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## “We Are More Clever Than the Brainwashed Majority”: The Visualization of “Anti-Viral” Routes of the Covid Deniers Movement in Social And News Media

In this paper, the author analyzes the media representation of the a COVID deniers movement. The basis of the deniers’ ideology is their refusal of a lockdown imposed to the majority of the population. “Panic attacks” of collective lockdowns are considered by deniers as following a conspiracy logic (i.e. “the government tries to benefit from this situation”, “this is a false threat” etc.). Thus, they show their intention of not being infected by "collective instinct" nor by a "mass panic state".

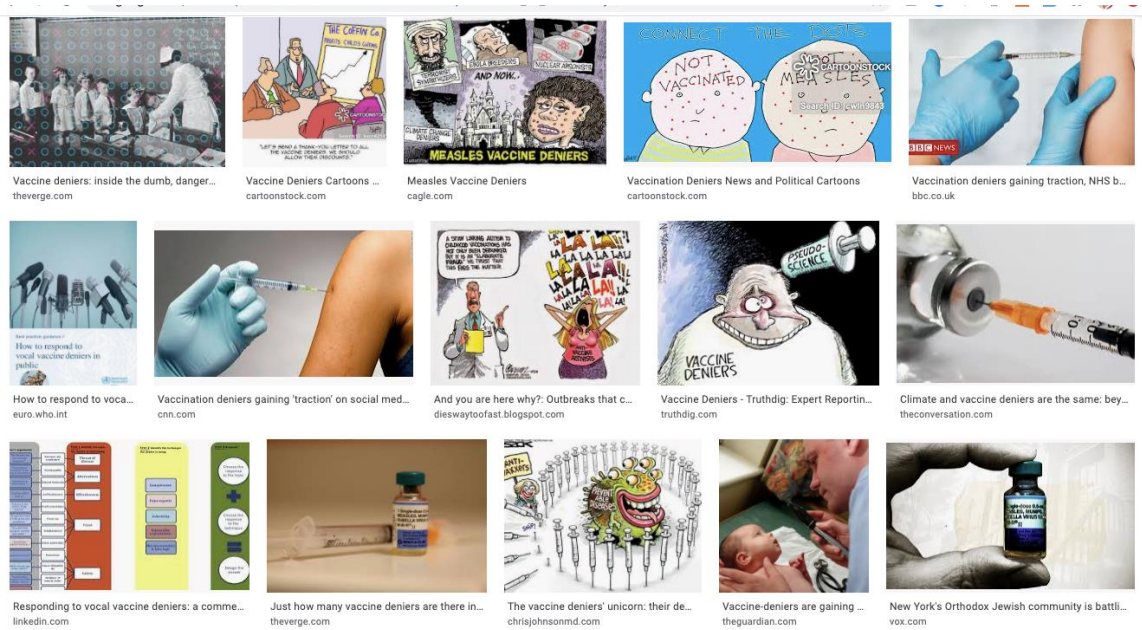
The author focuses on images of the deniers movement; their media-aesthetic (Manovich, 2001; Mitchell, 2013) is analyzed.

As T. Sampson and J. Parikka (2020) noted, “After the applauding of brave health workers and songs of the shutdown subside, painful social, economic and political struggles will inevitably follow the virus”. COVID-deniers movement is an important part of the current “universal virus” chronicle.

(1) “A collective portrait” of COVID-deniers in news media: fighting for their rights

Comparative search in “Google Images”:

Vaccine deniers



Climate change deniers:





Dominating attitude	Irony	Irony + Threatening	Neutral + Support
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This analysis helps us see the differences in the “collective portraits” of these three types of “deniers movements”. Even if in news articles we can observe a critical approach to description of the COVID-deniers movement, the images illustrating these articles describe the movement as a type of democratic struggle for human rights (or at least, we can see this trend).

This trend is supported by Wikipedia, where we can find, in the article “Protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests\\_over\\_responses\\_to\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_over_responses_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic)), a number of pictures of “anti-lockdown” meetings around the world.

Illustrations from the Wikipedia article:



About 800 protesters gathered outside the Minnesota Governor's Residence for the "Liberate Minnesota" rally on April 17.



Several hundred anti-lockdown protesters rallied at the Ohio Statehouse on April 20.

