

Counteracting Dangerous Narratives in the Time of COVID-19

A GUIDE FOR THE UNITED STATES • MAY 2020

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Throughout history, pandemics and other outbreaks of disease have triggered and accelerated division, hate, and violence. Unfortunately, COVID-19 is no different. But there are important steps we can take, right now, to address these risks.

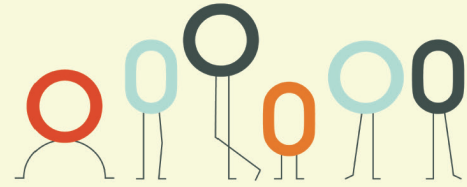
In the face of COVID-19, the actions of leaders -- be they formal, informal, long-standing, or emerging leaders -- will shape how we as a society respond to the challenges of this moment. In doing so, they will also shape the impact of COVID-19 and the accompanying economic crisis on our social fabric.

This is a guide for such leaders. The guide offers insights for analysis and action to prevent increased division and identity-based violence and other harms. It is by no means exhaustive and does not attempt to predict where future identity-based fault lines and harms may occur. Rather, it seeks to:

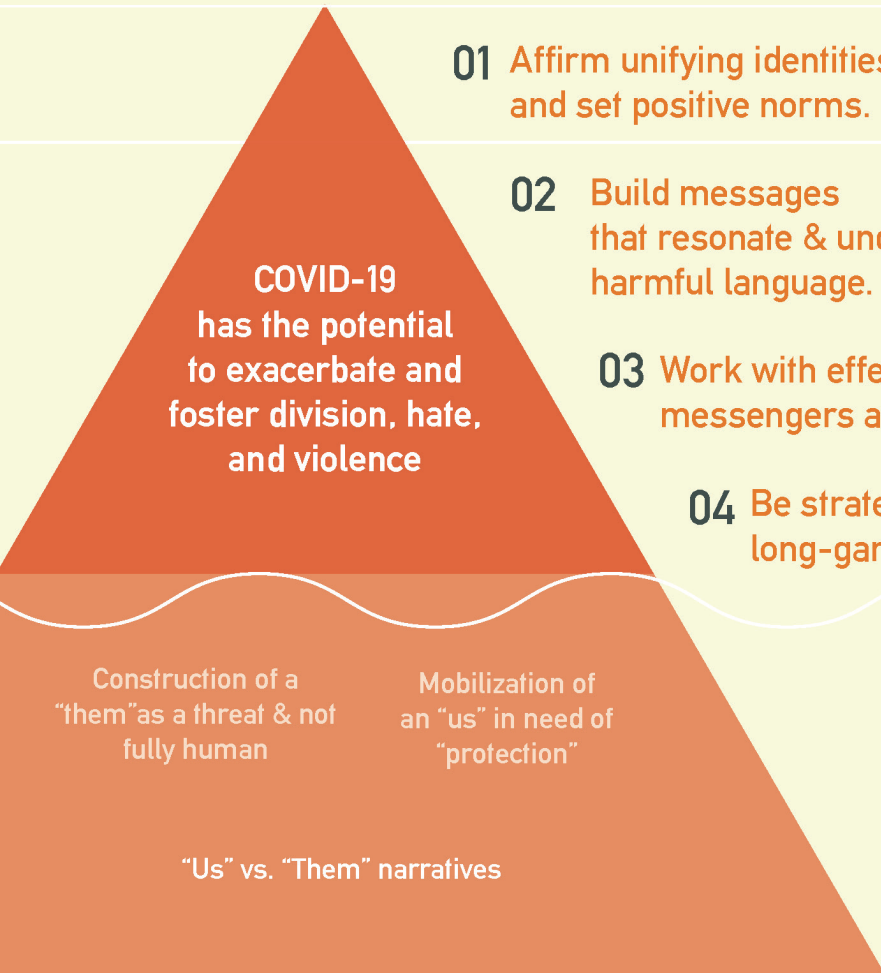
- 1) Equip leaders with additional tools to identify and understand the relationship between communication and group-targeted harm and violence, in part by illustrating how these dynamics are playing out in the face of COVID-19 thus far; and
- 2) Suggest ways in which leaders can prevent division, hatred, and violence amidst the increased risks created by COVID-19.

COVID-19 threatens to exacerbate divisions and foster conditions that can fuel hate and violence.

In the face of these risks, leaders and communities can take key steps to promote inclusion, dignity and respect.



