

INFODEMIC COVID-19 IN EUROPE: A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF DISINFORMATION

A fact-checking report by **AFP**,
CORRECTIV, **Pagella Politica**/
Facta, **Full Fact** and **Maldita.es**



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INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a collaboration between independent fact checking organisations across five European countries: Pagella Politica and Facta in Italy, Maldita.es in Spain, Full Fact in the UK, Correctiv in Germany and Agence France-Presse in France.

It looks at articles published by those five fact checkers over the months of March and April 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread across Europe and large-scale public health measures were imposed. In total 645 articles relating to Covid-19 (and the social and political issues around the outbreak) were published by the five organisations.

This total also includes more general articles that do not have a specific fact check or debunking element (for example, explanatory articles about the science behind the virus, or about the various rules of lockdown in each country).

This report will examine common themes in Covid-19 misinformation (as well as claims that are currently unevidenced, rather than outright false) that have emerged across most or all of the five countries. It will also highlight some areas where the topics of misinformation diverge, with a theme that has prominence in one or two countries not being reflected in the others.

This is not to suggest that every inaccurate, unevidenced or misleading claim about Covid-19 and the pandemic has been fact checked, or that every theme is included in this report. The landscape of evidence has changed rapidly over the last few months. Fact checkers also work on limited resources and do not have the capacity to check everything that we see. Rather this report and the fact checks it analyses are an attempt to capture the most viral and potentially harmful claims fact checkers came across in the early months of 2020.

COMMON THEMES

The following are major themes of misinformation that emerged across all or most of the five countries. Some of these themes have a degree of overlap between them, but generally we considered them distinct enough to highlight:



Cures and remedies

Perhaps the most consistent topic of misinformation was misleading medical advice around supposed cures or remedies for Covid-19. We will examine some of the common themes in this category at greater length later.



5G misinformation

The belief that Covid-19 is caused (or made worse, or helped to spread) by 5G cellphone technology was common across all five countries, although it was especially common in Italy and the UK. The claims varied quite a lot, both between countries and within them, from general claims that 5G was behind the disease (examples can be seen in [Spain](#), [France](#), [Italy](#), [Germany](#) and the [UK](#)) to specific claims around a video of a phone mast being destroyed (which was seen in [Italy](#) and [Germany](#)) and broader claims that fold 5G in with other conspiracy theories (as seen in [France](#), [Spain](#), and [Italy](#)).



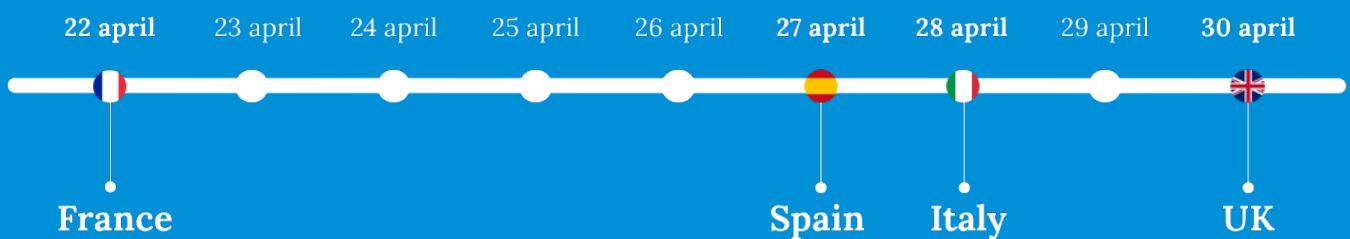
Avoiding or preventing infection

Related to, but distinct from, medical advice around cures and remedies for people who may have been infected, is medical advice on how to avoid infection in the first place. These often took the form of lengthy lists of advice that blended accurate or partially accurate information with unsound medical advice - very similar lists were seen in [Spain](#) and [France](#), while another different list appeared in [the UK](#). One common theme among many of these was that warm temperatures would kill the virus, as also seen in [Germany](#) and [Italy](#). This advice was often falsely attributed to some authority, for example [Johns Hopkins University](#), [Unicef](#), or simply [medical professionals](#).



