirical data through direct interactions with human participants other than through virtual means. This poses its own conundrums for the research process, of how to recruit participants, conduct research, and meet ethical standards. If you chose a quantitative approach, conducting surveys might be too labour-intensive and pose its own challenges. An alternative is to use available statistical data sets (e.g. census reports). We have a number of faculty members, who work in the innovative field of big data and digital data, and who can help you with that. For those of you interested in qualitative methods, there is also a range of textual and visual data that can be examined, such as archival materials, newspaper reports, and other textual, sonic and visual media. It is important that you choose an approach that you can relate to and be willing to dig deeper into. Your choice of a thesis supervisor should be informed by your methods choices.

All further details, including the organization of your thesis will be discussed in the course. The expected length of the thesis is between 8,000-10,000 words.

COURSE OUTLINE

AP/SOCI 4000 B. 6.0 HONOURS THESIS

REMOTE DELIVERY/BLENDED

Faculty of Liberal Arts
and Professional Studies
Department of Sociology
York University
2020-2021 Y Term
Prof.

Synchronous Meetings
T 11:30-2:30

Course Description

This class fulfills the senior thesis requirements in the Sociology program. There are many compelling reasons for you to take the Honours Thesis course, apart from writing a thesis. Foremost, it offers you the opportunity to conduct research on a topic that you truly care about. You will be able to plan, conduct, and write up your research and receive excellent peer support in addition to being supervised by another faculty member in our program.

This class builds on the comprehensive body of theories and methods that you have acquired during your junior and senior years of sociology training at York. To accommodate the spectrum of individual research interests, I generally do not highlight a single substantive topic in this course. However, 2020 is unlike any other year, and we will strategize how to work around shared concerns (e.g. climate crisis, anti-black racism, covid19, if there is interest). Either way, I will make sure that our class activities and assignments tackle such contemporary issues to illuminate the very practical tasks and problems of research design, practice, ethics and writing.

In this course we learn from each other's projects and create synergy effects by sharing ideas and solutions as we enter different phases of the research process. Taking on the responsibility to design a senior thesis project can feel overwhelming or even intimidating. This is absolutely normal; but do understand that you are not in a solitary place. My course supports you at different stages of research work, offering advice on how to find an original question and organize your research project. To enable a positive learning experience and help you relate sociological knowledge to social and cultural worlds, this course uses appropriate pedagogical tools that help you succeed.

During the 2020 covid19 pandemic and its resulting regulations of public life, there are certain limitations on our ability to conduct research. Studies that involve face-to-face interviews or in-person surveys, focus groups, participant observation etc. need to be redesigned or left altogether. Research with vulnerable groups will make research ethics even more challenging than they would usually be. With these limitations in mind, we can respond and find meaningful ways to do our research. Our objectives are broader than just applying a method to a given topic. This course encourages critical reflections on research practice and our role as publicly engaged sociologists. And the times couldn't be more relevant for doing that.

As fourth-year students, you have now acquired a deeper understanding of the complex nature of sociological knowledge formation. You have had the opportunity to debate the political and ethical dimensions of sociological practices. Creating your own research project allows you to become an active researcher and relate to sociological knowledge production. As mentioned, this process can be messy and difficult to navigate at first. However, it is also a great opportunity to reflect on your position, contribution and the societal contexts that shape sociological research in general. Research and writing can boost your confidence in your chosen career and in graduate school. Inasmuch as this course is about practicing research and thesis writing skills, it is also about your personal and intellectual growth as a student sociologist. I am excited to join you on this journey together.

Course Learning Objectives

The Honours Thesis course aligns with the following program learning objectives for the Sociology Honors degree (see: http://laps.yorku.ca/files/2015/04/SLO_Sociology_BA.pdf):

- Build on and consolidate sociological knowledge (BA level) in ways that contribute to future careers
- Employ logical, lateral and/or imaginative thinking in addressing an original idea or problem
- Organize and critically assess social issues in a coherent argument when researching the topic of your own choice
- Examine, understand and critically assess sociological data and draw substantive conclusions
- Support and critically assess ideas using referenced evidence and original empirical data
- Examine biases and assumptions about knowledge, including the role of social location, positionality and intersectionality (race, ethnicity, class, sex/gender, ability/disability)
- Effectively manage time and balance commitments between education, work, friendship and family commitments

Our course design combines collaborative work in the classroom with in-depth independent research under thesis supervision by an individual faculty member. By taking this course, you can expect to:

- Be able to work in small peer groups cooperatively and effectively hone your teamwork skills in a research environment
- Learn from successes and failures in research, and acquire the skills to find solutions to challenges that occur in actual research practice
- Learn about research ethics and conduct your research with primary sources in adherence with ethical principles and current research policy
- Practice self-reflexive methods and in-class workshops on specific thematic issues and research problems
- Identify, select, and combine specific methodological tools and sociological debates to generate knowledge that contributes to social change and social justice
- Present your findings in the form of oral presentations and written reports in the classroom and receive training to communicate your research
- Gain experience working with others in and outside the classroom and learn to conduct yourself as a professional researcher

This is not an exclusive list. Instead, it helps you distinguish the goals of research capstone course in relation to other fourth-year seminars.

Course Organization in a Remote Format

The guiding principles of the course organization are to:

- create a healthy balance between (synchronous) class meetings (on the Zoom app) and individual study & research time (asynchronous)
- formulate benchmarks and activities that keep you in a good workflow without micromanaging your research
- provide various learning opportunities throughout the year to reflect on the research process and to learn from common mistakes
- facilitate collaboration within peer groups and your thesis supervisor in support of the major course assignments

This course is organized as a combination of in-class seminars that include individual and group activities, peer group forums on Moodle, social interaction with thesis supervisors, and individual time for research and writing. Course dynamics will gradually shift with every new research phase. Weekly live meetings on Zoom that help us build community are followed by sessions that alternate between synchronous and asynchronous elements. Note: The link to our weekly Zoom meeting is on the top page on the Moodle course. <https://moodle.info.yorku.ca/>

Weekly seminars emphasize interaction and group collaboration. I use introductory slides for most weeks to facilitate discussions and comment on key points in the readings. Do not expect comprehensive text summaries. Readings need to be prepared in advance of each session. The slides will be available on Moodle along with the Zoom live recording of the intro part with mics and cameras turned off.

I have adjusted all course materials to facilitate learning in a remote environment: slide presentations are much shorter and more condensed as they would normally be. I use more time for guided group activities, discussions, individual work and several breaks in-between the segments. There is a limited amount of activities per session.

My role in this course is that of an active facilitator. Whereas I introduce and moderate content and discussion, the success of this course is driven by your enthusiasm and commitment to your research projects. To maintain a level of fairness and objectivity, I will myself not supervise any of your Honours theses. However, I do my best to help you find your thesis supervisor.

On our Moodle page, you will find that the course is broadly organized into four sections. The details for each section, including links to Zoom meetings, assignments, resources and activities are all listed on Moodle. Here is a broad overview.

Key Objectives per Section

(1) Research Design (Weeks 1-6)

- Familiarize yourself with the course & thesis requirements
- Become part of a research community (virtual class & groups)
- Contemplate possible topics & learn how to create an original research question
- Read required readings: excerpts from research guides (Moodle) & prepare for a quiz
- Draft a formal email invitation to invite a thesis supervisor
- Identify your research problematic & write a one paragraph justification of your topic & research question to discuss in class

(2) Literature Review (Weeks 7-12)

- Participate in the remote library workshop to hone your literature search skills
- Experiment and adapt your search strategies (key words, journals etc.)
- Understand your annotated bibliography as a work-in-progress
- Prepare for your first Zoom meeting with your thesis supervisor
 - discuss questions about your field of research; consider options
 - get advice on primary sources & secondary research literature
 - learn what peer-reviewed sociology journals are crucial for your topic
- Prepare 2 powerpoint slides to support a 5-min presentation of your proposal
- Draft & submit your research proposal & annotated bibliography

(3) Conducting Research (Weeks 13-18)

- Use designated class time to address questions around data & analysis
- Create a checklist for your research targets
- Create a reasonable timeline and schedule weekly tasks, adjust them as needed
- Use a personalized system to organize your data & findings
- Note-taking and drafting short paragraphs are key
- Use group support, office hours, and designated class time to deal with roadblocks
- Prepare for and hold your second Zoom meeting with your thesis supervisor
- Seek out help & use course resources if you procrastinate

(4) Thesis Writing (Weeks 19-24)

- Use designated class time to organize your writing process
- Discuss & learn to use methods such as storyboarding to organize your writing
- Prepare 5 PowerPoint Slides to summarize your key findings in the Thesis Forum
- Create your final bibliography as you write
- Keep your reference style consistent while drafting sections
- Use peer support to receive feedback on drafts
- Use peer group as your writing group (meet to write, internal submission of drafts)
- Share a first draft of thesis with your supervisor
- Use remaining time to submission date for revisions, editing, and fine-tuning

Course Components & Evaluation

Your thesis supervisor is responsible for 60% of your course work, the other 40% I will grade. I do interact with each thesis supervisor at different stages of the course, share my syllabus, grading rubrics and discuss expectations beforehand, so that we have as much consistency as possible across the different Honours theses.

This division of labour reflects the importance placed on the research *process* rather than just the final product (thesis, research paper). Learning occurs in class, through interactive group activities, presentations and individual collaborations with your supervisor. Accordingly, significant weight is distributed over various assignments, including active participation and smaller, research-related tasks.

<u>Research Process & Course Participation <i>Evaluated by the Course Instructor</i></u>	40%
Research Quiz	10%
Team Wiki	10%
Participation	10%
Thesis Forum	10%
<u>Thesis Components: <i>Evaluated by the Thesis Supervisor</i></u>	60%
Annotated Bibliography (<i>submitted through Turnitin</i>)	20%
Honors Thesis (<i>submitted through Turnitin</i>)	40%

Note: We use the percentage scheme to grade assignments. For general information about the York grading system, consult your York University Undergraduate Calendar.

Explaining the Assignments (& Due Dates)

The course strikes a balance between synchronous and asynchronous components. Assignments have been carefully distributed. Some requirements have been changed to manage workload during covid19. Despite my best efforts, it will be necessary for you to plan ahead, factor in extra time, set yourself individual “due dates” prior to submitting the work. *Effective time management during research assignments is part of what we learn in this course.* All other accommodations need to be discussed with the course director and thesis supervisor at least three weeks prior to a due date. For students using Accessibility Services please see the appendix.

Research Quiz (Scheduled for Oct 27)

The purpose of this online quiz is to assure that you have read through the preparatory course material (especially the research guide sections) and are familiar with all the necessary steps of research design.

The quiz is scheduled for 1 hour during course time and consists of 20 multiple choice questions. It is open-book and needs to be completed individually. While we stress collaboration in this course, any form of exchange between students during this quiz constitutes cheating. For violations of academic honesty please see the course appendix.

Team Wiki (Graded at the end of each term)

I have set up two wikis: a “Team Wiki” (graded) and a “Journal Wiki” (not graded). Using the wiki feature keeps your course work neatly organized in one place. In the “Team Wiki”, your contributions to your team are accounted for as is the work of the team as a whole. Keeping this log will help us engage with each other and have an account of who does what in the groups. The “Journal Wiki” is your personal domain in which you can log your individual course work (such as journal or reflection sessions in class) and whatever notes or other work you like to assemble.

In a remote course, the wiki forms an important tool to document your course participation. While much of your work evolves around your individual research project, it is vital to participate in our class activities and discussions. Wikis allow you to share your ideas, thoughts and questions.

The team wiki will be graded for completion and engagement level, not scrutinized for style, grammar and content. Teams will be set up starting week 3. Teams will be reshuffled for the winter term. The team is the group you collaborate with in your Zoom breakout rooms. Much of the teamwork is done as part of our regular seminar sessions. As we advance, the teams can decide how to support each other outside of regular class time. Some level of engagement is expected and guidance for best practices will be provided.

