

# A CONTAGION OF INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST:

Viral Disinformation of the COVID Vaccine and the Road to Reconciliation

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## FOREWORD

This is a moment of truth for our democracy.

As unprecedented political violence from the right invades our capitol, as mass rioting from the left scars downtown areas in major U.S. cities, and as conspiracies spread like wildfire, the true enemy of our democracy has finally made its identity clear.

Many thought it was the Russians; others felt it was Trump. Some thought it was pedophiles needing to be locked up in Guantanamo Bay. Others thought it was QAnon or the proud boys, perhaps Antifa or Soros. History being what it is, as the list gets thinner, the antisemites always suspect the Jews. They are all, of course, wrong.

It would appear we, the American people—the structure of our discourse and division, our endorsement of disinformation and distrust—are the enemy of democracy we have been waiting for.

As a virus that knows no race, that consumes the poor and rich, that infects and kills people of any political persuasion grows in our democracy, a contagion of distrust appears in its wake. Conspiracy eats at the trust we have for one another as fellow Americans by casting doubt on the American project itself.

This is true not merely for the “conspiracy groups” who many deride as merely mentally ill, but also for the unreasoned witch hunts which seek to censor them out of existence. While we must not withhold truth where it is merited, these crimes and conspiracy cults are of sobering concern—we must also avoid dehumanizing the culprits. Like a pinata, the conspiracies are falling out like candy when we beat them too aggressively. The distrust takes on new forms—always enterprising, conspiracy now takes aim at the very oxygen we would need to defeat it—our public health.

“A Contagion of Institutional Distrust,” the latest research from the Network Contagion Research Institute, maps how a broad swath of Americans are mobilizing against vaccines and public health restrictions and seeks to map that mistrust in the same way we are mapping the virus itself. The report offers us incredibly important new tools, such as methods to detect and forecast emerging threats to our democracy and public health at the county level, from social media platforms that are becoming increasingly sovereign from democratic control. More importantly, it maps the underlying concerns of our fellow Americans, who, as it turns out, are mothers who want their children to return to school or people understandably concerned about government excess, more often than they are people who believe Aliens are stealing our election.

With these maps in hand, we must now come together as Americans to look past the caricatures, blame, and the lies because the path to public health, the path to healing, is now sewn directly to our commitments to one another and to renewing our democracy. Our fight against tyranny, conspiracy, and corrosive mutual distrust now stands on our ability as Americans to reject the disgust of blame. We must appeal, through coherent reason, toward a sober consensus of unlikely collaborators. This effort will require courage and character and test our patriotic commitments to one another and our constitution. If that sounds idealistic and all-too-earnest, take heart, it merely renews an old story passed down to us from our founding fathers—a story about how our country was founded.

### Denver Riggelman

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## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the January 6th attack on the Capitol and the mass online deplatforming that followed, researchers at the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI) report three troubling trends:

- Mass online deplatforming and other efforts to censor conspiracy theories seem to be interpreted by conspiracy theorists as evidence of a conspiracy.
- Mass deplatforming may have made conspiracy theories more difficult to detect for two reasons: First, some conspiracy theories and their adherents, including QAnon, have moved to private channels and platforms, or to the dark web. Second, conspiracy theorists are creating and disseminating memes on mainstream social media platforms that are difficult for tech companies to censor because they are more generic and less likely to arouse suspicion. These memes revive “New World Order” (“NWO”) kinds of conspiracy theories, which revolves around distrust in institutions and leaders and allegations of a “one world government.”
- Included in the overarching anti-government, anti-institution conspiracy theory are theories that create resistance to both the Covid vaccine and various public health measures intended to combat the spread of Covid.

This report chronicles the emergence of a broad, anti-government conspiracy theory that has “Big Brother” elements. It highlights the themes that this overarching conspiracy theory shares with deplatformed conspiracy theories, illustrates the unintended consequences of social media deplatforming, maps the adoption of anti-vaccination and anti-public health restrictions as elements of the broader conspiracy theory, and indicates that the New World Order conspiracy theory is a statistical indicator of real-world anti-vaccine and anti-restriction protests. This underscores the complexities inherent in using social media censorship as a tactic to defeat disinformation and points to the need for continued vigilance in monitoring online extremism in order to detect potential threats, understand public concerns, and find ways for institutions to regain public trust.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. In the wake of the election and events of January 6th, articles and memes containing the term “New World Order” and other anti-government and anti-“globalist” symbols not only exploded on fringe Web communities and fake news platforms but surged across mainstream platforms, making them available to those not already immersed in the world of conspiracy theories.
2. “New World Order” and other anti-government and anti-“globalist” online content spiked in tandem with vaccine distribution disruption during an anti-vaccine protest at Dodger Stadium.
3. Anti-government and anti-“globalist” content on social media increasingly includes anti-restriction and anti-vaccine content.
4. NCRI analysis indicates three key statistical indicators of anti-restriction and anti-vaccine protests at the county level:
  - A county’s history of intimidating counterprotest activity running concurrent with Black Lives Matter protests.
  - The severity of covid restrictions (such as enforced lockdowns).
  - Searches for “New World Order” on Google

- NCRI aggregates data sets both in the real world and online to perform a geographically weighted regression which provides a spatial model for anti-restriction and anti-vaccine protests for counties across the U.S.