TAKE STRATEGIC ACTION ----->



01 Affirm unifying identities and set positive norms.

02 Build messages that resonate & undercut harmful language.

03 Work with effective messengers and channels.

04 Be strategic about the long-game (beyond COVID-19).

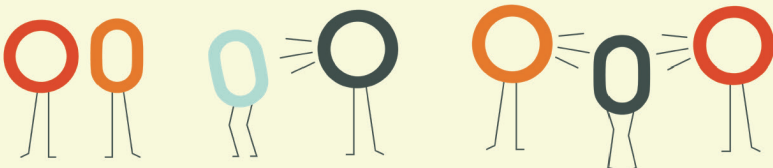
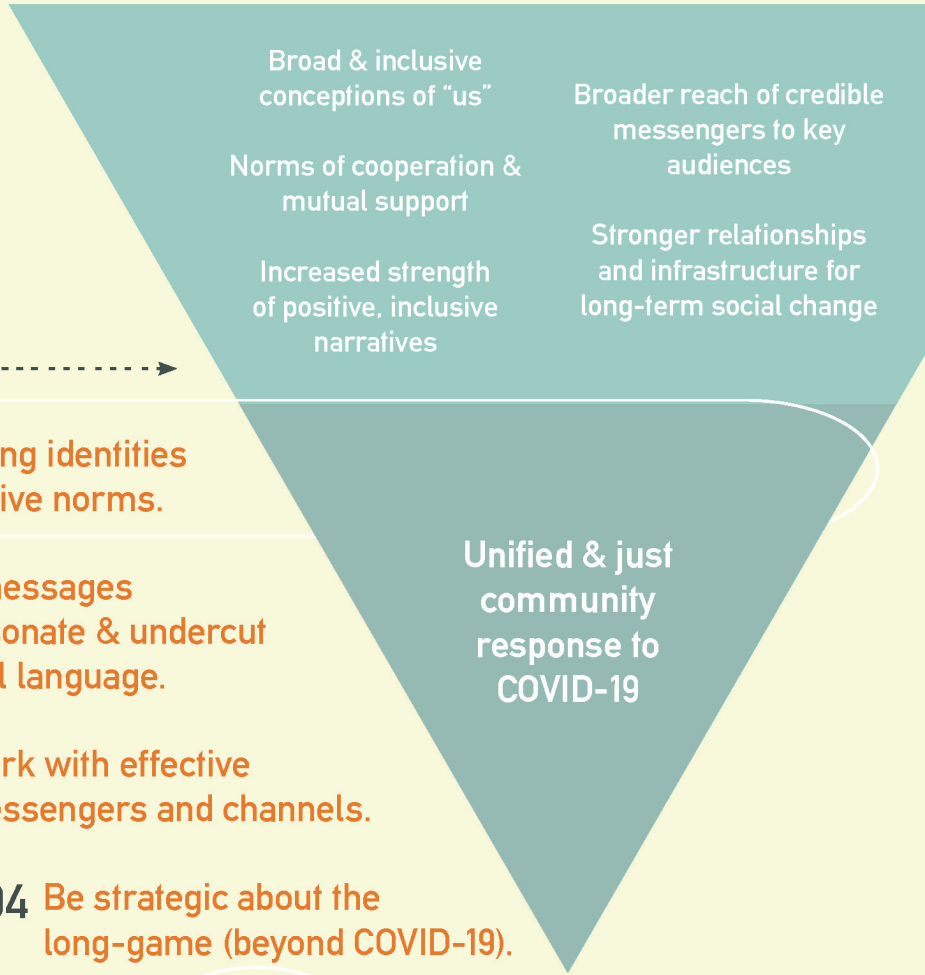


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I: Why this guide

Throughout human history, pandemics and other outbreaks of disease have often served to trigger and accelerate societal division, hate, and violence. The threat of disease and related uncertainty exacerbate the underlying dynamics of conflict: people turn inward, often “closing ranks” around their in-group and blaming other groups for their hardships. As part of this, minorities and/or marginalized groups are often targeted or scapegoated as spreading the disease and/or responsible for related societal crises (e.g., medical shortages, economic downturns, etc.). This pandemic blame game is often used as justification for discriminatory policies, rights violations, violence, or other forms of harm. In sum, pandemics--and the social and economic crises they produce--can increase the strength and prevalence of hateful and dangerous narratives and actions toward targeted groups.

In the U.S., we have seen this dynamic play out time and time again. For instance, widespread (and false) narratives in the second half of the 19th century equated the Irish with the spread of cholera, Chinese immigrants with the bubonic plague, and Mexican immigrants with Typhus. Tuberculosis, referred to as “the tailor’s disease” (referencing the Jewish-owned garment businesses on New York City’s Lower East Side), was central to xenophobic, anti-Semitic rhetoric in the late 19th century and early 20th century. While no singular group was routinely blamed for the Spanish Flu of 1917/1918, it nonetheless helped fuel an isolationist sentiment in America. This ultimately led to a seismic shift in immigration policy: the 1924 National Origins Act, which cut immigration by over 80% and expressly avored “immigrants whose external appearances resembled the majority of white American faces.” The policy remained in place until the 1960s.

More recent examples of pandemic-triggered hate and harm exist as well. For instance, in the early days of the AIDS crisis in the U.S., Haitians were widely stigmatized as carriers of HIV, feeding social and economic discrimination. Marleine Bastien, the executive director of the nonprofit organization Haitian Women of Miami, recalled “I was working as a medical social worker at the time, and every week I saw patients who lost jobs as a result of this. Being called ‘Haitian’ was the worst possible curse.” It also influenced policy decisions: when thousands of Haitians fled to the U.S. for safety following a 1991 coup d’etat in Haiti, Haitian refugees who had been approved for asylum but tested positive for HIV, *or had a relative that tested positive*, were imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay.

In these cases, narratives of “the other” as a threat (e.g., carriers of disease, hoarders of resources) strengthened public support for policies that curtailed civil liberties, diverted resources from the targeted groups, or restricted the institutions or organizations trying to protect them.

Current indications suggest that COVID-19 may have similar repercussions. The pandemic has already activated societal, political, and ethnic divisions within the U.S., placing already marginalized communities further in harm’s way. Consider the numerous conspiracy theories linking the spread of COVID-19 to Jews, Asians, and Asian-Americans. Indeed, since COVID took root in the US, we have seen a 50% increase in media reports of bias incidents against Asian-Americans as well as an increase in online hate speech targeting Jews. The crisis has also fed harmful narratives about immigrants. To illustrate, this article, published by Breitbart, reinforces the false narrative of immigrants as spreaders of disease, stating “... Trump Administration officials returned more than 10,000 migrants to Mexico under protocols designed to protect the American public from people who may have been exposed to the Coronavirus during their global travels.” Further, the pandemic has highlighted pre-existing structural inequities: an extraordinarily disproportionate number of Black people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19 and related complications.

