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Covid scepticism has become a fulcrum for influencers and audiences who see themselves on a journey of personal discovery toward better physical and mental health.

- This pursuit of better health begins with rejecting public health advice.

- Fact checking and debunking can make the problem worse by feeding persecution narratives.

- Self-appointed truth-tellers wear the ‘misinformation’ label as a badge of honour.

- Countermeasures must focus less on tracking extremist content and more on exploring how it engages people emotionally and motivates them politically.

- We must shift from media literacy to media empathy. Instead of debunking misinformation, we need to ask what attracts people to it in the first place.
KEY FINDINGS

Misinformation often finds a large audience before mainstream debunkers learn about it.

- Evidence shows that covid sceptics and anti-vaxxers are often hugely influential among large online communities well before they attract mainstream attention and criticism.

De-platforming can have the unintended consequence of amplifying messages among audiences seeking ‘truths’ the mainstream won’t tell.

- The TikTok hashtag for the influencer Andrew Tate, who has expressed vaccine scepticism and faced criticism for misogyny, grew from 12 billion views to 18.2 billion views after his banning from the platform.
- The former Pfizer scientist and covid-sceptic Mike Yeadon left Twitter with just over 91,000 followers, but he now has a shared Telegram channel with over 100,000 followers.

There is a core group of UK-focused covid-sceptic Telegram channels with over 580,000 combined followers.

- 59% of these channels share content referencing phrases Dr Robert Malone popularised.
- 44% of these channels use key phrases associated with QAnon.

Right-wing extremists successfully tap into online audiences interested in self-help, lifestyle advice and a broader pursuit of ‘truth’.

- Russell Brand’s YouTube videos are routinely shared by far-right figures and groups including Tommy Robinson and one of the top QAnon channels on Telegram.
- TikTok has become a hub for ‘truth-telling’ lifestyle advice targeting adolescent boys and young men, but this advice often advances racist and misogynist ideas.
Covid scepticism & reactionary politics

Despite widespread compliance with lockdown measures and high vaccine uptake in the UK, the public health response to COVID-19 also sparked resistance. Several thousand people attended monthly anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests in London in 2021, many of them motivated by social media ‘misinformation’, which the ONS identified as a key cause of vaccine refusal.¹

Even in this ‘post-pandemic’ moment, covid scepticism continues to drive reactionary and extremist political content online. The news cycle may have moved on, but a large and engaged online audience has not.

This report documents a persistent and growing covid scepticism online, showing how it draws in reactionary and even extremist ideas and influencers. Covid scepticism acts as a fulcrum for highly engaged online audiences interested in rejecting mainstream consensus about public health and pursuing a personal journey of self-discovery toward better mental and physical health. For these audiences, the coordinated public health response to COVID-19 is seen as a prime example of ‘the mainstream’ enforcing groupthink and ruling out dissent. ‘Misinformation’ becomes the ‘truth’ that ‘they’ do not want you to hear.²

These are worrying developments amidst ongoing battles against online extremism and vaccine rollouts combatting polio, flu and COVID-19 variants. But covid scepticism is finding a dedicated audience. In his daily videos questioning the public health response to COVID-19, Russell Brand explicitly invites his over 6 million subscribers on YouTube to join him on a ‘voyage towards truth’ and warns his audiences that ‘they’ might silence him for speaking the truth. In a 27 September video announcing YouTube had pulled one of his videos for misinformation, Brand asked ‘Is it possible that YouTube now dances to the tune of the mainstream media? Dances to the tune of the establishment?’ Top comments stated that ‘getting censored from YouTube is a badge of honor’ or like ‘being knighted’, and that it shows ‘you’re doing something right’. Brand did apologise for the video in question, in which he misinterpreted National Institute of Health guidance on Ivermectin, but he still seized upon the misinformation label as a sign of mainstream hypocrisy.

