Codebook

For the Research Project

Searching for Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories Across Two Search Engines, Six countries, Six languages, and Time

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# Part I. Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability Tests

# Units of data collection and coding

The **unit of data collection** is the unique query.

The **unit of automated coding** is the **unique query**. For each unique query, we collected its header, its abstract, as well as the full text of the webpage the result linked to (document). For variables coded at this level, see the query-related codes V1-V7.

The **first unit of manual coding** is the **unique top-level domain or, in the case of profiles on social networking sites (SNS), the unique SNS profile**. For variables coded at this level, see the unique-source-related codes V8-V10.

The **second unit of manual coding** is the **unique result page**. For variables coded at this level, see the unique-result-related codes V11-V19.

# Coding Procedure

All query-related codes were collected and filled in automatically by the Python script that automatically retrieved the data. The codes pertaining to unique top-level domains (V8-V10) and unique result page (V11-V19) were filled in in two separate manual coding efforts.

# 3. Intercoder reliability

In this project, we followed what Rössler (2013) has referred to a “project language proceeding” (p. 463), meaning that we did all the coder training and tests in the project language, i.e. in English. Subsequently, we considered coders as reliable if they succeeded in coding a random English language sample of units with satisfactory intercoder reliability.

We worked with three coders who were fluent in at least one local language (Russian, German, Ukrainian, Belarusian) and English. This initial version of the codebook was created by the authors of the study between April 2020 and September 2020. During this time period, the codebook was revised repeatedly, after numerous preliminary coding sessions, discussions in the research team and three intercoder reliability tests. As a result, satisfactory intercoder reliability between two coders (who were co-authors) was achieved. Before joining the coding effort, the remaining coder had to pass test rounds in which the coder was assigned 50 items.

# Part II. Variables and instructions for coders on how to code them

# UNIQUE-QUERY-RELATED CODES

This category of variables is used to locate the search results in space, time and different segments of the internet. These codes were coded automatedly.

## V1\_ID: Specific ID for the item (nominal)

Assigned automatically by the system.

## V2\_Country: Location of search (nominal)

The geographical location of the “user” in the country of the search (done without personalization and simulated through IP rotation). This variable signifies the location, stimulated in the course of data collection, not the physical location of the coder.

* + - 1 = USA
    - 2 = Russia
    - 3 = Estonia
    - 4 = Germany
    - 5 = Ukraine
    - 6 = Belarus

## V3\_Language: Language of the search term (nominal)

* + - 1 = English
    - 2 = Russian
    - 3 = Estonian
    - 4 = German
    - 5 = Ukrainian
    - 6 = Belarusian

## V4\_Platform: Name of the platform (nominal)

The web search engine platform, on which the search was conducted.

* + - 1 = Google
    - 2 = Yandex

## V5\_Date: Date of search (nominal)

The date on which the search was conducted using an **8-digit code (dd.mm.yyyy)**

## V6\_Specific\_Search\_Term: The used search term (nominal)

Specificity of the keywords, used for conducting the search. We use the most search terms related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the local languages.

* + - 1 = COVID-19
    - 2 = COVID-19 origin
    - 3 = COVID- 19 biological weapon
    - 4 = COVID-19 truth
    - 5 = COVID-19 conspiracy theories
    - 6 = COVID-19 conspiracy

## V7\_Ranking: Ranking of the search result (interval)

The place of the specific item in the ranking of the search results. A number between 1 and 20 (as we code the first 20 results per search query).

# UNIQUE-SOURCE-RELATED CODES

The items in this section were coded manually.

## V8\_Source\_type: Type of source (nominal)

In this variable we code the type of actor or organization, which we considered as responsible for the content.

**1 = Professional Academic publishers, Universities, Reputed Think Tanks**, including professionally organized reference bases, academic journals, released in cooperation with the established academic organisations, etc.

**Examples:** springer.com, tandfonline.com, mit.edu, medscape.com, theconversation.com, www.poynter.org, scientificamerican.com

**Further Instructions:**

Usually, a characteristic of the reputed academic institution is that people with recognized academic degrees work for it, as well as the texts and articles, published from the website, go through the process of tedious review, usually blind peer reviews.

In case you see an academic institution that might be considered as a government-affiliated organization, for example John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, check the About Us page, but generally code it as an Academic Institution.

Think tanks and analytical centers should also be coded as Academic Institutions only in case they are well-established, have an academic history and considered trustworthy in the academic environment, e.g. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism or Pew Research Center.

