



#5GCoronavirus

How a global pandemic gave life
to an old conspiracy theory.

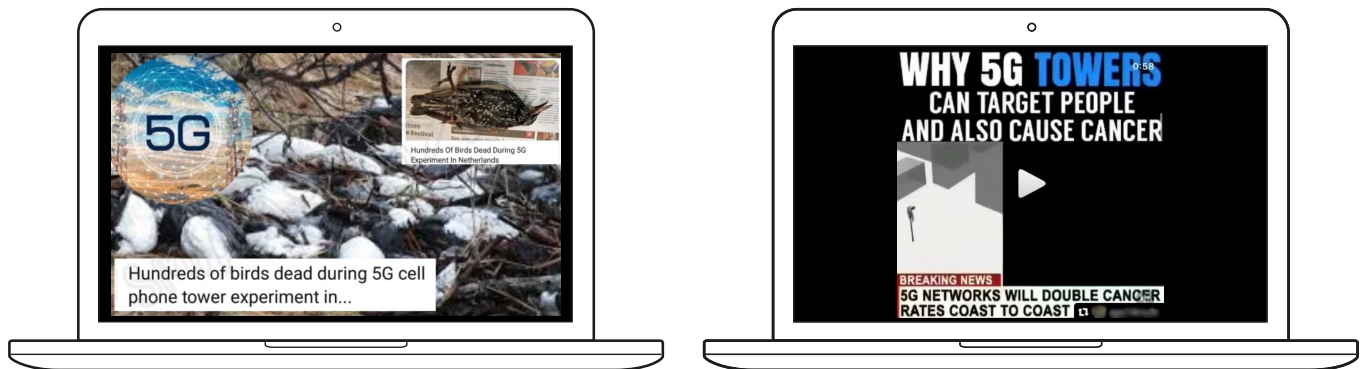
April **2020**



Introduction

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 there has been a dramatic increase in the proliferation of medical disinformation and conspiracy theories. Most recently, conspiracy theorists have adapted to fears about the spread of COVID-19 by pushing misinformation which links the spread of the virus to the deployment of 5G towers around the world. These speculations have gained significant traction on social media platforms including Instagram and Twitter.

Despite a recent surge in popularity, 5G-related conspiracies are not new. Originally proposed in 2013, 5G, or '5th Generation' technology has attracted many concerns about its purpose and alleged risk to the public. Although official investigations by Ofcom and the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) have not deemed 5G a health risk, conspiracy theorists circulate unsupported claims that 5G can cause brain damage, cancer and other health issues by emitting dangerous levels of radiation. Related theories state that 5G technology is part of a covert surveillance and mind-control programme orchestrated by a nefarious super-elite.



Since the outbreak of COVID-19, public fear regarding the spread of the virus has provided 5G conspiracy theorists with an opportunity to adapt and reiterate their core beliefs to a wider audience, demonstrating the adaptability of conspiracy theorists in leveraging topical insecurities to validate their worldview and expand their networks.

Emerging trends indicate a belief that the widespread roll-out of 5G has either caused or exacerbated the pandemic, specifically by emitting radiation and absorbing oxygen from the atmosphere. Other theorists state COVID-19 has been faked or deliberately synthesised for the purposes of keeping people off the streets so governments can set up 5G towers without disruption.

By synthesising initial theories about 5G radiation and disease into new speculation about its role in the current pandemic, conspiracy theorists provide credulous users of social media with alleged evidence to attribute COVID-19 to 5G technology, and encourage doubt and skepticism when engaging with official narratives on the pandemic.

Originally Tweeted on 3 April 2020.

Text reads:

The left is a map of Covid19. The right is a map of dense 5G areas. Quite the overlap. Perhaps this virus is not lethal on its own, but it is a binary system and the lethality increases when 5G comes online. Also, don't forget Wuhan is a 5G test bed. #5GTOWERS #COVID19 #Stop5G





These conspiracies about the danger of 5G have already proven to have dangerous consequences, especially in the United Kingdom where more than 30 5G masts have been attacked since early March 2020, while several telecommunications workers have been publicly harassed.¹ Most recently, a mobile phone mast providing connectivity to the Nightingale Hospital in Birmingham was vandalised, severely disrupting communication access for patients and essential staff combating the spread of COVID-19.²

Moonshot has conducted in-depth research on Instagram and Twitter to better understand the nature and volume of the 5G conspiracy.