Brand is not the only influencer to leverage the apparent hypocrisy of mainstream debunkers to expand his audience. Joe Rogan invited the prolific vaccine sceptic Robert Malone to his podcast, which averages 11 million listeners,³ precisely because Malone had been ‘silenced’ by bans from Twitter and YouTube for spreading misinformation.⁴ In this context, banning and debunking purported misinformation runs the risk of enhancing its appeal and widening its audience.⁵

There is an urgent need for more inventive ways to respond to misleading social media content. Drawing on analysis of TikTok, 4chan, Telegram and YouTube, this report charts links between extremism, covid scepticism and narratives of a personal journey of self-improvement. It calls for a move away from combatting ‘misinformation’ and toward identifying the emotional bonds that connect people to reactionary and extremist thinking. The fight against ‘misinformation’ must begin by engaging with everyday people and their digital lives.
Misinformation in the post-mainstream era

Obscure and extremist political ideas thrive in our highly splintered media environment. We live at a paradoxical moment for media: never have so few private corporations exerted such consolidated control over television, radio and print. Yet despite this consolidation, TikTokers, YouTubers and podcaster can attract audiences in the millions almost entirely outside of ‘mainstream’ awareness.

It is crucial to recognise that there is no mass audience online, and therefore no widely shared forum for public debate on key issues. There is no longer any ‘pure’ and rational space for debate. News and information now spread in the same places that people socialise, seek likes and engagement, and offer their own takes and commentary. This is known as context collapse, and it has scrambled traditional political definitions.⁶

Online, extremist ideas can pop up in unexpected places and find audiences even among people who would not consider themselves particularly partisan. This trend is reflected in referrals to the UK Home Office’s Prevent Programme, which is often justifiably seen as a vehicle for Islamophobic surveillance. However, it might surprise many that Prevent referrals for ‘Islamist radicalisation’ have declined steadily over the last five years. Since 2018, the most common referral category has been ‘mixed, unstable or unclear ideology’ (MUU), the Home Office category for extremism that draws from multiple, unstable and incoherent ideologies.

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Prevent referrals by type of concern, March 2016 - 2021

Source: Home Office Official Statistics
Whatever one makes of the risks of the Home Office relying on this catch-all ideological category, the rise of MUU is in large part the outcome of more people living more of their lives online. Context collapse makes ideologies appear incoherent to anyone not already initiated in the worldviews of niche online spaces, where one person’s extremist misinformation is another’s liberating truth.

There is by now a wealth of information from academic research and other reports tracking the spread of far-right extremism online. Methodologically, this report is similar to others in that it draws on extensive time spent observing digital platforms and digital communities combined with computational analysis and ‘scraping’ of posts, comments and other content from these platforms. However, this report seeks to move beyond merely measuring content and tracking extremism. Instead, it focuses on the emotional appeals that make audiences connect with covid scepticism. The report practices what the eminent scholar of fascism Roger Griffin calls ‘methodological empathy’, which seeks to understand the appeal of reactionary, radical and even extremist worldviews in order to combat them. It is important to emphasise that methodological empathy does not require sympathy. The goal is not to share the feelings of reactionary or extremist influencers or the feelings that attract audiences to their ideas. Instead, the goal is to understand how and why these viewpoints appeal to audiences.

The report concludes with practical suggestions aimed at practitioners who work with community members. These suggestions focus on replacing ‘media literacy’ with ‘emotional literacy’, a distinction that moves beyond fact-checking and source-verification, which can be losing battles, and towards seeking to understand why people find extremism attractive in the first place.
Andrew Tate & TikTok: cycles of influence

Andrew Tate’s meteoric recent rise to prominence and subsequent banning from all major social media platforms exemplifies many of the dynamics of contemporary media. An influencer espousing extreme viewpoints attracts controversy, which only attracts more attention. This feeds a cycle of outrage and social media engagement, which the influencer monetizes.