**2 = Wikipedia pages and academic sources with low repute** (including preprint archives, volunteer-based academic websites and non-profit academic websites)

**Examples:** researchgate.org, sciencedaily.com, jurist.org, wikipedia.com

**Further Instructions:**

In this variable, we code the websites that present themselves as possessing academic authority, however either the grounds for that are insufficient, and/or the material can be uploaded freely without the peer review or feedback and/or the information presents a commentary or an opinion piece.

Semi-professional and amateur websites that specialize in research news and in anything journalism-related are coded as 6.

**3 = Websites operated by government organizations**  
**Examples**: osha.gov, coronavirus.gov, arbeitsagentur.de, who.intl, un.org, RKI.de

**Further Instruction:** In this variable, we code the websites of both the intergovernmental organizations such as who.int; un.org; as well as the websites of national health authorities, that receive the funding from the government or several governments and/or has influence on the governmental policies. Items with a domain .gov should be coded as government organizations.

We do not code under this categories state-owned news websites, such as - [rg.ru](http://rg.ru), [tass.ru](http://tass.ru) and [belta.by](http://belta.by) - they should be coded as 5.

**4 = Non-governmental organizations or parties** (civil society organisations, NGOs, parties, churches, including local community charity pages, initiative pages, etc.)  
**Examples:** avma.org. lung.org, Freedom House; Amnesty International. wyandottedaily.com

**Further Instruction:** In this variable, we code the websites of the non-governmental organizations, that are not affiliated with any government explicitly, and that receive their funding independently from it.

**5 = Major (mass) news media outlets** **(including their profiles on social media)**

**Examples for Russia**: lenta.ru, kp.ru, aif.ru, ria.ru, rg.ru, tass.ru   
**Examples for Germany:** faz.net, sueddeutsche.de, Bild.de, Welt.de, Zeit.de, ARD, ZDF  
**Examples for the USA:** Foxnews.com, CNN.com, The Washington Post, Time.com; vox.com   
**Examples for Belarus:** TUT.by, belta.by  
  
**Examples for Ukraine:** www.pravda.com.ua

**6 = Niche and special interest media (far right wing, far left wing, local media, special interest media, minority media etc.)**

**Examples:** adweek.coma42.ru, hrodna.life, tsargrad.tv, modernghana.com, lugaland.com

**Further Instructions:** In contrast to the mainstream media, that covers a wide variety of topics and issues, we code the outlets as niche/minority mass media that are focused either on special area of interest (e.g. health news; marketing news; economic news), or present local news that focus primarily on the regional events and developments (for example, in case of Belarus portals as hrodna.life and in case of Russia - m24.ru), whose reach is not as wide as in the mainstream media.

**7 = Foreign communication media (affiliate with nation states) (including their SNS profiles)  
Examples:** BBC.com, RT.com, Sputnik.by, cgtn.com, aa.com.tr, www.aljazeera.com, , dw.com, belsat.eu

**Further Instruction:**The website shall be coded as a Foreign Communication media if the outlet is sponsored by the nation state and specifically targets audiences abroad instead of domestic audiences.

**8 = Individual accounts on social networking services (SNS)/online communities/video sharing platforms, social news aggregators, web content rating, and discussion websites with original user-generated content** (not creating content in affiliation with any type of organization)

**Examples:** personal accounts/posts on Reddit.com, Twitter.com, Pikabu.ru; Facebook.com; YouTube.com

**Further Instruction:** As for the geographical origin on the social networking site, we code the origin of the content creator, i.e. of the user who made the post.

In order to determine that, a coder should check the personal profile of the poster, and consider the last 5 posts. If the origin is still unidentifiable (not mentioned by the content creator explicitly or it is not easily understandable from the context) please code in V9 the option 99.

**9 = For-profit companies**

**Examples:** apple.com, amazon.de, tesla.com

**10 = Thematic or personal blogs by (teams) of journalists or influencers** (outside SNS)

**Examples:** varlamov.ru, nstarikov.ru, wodarg.com

**Further Instruction:** In this category, we only code website-blogs (for example, blogs by private persons, journalists, scientists)-. If it is a blog entry on the university website, or a blog entry on the who.it website, it could be coded in corresponding categories).