These dynamics are complicated and exacerbated by the politicization of the pandemic and related health measures (itself fueled by high pre-existing levels of partisan polarization¹). Conceptions of and responses to COVID-19 were politicized early on, with some far right outlets going so far as to claim that the virus was a Democratic hoax. More recently, in this already divided environment, “LIBERATE!” protests, organized against stay at home orders, have bundled together protests over public health policy with the very types of dangerous narratives described above, including swastikas and anti-Semitic signs (e.g. an illustration of a rat with the Star of David reading “The Real Plague”). While protests are relatively small and non-representative (survey data shows 90 percent of Americans believe we are “all in it together” and 78 percent remain cautious about returning to normal activities), they have gained support and attention from political leaders, including the President. They

¹ Our polarization has not only increased in the past decade, it has become increasingly identity-based and affective (emotional) with divisions now stemming more from how people feel about those on the other side of the political spectrum than from disagreements on policies or issues (see also here and here). Simultaneously through a process of social sorting, our personal (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious) and political identities have become attached to one another, with each party reflecting distinct religious, geographic, and racial divides (see also here). In this environment, the space for dialogue and compromise recedes and partisan politics assumes a zero sum mentality.

have also led to an increased atmosphere of intimidation and violence (for example, the Michigan State Legislature closed its session because of armed protestors and death threats against the state's Governor), especially when it is or appears to be condoned by leaders, can ultimately increase the risk of individuals and groups being targeted based on identity.

II: How risk is increased: Patterns of communication & their underlying psychosocial dynamics

Certain patterns of speech are commonly repeated before and during violence that targets groups based on their identity. Unfortunately, these narratives can be easily fueled by uncertainty and anxiety, such as the current public health and economic crises: (1) narratives portray groups as to blame for the pandemic and economic crisis, as an ongoing threat, and as not fully human (e.g. through comparing people to pests, rodents, or the disease itself); (2) narratives build an exclusive “us” in need of protection, portraying violence or harm as necessary (and even good) and depicting other social or political solutions as infeasible.

Communication is a primary way in which we make sense of the world around us. It is central to our understanding of how we should interact with other people.

Communication shapes our ideas of the world, our sense of belonging, and how we make sense of life events. It shapes who or what we perceive as threatening, how we think we should behave, and where we believe we belong. It does this not only through content but also through *how that content is delivered*, including:

- The messengers: what are the people we trust saying? What about the people we distrust, or think have bad intentions towards us?;
- The tone and type of content (for example, is it emotive content like videos, stories, symbols? Is it charged with angry words and tone, or is it a voice with calming music in the background?);
- How the content is disseminated: Where and how often? Through two-way or one-way channels? Social media, in-person communication, a phone call?

Some basic frameworks for understanding the role of communication can be instructive for navigating this moment. These frameworks can be particularly useful for assessing how communication is being used to exacerbate us vs. them divisions, mobilize support for targeting groups based on their identity -- or, conversely, promote unity and cooperation.

Communication can be used to increase people's acceptance of policies or actions - even violence - that target specific groups based on their identity. Such communication divides people into an "us" and a "them", portraying "them" as a threatening other, sometimes responsible for "our" misfortunes or past wrongs, and usually as essentially different or even not fully human. It can depict "us" as needing to protect our own group--to right wrongs, or to build a better future. It can even mobilize us to participate in -- or support -- violence and harm, and it can create powerful pressures and incentives for those who might oppose such actions to remain silent.

These narratives can be fueled by crises, including pandemics and economic downturns. The threats inherent to a pandemic or an economic crisis - where a zero-sum mentality often emerges (e.g., "it's either us or them") - can help drive these narratives.

1: Narrative patterns create and target an "other" or "them." Be on the lookout for these themes:

- **The portrayal of a group as "guilty" or to blame.** This narrative portrays an entire group as "guilty" or to blame for harms against the "ingroup," whether it be past violence, current violence, an economic downturn, disease, etc. This is used to justify violence and harm as a way to right wrongs or punish the guilty.

The way blame is attributed matters because it can create or amplify an "us vs. them" mentality. For example, one study demonstrated that when the 2008 economic crisis was framed in a way that attributed responsibility to a group (either immigrants or bankers), people reacted with increased anti-immigration or anti-semitic prejudice, respectively. [Read more about how this happens here.](#)

This idea of a group being "guilty" or to blame feeds into existing cognitive biases like "collective blame." Social science has shown that people have a tendency to hold groups collectively responsible for the crimes or wrongs of

individual group members (whether real, imagined or fabricated). Unfortunately, even beyond blaming an entire group for the actions of an individual, this can be used to justify “vicarious retribution,” or revenge, against other members of that group.

Today, we see these dynamics playing out via references to COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus” or the “Wuhan virus.” Such references connote blame to an entire group of people, and have also been used to fuel narratives that people of Asian descent pose a threat. Online conspiracy theories attribute the outbreak of COVID-19 to powerful Jews, while some fringe figures now claim that COVID-19 is a punishment for homosexuality. We also see narratives of blame being used to frame the disproportionate number of COVID-19 fatalities among Black people in the U.S. as some sort of personal, moral, or community failure (e.g., “they don’t take care of themselves”). As economic consequences continue to manifest, be on the lookout for further blame narratives targeting additional groups.