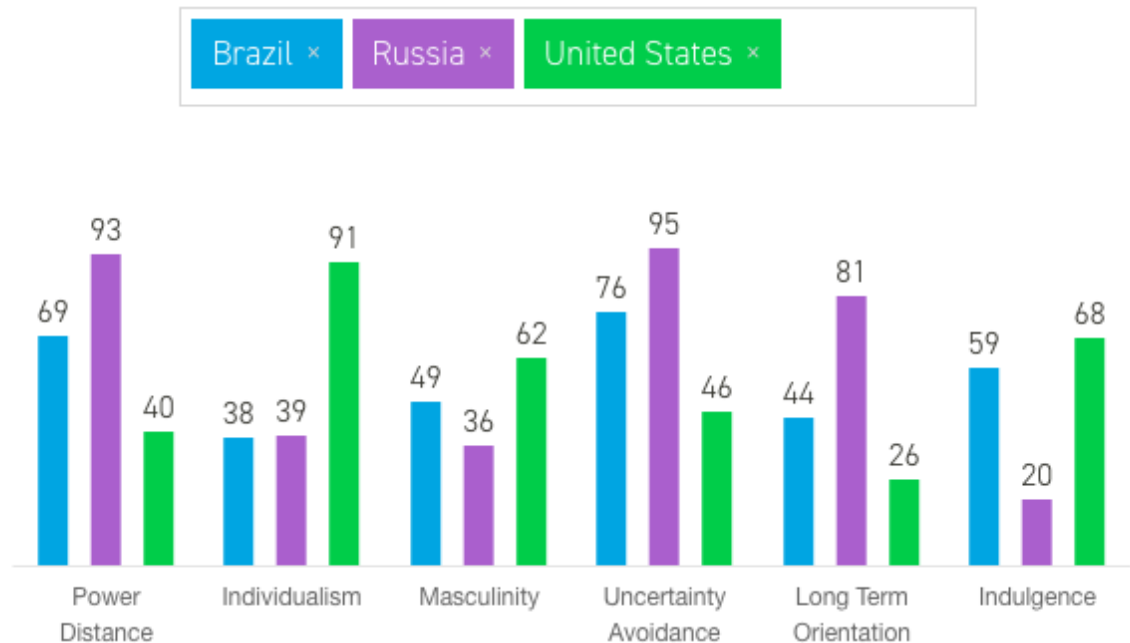
(2) What is “more viral” – “anti-lockdown” or “pro-lockdown” propaganda?

Two points are important: the position of the particular government toward COVID-19 and the type of democracy in this country.

	USA	Brazil	Russia
Position of the government	Partly pro-, partly anti- (due to Trump's inconsistency)	Anti-lockdown	Pro-lockdown

Type of democracy (a power distance index from Hofstede's model)	40 (non-acceptance of a hierarchical order, high value of individual freedom)	69 (acceptance of a hierarchical order)	93 (authoritarianism)
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Comparison of the 3 countries by the Hofstede's Model of Cultural Dimensions



The Power Distance Index has been chosen as an indicator of the “democracy type” in each country (This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people – see <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture>).

Thus, taking into account the situation in three countries, we get 3 variants of the expected visualization of COVID-deniers: (1) positive (labelled as “government right propaganda”, Brazil), (2) dissonant (labelled as “enemies of rationality”, or “clever minority fighting for their rights”, USA), (3) surprising (labelled as “odd behavior”, Russia).

Of course, in each country we find different attitudes toward COVID-lockdown but here we are discussing the “possibility of virality” of the expected dominant type of visualization of the deniers movement. The driver of this virality is the attention news media pay to the content circulating in social media dialogues.

### **Examples**

Brazil: 45 seconds popular video <https://twitter.com/i/status/1241878122095575041> by Olavo de Carvalho, 22.03.2020 (a philosopher, supporter of the Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro: “This pandemic simply doesn’t exist. We don’t have a single death that has been traced back to the coronavirus. And to confirm that relationship, we would need to examine each organ of those who have died recently.”). 6,7 K likes, 2,5 K reposts, 800 K views (in Portuguese). Visualization – “a speaking head”, a “professor-like” stereotyped image (an aged and wise-looking person, with glasses, speaking emotionally and confidently; background – shelves of books as a symbol of knowledge and science).

OLAVO E TODOS VINCULADOS AO SITE DEVEM SER PRESOS



Ovalo de Carvalho denies “the existence of coronavirus” and claims the present situation with COVID is a “manipulation”.

The link to this video is in the “pro-lockdown” article “[Factually: Coronavirus deniers spread a deadly message](#)” by Cristina Tardáguila and Susan Benkelman, March 26, 2020, AmericanPress.