### UNCERTAINTY, TRANSPARENCY, AND TRUST

On January 30, protesters in Los Angeles disrupted one of the largest vaccine distribution sites in the US, interrupting vaccinations for nearly an hour. Roughly fifty people gathered at the entrance of Dodger Stadium, forcing the fire department to close the gates. Brought together for a “Scamdemic Protest/March” organized on Facebook, the LA incident is an example of the anti-restriction and anti-vaccine protests that have emerged regularly and nationwide since the early lockdowns.

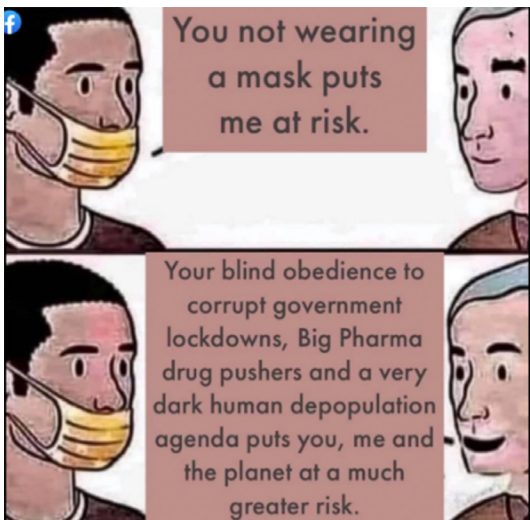
Conspiracy theories are a method of grappling with uncertainty. They represent an explanatory framework that works to make sense of a world that, to the conspiracy theorist, is chaotic and threatening. Especially when things seem out of control, it is easier to accuse evildoers of secretly controlling the world than it is to accept that bad things happen for complex and sometimes unknown reasons. Given that pandemic represents a threat to life and well-being, and the government’s responses to it can be experienced as both chaotic and a threat to liberty, it is unsurprising that conspiracy theories about the pandemic and responses to it have proliferated.

One way to corrode liberal democracy is to undermine support for its institutions. Mixed messages and double standards in both censorship and public health restrictions appear to validate conspiracy theorists’ claims. Qanon and Trump were banned from several online platforms while simultaneously, the social media app, Parler, was cut off by Amazon, Google, and Apple. Meanwhile, restrictions (e.g. prohibitions on indoor dining and restaurant and other building closures), and safety measures (e.g. social isolation, masks, and distancing) have been in place far longer than initially communicated. Vaccines, created at an unprecedented pace, were followed by a chaotic roll-out that included confusion about qualifications for vaccination (e.g. the elderly versus people of color). Contradictory government information about masks and herd immunity were issued at the highest levels, and during the height of the “lockdowns,” public health officials gave Black Lives Matter protests their stamp of approval while insisting that other mass gatherings were unsafe. These all provide fodder for such conspiracy theories.

While exaggerated, conspiracy theories often contain a grain of truth. In this case, swift changes in election law, which allowed an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots, also created legitimate concerns about whether procedures could be implemented quickly enough to prevent fraud. The hurried response to Covid combined with the media’s anti-Trump stance and the summer’s political unrest created legitimate concerns about ideology taking precedence over “science.” Tech platforms and public health officials have not always been correct in their assessments or honest in their public statements, and have not always lived up to democratic norms of transparency and protection of individual rights. These failures feed conspiracy theories that cast such failings not as inevitable failures of fallible humans coping with a crisis unprecedented in our lifetimes, but as the sinister workings of powerful cabals of bad actors seeking power and domination.



A January 23rd protest at Dodger Stadium—one of the largest vaccination sites in the country—resulted in a temporary closing of the entrance to the stadium.



Facebook meme illustrating concerns embedded in Covid-related conspiracy theories.

After conspiracy groups such as QAnon were banned from mainstream social media platforms, new memes began to appear that incorporate many of their themes but seem designed to have wider popular appeal and escape censorship on mainstream platforms. Memes such as “COVID1984,” for example, steer legitimate concerns about contradictory information, public health restrictions, vaccine efficacy, and censorship of unpopular ideas toward a belief in an ominous totalitarian enemy with tentacles in “big tech,” media, and government.

As the historical vaccine roll-out is underway, largely peaceful protests about restrictions have emerged nationwide. However, a rash of non-compliance and potential disruption based on conspiracy theories is beginning to emerge with this movement in the form of maskless shoppers storming shopping centers, vaccine supplies being deliberately sabotaged and protesters actively disrupting distribution. While most protesters are simply parents who want their children to return to school or play sports again, a set of malignant actors appear to be along for the ride. Disinformation and conspiracy theories about other vaccines have been around for decades, but during a pandemic of this magnitude, disinformation about safety measures and Covid vaccines pose a substantial risk to public health.