Participation (Graded at the end of each term)

Active participation (in discussions, group work etc.) helps foster a dynamic learning environment. Remember that this is a senior-level seminar and you have some agency to shape our discussions. As a group learning activity is usually followed by a class discussion, there is ample opportunity to make your voice heard. You might choose to share your teamwork results after a breakout session, elaborate your own ideas or be an active listener when others speak. Share your feedback in the thesis forums. At all times, we want to engage in a mutually respectful and supportive manner, irrespective of our mutual opinions and positions.

Thesis Forum (Scheduled for Mar 30 & Apr 6)

Once each term, we will hold sessions in which students can discuss their work and receive feedback by the group. The first will be a research forum loosely organized around questions stemming from the literature review. There is no separate evaluation for this first meeting, as activities will be tied to team wikis and active discussion marks. The second forum is the thesis forum (in March), a culminating activity in which you can discuss the findings from your research. For this purpose, you need to prepare a short 5-10 min presentation on 4-5 PowerPoint slides (or similar like Prezi etc.) that highlight key findings and discussion points. Depending on class size, thesis forums will either be held with the entire group or in (recorded) breakout rooms.

Annotated Bibliography (Due Dec 10)

The first assignment that is evaluated by your thesis supervisor is the Annotated Bibliography. This is an important component on your path to writing your final Honours Thesis. It contains some information about your research topic & question (“motif”) and a concise statement of why the research matters sociologically (“significance”). The main part is a discussion of the relevant sociological literature of your chosen field, based on a *comprehensive* literature review. Your literature review will be supported by an in-class library workshop with our subject librarian Kalina Grewal.

Your goal is to produce an up-to-date survey of those scholarly sources that directly apply to your topic and question. Note that these sources are different from your primary data and are required to build your thesis argument and discussion. Your annotated bibliography should include between 10-15 carefully chosen, peer-reviewed sociological sources (articles and books). This is not about the number, but the kind of sources you select. They need to be listed alphabetically and include a proper reference list (in MLA or Chicago style). You need to explain the relevance and use of each selected source. *The expected length of the annotated bibliography is somewhere between 2,000-2,500 words (around 10 double-spaced pages, 11pt Arial font as reference). We will discuss further details in class.*

Annotated Bibliography	Honours Thesis
First Paragraph: state your research question with a short rationale (motif)	Introduction: How the research question has evolved, research motif and significance, and outline of the work
Second Paragraph: Briefly explain why and in what sense your research question matters in sociology (significance)	Societal Context: In what field you place your work and what sociological knowledge contributes
Use author(s) and short title (bold), followed by a paragraph that explains <u>in your own words</u> (1) why you have selected this source (2) how it connects to your your topic, (3) and what conceptual framework is used by the author(s)	Research Context: What other scholars have found, what results their research yielded and how it has informed your research, what broader methodology informed their work
N/A	Methods: what data you have analyzed with what methods
N/A	Findings: what you found when analyzing your sources; in conjunction with sociological theories and arguments discussed in the field
Bibliography with referencing details and DOIs	Conclusion, Full Bibliography, Appendices

Honours Thesis (Due Apr 13)

The Honours Thesis is your final research paper for this class. With the volatile covid19 situation and research policy regulations, we likely won't have the opportunity to gather empirical data through direct interactions with human participants other than through virtual means. This poses its own conundrums for the research process, of how to recruit participants, conduct research, and meet ethical standards. If you chose a quantitative approach, conducting surveys might be too labour-intensive and pose its own challenges. An alternative is to use available statistical data sets (e.g. census reports). We have a number of faculty members, who work in the innovative field of big data and digital data, and who can help you with that. For those of you interested in qualitative methods, there is also a range of textual and visual data that can be examined, such as

archival materials, newspaper reports, and other textual, sonic and visual media. It is important that you choose an approach that you can relate to and be willing to dig deeper into. Your choice of a thesis supervisor should be informed by your methods choices.

All further details, including the organization of your thesis will be discussed in the course. *The expected length of the thesis is between 8,000-10,000 words.*

Late Policy & Grade Deferral

The general policy is a 5% per day deduction for work that is overdue. If you have an accommodation letter and require an extension for your honour thesis, please contact your thesis supervisor (Cc' to course instructor). Such discussions need to happen at a minimum of 3 weeks prior to the posted submission date. I understand that pressures mount the closer we get to a deadline. However, careful planning of your research benchmarks is an integral part of an Honours Thesis project, so be proactive.

For grade deferrals based on extenuating circumstances, a Deferred Standing form (<https://secure.students.yorku.ca/pdf/final-exam-assignment-deferred-standing-agreement.pdf>) must be submitted to the course instructor no later than 7 days after the submission date. This needs to be accompanied by an email by your supervisor outlining their approval and reason for the deferral.

Email Policy

I will check my email (nijhawan@yorku.ca) regularly and respond to course-related inquiries Mon-Thurs. Please allow 48hrs response time. Do email me for course-related questions that require individual consultation or whatever else you are struggling with. I encourage to address general discussion questions in class. I generally do not respond to emails Fri-Sun. Emails that concern drafts of your Annotated Bibliography and Honors Thesis should be directed to your thesis supervisor. In case of urgent requests and emergencies, please mark your subject line accordingly and I will get back to you as soon as possible.

Office Hours

Office hours for this course will be held Wednesdays, 2:30-3:30pm. Please look out for course announcements in case I need to shift the day/time. A Zoom link for authenticated users (course participants) can be found on Zoom. For office hours, you will be placed in the waiting room area until it is your turn.

Weekly Schedule

Texts

All required readings are available on Moodle. You can also find electronic copies of the student guides to writing through Scott library. To reduce the amount of readings to a reasonable level, I only post those excerpts on Moodle that are absolutely required. Most selections are from:

- Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb & Joseph M. Williams. 2008. *The Craft of Research*. (3rd Edition). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- R.P. Massengill, *Writing Sociology. A Guide for Junior Papers and Senior Theses*. https://sociology.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Writing_Sociology_Senior_Thesis_Guide_Final_Latest_Update.pdf
- Margot Northey, Lorne Tepperman & Patrizia Albanese. 2012. *Making Sense. A Student's Guide to Research and Writing*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Kate L. Turabian. 2008. *Student's Guide to Writing College Papers*. (4th Edition, revised by Gregory Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, and the University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

In addition, there are a few additional texts required for group work & discussions. Most are listed under the weekly headings. A few will be added, once we have determined which research methods are chosen by the class.

2020 Fall Term

1) *Research Design*

15 Sept

Course Introduction

22 Sept

From Topic to Research Question

Required Readings:

- R.P. Massengill, *Writing Sociology*, pp. 5-13.
- Kate L. Turabian, *Student's Guide*, pp. 26-39.

29 Sept

Motive and Research Question

Due: Formal Email (Draft) to Supervisor (Journal Wiki)

Required Readings:

- R.P. Massengill, *Writing Sociology*, pp. 14-20
- W.C. Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, pp. 35-67

Preparation for Group Work (Team Wiki):

- R. Padawangi & M. Douglass, "Water, Water Everywhere: Toward Participatory Solutions to Chronic Urban Flooding in Jakarta"

06 Oct	<p>Choosing a Paradigm</p> <p>Due: Refining my Research Question (Journal Wiki)</p> <p><u>Required Readings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ R.P. Massengill, <i>Writing Sociology</i>, pp. 26-34. ▪ M. Northey et al. <i>Making Sense</i>, pp. 32-61. <p><u>Preparation for Group Work (Team Wiki):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ P.S.S. Howard, "On the back of blackness: contemporary Canadian blackface and the consumptive production of post-racialist, white Canadian subjects." <i>Social Identities</i> (2018) 24(1): 87-103
13 Oct	<p>Fall Reading Week</p> <p>Due: Refining My Research Question (Journal Wiki)</p>
20 Oct	<p>Research Ethics</p> <p><u>Required Readings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ M. Northey et al. <i>Making Sense</i> pp. 101-13 ▪ W. Booth et al, <i>Craft of Research</i>, pp 273-76
27 Oct	<p>Online Quiz (Moodle) /no formal class meeting</p>
2) <i>Literature Review</i>	
03 Nov	Building an Annotated Bibliography
10 Nov	Research Time: Lit Review /no formal class meeting
17 Nov	Research Time: Lit Review /no formal class meeting
24 Nov	<p>Research Forum</p> <p>Due: Elevator Pitch (Team Wiki)</p>
01 Dec	Research Forum
08 Dec	<p>Team Consultations /no formal class meeting</p> <p>Extended Office Hours</p> <p>Due: Annotated Bibliography: Dec 10</p> <p>Due: Research Ethics Forms (only if required): Dec 17</p>

2021 Winter Term

3) *Conducting Research*

12 Jan	Empirical Research Stage: Building blocks for Success <u>Required Reading:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ W. Booth et al, <i>Making Claims</i>, pp. 121-38
19 Jan	Empirical Research Stage /no formal class meeting
26 Jan	Empirical Research Stage /no formal class meeting
02 Feb	Research Collaboration Meeting
09 Feb	Supervisor meetings /no formal class meeting
16 Feb	Winter Reading Week
23 Feb	Infographic & Infosheet Meeting Required Reading TBA

4) *Honours Thesis*

02 Mar	Storyboarding & Writing Tips Due: Thesis Outline Required Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Turabian, <i>Student's Guide</i>, pp. 63-88
09 Mar	Teams /no formal class meeting
16 Mar	Peer Review Meeting
23 Mar	Team Consultations /no formal class meeting
30 Mar	Thesis Forum 1 Due: Honors Thesis Draft to Supervisor
06 Apr	Thesis Forum 2
13 Apr	Due: Honours Thesis

Appendix

Academic Honesty

As a student sociologist conducting your own independent research and writing, it is incumbent to follow best practices and abide by the Senate Policy on academic honesty, which includes proper citation of others' research and ideas. I do understand the difficulties of student workload and time pressure, but there is no excuse whatsoever for plagiarizing. Course instructor and thesis supervisors will verify all written work. If any of us would find evidence for an *alleged* plagiarism case, departmental procedures will be followed, and the case moved to the academic honesty committee for review. Please be aware that the lack of intention to plagiarize is not a criterium used in the evaluation of the case.

Please consult the Senate Policy: <http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/document.php?document=69>

Note the following York University policy: Once a plagiarism process is initiated, "a student accused of academic dishonesty may not drop or be deregistered from the course in question until a final decision is reached."

Accessibility Services

At York University we foster an atmosphere in which people with visible and invisible disabilities are fully respected by teachers and their peers and are supported with whatever means possible to achieve high academic standards. To find out how to get registered with accessibility services, please see York University's Counselling and Development Centre: <http://accessibility.students.yorku.ca> Note that all students already registered with accessibility services need to renew their letter of accommodation. The necessary forms can be found under "Returning Students."

Accommodation for Religious Observances:

Whenever religious observances pose a conflict with your assignment and submission dates, you need to consult with me and your thesis supervisor at least three weeks ahead of time. For details, please visit the Religious Observances Website: <https://w2prod.sis.yorku.ca/Apps/WebObjects/cdm.woa/wa/regobs>

Writing Centre

If you seek help in improving your academic skills in essay writing, please do not hesitate to contact me and inquire about possible resources and strategies. You can also receive help by the Faculty of Arts' Centre for Academic Writing: <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/writ/centre/>

"The Writing Centre offers individual instruction in all aspects of writing. A student must enrol to see a Writing Instructor. Normally a student is permitted one 50-minute session per week in which he or she works together with an instructor on course assignments. The goal of the instruction is to improve the student's ability to write effectively in a range of academic situations. Some students meet with an instructor regularly through the year; other students find one or two sessions sufficient to meet their goals."

