Against the backdrop of the global Covid-19 pandemic, billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates has become the subject of a diverse and rapidly expanding universe of conspiracy theories. As an example, a recent poll found that 44% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats in the US now believe that Gates is linked to a plot to use vaccinations as a pretext to implant microchips into people. And it’s not just America: 13% of Australians believe that Bill Gates played a role in the creation and spread of the coronavirus, and among young Australians it’s 20%. Protests around the world, from Germany to Melbourne, have included anti-Gates chants and slogans.

This report takes a close look at a particular variant of the Gates conspiracy theories, which is referred to here as the ID2020 conspiracy (named after the non-profit ID2020 Alliance, which the conspiracy theorists claim has a role in the narrative), as a case study for examining the dynamics of online conspiracy theories on Covid-19. Like many conspiracy theories, that narrative builds on legitimate concerns, in this case about privacy and surveillance in the context of digital identity systems, and distorts them in extreme and unfounded ways.

It’s important to note that there’s never just one version of a conspiracy theory—and that’s part of their power and reach. Often, there are as many variants on a given conspiracy theory as there are theorists, if not more. Each individual can shape and reshape whatever version of the theory they choose to believe, incorporating some narrative elements and rejecting others.

Broadly, however, the ID2020 conspiracy theory is a version of the widespread theory that Bill Gates and Microsoft are engaged in an effort to use the Covid-19 crisis as a pretext for mandatory vaccination programs, and that the vaccines in turn are a cover for implanting some form of microchip, radio frequency identification (RFID) chip or other digital tracking device. This chip is considered by some to be the satanic ‘Mark of the Beast’.

As the Covid-19 crisis has continued, the ID2020 conspiracy theory has evolved to incorporate other key narrative elements. This includes Event 201, which was a 2019 simulation of a pandemic outbreak that organisations connected to Gates participated in and that’s now viewed by conspiracists as proof that Gates and his associates were preparing for the Covid-19 outbreak, which they would later cause.
It also includes **Patent WO2020060606**, filed by Microsoft in 2019 and published in March 2020, which patents a system for using human body activity for mining cryptocurrency. The particularly unfortunate number of this patent, which features three sixes and therefore is associated by some with satanic influences, has contributed to it becoming woven into the conspiracy theory.

Among the many conspiracy theories now surrounding Gates, this one is particularly worthy of attention because it highlights the way emergent events catalyse existing online conspiracy substrates. In times of crisis, these digital structures—the online communities, the content, the shaping of recommendation algorithms—serve to channel anxious, uncertain individuals towards conspiratorial beliefs. This report focuses primarily on the role and use of those digital structures in proliferating the ID2020 conspiracy.

The key findings of this case study are as follows:

- On platforms where the overall activity on a topic or search term is low, a small number of highly engaged conspiracists have the potential to exert disproportionate influence over recommendation algorithms. This means that, when events drive a surge in mainstream interest in a given topic or theme associated with the conspiracy, new users may be directed towards conspiracy content or narratives, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement and algorithmic optimisation.

- Online conspiracies often share real information, such as legitimate media reporting or official documents, presented in a misleading or conspiratorial frame. This has two effects: it helps to create an illusion of legitimacy, and it complicates the efforts of social media platforms to moderate conspiratorial content.

- Localised and globalised conspiracy narratives can be mutually reinforcing.

- Established conspiracist communities adopt and dramatically boost new conspiratorial narratives and elements. The adoption of the ID2020 conspiracy theory by established conspiracist communities such as anti-vaxxers and QAnon* in the context of the Covid-19 crisis has made the theory’s reach significantly greater than it previously was.
What’s the ID2020 conspiracy theory?

