

## **INQUIRY INTO ANTI-VILIFICATION PROTECTIONS**

**Organisation:** Online Hate Prevention Institute

**Date Received:** 17 June 2020



**THE ONLINE HATE PREVENTION INSTITUTE**  
*Empowering communities, organisations and agencies in the fight against hate.*

LA LSIC - AVP INQUIRY  
SUBMISSION NO. 38  
SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION

# ONLINE HATE PREVENTION INSTITUTE SUPPLEMENTAL SUBMISSION

## ONLINE VILIFICATION AND CORONAVIRUS



FOR THE INQUIRY INTO ANTI-VILIFICATION  
PROTECTIONS OF THE LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES  
COMMITTEE OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY,  
PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

17 JUNE 2020

## PREAMBLE

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this additional submission to the inquiry in-light of the impact of COVID-19 on vilification. The pandemic has led to a significant rise in online vilification and we expect this to have a lasting impact through the recovery period. We have, as a community, moved backwards as a result of this pandemic and the additional stress it has placed on society, communities and individuals.

As the only Harm Prevention Charity in Australia dedicated to protecting people by reducing online hate, we undertook a program of work examining social media content during COVID-19. This work, summarised in this submission, was completed to aid this Inquiry and at the request of Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner. This work involved an unscheduled campaign and a manifold increase in our work compared to when we last addressed the Inquiry in February.

Further to the completed work, we designed a deeper and more effective crisis response. Unfortunately, we were unable to secure the small amount of financial support required to activate it. Many crises today have an online element, from COVID to Christchurch, and we recommend this be factored into future crisis responses, particularly those which can generate spikes in online vilification. There are things which can be done to limit the harm to the Victorian community, but they require active partnerships and timely interventions, not to mention appropriate investment.

While some opportunities to limit the unfolding harm have been missed, there are further opportunities for timely intervention. A need for urgent engagement remains. We begin this submission by highlighting this need.

Dr Andre Oboler, Dr David Wishart and Mr Mark Civitella

17 June 2020

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Andre was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Cyber Security at the La Trobe Law School, co-chair of the Online Antisemitism working group of the Global Forum to Combat Antisemitism, an expert member of the Inter-Parliamentary Coalition to Combatting Antisemitism and served for two terms with the board of the Quality Assurance Agency – the UK's higher education regulator. His research interests include online regulation and hate speech and the impacts of technology on society. He is a co-author of the book "Cyber Racism and Community Resilience: Strategies for Combating Online Race Hate".

Andre holds a PhD in Computer Science from Lancaster University, Honours in Bachelor of Computer Science and an LLM (Juris Doctor) from Monash University. He is a Senior Member of the IEEE, a Graduate Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and a Member of the Victorian Society of Computers and the Law.

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Mark Civitella is Chairman of the Online Hate Prevention Institute. He is a Lecturer in Strategic Communication at La Trobe University and works as a strategic communication consultant. He is a Fellow of the Public Relations Institute of Australia.

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Mark has been a director of a number of communication and research companies. He holds a B.A. (Monash University); Diploma in General and Comparative Literature (Monash University); Graduate Diploma in Public Relations (RMIT University) and is currently Doctoral Candidate at La Trobe University.

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David holds a PhD from ANU, and a Masters of Law, Bachelor of Laws (Hons) and Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Melbourne.

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#### ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This submission incorporates contributions from several law / criminology students from La Trobe University who have been completing internships with the Online Hate Prevention Institute. These students include: Theodoros Christant, Beyza Kaymakci, Lauren Lallo-Crofts, Sarah Ngo, Esther O'Kelly-Goodrich and others.

#### AUTHORISATION FOR SUBMISSION

This report has been produced by the Online Hate Prevention Institute and approved by the Board of Directors of the Online Hate Preventions Institute for submission to the *Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections* of the Victorian Parliament. It draws in part upon an expanding body of material and reports produced by the Online Hate Prevention Institute in its assistance to government, organisations and regulators across Australia and internationally.



Mark Civitella  
Chairman, Online Hate Prevention Institute

17 June 2020

## THE RISE IN ONLINE HATE DURING COVID-19

COVID-19 and the resulting restrictions saw more people spending more time online. Much of this time has been spent on social media and in video calls on platforms such as Zoom.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> Twitter wrote about “the stress of the new levels of traffic we’re seeing on our service” saying that the “effects of COVID-19 on Twitter have already surpassed any event we’ve seen, and it’s possible that as the pandemic continues, we will see additional stress on our service”.<sup>1</sup> In the previous 10 days Direct Messaging alone had risen by 30%.<sup>2</sup>

Facebook reported on March 24<sup>th</sup> that in many of the places hardest hit by Coronavirus use of their messaging services had more than doubled.<sup>3</sup> They compared the surge in use to the Olympics and New Year’s Eve, but on a sustained basis, and said “we are experiencing new records in usage almost every day”.<sup>4</sup> The surge was so large Facebook began degrading the quality of its videos to save on bandwidth.

Similar patterns of surging usage have been occurring across other platforms. The surge in usage has resulted in higher level of exposure to vilification by the public. It has also led to an increase in hate content as trolls and those seeking to promote division put their time into sowing discord and hate. The existing hate groups online adapted their messages to make them relevant to COVID-19, aiming to draw in broader audiences, maintain the interest of their members, and energise them.

We are concerned that the higher exposure to online hate messages has created distrust and will have a lasting negative effect. Community cohesion has been weakened, resilience reduced, and people have been left more susceptible to extreme messages of hate and radicalisation. Moving forward, we can expect the scapegoating of minorities is likely to increase due to ongoing economic stress and the risk of some moving down a path to violent extremism will grow.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/keeping-our-apps-stable-during-covid-19/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## RESPONDING TO ONLINE VILIFICATION

There is a need for both urgent engagement on online vilification as we respond to COVID-19, but also for action to address past structural weaknesses so we return to a more resilient position than we were in before this crisis.

### THE NEED FOR URGENT ENGAGEMENT

The Online Hate Prevention Institute (OHPI) is a harm prevention charity focussed on detecting, analysing, understanding and preventing online hate.

The impact of Covid-19 has seen an escalation in online hate in an environment we have not previously experienced. This is the first global pandemic with enforced social restrictions in an age of mass social media communication. The impacts need to be captured and analysed in the context of emergence into a different social circumstance – post-lockdown.

In relation to the rise in vilification resulting from increased and targeted online hate, we must understand that Covid-19 has set back multicultural and broader social cohesion by decades.

There have been numerous media reports of vilification of groups within our community. The Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner has been vocal in drawing attention to behaviours targeting Asian Australians; the Asian Australian Alliance has raised concerns; many groups have put up flags to show racial vilification driven by concerns of Covid-19.

OHPI has been supporting the Race Discrimination Commissioner and has raised concerns. 48 hours after we posted, on what appeared to be a systemic campaign of online abuse targeting international (Chinese) students, two Chinese students were assaulted in the centre of Melbourne. Their attackers cited Covid-19.

The real and immediate impact of online hate is prevalent and needs to be addressed.

A key concern is, despite the best intentions of organisations raising concerns, they appear in the media and elsewhere as ‘anecdotes’. That is, they are not structured, measured and analysed reports, rather they are but a collection of personal observations. As such it is hard for authorities and the law to engage.

OHPI is the only organisation in Australia with a software platform and expertise to gather this data on social media, and collate, measure, and report quickly on its findings. It transforms anecdotal observations to hard data. Data that can be acted upon. This also allows for the rejection of some assertions that simply do not have a significant basis in fact.

OHPI also works to shut-down postings which breach regulatory guidelines or are in breach of law – including Victorian law. We do this through our own reporting to social media platforms, campaigns encouraging public reporting and in the most urgent cases through direct representations to our



contacts within the social media companies. Where we identify threats or legal breaches, we report to the relevant law enforcement organisation.

OHPI anticipated the impact of Covid-19 and sought to work with both the Victorian Government and the Commonwealth. While we have the expertise, skills and track record in this space, the absence of a partnership with government, as discussed when we appeared before the inquiry in February this year, leaves us short on capacity. Possibly we had a more acute sense of the impact of Covid-19 and how social restrictions would challenge social resilience, and we may have anticipated more correctly the escalation of negative behaviours online. The lack of partnership of OHPI and government should be of concern to our community.

We remain overwhelmed by demand and underwhelmed by support from government.

Without support from Government, we have recently responded to the demands emanating from the impacts of Covid-19 at 400% normal output. However, this was insufficient to meet the demands driven by concerns of Covid-19.

This is concerning as it meant added risk and negative impact to the Victorian and Australian community.

We proposed to set-up software and train at-risk communities to identify and report instances of online hate targeting them. Action could then have been taken to reduce or remove the online hate. This would have empowered communities and driven greater resilience to the hate targeting them.

Instead, people were assaulted, vilification increased, some groups were too frightened to leave their homes and the overall fabric of Victoria's leading multicultural program has been degraded. Victims primarily hid from broader society. There was inadequate protection for the vulnerable.

For this there are many consequences, including being identified by China as a racist country.

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## OHPI CONTINUED COMMITMENT

As an example of the background work we have been conducting to protect the Australian community, we have been active and working with Washington-based *The Counter Terrorism Group* and with a number of groups here in Australia.

Together we have been monitoring extremism, specifically the Boogaloo movement that has been organising a violent reaction to Covid-19 lockdowns in the United States. These groups have also been (so far unsuccessfully) seeking to recruit and infiltrate into Australia. They are highly armed to military standards in the US. We have reported to the relevant authorities in Australia and the US Embassy, and our CTG colleagues have reported accordingly in the US. This work is on-going and is currently evaluating 81 online groups and 31 individuals to assess the level of threat they may pose. The work has documented methodologies of online engagement by these groups with direct relevance for those with intelligence and law enforcement responsibilities here. Our work also monitors for any risk of these groups spreading into the Australian community.

We have also been in discussions with an Australian partner about investigating tens of potential people of interest here in Australia. To balance the human rights of the individuals and the safety of the community, as well as reducing the backlog on police and other agencies, we believe it is important for civil society groups like ours to gather, document and assess the available open source intelligence before determining whether there is a sufficient basis to draw government's attention to an individual. This work is on hold until we have available capacity.