1. **Senate Policy on Academic Honesty**

The Policy on Academic Honesty is an affirmation and clarification for members of the University of the general obligation to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty. As a clear sense of academic honesty and responsibility is fundamental to good scholarship, the policy recognizes the general responsibility of all faculty members to foster acceptable standards of academic conduct and of the student to be mindful of and abide by such standards.

Academic honesty requires that persons do not falsely claim credit for the ideas, writing or other intellectual property of others, either by presenting such works as their own or through impersonation. Similarly, academic honesty requires that persons do not cheat (attempt to gain an improper advantage in an academic evaluation), nor attempt or actually alter, suppress, falsify or fabricate any research data or results, official academic record, application or document.

Suspected breaches of academic honesty will be investigated and charges shall be laid if reasonable and probable grounds exist. A student who is charged with a breach of academic honesty shall be presumed innocent until, based upon clear and compelling evidence, a committee determines the student has violated the academic honesty standards of the university. A finding of academic misconduct will lead to the range of penalties described in the guidelines which accompany this policy. In some cases the University regulations on non-academic discipline may apply. A lack of familiarity with the Senate Policy and Guidelines on Academic Honesty on the part of a student does not constitute a defence against their application. Some academic offences constitute offences under the Criminal Code of Canada; a student charged under University regulations may also be subject to criminal charges. Charges may also be laid against York University students for matters which arise at other educational institutions.

2. **Senate Guidelines on Academic Honesty**

2.1 Summary of Offences Against the Standards of Academic Honesty

The following summary of offences is not exhaustive, nor are the definitions provided for each offence confined to the examples cited.

2.1.1 Cheating is the attempt to gain an improper advantage in an academic evaluation. Forms of cheating include:

- Obtaining a copy of an examination before it is officially available or learning an examination question before it is officially available;
- Copying another person's answer to an examination question;
- Consulting an unauthorized source during an examination;
- Obtaining assistance by means of documentary, electronic or other aids which are not approved by the instructor;
- Changing a score or a record of an examination result;
- Submitting the work one has done for one class or project to a second class, or as a second project, without the prior informed consent of the relevant instructors;
- Submitting work prepared in collaboration with another or other member(s) of a class, when collaborative work on a project has not been authorized by the instructor;
- Submitting work prepared in whole or in part by another person and representing that work as one's own;
- Offering for sale essays or other assignments, in whole or in part, with the expectation that these works will be submitted by a student for appraisal;
- Preparing work in whole or in part, with the expectation that this work will be submitted by a student for appraisal.

2.1.2 Impersonation is to have someone impersonate one's self in class, in a test, examination or interview, or in connection with any other type of assignment or placement associated with a course or academic program. Both the impersonator and the individual impersonated may be charged.

2.1.3 Plagiarism is the misappropriation of the work of another by representing another person's ideas, writing or other intellectual property as one's own. This includes the presentation of all or part of another person's work as something one has written, paraphrasing another's writing without proper acknowledgement, or representing another's artistic or technical work or creation as one's own. Any use of the work of others, whether published, unpublished or posted electronically, attributed or anonymous, must include proper acknowledgement.

2.1.4 Improper research practices. Academic research includes the collection, analysis, interpretation and publication of information or data obtained in the scientific laboratory or in the field. Forms of improper research practices include:

- Dishonest reporting of investigative results, either through fabrication or falsification;
- Taking or using the research results of others without permission or due acknowledgement;
- Misrepresentation or selective reporting of research results or the methods used.

- 2.1.5 Dishonesty in publication. It is a violation of academic honesty to knowingly publish information that will mislead or deceive readers. This includes the falsification or fabrication of data or information, as well as the failure to give credit to collaborators as joint authors or the listing as authors of others who have not contributed to the work. Plagiarism is also considered a form of dishonesty in publication.
- 2.1.6 Dissemination of information without permission. Information or experimental data that was collected with a member of faculty or another student, and other works that involved the participation of a faculty member or another student, should not be submitted for publication or otherwise disseminated without their permission.
- 2.1.7 Abuse of confidentiality. Taking or releasing the ideas or data of others that were given with the expectation that they are confidential is inappropriate. This includes the ideas or data obtained via the evaluation of confidential grant proposals, award applications or manuscripts that will be or may have been submitted for possible funding or publication. Unless one is authorized to do so, it is improper to obtain a password assigned to another or to copy or modify a data file or program belonging to someone else. Proper authorization means being granted permission either by the owner or originator of that material, or by an appropriate faculty member or administrator.
- 2.1.8 Falsification or unauthorized modification of an academic document/record. It is a breach of academic honesty to falsify, fabricate or in any way modify, either through omission or commission, an application to the University or a program, course student examination or test, transcript, grade, letter of recommendation or related document, a degree, a physician's letter/form or any other document used in support of an academic application, record, petition/appeal or endeavor.
- 2.1.9 Obstruction of the academic activities of another. It is a violation of academic honesty to interfere with the scholarly activities of another in order to harass or gain unfair academic advantage. This includes interference or tampering with experimental data, with a human or animal subject, with a written or other creation (e.g., a painting, sculpture or film), with a chemical used for scientific study, or with any other object of study.
- 2.1.10 Aiding and abetting. Encouraging, enabling or causing others to do or attempt any of the above with intent to mislead an instructor, academic unit, program, office or committee as to a student's academic status, qualifications, actions or preparation, or knowingly aiding or abetting anyone in a breach of academic honesty shall itself be considered misconduct.

2.2 **Summary of Penalties for Academic Misconduct**

When verified, violations of academic honesty may lead to the following range of penalties, which may be imposed singularly or in combination for any offence. The following penalties are listed in ascending order of severity.

- 2.2.1 Written disciplinary warning or reprimand.
- 2.2.2 Required completion of an academic honesty assignment.
- 2.2.3 Make-up assignment, examination or rewriting a work, subject to a lowered grade.
- 2.2.4 Lower grade on the assignment, examination or work.
- 2.2.5 Lower grade in the course.
- 2.2.6 Failure in the course.
- 2.2.7 Permanent grade of record. The grade assigned shall remain as the one grade of record for the course, even if the course is repeated. This penalty can be added to any other penalty, but shall always be attached to the penalty of failure in the course.
- 2.2.8 Notation on transcript. Notation on transcript can be a separate penalty or it can be added to any other penalty. Transcript notation shall always be included in cases of suspension, withholding or rescinding a York degree, diploma or certificate and expulsion from the University. Transcript notation can be for a limited period, at the end of which the notation will be removed from the student's transcript. When no period is specified for a transcript notation, a student may petition to the Faculty Petitions Committee to have the notation removed after a period of five years from the date at which the notation was entered, with the exception of notation of expulsion from the University.
- 2.2.9 Suspension from the University for a definite period, not to exceed 5 years, with transcript notation. Suspension is defined as a penalty of a variable but limited period during which the student may not register in the University, imposed for serious academic offences such as plagiarism and cheating. A student who is otherwise eligible to graduate, but is suspended, may not apply to graduate until the suspension expires or is lifted. This penalty may be awarded only by a Faculty-level committee which is recognized by a Faculty Council as the responsible body to assign this penalty.
- 2.2.10 Expulsion from the University with transcript notation. Expulsion is defined as permanently terminating a person's right to continue as a student in the University. This penalty may be awarded only by a Faculty-level committee which is recognized by a Faculty Council as the responsible body to assign this penalty.
- 2.2.11 Withholding or rescinding a York degree, diploma or certificate with transcript notation. When a Faculty decides to rescind a degree, diploma or certificate, the decision, with supporting documentation, must be forwarded to the Senate Appeals Committee for approval on behalf of Senate.

Exploring the COVID Conspiracy Landscape: Themes and Discourses on MeWe

Edmund Siu

Department of Sociology, York University

SOCI 4000: Honors Thesis

Professor

April 20, 2021

Introduction

Conspiracy theories (CTs) are “explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups” (Goertzel, as cited in Douglas et. Al., 2017). Although these theories have been repeatedly refuted by major news outlets and government officials, CTs have found a global audience via social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter (Schaffer, 2020). The most influential conspiracy theory of our time is QAnon which surfaced in 2017 in the United States and claims that President Trump is fighting against a group of Satan-worshipping, pedophilic elites that controls the world behind the scenes. This cabal consists of Democratic politicians, Hollywood celebrities, and journalists (Rauhala & Morris, 2020). The CT prophesizes a day of reckoning when good (Trump) will prevail over evil, resulting in arrests and execution of members of this secret society. QAnon has since been exported to other countries and mingled with other conspiracy theories including those associated with 5G technology and vaccination (Spring & Wendling, 2020). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the ensuing lockdown measures further fanned the flames of global conspiracism. New CTs about COVID-19 as a hoax or a plot orchestrated by evil actors have mixed with existing CTs and adapted to local contexts (The Economist, 2020).

Adherents of CTs, once dispersed and relegated to the margins of society, have become a political force to be reckoned with. During the pandemic, they demonstrated their proficiency in using online platforms to spread disinformation and organize rallies in North America and Europe. Throughout September 2020, they joined the ranks of far-right activists and anti-vaxxers in anti-lockdown protests in Italy, Britain, Australia, Germany, and New Zealand (The Economist, 2020; Gunia, 2020). In the United States, QAnon agitators leveraged online platforms (e.g., Patriot Caravans and GiveSendGo) to fundraise and coordinate caravans for Trump supporters and fellow QAnon followers to travel to Washington in the months leading up to the riot on January 6, 2021 (Kirkpatrick et. al, 2021). They were also among the mob that clashed with police officers

and broke into buildings on Capitol Hill to stop the certification of the presidential election results (Reality Check team and BBC Monitoring, 2021). It is important to note that CT communities and far-right groups (e.g., Proud Boys and Oath Keepers) are not necessarily distinct groups, as it has been shown that some rioters claimed membership in more than one groups (Kirkpatrick et. al, 2021).

Despite the fact that widespread conspiratorial thinking has united diverse groups to stage anti-lockdown protests, their motives, exchanges, and mobilizing efforts online remain understudied. Therefore, this paper aims to take panoramic snapshots of the virtual conspiracy landscape on MeWe – an alternative to Facebook to which right-wingers and CT followers have recently migrated – and identify the major concerns and discourses mobilized by various groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings suggest that these groups' fears are centered on: (1) violation of their rights and freedoms; (2) surveillance and technology; (3) censorship and indoctrination; (4) a feeling of encirclement by conspiracies perpetrated by powerful individuals and organizations. These anxieties have been adopted to the pandemic and generated COVID-related CTs and narratives that utilize discourses of populism, partisanship, children, and counter-hegemonic expert opinion. Findings suggest that conspiracism has unified disparate groups in the sample (far-right, anti-lockdown and anti-mask, anti-vaccination, and anarchist groups) and offered a common frame of reference that is conducive to collective action. The paper will end with insights into measures that can curb the spread of global conspiracism.

Literature Review

Belief in CTs may have been considered eccentric and confined to lone individuals. However, it has become quite prevalent in the United States owing to the dissemination of QAnon and other CTs on mainstream media and social media platforms (Schaffner, 2020; Miller, 2020). Conspiratorial thinking has seeped into the political sphere across the globe with populist politicians, such as Donald Trump (Alba & Decker, 2021) and Jair Bolsonaro (Bevins, 2020), openly espousing CTs to mobilize their supporters. The devastation and uncertainty brought by the COVID-19 pandemic only enhanced the appeal of CTs, spurring followers into collective action in North America and Europe. All this did not escape the attention of social scientists. There has been growing interest among them to investigate the factors that contribute to belief in conspiracy theories.

Although conspiracy theories related to the pandemic are a contemporary development, conspiratorial thinking is hardly a new mindset. The American historian Richard Hofstadter (1964) coined the term “the paranoid style” to describe the exaggerated and conspiratorial mode of expression that has been an episodic feature of right-wing movements in the United States, especially in the 1950s and 60s. The paranoid style entails a feeling of persecution against their country or way of life. Followers interpret historical events as driven by a pervasive conspiracy and view said conspiracy in apocalyptic terms. Key elements of the paranoid style include: (1) a conspiracy to replace American capitalism with socialism; (2) the infiltration of the top echelon of the government to act against American national interests; (3) penetration of institutions (e.g., education, religion, and mass media) by communist agents to erode American resistance.