The **ID2020 Alliance** is a non-profit organisation that promotes shared principles to guide an ethical approach to global digital identity systems. Microsoft is one of the **ID2020 founding member organisations**. In September 2019, the ID2020 Alliance launched a new digital identity program in partnership with GAVI, which is the global vaccine alliance co-founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and others. Partly because of its work with GAVI and connections with Microsoft, ID2020 has been the subject of conspiracy theories since long before the Covid-19 crisis. ID2020 conspiracy theories before 2020 primarily centred on resistance to vaccinations, but many variants also drew in elements of opposition to the UN and the so-called ‘New World Order’ or fears that ID2020 and Microsoft were using vaccination programs as a cover to implant microchips, quantum dots or other tracking devices.

One particularly prominent version of the ID2020 conspiracy that appears to have been driven primarily by fringe Christian conspiracy sites is that ID2020’s program is linked to the **Mark of the Beast**. Conspiracy theories about vaccines being the Mark of the Beast date back centuries, to when smallpox vaccines (derived from cow lymph) would leave a physical mark on the human body.

In 2019, **fringe conspiracy media put a modern twist** on an old conspiracy, alleging that ID2020 is part of a global New World Order conspiracy to inject microchips, representing the Mark of the Beast, into the population in order to track and control them:

> The ID2020 Alliance, as it’s being called, is a digital identity program that aims to ‘leverage immunization’ as a means of inserting tiny microchips into people's bodies. In collaboration with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, also known as GAVI, the government of Bangladesh and various other ‘partners in government, academia, and humanitarian relief,’ the ID2020 Alliance hopes to usher in this mark of the beast as a way to keep tabs on every human being living on Earth. Similar to how cattle are marked with ear tags, this globalist alliance wants all humans to be ‘vaccinated’ with digital tracking chips that will create a seamless monitoring system for the New World Order to manage the populations of the world with ease. Vaccines now being used to harvest biometric identities of everyone; Big Brother merges with Big Pharma.

— **Natural News**, 23 October 2019

There were 192,665 tweets containing references to the ID2020 conspiracy theory between October 2019 and May 2020 (Figure 1). Interest in the theory peaked during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the March–April 2020 period.
Fringe conspiracy activity shapes algorithms where overall engagement is low

Searches show that, by December 2019, conspiracy-related content made up a significant proportion of the total social media activity relating to ID2020. Of the 281 ID2020-associated tweets in December 2019, 85% were conspiracy theory related.

There appears to have been some degree of crossover from quite early on between ID2020 and anti-5G conspiracy theories, which is unsurprising, given the high level of cross-pollination between anti-vaccine and anti-5G groups more broadly.

Even so in December, ID2020 conspiracy theories remained small and total levels of activity related to ID2020 remained relatively low. So why is this significant?

Algorithms on platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are designed to respond, in part, to engagement. Where overall activity is low, a small number of highly engaged users have the potential to exert disproportionate influence over recommendation algorithms. In other words, where conspiracists are the most engaged users on a given niche topic or search term, they both generate content and effectively train recommendation algorithms to recommend the conspiracy theory to other users. This means that, when there’s a rush of interest, as precipitated in this case by the Covid-19 crisis, large numbers of users may be driven towards pre-existing conspiratorial content and narratives.
A video uploaded to YouTube in February 2020 shows this process in action in the context of ID2020. In the video, titled ‘Corona Virus, Vaccines and ID2020: MOTB CHIP’, the user searches for ‘ID2020 vaccines’ and the Mark of the Beast conspiracy theory is recommended (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Screenshot of YouTube video

It’s important to note that the user’s personal search history is also likely to have influenced their search results. In this case, it appears that the individual had previously searched for anti-vaxxer content; this is an interesting example of the role of recommendation algorithms in propagating new conspiracies among users already inclined to conspiratorial thinking.

The broader takeaway point from this is that, because overall online engagement in connection to ID2020 was low in 2019, that meant that the disproportionately high engagement by conspiracy users was able to help shape recommendation algorithms that would drive users—particularly users already prone to conspiratorial views—towards the ID2020 conspiracy. This cycle is likely to have been self-reinforcing: engagement on conspiracy topics shaped recommendation algorithms, which drove greater engagement, which reinforced the algorithmic recommendation.