Tate attracted millions of fans and haters alike on TikTok with hyperbolically misogynistic dating advice and equally hyperbolic claims about making money, all of it targeted at adolescent boys and young men. He used the attention to flog Hustler’s University, which promised ‘hard-hitting lessons in making money’, all the while aligning himself with extremist figures including the far-right activist Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon, known as Tommy Robinson. After a crescendo of mainstream criticism, all major social media platforms banned Tate in late August 2022.

In the justifiable focus on what has been characterised as Tate’s misogyny, his covid scepticism and vaccine hesitancy have been less noticed. In one of his first podcast appearances after his banning, Tate claims that there has been ‘an absolute blacklist on all opposing views’ during the pandemic, and that social media platforms are part of ‘the matrix’ offering a false vision of reality.

Tate articulates a view that is also widely held among reactionaries and extremists: the public health response to covid-19 was in fact a ploy to limit opposition and enforce conformity. By this logic, mainstream media and social media platforms call any criticism of the covid measures ‘misinformation’ because they want to prevent individuals from seeking the truth and from taking control of their own lives.

Although his hateful comments are attention-grabbing, the focus on better mental and physical health through self-control and self-discovery is a crucial part of Tate’s appeal. The cliché that social media fuels outrage is accurate. But Tate’s fans don’t like him just because he’s outrageous; they like him because he offers a vision of the ‘truth’ about relationships, money and well-being, however distorted.

The 2021 Facebook leaks provided definitive proof for what we already know, which is that social media platforms value nothing over engagement – likes, comments and shares — and that negative content drives engagement. But negativity is not just about outrage and anger. It’s also about sadness, isolation and feelings of failure.
The trick Tate pulls is to remind his audience of their sadness, of what they’re missing in their lives — whether it is money, meaningful relationships or self-esteem — and to answer that sadness with outrage. This outrage then becomes the motivation for a journey toward self-improvement. Outsiders will tend to see only the anger and outrage, but those inside the fan community connect first through feelings of vulnerability, which are translated into outrage, and then treated with a plan of action.

The plan can take the form of self-help, whether it is Jordan Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos* or Hustler’s University, which offers an antidote to being broke and lonely. Or the plan can be something more extreme. But the plan is inevitably about self-control and self-discovery. When we focus only on the outrage surrounding a figure like Tate, we underestimate his appeal. It is not that he makes convincing arguments, but that he refuses to be controlled. A social media ban becomes a badge of honour for Tate and his community of followers, a sign that they have stumbled upon forbidden truths on their social media feeds.

This is why, at least in the short term, the banning has raised Tate’s profile. On TikTok, Tate’s hashtag continues to grow after his banning, from 12 billion in August, when he was banned, to 18.2 billion as of 17 October. Tate’s recent appearance on a podcast of wealth creation has 8.6 million YouTube views. Clips from this podcast, along with clips from a post-banning appearance on a popular Twitch streamers channel, have quickly populated TikTok. He has quickly amassed 678,000 subscribers and counting on Rumble with videos featuring titles like ‘Andrew Tate – Born Banned’, nearly equalling his total of just over 700,000 YouTube subscribers.

This is not to say the ban has had no negative repercussions for Tate and his business model. He has closed Hustler’s University. TikTok audiences will move on soon enough. But focusing too much on Tate himself can lead to bigger mistakes about how social media works. The most powerful influencers don’t just post content themselves; they curate a community of followers who re-post, re-share and re-mix their content. Tate himself does not need to be ‘on’ TikTok to have a massive presence on the platform. He cultivated a massive army of fan accounts who promote Hustler’s University with affiliate signup links in their bios that pay out whenever someone joins Hustler’s University. These fan accounts continue to be the engine room of Tate’s social media factory. The Hustler’s University pay-outs incentivized these accounts to flood TikTok with brief clips of Tate, amplifying his influence. Just three of the more prolific fan accounts have generated 13 million likes for Tate content.