Conspiratorial thinking and the Interconnectedness of CTs

Much research on CTs is conducted by analyzing online survey data (Ardevol-Abreu et al., 2020; Enders & Smallpage, 2019; Goldberg & Richey, 2020; Miller, 2020; Schaffner, 2020; Swami et al., 2016) and scanning content on media outlets (Sturm and Albrecht, 2020) and social media (Gruzd & Mai, 2020). The most consistent findings in these studies are that conspiratorial

thinking, “a general tendency to engage with conspiracist explanations for events” (Brotherton et. al., as cited in Enders & Smallpage, 2019), is a primary predictor of belief in CTs and that distinct CTs are interconnected. In Enders and Smallpage’s study (2019), conspiratorial thinking predicted eight out of nine conspiracy beliefs. Similarly, Goldberg and Richey (2020) attribute anti-vaccination skepticism to a psychological propensity to trust CTs. More importantly, scholars have noted the interconnectedness of disparate CTs (Enders & Smallpage, 2019; Goldberg & Richey, 2020; Miller, 2020; Sturm & Albrecht, 2020). In Miller’s (2020) research, not only are there strong, positive associations among CTs, American participants embraced multiple CTs that contradict each other. Likewise, in Goldberg and Richey’s (2020) study, all three CTs – Obama is a Muslim, 9/11 Trutherism, and Anti-vaxxism – are positively and significantly inter-correlated. Moreover, Sturm and Albrecht’s (2020) examination of media outlets indicate that there is substantial overlap between apocalyptic narratives that have been put forth by the far-right, evangelical, and radical left groups, which helped unify these groups to participate and organize anti-lockdown protests.

Emotions and Social Motives

Although there is no definitive explanation of conspiratorial belief, researchers have identified several emotions and social motives that underlie conspiracism. Using online survey data and regression analysis, Miller (2020) and Swami et al. (2016) respectively found that personal uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and psychological stress are positively correlated with belief in CTs. Studying news reports and other published sources, Meese et al. (2020) showed that technophobia and fear of government surveillance are at the core of popular COVID-5G conspiracies. Other than emotions, a range of motives also drive conspiratorial thinking. Douglas and Cichocka’s (2017) review of psychological research suggested that people are drawn to CTs because CTs fulfill their epistemic (understanding their environment and protecting their beliefs), existential (feeling safe and in control of their environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group) motives.

Political Distrust, Ideology, and Other Predictors

Researchers have also observed the efficacy of political distrust and ideological orientations in explaining susceptibility to CTs. While Goldberg and Richey (2020) established that there is a negative relationship between political trust and conspiracies, Enders and Smallpage (2019) pointed out that ideological orientations and paranormal beliefs were useful predictors, albeit weaker when compared to conspiratorial thinking. Applying a multivariate analysis to secondary panel data, Perry et al. (2020) found that people who adhere to Christian nationalism – an ideology that connects “disregard for scientific expertise; a conception of Americans as God’s chosen and protected people; distrust for news media; and allegiance to Trump” – are more likely than others to engage in incautious behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other minor predictors of belief in CTs include lower levels of political knowledge and education levels, and support for authoritarianism (Goldberg & Richey, 2020).

Spread of Misinformation, Impact of Conspiracism, and Populism

Building on previous research on the correlates of belief in CTs, other researchers focused on the spread of disinformation in virtual space, and some have begun to consider the impact of conspiracism. For instance, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2020) uncovered how far-right groups and individuals and conspiracy communities have exploited technology platforms to spread messages of hate and extremism, and disinformation during the pandemic. Meanwhile, Gruzd and Mai (2020) traced the development and dissemination of the empty-hospital conspiracy theory on Twitter under the hashtag, #FilmYourHospital, in late March 2020, and learned that it was largely coordinated by conservative internet celebrities and far-right groups. Assessing the effects of conspiracism on participants, Ardevol-Abreu et al. (2020) noticed that conspiratorial beliefs lead to more negative perceptions of government leaders and institutions’ responses to citizens’ needs. A much-neglected aspect of COVID-related CTs is their interactions with populist politicians. In their collaborative report, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020) provide an overview of populist politics in 16 countries during the pandemic. They remark that populist

leaders are not ideologically aligned; rather they have adopted different positions and policies to varying degree of success in dealing with the pandemic. They also cautioned readers not to treat medical experts as if they are a united and apolitical camp.

Placing My Research in the Existing Body of Knowledge

Research on conspiracism thus far has mostly relied on multivariate analysis of survey data. Only a small number of researchers have turned to content and exchanges on media outlets and social media platforms to understand the dissemination of misinformation and CTs. Due to the recent exodus of CT supporters and right-wing groups from Facebook and Twitter to alternative online platforms, researchers have lost access to troves of online data and their lines of communication with these populations. This exploratory study seeks to fill this research gap by investigating an alternative online platform to lay bare the characteristics and dynamics of COVID-19 conspiracism.

Methodology

To study the narratives and discourses propagated by groups at the periphery of the political sphere, I originally planned to collect posts from Facebook groups and Telegram channels identified in existing literature (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020) and Parler, a social media platform favored by Trump supporters. Collecting meaningful data from targeted communities, however, was no longer possible when social media giants, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, took action to remove accounts and groups linked to QAnon and other CTs in late 2020 (Spring & Wendling, 2020) and tech giants Apple and Google removed Parler from their respective app stores (Needleman, 2021). After learning that far-right groups and Trump supporters had moved to alternative platforms in response to the crackdown (Ray, 2021; Wilson, 2021), 4Chan (an anonymous imageboard website) and MeWe (an alternative to Facebook) were chosen to be sites of investigation. In the end, 4Chan was abandoned because

there was insufficient data and the anonymity of users meant that connecting users and their posts to specific groups was out of the question.

From February 6 to March 4, 2021, a total of 120 posts were collected from 9 groups on MeWe using selective sampling. These groups fall under four categories: anti-lockdown and anti-mask, anti-vaccination, far-right, and far-left (See Table 1 for a summary of the groups).

Table 1: Summary of MeWe Groups

Type	Name	Number of Members	Number of Posts Collected
Anti-lockdown and anti-mask	Anti-lockdown USA	203	14
Anti-lockdown and anti-mask	Collective Action	3,320	11
Anti-lockdown and anti-mask	NO MASKS NO LOCKDOWNS USA	1,300	14
Anti-vaccination	EDUCATE BEFORE YOU VACCINATE	2,092	11
Anti-vaccination	PEOPLE FOR COVID-19 TRUTH AND HEALTH FREEDOM	650	13
Far-right	COMPLETE FAITH IN TRUMP	6,642	13
Far-right	THE RIGHT SIDE GROUP	585	18
Far-left	ANARCHISM	1,565	12
Far-left	CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS	1,212	14
		Total: 17, 569	Total: 120

These groups were located by entering keywords (e.g., anti-lockdown, COVID-19, Trump, anti-vaxx, vaccination, right, anarchists) in the search bar. The list of groups was further narrowed down based on relevant group descriptions, number of followers, and accessibility. Groups that had the most followers and granted me access were prioritized (viewing posts in many groups required becoming a member after answering screening questions and getting approval from group administrators). When answering these questions, I tried not to repeat existing CTs and

simply stated that I was interested in learning more about these groups' views. After becoming a member in these groups, I collected 12-18 posts from each group and saved them as JPG and PDF files on the local drive. Many of these comments came in the form of memes – digital cultural artefacts (e.g., humorous images, videos, phrases, etc.) that are transmitted via the Internet among numerous users – while others were texts that were sometimes attached with external articles or videos. I moved from one group to another when a point of saturation had been reached. Finally, each post was manually coded to detect key themes and CTs across the groups.

The strengths of this online research lie in its ability to reach thousands of participants and its efficiency in saving time and costs. Through a social media platform like MeWe, I was able to access individuals and groups that are difficult to contact through official channels. For instance, it is unlikely to find many participants on the far ends of the political spectrum who are willing to be interviewed by researchers from established institutions; they may fear being stigmatized or question the political leanings of the institutions to which the researchers belong. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only made in-person interactions a public health hazard, but also forced target groups to shift mobilizing efforts online. Therefore, online research is appropriate for studying these groups' interactions up-close in a safe and ethical way. Furthermore, compared to in-person research, online research is much more cost-effective, and it saves a great deal of time by eliminating any barriers imposed by geographic locations and time zones.

On the other hand, there are several issues that arose from this project. First, this small dataset is not representative of the populations that I would like to study. Second, views of influencers were oversampled as active users are more likely to have contributed to online discussions. Third, access to some groups that met the selection criteria was denied, thus potentially restricting the range of data collected. Fourth, the validity of the data can be questioned due to content moderation (i.e., the deletion of posts) carried out by group administrators and users' comments that were oriented toward performative activism. Despite these limitations, this

project offers a glimpse into the interactions and discourses that are mobilized by various groups on MeWe during the COVID-19 pandemic and can inform future online research.

Findings

Part I: Major Themes in Distrust of Powerful Individuals and Organizations

There is a deep-seated distrust of powerful individuals and organizations across the groups. Many groups openly expressed concerns about governments (n = 8), politicians (n = 8), plutocrats (n = 7), and corporations (n = 4). The distrust is often connected to themes about the violation of rights and freedoms, surveillance and technophobia, censorship and indoctrination, and a feeling of encirclement by conspiracies.

Violation of Rights and Freedoms

For far-right and anarchist groups, the government constantly undermines the constitutional rights and freedoms that define the American national ethos. For instance, a meme posted in *The Right Side Group* defines Americanness as “eat[ing] meat... drink[ing] beer... own[ing] guns... lov[ing] freedom... [and] speak[ing] English” (Johnson, 2021a). Both groups objected to gun-control legislations and considered them a form of state oppression that eroded citizens’ freedoms and warranted resistance. Some users even went as far to predict that gun confiscation by the government will trigger a second civil war (Yesthal, 2021a). Another constitutional right that is under threat is economic liberty. Some members viewed the shutdown of businesses during the pandemic as illegal and un-American. For instance, a meme in *Anti-lockdown USA* declares that it is against the law to force businesses to close their stores and calls policymakers “UNCLE SAM’S MISGUIDED CHILDREN” (Bailey, 2021a) (See Figure 1.1). The un-Americanness of such a policy is reinforced by a picture of George Washington who looks dignified but solemn, almost as if he is disapproving the closure of small businesses.

Figure 1.1

IT'S NOT ILLEGAL TO OPEN YOUR BUSINESS, IT'S ILLEGAL THAT IT IS FORCED TO BE CLOSED



Note. From Anti-lockdown USA, by D. Bailey, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/EvaQ2pJQOIGNEYdr85OVyv_z_AGe6XWF3GXaZJMSIoBq11FfozFfBidb1c/1600x1600/img?static={static}).

Surveillance and Technophobia

Surveillance from the government and big tech, and technophobia are another major theme in online discussions on MeWe, especially among members of far-left groups. Members of *Anarchism* and *CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS* viewed growing surveillance from the government through an Orwellian lens and referred to the government as “Big Brother” (Yesthal, 2021a) and “big daddy” (Floyd, 2021). Similarly, big tech is regarded as an equally sinister force that leverages the Internet to monitor user activities and harvest their personal data. A meme that was circulated in *CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS* integrates the Eye of Sauron from the film *Lord of the Rings* into the Google logo (Wilson, 2021) (See Figure 1.2). In the movie, the Eye allows the Dark Lord to search and track the movement of those who carry a magical ring he covets. This meme highlights

the user's fear of Google's omnipresence and its perpetual gaze on Internet users, which helps further the company's hidden agendas.

