

THE DARK POWER OF DISINFORMATION: WHEN THE NOISE DIES DOWN



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Cyber & Digital

WHEN THE NOISE DIES DOWN

■ EVENTS OF 6 JANUARY 2021

Fallout from the disturbing events of 6th January in the US continues to settle this week, as FBI Director Christopher Wray testifies before the senate judiciary committee on Tuesday. His testimony includes the bleak warning that the threat from highly motivated Domestic Violent Extremists (DVE) is on a par with the threat from ISIS.

Quite an admission from one of the US top law enforcement professionals, the scale of the threat brought home by the revelation that the FBI is currently investigating approximately 2000 domestic terrorism cases. This figure represents a significant uptick since the level was given at about 850 in the congressional hearings of March 2019.

The FBI has been relentless in pursuit of the 6th January Insurrectionists and as a result of subsequent investigations, searches of suspects homes and their somewhat ill-judged 'bragging on social media', many are looking at serious criminal charges.

Amongst those charged there are (until recently) law enforcement employees such as Virginia cops, Jacob Fracker and Thomas Robertson who were photographed during the riot in front of statues within the Capitol Building.

In an even more extreme example of the warped views and actions carried out by the mob is the release of details in respect of charges brought against retired US Air Force Lt Col Larry Brock who was photographed on the Senate Floor wearing a helmet and carrying zip-tie handcuffs.

US Prosecutors revealed this week that Brock's stated intentions were to "take hostages" and more chillingly, "execute members of the U.S. government".

WE NEED TO TREAT DISINFORMATION AS A 'SECOND PANDEMIC'

■ THE DISINFORMATION SPREAD

In the UK, we follow these unfolding events in disbelief.

Noting that there are important questions we need to ask regarding the motivation driving this behaviour? How do we begin to counter the narrative that would twist someone's view of their government in this way?

Even more concerning that this perverse narrative is taking root and radicalising members of the public including the law enforcement and military community that are at the end of the day, there to protect the public and serve to defend our liberal values and freedoms.

Whilst the apparent role of former President Trump in inciting the mob on the day is somewhat beyond question, there was an undeniable element of QANON involvement, paraphernalia clearly sported by prominent members of the mob.

US Court documents reveal that loyalty to the QANON conspiracy theory is a common thread amongst many who have been charged and that several of those who were armed participants in the riots were known to the FBI as supporters of the movement.

The disinformation spread by the QANON belief system is as remarkable as its rise from an apparently harmless fringe internet forum for people wishing to spread conspiracy theories to become a rallying cry for individuals committed to carrying out acts of domestic terrorism.

Such is the dark power of disinformation, driven by the viral engine of social media and given tacit support amongst elected officials who repeatedly refuse to condemn it, including former President Trump.

Those of us in the UK who monitor the spread of disinformation and associated extremist behaviour very often turn to the US for the clearest examples of its malevolent consequences.

All too often highly toxic views are expressed under the protection of the US constitution by individuals that fervently believe what they are saying and constantly repeat it to a ready army of heavily armed 'fellow travellers'. ...A heady mix indeed.

■ CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES

The UK has not yet seen the widespread uptake of the QANON belief system but there are worrying signs. Throughout 2020, commentators were noting that the ‘narratives’ that sit behind QANON had been instrumental in a number of demonstrations occurring across the country and that several UK based ‘influential voices’ in the movement were gaining prominence, internationally.

This disinformation was being repackaged by QANON advocates to incorporate several longstanding UK conspiracy theories with anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination (Anti-Vax) narratives combined. This follows a US trend to incorporate Anti-Vax narratives within their core message, QANON is nothing if not a ‘broad church’.

Well known British conspiracy theorists laid the ground work for these campaigns going back many years. At a demonstration in Trafalgar Square last September, QANON related slogans and paraphernalia were displayed prominently amidst the crowd.

THERE ARE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ASK REGARDING THE MOTIVATION DRIVING THIS BEHAVIOUR?

■ A SECOND PANDEMIC?

Highly respected groups such as the BMA are sounding the alarm and are so concerned about disinformation being spread online by Anti-Vaxxers and the potential to impact C19 vaccine uptake rates, particularly amongst the young, that it has stated publicly and repeatedly the need to treat disinformation as a ‘second pandemic’.

As if to echo the joint statement of the UN and WHO that “Misinformation costs lives” the BMA has publicly called for speedy, firm action to address these narratives and “to tell people the truth: that immunisation is good for you”.

The UK Government is known to be so concerned about the impact disinformation campaigns may have to increase vaccine hesitancy that in November last year, the UK Government (including Health Secretary Matt Hancock) met with senior representatives of Facebook, Twitter and Google to agree an approach to tackling the spread of disinformation on social media.

This included agreement in principle that no company should profit from the spreading of C19 Anti-Vax disinformation, a clear swipe at the way the viral engine of social media, algorithms, drive content delivery between like-minded users (i.e. if you like A then you must like B).

■ WHERE TO NOW?

It has been reported that several key initiatives have been agreed to begin to tackle the issue and throughout the pandemic the UK Government’s, Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) has been working with online platforms to ensure action is targeted where it is most needed and most effective.

As we head into the spring eagerly anticipating the easing of lockdown only time will tell whether enough is being done and at sufficient pace to tip the balance in the all too important battle for public confidence.

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BD@GEMSERV.COM



+44 (0)20 7090 1022