The claim that the virus was man-made

We've seen a broad category of claims around the notion that the virus was not naturally occurring, but created deliberately. This has included false claims that a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Professor Tasuku Honjo, has said that the virus was not natural (seen in France, Spain, Italy and the UK); claims that it originated from the USA, possibly as a bio-weapon (variants of which emerged in Germany, Spain and France); that it originated in Chinese laboratories (examples include claims from Spain, Italy and the UK), or that it originated locally in that particular country (for example, this French claim that it came from the Pasteur Institute.)



*Timeline with the misinformation related to the Nobel Prize Tasuku Honjo



Vaccine misinformation

False rumours and conspiracy theories around the issue of vaccines have been another major topic seen in all five countries. This has included false claims that early vaccine trial volunteers have died (claims about the same woman were seen in [the UK](#), [Spain](#), and [Italy](#)), untrue claims of vaccines being ready or imminent (as seen in [France](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [the UK](#)), and existing vaccines for animal coronaviruses being wrongly identified as

vaccines for SARS-CoV-2 (examples can be found in [Italy](#), [the UK](#) and [Spain](#)). False claims about mandatory or enforced vaccination were seen in [Germany](#) (these claims about 'new' German laws also appeared in [the UK](#) outside the time of this report) and in [Spain](#), and misattributed claims of civil unrest in South Africa around vaccines were seen in [France](#).



Masks and PPE

Issues around the use of face masks and more broadly around the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) were the major connecting theme across all countries. This included general questions about the effectiveness of face masks (as seen in [Germany](#), [Spain](#), [Italy](#) and [the UK](#)), questions around how and when official advice was changed (as seen in [Spain](#)), how best to use face masks (seen in [France](#), [Italy](#) and [Spain](#)), and specific claims that masks may be ineffective or even harmful (for example, from [Germany](#) and [Spain](#)). There is also a common theme of inaccurate rumours about PPE and supply chains, with locally-specific examples being seen in [France](#), [Germany](#) and [Spain](#).



Bill Gates

Bill Gates, the Microsoft founder and philanthropist, has been a focal point for many conspiracy theories, including ones already discussed around the virus being man-made, vaccinations, and 5G. In particular we've seen many related claims across countries that he already owns a patent on the virus or a vaccine for it (for example, these from [Spain](#) and [the UK](#)) or that "Event 201", a preparedness exercise he was involved in, shows he knew about the pandemic in advance (as seen in [the UK](#) and [Italy](#)).



Comparisons between coronavirus and seasonal flu

Misleading comparisons between the coronavirus outbreak and seasonal influenza were seen in many countries - for example, in [France](#), [Italy](#), [the UK](#) and [Spain](#). This was sometimes promoted by particular individuals in the service of broader points about the nature of the public health response, as seen in [Germany](#) and [Italy](#).

CURES AND REMEDIES

While there was a wide range of misinformation around cures, remedies, diagnoses and other ways to combat Covid-19, some common repeated false information did emerge across all or most of the five countries.

Hydroxychloroquine and Chlorine Dioxide

Promoted as a potential cure by some doctors and several public figures, including President Donald Trump and billionaire Elon Musk, the drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine were a topic of interest, with articles from [the UK](#), and [several](#) from [France](#) ([one of the key doctors](#) promoting the use of the drugs is French) and [Spain](#). Meanwhile claims about chlorine dioxide, a disinfectant, were seen in [Germany](#) and [repeatedly](#) in [Spain](#).

Nicotine

The unproven idea that smoking, or specifically nicotine, can protect against coronavirus was covered in [Germany](#), [Italy](#) and [Spain](#).

A breathing test to tell you if you've caught coronavirus

Often appearing alongside the water-drinking advice as part of similar lists, was the idea that holding your breath could either help you diagnose whether you have Covid-19, or help prevent it. This was seen in [France](#), [Germany](#), [Spain](#) and [the UK](#).






