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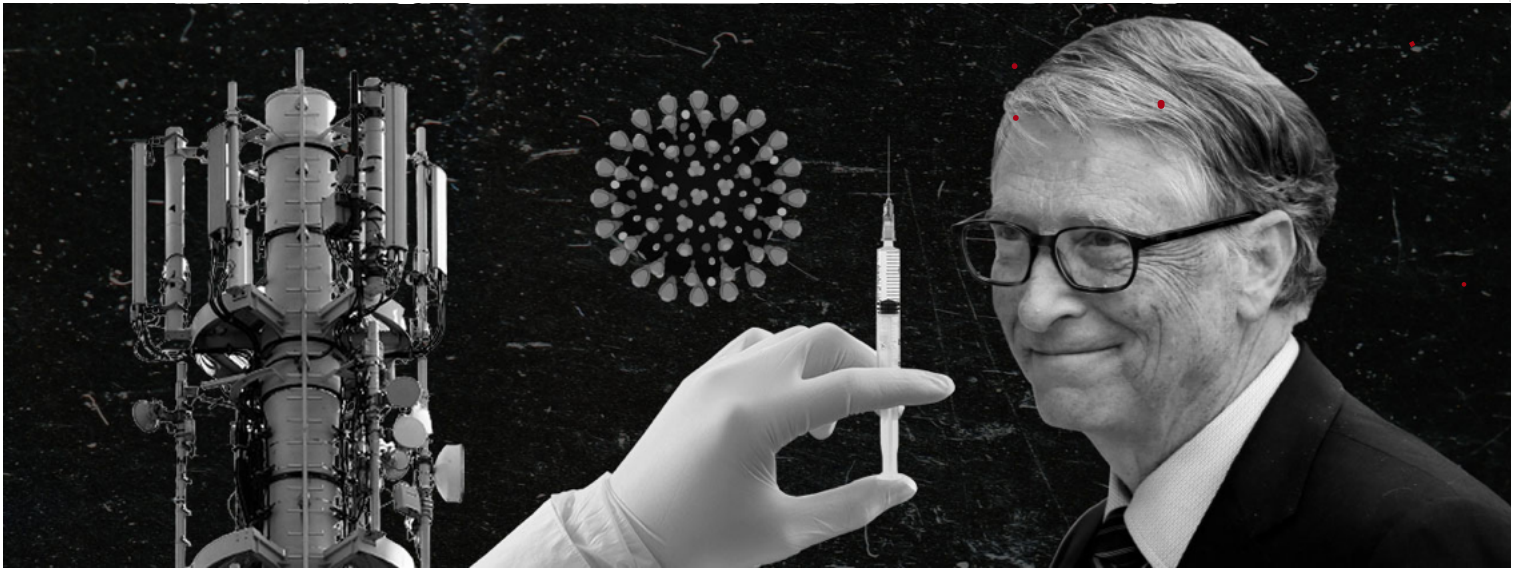
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Coronavirus

Why people believe Covid conspiracy theories: could folklore hold the answer?

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Researchers have mapped the web of connections underpinning coronavirus conspiracy theories, opening a new way of understanding and challenging them.

Using Danish witchcraft folklore as a model, the researchers from UCLA and Berkeley analysed thousands of social media posts with an artificial intelligence tool and extracted the key people, things and relationships.

The tool enabled them to piece together the underlying stories in coronavirus conspiracy theories from fragments in online posts. The model that allows for narratives to be reconstructed from the noisy data of online updates, was designed by Prof Vwani Roychowdhury, who initiated the project, and was built by his team in the Electrical and Computer Engineering department at UCLA.

One discovery from the research identifies [Bill Gates](#) as the reason why conspiracy theorists connect 5G with the virus. With Gates' background in computer technology and vaccination programmes, he served as a shortcut for these storytellers to link the two.

Gates is a persistent figure in the anti-vaccine stories. "He's a great villain," says the folklorist Prof Timothy Tangherlini who collaborated with Roychowdhury on the research. It's Gates' world-spanning influence in tech and then health that lodges him at the heart of a lot of conspiracies.

"Bill Gates is in Africa, he's in everybody's house because everybody's got computers, and then he's pushing these vaccines."

Folklore isn't just a model for the AI. Tangherlini, whose specialism is Danish folklore, is interested in how conspiratorial witchcraft folklore took hold in the 16th and 17th centuries and what lessons it has for today.

Whereas in the past, witches were accused of using herbs to create potions that caused miscarriages, today we see stories that Gates is using coronavirus vaccinations to sterilise people. A version of this story that omits Gates but claims the vaccines have caused men's testicles to swell, making them infertile, was [repeated by the American rapper Nicki Minaj](#).

The research also hints at a way of breaking through conspiracy theory logic, offering a glimmer of hope as increasing numbers of people get drawn in.

The diagram below is a small section of the anti-vaccine stories that the researchers found.

Mapping the coronavirus conspiracy theories



Why Bill Gates?

One name comes up a lot. Why do people blame Gates for everything?

He's become a symbol for the worst parts of big tech, says Tangherlini.

"He's got information, he's got computing power and he's got more money than anyone else in the entire world." And from that perspective, his philanthropy can be seen as suspect: "now he's decided to tell you how to live your life".

And while the results of his philanthropy may be an objective good, the lack of accountability of his funding and foundation is something that worries people. There are non-conspiratorial criticisms of his position as the most powerful decision-maker in global health, affecting the lives and healthcare of millions of the world's poorest people.

He is not elected or accountable and though people know there is a lot of money, they are not sure where it is all going, or why.

"He has this foundation that is a black box, and with black boxes you can ascribe all sorts of things to them. And he's going out and doing something that reeks of colonialism - he's going out to help the poor black and brown people in Africa

BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE IN AFRICA.