This work has primarily been financed by individuals and communities across Australia. There is significant concern in the community and a growing recognition that the online space has become a more significant arena for hate. Yet, a lack of government support exposes the Victorian and Australian community to risk. We operate with the knowledge that our stretched capacity can result in missing a threat, or our systems not picking up the organisation of violence against a group in our own community.

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## MOVING FORWARD

The impact of Covid-19 has set the Victorian and Australian community back some decades. Those in our community who vilify others have prospered under Covid-19. The seeds have been sown for greater harm to our community over the recovery period, as we discussed with SBS.<sup>5</sup> We need to regain control.

OHPI believes we can assist the Victorian Government in the following ways:

1. **Immediately empower the communities.** Provide the resources, software and tools to communities to collate data on hate targeting them.
2. **Find out where we now stand.** Immediately audit (full data collation) online hate and targeted behaviours towards at-risk groups in the Victorian community.
3. **Analyse the problem.** Use our software to categorise and gather empirical data about hate speech. Report to government so resources can be appropriately targeted.
4. **Assist with legislation.** In the consideration of legislation targeting vilification, to provide to Victorian Parliament the deepest and broadest data upon which to base any potential legislation. The Victorian Parliament would then lead the world with the most comprehensive analysis of Covid-19 related information.
5. **Reduce and remove hate speech.** What is online stays online - unless it is removed. Keeping hate speech online legitimates hate speech. OHPI can work with Government to 'clean up' online hate.

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Carr-Catzel. "A call for a National Anti-Racism Strategy", SBS World News Radio, 11 June 2020. Online at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/audiotrack/call-national-anti-racism-strategy>

The messages of hate that have been produced during this crisis will continue in circulation and their impact will only increase if action on this problem is not taken.

Despite limited resources, experts around the world are still turning to our data as some of the best available. Our data was presented in a global webinar, run from Washington DC, for the IEEE Computer Society.<sup>6</sup> We are taking steps to work with a partner across Southeast Asia. This month the Covid-19 Task Team at UNESCO notified us that they had brought our work to the attention of their colleagues working in the prevention of hate speech. Later this month we will be presenting on aspects of Covid-19 and antisemitism to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

We are located in Victoria and working to be world leaders in this space at a time when it is so greatly needed. We have software systems to address online hate which have been the models of government agencies across the world. We work with partners in Europe, the United States, and are developing work in Southeast Asia – but currently have no government support in our home in Victoria.

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<sup>6</sup> A video is available at <https://event.on24.com/wcc/r/2359513/5D979F1815F88AF8791752DEBAAD1D2D>

## ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES

COVID-19 has exposed a broader structural weakness. Online hate plays a major role in influencing society. Right now, for example, messages promoting distrust of police, which originate in the US and reflect very different circumstances to here,<sup>7</sup> are impacting attitudes in Australia. This in turn can lead to lower reporting of hate crimes and a general reluctance from the most vilified communities to seek government support.

Online Hate Prevention Institute represents a unique and world leading capacity here in Victoria. Our broad remit across all forms of hate, however, poses its own barrier. Government finds it difficult to categorise an organisation like the Online Hate Prevention Institute that represents the public interest broadly and which works across the whole community and across so many different areas of government responsibility. This affects the grants process, community engagement process and the consultation processes. This same framing of society is what leads to vilification against some groups, but not others, being covered by the current laws.

As part of broadening the coverage of vilification laws it would be useful to also broaden the approach of government to ensure relevant purpose-based charities, and not just community groups, are engaged. Purpose driven organisations can provide a deeper level of specialist expertise and the capacity to apply that expertise to different communities as the need arises. Covid-19 highlighted, for example, the gap in monitoring expertise between the Chinese and various Asian communities on the one hand and the Jewish and Muslim communities on the other. The gap between the Jewish and Muslim communities' capabilities and those of a specialist organisation like the Online Hate Prevention Institute when it comes to online hate are also significant.

We believe collaboration within civil society and between civil society and government is the most effective approach. We seek to work in partnership with the relevant community organisations and peak bodies when we can. Unfortunately, we have noticed repeatedly how concerns over funding, whether competition for government grants, or concern over competition for support from limited major donors, often becomes a barrier to collaboration. It encourages organisations to "go it alone" even when they lack expertise, and it reduces the effectiveness of the investment from public or donor funds even as it increases project risk. Fostering competition in this space, even when coupled with incentives for joint projects, can do more to harm than to benefit the effective use of public funds.

In recent years there has been a focus on youth engagement in this space. We support engagement with youth and youth run organisations, but there is also a need for specialist expertise. The best response is a collaboration. Young people are often more familiar with online technologies than most other Victorians, but there is a significant gap between familiarity and technical expertise. We need the experiences of our young people and the technical knowledge of experts to address the various forms of online vilification impacting youth on the platforms where it occurs.

## VILIFICATION AND HATE DURING COVID-19

In this section of the submission we look at some types of vilification which have been occurring in relation to COVID-19. Our focus is related to online vilification, but we have in places included details of wider trends. While we have sought to differentiate issues causing a rise in hate related to COVID-19 from those in which COVID-19 related vilification has simply displaced other vilification against the same group, more data is needed to gain a more precise picture.

The largest trend is the rise in Sinophobia, an increase in the volume of vilification directed against people of Chinese heritage / ethnicity. This is in part due to existing hate groups and online hate communities refocusing their attention from their usual targets, such as Jews or Muslims, to instead focus on those of Chinese or Asian heritage or ethnicity. This is a global trend but is particularly acute among Australians. Where other promoters of hate seek to return to their usual focus, it is more often than not Australians pushing to maintain to focus on Chinese and Asian people.

COVID-19 has created an excuse to renew previous anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism in Australia. This attention was largely absorbed into Islamophobic movements in recent years. This has the potential to become a mass movement, organised online, as we saw with the anti-Muslim protests around 2015. In contrast a large part of the far-right has refocused from Islamophobia vilification to antisemitic vilification, but there too there is deep interest in anti-Asian and anti-Chinese sentiment. Rather than the threat of a normalisation of vilification in society, these far-right groups and individuals now pose more of a security threat.

A key lesson is that the online infrastructure of hate which is developed to attack one group can very readily be repurposed to attack another group. There is a need for a broad-based approach to tackle this problem and recognition that hate groups pose a general threat and not just a threat to those they usually see as their targets.

## SINOPHOBIA AND ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

Sinophobia is the vilification of Chinese people and people of Chinese heritage. It is a specific form of racism and as such would be covered by the existing Racial and Religious Tolerance Act. While it has a strong historic presence in Victoria, for example during the gold rush of the 1850s, until now it has not been one of the more predominant forms of racism in Victoria. This has changed with COVID-19 both in terms of real-world incidents and with respect to the spread of Sinophobic online vilification. The association of the virus with China has seen the escalation of hate speech and race-motivated attacks against those of Chinese and Asians heritage more broadly all around the world.

The trend exists not just in Victoria and Australia but also internationally. The ADL, for example, has started tracking Sinophobic incidents in the US based on media reports, social media reports and reports it received directly.<sup>8</sup> Before 2020 the ADL, which largely focuses on antisemitism but also covers other forms of online hate, had no in-depth work on Sinophobia and only passing references in broader work, such as noting that Chinese people were one of many groups who could be targeted by racial slurs.<sup>9</sup>

Sinophobia has a larger history in Australia and specifically in Victoria. Anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1850s led to violence against Chinese immigrants at the Melbourne wharf, in Ballarat, Bendigo and other parts of Victoria.<sup>10</sup> In 2017 the Victorian Premier issues an apology to Victoria's Chinese community for these historic events.<sup>11</sup> While many in the Chinese Australian community have been in Australia for generations and many Australian Chinese community organisations have no connection with the Chinese Government at all, suspicions and negative attitudes based on race / ethnicity have in recent years impacted the community.

Difficulties for the local Chinese community have been regularly triggered by concerns about China. In 2018 it was discussion about Chinese foreign interference,<sup>12</sup> In 2015 it was concerns over foreign investment from China, particular in the property market,<sup>13</sup> and in the 1990s it was the rise of Pauline Hanson and the fear she spread of a Chinese takeover of Australia following the recession.<sup>14</sup>

Australia's proximity to China geographically and our strong economic ties and make China, and therefore also concerns about China, a larger topic for Australia than it is in other parts of the world like the US and Europe. Social media reflects these tensions and often fails to differentiate between the

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/reports-of-anti-asian-assaults-harassment-and-hate-crimes-rise-as-coronavirus-spreads>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/slurs-offensive-jokes-and-how-to-respond.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/conflict-and-harmony/anti-chinese-riots/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-25/victoria-apologises-to-chinese-for-racism-during-gold-rush-era/8558998>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/07/world/australia/china-australia-history.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.afr.com/companies/our-complex-relationship-with-chinese-australians-20151227-glvgml>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Chinese state, Chinese people in Australia such as international students, and the Australian Chinese community.<sup>15</sup>

The name used for the pandemic can significantly impact the attitude people adopt. World Health Organisation designated the virus COVID-19 specifically to avoid this problem. This was in-line with guidelines to avoid creating a name that referred to a particular location, individual or animal due to the long history of radicalised pandemics. The guidelines on naming diseases were created in 2015 when WHO recognised the consequences of identifying a disease by its place of origin. Dr Keiji Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director General for Health Security, stated at the time that, “disease names really do matter to the people who are directly affected. We’ve seen certain disease names provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities, create unjustified barriers to travel, commerce and trade, and trigger needless slaughtering of food animals.” Despite this, the increasing use of other names led to WHO officials taking further steps to warn against the use of these terms in order to prevent racial profiling and xenophobic behaviour.

Although Government authorities and health organisations in Australia referred to the Coronavirus without mentioning the origin of the virus or a particular ethnicity, the language adopted in the media took less care and as a result increased anti-Chinese sentiment. Expressions used to describe COVID-19 such as ‘Wuhan virus’ or ‘Chinese virus’ (the later also used by President Trump)<sup>16</sup> have been described as significantly ‘problematic as it associates the infection with an ethnicity’.<sup>17</sup> This leads to blame being placed on Chinese people for the outbreak. This sentiment was reflected in Australian media with headlines such as “China kids stay home” and “Chinese Virus Pandemonium”.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, this type of language has then been adopted by the Australian public when referring to the coronavirus.