Methods

Qualitative research was conducted on Instagram and Twitter, where we explored content related to 5G conspiracies and identified the most commonly used hashtags that called for the removal of 5G and those that linked 5G to COVID-19, cancer, radiation, and other conspiracy theories. We expanded this list as we identified new posts and the hashtags used as part of them.

We focused on the spread of hashtags rather than keywords within posts because a conspiracy theorist's use of a hashtag indicates an effort to draw attention to their posts, to organise with other people using the hashtags outside of their immediate following, and to promote a particular message. Where possible, we sought to eliminate false positives, including users simply discussing or ridiculing the conspiracy. This process led to the curation of a list of 32 hashtags:

#5Gburnyourbrain, #5Gcancer, #5Gcausescancer, #5GCausescoronavirus, #5Gcorona, #5Gcoronavirus, #5GDeath, #5Genocide, #5Gheadache, #5GHealthHazard, #5GIsDangerous, #5Gisgenocide, #5Gistheenemy, #5Gisthevirus, #5Gkillgrid, #5Gkills, #5GMindControl, #5Gnewworldorder, #5Gradiation, #5GSyndrome, #5Gtowerchallenge, #5Gwillcontrolyou, #burn5G, #burn5Gtowers, #destroy5G, #destroy5Gtowers, #Disable5GTowers, #kill5G #kill5Gtowers, #Stop5G, #Stop5Gnow, #teardown5G

We used open-source Instagram and Twitter crawlers to retrieve all posts from all time (up until 10.04.20), using any of these hashtags, which produced a database of 47,647 posts. The data was then disaggregated by platform, hashtag, and date, to enable an analysis of the volume of posts over time, by platform, and the narratives being circulated. All the text accompanying the gathered posts was coded into a corpus text database, and lexically analysed to reveal the top keywords and themes occurring in conjunction with the hashtags.

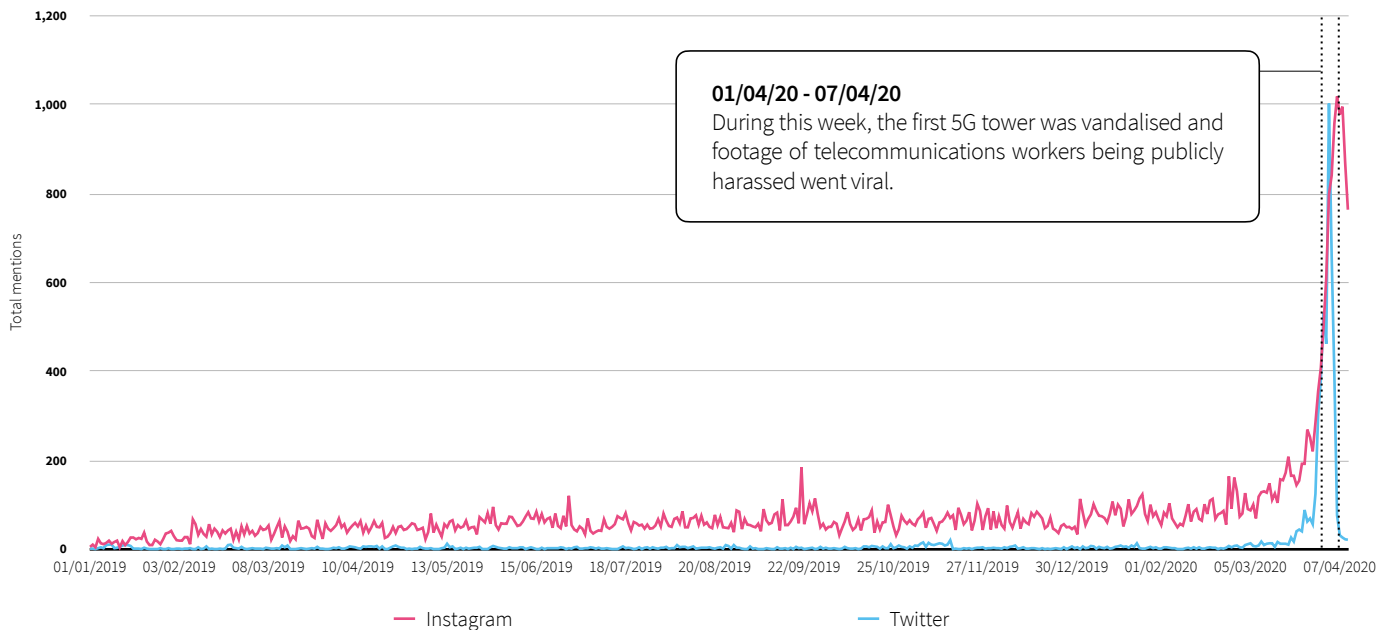
¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-5g-conspiracy-theory-telecom-tower-arson-liverpool-birmingham-a9460396.html>

