CENTER ON TERRORISM, EXTREMISM, AND COUNTERTERRORISM

Proud Boys Amplify Anti-Vax and Coronavirus Disinformation Following Support for Anti-Quarantine Protests

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Compiled May 1, 2020

ABSTRACT

This analysis of Proud Boys-affiliated social media discourse on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram reveals a dangerous trend of promoting COVID-19 disinformation and amplifying nefarious conspiracy theories rooted within violent extremist ideologies. The group additionally produces rhetoric about a proposed civil war, which serves as indirect incitement to political violence within the United States. This brief is the fourth in a series of targeted analysis of disinformation spread by groups on the Far Right. The Proud Boys' promotion of "Reopen America" protests threatens to further mainstream the racist neo-fascist ideology of the group. In spite of enforcement action by large social media sites, Proud Boys continue to evade moderation and their discourse continues to circulate. This serves to normalize their ideas, and their recruiting efforts are strengthened by the combination of their social media influence and their efforts to align with reopen protests.

1. Introduction

Members of the Proud Boys — a self-proclaimed chauvinist organization that supports a far-right, neo-fascist ideology — have engaged in spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, and racism about the COVID-19 pandemic over the past few weeks. They join a growing list of right-wing organizations that have consolidated around a central message that includes: 1) shelter-in-place orders in the United States are ineffective and even unconstitutional, 2) the coronavirus is being weaponized and may have been created by a cabal of elites including Bill Gates, and 3) a possible coronavirus vaccine will likely be a tool for population or mind control by the cabal of elites.

In this piece, CTEC introduces the Proud Boys and their history of violent rhetoric and action and then analyzes Proud Boy-affiliated discourse on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram. CTEC's investigation of Proud Boy accounts shows widespread engagement with violent conspiracy theories, disinformation, and promotion of narratives that downplay the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the Proud Boys' history of committing violence and their in-person participation and leadership with the recent anti-quarantine "Reopen America" protests, this constitutes a dangerous trend.

2. Who are the Proud Boys?

The Proud Boys are an all-male, far-right neo-facist group started in 2016 by Gavin McInnes, the co-founder of Vice Media and Vice Magazine. The organization is now led by Miami native and congressional candidate Enrique Tarrio, the group's anointed international chairman. They describe themselves as a Western chauvinist organization and have a paramilitary wing called the Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights (Coaston 2018). The Proud Boys have repeatedly claimed to be racially inclusive and resisted accusations of racism, despite examples of chauvinism, islamophobia, transphobia, anti-immigration, and nationalism among its membership and publicity (ADL n.d.).

The Proud Boys as a group consists of chapters across the United States, and members are often present alongside White Supremacist groups during events such as the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally and UC Berkeley protests of 2017. The Proud Boys have participated in violent street brawls and frequently incite violence toward perceived enemies on chat apps like Telegram (ADL n.d.). They are also reportedly classified as a far-right extremist organization by the FBI (Wilson 2018).

Social platforms have taken relatively strict enforcement action against Proud Boys, including McInnes. In 2018, both Twitter and Facebook announced that they would be deplatforming the group, quickly removing most of the largest influencers and groups (Mac and Montgomery 2018, and Statt (2018)). Proud Boys have proved adept at evading these bans, however, returning to Facebook and other platforms under modified names. They have also begun promoting pro-civil war narratives, especially the "boogaloo" meme (Lytvynenko 2019).

3. Proud Boy Twitter Discussion Promotes Conspiracy Theories

In spite of Twitter's enforcement against them, several Proud Boys and affiliated groups remain active on Twitter. Through research, CTEC has compiled 14 Twitter users who are self-declared Proud Boys, either through use of the #poyb ("Proud of Your Boy") hashtag or through statements on their account descriptions. We collected data from the Twitter timelines of these 14 accounts, a list that includes members, influencers, and chapters. This data was pulled from Twitter using Kearney (2019), and the dataset includes over 11,000 posts.

From the tweets that discuss COVID-19, CTEC observed a strong undercurrent of conspiracism and cynicism toward shelter-in-place and quarantine policies. As we have observed in previous intel briefs, anti-Bill Gates narratives are widespread, and the Proud Boys' penchant for violent rhetoric results in particularly aggressive posts targeting him.