- **Threat construction.** In this narrative, an entire group is depicted as posing a threat to “our group” (the “ingroup”), thus reframing violence as necessary self-defense. This can be a security, economic, or symbolic threat (e.g., a threat to values, way of life, or purity). Perceptions of threat can lead people to protect their in-group and -- under certain circumstances -- attack the “outgroup.” We know that COVID-19 poses nearly universal health and economic threats, and in such an “unsettled” time, people are more likely to sense threat from, be more hostile to, and blame marginalized out-groups for their misfortune. Read more about how this happens here.

Threat is often closely related to blame. As outlined above, marginalized groups have already been blamed for COVID-19 and then portrayed as an ongoing threat. To determine how specific groups are perceived as threats, it’s critical to understand how intent and capacity are discussed: groups are viewed as a threat when there is the perceived *intent* and *capacity* to hurt -- when the group is seen as *choosing* to do the harm and is capable of carrying it out. This can be either through negligence (stupidity, incapacity) or malice (a desire and ability to hurt).

- **De-Identification/dehumanization.** Narratives that portray a group as less than human or essentially different from “us” are dangerous because they make it easier for people to justify or endorse group-targeted harm. Such narratives

often reference groups as diseased, or depict them as animals or insects, such as pests and vermin. An example from the present moment is in the numerous COVID-19-related anti-Semitic conspiracy theories: caricatures depicting Jews as demonic creatures responsible for COVID-19 -- are circulating across social media platforms such as Telegram and Gab.

2: Messages that create and mobilize an “us” are also central in driving violence or harm directed at another group.

Messages about the “us” are typically centered on why “our group” is justified in committing violence or other forms of harm. They also help set norms and expectations for behavior among in-group members and create “moral imperatives” to act.

Common patterns in messages about the “us” include:

- **Portraying violence or other group-targeted harm (e.g. rights violations, discrimination) as necessary and even good:** In this narrative, violence is portrayed as necessary to protect oneself or the group at large, particularly “the vulnerable.” Here, empathy is weaponized. The narrative activates empathy solely for the ingroup, mobilizing group members to “protect” themselves at the expense of--indeed, because of--the “other.” Read more about how empathy is used - and where it fails - here. In this narrative, people who engage in “protective, necessary” violence are seen as good group members and even glorified. In some cases, the narratives are tied to ideas about masculinity and what it means to be “a good man.” White supremacists, for instance, often invoke the need to “protect” (white) women and children in their calls for violence.

In the face of COVID-19, we’ve seen this narrative used to justify violence. In Midland, Texas, for instance, a 19-year-old man attacked an Asian-American family of four, including two young children. When interviewed by police, he attributed his attack to his belief that the family was Chinese and spreading coronavirus to others. As discussions about reopening the country continue, we may also see this play out more subtly in conversations about trade-offs between risks to different groups.

- **Destruction of Alternatives:** Here, social or political solutions to the problem are depicted as unfeasible or ineffective, and violence is thus painted as the *only* possible course of action. This removes moral agency and responsibility for

violence: if violence is the sole option to protect one's group (including the vulnerable), it can become the moral - and only possible - choice. Again, people who advocate for alternatives are painted as weak or even traitorous.

- **Futurization:** These messages play on the idea of hope and aspiration and focus on the future. They evoke the notion that a secure and beautiful future is only possible by targeting other ("threatening," "guilty," "non-human") groups. In this moment, for instance, far-right groups have seized on perceptions of government failures to protect while asserting their readiness to step into roles of authority and build a better future.

These ideas and narratives can be fueled by mis- and dis-information. Mis- and dis-information-- such as false rumors and conspiracy theories-- are consistently used in narratives that promote identity-based violence. They provide (false) examples to support arguments that a group is threatening, guilty, or not fully human. They spread quickly by invoking emotions like fear, surprise, and disgust. Misinformation is often "sticky" or difficult to correct, especially when it taps into emotions like fear or fills the need for certainty or clarity. This is especially so now, in a moment that feels high stakes and full of uncertainty. Still, by understanding how and why misinformation takes hold in people's minds, we can more effectively work to correct and counteract it. [Read more about mis- and disinformation here.](#)

»»» Disinformation and misinformation both refer to false or misleading information. The key distinction between the two is that misinformation is unintentionally false, whereas disinformation is designed to mislead. Given that many false rumors are spread unintentionally -- particularly in times of confusion and anxiety -- this guide specifically focuses on a broad conception of misinformation. This definition encompasses false information that might have initially been spread to mislead but has since been spread for less nefarious purposes (e.g., to inform or share rather than to mislead). **«««**

Additionally, the metaphors that are used to discuss the pandemic and economic crisis can fuel harmful ideas. Metaphors are an essential tool in how we communicate; it is estimated that we use one metaphor for every 25 words spoken. Metaphors allow us to understand something complex and abstract in a concrete, familiar way. They are powerful because they harness the framing, emotions and implications of one thing (e.g. "life") and apply them to another (e.g. "a box of chocolates"). Given the complex nature of pandemics, messages around disease and its spread rely particularly heavily on metaphors. Research suggests that biomilitary metaphors (e.g. a *battle* against a

disease) and criminality metaphors (e.g. a disease is *stealing* our future), some of the most prevalent amidst pandemics, may increase xenophobia and the targeting of marginalized groups. [Read more about the use of metaphors in pandemics here.](#)