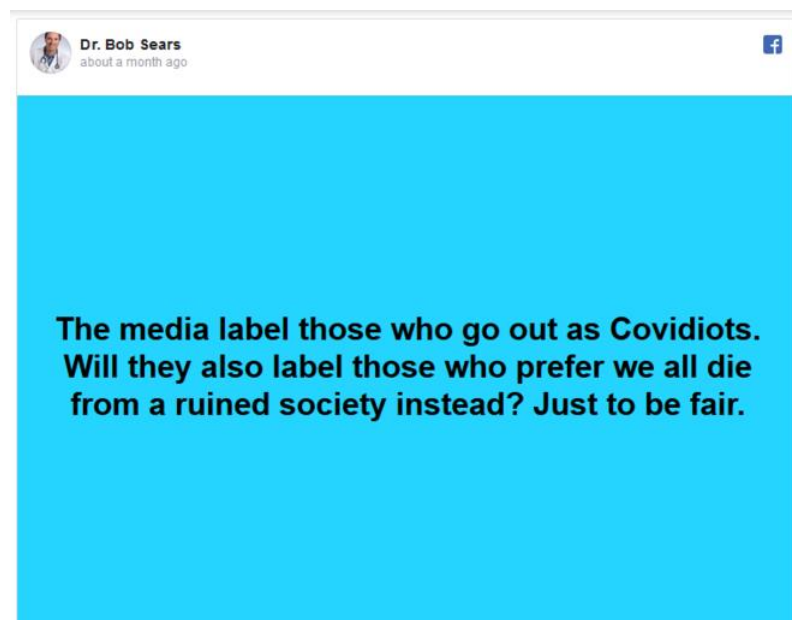
USA:

The pictures from “pro-lockdown” articles show protests as a “sign of freedom” (even if the discourse of the article does not support the protests).



Illustrations from the article by Camron Slessor, “Why do coronavirus sceptics and deniers continue to downplay the disease?”, posted 3 May 2020, ABC (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-03/coronavirus-sceptics-continue-to-downplay-covid19/12201344>).

Example of some viral tweets (with minimal visualization effects used – just fonts plus coloured background; the following two tweets are included in the article “[COVID-19 pandemic deniers and the antivaccine movement: An unholy alliance](#)” by David Gorski on April 20, 2020, 10K shares, translated into 5 languages):



At the same time, we can find examples of “public sphere” (Arendt, 1998; Habermas, 1989; see also Pringle, 2017) with a sort of a dialogue (see the last tweet above – the opponent opinion is mentioned). Another example:





The series of pictures were done by the non-professional citizen journalist Alyson McClaran in Denver on April 19, shared in social media and then published by a number of American and other news media. The conflict of a denier (an unpleasant overweight woman in the T-shirt with American symbols and the home-made slogan "Land of the Free") and a

healthcare worker in uniform with face-mask shown as a spectacle: one can see a dramatic “mute narrative” where two citizens of the same country are ready to defend their values fearlessly. Evidently, the sympathy of the photographer and users sharing these pictures is on the side of the healthcare worker, symbolizing the heroism of doctors during the pandemic.

Russia: Russian journalists use the term “COVID-dissidents”; some articles about COVID-dissidents illustrated with “right” photos (people with masks, gloves; hospitals prepared for COVID-patients etc.).

An example: news about a schema-hegumen Sergey (Romanov), claiming that coronavirus is “a total fake” and “a tool of Satan” in the hands of people of power. He occupied a female monastery with the help of his supporters and said through media channels that he swore that all people believing in COVID-19 and following lockdown rules would die in the fire of hell. In Russian media-sources, he is shown as “mad” rather than a “fighter” for human rights.



Viral video, schema-hegumen Sergey – to Russian Orthodox Church authorities: “Cut my tongue if you want to shut me up”. Visualization: the wooden wall of “izba”, portraits of Alexij II (the 15th Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’, died in 2008) and Stalin.

We can suggest the following:

- The COVID-deniers movement was (sometimes unintentionally) favorably represented by news media; information about anti-lockdown protests was given in a neutral or supportive way depending on the pandemic policies in the different countries.
- The virality of this information was supported by visual tools (pictures, videos); social activism of deniers was shown as a part of normal democratic development (fight for human rights) even if the journalists in their news media articles tried to persuade people to follow the lockdown rules.
- The “inner” conflict between “pro-” and “anti-” groups of users confirmed there is a lack of persuasive techniques of consensus in public dialogue and an increased the gap between the two groups, leading toward social disorder (mutual misunderstanding between the two groups can lead to a sort of “civil war”, see Hoggan, 2019).

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