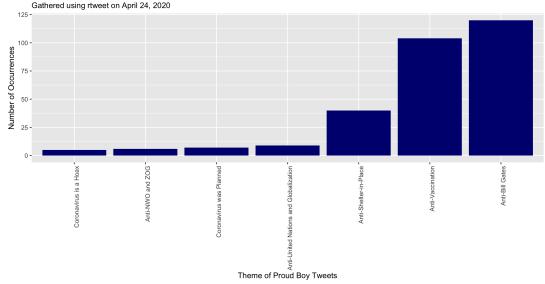
These narratives are shared in varying forms by most of the accounts in our list, and many have garnered significant engagement. As shown below, these accounts have retweeted fabrications and fear-mongering about Bill Gates and the World Health Organization, most of which specifically aim to increase paranoia and doubt about the safety of vaccines.

text	screen_name
Bill Gates is now funding the NYU study on the "efficacy" of Hydroxycloroquine at the same time he launches his vaccine. Just another coincidence, right?	BryceGeorge18
Want to be super clear— I am not against vaccinations. I am against human guinea pigs of African tribal children for vaccinations, which means I am necessarily against @BillGates and I am thoroughly celebrating the defunding of @WHO.	trailoffears20
BILL GATES VACCINE? Is this real I WONT TAKE IT I will shoot fried chicken grease up my arm before I take a Bill Gates Vaccine Am I alone? Will you take it? NO or YES https://t.co/V1XdDaf7Br	calgary_pb
Lockheed Martin CEO to step down soon Bill Gates stepped down from Microsoft and Berkshire Hathaway Disney CEO has stepped down Boeing CEO stepped down Wells Fargo CEO stepped down And countless more in 2020 alone. What is going on????	TenebrisSanctus
Just a reminder: Gates is NOT a doctor Gates is NOT an epidemiologist Gates was NOT elected Gates is NOT even a lifetime bureaucrats owhy is he the authority? It's HIS #Plandemic DARPA funded his #NewsGuard & Damp; #ElectionGuard know your master https://t.co/7WbMAmvlnW	JusticeMulisha
Granny talking now! Just don't bow your knee to force vaccines @realDonaldTrump we don't want any part of that nor Bill Gates https://t.co/gFaAFiuDPW	BryceGeorge18
That's a big NO!!! Do You Trust This Man? Bill Gates Says Chemtrails Are Good For Us - CD Media https://t.co/anTqiC9vQ9	titansofliberty
Let me be clear Government: Fuck your closures Fuck your inflated predictions Fuck your inflated mortality rate Fuck your refusal to use Hydroxycloroquine Fuck Fauci Fuck Bill Gates Fuck Gates' vaccine profits Fuck your stealing our rights Fuck your destroying our economy	titansofliberty
RETWEET! Bill Gates says mass public gatherings will not come back "at all" until every human being in the world is vaccinated!!! https://t.co/hDNDImH6yJ	JusticeMulisha
1. Create Computer Virus. 2. Create Antivirus Program. 3. Harvest Revenue. 4. Repeat With Humans. William Henry Gates III https://t.co/CqQqHFhVx7	reallouiehuey

The accounts have also taken to spreading other such conspiracy theories and disinformation popular on the American Far Right. There are several examples of using terms like "plandemic" to refer to the theory that the coronavirus was orchestrated; some Proud Boys also blame the supposed New World Order ("NWO") for the pandemic. In this analysis, CTEC compiles all Tweets that discuss one of a handful of coronavirus-related themes that have been linked to disinformation efforts and violence:

- Claims that the coronavirus is a hoax
- Claims that the coronavirus was planned (using the term "Plandemic")
- Blaming the NWO or the Zionist Occupied Government ("ZOG") for the pandemic
- Attacking Bill Gates as the mastermind behind a plot to weaponize coronavirus
- Anti-vaccination
- Anti-United Nations and globalization