Figure 1 President Trump referred to it as the "Chinese Virus"

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<sup>15</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/academic-freedom-criticism-of-china-and-racism/>

<sup>16</sup> Jerome Viala-Gaudefroy and Dana Lindaman, ‘Donald Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’: the politics of naming’, *The Conversation* (online), 22 April 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Blackiston, ‘Criticism over ‘downright offensive and unacceptable race discrimination’ in News Corp Coronavirus headlines’, *Mumbrella* (online), 31 January 2020 <<https://mumbrella.com.au/criticism-over-downright-offensive-and-unacceptable-race-discrimination-news-corp-coronavirus-headlines-615148>>.

Media coverage and social media content which emphasised COVID-19's origin from China, even after it became a global pandemic, played into racist stereotypes. The association of the virus to China has seen the escalation of hate speech and race-motivated attacks against Asians all around Australia. The COVID-19 Coronavirus Racism Incident Report launched by Asian Australian Alliance has reported over 300 cases of COVID-related racism since 2 April 2020.<sup>19</sup>

Online hate and bullying directed against Chinese and Asians have played into racial stereotypes with particular emphasis on Chinese culture and food. These racist sentiments have further escalated into race-motivated attacks against Asians across Australia. In one case, a woman specifically used the term 'Chinese virus' to justify her racially charged taunts and abuse towards a Chinese woman in Melbourne.<sup>20</sup> In another unprovoked incident, two international students from China were physically assaulted by assailants that told them to "go back to China".<sup>21</sup> This behaviour is based on the belief that Chinese people, including Australians of Chinese heritage, are somehow to blame for COVID-19. The linking of "China", "Chinese" or Chinese related language (like "Kung Flu") to what people call the virus exacerbates the problem.

Chinese people have also increasingly become the victims of racial attacks and abuse especially through online mediums such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

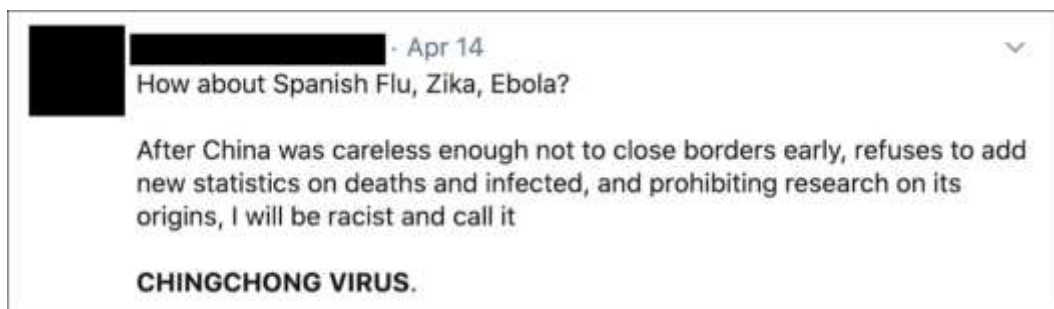


Figure 2 The use of a racial slur to name virus further emphasises the racist hate being projected

We recommend media organisations, and the public when commenting in social media, make an effort to avoid using places or ethnicities in discussion unless strictly necessary. A discussion on the origins of the virus has a reason for mentioning Wuhan, a discussion about infection rates in Victoria should simply refer to Coronavirus or Covid-19. This will reduce the prevalence of such terms and help to reduce tensions in society.

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel Yang, 'Video shows Chinese woman being racially attacked in Melbourne over coronavirus', *ABC News* (online), 6 May 2020 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-06/coronavirus-woman-racist-attack-in-melbourne/12216854?nw=0>>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> 'Two Chinese students assaulted and robbed during apparent racist attack in Melbourne', *SBS News* (online), 18 April 2020, <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/two-chinese-students-assaulted-and-robbed-during-apparent-racist-attack-in-melbourne>>.



Examples of problematic names being used on Facebook include “China flu”, “Chinese virus”, “Wuhan Flu”, and “Kung Flu” (a reference to “kung fu”, an umbrella term for Chinese martial arts). A “joke” about Chinese-made goods being poor quality and that the virus is a success for lasting longer than other things from China was common across multiple social media platforms. Others found “Kung Flu” to be funny. The examples discussed below were posted by Australians to Facebook.



Figure 3 A racist jokes about China using "China Flu"



Figure 4 Use of Kung Flu on Facebook

Many comments were ambiguous about whether it is China or Chinese people (including Australians of Chinese heritage) who they blamed and sought to target. In one post, for example, it is referred to as the “Chinese virus” and there is a call for “these pricks” to pay.

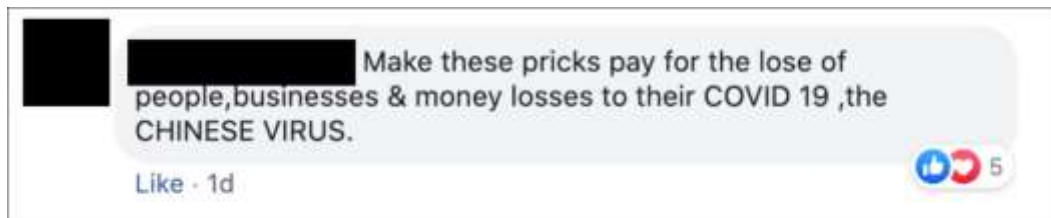


Figure 5 Calls for Chinese people to pay for the harm the virus caused

Some actively pushed for the neutral term COVID-19 to be dropped in favour of something directly linking it to China. The example below suggests Wuhan Flu be used.

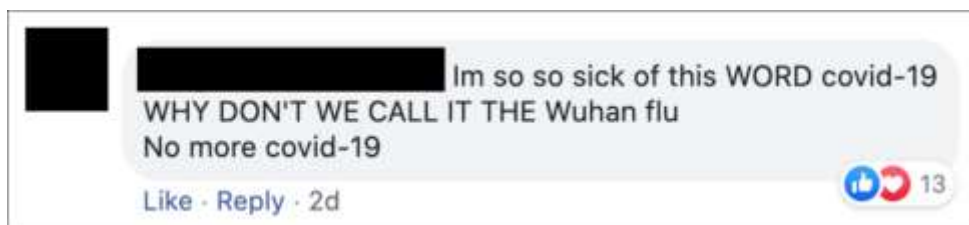


Figure 6 A call not to use Covid-19 but rather Wuhan Flu, a move that seeks to heighten tensions

A popular meme on social media referred to “China’s Winnie the Flu”. This emphasizes that China is to blame, but also represents the virus as a Chinese person. This symbolism helps to fuel racism against people who look Chinese.

These Australian Facebook comments highlight the continuous reference to Chinese people and the origins of the virus. Despite the impact of associating the virus with China, language like this is continuously used on social media without any condemnation from other users. Instead, these comments are liked and further entertained by others helping to cement negative attitudes.



Figure 7 A commonly repeated meme of Winnie the Flu

In tackling this problem, the San Antonio City Council in Texas unanimously passed a resolution condemning the use of terms such as “Chinese virus” and “Kung Fu virus”. By labelling them as hate speech, the Council emphasised that deliberate use of these terms only increases the spread of misinformation and racism. The resolution further denounced anti-Asian bigotry, all hateful speech and violent actions as well as affirmed its commitment to combating hate crimes targeting Asians. Although this is largely a symbolic move, it raises awareness of the effect on the people’s livelihoods when hate speech becomes popularised and used as a means of attack. Similar actions could be considered here, for example from the Victorian Parliament.

Another approach would be to create public awareness of the consequences that occur when terms such as the ‘Chinese virus’ is used through an education campaign. Often people use such terms in ignorance - not knowing that they are perpetuating racism and blame towards the Chinese community. This could also encourage active by-stander action, including reporting to social media platform to facilitate the removal of such content, reporting to agencies or civil society groups to enable monitoring, and (when safe) responding on social media to push back against such usage.

We found broader attacks on Asians and “international students” as well. For example on Twitter a tweet about university efforts to support foreign students was shared with a message that referred to the students as “infiltrators”.



Figure 8 Anti-International Students tweet

There were also more general anti-Asian attacks, some explicitly xenophobia in their language.

We also observed attacks related to Chinese culture and food. Thrown into the mix was old campaign material about cruelty to animals in China. This material, some of it very disturbing, was used to promote racism against Chinese restaurants in Australia, the US and other countries. It also led to a hardening of anti-Chinese attitudes with people expressing views that China deserves the virus.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 9 Anti-Asian xenophobia



Figure 10 Loss of empathy for China



Figure 11 Attacks on Chinese restaurants



Figure 12 Stretching blame again animal cruelty in China to not employing people of Chinese heritage

<sup>22</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/from-food-to-hate-during-covid-19/>

## ISLAMOPHOBIA

Facebook hate pages dedicated to targeting Muslims continued to do so, however, they sought to use COVID-19 to keep their content current and related to the news. There was a noticeable diversion into anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment in many of the groups.<sup>23</sup> We have discussed the harm such groups cause not only to the groups they target but also to the broader society as they undermine social cohesion, democracy, and the economy. We now add to that

the observation that such groups provide ready audiences and online infrastructure for attacking other minority groups, should that appear to benefit them. While white supremacists have largely been kicked off Facebook, other forms of Islamophobia remain and some of them have created quite large communities. This is a threat that must be addressed by social media platforms.

Many of the groups we look at are specifically Australian, but their audience usually includes a significant number of people from outside Australia. We've previously shown how a Bendigo specific anti-Muslim page had only 3% of its audience from Bendigo and only 20% from Victoria as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, local or Australian pages are more likely to create a false sense that their values are representative of the wider local or Australian community, even when they are a tiny minority view within that community and much of the support is in fact comes from elsewhere. The monitoring of such groups remains important for understanding attitudes which are being promoted within Victoria.

The Islamophobia attacks on Facebook came in a variety of styles.