Gargling salt water, vinegar and drinking water

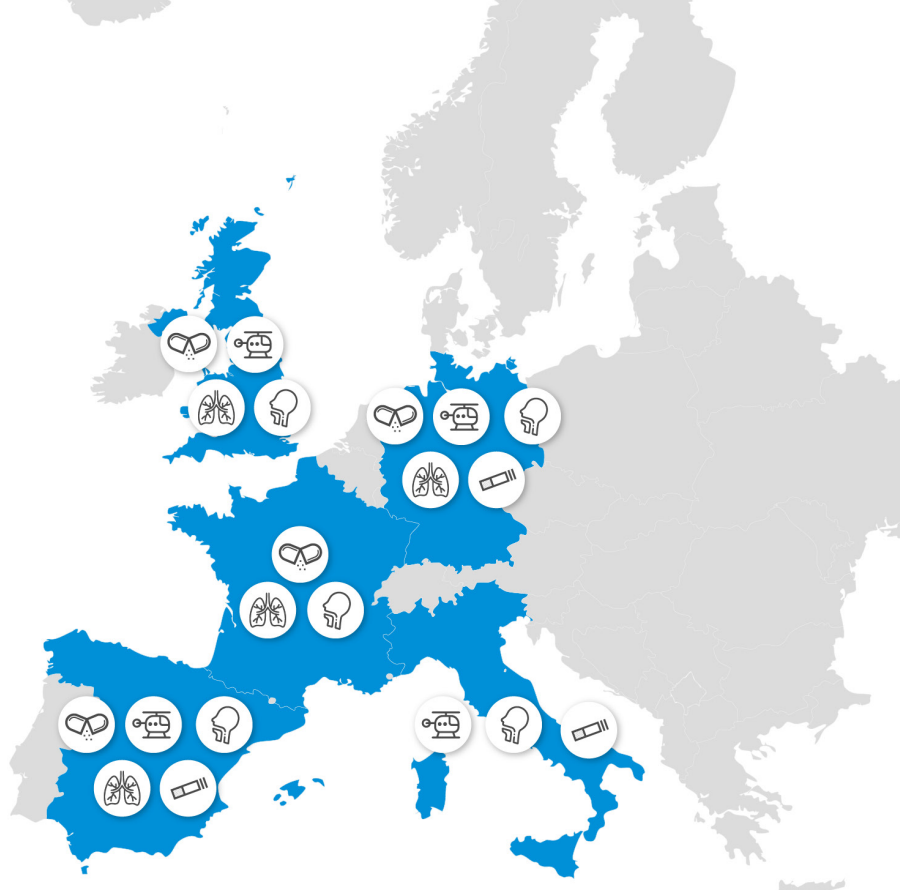
A common theme across much unevidenced medical advice we've seen - one that appears across all five countries - is advice relating to drinking water, or gargling either salt water or vinegar in order to combat the virus if you've been infected. Examples can be seen in [Germany](#), [the UK](#), [France](#), [Italy](#) and [Spain](#). Many of these came from similar variants on a list of advice that circulated in text form across many countries.



*Timeline dates refer to the date the misinformation was received, which may not coincide with the publication date.

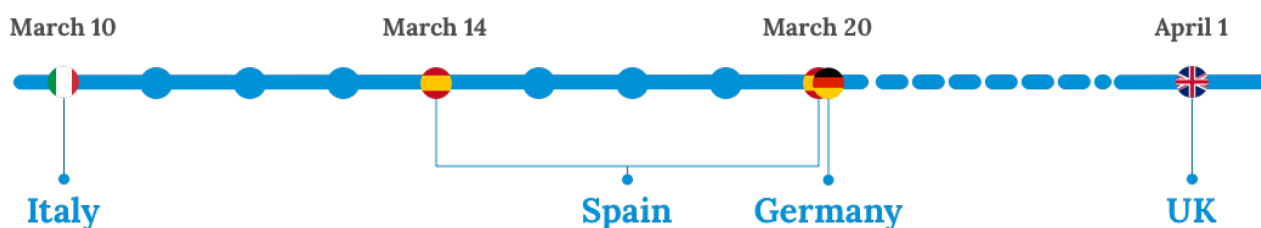
CURES AND REMEDIES DISINFORMATION MAP

-  Hydroxychloroquine/
chlorine dioxide
-  Spraying disinfectant
from planes
-  Gargling water and/or
other ingredients
-  A breathing test tells you
if you caught coronavirus
-  Nicotine