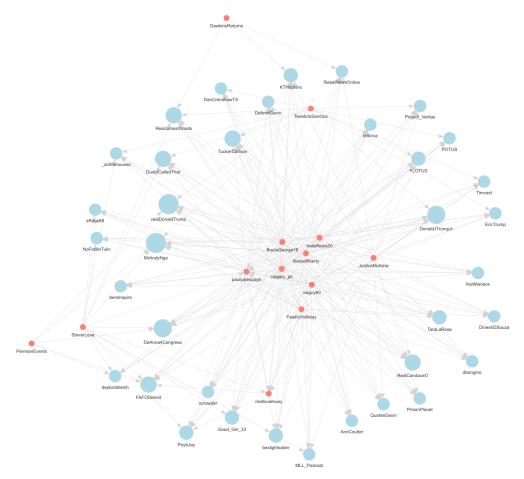
We find a strong presence of Bill Gates-related conspiracy theories among these accounts, which is not surprising given the popularity of these narratives among American right-wing communities in recent weeks. As CTEC has described in previous reports, other communities like the Oath Keepers and QAnon adherents have similarly been targeting Bill Gates. In the recent past, this rhetoric among the broader Far Right has escalated, resulting in actions such as the publication of passwords and email addresses from the WHO, National Institute of Health, and Gates Foundation on extremist social channels (Mekhennet and Timberg 2020).

In addition to their amplification of conspiracy theories, the Proud Boys have drawn considerable interest and concern specifically because of their tendency to promote violence. This has often come in the form of normalizing the idea of political violence, and even civil war, against liberals and leftists. For example, the Proud Boys have been at the forefront of the "boogaloo" meme, which involves far-right extremists using the term "boogaloo" as a masked reference to a new American civil war (Miller 2020, and Lytvynenko (2019)).

According to CTEC's investigations into the Proud Boys' Twitter activity, they have used coronavirus policies as excuses to further agitate for civil unrest and violence. Many of the accounts CTEC investigated used shelter-in-place as a wedge issue to incite anger and resentment toward governing parties and politicians. A search for "Boogaloo" or "Civil War" from their tweets reveal many examples of this trend.

That's EXACTLY how you get a #Boogaloo! https://t.co/Hyr8GHPXpE	FawKcHolliday
#Boogaloo2020 https://t.co/tUgyB1YQUq	FawKcHolliday
#Boogaloo2020 https://t.co/iY7vPhi0nS	vwguy60
@Julio_Rosas11 @ezralevant Phase 4: wonder what started the Boogaloo.	calgary_pb
@JackPosobiec It's an anti black anti democrat organization. A civil war would have started long ago without it.	PermianEvents
@realDonaldTrump A civil war fixed that problem last time. Just sayin.	PermianEvents
@TravisAllen02 @omgitsjcg I'm fine with y'all taking all that down. Its your history not mine. Geograpy doesn't determine what kind of person I am. Ideology does. Y'all tear all that shit down. We're going to need those spaces for the new civil war monuments anyway.	PermianEvents
These are more than just rallies. They're the first battles of a civil war. Follow me. I'll show you what's happening. https://t.co/NwecuAwgma	PermianEvents
@Cernovich 1776 is alive and well and waiting for the roll out to come in the shithole cities. The evidence is in the boarding of windows etcThey know it's coming, we know it's coming. Remember the Bible says we will endure a year of The Mark#Boogaloo2020 https://t.co/MjLG6lyEWN	trailoffears20
Me n sizzlechest @theBradChadford get serious for once 🕹 😂 🤝 #boogaloo #coronavirus #AOC #DemoCrips https://t.co/0JECLPFdEK	trailoffears20
You can not come to an accurate/absolute conclusion without considering ALL of the variables. #BoogalooSupreme2020	trailoffears20

A look at the Proud Boys' closest community on Twitter reveals an ecosytem of conspiracism, coronavirus trutherism, and far-right agitators. In the diagram below, CTEC visualizes the network of accounts that these 14 Proud Boys follow, which reveals the greater social media neighborhood that they inhabit. In addition to main-stream right-wing celebrities, like Donald Trump and Candace Owens, most of the Proud Boys also follow number of influential social media actors. These include Deanna4Congress, who CTEC investigated as a key figure in the spread of a coronavirus disinformation narrative, as well as Rebel News, a Canadian far-right publication akin to Breitbart.