Once the content is there, it becomes a resource for engagement – a snarky response video, a comical lip-synching of a serious rant, even a parody of Tate’s performance style. The most-liked video under the andrewtate hashtag features a young woman donning a purposefully low-effort Tate costume and imitating his catchphrases about
owning multiple Bugattis and not trusting women with ‘high body counts’. This video mocks Tate, but it still spreads his message. As The Observer reported, Tate built negative responses into his social media strategy – all attention is influence. Although it’s not always clear whether videos mocking Tate are intended as serious criticism or playful banter, there are also hashtags that specifically identify positive Tate content, including freetopg (213.3 million views), freethetruth (118.3 million views) and freetate (94 million views).

There are three key lessons to draw from Tate’s outsized influence:

• The first is that it is a mistake to focus only on whether social media content is extreme, outrageous or spreading misinformation.
  o Instead, we should focus where social media platforms focus: on whether people engage with the content and how emotionally charged those engagements are. Emotional engagement begets more engagement.

• The second lesson is obvious, but we tend to forget it: sadness is a strong emotion.
  o Reactionary and extremist politics tend to begin with feelings of vulnerability. In the most extreme cases, this can be hard to see and dangerous to empathise with. But for someone like Tate, whose politics are more ambiguous, and who attracts a large audience of lonely young men and boys, we miss the source of his appeal if we ignore how he taps into sadness, low self-esteem and poor mental health.

• The third lesson is the most difficult one, but also a key reason for this report.
  o Criticising, denouncing and banning extremist and reactionary ideas only proves to those who hold those ideas that they are on the right track. This is why a ban initially amplifies the influence of someone like Tate. Even if it eventually cuts off his attention stream, someone else can always step into the space he has left, and the cycle will begin again.

This is why it is crucial to understand these cycles of attention, and particularly how they operate largely outside of mainstream awareness.
4chan: ‘Mass psychosis’ & the mainstream lag

The imageboard 4chan is a kind of ‘ground zero’ for far-right extremism online. The 4chan board /pol/ has been widely credited with shaping the irony, shock humour and reliance on trolling that characterised the alt-right. But the board is not welcoming to outsiders. Its functionality is user-unfriendly by design. Moderation is notoriously loose, and pornography, violent images and hate speech (often deployed ‘ironically’) abound.

Even for the curious who can stomach the hate speech and master the confusing interface, it is difficult to keep up with discussion on 4chan. The default anonymity of 4chan has encouraged users to develop their own obscure, self-referential lingo. Users whose posts misuse the lingo are told to ‘lurk moar’ before attempting to join in.

4chan is also ephemeral. All posts are deleted within a day or two, although posts stay at the top of the page longer if they are ‘bumped’, or if they attract a response in the form of comments. This introduces an incentive to create novel and interesting content.

This combination of anonymity and ephemerality has made 4chan both highly creative and highly obscure to outsiders. The 4chan board /pol/, or politically incorrect, combines this anonymity and ephemerality with a focus on transgressing the ‘mainstream’ political consensus. This makes /pol/ a natural home for covid scepticism.

The visualisation below shows the top YouTube links in posts discussing vaccines on /pol/ from UK IP addresses between 31 July 2021 and 1 February 2022. YouTube Data Tools software (Rieder 2015) can query the ‘related videos’ parameter on YouTube to see which videos YouTube sees as most connected. A complex series of algorithms interacts with search and viewing history to shape which videos people actually see on YouTube, but the ‘related videos’ parameter is a useful indicator of what YouTube anticipates people will watch based on their viewing history – after all, the goal of the platform is to keep people watching. Videos cluster together in hubs.
Each node is colour coded by the categories YouTube uses – news and politics, education, people and blogs, entertainment and so on.