“Bill Gates is in Africa, he’s in everybody’s house because everybody’s got computers, and then he’s pushing these vaccines. And we already have prior storytelling about vaccines as threatening or dangerous or coming from the outside.”

Tangherlini says this is not what he personally believes about Gates – but “he’s a great villain”. The storytelling around him resonates with the antisemitic narratives circulating for centuries in Europe.

“This whole idea of a blood libel. And poisoning the wells, why not throw that in. Poisoning the wells is very similar to this faulty vaccination movement. You see how these motifs circulate? And they are interchangeable, it’s like algebra.”

Why not Jeff Bezos?

Partly it is Gates’ foray into global medicine that has given him omnipresent villain status, not to mention his contact with the likes of Jeffrey Epstein, but there are other factors that mean it is him and not Jeff Bezos or Larry Page, for example, who is at the centre of the conspiracy theory web.

You can have only one person dominating these stories, says Tangherlini, and it is hard to add another one. “If I started telling stories about Jeff Bezos, and if my friend hears it, he will say, ‘It’s a good story but I’m going to turn it back to Bill Gates’, so there’s a regression to the mean.

“In folklore, we have this law of self-correction. So if something doesn’t quite fit, you go back to the way you heard it from 15 other people. I might be saying Jeff Bezos. But if three other people are saying Bill Gates, it’s going to be Bill Gates.”

Why do people believe things that seem so wrong?

Conspiracy theories often crop up after catastrophic or unusual events and they thrive in environments where there is a lack of trusted information, says Tangherlini.

In 16th and 17th century Denmark, catastrophic events from floods to poisonous algae mixed with the massive change brought by industrialisation. For those isolated on small farms, access to trusted, consistent information was scarce and stories about witches start to take hold.

Today it’s clear that coronavirus has been a catastrophic event that has impacted everyone’s lives. On the face of it, a lack of information is not a problem in wealthy countries. However, the overload of information online can produce the same effect that Danish farmers faced several

centuries ago – a lack of trusted information.

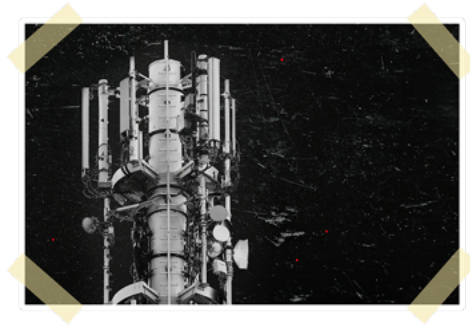
This is where conspiratorial storytelling comes in and these stories start to get created. Then, as now, stories are a powerful way of talking about

what we fear.

Stories are good at getting our attention

In a conspiracy theory universe...

Bill Gates



Witches

Often the most gripping stories are about things we fear...
In a conspiracy theory universe...

Bill Gates



Witches

People turn to storytelling to help them deal with threats...

These stories are not just alerts, they are spaces where people try to figure out what to do as well as who is with them and against them.

In a conspiracy theory universe...



Bill Gates



Witches

When these stories are false but people believe them, they can have damaging real-world consequences...

Many innocent people, mainly women, were killed in witchcraft trials. Today vaccine hesitancy is causing unnecessary deaths from coronavirus.

In a conspiracy theory universe...



Bill Gates



Witches

Tangherlini uses an example to explain how a 18th-century Danish farmer could start with a sick cow and end up with a story about a witch.

“In contemporary retelling of this, it is one dimensional: ‘The farmers all believed that if their cow was sick, there was a witch.’ That’s not the way people believe in things”. It is more of a negotiation, he says.

The farmer has heard stories about witches poisoning cows, but one neighbour tells him he should change the hay in his barn. Another advises him to see a healer.

Everyone agrees the cow is sick. But this back and forth over the cause is a way of establishing the threat to that community, and what can save them from it. Surprising events and other people acting out their beliefs can create a reinforcement effect. And that is what the professor has seen on Reddit forums and Facebook groups today.

Cracking a conspiracy - what’s the way out?

A diagram of story elements is not going to deradicalise someone who believes vaccines are implanting microchips in people’s arms. In our information overloaded world, more information is unlikely to change someone’s mind either. This project is more about understanding how these stories work rather than changing minds.

But it does raise one tantalising possibility that perhaps this mapping - what one of the authors, Pavan Holur, calls “an AI mirror held up to online conversations” - lets people see the totality of the belief system they are tying themselves into.

While someone might think vaccines are unsafe, they do not necessarily think 5G causes coronavirus.

“If people are looking at it and thinking ‘Wait a minute, I don’t trust at least this part of the narrative’,” Tangherlini says, “you might be able to fracture those low-probability links between domains. And if you can fracture or question them, you get the potential for community level change.”

With 98.8% of England’s coronavirus deaths in the first half of 2021 being **people who were not fully vaccinated**, anti-vaccine conspiracies have life and death consequences. Any interventions that loosen their grip could save lives.

In the end it was significant social change that shifted people’s beliefs on witches in Denmark. People were still telling witchcraft stories into the 1900s, centuries after they first appeared.

“Belief in stories about witchcraft in Denmark really started to drop off in the early 20th century. Multiple things were going on - access to

healthcare, WW1, more understanding of medicine and infection and the impact of radio. Now something people will say is, “There was a witch who used to live down there.”

This article was amended on 27 October 2021 to clarify that while 5G uses radio wave frequencies, it is not the name of any wave itself.

Conspiracy in the time of corona: automatic detection of emerging Covid-19 conspiracy theories in social media and the news, by Shadi Shahsavari, Pavan Holur, Tianyi Wang , Timothy R Tangherlini and Vwani Roychowdhury, is published in [National Library of Medicine](#)