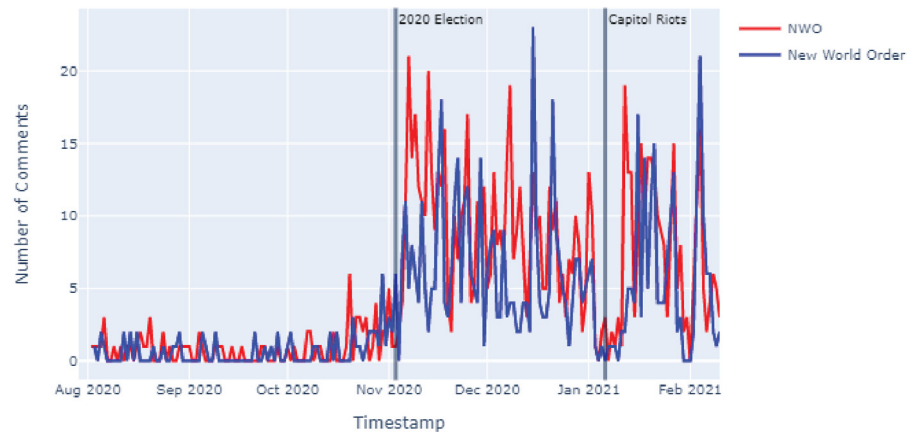
The unwillingness to take the vaccine is grounded in the same distrust in leaders and institutions that led to the attack on the Capitol. For anti-democratic actors, this offers the opportunity to create a spiral of distrust: The more distrust in leaders and institutions they sow, the longer it will take to vaccinate enough of the population to achieve herd immunity; the longer it takes to achieve herd immunity, the longer it will take for life to get back to normal; the longer it takes for life to get back to normal, the less credible leaders appear and the lower the public’s trust in institutions. Conspiracy theorists increasing focus on the vaccine and public health restrictions (masks, social distancing, quarantines/lockdowns... etc.), paired with increasing distrust in institutions, not only creates the risk of spreading Covid, but also risks spreading extremist disinformation, institutional distrust, and the corrosion of liberal democratic norms.

**New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theories appear to be expanding as a popular meme on fringe communities, and articles on the subject have surged across the Web, also appearing on mainstream platforms such as Twitter.**

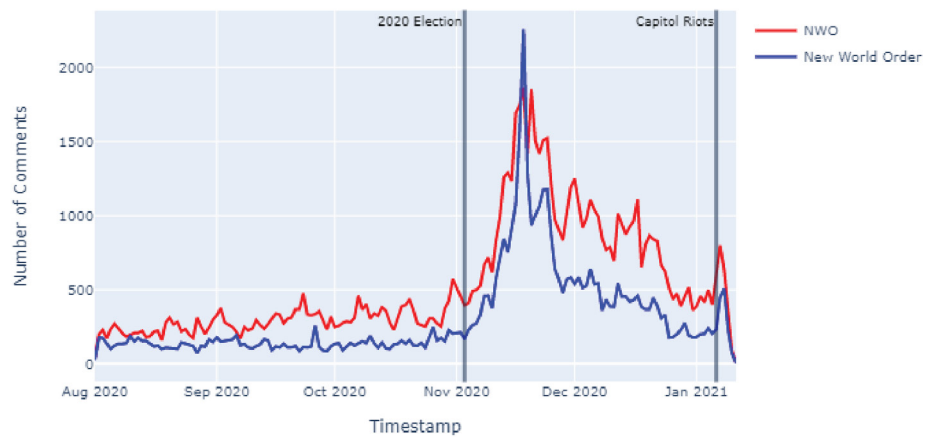
### **FREQUENCY OF “NWO”**

We examined the frequency of the term “NWO” (code for New World Order) on several fringe communities, including Parler, Thedonald.win and 8Kun. The term has roots in the 1960s and was popularized by anti-government extremists in the 1990s. The “New World Order” refers to a tyrannical “one-world” government facilitated by a cabal of elites via “false-flag” events to enact repressive measures against citizens. Our analysis suggests that days after the election, NWO conspiracy theory activity began spiking on fringe online communities. It spiked again in the days after the events of January 6th including on January 8th, when President Trump lost access to his Twitter account.

8kun Usage of "NWO" & "New World Order"



Parler Usage of "NWO" & "New World Order"



thedonald Usage of "NWO" & "New World Order"

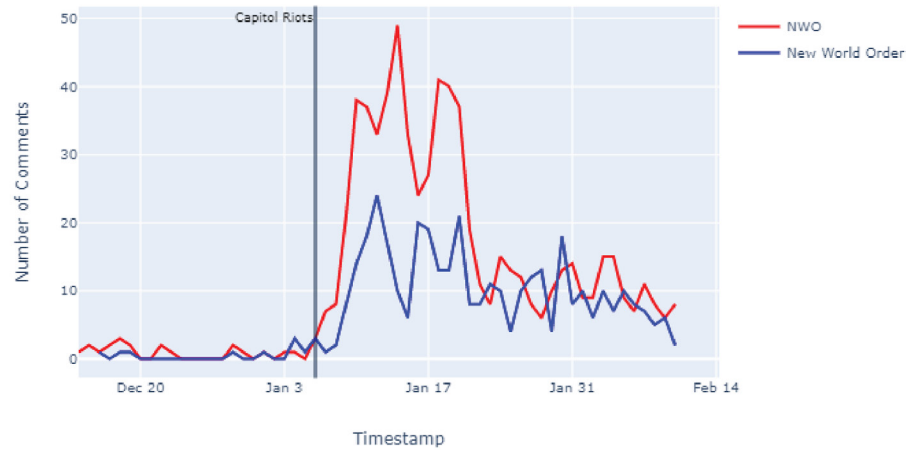


Fig 1. On fringe communities, thedonald.win, 8kun, and Parler mentions of NWO (new world order conspiracy theory) exploded days after the election (1st black line indicates the day after the election), and then again in the days following the events of Jan 6th (2nd black line) and after the deplatforming of President Trump which occurred on January 8th.