**11 = Search Engines**

**Examples:** yandex.ru, bing.com, mail.ru, duckduckgo.com, yahoo.de

**12 = Fact-Checking website**

**Examples:** snopes.com, fullfact.org

**13 = Other, please specify**

## V9\_Source\_Origin: Geographical Origin of Source

* + - 1 = Global/Transnational (including the EU)
    - 2 = USA
    - 3 = Russia
    - 4 = Estonia
    - 5 = Germany
    - 6 = Ukraine
    - 7 = Belarus
    - 8 = China
    - 9 = Great Britain (Ireland, Scotland and England)
    - 10 = Australia and New Zealand
    - 11 = Other (please specify)
    - 99 = unidentifiable

**Further instructions:**

In order to determine the Geographical Origin of the source of the item, please check the “About us” or “Our History” section of the website. Alternatively, if the geographical location of the source is not explicitly stated, you can use a search engine to find further information about the website. If the Geographical Origin of the source is not explicitly stated or impossible to determine (i.e. in case of user’s posts on Reddit or other social networking platforms), please code 99.

## V10\_Source\_Influence\_Russia: Connection of Source with Russia’s Ruling Elite

**0 = Not explicitly connected**

In this category, we code the websites that:

* + - Have no apparent connection to Russia
    - Were never under investigation or suspected to be connected with Russia’s ruling elites. A broad range of items can fall into this category, e.g. the mass media outlets outside Russia; academic websites, special interest websites, government websites, etc.
    - Opposition media in Russia that distances itself from the Russian ruling elites, be that media based in Russia (e.g. novayagazeta.ru) or the opposition media based outside Russia (e.g. meduza.io)
    - When the outlet is located in Russia (e.g. local newspaper), but it has a clear oppositional orientation and is known to be in opposition to the regime
  + When it is a website of a private company located inside Russia, but nothing is known about its connection to the Russian elites, and it does not seek to exercise influence and political influence in Russia. For example, these can be journals for the pharmacy industry (e.g. rosapteki.ru) or a medical company website, which works for profit (e.g.medsi.ru).

**1 = Connected to the Russian elites (Implicitly or Explicitly**)

In this category, we code the websites as connected to Russia’s ruling elites that are:

* Websites, that are operated by the Russian government and regional administration
* Major mass media sources, located inside Russia and known to be operated by the Russian government (e.g. 1tv.ru, tvzvezda.ru, ria.ru)
* Outlets, that are owned by Kremlin-friendly oligarchs, or people, who work in the Russian government or administration, or the wives of the oligarchs (e.g. lenta.ru)
* State-sponsored Russian outlets, which are aimed at the foreign audiences (e.g. rt.com, sputnik.com). In this category can also be added the so-called “submarine websites”, using the terminology of Watnabe (2018) i.e. foreign website source allegedly sponsored by Russia’s ruling elites (e.g. <https://russia-insider.com/en>)
* In case of Yandex.ru – when the content is posted on behalf of Yandex itself or its services, please code it as connected to the Russia’s ruling elites

**2 = Indeterminable**

In this category, we code the websites that:

* + - * Were suspected, investigated or publicly discussed as a potential Kremlin-supported website, but the allegations were never complete
      * If it is a major local Russian newspaper – even in case there is no explicit connection to the local/all-Russian administration, but it is the main newspaper of the region/city
      * All users on SNS that post content (e.g. any posts on reddit.com, videos on youtube.com; accounts on twitter.com). Also in case of Yandex.ru, when the content is posted on behalf of private persons/companies, who create content for Yandex services
      * Private Russian companies, that are not owned by the Russian elites directly, but express a clear political/societal stance and seek to exercise influence
      * When it is unclear who is the owner of the outlet and it is purposefully concealed/hidden.

# UNIQUE-RESULT-RELATED CODES

## V11\_Accessibility: Accessibility of the website (Nominal)

In this variable, please indicate whether you could still open the website and/or the item, whether it was removed or deleted

* + - 1 = Link is accessible
    - 0 =Link is not accessible

## V12\_Actual\_Language: Actual Language of the Item (Nominal)

* + - 1 = English
    - 2 = Russian
    - 3 = Estonian
    - 4 = German
    - 5 = Ukrainian
    - 6 = Belarusian

## V13\_Publication: Date of Publication (nominal)

The date on which the article/website was published using an **8-digit code (dd.mm.yyyy)**. If the article was updated over time, please code the date of the last update.

## V14\_Title: Title of the item (nominal)

Headline of the website/article (in original language)

## V15\_Paywall: Presence of a Pay Wall

Please indicate whether the further content is available behind a pay wall or is upon registration.

If the content is hidden behind a paywall or demands the user to register to continue, this is the last variable you need to code.

* + - 1 = Yes, content is hidden behind a paywall
    - 0 = No, content is not hidden behind a paywall

## V16\_Presence\_CT: Presence of Conspiracy Theories (nominal)

This code indicates whether a conspiracy theory is present in the analysed item.