As usual incidents related to individual Muslims, some of which were now related to COVID-19, were used to make generalisations to promote Islamophobia against all Muslims. In one case NSW related incident a woman whose license was suspended was arrested after running a red light then seeking to evade police.<sup>25</sup> Video of the arrest, in which the woman who is wearing a hijab tells police she is on the way to be tested for Coronavirus as she struggled with them, went viral. It was used by a wide range of

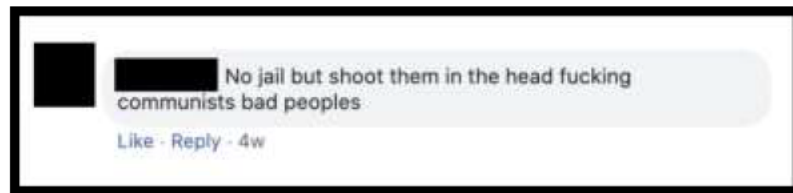


Figure 14 A comment on anti-Muslim page referring to Chinese people

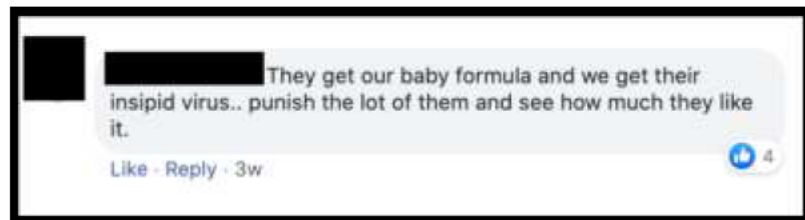


Figure 13 Another anti-Chinese comment on an anti-Muslim page

<sup>23</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/anti-muslim-groups-turn-their-focus-to-chinese-and-asian-australians/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/the-bendigo-mosque-exporting-hate-to-regional-victoria/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://10daily.com.au/news/crime/a200327wxmet/woman-faces-court-after-allegedly-repeatedly-spitting-on-police-office-20200327>



Islamophobic groups, particularly those associated with the counter Jihad movement, and was presented as a case of Muslims using COVID-19 as a form of terrorism.<sup>26</sup>

One was to single out mosques. Around the world most religious institutions stopped holding services in order to prevent the spread of the virus within their congregation. In some places and at sometimes this was voluntary and based on advice rather than government directives. In other places and at other times it became a legal requirement. Anti-Muslim groups shared media articles, often from less reputable media sources, which distort information to present a narrative that Muslims are getting a pass from the health restrictions.<sup>27</sup> This was particular prevalent in the United States and appears aimed at Christian conservatives.<sup>28</sup> In one case a mosque inside an essential services facility, a centre being used for emergency food distribution, was targeted despite the fact the food distribution and the prayer room were closed before the article was shared.



Figure 16 Distorted reporting to target Muslims



Figure 15 Old news and missing facts



<sup>26</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/using-twitter-for-hate/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/islamophobia-pages-and-the-targeting-of-mosques/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/islamophobic-pages-and-covid-19/>

Other articles from right wing sources significantly distorted news stories about COVID-19 and Muslims to promote hate. One article promoted the idea Muslims in Iran were licking mosques to make themselves immune to the virus.<sup>29</sup> The real story, a reported by the ABC, was that some pilgrims filmed themselves licking shrines that held relics in order to prove visiting the place of pilgrimage, a virus hot spot in Iran, was safe.<sup>30</sup>

Facebook itself was used to distort information by posting links to legitimate articles but then introducing them with commentary that misrepresented the story. Many people do not click through to the article, so the misinformation spreads even if reading the article itself would remove the confusion. This occurred with an SBS story about the Lakemba Mosque which cancelled gatherings during Ramadan and instead broadcast a 5 minute call for the end of the daily fast for each day of Ramadan. The post seeks to create outrage at this, when in reality there have been no complaints and residents and council were supportive.



Figure 17 Suggesting Muslims are being given a pass

Figure 18 Distorting the news



Figure 19 Lakemba mosque post

<sup>29</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/islamophobia-pages-and-the-targeting-of-mosques/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-06/this-is-why-coronavirus-is-so-bad-in-iran/12028458>

## RACISM AGAINST INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (AIDA) released a statement on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2020 warning of instances of racism against Indigenous Australians amid COVID-19. In one instance they report that a patient identifying as an Aboriginal person was denied priority testing and told it was only for “real Aborigines”, while in another a comment saying that Indigenous Australian patients “...only get it [COVID-19] because they don’t wash their hands”.<sup>31</sup> We also observed messaging from the far-right saying Indigenous Australians were immune to COVID-19, a move clearly designed to spread misinformation in order to decrease the use of safety precautions and increase the risk of harm.

There was a potential for structural and institutional racism to leave Indigenous Australians, who are in a higher risk group than the general population, behind. We’re pleased to note this was not the case and there was a strong and positive response by both Indigenous communities and government to provide specific resources and support for Indigenous communities.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, in the United States Black Americans are dying at three times the rate of white Americans and this is not entirely due to comorbidity but rather to unequal access to both testing and health care.<sup>33</sup>

The Black Lives Matter protests in Australia, while opposing racism, have also created tensions in the wider community. While organisers made efforts to reduce the risk of community transmission during these large-scale protests, they occurred against health advice. The message that we are all in this together mean those willing to take a risk in order to protests, a move likely to delay the further lifting of restrictions and which may put the health and lives of others at risk, are seen as going against the team effort. This point was further emphasised by some politicians and media commentators.

Frustration from Australians who have been unable to attend funerals, open businesses or carry on life as normal, while protesters were presented as ignoring the restrictions, may increase the risk of racist messages reaching more fertile ground. Responses by the far-right have ranged from expressions wishing to see the protests develop into a cluster and result in deaths of Indigenous Australians and their supporters, to conspiracy theorists who believe COVID-19 is a hoax and want to see a lack of infections, after government warnings, as proof of this.

There are issues of systemic and structural racism which increase the health risk of COVID-19 for Indigenous Australians, as well as the general health impact which was there before COVID-19.<sup>34</sup> As we respond to the virus and the recovery effort, and as we take this opportunity to reshape our society, we need to pay attention to both the opportunity for positive impacts on these issues and the risk of negative side effects from change.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.aida.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Indigenous-Doctors-warn-that-racism-will-cost-lives-MEDIA-RELEASE.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/blm-and-online-hate/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/black-americans-death-rate-covid-19-coronavirus>

<sup>34</sup> <https://insightplus.mja.com.au/2020/18/covid-19-racism-is-making-kids-sick/>

We also need better education on the issues of systemic racism in Australia. Far too many people in Australia, and Australians overseas, stated in social media and to the media that the issues in Australia were exactly the same as in the United States. While some issues are similar, there are other issues which are very different, or which lead to similar effects but have different causes. The often simplistic comparisons show a lack of understanding of both the very real and urgent issues in the United States,<sup>35</sup> including the impact of racism on COVID-19 related fatalities, and the nature of both the problem and the needed solutions to tackling Aboriginal deaths in custody and other issues of anti-Indigenous racism in Australia.<sup>36</sup>

One impact of COVID-19 is on Victoria's treaty process. This is not an 'optional extra' for when times are good, but an essential discussion Victorian Indigenous Communities, and the wider Victorian Community, needs to have. COVID-19 cannot be allowed to derail this important work.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/blm-and-online-hate/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/black-lives-matter-in-australia/>



## ANTISEMITISM

As news of COVID-19 broke, there was a high level of concern expressed by Jewish organisations around the world that antisemitism would likely spike as a result. This concern was based on past experience in which, at a time of crisis, antisemites regularly seek to blame Jews for the latest tragedy and at times this can become more mainstream, raising overall levels of antisemitism. The phenomena can be seen as far back as the Middle Ages when, at the heights of the Black Death in Europe, 200 Jewish communities were destroyed after they were blamed for the plague.<sup>37</sup>

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### GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Each year the Kantor Center at Tel Aviv University collates data from Jewish communities around the world and releases an annual report on antisemitism in the preceding year. Breaking with this approach, the latest report, released on April 20<sup>th</sup>, also includes analysis on COVID-19 related antisemitism in early 2020.<sup>38</sup> The report provides examples of online content that accuses “Jews”, “Zionists” and “Israelis” of causing and/or spreading COVID-19.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes a specific person is targeted, sometimes it is the group as a whole who is targeted. The researchers have highlighted the need for more data on the source of the accusations, their prevalence, and the level of public attention they receive.

The Kantor Center report notes that antisemitic narratives based on COVID-19 have been seen from right-wing extremists, ultra-conservative Christians, Islamists, and to a minor extent on the far-left. Antisemitic narratives related to COVID-19 have been based on older antisemitic narratives including well-poisoning, deicide, power conspiracy theories, and accusations of profiteering. There were also allegations by “regime dignitaries and scientists” in Iran and Turkey that Israel, Jews and America created COVID-19 as a weapon against Iran and Muslims in general.<sup>40</sup> The report highlights that the examples it shares are individual data points and should not (without further evidence) be taken as proof of a wider public mood or atmosphere.<sup>41</sup> Researchers, they warn, should “be careful not to readily attribute to Jews the status of a scapegoat in these exceptional times” given that there are a range of other narratives which may be more dominant. The narratives they list including anti-Asian racism, Muslim views of COVID-19 as divine retribution for China’s treatment of the Uyghur population, and views of COVID-19 as divine punishment within different religious communities.<sup>42</sup>

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of April the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, released a statement in which he said, “I am extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/health/01plague.html>

<sup>38</sup> [https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/sites/humanities\\_en.tau.ac.il/files/media\\_server/humanities/kantor/Kantor%20Center%20Worldwide%20Antisemitism%20in%202019%20-%20Main%20findings.pdf](https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/sites/humanities_en.tau.ac.il/files/media_server/humanities/kantor/Kantor%20Center%20Worldwide%20Antisemitism%20in%202019%20-%20Main%20findings.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p 21—22.

and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities".<sup>43</sup>

An op-ed in Haaretz looked at the dark web and reported that Coronavirus was being linked by the Alt-Right on these platforms to conspiracy theories of a Jewish plot for world control.<sup>44</sup> The article used a few examples of this narrative highlighting how it was comparable to historic allegations of Jews as plague carriers and well-poisoners.<sup>45</sup>