### "NWO" TOPIC NETWORKS

A topic network generated from over 1.5 million original tweets using the term "new world order" illustrates that the term attracts themes of global takeover, with elements of QAnon mythology and concerns that the virus is either a scam or being used to initiate global control.

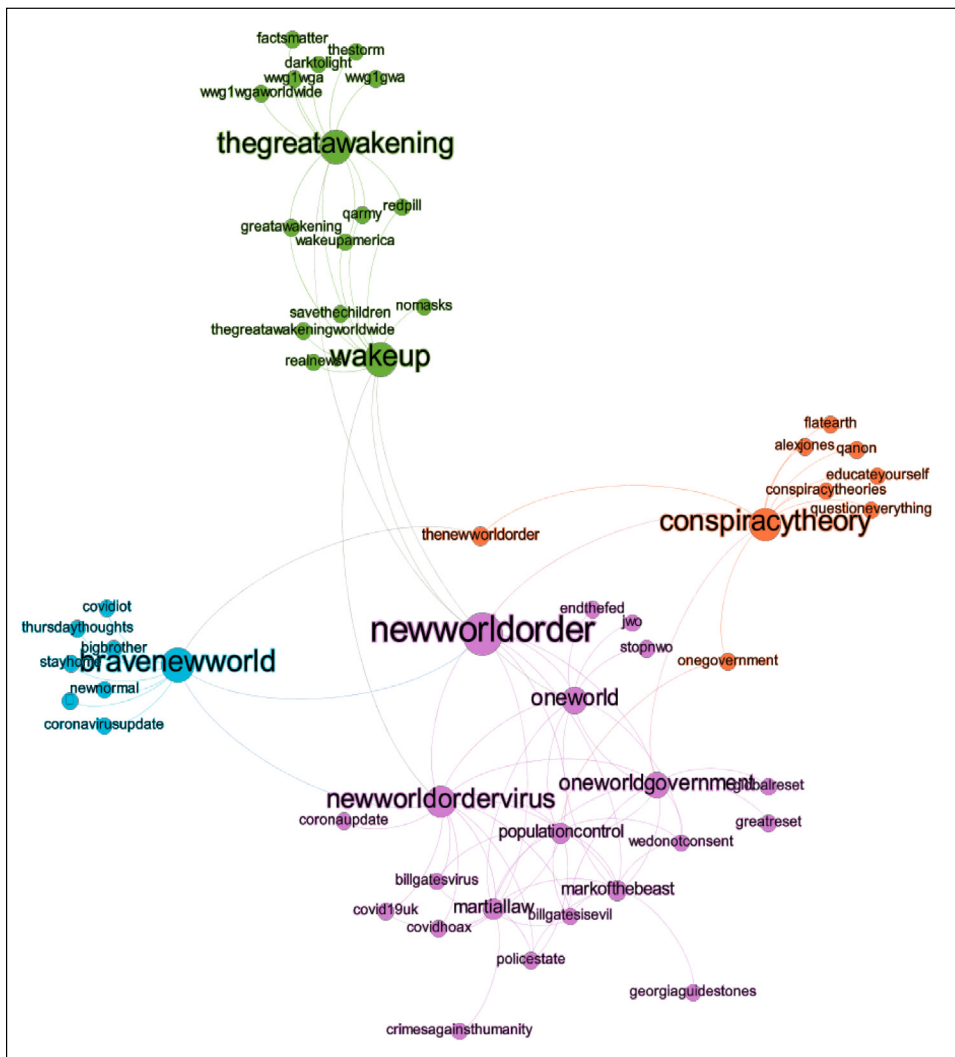


Fig 2. A topic network, generated from over 1.5 million original tweets using the term "newworldorder" on Twitter from January 1st, 2016 - February 17th, 2021.

From comments on several fringe communities<sup>1</sup>, we mapped the “NWO” topic network<sup>2</sup>. Our analysis of NWO before and after the election indicates thematic changes in the NWO conspiracy theory. It appears that before the election (See figure 3, left of the red line) the term worked as a catch-all for nefarious attempts at global control including “globalists,” “communists,” criminals, foreign entities and supernatural forces of evil. After the election (See figure 3, right of the red line), a number of notable changes became evident:

- The term closest to NWO in the topic network is “takeover”
- A “Coup” cluster has emerged
- The term “censorship” appears adjacent to both the “coup” and “takeover” nodes
- The term “pharma” has entered the topic network adjacent to “globalism” and “deception”
- The presence of a “pedophile” cluster (adjacent to “coup” and proximate to “DNC”) increases. This suggests the absorption of QAnon conspiracy into the topic network.