Note: While a dangerous narrative may not mobilize widespread support overnight, it can still have influence--even on moderate group members--by desensitizing them to such speech and changing their perceptions of group norms. Unfortunately (in this case), perceived norms - what we think all or most of our peers approve of or are doing - powerfully shape our actions. In fact, sometimes norms can shape our actions even more than our individually-held beliefs. Further, as people turn to their groups for security, certainty and protection amidst a difficult moment, perceived social norms can feel especially binding. For all these reasons (and when this dynamic is strong), it can be hard to speak against violence or dangerous rhetoric. Group members who speak out against violence or harmful speech risk being criticized as naive or traitorous and being ostracized by their own groups. [Read more about how norms can shift to encourage violence here.](#)

Finally, in understanding how communication unites, divides, or mobilizes societies for violence, it's critical to also consider *how* (through which mediums and messengers) such messages are being communicated. People are more likely to believe the information sources and channels (whether other people or outlets) they perceive as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and well-intentioned. Availability is also key - people can't get information they don't have access to. Channels and messengers define whether people access specific information and whether they will consider or trust it. This means we need to think not only about the content of narratives and communication, but also about which audiences are being exposed to which narratives. This is true at all times, but especially in moments of crisis and uncertainty, where the credibility and availability of information sources is constantly evolving. Right now, for example, city and state government officials are playing a central role as messengers around COVID-19, with increased levels of public trust and a larger and more regular platform to share their messaging, while traffic to partisan websites is decreasing. At the same time, online platforms peddling harmful conspiracy theories have a broader potential audience to recruit and early evidence suggests increased engagement with white supremacist content online as people stay home for social distancing. Being aware of how the information infrastructure is shifting across different audiences is crucial for understanding how both harmful and positive messages are spreading and resonating.

The risks described above are by no means exhaustive - and while we have already seen a number of these risks play out at the national, regional, and local levels, this is

not necessarily predictive of how they will change over time. By identifying and exploring known risks early on, however, leaders will be better positioned to analyze and respond as the situation evolves.

III: Considerations and Recommendations

In the face of increased risk, we suggest several key actions, communication strategies, and considerations critical for leaders. These are to (1) build a broader version of “us” by using your platform to affirm overarching and cross-cutting identities, model mutual helping behaviors, and set positive norms of unity and inclusion; (2) build messages that resonate and undercut harmful narratives that serve to other and fuel zero-sum mentalities; and (3) work with effective messengers and channels; and (4) be strategic about the long game by building strong cross-cutting relationships.

I: Use your platform to affirm overarching and cross-cutting identities, model mutual helping behaviors, and set positive norms of unity and inclusion.²

Defining an inclusive “we” and setting positive norms through communication and action is central to fostering positive behavior among wider segments of society. This type of communication and action can proactively undermine narrow and exclusive definitions of “we” or “us.” It also creates social support and influence that steers people towards cooperation and mutual support.

Actions that show cooperation between groups, actions by diverse groups, and/or actions by a broad “we” are important. Be they led, endorsed, or showcased by leaders, these actions are a powerful way to set norms of *inclusion* (“we are all on the same team”), *cooperation* (“we work together”), and *collective agency* (“we are

² Recommendations for unity and cross-cutting identities do not preclude discussions of inequities. Rather, they can provide a framework for discussing inequities under the umbrella of a shared identity-- increasing the salience of addressing these inequities among those who have been unaware or felt they were not directly affected.

'do-ers' and, together, we have the power to solve this"). Further, they activate cross-cutting identities and transform harmful "meta-perceptions" (perceptions of how "they" see "us") that may be floating in the culture (e.g. "they [the outgroup] hate/disrespect us" or "they want to hurt us") to more positive meta-perceptions (e.g. "they see us as human" and "they are one of us").

To do this:

i. Define the "we" broadly. Promote a broad and inclusive "we" that cuts across lines of division. You can do this by showing diverse groups coming together under common identities. Consider geographic identities (cities, towns, neighborhoods), family identities (being parent, child or sibling), a specific industry, sports team supporters, those who share specific hobbies, etc. Remember that in order to resonate, "we" should be characterized by interdependence and common goals and aspirations. In addition to challenging existing "us/them" divides by creating an inclusive "us," this strategy also keeps multiple parts of our identities active, instead of further pushing us into more singular and rigid identities.

ii. Tell stories that demonstrate the inclusive "we" by showcasing mutual helping actions. Stories and images are powerful in part because they act as "social proof," which help to establish or reinforce positive norms. These stories can model the larger "we" and can undermine negative perceptions between groups.

For example, elevate stories that show how people in a town or neighborhood virtually organize support for one another. Alternatively, you might highlight the variety of local organizations lending a hand to a local cause. Consider the message that comes across when reading about the large-scale interfaith food relief efforts in North Carolina, where 20,000 pounds of food have been distributed in Durham alone.

Tell these stories in ways that illustrate the community's unity *and* diversity. Such narratives and images make it harder for people to activate identities in ways that are divisive or harmful.

iii. Activate leaders across different communities under one overarching banner.

Create networks or projects that bring these leaders' communities together in ways that help them meet their common needs. Doing this can build trust and relationships between diverse leaders, and it also sends a message to the leaders' communities: "we are unified" and "we work together." As you create these networks, be strategic by thinking outside of the box as you invite participants. Remember that you will want to

bring diverse leaders together, and hopefully forge relationships that did not previously exist. Further, since people are most influenced by respected leaders or members of their peer group (including informal leaders at a church, a social movement, etc.), you can attempt to reach out to *informal* leaders within the community as well.