Figure 1.2

Google



Note. From CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS, by D. Bailey, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/KmMK6kzOWTmXAvccR-RAjiQs_7toh5t8OPwP0pSSQ9tgQXEnMcrCTj0-K34/800x800/img?static=0).

Far-right groups also share anarchists' apprehension. Members of *COMPLETE FAITH IN TRUMP* advised fellow members to use Telegram (Pacheco, 2021) (a messaging app that encrypts user data) and virtual private network (VPN) services (Privacy Patriots, 2021) to circumvent surveillance from the government and big tech. For anti-vaccination groups, anxiety around technology and surveillance manifests in the form of computer chips or nanomachines that are purportedly hidden in vaccines. These chips or nanomachines allow the government to monitor and even hijack the brains of people who received a vaccine (Davis, 2021). Some users claimed that these chips can speak to 5G networks and render people under the control of an operating system (P., 2021). Moreover, anti-vaxxers maintained that vaccines infuse the human brain with an abnormal amount of aluminum which can cause neurological diseases such as autism and Alzheimer's disease (J., 2021).

Censorship and Indoctrination

Many sampled users complained about censorship and indoctrination from the media and the government. They believe that the media works closely and acts as a mouthpiece of the Democratic government to distort and suppress the truth. For example, MeWe User Michael B (2021) shared an article that alleges that the Biden administration enlisted the help of big tech (Facebook, Twitter, and Google) to remove posts that challenged official narratives about the pandemic and the efficacy of vaccines. Others criticized the media and the government for silencing and stigmatizing them for revealing the truth. A meme uploaded to *Collective Action* (an anti-lockdown group) sums up this sentiment succinctly. In the meme, an apple is displayed in the center against a white backdrop and is accompanied by the following statement: “This is a watermelon[.] If you see an apple, it’s because you’re a right[-]wing conspiracy theorist” (The Cognosc, 2021). Here, the creator of the meme clearly decries the lies that the media and the government are feeding people and their labelling of those who seek to speak the truth as CT followers.

Beyond censorship, the media and education system were seen as mediums of indoctrination by some members of far-right and anarchist groups. A meme in *The Right Side Group* shows a dozen dolls leaning back into their chairs with the caption “Democrats waiting for CNN to tell them what to be offended by next” (Johnson, 2021b). This imagery portrays Democrats as docile puppets who await instructions from liberal news outlets and ridicules their notion of political correctness. Meanwhile, wariness of the education system is a recurrent theme in posts within anarchist groups. A meme posted by User James Kornacki (2021) in *Christian Anarchists* sarcastically says:

It’s 2019... get rid of Algebra 2 in high school and replace it with financial fundamentals. Teach kids about careers (not just college), salaries, credit, budgeting, taking out a loan, investing, college debt, buying a house, [and] filing taxes. (Kornacki, 2021).

He laments the deterioration of the education system through changes in the high school curriculum and the government's role in molding children into future consumers whose uncritical participation in capital serves the needs of financial elites.

A Feeling of Encirclement by Conspiracies

Despite some variations in their grievances, these groups spoke the same language of conspiracism. From their point of view, there was an all-encompassing conspiracy being perpetuated by networks of powerful individuals and organizations (Yesthal, 2021a) (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3

Develop Gardening and Hunting skills and Live outside the Influence of the Internet, the Government, Plutocrats, and their Laws



Note. From ANARCHISM, by G. Yesthal, 2021, MeWe (<https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>).

One of their primary targets is billionaires like Bill Gates (n = 6). He was depicted as a power-hungry profiteer whose goals are complete economic and political domination of the U.S. and the world (Ben There, 2021; Chuter, 2021). Other targets included politicians and the Democratic government who were perceived as co-conspirators behind nefarious plots. For example, User Ian Leverette's (2021) post repeats the debunked QAnon conspiracy, alleging that a Satan-worshipping cabal of Democratic politicians runs a child-smuggling ring out of White House and the Capitol Building. Furthermore, media and technology corporations were seen by users to be in league with politicians and the government against the masses. User Wendy Hallgren (2021) availed herself of a Christian song to get this point across in *Christian Anarchists*. Below is an excerpt of the lyrics:

The politicians all make speeches while the news men all take note

And they exaggerate the issues as they shove them down our throats;

Is it really up to them whether this country sinks or floats?

Well I wonder who would lead us if none of us would vote[.]

Well my phone is tapped and my lips are chapped from whispering through the fence[.]

You know every move I make, or is that just coincidence?

W[i]ll you try to make my way of life a little less like jail

If I promise to make tapes and slides and send them through the mail[?]

The lyrics communicate a sense of powerlessness and despair among ordinary people who are in the palm of politicians' figurative hand. Politicians govern the population by spreading propaganda through the media and spying on people's conversations and thoughts through smart phones and the Internet. These lyrics also speak to a feeling of encirclement by networks of

governments, politicians, plutocrats, and corporations, whose conspiracies are so keenly felt and observed by members of sampled groups.

Part II: Reactions to the Pandemic

The Convergence of Previous Themes and the Pandemic

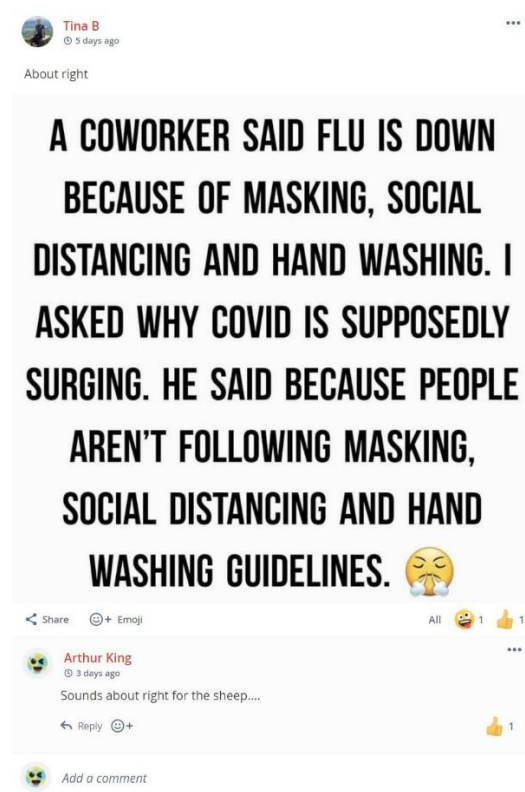
Conspiratorial thinking and the themes mentioned earlier found new expressions in the context of the pandemic and have generated a myriad of COVID-related conspiracy theories. Anti-lockdown and anti-mask content were present in 7 groups while anti-vax views were articulated in 6 groups.

Lockdown Measures and Public Health Guidelines. Lockdown measures and public health guidelines (i.e., mask-wearing and social distancing) were met with skepticism by the majority of users. Many were of the opinion that the guidelines did little to stop the spread of the virus (See Figure 2.1). More importantly, they were generally deemed to be an infringement of users' rights and freedoms. As User Thomas McCall (2021) puts it:

I fully support your right to hide in your house and wear your face diaper until you can take an untested vaccine developed by corporations that cannot be sued when you have an adverse reaction. As long as you fully support my right to do none of those things[,] we don't have a problem.

Numerous users like McCall argued that they should have the right to decide their own course of actions during a pandemic. Any measures that had been imposed on them amounted to an infraction of their personal freedoms.

Figure 2.1



Note. From EDUCATE BEFORE YOU VACCINATE, by T.B., 2021, MeWe (<https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>).

Likewise, closure of businesses during the pandemic posed another challenge to their economic liberty. In a meme shared by User Joe Eldred, the caption reads “Governors announcing that private citizens are allowed to conduct commerce again” (AnarchoChristian, 2021). Below the text is the Persian god-king Xerxes I (from the film *300*) who extends his hand toward the audience and proclaims, “I am a generous God” (see Figure 2.2). The message of the meme is plain: commerce is a fundamental right that each citizen is entitled to and governors’ attempts to put a hold on business is arbitrary. The meme can also imply that defiance from the people and confrontation with the authorities are required to overthrow such tyranny, since ancient Greek states united against and prevailed over the invading army led by Xerxes at the end of the film.

Figure 2.2

I am a Generous God



Note. From CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS, by AnarchoChristian, 2021, MeWe (<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/tzimAxnL857cqPWa4nkYgmypz4L-vvQpshi0uEVP0BgQhmUhfbkMPVs6uo/800x800/img?static=0>).

COVID-19 Vaccines. Worries of surveillance and technophobia were carried over to the pandemic with little modification. Some members of sampled groups continued to be wary of COVID-19 vaccines that allegedly contain computer chips with which governments and corporations can track and control individuals. Others questioned the efficacy of the vaccines and warned of their harmful effects on one’s health: User Sovereign Mark Allen Snow (2021) uploaded a video of a lady convulsing and foaming at the mouth after reportedly receiving a vaccine; User Mirza Cairo (2021) posted a meme that portrays “world depopulation” as a side effect of vaccines.

Censorship resurfaced as a key theme in conversations about vaccines and the pandemic. Members in 6 out of 9 groups complained that the severity of the pandemic is overblown, and the truth (behind COVID-19 vaccines and the pandemic) is being covered up by governments, the media, and medical professionals. For instance, the group guidelines of *Educate Before you Vaccinate* urge users not to share the names of medical professionals who support the anti-vaccination movement due to firings and revoked licenses of anti-vax doctors by hospitals and clinics (Mrs. Mystery, 2021). In the meantime, User Ronda [Admin] (2021) claimed that different government departments in America contradicted each other internally with regard to the safety of vaccines.

COVID Conspiracism

Powerful Individuals and Groups. Exchanges in the sampled groups are rife with conspiracy theories that downplayed the gravity of the pandemic, discredited lockdown measures and public health guidelines, and sowed doubts about vaccines (See Table 2 for a summary of COVID-related CTs). In spite of the diversity of CTs, the bulk of them circled back to the accusation that the pandemic had been orchestrated by powerful individuals and organizations to gain power and money. Although there was no consensus among group members on the origins of the coronavirus, a number of CTs suggested that the pandemic was engineered artificially by big pharma, plutocrats, and politicians. One theory asserts that the coronavirus was created in a laboratory in Wuhan in a project financed by Dr. Fauci (director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease) and the Obama administration (Cloud Strife, 2021). Another insists that coronavirus is not the first man-made pandemic that billionaires have devised to generate profits from selling vaccines (Fulanito, 2021). Billionaire Bill Gates was frequently characterized as a supervillain who is working in concert with corporations and politicians in a sprawling COVID-19 conspiracy. Vaccines backed by Gates supposedly carry surveillance chips that spy on recipients (P., 2021) or have the potential to cause permanent damage to recipients'

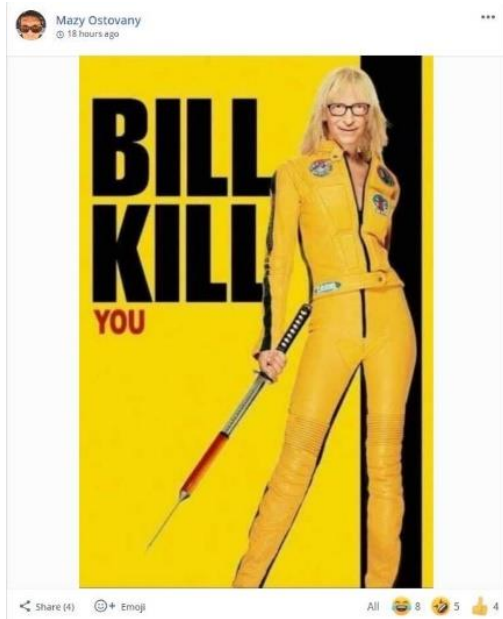
health (see Figure 2.3). He is purportedly in cahoots with world leaders to extend lockdown measures to accumulate capital and seize power (see Figure 2.4).