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## THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, antisemitism had risen sharply prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>46</sup> The ADL's CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, explained in January that while the number of Americans with antisemitic views remained about the same, "more of the millions of Americans holding antisemitic views are feeling emboldened to act on their hate."<sup>47</sup> Gary Rosenblatt, Editor at large of The Jewish Week of New York, wrote in the Atlantic in March that antisemitic "attacks are the main topic of discussion among an American Jewish community shaken to its core" and that he had "never encountered such a level of palpable fear, anger, and vulnerability among American Jews".<sup>48</sup>

The Coronavirus pandemic has intersected this heightened antisemitism in the United States. The ADL noted that antisemitic content related to COVID-19 began circulating early in the pandemic within fringe platforms such as Telegram, 4chan and Gab, "but as the virus spreads, it has gotten easier to find xenophobia, antisemitism and conspiracy theories on mainstream social media platforms".<sup>49</sup> The main messages among extremists on the smaller platforms were: support for Jews dying from the virus, encouraging other extremists to spread the virus to Jews if they get ill, claims Jews are responsible for the virus, claims Jews are spreading the virus, conspiracy theories that Jews are using the virus to increase Jewish control of society, reduce global population, or to generate profits.<sup>50</sup> Some extremists took the narrative of Jews or Israel being behind the virus, either as a tool to kill non-Jews or in order to profit from a vaccine, from fringe platforms onto Twitter and Facebook.<sup>51</sup> A separate article from the ADL on March 17<sup>th</sup> gives a number of examples of these narratives as well as examples of extremists seeking to use COVID-19 to promote Sinophobia and homophobia.<sup>52</sup> One article over a month later on

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-the-jews-control-the-chinese-labs-that-created-coronavirus-1.8809635>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/anti-semitism-rise-trump](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/anti-semitism-rise-trump)

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/anti-semitic-stereotypes-persist-in-america-survey-shows>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/anti-semitism-new-normal-america/608017/>

<sup>49</sup> "Extremists Use Coronavirus to Advance Racist, Conspiratorial Agendas", ADL Blog, March 20, 2020. Online at <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremists-use-coronavirus-to-advance-racist-conspiratorial-agendas>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Coronavirus Crisis Elevates Antisemitic, Racist Tropes", ADL Blog, 17 March 2020. Online at: <https://www.adl.org/blog/coronavirus-crisis-elevates-antisemitic-racist-tropes>

antisemitism and Covid-19 reused the same examples with minimal new evidence.<sup>53</sup> There has also been a particular rise of hate in comments on mainstream social media sites which are directed against the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in New York and New Jersey.<sup>54</sup>

The Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, primarily about the death at the hands of police of George Floyd and a growing number of other Black Americans, is also in part influenced by inequalities, including access to testing and health care, which are leading to Black Americans dying from COVID-19 at three times the rate of white Americans.<sup>55</sup>

The image on the right, which looks to be from Black Lives Matter, calls for an end to “Jewish Privilege”. It highlights the number of Jewish people who attend top US universities. The image has been widely reposted to social media by individual members of the Jewish community in a range of countries including Australia.<sup>56</sup> Each time it has been posted it has triggered high levels of engagement broadening its audience. The material is in reality an antisemitic poster created by the far right at least three years ago and which aims to create animosity between the Jewish community and Black Lives Matter. It was plastered around the University of Illinois at Chicago along with other posters in a similar style in March 2017.<sup>57</sup>



## THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the UK the CST has noted how “posts and memes from the United States [have been] influencing extremist narratives in the United Kingdom” and how “anti-Chinese xenophobia [has been] merging

<sup>53</sup> “Coronavirus: Antisemitism”, ADL Blog, 22 April 2020. Online at: <https://www.adl.org/blog/coronavirus-antisemitism>

<sup>54</sup> “On Social Media, Haredi and Orthodox Jewish Communities are Scapegoated and Blamed for COVID-19”, ADL Blog, 29 April 2020. Online at: <https://www.adl.org/blog/on-social-media-haredi-and-orthodox-jewish-communities-are-scapegoated-and-blamed-for-covid-19>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/black-americans-death-rate-covid-19-coronavirus>

<sup>56</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/blm-and-online-hate/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://chicagoist.com/2017/03/20/more-anti-semitic-flyers-found-on-u.php>

with anti-Jewish conspiracy theories”.<sup>58</sup> The assessment as at early April was that the “racist narratives have not, so far, influenced mainstream public debate” but that “the longer this crisis goes on, with its profound impact on people’s jobs, livelihoods and mental health, the more likely it is that people will start to look for scapegoats”.<sup>59</sup> The CST noted 5 categories of antisemitism related to COVID-19: (1) Coronavirus is a hoax and part of a Jewish plot to mislead the public, (2) Coronavirus is real and was created as part of a Jewish/Zionist plot aimed at global depopulation, or it was developed by Jews and blamed on China to start World War III, or that Jewish (and non-Jewish) business leaders created it to profit from selling a vaccine, (3) Jews are responsible for spreading the virus, one basis for this in the UK was media reports that the Jewish community was over-represented in both infections and deaths – this saw some shift from calling it “Wu flu” to “Jew flu”, (4) Celebration of Jewish deaths among far-right antisemites, (5) extremists on sites like Gab and 4chan have called for people to deliberately infect Jews if they fall ill.

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## TURKEY

Turkish social media has promoted antisemitic Covid-19 narratives such as the idea that “Jews manufactured and spread the virus to end western civilization”, “We will annihilate the global masters behind the virus,” “The virus is only a minor part of a bigger game that targets Turkey,” and that “The virus was created to overthrow Erdoğan, leader of the umma”.<sup>60</sup> The small Islamist political party Yeniden Refah, said the “virus serves Zionism’s goals of decreasing the number of people and preventing it from increasing” and went on to say “Zionism is a five-thousand-year-old bacteria that has caused the suffering of people”.<sup>61</sup> In this context Zionism is clearly being used as a code word for Jews.

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## IRAN

In Iran the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, claimed the virus was the result of a magical attack against Iran, and while Jews were not mentioned directly his office later issued a clarification saying that “Jews and especially the Zionists previously have a long history of supernatural affairs”.<sup>62</sup> This was promoted by the cyberwarfare division of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Coronavirus and Plague of Antisemitism, CST Research Briefing, 8 April 2020 p. 3. Online at: <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/d/9/Coronavirus%20and%20the%20plague%20of%20antisemitism.1586276450.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/turkey-coronavirus-jews/>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> <https://iranwire.com/en/blogs/26/6884>

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

The Iranian Government also ran the “We Defeat Coronavirus International Cartoon Contest”,<sup>64</sup> which featured a number of antisemitic submissions,<sup>65</sup> as well as anti-American submissions.<sup>66</sup>

The submission to the Iranian competition by Amir Hossein Jafari Nejadian from Iran, for example, depicts COVID-19 as a Jewish virus which is being made to look more dangerous through efforts by the United States. As has been seen with Iran’s Holocaust denial cartoon competitions, run through the same platform as this competition, once generated as a result of the competition, hate cartoons have the ability to circulate through social media for years.<sup>67</sup>



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## AUSTRALIA

Research from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has examined COVID-19 related antisemitism posted by Australians on Gab.<sup>68</sup> The platform has quite deliberately become the home for white supremacists and other extremists who are increasingly being excluded from mainstream social media. The ECAJ research notes 10 themes to antisemitism related to COVID-19:<sup>69</sup>

1. The reposting by Australians of images which refers to Jews as a virus
2. Allegations that COVID-19 was created by Jews. This includes: allegations that Jews were the real power behind the Wuhan Lab or China in general, allegations COVID-19 was related to Israel/Iran tensions and was a bio-weapon, and allegations COVID-19 is part of a Jewish plot for White Genocide.
3. Allegations Jews are spreading COVID-19 and calls to spread the virus to Jews
4. Conspiracy theories alleging COVID-19 is a Jewish plot for world control through economic chaos, lockdowns and a reduction in rights and freedom. One notable example is the doctoring of Victorian Government campaign material where the word “together” was replaced with

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<sup>64</sup> Submissions at: <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/gallery/gallery-of-intl-cartoon-contest-we-defeat-coronavirus>; see also <https://www.jwire.com.au/sadly-unsurprisingly-anti-semitic-israel-slams-iran-for-its-state-sponsored-anti-semitic-coronavirus-cartoon-contest/> and <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/447111/Iran-s-We-Defeat-Coronavirus-Intl-Cartoon-Contest-announces>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/media/zgalleries/48a7f0c22e984a86dcda31789e64208d/amir-hossein-jafari-nejadian-iran.jpg>; <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/media/zgalleries/48a7f0c22e984a86dcda31789e64208d/yuksel-cengiz-turkey6.jpg>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/media/zgalleries/48a7f0c22e984a86dcda31789e64208d/agim-krasniki-kosovo2.jpg>; <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/media/zgalleries/48a7f0c22e984a86dcda31789e64208d/hamid-karout-syria3.jpg>; <https://www.irancartoon.com/site/media/zgalleries/48a7f0c22e984a86dcda31789e64208d/ridha-h-ridha-germany1.jpg>

<sup>67</sup> <https://ohpi.org.au/holocaust-denial-cartoon-competition/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.jwire.com.au/covid-19-and-the-plague-of-online-antisemitism/>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

“SubJewed” so it read: “Staying Apart Keeps Us SubJewed. To help keep us SUBJEWED, visit...”. ECAJ noted there was also opposition within the far-right community to these conspiracy theories blaming Jews for COVID-19 with some pointing out that it did not sit well with what they see as the goals of the Jewish conspiracy they believe in.

5. Claims that COVID-19 is a hoax made by Jews
6. Claims COVID-19 is a scam for Jews to make money were common. This includes the idea that Jews were profiting from lending money to governments, benefiting disproportionately from welfare support, and buying companies up cheaply to profit.
7. Some anti-vaxxer material linked the vaccines to Israel and suggested they were a Jewish plot
8. Christian religious antisemitism which implied COVID-19 was a punishment for the Jews
9. COVID-19 discussion was linked to Holocaust denial and distortion related memes

Other reporting from ECAJ also noted how conspiracy theories were being rejected within far-right circles as the idea led to inconsistencies with pre-held beliefs.<sup>70</sup> Chief amongst these is that the far-right is in favour of border closures and more authoritarian control, while they view Jews as the primary cause of opposition to such policies. COVID-19 has empowered nationalist politics, a point the far-right recognises.