In the context of coronavirus disinformation and the spread of harmful conspiracy theories, networks like this help generate, evolve, and amplify certain messages. That many of the Proud Boys follow DeAnna Lorraine, Candace Owens, and Dan Bongino, who all have downplayed the severity of the pandemic and spread false narratives about its origins, has likely contributed to their own embrace of coronavirus trutherism. In addition, as they engage with the more influential accounts, the Proud Boys themselves become vectors of message transmission and amplification.

In spite of their attempts to garner positive press through high-profile rejection of racism and white supremacy, the Proud Boys remain a dangerous far-right organizations due to their embrace and promotion of political violence. Their use of the pandemic to accelerate calls for a new civil war with liberals indicates a significant and notable escalation of their ideology.

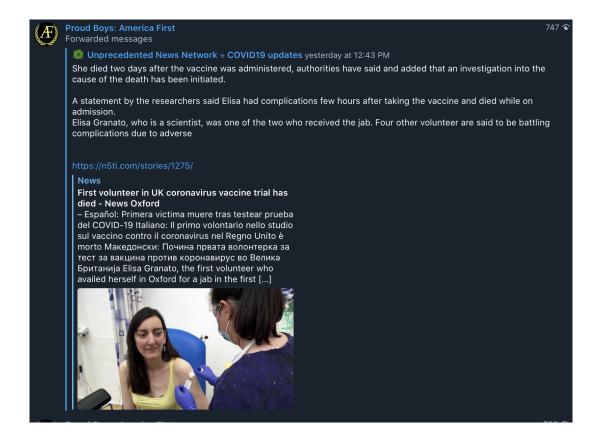
4. Few Proud Boys Remain on Facebook, While Telegram Has Become a Haven

In 2018, Facebook took widespread enforcement action against pages and profiles affiliated with the Proud Boys, stating that the group was engaging in spreading hate and violence on the platform (Statt 2018). As such, the Proud Boys' Facebook presence—to the extent that there still is one—is fairly difficult to track. However, CTEC uncovered and investigated two major profiles that are owned by presumed members of

the group, including one with over 1000 likes. This account has recently attempted to remove any evidence of Proud Boy affiliation, but CTEC observed past use of #poyb, a rallying call for Proud Boys nationwide.

In addition to calling for the reopening of America, Proud Boys have also spread conspiracy theories about the reasons for shelter-in-place orders, potential cures for COVID-19, and the nature of the disease. For example, these pages have been promoting hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for the virus, in spite of recent evidence suggesting it is not effective and may actually be harmful (Dunn 2020). The reason for New York City's lockdown is also subject to conspiracy theories and speculation.

On Telegram, where many Proud Boys have moved following moderation action by Facebook and Twitter, public channels affiliated with the group have garnered thousands of followers. For the past few weeks, these accounts have been amplifying the dominant far-right messages about the pandemic, including the anti-Gates conspiracy theories. The largest account, ProudBoysOfficial, has also spread a falsified news story alleging that the first volunteer for a work-in-progress coronavirus vaccine died (Media 2020). In addition, Gavin McInnes has been active in posting racist allegations, such as blaming Black communities for not social distancing and insinuating that they are inferior. These trends are shown in the screenshots below.





5. Why does this matter?

Access to widely used, globalized social networking sites like Facebook allow the Proud Boys to spread their ideology, thus contributing toward recruitment of members into the organization. Additionally, the Proud Boys have been able to garner some support from conservative politicians, such as Mike Detmer, a Michigan GOP candidate, who recently posted a selfie with members of the group (Burke 2020).

Due to their facade of anti-racism, Proud Boys have an advantage over more fringe white supremacist organizations. Their intentionally elevated rhetoric and aesthetics let them pose as a refined, anti-government militia, more than a neo-fascist fight club. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this means that they are able to take a more visible role in the Reopen protests alongside other militias like the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters.

However, the Proud Boys are not just a gun-rights advocacy group or a libertarian movement. As shown in this report, they have been engaging in dangerous rhetoric far beyond mainstream conservativism. They have been at the forefront of pro-civil war advocacy, and their past shows that they have been particularly willing to turn to violent action. Further, Proud Boys have been able to evade enforcement action from Facebook and Twitter, even while their highest-profile leaders have found a haven on Telegram.

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