Table 2: COVID-19-Related Conspiracy Theories (CTs)

Type of CT	Frequency	Variations
Severity of COVID-19 pandemic is overblown	6 groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coronavirus does not exist • COVID-19 is nothing but the seasonal flu • People will naturally develop herd immunity against coronavirus so lockdown measures and vaccines are unjustified
Anti-lockdown and anti-mask	7 groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masks and/or lockdown are ineffective at curbing transmission of COVID-19
Anti-vaccination	5 groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaccines have detrimental effects on your health: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They can lead to adverse reactions 2. They can cause neurological diseases such as autism and Alzheimer's disease 3. They can kill you
Powerful individuals and organizations' schemes	8 groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pandemic had been orchestrated by plutocrats (e.g., Bill Gates) and political elites to gain power and/or money • Vaccines are a scheme created by big pharma to generate profit and/or experiment on people • Vaccines are a means through which evil actors cause worldwide depopulation

Figure 2.3

Bill Kill You



Note. From NO MASKS NO LOCKDOWNS USA, by M. Ostovany, 2021, MeWe (<https://mewe.com/group/5f5e17f4a4da0b51c9846a3b>).

Figure 2.4

Camp Lockdown: The New World Order



Note. From Anti-lockdown USA, by B. Howard, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/jWcRd0X1mvVYKOEDgt3JXHX0YGw82eyqk-5mW5iko75gWjE6xJ-CTsF0Ldg/1600x1600/img?static={static})).

Interconnectedness of Themes and Multiple CTs. Interestingly, users demonstrated the ability to weave multiple themes into coherent narratives to interpret the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 2.5 is a good case in point (Bailey, 2021b); it successfully combines anti-masks sentiment, fear of government surveillance, vaccine-related technophobia, the right to bear arms, and systemic persecution into one narrative about the pandemic.

Figure 2.5

Multiple COVID-related themes



Note. From *Anti-lockdown USA*, by D. Bailey, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/comments/dwvW_Gy1J-cJOqSvrVJHCSOj6AxmRDUgfYq4-zrAnyxqJHZfESdKQWGU5Ko/photo/1600x1600/bill+melinda+camps.JPG).

The articles and videos shared by users tend to be collages of distinct CTs from various sources that inform readers of powerful individuals and groups that are concocting schemes against them. The following is a list of CTs that are present in an article shared in *Anti-lockdown USA*:

CT 1: Mandatory vaccination is a way to connect human bodies to artificial intelligence and surveillance platforms.

CT 2: The Great Reset allows governments to expand their powers, suppress liberty worldwide, and track individuals with surveillance chips.

CT 3: COVID-19 is a mild disease that served the purpose of establishing surveillance over humanity.

CT 4: Big tech works with the government to silence anyone who dares challenge the effectiveness of the lockdown, masks, and vaccines.

CT 5: Bill Gates backs vaccination efforts and surveillance chips that can be inserted into human bodies.

CT 6: Gates funded anti-HPV vaccine trials that maimed thousands of girls in India (P., 2021).

To substantiate these theories, the author cited a wide range of sources such as Ron Paul (a former Republican congressman), Klaus Schwab (founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum), ScienceAlert.com, Indian Economic Times, and others. As illustrated here, conspiracy theory influencers are adept at pulling ideas and statements from numerous sources to paint a picture of interrelated conspiracies at work.

Section III: Discourses

Populism and Partisanship

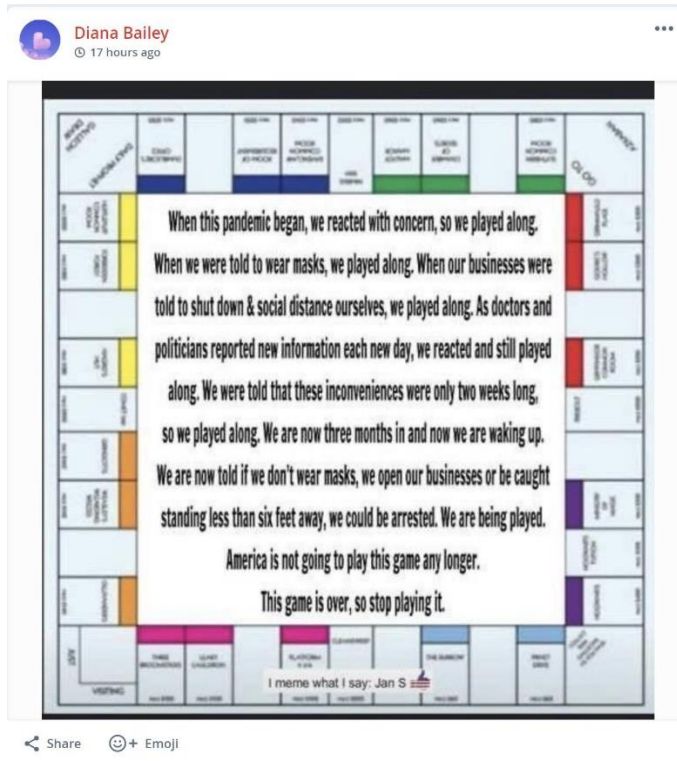
The People vs. Elites. Populism is a discourse that politicizes the dichotomy of the “the people” and “the elite,” and thrives in times of crisis (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). This type of discourse was ubiquitous in the online conversations on MeWe. Users regularly referred to themselves as the people who are going up against experts, politicians, and wealthy individuals who make up the elite class. The antagonism between the two is often conveyed using plural pronouns: “you” or “we” (the people) and “they” (the elites). A post in *PEOPLE FOR COVID-19 TRUTH AND HEALTH FREEDOM* exemplifies the compatibility of conspiratorial thinking and populism:

It doesn't matter if it's COVID, the war on terror or climate change... The con is always the same. They first weaponize fear around an invisible threat. Then they tell you that they're the only ones who have the special equipment to see or measure that invisible threat. Then they use your fear[-]infused mind like a yo-yo, to control and make you dance like a circus monkey... based on threats that never existed in the first place (Terrell, 2021).

Although the word "elite" was not used, "they" undoubtedly include the elites. The creator's outrage is directed at politicians and experts (scientists and medical professionals) who fabricate crises time after time to manipulate people through fear. In like manner, User Diana Bailey (2021c) shared a meme that features text in the center of a Monopoly game board. The last few lines state that, "We are being played. America is not going to play this game any longer. This game is over, so stop playing it" (See Figure 3.2). The board game signifies that the ongoing pandemic is a "game" manufactured by "doctors and politicians" (Bailey, 2021c). The rules of the game are unfair and designed to disadvantage Americans every step along the way, much like how players must pay rent to their opponents when their pieces land on others' properties. The endgame of the elites is simple – the absolute subjugation of the American people.

Figure 3.2

The COVID-19 Pandemic is a Game



Note. From Anti-lockdown USA, by D. Bailey, 2021, MeWe

(<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/3QNWcupV9N-JrMjJbZiAES3AEoiu1bbHWaAJYMbcQ09gJ41SCfCmMoV-IHQ/1600x1600/img?static={static}>).

Populism intermingles with Religion and Partisanship. Additionally, populism has proven to be highly malleable and capable of being merged with religious and political narratives. A quote shared in *Christian Anarchists* characterizes “Jesus Christ... [as] the creative non-violent anarchist par excellence. Working not from the top down, but from the bottom up with the poor... to empower people and enable them to realise their potential” (Figure 2.11) (Andrews, 1999, as cited in Wodzack, 2021). Once again, the people are juxtaposed with the elites. However, Jesus is used as a moral authority to lend support to anarchism and implicate the elites’ and governments’ oppression of the people.

For sampled far-right groups, Donald Trump is a champion of the people who protects American interests and stands up against political elites around the world (see Figure 3.3). His defeat in the 2020 presidential election left many users in disbelief. They questioned the legitimacy of the election on MeWe and launched a litany of attacks on Joe Biden's competence and integrity, with some adducing his son Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine and China. Anarchist groups joined the far right in their polemic against Biden and other Democratic figures such as Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of the House of Representatives) and Andrew Cuomo (Governor of New York). Some members believe that the Democrats won the election through fraudulent means and that Biden's allegiance does not lie with the American people (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.3

World leaders vs. Donald Trump.




Note. From THE RIGHT SIDE GROUP, by J. Johnson, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/vFZZNNwssyZCf95hXEEYvth3Nn3eGb5tpjGoaqQwibdge3AqJldQI_ESVZA/800x800/img?static=0).

Figure 3.4

Biden Cannot be Trusted


 **Ray Savage**
3 days ago

It's obvious that Biden's oath to uphold our Constitution was just a farce. His actions on our border prove his allegiance to something else altogether.

I'm asking: What is the end game?


Share 😊+ Emoji 👍 2

View previous comments 2 of 4


 **Wally Stover**
1 day ago

Scripture being fulfilled! 🙏❤️

Reply 😊+

 **Midnight Visions**
5 hours ago

The Democrats are all about the destruction of the USA, at the expense of all Americans. They have cheated at all elections since the 1960's, and the goal of creating their own socialist country is insight. Permanent power for the Democratic crime family. Every country in the planet would have arrested and executed these traitors by now.



Reply 😊+

Note. From CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS, by R. Savage, 2021, MeWe

(<https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>).

Dr. Seuss and Cancel Culture. The issue of cancel culture was raised twice in far-left groups. Both posts are memes that call attention to the recent decision to pull six Dr. Seuss books off the shelf by the author's estate, due to racist and insensitive imagery of Asian and African people (Aratani, 2021). Users who uploaded the memes perceived the move as a surrender to the pressures of cancel culture espoused by Democrats. They fear that this was the first of many steps to strip them of their freedoms and rights under the guise of political correctness and

progressiveness. As Cartoonist Michael Ramirez puts it, “Today, it’s a book, so watch what you do. One day in the future, they may cancel you” (2021).

Figure 3.5

Dr. Seuss



Note. From CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS, by R. Savage, 2021, MeWe

(<https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>).

Children

4 out of 9 groups (one anti-lockdown and anti-mask group, two anti-vaccination groups, and one far-left group) mobilized discourses about the safety and education of children to make their case. Not surprisingly, anti-vaxxers warned of the dangers of vaccinating children. User MICHAEL B shared an article that reports the recruitment of children as subjects of a COVID-19

vaccine by Oxford University, to which another user replied, “What kind of parent allows this?” (B., 2021). Another user provided a stunning visual representation of the perils of vaccination by showing a toddler surrounded by syringes that are pointed at him (See Figure 3.6). Members of *No Mask No Lockdown USA* similarly expressed concerns about the negative effects (physical, psychological, and behavioral) that masks can have on children. At the same time, there were users from *No Mask No Lockdown USA* and *Christian Anarchists* who denounced the indoctrination of children by the education system and advocated for homeschooling (Ann, 2021; Kornacki, 2021).

Figure 3.6

Baby Surrounded by Syringes



Note. From EDUCATE BEFORE YOU VACCINATE, by T. B., 2021, MeWe

(<https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>).