* + - **0 = No conspiracies theories are mentioned** (when no words “conspiracy”, “conspiracy theory” or related terms such as 5G, Bill Gates, Biological Weapon; Vaccination, etc. are mentioned in the item)
    - **1 = One or several conspiracy theories are mentioned, but all conspiracy theories are exclusively and forcefully debunked** or when the “conspiracy”, “conspiracy theory” or related terms such as 5G, Bill Gates, Biological Weapon; Vaccination, etc. are mentioned in the item, but are not supported and are generally disproved
    - **2 = One or several conspiracy theories are mentioned, but at least one conspiracy theory is not forcefully debunked**

**Further Instructions:**

In order to determine whether a conspiracy theory is mentioned, we follow the logic of Uscinski & Parent (2014). Accordingly, narratives qualifying as conspiracy theories must include all four elements found in standard definitions of conspiracy theory: they must suspect "(1) a group (2) acting in secret (2) to alter institutions, usurp power, hide the truth, or gain utility (4) at the expense of the common good" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 58).

Concerning whether the conspiracy narrative is "forcefully debunked", coders should read/watch the entire item until the end, paying particular attention to the final paragraph and/or closing remarks, as in many cases they determine the position of the author regarding the conspiracy theory.

By forcefully debunking, we understand when the conspiracy theory is mentioned in the item, but only in the context to disprove it. An example of forceful debunking can be Andersen et al. (2020) which includes scientific data that debunks any speculations about COVID-19 as being man-made, and that among others, includes statements as *"It is improbable that SARS-CoV-2 emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus"* and *"However, since we observed all notable SARS-CoV-2 features, including the optimised RBD and polybasic cleavage site, in related coronaviruses in nature, we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible."*

By not forcefully debunked, we understand several categories of items. Some items that fall within it support conspiracy theories. Others mention conspiracy theories and bring no evidence to disprove them. Finally, we also include items in this category that might initially claim that they debunk conspiracy theories, but that, in fact, make little effort to disprove them and that instead push the audience towards further speculation in the direction of conspiracy theories. For the last category of items, looking at the "undertext" that the item promotes, the context referenced, and the item's whole tone under scrutiny is crucial. Thus, analysing the last paragraph/ the bottom line can be especially relevant for the correct interpretation of the whole item.

An example of the item that discusses a conspiracy theory and does not forcefully debunk it isYadav & Bajpaj (2020). This article has statements as *"Amidst this chaos, there has been misinformation and rumors have been* [*surfacing*](https://www.vox.com/2020/3/4/21156607/how-did-the-coronavirus-get-started-china-wuhan-lab) *on social media, the most prominent among them being conspiracy theories regarding the use of COVID-19 as a bioweapon by China"*. While the author labels these speculations as a conspiracy theory and from the first glance could be seen as moving in the direction of debunking, the content of the article is dedicated to the potential lawsuit that the US can form against China for spreading the COVID-19, which places the content of the article in the COVID-19 conspiracy domain. Finally, the last paragraph inserts that "*The only factor which remains in this puzzle is the proper evidence proving such a conspiracy exists. Once a proper investigation is initiated, things will become more clear. However, the behavior of the Chinese government is alarming and appears to be suspicious",* which seals the conclusion that the article is not aimed at forcefully debunking conspiracy theories. In contrast, it is rather aimed at furthering the reader's speculations about COVID-19 being a Chinese biological weapon. Another good example of the article that contains a non-debunked conspiracy theory is De Almeida (2020).

**Further instructions about coding SNS:**

When the website you code is the link to the Twitter page, please code only the first Tweet, when it forwards you to the Facebook personal page or public page - please, code the first post, if it forwards you to the YouTube play list - please, only code the content of the titles of the videos and if present - the Description of the video.

**If the conspiracy theories are not present in the text or are present in the text, but are forcefully debunked, this is the last variable you need to code**

**V16a\_Topic\_Related:** Relation of the website content to COVID-19/the pandemic

* **1** = Yes, website content is related to the topic of this study
* **0** = No, website content is unrelated

Example: Code 0 (content is unrelated) when the website is about the beer brand “Corona”, about the name “Corona”, about software called “Corona” or about the music band “Corona”.

**V17\_Specific plot of the top-5 conspiracies related to COVID-19**

In this section, we have listed 5 most frequently mentioned narratives of CTs plots, that have appeared in the course of COVID-19 pandemic.