What stands out from this visualisation is the ways celebrity culture, entertainment and education all overlap and intermingle with news and politics. This is a form of ‘context collapse’, and it is a key tendency on /pol/ that resurfaces on other platforms. Although the dominant category is ‘News and Politics’, overall the most common categories are those that seemingly have little to do with news or politics. Videos from widely different categories cluster in hubs on the network because YouTube viewers pursue their own interests (guided along by algorithms), and these interests do not reflect the distinctions mainstream news coverage adheres to. This is how covid scepticism fuels what the Home Office calls mixed, unstable, or unclear ideologies.

This form of ‘context collapse’ suggests that a focus on ‘junk news’ or ‘bad information’ polluting the ecosystem may be missing the point – even on /pol/, a space explicitly dedicated to politics, users are pursuing their own definitions of ideas and information.12 ‘Do your own research’ is a key catchphrase of the infamous QAnon conspiracy theory, which began on 4chan before moving to 8chan and across social media. ‘Doing your own research’ is about a kind of Quixotic quest of self-education that understands itself as going ‘deeper’ than just following ‘the news’. This lack of strict separation between ‘news’ and ‘culture’ or ‘entertainment’ and ‘self-education’ is a source of strength rather than weakness. It allows these groups to deal in tone, style and oppositional stance rather than substance. It also makes it difficult to combat claims. What might appear as misinformation to an outsider is not experienced merely as information by those who engage with it. In the case of 4chan, where users refer to themselves with the collective name ‘anon’, misinformation might in fact be the substance of a collective identity.

This is one reason misinformation is often identified long after it has taken root out of the view of the wider public. For instance, Spotify came under fire in January 2022 after the platform’s hugely popular podcaster Joe Rogan interviewed the controversial
scientist Robert Malone, who described the vaccine rollout as symptomatic of a ‘mass formation psychosis’ on the level of Nazi totalitarianism. However, 4chan users were sharing Malone’s ideas as early as June 2021 and providing links to an alternative media ecosystem that includes YouTube channels like After Skool, which targets a young audience, and which published a video in August 2021 on ‘mass psychosis’ that has attracted nearly 5 million views. Mainstream criticism of Malone only inspired further discussion of his ideas on 4chan.

The chart below shows this pattern. It visualises daily mentions of Malone on 4chan’s /pol/. Malone was the subject of discussion on /pol/ as early as June 2021, well before he attracted mainstream attention. Interest in Malone was actually tapering off in the winter of 2021, but when Rogan was criticized for inviting Malone on his podcast, Malone also surged back into attention on /pol/. This renewed discussion tended to mock mainstream media for belatedly learning about Malone and for misperceiving his ideas as misinformation.

![Robert Malone references in vaccine discussions on /pol/, June 2021 – January 2022](chart.png)

This is a pattern that extends beyond /pol/: a steady hum of discussion around an alternative idea begins within an online community. If the idea enters the mainstream news cycle – often covered as an example of misinformation – members of the community reconnect with the idea as they mock mainstream media coverage. In other words, online audiences connect emotionally with ‘misinformation’ outside the mainstream awareness, and belated criticism from the mainstream only reinforces the initial connection. Mainstream debunking is received as clumsy, antagonistic, or both, which only feeds the desire for further alternatives.
Telegram: Platform of the de-platformed

As platforms like Twitter and YouTube become more proactive in banning extremist content providers, they migrate to other, lesser-known platforms such as Telegram and Rumble with looser moderation policies. By the time the wider public learns of these misinformation cultures, they have already taken root in an alternative media ecosystem that targets a young audience, exploiting anxieties and offering extremist solutions.

Telegram has become increasingly important for people who have been de-platformed to build their audiences. People with large Twitter followings who are de-platformed and decamp to Telegraph often lose follower numbers simply because Telegram has fewer users, but follower counts can still be very large. The former Pfizer scientist turned anti-vaxxer Mike Yeadon left Twitter with just over 91,000 followers; he now has a shared Telegram channel with over 113,000 followers. Telegram’s encryption and lack of moderation makes it attractive to anyone wishing to avoid government surveillance. Telegram groups can have up to 200,000 members, and Telegram channels have an unlimited audience size. The channels look a lot like other social media feeds, with the key difference that they are not easily searchable, even by keyword. To find the channel, it is necessary to be ‘in the know’.