² <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-suspected-arsonists-target-phone-mast-providing-nightingale-field-hospital-11973534>



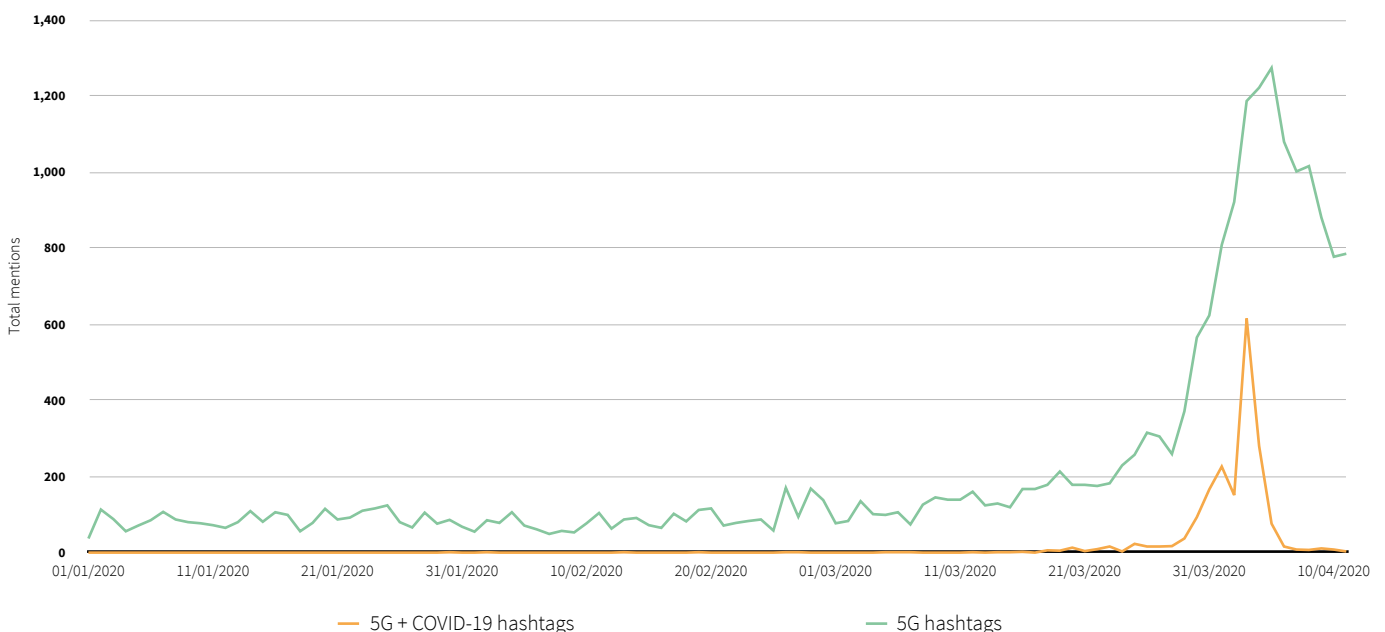
Volume of hashtag mentions over time

The earliest reference to 5G conspiracy theories via these hashtags was from March 2015 on Instagram, and January 2017 on Twitter. Approximately 94% of recorded mentions on both Instagram and Twitter occurred between January 2019 and April 2020.



The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a phase of exponential growth in the number of mentions in the first three months of 2020, increasing by 78% on Instagram and 366% on Twitter versus the last three months of 2019. Between February and March 2020, Instagram and Twitter have seen an 108% and 1749% increase in activity respectively.