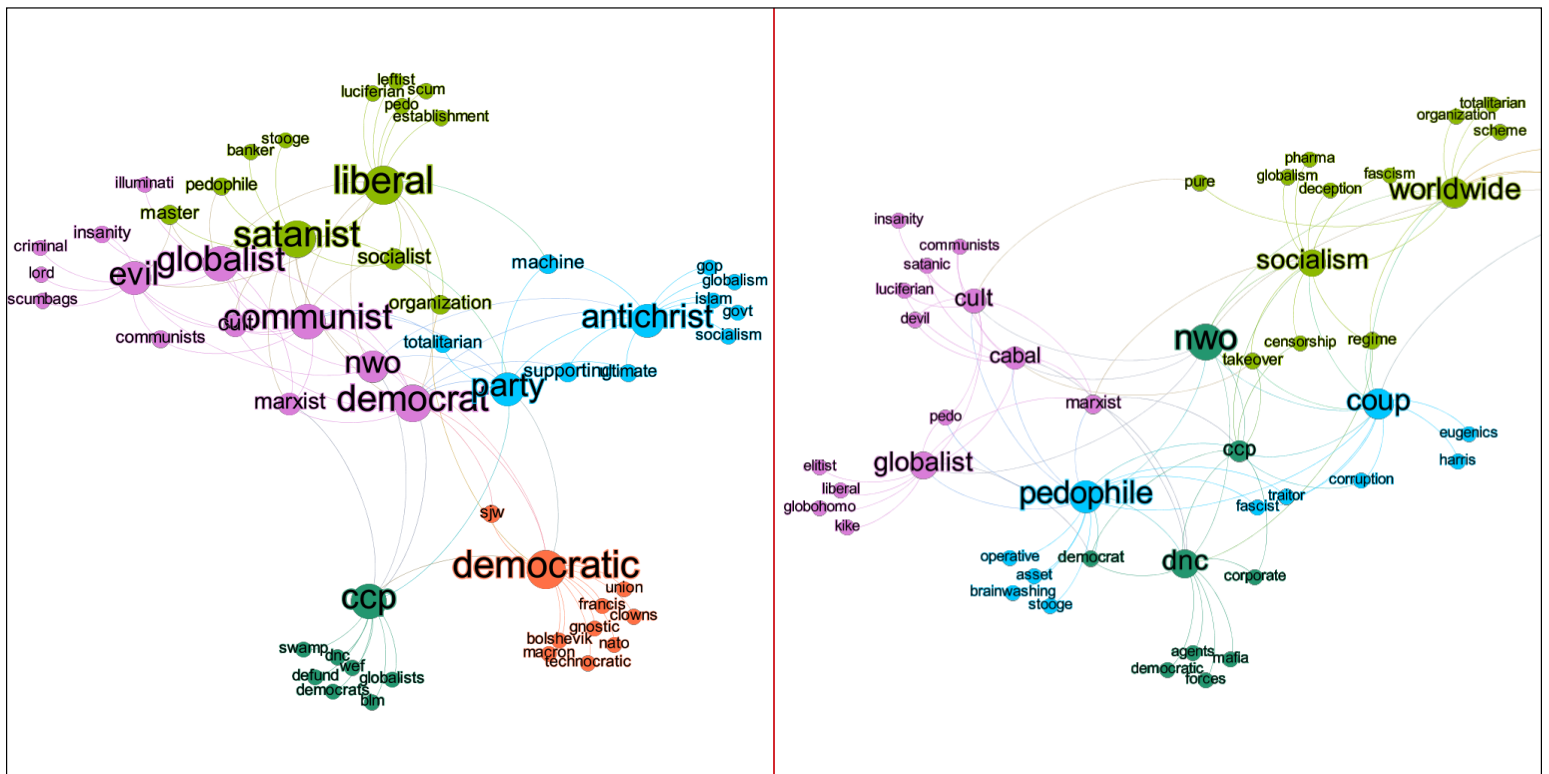


Fig 3. A topic network for the term “NWO” sampled from over 30,000 comments over six month across several fringe Web communities from the three months before the 2020 election (left of the red line) and the three months after (right).

1 ~30k comments from 4chan, 8kun, parler, thedonald with the term “nwo” from November 1st, 2019 - November 3rd 2020 (Graph I) and November 4th, 2020 - February 12th, 2021 (Graph II)

2 For methods see <https://arxiv.org/abs/1809.01644>



### “NWO” ARTICLES

Using Storyzy, a technology that categorizes disinformation sites and video channels as either “trusted” sources, sources of disinformation, or “uncategorized” (legitimacy is undetermined), we ran a search on the volume of original articles containing the term “new world order.” Our analysis indicates that a surge in articles with “new world order” in the title or the body of the text emerged shortly after the events of January 6th, largely from Web domains that Storyzy could not characterize.



Fig 4 Analysis on volume of original articles containing the terms “new world order” from August 2020 to January 2021. Uncategorized sources are usually new disinformation sources. Articles containing the term spiked after Jan 6.

### MAINSTREAMING “NWO”

The trends we discovered on Twitter reflect the same changes we observed in our analysis of fringe platforms, with “new world order” spiking around the election and following January 6th (figure 5).