Telegram has a lively anti-vaccination and covid-sceptic community. There are three key channels in the UK covid-sceptic scene. The channel ‘robinmg’, which Yeadon shares with anti-lockdown activist Robin Monotti and the independent journalist Cory Morningstar, has over 113,000 followers. World Doctors Alliance, a covid conspiracy group, has a channel (called worlddoctorsalliance) with over 140,000 followers. dailyexpose, the Telegram channel for the online misinformation publication The Exposé, is also a key actor in the covid-sceptic space. Its following is relatively small at just over 40,000, but posts from this channel are frequently forwarded among other anti-vaccine and covid-sceptic channels.

The ‘forwarding’ function is crucial on Telegram, much like the ‘retweet’ is on Twitter. A key difference between Telegram and mainstream platforms like Twitter is that there is no aggregated ‘Telegram feed’ that combines content from several channels, and there is no Telegram algorithm that ‘suggests’ content. Users must look at each channel individually, and the only way to find new channels is to learn about them apart from advertisements outside of Telegram is to discover them through forwarded messages. These forwarded messages appear in the feeds of channels users have already followed along with a link to the original channel. In this way, users discover
new channels through forwards. This makes the Telegram forward function even more important than the Twitter retweet, because it is the primary way to discover content from channels one doesn’t already follow. It also makes the ‘echo chamber’ effect even more powerful on Telegram.¹⁴

The above diagram draws on a dataset of all channel posts from robinmg, worlddoctorsalliance, and dailexpose between December 2021 and May 2022. All channels that received more than 10 forwards from a seed channel or more than 5 forwards from multiple seed channels are depicted on the diagram. Although this diagram excludes some significant findings – including worlddoctorsalliance forwarding Tommy Robinson’s telegram channel six times – this focus helps reveal how covid scepticism is the fulcrum of an alternative information ecosystem.
In reverse order, the top three channels receiving multiple forwards were:

**Childrens Health Defense** (54,281 subscribers): shares anti-vaxx content, covid-denialism and ‘medical freedom’ in the name of ending childhood epidemics

**NewResistance** (27,507): the channel of Xoaquin Flores, a Belgrade-based American journalist who claims to have studied under Aleksander Dugin, the ultranationalist, esoteric philosopher and Putin adviser who has been calling for war in Ukraine since 2014. The content is highly idiosyncratic and often densely theoretical, ranging from the ‘Great Reset’ and anti-vaxx content to ruminations on the war in Ukraine as a ‘spiritual war’ between a decadent ‘post-modern’ Ukraine and a spiritually grounded Russia.

**VigilantFox** (60,847 subscribers): Trumpist politics with a heavy focus on anti-vaxx content and covid-denialism. The channel concentrates on networking other ‘independent journalist’ channels focused on QAnon and anti-vaxx content.

There are disturbing trends in content of the channels that receive forwards from the seed channels, all of which are key actors in the UK-focused anti-vaxx and covid-sceptic community on Telegram.

- 59% of these channels share content referencing ‘mass psychosis’ or ‘mass formation’, echoing phrasing popularised by Dr. Robert Malone
- 44% use key phrases associated with QAnon, including references to the great awakening, the figure of Q, the coming storm, and WWG1WGA (short for the QAnon phrase ‘Where we go one, we go all’.)
- Of the 14 channels with over 100,000 subscribers, 11 referenced mass formation or mass psychosis and 9 used key phrases associated with QAnon.

