

COVID-19 Vaccine Disinformation





INTRODUCTION

More than 170 different teams of researchers around the world have been working to find a vaccine for the coronavirus since the global pandemic began earlier this year, and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has since been approved and rolled out to frontline healthcare workers.

Almost as soon as the pandemic began, disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracies about a vaccine started taking hold online, aimed at promoting distrust and sowing confusion in a way that could prolong the pandemic. The narratives have continued since the vaccine was deployed, and we anticipate will grow in the new year.

From August to November, Alethea Group identified and analyzed the top false or misleading narratives circulating online about the COVID-19 vaccine. We found the narratives to be largely consistent across events related to the vaccine, such as development and approval. We analyzed content across mainstream social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We also identified the top websites publishing false news-like content on the coronavirus vaccine. From the data, we found popular narratives by analyzing the text and conducting topic modeling. We determined these narratives to be high-impact based on the engagement metrics and estimates of impressions.

KEY FINDINGS

Narratives seek to sow mistrust in the vaccine.

Alethea Group identified six key false narratives spreading online about the coronavirus from August-November. They include the following claims: Dr. Fauci will financially profit from a COVID-19 vaccine; pharmaceutical companies are exempt from vaccine liability claims; Bill Gates will financially profit from vaccine research; Gates will use the vaccine to implant trackers into recipients; Gates will use the vaccine as a depopulation weapon; and COVID-19 vaccines use aborted baby parts. Together, across the three main social media platforms and the websites we analyzed, these narratives attracted more than 36.2 million potential impressions.

Influencers play a significant role in perpetuating vaccine disinformation.

Popular narratives spread on Twitter mainly through retweets of posts from verified and unverified “influencer” accounts that primarily identify as right-wing. Of the more than 40,000 tweets we analyzed during this period, 83 percent were retweets. The key narratives on Twitter promote distrust in high-profile vaccine production stakeholders, such as pharmaceutical companies (“big pharma”), Dr. Fauci, and Bill Gates. They warn about alleged dangers of the COVID-19 vaccine, make false claims about hidden motives behind vaccine production, and promote conspiracy theories about how vaccines are made or how they will affect participants. For example, one of the most popular false claims in this narrative is that Dr. Fauci owns a stake in the COVID-19 vaccine patent.

Known unreliable sources, including those identified by the U.S. Government as Russian proxies, spread false information, especially by Facebook.

On Facebook, the conspiracy about Gates’ depopulation and human tracking agenda gained popularity across the time period we analyzed. Articles from unreliable sources, such as [globalresearch\[.\]ca](https://www.globalresearch.ca), a Canada-based political website known to publish conspiracy theories that the U.S. State Department accused of being a proxy for Russian disinformation,¹ were shared on

¹ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem-08-04-20.pdf>

Facebook. Three articles from Global Research in the period we monitored received more than 350k engagements on social media.

YouTube continues to be a hotbed for conspiracy theories furthering the idea of elitist control, including by and within QAnon.

On YouTube, the most popular false narrative was the claim that Bill Gates plans to track people by implanting microchips through the coronavirus vaccine injection. A 9-minute video titled “Bill Gates- Microchip Implants to Fight Coronavirus” that made this claim has received more 1.9 million views since it was posted on March 21, 2020.

The online communities and outlets known for spreading political disinformation are also spreading health-related misinformation, using similar themes and trends of stoking mistrust.