Counter-Hegemonic Expert Opinion

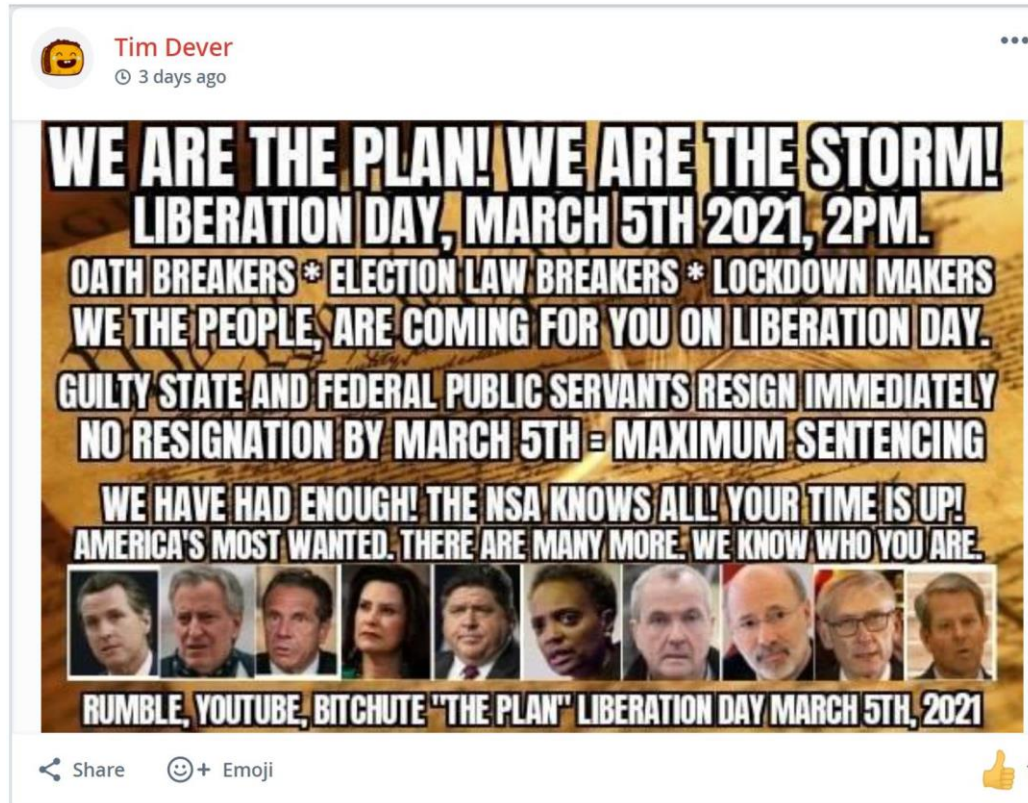
More than half the groups (n = 5) deployed expert opinions that contradicted mainstream explanations of the pandemic and COVID-19 vaccines. For example, a member of *Educate Before You Vaccinate* cited “Dr. Merrick[’s]” and “Dr. Dolores Cahill[’s]” (Miles, 2021a, 2021b) recommendations as reasons not to vaccinate against the coronavirus. Users from anti-lockdown and anti-mask groups referenced a leaked draft from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (Panaitescu, 2021) and a non-peer-reviewed study (Hall, 2021) that respectively list the adverse outcomes that can result from vaccination and masking. By the same token, another user invoked articles of the Nuremberg Code (ethical research principles established in light of cruel human experimentation on Jewish prisoners in German concentration camps during WWII) to argue that mandatory vaccination fails to obtain people’s informed consent and violates people’s basic human rights (Ostovany, 2021b).

Call for Collective Action and Violence

There were a few instances where members of far-right and anti-lockdown and anti-mask groups called for collective action and even violence. For instance, User Mal Loe (2021) proposed a no-mask day where small groups of individuals would appear in stores across the country while refusing to wear masks. Nevertheless, not everyone agreed with this peaceful approach. Some users insinuated that the current state of affairs – the Biden administration and the pandemic – necessitated an armed resistance from the American people. User Patton Gunn 3 (2021) invited others to join his group “Liberal Bashing 101” by sharing a meme that spotlights a uniformed Caucasian man who is armed with a M16 rifle. The caption above the man declares, “THE TIME HAS PASSED FOR A PEACEFUL RESOLUTION.” The most extreme rallying cry was a meme shared by User Tim Dever (See Figure 3.15) in which he demanded Democratic government officials to resign before March 5, 2021 or face the wrath of Americans who will pass out “MAXIMUM SENTENCING” on “Liberation Day” (Gunn, 2021).

Figure 3.15

Liberation Day



Note. Targets of Liberation Day include Democratic State Governors: Gavin Newsom (pictured far left), Andrew Cuomo (third from the left), and Gretchen Whitmer (fourth from the left). From Anti-lockdown USA, by T. Dever, 2021, MeWe

(https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/MZT9k8lvq0bTeBgnWkic4qWINwTwn-iW6N_I4uBWaDFgG1EtrKKWSEud9us/800x800/img?static=0).

Conclusion

Across the groups sampled on MeWe, there was a profound sense of distrust of powerful individuals and organizations (i.e., governments, politicians, plutocrats, and corporations). Their anxieties revolved around four themes: (1) violation of rights and freedoms; (2) surveillance and technophobia; (3) censorship and indoctrination; (4) a feeling of encirclement by conspiracies. These themes formed the lens through which sampled groups viewed the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown measures were considered as an infringement of users' rights and freedoms while COVID-19 vaccines aroused the same fear of surveillance and new technology that is often associated with big tech and governments. Moreover, accusations of censoring the truth of the pandemic and vaccines were made against medical professionals, the media, and governments. Besides, users and influencers on MeWe demonstrated the ability to combine specific themes and conspiracy theories to create coherent narratives about the ongoing pandemic. In these narratives, discourses of populism, partisanship, children, and counter-hegemonic expert opinion had been mobilized. There were also a few calls for protests and violence in the data set.

Distrust of powerful individuals and organizations as well as conspiracism are the common thread that runs through online discussions. There were multiple intersections between narratives put forth by far-right, anti-lockdown and anti-mask, anti-vaccination, and far-left groups on MeWe. This lends some support to Sturm and Albrecht's (2020) argument that narratives of contagious conspiracism have unified diverse groups across the conspiracy landscape to mobilize against lockdown measures. However, there are two caveats to be mindful of. First, their study included far-right, radical left groups, and evangelical groups, last of which were absent in this sample, meaning that this paper's findings do not apply to them. Second, the small number of cases, where users explicitly brought up collective action and violence against lockdown measures, failed to attest to the effectiveness of conspiracism in mobilizing adherents. Furthermore, users' willingness to adopt and amalgamate multiple themes and CTs is consistent with past studies that

identified the interconnectedness of conspiracy theories (Enders & Smallpage, 2019; Goldberg, 2020; Miller, 2020; Strum and Albrecht, 2020).

Above all, this paper has generated several insights into COVID-19 conspiracism and the measures that should be taken to tackle it. Belief in CTs feeds off a sense of powerlessness among citizens who believe their participation in the political sphere is immaterial, since they believe major institutions have fallen under the control of financial and political elites. To stem the flow of conspiracism, governments must address the political and socioeconomic issues that underlie citizens' insecurities. One way to enhance people's political efficacy is to move society toward participatory democracy, in which greater political representation and participation of citizens in public policy decisions are favored compared to traditional representative democracy. This will put political power in the hands of citizens and restore their faith in their government. Another way to empower individuals is to reverse neoliberal reforms that had privatized public goods (e.g., education, healthcare, and infrastructure) and regulate markets in ways that protect citizens' interests. Failing to do so will only strengthen the monopolistic or oligopolistic position of corporations (especially those in the tech and pharmaceutical industries) and boost anti-corporate and anti-establishment attitudes.

One factor that contributes to distrust of billionaires is the widening income and wealth gap between the top 1% and the 99% in the United States, which has reached unprecedented levels in recent years (Piketty, 2014a). Closing that gap, whether through a global wealth tax (Piketty, 2014b) or promotion of communal ownership of property (Walcott, 2021), will lessen suspicion of and hostility toward the wealthy. Finally, as illustrated by the recent migration to alternative online platforms and messaging apps by CT and far-right groups, cancel culture – enforced by social media and tech firms – will only drive these communities further underground and reinforce their self-perception as victims of ostracization. This not only shuts down all forms of dialogue between them and liberals but has also constructed echo chambers in which

partisanship and conspiracism can reverberate and grow, thus intensifying political polarization in society. To avoid this pitfall, CT adherents and other politically marginalized groups must be allowed to rejoin mainstream social media and online platforms so that their conspiracy theories and beliefs can be discussed and contested by others.

Finally, this exploratory study has shed light on the concerns and deployment of discourses and CTs by groups across the conspiracy landscape on MeWe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, its scope and findings are limited to nine groups on one platform. To get a grasp on the ways in which CTs proliferate and facilitate collective action through online channels, future research should expand the number and diversity of groups from which data is collected, and investigate discussions on other alternative online platforms, such as Gab (an alternative to Twitter) and Rumble (an alternative to Youtube), and messaging apps like Telegram. An operation of this scale can be accomplished with the help of web scraping softwares that extract data from websites and store them in a database or the researcher's local computer.

References

- AnarchoChristian. (2021). *Governors announcing that private citizens are allowed to conduct commerce again*. [Digital image]. MeWe.
<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/tzimAxnL857cqPWa4nkYgmypz4L-vvQpshi0uEVP0BgQhmUhfbkMPVs6uo/800x800/img?static=0>
- Andrews, D. (1999). *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering A Radical Spirituality of Compassion*. Wipf and Stock.
- Ann, L. (2021). *Schools not being open reduces the chance of our children being indoctrinated*. [Goup post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>
- Alba, D., & Decker, B. (2021, March 1). *Trump's Multiple Conspiracy Theories in Fox News Interview. Here Are Their Roots*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/article/trump-conspiracy-theories.html>
- Aratani, L. (2021, March 3). *Six Dr Seuss books cease publication over racist and insensitive portrayals*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/02/six-dr-seuss-books-cease-publication-racism>
- Ardevol-Abreu, A., Gil de Zuniga, H., & Gamez, E. (2020). The influence of conspiracy beliefs on conventional and unconventional forms of political participation: The mediating role of political efficacy. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(2), 549–569.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12366>
- Bailey, D. (2021a). *IT'S NOT ILLEGAL TO OPEN YOUR BUSINESS, IT'S ILLEGAL THAT IT IS FORCED TO BE CLOSED* [Digital image]. MeWe.

https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/EyaQ2pJQOIGNEYdr85OVyv_z_AGe6XWF3GXaZJMSloBg111FfozFfBidb1c/1600x1600/img?static={static}

Bailey, D. (2021b). *Just wear the mask, time passes. Just let the government track your location, time passes.* [Digital image]. MeWe.

https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/wdml6DEDsaP3OkFV0Row38PiEEVuISVr1bQF3Qir61ZgHSN5R11lffC1_7g/1600x1600/img?static={static}

Bailey, D. (2021c). *Monopoly Gameboard* [Digital image]. MeWe.

<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/3QNWcupV9N-JrMjJbZjAES3AEoiu1bbHWaAJYMbcQ09gJ41SCfCmMoV-IHQ/1600x1600/img?static={static}>

Ben There. (2021). *BILL GATES NOW THE BIGGEST LANDOWNER IN THE US.* [Link attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5fac6cae0d6da56e455ccc1e>

Bevins, V. (2020, September 16). *How Anti-Communist Conspiracies Haunt Brazil.* The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/how-anti-communist-conspiracies-haunt-brazil/614665/>

B, M. (2021a). *White House Enlists Social Media Giants to Suppress Vaccine 'Misinformation'* [Article attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5eae653328596b75c43292aa>

B, M. (2021b). *COVID-19 Vaccine To Be Tested on 6-Year-Olds.* [Article attached] [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5eae653328596b75c43292aa>

B, T. (2021a). *For all your mommies out there, here's a visual representation of what the vaccine recommendations looks like.* [Digital image]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>

- B, T. (2021b). *A COWORKER SAID FLU IS DOWN BECAUSE OF MASKING, SOCIAL DISTANCING AND HAND WASHING*. [Digital Image]. MeWe.
<https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>
- Cairo, M. (2021). *Side effect of vaccines is world depopulation*. [Digital image]. MeWe.
<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/AUJx3CbrdgahKjBXf0Ple5xfLRH3s87Cl-0Pjc9Yh71gHVH0R11lffBKZP0/800x800/img?static=0>
- Chuter, R. (2021). *RFK, Jr. Interviews Vandana Shiva: The Gates Empire 'Will Own Everything'*. [Video attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5da3dbd3a2b56b0ed8e27171>
- Cloud Strife. (2021). *Documentary Proof: University of North Carolina Generated COVID-19*. [Link attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5eb2f723014a5a3adcd3d8dc>
- Davis, T. (2021). *Researchers engineer tiny machines that deliver medicine efficiently* [Article attached] [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>
- Dever, T. (2021). *WE ARE THE PLAN! WE ARE THE STORM! LIBERATION DAY, MARCH 5TH 2021, 2PM*. [Digital image]. MeWe.
https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/MZT9k8lvq0bTeBgnWkjc4gWINwTwn-iW6N_I4uBWaDFgG1EtrKKWSEud9us/800x800/img?static=0
- Douglas, K., Sutton, R., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science : a Journal of the American Psychological Society*, 26(6), 538–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>
- Enders, A., & Smallpage, S. (2019). Who Are Conspiracy Theorists? A Comprehensive Approach to Explaining Conspiracy Beliefs. *Social Science Quarterly*, 100(6), 2017–2032. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12711>