The focus on ‘mass formation psychosis’ should worry anyone invested in ‘debunking’ mis- or disinformation. This phrasing has taken hold precisely because **efforts at countering what appears to outsiders as misinformation look like symptoms of psychosis to insiders.**
The Good with the bad?
Russell Brand’s covid scepticism

No one captures the ambiguous potential of linking politics with a journey of personal discovery better than Russell Brand. The stand-up comedian and Hollywood star previously associated with the left has attracted controversy for what many describe as his covid scepticism. Brand opens every one of his almost daily videos on covid scepticism, the Great Reset, Bill Gates, and the like with the catchphrase ‘Hello you 5.9 million awakening wonders!’ There is no evidence that Brand is intentionally echoing QAnon’s ‘Great Awakening’, but QAnoners have received him as a fellow traveler. This is clear on Telegram, where his content is routinely shared by the top QAnon channel on Telegram, the far-right activist Tommy Robinson’s channel, and the Pepe Lives Matter channel, which focuses on memes and the alt-right.

This is not to say that Brand is actively seeking those connections, but content spreads on social media through networks of association. Online, all of us learn through those with whom we are linked. This is another reason the misinformation and the disinformation labels are misguided: messages don’t spread on social media as they would on a television or radio broadcast. Instead, they resonate among audiences who are already connected to a specific culture of belief. This means the intent behind the message is often less important than how it connects emotionally.

One way to chart these networks of association is by looking at how social media platforms categorise content. Querying YouTube’s ‘related to’ parameter with Russell Brand’s videos added to the above list of most-linked YouTube videos from UK IP address on 4chan’s /pol/ shows this network effect. The visualisation below is a detail of Russell Brand’s network of association on YouTube. This network is not one Brand himself actively chooses. It is a reflection of how YouTube categorises his videos, which is in turn a reflection of what audiences who engage with his content also find interesting.

Some of the links are unsurprising. The Problem with Jon Stewart and Real Time with Bill Maher are both programmes where hosts offer comedic commentary on politics and culture. But look closer, and we see Russell Brand’s channel is linked with the Modern War Institute, a war strategy and ideas forum
housed at West Point. Brand is also linked to Doug Batchelor, an evangelical pastor and self-help guide, and to a range of ‘prepper’ channels. Perhaps more worryingly, Brand is also connected to self-described journalist and frequent far-right apologist Tim Pool, whom Brand has hosted on his podcast, as well as to ‘Violet Bunny’, a channel devoted to revealing the conspiracies of the ‘New World Order’. Context collapse once again scrambles political definitions.

The next detail of Brand’s network of association shows YouTube placing Brand’s videos in a network with more extremist content creators. There is a direct connection from Brand’s channel to JRE Clips, which shares clips of the Joe Rogan Experience, and from there to Be Grateful Bear, a channel that creates animations for monologues from alt-right comedians and commentaries.

From 4chan to Telegram to YouTube and back, there is an alternative information ecosystem that views the mainstream as subject to a ‘mass formation psychosis,’ and that seeks to replace mainstream thinking with a journey of personal discovery. Perhaps unintentionally, Russell Brand has tapped into this ecosystem with tremendous effect.
Brand styles himself as a fearless truth-teller. He routinely warns his audience that 'they' will eventually ban him, and he appears to be anticipating de-platforming. He has set up backup accounts on Rumble and the Rumble-owned creator crowdfunder site Locals, which features right-wing influencers including Paul Joseph Watson. Brand has also taken to adopting a position of strategic disinterest, often claiming 'he doesn't know what's right for you and your family', and appealing to individual freedom. He also focuses on criticising 'medical paternalism' and the 'authoritarianism' that comes with it. As Brand said in a recent video:

“How can you argue with the suspicion and cynicism that’s grown out of this medical paternalism and the authoritarianism that surrounds it? The idea that people aren’t intelligent enough to make their own decisions, so centralised bodies are guiding our lives. I believe we at a critical point where we need to arrest the slide into global technocracy and the underlying assumption that most people are idiots.’