**Conspiracy theorists appropriate real content and present it in misleading frames**

In addition to creating conspiracy content, online conspiracists often make use of non-conspiratorial content, such as real media reporting or official documents, which are then presented in a misleading and conspiratorial frame. Using this content helps to confer the illusion of legitimacy. In much the same way that the most convincing lies contain a grain of truth, the most effective conspiracy theories are built with a cornerstone of reality.
A key example of this in the case of the ID2020 conspiracy theory is an article published in September 2019 by Biometric Update, a website that covers biometric technology. The article, titled ‘ID2020 and partners launch program to provide digital ID with vaccines’, is legitimate media coverage of ID2020’s coordination with partners, including global vaccine alliance GAVI and the Government of Bangladesh, to combine immunisation and digital identity programs.

This legitimate article has been shared and linked to hundreds of times by conspiracy theorists and social media groups, which frame it as ‘proof’ of the ID2020 conspiracy. On Facebook alone, the article has been shared more than 500 times in the past three months through more than 188,000 interactions (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of Facebook post in ‘Collective Action Against Bill Gates, We Won’t Be Vaccinated!!’ group

Twitter and Facebook are the most popular platforms for distributing the article. It’s also regularly posted on Reddit in the /r/conspiracy subreddit. The nodes in Figure 4 represent one account/page sharing the article and are coloured by the social media platform involved. Arrows are scaled according to the number of times the article was shared by that account/page.
Another example of this is the way in which Microsoft’s real patent for a system that uses human body activity for cryptocurrency mining has been used in support of conspiracy theories. Patent WO2020060606—CRYPTOCURRENCY SYSTEM USING BODY ACTIVITY DATA was initially filed in 2019 and was granted in March 2020. Although a patent of this nature would probably always have drawn some attention from conspiracists, the coincidences of timing amid the growing focus on conspiracy theories centred on Bill Gates and the equally unfortunate patent number have clearly contributed to making the patent a focus for conspiracists.

Within days of the patent being granted, it had become the subject of fevered speculation on social media, spurred on by conspiracy media outlets and even celebrity influencers. Oscar-nominated Russian film director Nikita Mikhalkov aired the theory on Russian television in an episode of ‘Besogon TV’ (roughly translated as ‘Demon banisher’). Australian former celebrity chef Pete Evans, who has previously circulated anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, shared the patent on Facebook to his followers, saying he was ‘just asking for a friend’ what it meant (Figure 5). The post garnered more than 900 likes, 700 comments and 200 shares.
Direct links to the patent have been shared widely, presenting the patent both in the context of conspiracies focused on Bill Gates broadly and the ID2020 conspiracy specifically. Just as for the Biometric Update article, Twitter and Facebook remain the most popular platforms for conspiracy theorists sharing the link (Figure 6).

Data source: CrowdTangle; Twitter data limited to 7 days.
Another notable way in which the patent is being worked into the conspiracy theory is by first presenting the conspiratorial framing, and then encouraging others to ‘Google it’ for themselves (Figure 7).

The significance of this is twofold: first, it moves viewers from passive to active engagement (albeit at a very low level); second, it functions as a purported ‘proof’ that the conspiracy theory is, in fact, the truth. The fact that the patent does indeed exist is positioned as evidence that the broader conspiracy must also exist (and even that conspiracists are owed an apology).

The appropriation of legitimate content and genuine information into conspiratorial narratives also extends to real-world events.

A major narrative component of many Gates conspiracy theories, including the ID2020 theory, is Event 201. In October 2019, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the World Economic Forum in a simulated pandemic tabletop exercise, called Event 201, for government, business and civil society leaders. The exercise was based on a scenario in which a fictional novel coronavirus broke out among pig populations in South America, made the leap to humans and turned into a global pandemic. Unsurprisingly, this event has been incorporated into a range of conspiracy theories, including the ID2020 theory.
Google Search Trend data shows that global public interest in the Event 201 simulation was almost non-existent (bar a brief spike in late January, when Covid-19 cases were initially detected in the US) until March, when searches for ‘Event 201’ rocketed upwards in tandem with searches for ‘ID2020’ and ‘mark of the beast’ (Figure 8).