>>> The town of Tuzla, Bosnia activated its “Tuzlan” identity during the Bosnian war to bring together people from all different ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds as a common “we.” This included everyone--members of the miners union, the local mayor, a local radio station, women’s support groups, and faith leaders. Against the backdrop of the threat of war and violence, this group committed to living and working peacefully together throughout the war and to resolving issues as they arose. They avoided the national-level narrative that a certain ethnic or religious group posed an existential threat and fighting to protect one’s group was thus necessary. Instead, they prioritized their unified Tuzlan identity above all others. It became an emblem, depicted in stories, a song, public announcements, and events. <<<<

iv. **Emphasize “who we are” instead of “who we are not.”** Research shows that -- especially in times of uncertainty -- people gravitate towards leaders who can define “who we are” rather than leaders who focus on “who we are not.” Thus, do not spend valuable time pointing out the flaws of others, be they leaders, outgroups, etc. Instead, publicly define the “we,” using your community’s words and examples, in inclusive, positive ways. According to international research on community resilience, themes that are likely to resonate in an “unsettled” time include: inclusivity, diversity, unity, agency, hope, an anchoring in good will, a focus on safety and security, competency and effectiveness.

v. **Wise communications and actions will also be wary of themes or messages that can have negative consequences (for example, inadvertently signaling harmful norms). To prevent this:**

- o **Be cautious in how you assign blame, and track how blame is being attributed in your community’s discourse.** People have a tendency to view groups as entities, and to blame entire groups of people for the (real or believed) actions of an individual. This kind of collective blame is not only inaccurate and unfair, it can lead to vicarious retribution (members of one group attacking members of another group for “revenge”). Indeed, amidst COVID-19, Asians and Asian Americans have already been targeted with hate rhetoric and attacks in many

cities throughout the U.S. Such attacks are not only egregious for the harms they do to victims, they also inform norm perceptions within the general population. Be aware of such tendencies or narratives in your community, and be cautious in how you depict blame and responsibility for the challenges your community is facing.

- **Design messages and share stories that make it clear most people DO NOT approve of or participate in rhetoric or actions that demonize groups of people as the cause of this virus.** These stories show that such behavior is not the norm, and most people do not approve. As you craft these messages, however, **be careful to not inadvertently signal negative norms**, as these can signal to people that it is acceptable and common to harbor and possibly even act on prejudice. For instance, instead of saying “Prejudice against Asian-Americans is higher than ever during COVID-19,” focus on a statistic, protest or story demonstrating a positive norm, e.g., that most people wholeheartedly reject the uptick in prejudice against Asian-Americans, are partnering with Asian Americans, are taking action to counter such prejudice, etc. This brings attention to the problem while still showcasing positive actions.

vi. For the most impact, think about who you are as a messenger, and work with other messengers to reach further:

- **Be strategic. Remember, when setting norms, people are most influenced by respected leaders or members of their peer group.** This can be formal or informal leaders across a variety of groups - in their faith community, a social movement, their friends, employer, etc. People are more susceptible to such influence during moments of uncertainty.
- **As a starting point, you can set norms for the people within your existing social circles.** Consider: Who do you already set norms for (and with)? How do they see what you do and emulate it? Do you speak publicly? Do people follow you on social media?
- **You can also reach further by recruiting others, or telling stories that include other leaders or norm-setters.** What other leaders (formal or informal, old or new) are people looking towards to set norms? Who else might you work with to ensure you are signaling positive norms in the messages you provide, the stories you share, and the example you set? Who might you work with to set norms for a broader audience? The more you can recruit others to set norms the better.

2: Build messages that resonate and undercut harmful narratives

In addition to proactively setting norms and creating a broad “we,” it’s critical to effectively undercut harmful narratives and to be aware of the risks of communicating in the current environment to avoid inadvertently causing harm. Priorities for doing this include using metaphors wisely, using strategic messaging to increase empathy and engagement with targeted communities, undermining stereotypes, and handling mis- and dis-information with care:

i. Use metaphor wisely.

During COVID-19, it is important to separate the disease from the people who do or might have it. Why? Because when people are conflated with the disease itself, threat responses such as disgust, fear, and anger can be transferred from the disease to groups of people. Certain metaphors, particularly biomilitary and criminality ones, are more likely to conflate groups of people with the disease itself.

What to do:

- **Select and employ metaphors that set positive frames - and avoid those that feed harmful narratives.** Be cautious when using biomilitary and criminality metaphors. These types of metaphors are commonly used during pandemics, but they can prime for fear, anger, and suspicion of the “other.” Instead, employ metaphors with informative, positive frames, which are more likely to orient people towards cooperative attitudes and action. For example, by likening public health measures to auto safety (“washing your hands is like fastening your seat belt”) you set a frame of agency without fear mongering or scapegoating. (e.g., “There are precautions I can take to reduce my risk of harm, though I know the risk still remains).”

ii. Use strategic messaging to increase empathy and engagement with targeted communities.