Helicopters spraying pesticide or disinfectant

One of the most widespread rumours was the notion that helicopters (usually described as military or police helicopters) were going to spray disinfectant or pesticide over an infected city. The rumours spread rapidly between countries, usually retaining common elements - there are five helicopters, and they will be spraying the disinfectant after 11pm. This may have started in [Italy](#), and was also seen in [Spain](#), [Germany](#) and [the UK](#). (Peter Burger of Dutch fact checking outlet Nieuwscheckers [has chronicled the rapid global spread of this particular rumour](#).)

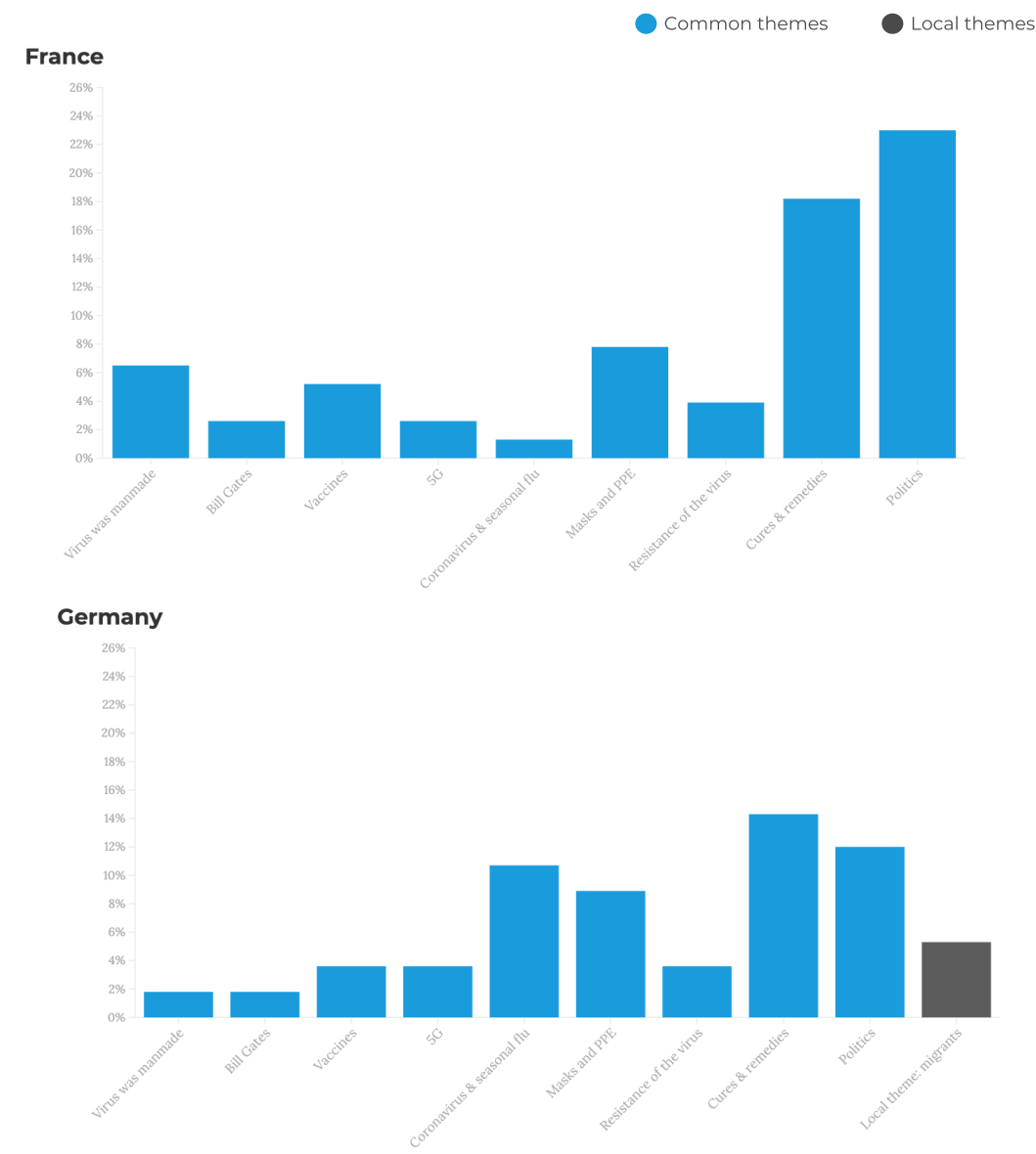


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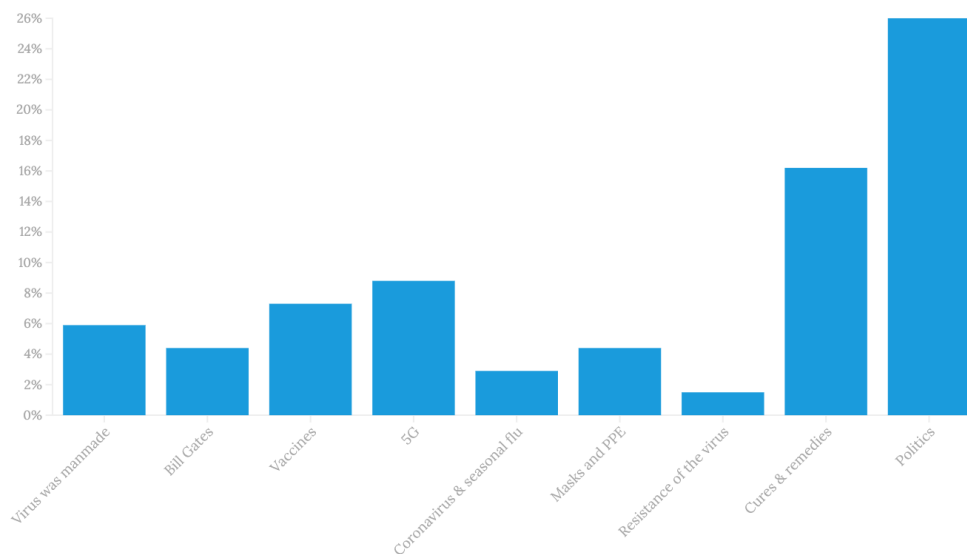
POLITICAL MISINFORMATION

A common topic across all countries, as the outbreak spread and large-scale public health interventions were imposed, was false information relating to specific national laws, or alleged actions or messages ascribed to politicians or authorities more generally. The details of these were usually specific to the individual countries, although we did see examples of rules from one country being misleadingly circulated in another country.