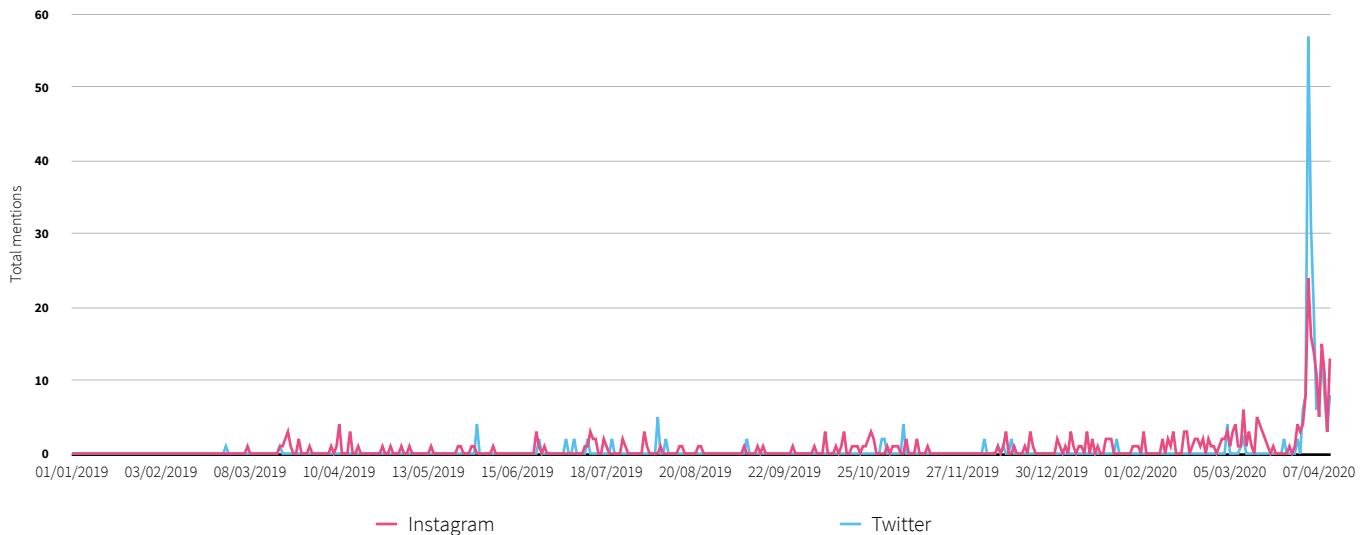
The use of hashtags explicitly linking COVID-19 to 5G technology also peaked during this time, while 'corona' was the 19th most used unique word in the posts using the hashtags.





Calls for criminal damage

Moonshot observed 341 hashtag mentions on Instagram and 223 on Twitter encouraging the violent destruction of 5G towers. The volume of mentions for these hashtags has also increased dramatically in March. Despite having much lower traffic for all 5G related hashtags, the biggest spike in the use of violent hashtags in March was on Twitter.



This spike is steeper and more sudden than the more gradual increase observed on Instagram. Harmful hashtags can gain traction relatively quickly on Twitter.



Read our related report: **"International Burn Down a 5G Tower Day": Monitoring calls for the destruction of 5G technology**

These hashtags include #kill5G, #burn5G, #burn5Gtowers, and #5Gtowerchallenge,³ while posts on Instagram are naming May 3rd 2020 as "International burn down a 5G tower day".

On Twitter, users are openly encouraging the widespread burning of 5G towers. These incitements to commit arson and criminal damage pose considerable risk to the general public.