Floyd, C. (2021). *Lol keep begging big daddy gov you fucking slaves*. Your just an individual floating through space on a rock [Response to group post]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>

Fulanito, P.C. (2021). *The 1918 virus pandemic was the direct result of TYPHUS FEVER VACCINES injected into millions of soldiers during the Great War (WWII)*. [Link attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>

Goldberg, Z., & Richey, S. (2020). Anti-Vaccination Beliefs and Unrelated Conspiracy Theories. *World Affairs (Washington)*, 183(2), 105–124.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820020920554>

Gruzd, A., & Mai, P. (2020). Going viral: How a single tweet spawned a COVID-19 conspiracy theory on Twitter. *Big Data & Society*, 7(2), 205395172093840–.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720938405>

Gunia, A. (2020, September 30). *The U.S. Exported QAnon to Australia and New Zealand. Now It's Creeping Into COVID-19 Lockdown Protests*. Time. <https://time.com/5894139/qanon-australia-new-zealand-conspiracy-theory/>

Gunn, P. (2021). *You are invited to join my group: "Liberal Bashing 101"*. [Image attached] [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5f5e17f4a4da0b51c9846a3b>

Hall, R. (2021, January 25). *New Study Finds Masks Hurt Schoolchildren Physically, Psychologically, and Behaviorally*. Montana Daily Gazette.

<https://montanadailygazette.com/2021/01/25/new-study-finds-masks-hurt-schoolchildren-physically-psychologically-and-behaviorally/>

Hallgren, W. (2021). *Listening to some old school Christian music*. [Group post]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>

Hofstadter, R. (1996). *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Cambridge:

Harvard University Press (Original work published in 1964)

Howard, B. (2021). *CAMP LOCKDOWN: NEW WORLD ORDER*. [Digital image] [Response to

group post]. MeWe. [https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/comments/dwvW_Gy1J-](https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/comments/dwvW_Gy1J-cJOqSvrVJHCSOj6AxmRDUqfYq4-zrAnyxgJHZfESdKQWGU5Ko/photo/1600x1600/bill+melinda+camps.JPG)

[cJOqSvrVJHCSOj6AxmRDUqfYq4-](https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/comments/dwvW_Gy1J-cJOqSvrVJHCSOj6AxmRDUqfYq4-zrAnyxgJHZfESdKQWGU5Ko/photo/1600x1600/bill+melinda+camps.JPG)

[zrAnyxgJHZfESdKQWGU5Ko/photo/1600x1600/bill+melinda+camps.JPG](https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/comments/dwvW_Gy1J-cJOqSvrVJHCSOj6AxmRDUqfYq4-zrAnyxgJHZfESdKQWGU5Ko/photo/1600x1600/bill+melinda+camps.JPG)

Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2020). *COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.2: Far-right*

Mobilisation. ISD. [https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-](https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/)

[briefing-no-2/](https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/)

Johnson, J. (2021a) *This is America. We eat meat, we drink beer, we own guns, we love*

freedom, we speak English [Image attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/601affcd4af0e329131e178>

Johnson, J. (2021b). *Democrats waiting for CNN to tell them what to be offended next* [Image

attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/601affcd4af0e329131e178>

Johnson, J. (2021c). *World leaders vs. Donald Trump*. [Digital image]. MeWe.

<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/vFZZNNwssyZCf95hXEEYvth3Nn3eGb5tpjGoaqQwi>

[bdge3AqJldQI_ESVZA/800x800/img?static=0](https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/vFZZNNwssyZCf95hXEEYvth3Nn3eGb5tpjGoaqQwi)

J. (2021, January 15). *Aluminum: Record Levels Found In Brain Tissue of Susceptible Children*.

Deep Roots at Home. <https://deeproofsathome.com/aluminum-autism/>

- Katsambekis, G., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2020). *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report*. Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/12546284.v1>
- Kirkpatrick, D. D., McIntire, M., & Triebert, C. (2021, January 16). *Before the Capitol Riot, Calls for Cash and Talk of Revolution*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/16/us/capitol-riot-funding.html>
- Kornacki, J. (2021). *It's 2019... get rid of Algebra 2 in high school and replace it with financial fundamentals* [Image attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>
- Leverette, I. (2021). *PEDOPHILE RING CENTERS AROUND WHITE HOUSE, CAPITOL BUILDING AS CHILDREN SURFACE*. [Link attached]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5fac6cae0d6da56e455ccc1e>
- Loe, M. (2021). *I propose a no mask day of protests we come in force how are they going to stop 10*. [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5f5e17f4a4da0b51c9846a3b>
- McCall, T. (2021). *I FULLY SUPPORT YOUR RIGHT TO HIDE IN YOUR HOUSE AND WEAR YOUR FACE DIAPER*. [Digital image]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>
- Meese, J., Frith, J., & Wilken, R. (2020). COVID-19, 5G conspiracies and infrastructural futures. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy*, 177(1), 30–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20952165>
- Miles, A. (2021a). *Dr. Merrick speaks on Ivermectin and Hcq and how we do not need a vaccine*. [Link attached] [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>

Miles, A. (2021b). *Interview with Professor Dolores Cahill*. [Link attached] [Group post]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>

Miller, J. (2020). Do COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs Form a Monological Belief System?

Canadian Journal of Political Science, 53(2), 319–326.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000517>

Mrs. Mystery. (2021). *GUIDELINES July 16th, 2019* [Group guidelines] [Document attached].

MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5c637eef8181e50c0cabefb7>

Needleman, S. E. (2021, March 11). *What is Parler? Conservative Social-Media App Denied*

Apple's App Store Access. WSJ. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-parler-app-apple-android-11610478890>

Ostovany, M. (2021a). *BILL KILL YOU*. [Digital image] [Group chat]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5f5e17f4a4da0b51c9846a3b>

Ostovany, M. (2021b). *Vaccines are in direct violation of The Nuremberg code*. [Group post].

MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5f5e17f4a4da0b51c9846a3b>

Panaitecu, S. (2021). *FDA Safety Surveillance of COVID-19 Vaccines: DRAFT Working list of possible adverse event outcomes*. [Link attached] [Group post]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5eb2f723014a5a3adcd3d8dc>

Pacheco, M. (2021). *With the ban-spree of big tech, telegram might be the only way to communicate & read news for Donald J. Trump* [Link attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5da3dbd3a2b56b0ed8e27171>

Perry, S., Whitehead, A., & Grubbs, J. (2020). Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans' Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 59(3), 405–416.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12677>

Piketty, T. (2014a). Two Worlds. In *Capital in the 21st Century* (pp. 291-303). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Piketty, T. (2014b). A Global Tax on Capital. In *Capital in the 21st Century* (pp. 515-534). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Privacy Patriots. (2021). *Dan Bongino was right, ExpressVPN is currently the best tool we have against Big Tech. Get yours and support Dan* [Link attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5da3dbd3a2b56b0ed8e27171>

P. (2021, March 18). *Prof. Dolores Cahill: Why People Will Start Dying A Few Months After The First Mrna Vaccination*. Coronavirus News.

<https://coronaneews123.wordpress.com/2021/01/18/professor-dolores-cahill-why-people-will-start-dying-a-few-months-after-the-first-mrna-vaccination/>

Ramirez, M. P. (2021). *Dr. Seuss*. [Digital image]. MeWe.

<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/BqAV6ijjFKU6DshNoliqQRpwNc-CmYuB5nmQnMNSJa5qQ7TpMcrCTj0HN28/800x800/img?static=0>

Rauhala, E., & Morris, L. (2020, November 13). *In the United States, QAnon is struggling. The conspiracy theory is thriving abroad*. Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/qanon-conspiracy-global-reach/2020/11/12/ca312138-13a5-11eb-a258-614acf2b906d_story.html

Ray, S. (2021, January 14). *The Far-Right Is Flocking To These Alternate Social Media Apps — Not All Of Them Are Thrilled*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/01/14/the-far-right-is-flocking-to-these-alternate-social-media-apps---not-all-of-them-are-thrilled/?sh=46abe47155a4>

Reality Check team and BBC Monitoring. (2021, January 7). *Capitol riots: Who broke into the building?* BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/55572805>

Ronda [Admin]. (2021). *See the contradiction?*. [Link attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5eb2f723014a5a3adcd3d8dc>

Savage, R. (2021). *It's obvious that Biden's oath to uphold Constitution was just a farce.* [Group post]. MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>

Schaffner, B. F. (2020, December 7). *QAnon and Conspiracy Beliefs*. ISD.

<https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/qanon-and-conspiracy-beliefs/>

Sovereign Mark Allen Snow. (2021). *Governors announcing that private citizens are allowed to conduct commerce again.* [Video attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5eae653328596b75c43292aa>

Spring, M., & Wendling, M. (2020, September 3). *How Covid-19 myths are merging with the*

QAnon conspiracy theory. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>

Sturm, T., & Albrecht, T. (2020). *Constituent Covid-19 apocalypses: contagious conspiracism, 5G, and viral vaccinations.* (2020). *Anthropology & Medicine*, 1–18.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2020.1833684>

Swami, V., Furnham, A., Smyth, N., Weis, L., Lay, A., & Clow, A. (2016). *Putting the stress on conspiracy theories: Examining associations between psychological stress, anxiety, and*

belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 99, 72–76.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.04.084>

Terrell, G. (2021). *IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S COVID, THE WAR ON TERROR OR CLIMATE CHANGE*. [Digital image]. MeWe.

<https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/O5vLsozSITmTIQfaWaizkrflWsBsSvvAyiH4wTqihwhgMSWHhfbkMPVKrsE/800x800/img?static=0>

The Cognosc. (2021). *If You See An Apple You Are A Conspiracy Theorist* [Image attached].

MeWe. <https://mewe.com/group/5eb2f723014a5a3adcd3d8dc>

The Economist. (2020, September 6). *Anti-lockdown protests have been hijacked by conspiracy theorists*. <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/09/06/anti-lockdown-protests-have-been-hijacked-by-conspiracy-theorists>

Walcott, R. (2021). *On Property* (pp. 9-14; pp. 94-105). Windsor: Biblioasis.

Wilson, J. (2021, January 19). *Rightwingers flock to “alt tech” networks as mainstream sites ban Trump*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/13/social-media-trump-ban-alt-tech-far-right>

Wilson, M. (2021). *Google* [Digital image]. MeWe.

https://img.mewe.com/api/v2/photo/KmMK6kzOWTmXAvccR-RAjiQs_7toh5t8OPwP0pSSQ9tgQXEnMcrCTj0-K34/800x800/img?static=0

Wodzak, M. (2021). *Jesus Christ was the supreme example of authentic anarchy – the creative non-violent anarchist par excellence*. [Group post]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5bd0d580a3ca430e5e56f122>

Yesthal, G. (2021a). *Fuck the internet, fuck the government, fuck the plutocrats, fuck their laws.*

Prepare to just live, and do it without Big Brother [Digital image]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>

Yesthal, G. (2021b). *Civil War will begin in the earnest with either the escalation of Red Flag*

Laws OR [Image attached]. MeWe.

<https://mewe.com/group/5aade81ca5f4e5685d885e7c>