Related queries for the same period show that users were drawing a strong connection to Bill Gates for all three search terms (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Google Search Trend worldwide data for the terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’ and ‘mark of the beast’ from 18 October 2019 (the date of the Event 201 simulation) to 6 April 2020**

![Figure 8: Google Search Trend worldwide data for the terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’ and ‘mark of the beast’ from 18 October 2019 (the date of the Event 201 simulation) to 6 April 2020](source)

**Source:** Google Trends

**Figure 9: Google Search Trend worldwide data for the terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’, ‘mark of the beast’ and ‘bill gates’ from 18 October 2019 (the date of the Event 201 simulation) to 6 April 2020**

![Figure 9: Google Search Trend worldwide data for the terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’, ‘mark of the beast’ and ‘bill gates’ from 18 October 2019 (the date of the Event 201 simulation) to 6 April 2020](source)

**Source:** Google Trends
Similar trends are found on Twitter, where there were 192,665 tweets containing the three terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’ and ‘mark of the beast’ between October 2019 and May 2020.

As is usually the case with large, public events involving high-profile corporate and government figures, Event 201 was promoted with a full suite of glossy marketing material. This has unfortunately proven to be a treasure trove of content for conspiracy theorists.

For example, the ‘Event 201 Pandemic Exercise: Highlights Reel’ YouTube video posted by the Center for Health Security in November 2019 received more than 3.15 million views by 27 May 2020 (by comparison, views for the most popular video of the Clade X pandemic exercise were at 43,000, despite the video having been up for two years). Based on data from Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool, a large proportion of those viewers appear to have come from conspiracist Facebook groups in a variety of languages (figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10: Screenshot showing YouTube video with CrowdTangle plug-in
The practice of presenting legitimate content within a misleading frame as ‘proof’ is effective because it implies that, because the content is real, the conspiracy must also be real.

A possible additional benefit may be that it’s more difficult for social media platforms to moderate. For example, while platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook can take strong action against overtly conspiratorial content such as the Plandemic video, banning the sharing of the legitimate video of a real event such as the Event 201 footage would be likely to be much more difficult. Banning it would also make little sense, as the point of the Event 201 material is to be a source of thinking and insight into how a pandemic might unfold and be managed.

**Conspiracies are both localised and globalised**

A feature of conspiracy theories during the Covid-19 crisis is that, much like the dynamics of the crisis itself, they’re simultaneously both local and global. While at first the forces of localisation and globalisation might appear contradictory, in practice they appear to be mutually reinforcing. ID2020 conspiracy theories are spreading globally, across multiple platforms and in multiple languages (Figure 12). They appear to have gained particular traction in several nations in Africa. On 25 May 2020, the top eight countries searching for ‘ID2020’ were all in Africa (Trinidad and Tobago came in at number 9 and the US at number 10).
This particular geographical focus is likely to be driven, at least in part, by the long and at times controversial history of GAVI and the Gates Foundation in Africa and by related, pre-Covid19, conspiracy theories about the Gates Foundation and population control.

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, those pre-existing conspiracy theories have been fuelled by myriad false or misleading claims, including false allegations that Gates tried to bribe Nigerian politicians to institute forced vaccinations, and viral hashtags opposing vaccine tests in Africa, which became muddled up with anti-vaccine and anti-Gates theories (for example #africansarenotlabrats, #africansarenotguineapigs).