Our own analysis at the Online Hate Prevention Institute also found occasional efforts by antisemitic individuals to link COVID-19 to Jews, however, such efforts did not gain much traction. Our own analysis supports the ECAJ evidence that efforts to connect COVID-19 to antisemitic conspiracy theories were little more than assertions that “Jews control everything” therefore “the Jews must be behind COVID-19” and were unconvincing even to other antisemites in the face of alternative narrative and discussion.



In communities like /pol/ on 4chan where antisemitic conspiracy theories alleging Jewish control of banks, media and governments are a staple, there were occasional messages asserting Jews were responsible for Coronavirus, but far more focus on China, particularly from Australian posters.

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/coronavirus-and-ethno-nationalism/12312546>





The usual antisemitic messaging, however, still appeared. A thread promoting an interview between Sky News Australia journalist Sharri Markson and Flinders University Professor Nikolai Petrovsky soon attracted a comment from a self-declared White Supremacist who denounced the journalist as a “zionist kike” and referred to her as “(((Sharri Markson)))” using the echo notation to signal a Jew. The same message went on to promote the conspiracy theory of Jewish media control by wrongly asserting that “Rupert Murdoch was born in Melbourne, Australia, to Jewish parents”. This misinformation has been promoted by antisemitic sites like Jew Watch for decades. Mr Murdoch is not Jewish or of Jewish ancestry.<sup>71</sup> It highlights how the regular antisemitism in these forums is still sprinkled in amid COVID-19 content.

While there was some use of the term “Jew Flu” for COVID-19 on 4chan, its use was far exceeded by other terms and was almost exclusively confined to /pol/ which as we noted in a previous report was radicalised with white supremacist ideology some years ago.<sup>72</sup> References to terms such as “Wu Flu” and “Kung Flu” with other terms such as “China Flu” and “wuhan flu” also appearing far more regularly than “Jew Flu”. Content on 4chan has a very limited lifespan, from a few hours to a few days depending on which part of the site it is on and level of traffic it receives. A search on June 15 returned the maximum of 10 pages of results on 4chan for the following searches: Coronavirus, “Corona Virus”, covid, wuflu, “Wu Flu”, “Wuhan Flu” and “kung flu”. In contrast: Jewflu 1, “Jew Flu” 2 (all but 1 post was on /pol/), “China flu” 7 and Kungflu 7. Limiting the search to /pol/ gave 10 pages for: Coronavirus, “Corona Virus”, covid and wuflu. On /pol/ “Wu Flu” 1 (1 result), “Wuhan Flu” 7, kungflu 3, Jewflu 1 (3 results), “jew flu” 2, “kung flu” no results. The /pol/ forum is deeply antisemitic and a search for kikes gives a full 10 pages of results, in fact a search for “gas the kikes” also gives 10 pages of results. “Jew flu” is a very minor part of the regular antisemitism in the forum, it is present enough to allow researchers to gain examples, but it is not a major theme among the regular volumes of antisemitism.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.ipost.com/opinion/op-ed-contributors/i-am-not-jewish-but>

<sup>72</sup> Andre Oboler, William Allington and Patrick Scolyer-Gray, “Hate and Violent Extremism from an Online Sub-Culture : The Yom Kippur Terrorist Attack in Halle, Germany (Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2019) <https://ohpi.org.au/hate-and-violent-extremism-from-an-online-subculture-the-yom-kippur-terrorist-attack-in-halle-germany/>

## MISOGYNY

Back in 2018, the United Nations Secretary-General declared violence against women a “global pandemic”. With the emergence of Covid-19, women living in households where their safety was at risk were ‘locked in’ to potentially dangerous situations. The risk was increased due to the confinement in close quarters of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and broader tensions and risks created by financial difficulties, increased stress and increased alcohol consumption. The CEO of USA’s largest domestic violence support provider, Alejandro Castillo explained, “the options for protecting yourself [from COVID-19] are at odds with the options for protecting yourself from an abuser”.<sup>73</sup>

In Australia support services received reports of perpetrators of domestic violence who terrified their partners by threatening to invite an individual infected with the virus to visit, or by informing them visiting friends were infected.<sup>74</sup> Justice Marcia Neave, who chaired the Royal Commission into Family Violence that concluded in 2016, warned that “It will get worse, during this terrible period of time”.<sup>75</sup> In NSW there was a 40% increase in the number of cases being managed by front line services, in South Australia the number of cases from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities more than doubled, Victoria saw a fall of 30% in calls to services and this is believed to be because victims were unable to gain the privacy needed to make a call.<sup>76</sup>

There have been some country specific issues related to COVID-19 and misogyny:

- In Russia a Bishop from the Russian Orthodox Church called on women not to admonish their husbands and to undertake acts of penance if they do. Claiming the comments were taken out of context by the media, the Bishop later stressed that “it’s equally important for husbands to stop admonishing their wives”.<sup>77</sup>
- In Malaysia the Women’s Ministry called on women to “avoid nagging” their husbands during the crisis, a move they later apologized for, and also encouraged women to wear make-up and dress well while at home during the lock down – which sparked public anger.<sup>78</sup>
- In Iran, over recent months more than 250 women have been arrested for breaking Iran’s modesty laws by posting photographs on Instagram showing them without head coverings or where their hair could be seen despite wearing a hijab.<sup>79</sup> The rise in the use of Instagram in Iran, 31% in just the first few days of the lockdown, along with an increased focus from authorities have increased the risk.<sup>80</sup>
- In Pakistan a popular Islamic cleric, Maulana Tariq Jameel, blamed women for the pandemic. During a telethon where he appeared with Prime Minister Imran Khan he claimed the

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/coronavirus-pornography-and-the-pandemic-of-violence-against-women/12131020>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-29/coronavirus-family-violence-surge-in-victoria/12098546>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/audio/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-violence-complaints-in-australia-rise-even-as-reports-by-phone-fall>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/27/dont-nag-your-husbands-during-coronavirus-lockdown-church-official-tells-russian-women-a70107>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-06-07/iran-instagram-coronavirus-social-media-crackdown>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



immodesty of women was leading to divine punishment through the virus.<sup>81</sup> The comments were condemned by both the public and government ministers.

- In Israel, in Ultra Orthodox Jewish neighbourhoods, posters appeared blaming the “lack of modesty” of women for the virus while in Ultra Orthodox Jewish communities in the tri-state area in the United States (New York-New Jersey-Connecticut) similar messages were shared.<sup>82</sup>

The message that women were responsible for domestic violence against women due to their nagging was also seen in Australian social media comments. A media organisation that posted an article about police concerns over domestic violence during lockdown, received comments about women needing to “shut their nagging mouths” and “obey their ruler”. Another comment promotes the idea a woman’s place is cooking and cleaning and that they should not talk too much. The fact such comments were posted to the social media page of a mainstream media organisation, and remained there unmoderated for at least 9 weeks, is of concern.



Figure 20 Comments made on a Daily Mail article about concerns by police in Australia over domestic violence.

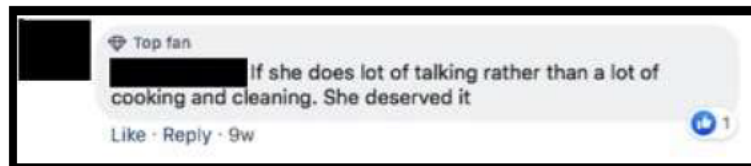


Figure 21 Another comment on the Daily Mail article

There has also been a specific increase in misogyny targeting middle-aged women causing scenes in stores, labelled as “the Karen’s and Susan’s”. Heather Suzanne Woods for Kansas State University explains the essence of the meme is about women who exhibit “entitlement, selfishness, a desire to complain” and who “demands the world exist according to her standards with little regard for others, and she is willing to risk or demean others to achieve her ends”.<sup>83</sup> The message is that it is these women who have been fighting over toilet paper, demanding to speak to store managers, and stocking up more than is reasonable on essentials.

While the “Karen” and “Susan” stereotype was around pre-Covid19, its use increased amid the pandemic along with gendered stereotypes about women being responsible for the household,

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.barrons.com/news/leading-pakistani-cleric-slammed-for-blaming-pandemic-on-women-01587990004>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.ipost.com/opinion/using-religion-to-scapegoat-women-for-disasters-opinion-624574>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/05/coronavirus-karen-memes-reddit-twitter-carolyn-goodman/611104/>

especially during lockdown. It has led to misogynistic jokes such as “I’m scared for people who actually need to go to the store and feed their fams but Susan and Karen stocked up for 30 years”.<sup>84</sup> The gendered stereotypes used reflect views from decades past rather than today’s reality, particularly with respect to women’s participation in the workforce. They instead promote the idea that the “woman’s role” is to take care of their homebound husband and children.

There is a need to consider the particular impact of public health policies, such as lockdowns and isolation, on women. The condition of all citizens must be taken into consideration, including women who are at risk of domestic violence. Policies which may not be worded as gender biased may nevertheless have gender related effected. Government can take further action with additional financial support packages for those in difficult circumstances due to both financial stress and domestic violence. Some programs already exist but these may need to be significantly expanded as a result of COVID-19.

There is also a need for greater work tackling online misogyny, the harmful attitudes it creates in society, and the message that such attitudes are acceptable. This misogynistic hate speech can reinforce attitudes which can lead to domestic violence. More work needs to be done in this space.



Figure 22 A post which likens “Karens” to the pandemic

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<sup>84</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>

## SOCIAL MEDIA CONCERNS BEYOND VILIFICATION FROM COVID-19

There are also a range of narratives of concern to public health and safety which go behind vilification.

### PROMOTING COVID-19 AS A HOAX OR TRIVILISING IT

One of the many conspiracies circulating the internet in relation to the current pandemic, is the promotion that the Covid-19 virus is nothing more than a hoax. This idea claims that despite evidence given by many authorities such as government and health officials, the virus is a tool to deceive and control the lives of billions of people around the world and therefore should not be believed as it is nothing more than a common cold.

The theory of Covid-19 being a hoax, has been widely promoted, particularly through online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among many others. As the pandemic continues, so do the conspiracy theories surrounding the virus and the number of people reached.