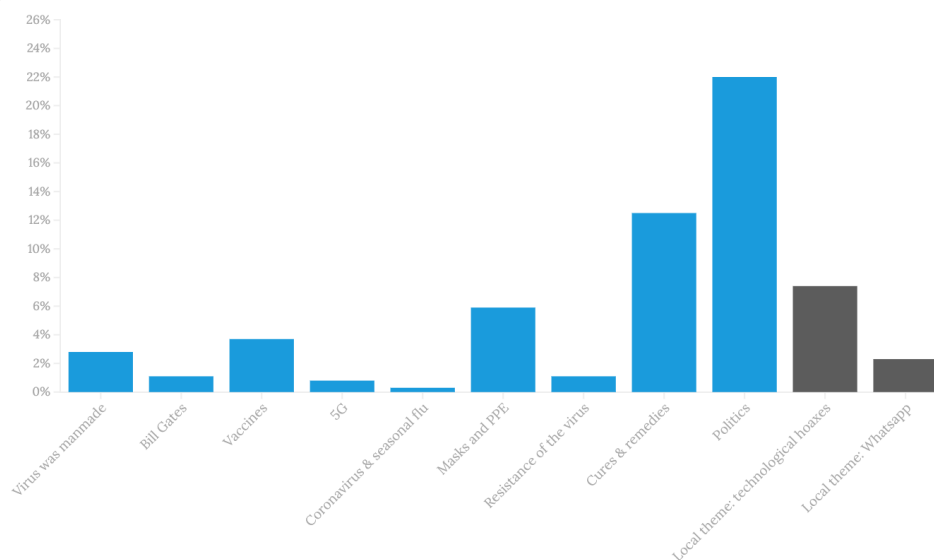
The percentage of fact checks in the sample that related to false information about the political and social response to the outbreak varied across countries - although whether that reflects a genuine variance in the amount of misinformation on these topics across the countries, or simply the editorial choices made by the different organisations cannot be said with any certainty.



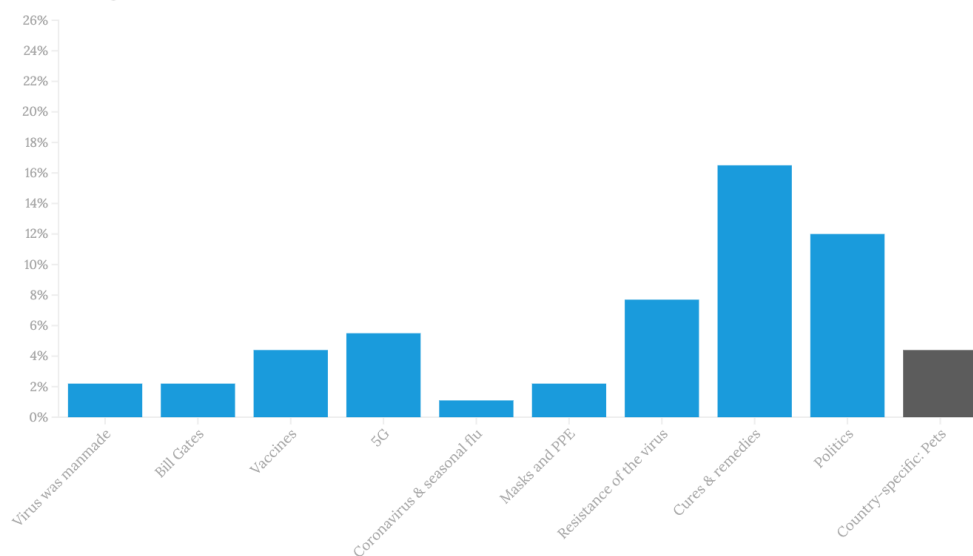
Italy



Spain



United Kingdom



The % of COVID-19 fact checks on different topics in each country. Misinformation related to political issues concentrate the largest number of articles in France, Italy and Spain. In Germany and the UK most misleading content refers to cures and remedies.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

As the five different countries experienced their outbreaks at roughly the same time, information in one country would often track what was happening in another. Particularly notable was that during the month of March, as Italy experienced the peak of its outbreak ahead of the other countries, false and unverified information about what was happening in Italy was common across [Germany](#), [the UK](#), [Spain](#) and [France](#).

And a final common issue across all five countries was the false belief that Muslim communities in each country were somehow receiving preferential treatment or were not being held to public health rules. Examples of this can be seen in [France](#), [the UK](#), [Germany](#), [Spain](#) and, outside the time of this report, in [Italy](#).