In an attempt to mobilize people to support targeted communities, one common instinct is to showcase communities’ suffering. The idea is, “Once people feel empathy, they’ll want to help.” However, research suggests that experiencing and acting on empathy for “other groups” is complicated. And sometimes showing only suffering

can portray groups in a way that inadvertently feeds dehumanizing narratives. A strategic approach can mitigate these risks and help mobilize empathy for action:

- **First, emphasize an overarching identity -- then invoke empathy.** Start by activating a common identity (e.g., local community, or “moms”). Then tell stories that activate empathy within the frame of that identity. For example, start with an identity of “moms uniting to face COVID-19,” then tell individual stories that evoke empathy for moms from all different backgrounds. This is helpful because we reliably feel more empathy for groups we are a part of, so by first activating a common identity you are making it more likely that someone will experience empathy.
- **Model empathy to make it a norm.** Publicly demonstrate empathy and compassion. Show yourself, for example, watching a story or talking to someone about their experience and expressing your own compassionate emotions and actions. Even better, show a 2nd, 3rd, and 4th person following your lead. Be open and show people how they can navigate challenges to empathy: if there is a tension between empathy/compassion and individual fears and anxieties, acknowledge it and demonstrate or explain how you decided which impetus to follow.
- **Establish a norm on how to relate to others, no matter who they are.** In all your communications, show empathy by acknowledging and asking about others. People are hurting in diverse ways, but we are all facing an uncertain future. Model a process of asking, listening, understanding, and acknowledging peoples’ experiences. Many people will die from this virus, and many more will face enormous economic hardship, unsure if they can keep a roof over their head or food on the table. Be sure to treat each of those losses with humanity. For example, do NOT repeat messaging that asks who will be most affected based on voting lines. This will only feed division.

iii. Undermine stereotypes

- **Be careful to speak to both warmth and competence.** When you tell stories about people or groups that are being targeted with hateful speech right now, make sure you showcase both their warmth (caring for others in and outside their groups) and competence (responsibility, complex emotions like concern or hope, etc.). Why? Because othering narratives often try to portray people without one or the other-- warmth or competence. Someone who is competent

but not warm may not care about you, or could want to hurt you; someone who is warm but not competent might be perceived as inconsequential or less valuable to society. One way to bolster a perception of a group being “warm” is to showcase members’ positive intentions or helpful/altruistic/caretaking actions towards the larger community. You can bolster “competence” perceptions by showcasing people solving problems.

- **Avoid “exceptional” stories.** When you’re trying to push back on hate, it can be tempting to tell stories of exceptionalism. While stories of incredible people can be inspiring, often such people can seem almost superhuman, making it difficult for people to generalize from these stories to a larger group. It’s important to avoid feeding the argument that people only deserve compassion, or are only included in the bigger “we” if they are exceptional. Instead, use stories to show normal people from all different groups who are showing compassion to each other, struggling, finding solutions, etc., and who are ultimately interdependent and part of the same “we.”
- **Avoid depictions that evoke disgust.** Stay away from showing people in scenes or backgrounds that could make people feel disgust (e.g., showing already targeted groups amidst dirtiness, disease), as it may inadvertently create an association of that group with the emotion of disgust.

iv. Handle misinformation and disinformation with care

When correcting misinformation and disinformation, it’s important to address both the misinformation as well as the underlying narrative(s) it feeds into. It is particularly important to challenge narratives that portray targeted group(s) as threatening (to a way of life, to physical security, values, etc.) or as guilty of violating core moral values. If the narrative negatively targets a group of people, consider additional strategies for counteracting that narrative in the longer term (e.g., positive norm setting, emphasizing crosscutting identities, etc).

Some best practices for correcting individual pieces of misinformation:

- **Correct misinformation as quickly as possible.** The more that people hear or see misinformation, the more they are likely to believe it.

- **Use positive framing.** For example, if John has been accused of being a thief, the best correction will re-focus attention on what John *is*, e.g., “John is an honest person who is always sharing and never taking from anyone” rather than what he *is not*, e.g., “John is NOT a thief.” Why? Because repeating the original accusation can make the association between two things stronger, and can make it sound more familiar. When you say “John is not a thief,” you’re still creating an association between John and thief.
- **Try not to repeat the misinformation, but if you have to, give a warning *before* you repeat it (not after!).** The more misinformation is repeated, the more people become familiar with it and are likely to believe it. By warning them *in advance* of repeating the association, you have activated their critical thinking skills in a way that prevents the association from strengthening under their radar.
- **Focus on the source, not just the content. Make sure *your correction comes from a trusted source*,** e.g., an individual, institution, or news outlet that people find credible and whom they believe represents their values/interests. This might require building trust or recruiting messengers. **Prompting people to question sources of mis- and disinformation can also be effective.** Encourage people to consider the motive of the source: why would someone spread false or misleading information (e.g., is it clickbait that would help them earn money)? Where relevant, ask someone to consider where the information came from and why.
- **If possible, counter misinformation by providing an alternative explanation for the evidence that is used to inform the incorrect claim.** Misinformation is more likely to have influence if people infer a causal relationship from the evidence (e.g., between the presence of flammable materials and a subsequent fire). A correction that simply disputes that the materials caused the fire will be less effective than one that provides an alternative explanation for the fire, such as arson.
- **Keep your corrections simple and easy to understand!** If and when possible, use clear and simple visualizations.
- **Understand the underlying narratives that the mis/disinformation is tapping into.** Why would someone believe the misinformation? What emotions, identities, experiences are attached? What sense of truth or existing belief is it resonating with? By asking these questions, you can inform your broader approach and understand the bigger narratives, ideas, and beliefs you will need to tackle.

3: Work with effective messengers and channels.

Amidst a crisis, communicating through key trusted messengers and channels is critical. To communicate most effectively, you will want to monitor and engage the most relevant and appropriate messengers and channels in your work.