Taken together, these findings tend to indicate that conspiracy theories about the election, QAnon conspiracy theories about pedophiles, and traditional apocalyptic, militia conspiracy theories are all blending into an overarching “New World Order” conspiracy theories.

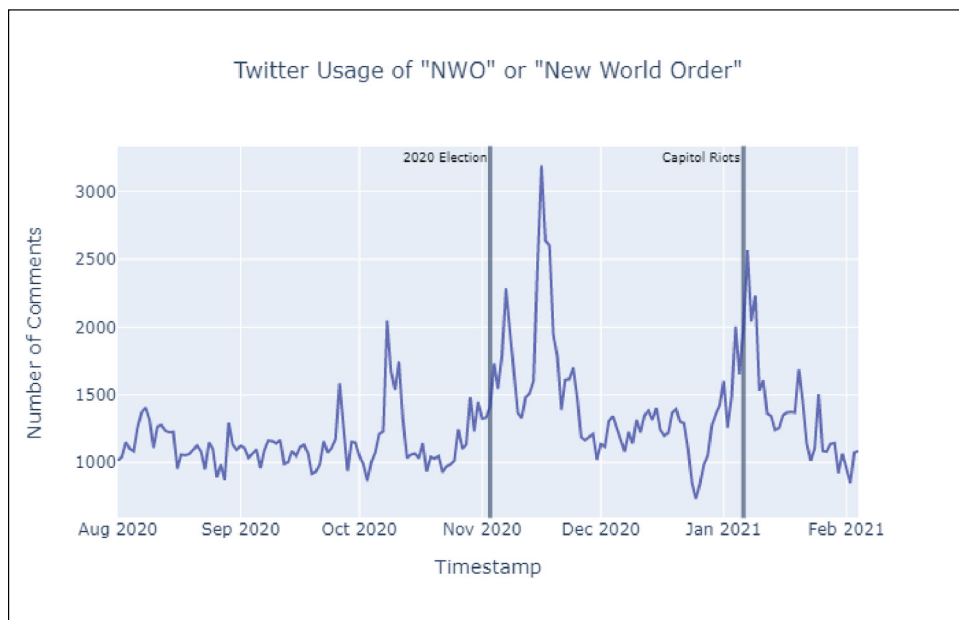


Fig 5 Number of comments per day using the terms “nwo” or “new world order” on Twitter shows spiking in the days following the 2020 election (1st black line) and in the days following January 6th (2nd black line).

**NWO-related conspiracy memes and codewords spiked during the Dodger Stadium anti-vaccine protest.**

The event in Dodger Stadium was organized on Facebook using the “scamdemic” meme. As expected, a frequency analysis<sup>3</sup> during the mobilization event on Twitter shows the word “scamdemic” spiking. To contextualize this signal, we ran a hashtag analysis over comments that contained the term “scamdemic” found that concerns of dystopian government overreach represented as the #greatreset (a world economic forum plans to restructure the global economy in light of Covid and Global Warming), #covid1984, #tyranny, and #nwo were associated with “scamdemic,” as were accusations that the virus is a hoax.

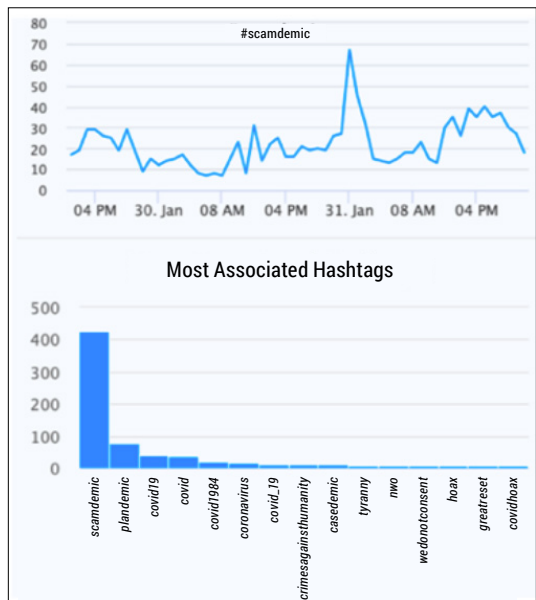
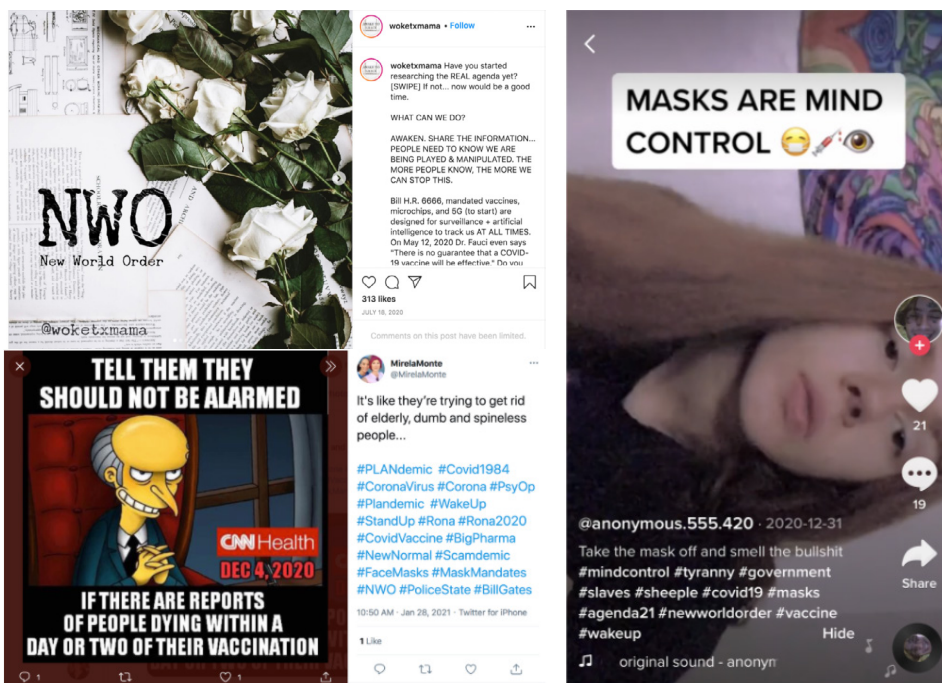