Some themes that were especially common in one country were notable by the fact that they were either entirely absent or far less common

in all other countries. The UK had a large amount of unverified claims about pets and [how the outbreak was affecting them](#). Germany saw several claims about migrants, including that they were [secretly being allowed into the country](#) under the [cover of lockdown](#). Claims of chemically-impregnated masks being used by robbers to incapacitate their victims were seen in [Spain](#) and [Germany](#), but not widely shared elsewhere. And [Spain](#) saw a large number of [scams](#) and hoaxes related to [technology](#).

It's interesting to note that in Spain false claims circulated linked with the fact that users' WhatsApp activity would somehow be [monitored or censored](#). The misinformationzz could have easily reached the other countries, since WhatsApp is commonly used there as well. However, this didn't happen, and the other countries didn't deal with this topic.



CONSPIRACY THEORIES AROUND BILL GATES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Like George Soros, Bill Gates is a longstanding and recurring target of many conspiracy theories. But with the Covid-19 pandemic and its flood of false information, the Microsoft co-founder entered another dimension, becoming the number one scapegoat, accused of creating, spreading or breeding the virus in order to “control the world” and/or “sell vaccines”.

The name of the billionaire and philanthropist appeared early on in the outbreak, at the end of January in [Germany](#), a few weeks before the pandemic hit Europe hard. An exercise to simulate what might happen if there was a severe pandemic, fueled the first accusations. The simulation, called "[Event 201](#)" ran in partnership with the Gates Foundation and was based on a coronavirus. It took place several weeks before the first known cases of Covid-19 were publicly identified by Chinese authorities in December 2019. Although coronaviruses are a broad category of viruses which includes the common cold or SARS, that exercise became the most widely used "evidence" against Gates, appearing in similar publications in [France](#), [Spain](#), [Italy](#) and [the UK](#). The general idea is to say that Gates created the virus or, at least, that he knew it existed before the pandemic. Another unsubstantiated rumour has also

been associated with this claim, alleging that [a patent for the new coronavirus was filed in 2015](#) by the UK-based Pirbright Institute which received, among others, some funding from the Gates Foundation. The patent does exist, but this claim was also based on the incorrect assumption that there is only one coronavirus. [Similar misinformation in the UK](#) claimed that both the virus and the vaccine were already patented, and that the vaccine was owned by the Gates Foundation. In [Germany](#), Gates' quotes have been truncated to make him appear to say that he's making a 2,000 percent profit from vaccines.

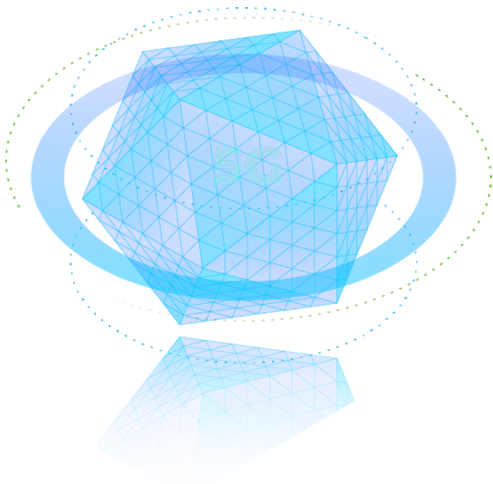
Like a super villain in a James Bond movie, the billionaire is portrayed as someone who wants to "control people", at any cost. In [France](#), many claim that Gates wants to take advantage of Covid-19 to implant "microchips" through vaccines in order to "label" and geolocate the population. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which [promised \\$250 million](#) to fight the pandemic, funds a wide range of research projects on public health and vaccines. But these kinds of posts mix up, falsely interpret or exaggerate various projects and statements, creating misleading stories.

Less harmful but just as false, the ex-Microsoft boss is also presented as a cynic who does not care about the dramatic consequences of the virus: in [Spain](#) some people attributed a letter to him in which he supposedly said that the coronavirus has a "spiritual purpose", that he is "the great corrector" and that he "is here to teach us some lessons that we seem to have forgotten". No one has ever seen the letter. Another common method of producing false

narratives online is with doctored pictures: in [France](#) and [Italy](#), people shared a photo of a real Foundation building with a doctored inscription reading "Center for Global Human Population Reduction".