Influential Nigerian pastor Chris Oyakhilome has also publicly linked the ID2020 conspiracy with 5G and other coronavirus-related conspiracies (Figure 13). The UK media regulator Ofcom has sanctioned and suspended broadcast licences for Oyakhilome’s religious media outlets Loveworld News and Your Loveworld, which promoted Oyakhilome’s comments (and in so doing helped to spread the conspiracy from the African continent to the African diaspora and other viewers in the UK). That hasn’t stopped videos of the segment from spreading widely on social media among users both inside and outside of Africa.
These Africa-centred conspiracy narratives both reinforce and are reinforced by conspiracy variants in other regions. Sara Cunial, an MP who was expelled from Italy’s Five Star Movement in 2019 due partly to her history of anti-vaccination advocacy, made headlines around the world when she gave a speech calling for Gates to be arrested over the ID2020 conspiracy and supposed crimes against humanity in Africa and India. Footage of the speech is often misleadingly framed as though the Italian Government is calling for Gates’s arrest, as opposed to one politician without the support of many of her parliamentary colleagues. The video has since gone viral, racking up millions of views, according to research by DFR Lab.

What this helps to demonstrate is the way in which a crisis that’s both local and global, combined with an information ecosystem that’s also increasingly both local and global, results in the cross-pollination of conspiratorial narratives across geographical and national boundaries. The most successful variants of the ID2020 conspiracy theory in Nigeria may differ in a number of ways from the most successful variants in Italy, for example, but elements of each can nonetheless be borrowed by each other and so become mutually reinforcing.
Existing conspiracy communities adopt and adapt new narratives

There doesn’t appear to be a distinct, focused group or community developing around the specific ID2020 conspiracy narrative. Instead, the narrative has been adopted and adapted by a range of other, more established, conspiracist communities. Those established communities have played a pivotal role in boosting the ID2020 narrative to the levels that it has reached today. We now briefly examine how the ID2020 narrative is being incorporated by two groups: anti-vaxxers (which for the purposes of this report also include some anti-5G movements, as the two often intersect) and QAnon believers.

ID2020 and anti-vaxxers

As mentioned above, due to the connection between ID2020 and the global vaccine alliance GAVI, anti-vaxxers were instrumental in creating the early variants of the ID2020 conspiracy theory before the outbreak of Covid-19.

One of the first to promote the ID2020 conspiracy was Natural News (a fringe-media empire that’s been banned from Facebook for sharing health misinformation and conspiracy theories), which wrote that ‘Similar to how cattle are marked with ear tags, this globalist [ID2020] alliance wants all humans to be “vaccinated” with digital tracking chips that will create a seamless monitoring system for the New World Order to manage the populations of the world with ease.’ Elements of this narrative were subsequently reprinted or adapted by other fringe and conspiracy media outlets such as Now the End Begins (which adopted the microchips-as-vaccines narrative and added in a religious twist about them also being the Mark of the Beast) and began to circulate on social media among anti-vaxxer groups (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Screenshot of post sharing the Now the End Begins article on Vaccine Awareness South Africa Facebook group
The connection between the ID2020 conspiracy narrative and anti-vaxxer groups and influencers has continued and strengthened into 2020, often merging into a confused and confusing crossover with anti-5G, anti-RFID, anti-New World Order and other conspiracy theories in ways that are difficult to explain succinctly (Figure 15).

![Figure 15: Screenshot of post about ID2020 in Facebook group Corona5Gvirus DepopulationRFIDchipvaccin Resistens (primarily in Swedish language)](image)

As a result of the linkages between the non-profit ID2020 Alliance, the Gates Foundation and vaccination programs, the ID2020 conspiracy has been incorporated into the significant and growing anti-vaxxer and anti-5G community. This has played a pivotal role in the development and dissemination of the ID2020 conspiracy theory to a much broader audience than it would probably otherwise have reached.

**ID2020 and QAnon**

Established QAnon communities (some of which, it should be noted, also have some level of crossover with anti-vax, anti-5G and fringe religious conspiracy theory movements) have also latched on to and built upon the ID2020 conspiracy theory following the outbreak of Covid-19. A number of key QAnon influencers have played a role in promoting the narrative to their audiences as part of the broader QAnon conspiracy universe.
Some media reporting has traced the timeline of Bill Gates and coronavirus conspiracy theories back to a Reddit ‘Ask Me Anything’ session, which Gates participated in on 18 March 2020 and which is reflected in a notable spike in searches for the three search terms related to the Gates conspiracies on 19 March, but search data also shows that the rise in interest in the conspiracy theories began several days earlier. Searches for ‘Event 201’, in particular, took off from around 10 March (Figure 16).