The conspiracy theory surrounding the idea of COVID-19 being a hoax, poses many risks to those who choose to believe such a claim. A claim which goes against the information submitted by government and health officials, increases fear in the public and raises suspicion and distrust in the government. Such distrust may cause individuals to ignore restrictions and health recommendations which they believe are unnecessary.

The hoax messages generally relates to underlying suspicion of the motivations of agencies such as government, media and health organisations. The mindset of hoax advocates may also promote further harms to the Victorian community such as anti-vaxxers. If, or when, A Covid-19 vaccine is developed, trust in government will be essential. This aspect requires a dedicated response by government to address the magnification of distrust online.

A related phenomena has been to downplay COVID-19, admitting it is real but suggesting it is no worse than a



Figure 24 Hoax message on Facebook



Figure 23 Another hoax message on Facebook

cold. This further feeds the idea that governments are taking advantage of it to enforce policies and laws they otherwise wouldn't be able to.

The image below, for example, emphasises the stupidity of those who believe in the virus, comparing them to sheep who mindlessly follow and believe the information provided to them by the government and mainstream media.

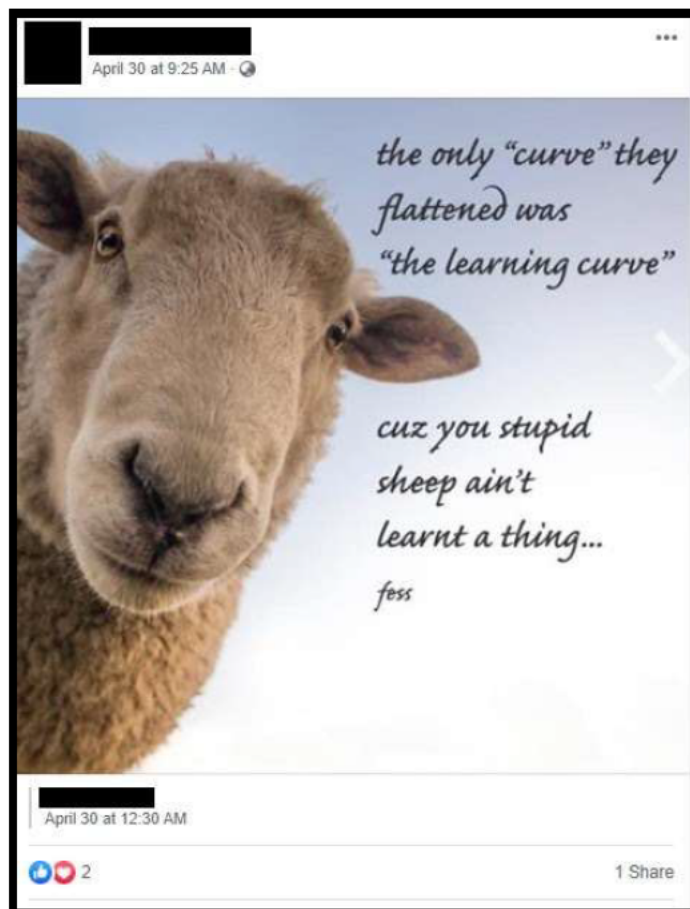


Figure 26 Meme implying people are being misled



Figure 25 Trivialising COVID-19



## FALSE EMERGENCY RESPONSE INFORMATION

Misinformation relating to the COVID-19 pandemic looks at the origin, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of the disease. Such information has been widely shared through not only social media but also some mainstream media channels. Perhaps the most famous example was President Trump suggesting in a live press conference that injections of disinfectant should be considered.<sup>85</sup>

Due to the large amount of false information relating to COVID-19, it can be difficult for individuals to differentiate between facts and misinformation. This is exacerbated with conspiracy theories suggesting health authorities, government and the media are not to be trusted. This pushes some people to alternative sites and conspiracy theories.

The idea Covid-19 is nothing more than a common cold is perhaps the most common misinformation. It can provide individuals with a false sense of security as they are led to believe the dangers and risks portrayed by the government are over exaggerated or only apply to others, not to them. As a result, these individuals may decide to ignore government directions as well as important information released by health authorities.

One potential recommendation to prevent the spread of misinformation relating to Covid-19 is to raise public awareness about the significant impacts false information can cause and which information should be trusted. The campaign 'Stop The Spread' is an example of this recommendation, which is run by The World Health Organisation (WHO) together with the United Kingdom Government. This campaign aims to raise awareness and stress the importance of checking information with reliable sources such as WHO and

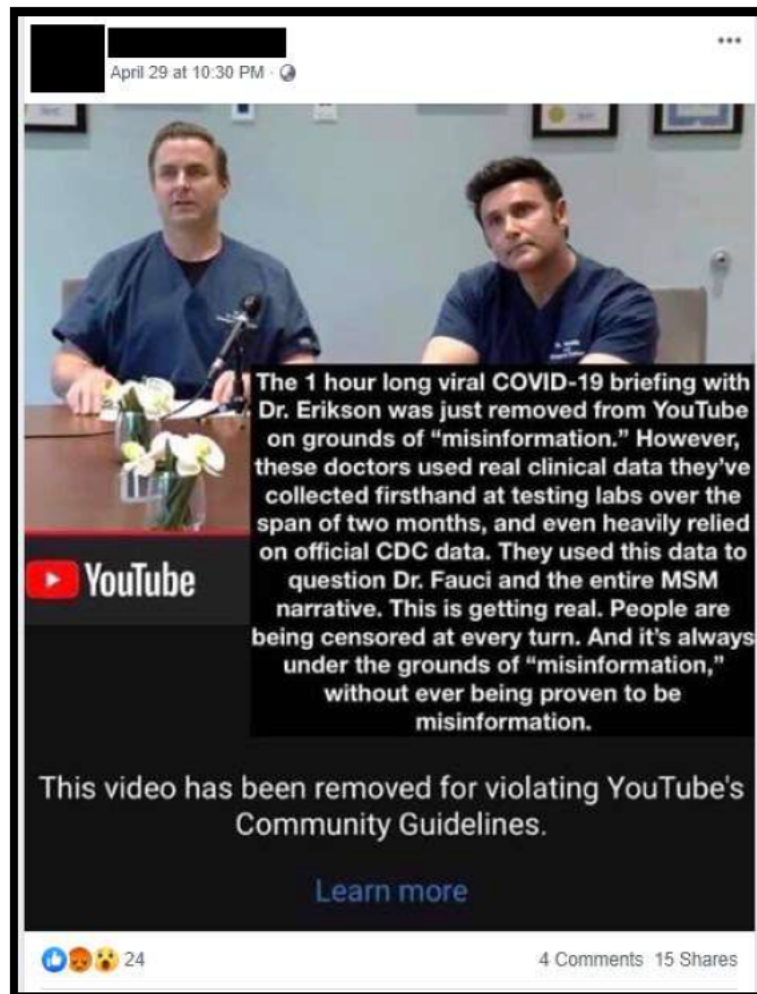


Figure 27 The removal of misinformation is treated as a conspiracy

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>

appropriate health officials, as well as emphasise the 'risks of incorrect and false information regarding the Coronavirus pandemic'.

In one viral video two American doctors, who are not experts in the field, conducted their own studies and concluded that the Coronavirus was similar to the flu. However, according to the American College of Emergency Physicians and the American Academy of Emergency Medicine, this claim was incorrect, their research was flawed in basic ways and 'inconsistent with current science and epidemiology regarding COVID-19'.<sup>86</sup>

In Australia, a fake emergency notice (shown left) which was not created by public health authorities went viral in social media. The contact numbers provided were only to be used by doctors and pathologists to report confirmed cases. However, due to this notice the contact numbers were inundated with calls by the public trying to 'do the right thing'.

Authorities had to step in and provide clarification for the public. The tweet by NSW Health also directs the public to a web page to obtain up to date information about the pandemic.