Last but not least, Gates is accused of being indirectly responsible for hundreds of thousands of children being paralysed in India due to vaccine campaigns he sponsored, according to many posts which appeared in [France](#), [Italy](#), and [Germany](#). These claims are not only false but can also have serious consequences for public health. "These conspiracies are powerful enough to drive down institutional trust around health organisations, and as a result, possibly drive down vaccination rates, which is worrying," commented Rory Smith, research manager at [First Draft](#).

The false information targeting Bill Gates appeared as early as January and continued into May. So it seemed more logical to include them all in our case study rather than limiting ourselves to March and April.



HOW A 5G CONSPIRACY THEORY WENT VIRAL DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Are 5G networks dangerous to our health? This question was asked [months before](#) anyone knew the term Covid-19. But during the coronavirus crisis, the myth that 5G was somehow responsible for the pandemic became very popular. Google Trends shows a steep increase of worldwide search requests with the term “5G” at the end of March and beginning of April 2020, parallel to a bump in the popularity of searches for “5G dangerous” or “coronavirus 5G”.

The new technology was put into practice in 2019, when [the first countries established it](#). Before the pandemic, the concerns about 5G were something that popped up now and then on the internet. Similar criticism also exists for established technologies: for years, some [have claimed](#) that radiation from devices like cell phones, cordless phones, Wi-Fi or broadcast antennas might for example increase the risk for cancer. Safety restrictions concerning radiation limits apply for all of them, including 5G. Nevertheless 5G has excited people like no other mobile network.

Misleading reports about 5G often include pictures or videos of birds falling dead to the ground, allegedly because of the radiation. Fact-checkers from [Spain](#), [Italy](#) and [Germany](#)

have repeatedly debunked them. As the new coronavirus broke out in China, the theories around 5G were attached and adapted to the new threat. Claims blaming 5G for the deaths in Wuhan appeared in European countries as early as in January. They were debunked in [the UK](#) and [Germany](#), but the myth was here to stay. They appeared again in [Spain](#) and [Italy](#) in March and April. Nevertheless, [people started actually burning 5G towers](#) in the UK.

There is no evidence that 5G can harm people, damage their immune system or somehow make the impact of SARS-CoV-2 worse. Claims that 5G can destroy cells in the body and causes symptoms similar to a flu are also false, according to the [Federal Office for Radiation Protection](#) (BfS). It explained that electromagnetic fields can cause a marginal, unnoticeable warming of the body surface that doesn't reach the lung.

This is in line with statements from the [WHO](#): “Radiofrequency exposure levels from current technologies result in negligible temperature rise in the human body. (...) Provided that the overall exposure remains below international guidelines, no consequences for public health are anticipated.” 5G uses higher frequencies than the other technologies, but in fact, the higher the frequency of the electromagnetic field, the lesser the penetration of the radiation into the body tissue.

And it definitely has nothing to do with the coronavirus. In its [myth busters about Covid-19](#) the WHO emphasised: “5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19.” Other claims that 5G makes the hemoglobin in our blood “go

crazy” so it doesn't transport oxygen anymore, [circulated in Italy and were debunked](#). Further, as Alberto Nájera, professor of physics at the Spanish University of Castilla - La Mancha [said](#), it is impossible to have an interaction between electromagnetic radiation and the virus.

While Covid-19 is a global pandemic, 5G [does only exist in some places](#). One of them is Wuhan. But, as [the WHO](#) points out, people living in areas without this technology also get Covid-19 and may become severely ill or die. A map circulating in France and allegedly showing a correlation of the spread of Covid-19 and the roll-out of 5G [was fake](#); it was about the use of fiber optics in France in 2019. And case studies from Wuhan [showed](#) that people were infected who never visited the city, but rather came into contact with family or friends who lived there. This is because SARS-CoV-2 is a virus that is transmitted from human to human – and not by electromagnetic radiation.

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