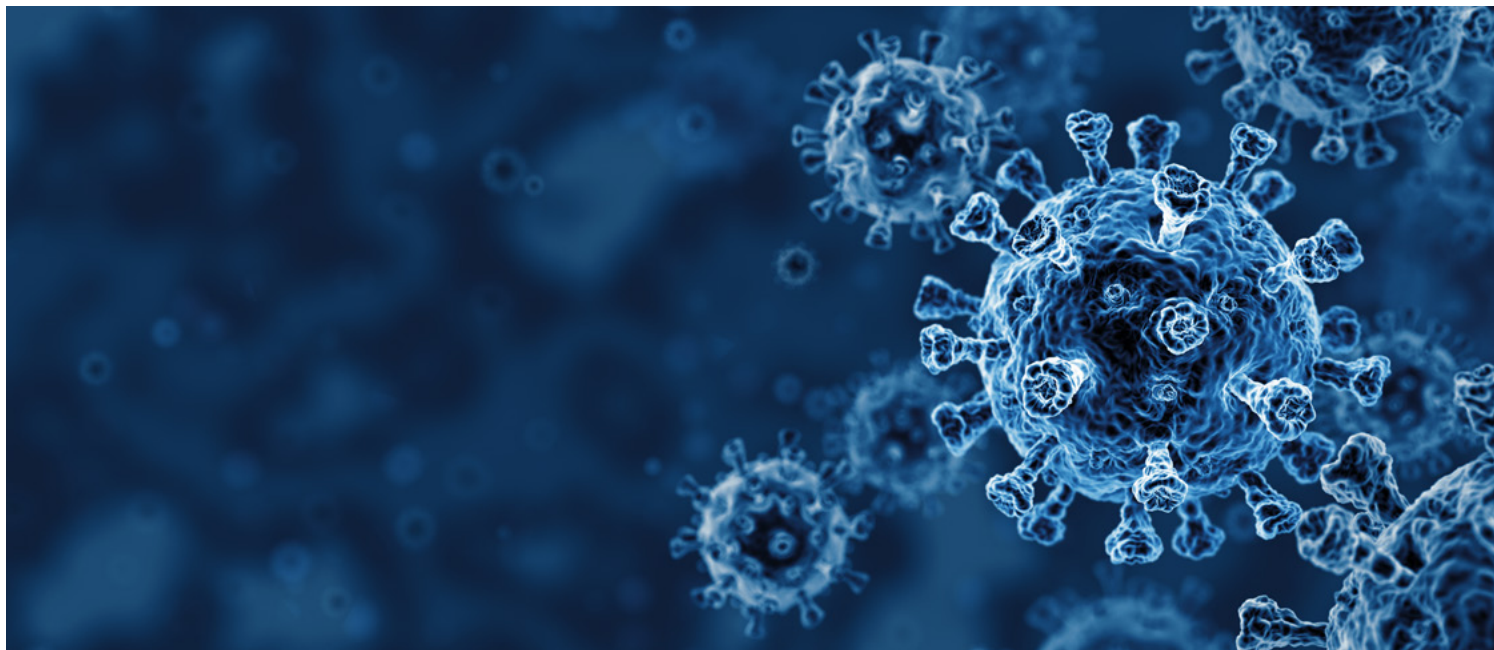
The Gateway Pundit, an American far-right news and opinion website, was the most popular domain pushing false or misleading content about the coronavirus during this time period; the 11 articles from the Gateway Pundit published in this period were shared almost 20,000 times on Twitter and around 45k engagements across social media platforms. Its most popular coronavirus vaccine-related article titled “UNBELIEVABLE: In New Interview Bobby Kennedy Jr. Claims Dr. Fauci will Make Millions on Coronavirus Vaccine and Owns Half the Patent” generated 65.4 million potential impressions on Twitter and had 25.3k engagements across social media more broadly.

Additional top websites we identified as the primary spreaders of false information on coronavirus include Zero Hedge, 21st Century Wire, Infowars, and globalresearch.ca. Most of the domains that push false narratives can be characterized as right-leaning, and/or promoters of pseudoscience and conspiracies. We assess social media users spreading the content from these domains are mostly a mix of anti-vaxxers, self-identified Trump supporters, conspiracy theorists, and religious groups, based on an analysis of account bios and content published by the accounts.

In addition to targeting individuals involved in the vaccine development and approval process to sow mistrust, corporate brands have also been attacked.

False narratives demonstrate continued distrust in Big Pharma, such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca, especially as vaccines are closer to becoming created and vaccine trial results become public. News of negative vaccine trial results amplify the narrative that the COVID-19 vaccine is dangerous and unreliable.

For example, a tweet stating “RT @BardsFM: AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine test guinea pig dies. AstraZeneca claims he was given a placebo, not the real vaccine. Would you admit to the world that your vaccine will kill people if you have billions of dollars at stake? Money buys, people lie. <https://t.co/R5lqKlfXVj>”² has been retweeted at least 287 times and the embedded article link by express.co.uk has been shared 23,356 times on Facebook. Other narratives related to the company claim that AstraZeneca’s vaccine may create neurological problems for trial participants and that the company has a history of bribery in multiple countries, a narrative pushed by globalresearch.ca, a site accused by the US State Department of being a Russian proxy.