Many have characterised Brand as a spreader of misinformation. This criticism is misguided, and it misunderstands how ideas circulate online. Brand’s success on YouTube does stem in part from his ability to identify the key themes and ideas of the covid sceptic information ecosystem. What makes him an effective communicator on YouTube is his remarkable ability to identify and empathise with the feelings that drive people to those themes and ideas in the first place. He rejects consensus. He tells the truth. He feels his audience’s pain. There is a lesson to be learned from Brand’s remarkable ability to connect emotionally with an audience of people who – like all of us – are indeed living through critical times. There is also a lesson to be learned of the dangers with this approach. After all, Brand’s videos are now being used to echo and amplify the ideas of the far right.
Conclusions & recommendations

For a large and highly engaged online audience, the pandemic marked a shift in their thinking. It revealed that the mainstream exists to obscure the truth, and that only by undertaking a personal journey of self-discovery – guided by courageous truth-tellers – can one uncover the truth. The mainstream chorus calling those discoveries misinformation is evidence of their righteousness.

This is a dangerous time politically and for public health. We desperately need better strategies for combatting the kinds of reactionary politics that grow with online covid-sceptic communities. This report shows that debunking and de-platforming have a strong tendency to enhance the emotional appeal of those targeted. More stringent platform regulation could help resolve the issue, but it remains a distant prospect.

This is where the third-sector, academics and activists working on public health, mental health, youth work and anti-racism can step in and take practical steps to help the communities they serve avoid radicalisation. These steps include:

Fact checking and debunking can make the problem worse by feeding feelings of persecution.

- Resist the urge to contest even the most outlandish ideas. Instead of rebutting these ideas, looking to establish common ground on the basis of shared vulnerability makes it possible to reframe the discussion away from reactionary or extremist ideas.

Avoid the trap of focusing on tracking and tracing extremist content. Extremists welcome such surveillance as a sign of the power of their ideas.

- Instead, focus not on keeping track of content as it shifts and changes but on how it engages people emotionally or motivates them politically. The emotional appeals are consistent even as the specific content changes.

Shift from media literacy to media empathy, from fact-checking to finding emotional common ground

- Checking sources is important, but search engines deliver results based on browser history, location and other factors. Crucially, a search will return results. Searching for a key trope or phrase from covid sceptic and alternative information communities will likely return results favourable to those communities.
- Acknowledge the problem of information overload in anxious times. Try to connect with the feelings that drive people to ‘alternative’ sources in the first place.
Notes & references


2 It is common to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation, where disinformation is shared purposefully, and misinformation is shared accidentally. However, as the internet adage Poe’s Law has long taught, intent is impossible to assess online.


7 All data from this report is available upon request. 4chan, TikTok and Telegram data was gathered using Stijn Peeters and Sal Hagen, ‘The 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit: A Modular Tool for Transparent and Traceable Social Media Research’. Computational Communication Research, Forthcoming. Available at SSRN: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3914892. YouTube data was collected with Bernhard Rieder (2015) YouTube Data Tools (Version 1.23) [Software]. Available from https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube.


13 Mattias Desmet, a professor of psychology at the University of Ghent, also describes the public health response to covid-19 as a mass formation psychosis. His comments come with more intellectual scaffolding but less performative flare.


15 The Great Reset is recovery plan for COVID-19 developed by the World Economic Forum. It has sparked several conspiracy theories online about a covert ‘globalist’ agenda to leverage the pandemic to impose control through mass vaccination, eradicate private property and impose digital currency, among other concerns.

16 It is sometimes assumed that YouTube’s recommendation algorithm acts as kind of digital ‘on-air planner’ setting the broadcast schedule. However, viewer choice is still crucial. YouTubers build success by appearing relatable to audiences and by hosting and guesting on other successful YouTubers. Audiences and networks of association are crucial. See Rebecca Lewis (2018) Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube. Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/library/alternative-influence/.