Fig 6 Top: A frequency analysis on the term scamdemic shows a spike overlapping with the disruptive Dodger stadium anti-vaccine protest. Bottom: A hashtag association analysis of terms over the time period show memes related to institutional distrust - “tyranny,” “nwo,” and “covid1984” and the “greatreset” appearing.



Examples of “New World Order” theories circulating on mainstream social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

**Political intimidation, severity of covid restrictions, and google searches for “new world order” are statistical indicators of anti-restriction and anti- vaccine protests**

We gathered data on anti-lockdown, anti-mask, and anti-vaccine protests in the United States from April 2020 to February 2021. These data were used to generate a map of the number of incidents by county. Our analysis determined that there was heavy clustering of protests in the West<sup>4</sup>

To determine statistical indicators for protest activity, we performed a linear regression assessing correlations between the number of protests against COVID-19 measures and several other demographic and regional variables<sup>5</sup>. We also examined searches for “New World Order” on google by region. Other variables<sup>6</sup> we examined include:

3 The “associated hashtags” function works by aggregating all tweets created by using various filters (in this case, the presence of the terms “scamdemic” and/or “plandemic” in the tweet) and then counts each hashtag associated with the result, and sets and ranks the hashtags by the number of occurrences in descending order.  
 4 Using Local Moran’s I.  
 5 For a complete list of variables and exposition of findings including collection and annotation, see [methods](#).  
 6 Reported as significant at p<.05 unless otherwise indicated.

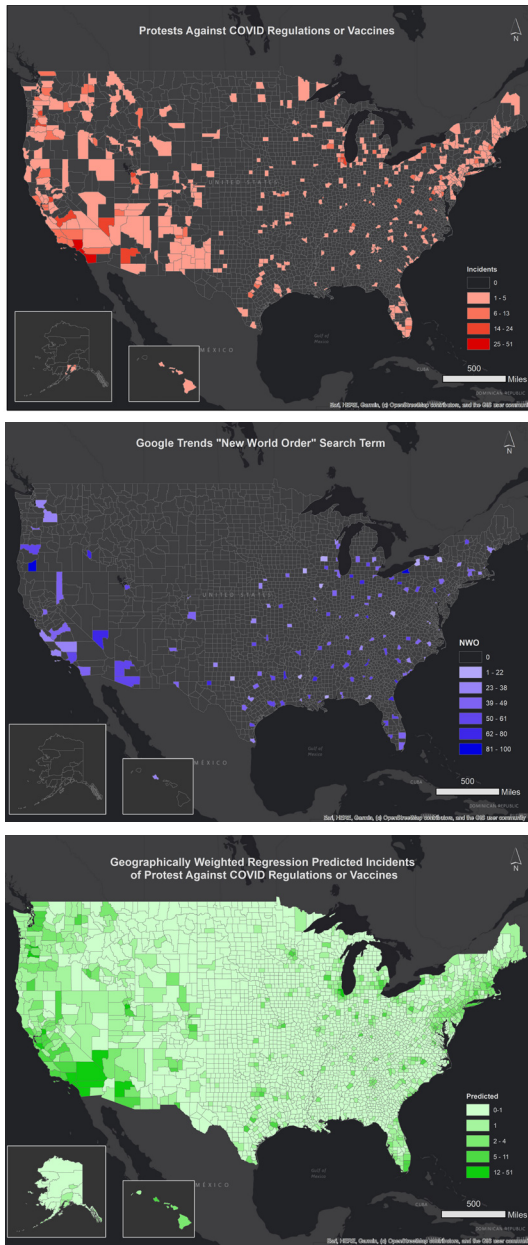


Fig 7 Top: A choropleth mapping of incident tallies by county for anti-mask, anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown mobilizations from April 2020 - January 29, 2021. Middle: A depiction of Google Trends of searches for "New World Order." Bottom: A geographically weighted regression (GWR) mapping of predicted incident tallies by county for anti-vaccine and anti-restriction protests. For a more in-depth narrative of these events, click on this [special Story Map feature](#).