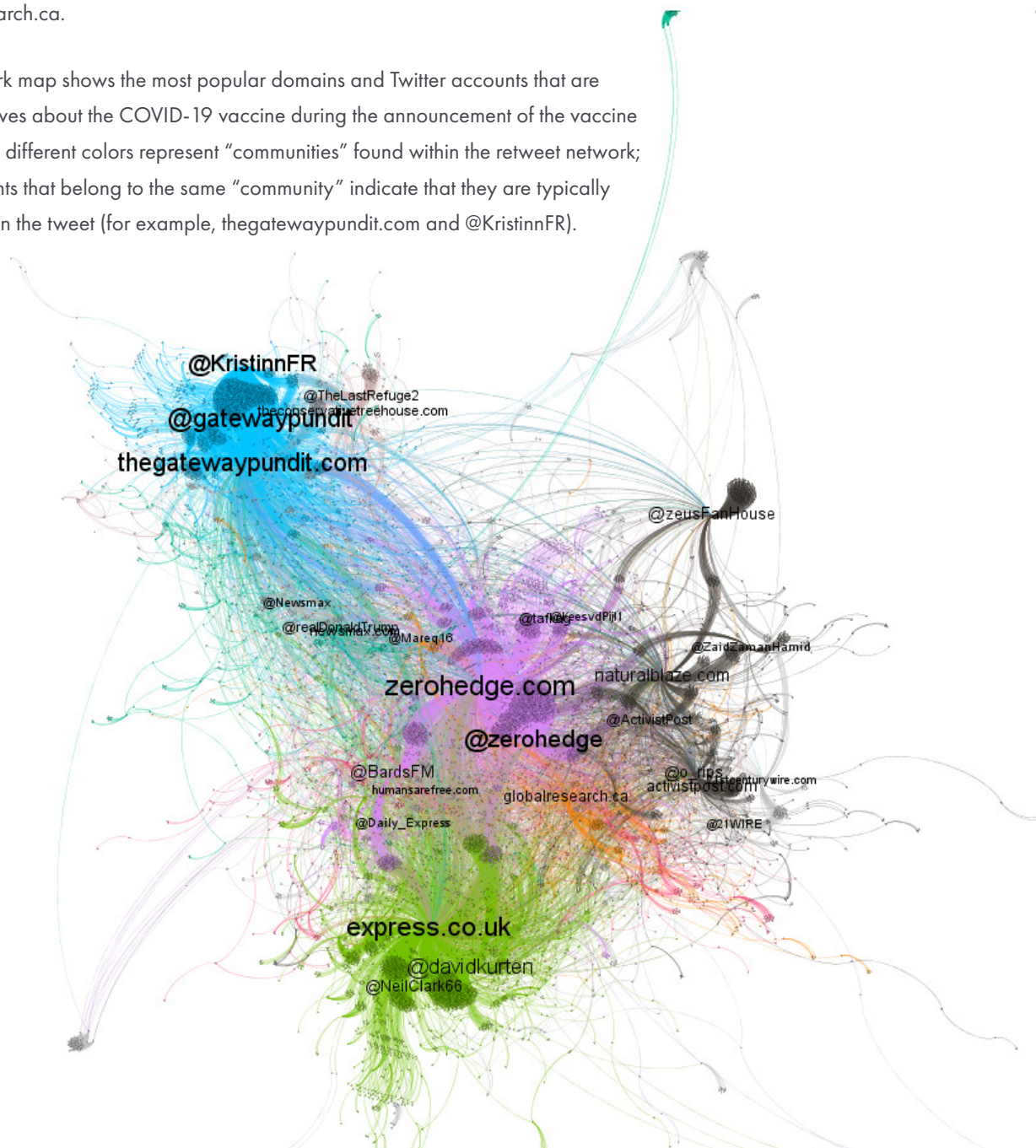


² <https://twitter.com/JoanneJema/status/1319053125513285634>

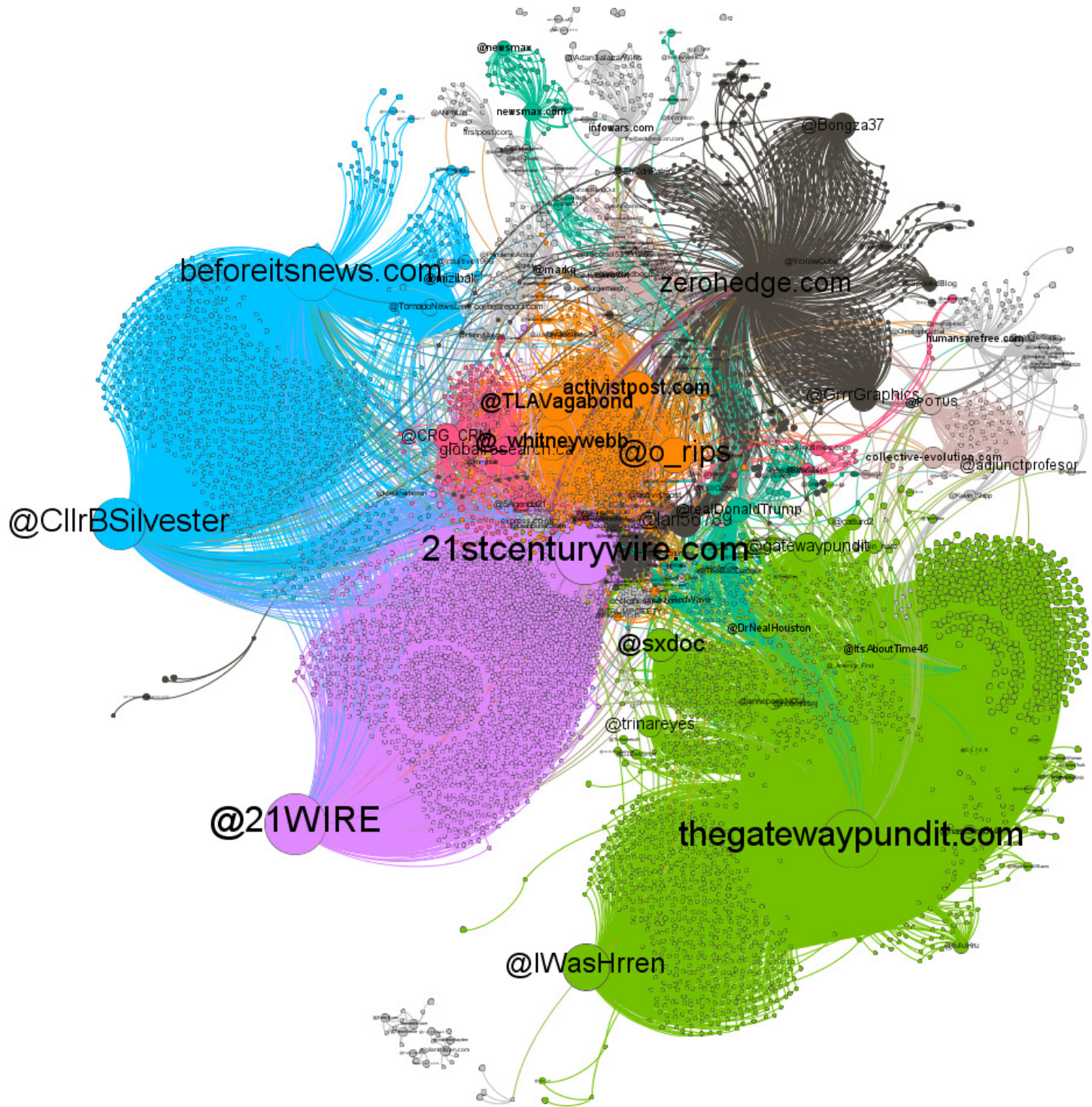
Spread of Disinformation Online

Online communities spreading and perpetuating disinformation continue to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine. We visualized the most popular topics and their spread on Twitter, which include shares of thegatewaypundit.com, zerohedge.com, and express.co.uk. Other domains that are frequently linked in false tweets about COVID-19 can be characterized as a mix of conservative news, conspiracy, and pseudoscience websites, such as naturalblaze.com, activistpost.com, infiniteunknown.net, and websites known to promote pro-Kremlin talking points, such as globalresearch.ca.

The following network map shows the most popular domains and Twitter accounts that are mention false narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine during the announcement of the vaccine and the election. The different colors represent “communities” found within the retweet network; domains and accounts that belong to the same “community” indicate that they are typically mentioned together in the tweet (for example, thegatewaypundit.com and @KristinnFR).



The map below shows the communities spreading disinformation specific to Bill Gates, looking at the period before the vaccine was still under development, from August-September 2020.





CONCLUSION

There is still time for organizations such as the federal, state, and local governments as well as pharmaceutical companies to address narratives stemming from foreign and domestic actors through a variety of remediation strategies that could include counter-messaging or legal action.

However, the window is closing. With increased perpetuation of falsehoods from sources, including most recently right-wing news host Tucker Carlson, into communities, the risk of those believing false narratives continues to rise. Mitigation efforts must specifically seek to address the communities that have been inundated with false information, including providing accurate and detailed information on the vaccine to targeted communities so that their lives and the health and safety of their families and communities are not at risk.

PROTECT THE TRUTH IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Founded in 2019 with the mission to protect the truth, Alethea Group detects and mitigates instances of disinformation and social media manipulation to help clients navigate the new digital reality. Alethea Group is women and disability-owned and operated.



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