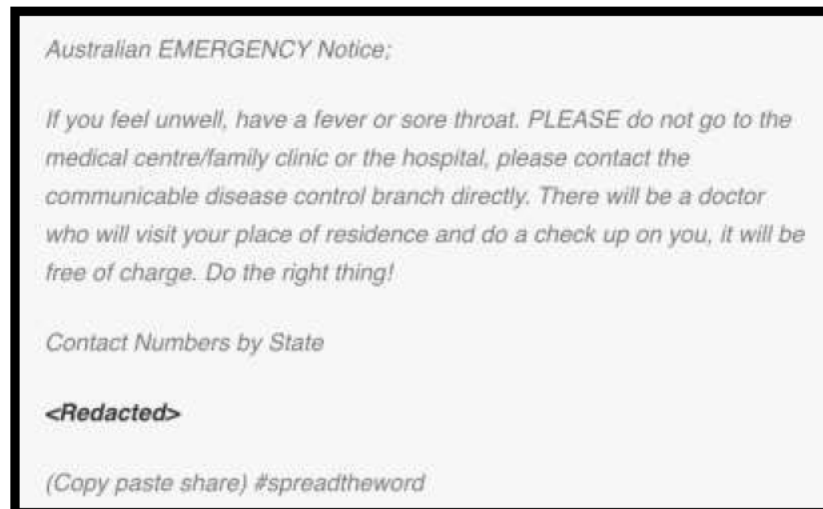


Figure 28 Fake emergency announcement



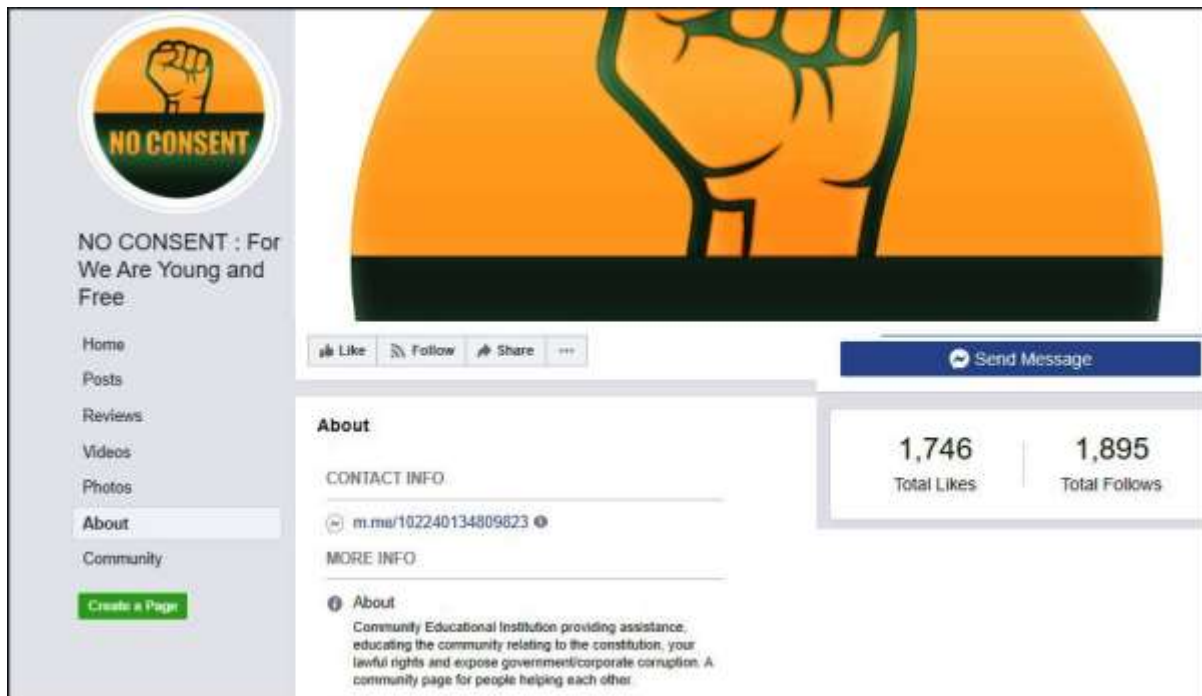
Figure 29 Response by NSW Health

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.acep.org/corona/COVID-19-alert/covid-19-articles/acep-aaem-joint-statement-on-physician-misinformation/>

## FALSE LEGAL INFORMATION

To understand the reasoning for the restrictions and laws that have been introduced, and why other measures have not been taken, an understanding of law, policy and public health is needed. There are balances which have been struck between different risks. Conspiracy theories and misinformation add further confusion.

The impact on our usual freedoms is unprecedented and not everyone has come on board or is willing to simply trust that government, law makers and experts are acting in their best interest. Some are using social media to “inform” others and the information they provide is often incorrect and can cause further (misplaced) anger against government. It can cause people to believe rules do not apply because they wrongly believe an exception applies to them. It can also misunderstandings about what are recommendations and what is legally required. This can further feed anti-government sentiments.



## CONSPIRACY THEORY ABOUT POPULATION CONTROL

Another conspiracy theory spreading on social media platforms is that Coronavirus was *deliberately created*, and its aim is to decrease the world's population. This also feeds on older conspiracy theories that the regular flu vaccination is doing more harm than good. A related conspiracy theory is that COVID-19 was created to empower government in new ways.

The population reduction conspiracy theory is often linked to Bill Gates and doctored image of a supposed "Centre for Global Human Population Reduction" at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. No such centre exists.<sup>87</sup>

Individuals who believe in this conspiracy theory may refuse to receive flu vaccinations, which health professionals have stated is important to reduced a doubling in hospital demand due to COVID-19 and Flu. COVID-19 vaccinations may also be refused once available.

There are also concerns about government data collection and a general distrust of government. Governments need to take care to be frank with the public and to ensure limitations on special government powers that are needed at this time are strongly enforced.



Figure 31 Fake photograph of the "Center for Global Human Population Reduction"



Figure 30 The vaccine as a tool of genocide



Figure 32 A meme on the COVIDsafe App as Government control

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/gates-foundation-building/>



## ANTI-GOVERNMENT SENTIMENTS

In response to the COVID-19 restrictions and public health policies put in place by both the federal and state government, Facebook pages to be set up to express dissatisfaction or disapproval of the governments' handling of the situation. Some are simply voicing their frustration over the matter, a valid part of the political discourse, but others are specifically targeting and vilifying politicians.

The Facebook pages have been created due to the frustration and resentment towards state and federal governments for continuing the lockdown restrictions in ways their supporters consider unnecessarily. They continuously spreading rumours and conspiracy theories that attack governments' initiatives to controlling the spread of COVID-19.

A Victorian page sought to organise protests which they describe as 'peaceful rebellions'. They argue police are on their side, supporting their efforts to overturn the government's restrictions and that police object to the tyrannical nature of the government's initiatives. There is also evidence of a belief that COVID-19 is a conspiracy for government control and that this is only 'Pandemic 1' and another will come in winter of 2021. They are calling on protesters to come and put a stop to these restrictions and control so that it doesn't happen again and so that the government stop infringing on their civil liberties.

This is an Australia offshoot of narratives which have been circulating in the United States, particularly among conspiracy theorists and within the "Boogaloo movement". In the US restrictions have clashed with constitutional rights and an existing second amendment movement (a pro-gun movement) has been promoting the idea that armed resistance is needed against government who they argue has become tyrannical through the lockdown restrictions.

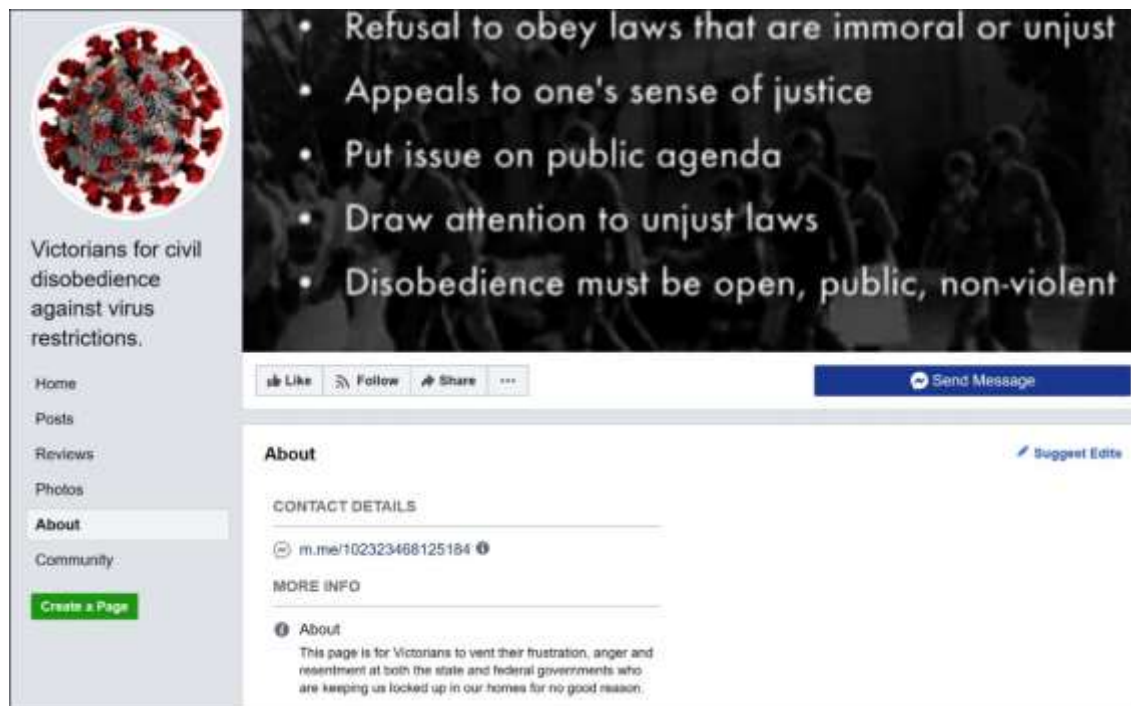


Figure 33 Victorian page encouraging civil disobedience

These US cultural attitudes are being reflected in Victorian groups. In one case they seek to get police onside with their conspiracy theories that restrictions are about control not public health.



Figure 34 Another Victorian page reflecting US revolutionary views



Figure 35 A post organising a protest

## CONCLUSIONS

There are many different narratives of vilification in relation to COVID-19. In Victoria, and Australia more broadly, it is the Chinese community and the broader Asian community who are most effected. Hate communities dedicated to attacking other groups have diverted at least some of their efforts to attacking Chinese and Asian Australians. These communities have had less developed approaches to monitor and tackle such vilification so were initially caught off guard. While some efforts have emerged to monitor and tackle the problem, they are of necessity reactive responses rather than well-tailored pro-active solutions. Longer term solutions, which draw on the experience in relation to hate targeting other communities, will be essential going forward as the hate raised by the current crisis is likely to fester beyond the initial impact.

We support the warning from the Kantor Center report that there are different narratives which seek to attribute blame or explain COVID-19 in different ways. These narratives are emerging in different communities in different parts of the world. In a multicultural community like Victoria, the increasing use of digital communications during the crisis will have weakened the outgoing links from different ethnic, religious and cultural communities while strengthening the cohesion within communities and the connections between communities here and similar communities or the mainstream society abroad. This increases the risk of different narratives from overseas being absorbed into our local communities which may negatively impact not only future community cohesion, but also the ability to effectively run multicultural activities. Programs which have run successfully in the past may require greater time, effort, and resourcing to achieve similar results. The ability of organisations and participants to contribute to the costs of programs may also be lower than in the past increasing what government may need to cover.

Tackling the many different narratives of hate which may take hold within different parts of the Victorian community will require both greater data and a more coordinated and collaborative approach. Individual communities may be both victims of COVID-19 related vilification and a source of vilification as narratives circulating within their community targeting other communities. The desire to find a scapegoat to blame during a time of crisis is strong and may be even stronger if it offers a response to incoming hate.

There is a need to build unity, oppose victimization, gather data, identify common narrative of hate, deconstruct those narratives of hate, identify where trust between different parts of the community may have reduced, and to focus attention and resources on the areas that need strengthening in a precise and focused manner. We need both a general strategy, community specific strategies, and an integration strategy that will ensure skills, learnings and trust are built and shared.

A virtual think tank led by government and with substantial civil society and academic involvement may be a viable approach to help move forwards. With civil society organisations under extreme financial pressure, government may need to ensure there is a real financial benefit to participation for all participating organisations, otherwise participation will add extra demands on organisations that are already struggling.