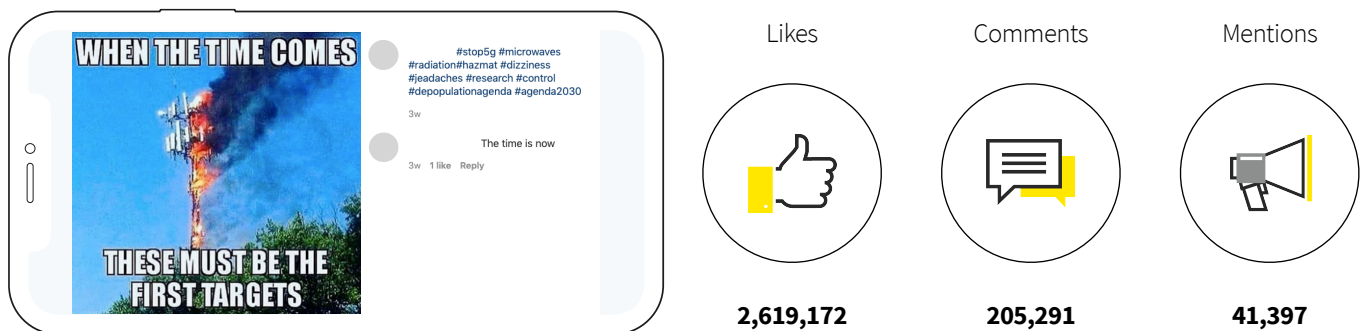
³ Viral trends on social media often encourage followers to complete a challenge (e.g the cinnamon challenge and the ice bucket challenge), showing an attempt by conspiracy theorists to make calls for criminal damage achieve some level of virality by using mainstream techniques.



A hotbed of 5G conspiracy theories

The 41,397 mentions on Instagram have stimulated further engagement with 5G conspiracy theories, gathering 205,291 comments, and 2,619,172 likes since 2015.

(Architectural differences between Instagram and Twitter will have had some bearing on the large disparity in hashtag volume between the two platforms. Instagram users can use up to 30 hashtags per post to draw attention to their content, which can run to 2,200 characters. Twitter recommends using no more than two hashtags per Tweet and has a character limit of 280.)



Overlap with other conspiracy theories

Moonshot's research also indicates that conspiracy theorists are using 5G as a gateway into their world more generally, exposing users to other, potentially more harmful worldviews. Out of over 100,000 unique words and phrases identified in the lexical analysis, the 6th and 31st most-used words were 'chemtrail' and 'fake cloud' - terms pertaining to conspiracy theories about harmful aerial and atmospheric tests allegedly conducted by the government.⁴ The 35th most used word was 'antivax', an umbrella term for vaccination skeptics who argue, among other things, that vaccines are highly dangerous, can cause autism, or can be used for mind-control and the regulation of population numbers. The spread of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories led to increased vaccine hesitancy in multiple states across America in 2019, resulting in a measles outbreak which triggered a state of emergency in Washington and Rockland County, New York.⁵ 'Chemtrail', 'fake cloud' and 'antivax' were referenced 19,472 times collectively in this sample of hashtag mentions between 2015 and 2020, indicating that many conspiracy theorists using 5G related hashtags are also using the topic of 5G to discuss and validate other conspiracy theories.

The extent of the overlap between 5G conspiracies, other medical mis/disinformation and anti-vaccination conspiracies was also evidenced in the sharing of popular videos on Twitter, including one narrated by someone claiming to be a former "Vodafone executive", claiming that 5G "activates" coronavirus and is "causing our cells to be poisoned". (In the posts we gathered, 'radiation' was mentioned 12,345 times, while cancer was mentioned 5,261 times.) This video and others like it have been viewed over 500,000 times to date.

The ideological underpinnings of these worldviews are often explicitly anti-government and sometimes anti-Semitic in their belief that the world is controlled by a covert network of elites who work against the population's interests. Many Tweets and Instagram posts claim the government uses technology like 5G and bioweaponry to deliberately spread disease and thereby manage overpopulation. Others contend that an international super-elite will convince the world population to receive a vaccine for the virus that in fact contains a microchip which can be used to monitor and control the global population. The sample of posts contains 496 mentions of keywords and profiles related to the 'Targeted Individual' community, a network of conspiracy theorists who believe they are personally subject to covert surveillance or 'gang-stalking' from government elites who use paid groups, microwaves, radiation and other technologies to stalk and coerce individuals into submission and even death. Fears related to the COVID-19 epidemic have not only brought fringe 5G conspiracies to a broader audience, but along with them comes the additional risk of exposing users to a broader network of problematic conspiracy theories about science, medicine and systems of governance.

⁴ <https://keith.seas.harvard.edu/chemtrails-conspiracy-theory>

⁵ <http://moonshotcve.com/anti-vax-online/>