* **V17a: COVID-19 is a biological weapon**1 = mentioned | 0 = not mentioned
* **V17b: COVID\_19 is distributed by 5G towers**1 = mentioned | 0 = not mentioned
* **V17c: COVID-19 is a plot for vaccinating and controlling the population**1 = mentioned | 0 = not mentioned
* **V17d: The origin and (initial) spread of COVID-19 is different from the one proclaimed (not related to the military purposes)**

1 = mentioned | 0 = not mentioned

**Examples:**

* + Laboratory worker carried the virus into the wet market (accidentally)
  + Virus was made in a laboratory (not as a weapon, but as a scientific discovery, coincidence, etc. - anything not military related)
  + Chinese people brought the virus into Europe
  + Virus escaped accidentally
* **V17e: The information about the treatment/mortality of COVID-19 is intentionally distorted by someone**

1 = mentioned | 0 = not mentioned

**Examples:**

* + Masks are not an efficient treatment of COVID-19 and they do not stop its spread
  + COVID-19 does not exist
  + The government hides the information/treatment efficient for COVID-19 , and natural medicine e.g. ginger and lemon or bleach/ hydroxychloroquine are efficient treatments of COVID-19
  + The numbers of infections/deaths are distorted (hyperbolized or intentionally presented as lower)
* **V17f: Other, please specify**

## V18\_Origin\_Plotter: Geographical origin of the responsible actor (nominal)

This variable indicates the geographical origin of the actor that is described as standing behind the COVID-19 secret plot. The plotter can be mentioned not explicitly as such, but for example, in the context of “who benefits from the events or situations”, who advances his or her position through the situation in the context of the plot, who is guilty, who isn’t truthful/telling the truth about the events, who is hiding the truth about something or who spreads the distorted information.**Please, code only the main plotter (one tip for determining the main plotter is to code the plotter mentioned repeatedly)**

* + - 1 = Global/Transnational (including the EU)  
      2 = USA
    - 3 = Russia
    - 4 = Estonia
    - 5 = Germany
    - 6 = Ukraine
    - 7 = Belarus
    - 8 = China
    - 9 = Great Britain (Ireland, Scotland and England)
    - 10 = Australia and New Zealand
    - 11 = Other country/region/entity (please specify)
    - 12 = No plotter is mentioned
    - 99 = unidentifiable

**V18a\_Other\_Origin\_Plotter:** Please, Specify

In case the country, from which the plotter originates, is not mentioned in the list of available plotters, please specify the country by writing it down manually.

**V18b\_Other\_Mentioned\_Plotters:** Please, Specify

We use this variable to write all the specific Plotters that are mentioned either in the capacity or as helping the main Plotter, supporting the main Plotter, etc. This can for example be 1) a specific religious group (Zionists, ISIS), 2) specific economic parties or sectors (Biontech; Pfizer), 3) specific persons (e.g. Bill Gates, Donald Trump, etc.), 4) specific media organisations (e.g. CNN, Fox News) are mentioned in the capacity of the Plotter, or 6) specific organisations (WHO, the Soros Foundation).

## V19\_Origin\_Victim: Geographical origin of the victim against whom COVID-19 is used (nominal)

We use this variable to indicate the actor against whom the secret plot of COVID-19 is. The victim should be mentioned explicitly to be coded, however in certain cases, such as for example with the phrasing as “many will suffer” please consider it coding as 1, or Ordinary people and Global as the Geographical origin, or indicating a specific national connection, if there is such. **Please, code only the main victim (one tip for determining the main victim is to code the victim that was mentioned repeatedly)**

* + - 1 = Global/Transnational (including the EU)
    - 2 = USA
    - 3 = Russia
    - 4 = Estonia
    - 5 = Germany
    - 6 = Ukraine
    - 7 = Belarus
    - 8 = China
    - 9 = Great Britain (Ireland, Scotland and England)
    - 10 = Australia and New Zealand
    - 11 = Other country (please specify)
    - 12 = No victim is mentioned
    - 99 = unidentifiable

## V19a\_Other\_Origin\_Victim: Please, Specify

In case the country, from which the victim originates, is not mentioned in the list of available victim, please, specify the country by writing it manually.

## V19b\_Other\_Mentioned\_Victim: Please, Specify

We use this variable to write all the specific Victims that are mentioned either in the capacity or as being the main Victim, being additional victim, etc. This can for example be 1) a specific religious/societal group (Muslims, Christians) , 2) specific economic parties or sectors, 3) specific persons 4) specific organisations, etc.

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