- Intimidating counter-protests during Black Lives Matter protests (after May 25, 2020)
- The severity of Covid restrictions (available through MultiState.us)
- 2020 FBI Hate Crimes data from 2019
- Presence of far-right aligned sheriffs (collected by Political Research Associates)
- Covid incident rate (through Johns Hopkins's COVID-19 database)
- US Census demographic data available through the 5-year American Community Survey for foreign born population

The analysis indicated that anti-BLM intimidation by counter-protesters, the strength of public health regulations and "New World Order" searches on Google, were key statistical indicators of anti-vaccine and anti-restriction protests.

A Geographically Weighted Regression analysis (which analyzes each county's data in relationship with neighboring counties) predicted about 70% of the variability in the data ( $R^2 = 0.7$ ). Based on post-hoc predicting, the model indicates that protests against Covid regulations and vaccines may be likely in parts of Southern California including Los Angeles, San Diego, and Orange County; and in the areas around Salt Lake City, Utah, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Chicago.

Anti-vaccine and anti-restriction protests peaked in the weeks following the election and again in the weeks following January the 6th (Appendix, figure 1). In the online version of this report we include an interactive, layered topographical map of all the variables [here](#) as well as a list of the ranked hotspots by county in the appendix figure 2.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this report, we find that an increase in anti-government and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories accompany recent protests, which appear to feed on widespread institutional distrust. While these findings can be used to better understand the motivators and underlying grievances of a protest movement that while largely peaceful, is rife with covid disinformation and vaccine skepticism.

- Current online conspiracy theories in the U.S. include themes of a stolen election, the imposition of excessive and authoritarian Covid restrictions, questions about the vaccine's efficacy and legitimacy, and frustration about technocratic censorship. These themes both reveal and create profound institutional distrust.
- Conspiracy theorists and fringe groups online are converging against an illusory common enemy – a tyrannical "new world order" government. Because of deplatforming efforts, memes about this new big-tent enemy appear more generic and mainstream, but are capable of impacting vaccine willingness, may inspire disruptive incidents for the vaccine distribution and undercut other public health measures which could further spread of the disease.
- Anti-restriction and anti-vaccine protests are predicted by previous political intimidation or aggression from anti-BLM counter-protesters, the strength of public health restrictions and Google searches for "New World Order."

**APPENDIX**

Fig 1 These data (n=962) were extracted from ACLED's database and through open source data collection on social media and through Google News.

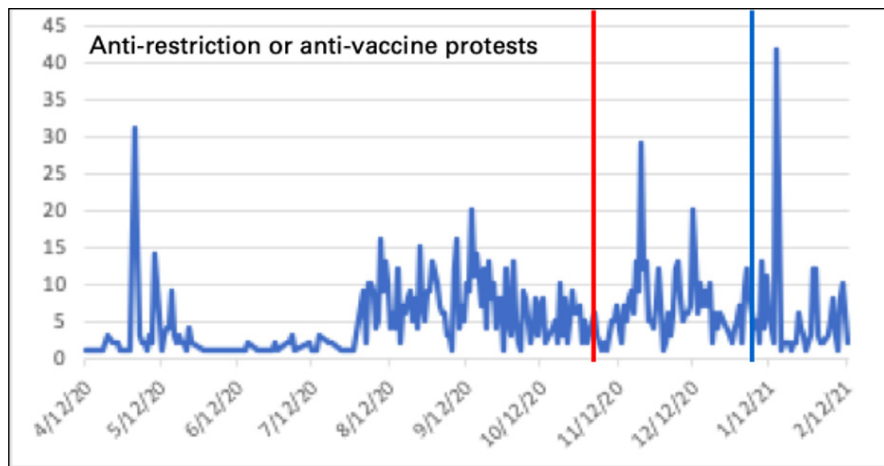


Fig 2 Top-30 counties in order of predicted number of anti-vaccination and anti-regulation protest activity.

- |                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Los Angeles County, California     | 16. King County, Washington           |
| 2. San Diego County, California       | 17. Kings County, New York            |
| 3. Orange County, California          | 18. Ada County Idaho                  |
| 4. Cook County, Illinois              | 19. Kern County, California           |
| 5. Clark County, Nevada               | 20. Queens County, New York           |
| 6. Maricopa County, Arizona           | 21. Spokane County, Washington        |
| 7. Salt Lake County, Utah             | 22. Bernalillo County, New Mexico     |
| 8. Sacramento County, California      | 23. San Francisco County, California  |
| 9. Multnomah County, Oregon           | 24. Jackson County, Oregon            |
| 10. Riverside County, California      | 25. Fresno County, California         |
| 11. Santa Clara County, California    | 26. Pima County, Arizona              |
| 12. San Bernardino County, California | 27. Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania |
| 13. Marion County, Oregon             | 28. Wayne County, Michigan            |
| 14. Alameda County, California        | 29. Snohomish County, Washington      |
| 15. New York County, New York         | 30. Washington County, Oregon         |

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**THE NETWORK CONTAGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (NCRI)** is a neutral and independent third party whose mission it is to track, expose, and combat misinformation, deception, manipulation, and hate across social media channels.

Acting as a public benefit corporation, NCRI is a not-for-profit organization that seeks to explore safe ways to audit, reveal challenges, devise solutions, and create transparency in partnerships with social media platforms, public safety organizations, and government agencies.