![Google Search Trend worldwide data for the terms ‘event 201’, ‘ID2020’ and ‘mark of beast’ from 1 to 31 March 2020](image)

Source: Google Trends

Also on 10 March, prominent QAnon conspiracist ‘Amazing Polly’ (who has almost 80,000 followers on Twitter and whose videos have been viewed more than 18 million times on YouTube) released a video connecting Event 201 to the broader universe of QAnon and anti-UN conspiracists. The original YouTube upload of this video appears to have been removed, probably by YouTube itself, but the BitChute version alone had been viewed more than 29,400 times by 5 June 2020.

The ID2020 conspiracy narrative has since been absorbed into the broader bundle of QAnon narratives, although exactly what role they play isn’t entirely clear (figures 17 and 18). As always, the broader QAnon movement is made up of a number of versions and variations.
Tweets mentioning ID2020 from March to May 2020 mostly referenced Covid-19 and Bill Gates, but the top 25 hashtags used in that period featured common QAnon references such as ‘#wwg1wga’, ‘#deepstate’ and ‘#qanon’ (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Top 25 hashtags (excluding #ID2020) used by ID2020 tweets from March to May 2020
After ID2020 tweets took off on 10 March, around 2% of the tweets consistently referenced QAnon and related terms daily. Before 10 March, tweets referenced both ID2020 and QAnon on sporadic days and on average represented 1% of all ID2020 tweets (Figure 20). Keep in mind that the total number of ID2020 conspiracy theory related tweets was also much lower in that period, as the spike in activity came after the ‘Event 201’ video on 10 March.

References to the ID2020 conspiracy tweeted alongside QAnon hashtags remain a small portion of the total ID2020 discourse (it’s worth noting that many QAnon-related accounts don’t always use hashtags in their tweets, but a comprehensive study of how many ID2020 tweets are coming from QAnon-related accounts would be a larger project beyond the scope of this short report). However, if both the ID2020 and QAnon movements continue to grow, it’s likely that we’ll see greater overlap of material across social media.

**Non-conclusion**

This isn’t a conclusion, because the ID2020 narrative and the broader universe of Covid-19-related conspiracy theories are very far from having run their course. There can be little doubt that these theories will continue to evolve and potentially to continue to spread to new audiences and communities. It seems highly likely that the theories spawned amid the Covid-19 crisis will outlast the pandemic and will continue to contribute to social and political polarisation and the broader erosion of public trust.
In this short report, we have sought to use one particular conspiratorial narrative—the ID2020 conspiracy—as a case study to highlight some of the elements and dynamics that are helping to drive the proliferation of conspiracy theories during the Covid-19 crisis. While we haven’t attempted to give a comprehensive explanation, we hope that this limited study will help to contribute to a wider understanding of the dynamics of Covid-19 conspiracy theories.

Notes

*QAnon is a conspiracy theory that a small group of secret agents (one of which previously posted as ‘Q’ on the imageboards 4chan and the now-defunct 8chan and now posts on 8kun) are working in coordination with US President Donald Trump to defeat a ‘deep state’ cabal of elite paedophiles. Despite being US-centric, this conspiracy theory is increasingly internationalised. For more on QAnon, see, for example ‘What is QAnon? The craziest theory of the Trump Era, explained’, ‘QAnon is more important than you think’ and ‘I understand the temptation to dismiss QAnon. Here’s why we can’t’.

**Plandemic is a conspiracy theory video posted to social media in early May 2020. It takes an anti-vaxxer line in relation to Covid-19.

Acronyms and abbreviations

GAVI Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization
RFID radio frequency identification
UN United Nations

About the authors

Elise Thomas is a Researcher working with the International Cyber Policy Institute
Albert Zhang is a Research Intern working with the International Cyber Policy Institute

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