To do this:

- **Identify and work with effective messengers and channels in your community.** Several questions can help guide your strategy: Are people becoming more dependent on certain sources of information (e.g., their employer, the Mayor's Facebook feed, NextDoor)? What messengers are becoming more credible and important in your community (e.g., healthcare workers, other essential workers, local elected officials)? Answering these questions will tell you whether and which new messengers or platforms to engage. The process of engaging them will involve building relationships.
- **Develop relationships with other messengers.** Develop relationships with the messengers deemed most relevant and critical in your community. Work with them to ensure that they use language that unites rather than divides, and that they aren't inadvertently furthering narratives that promote hate. You can also find ways to connect them to one another. One way to build trust is by offering your own platform and expertise to support these messengers.

4: Beyond COVID-19: Be strategic about the long game.

Finally, preventing identity-based harm and violence is long-term work. The COVID-19 crisis has the potential to fuel division and hate. At the same time, in this moment of crisis, communities can take intentional steps to build relationships and problem solve together in ways that can forge unity into the future. In studies of community resilience amidst diverse challenges such as pandemics, natural disasters, or war, one of the most critical success factors is the existence of a *diverse* community network, one with cross-cutting representation that has developed high levels of trust through collaborating together to solve problems. As much as possible, use this moment to build and strengthen relationships of trust that cross divides.

To do this:

- **Strengthen new relationships that have formed during COVID-19.** Identify where new relationships of trust are forming in your community amidst COVID-19 and consider how you can support or reinforce them.

- **Build new, cross-cutting networks and relationships.** Reach out to diverse leaders -- even those you might not usually connect with - to learn about each other's needs and challenges, share what's working for you, and figure out ways to mutually support one another.
- **Showcase these new networks and relationships.** Share stories about these new, cross-cutting relationships and their beneficial impact.

To apply these recommendations, it's critical to analyze the relevant dynamics at play within your community. To do so, you can ask key questions about your specific context using [this analysis tool](#).

Appendices

Additional Reading on Core Concepts

Appendix A: How “Us vs. Them” mentalities take hold, fueling animosity towards the “Other”:

The feelings of anxiety, stress, fear, and uncertainty that accompany COVID-19 have the potential to push us further into groups and “close ranks” (unite to defend common interests) and commit harms against members of other groups in order to protect members of our groups. Alternatively, these dynamics can activate identities that cut across lines of division or conflict - whether people’s identity as members of a particular town or city, as parents, or as medical providers.

Being a part of a group is in some ways the most fundamentally human thing. Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs puts “belonging” just above our basic physical needs, and it is at the center of our species’ evolutionary strategy -- our ability to coordinate as a group to survive and thrive. The groups we are part of form pieces of our social identity - parts of who we are and how we see ourselves. While some identities are chosen by us, many are assigned to us: such as race, gender, religion, or language. When we feel anxious, stressed, or scared, we seek safety in our groups and our group identities become even more important to us.

Disease outbreaks are likely to evoke all of these emotions: anxiety, stress, and fear. The looming threat of widespread illness, and the uncertainty around it, increases the likelihood of groups closing ranks. As threats of disease are coupled with a scarcity mindset (such as medical shortages, food shortages, lack of jobs), competition for resources can also fuel anger toward other groups. Thus, as people turn to their respective identity groups for protection and security, social identities can become more singular and rigid, and suspicions of “the other” begin to rise. This can create new fault lines between identity groups where none had previously existed, while also exacerbating existing “us vs. them” dynamics. Furthermore, people may feel more pressure to “go along with the group” given the greater need for protection and belonging amidst uncertainty, health and economic pressures.

We can see this play out in the U.S., particularly with the uptick of rhetoric and actions targeting Asian-Americans. Research has found a 50 percent rise in the number of news articles related to the coronavirus and anti-Asian discrimination between Feb. 9 and March 7, likely just the tip of the iceberg because only the most egregious cases have been reported. This has similarly borne out in the spike in hate crimes. In one such instance, in Manhattan a 23 year old Korean woman was approached by a stranger

who yelled, "Where is your [expletive] mask, you coronavirus [expletive]" before punching the woman in the face, sending her to the hospital.

At the same time, and in the same places, we have seen identities mobilized to increase cooperation and encourage positive behavior. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's #NewYorkTough Twitter and Instagram campaign that encourages New Yorkers to stay home has morphed into a rallying point, specifically in New York City, the current epicenter of the virus in the U.S. The hashtag-turned-motto has invoked a sense of civic pride in following social distancing guidelines and supporting other New Yorkers through coordinated efforts like mutual aid projects. It has also strengthened a "New Yorker" identity that supersedes existing divisions and fosters cooperation.

Appendix B: How targeted groups - particularly those that have been historically marginalized - are portrayed as threats, further justifying harms committed against them:

COVID-19 poses universal health and economic threats. This is key because intergroup dynamics shift amidst threat: if everyone sees themselves as facing a common threat, they can become more united; and if people see members of another group as a threat, the risks of violence or harm toward that group increase. Threat narratives may thus fuel harmful or discriminatory policies and actions toward marginalized groups. As such, it's critical to consider the types of threat being activated (threats of physical safety, contamination, economic status and well-being), the relevant emotions, and how blame/responsibility for these threats is assigned throughout rhetoric surrounding COVID-19.

To understand the complexities of social response to threats, it's useful to consider these different threat-response behavioral pathways.

First and foremost, diseases threaten contamination - of our own bodies, our families, and society at large. This prompts a visceral disgust response- one hardwired into our brains for the very purpose of avoiding possible contaminants. Disgust drives us to reject and distance ourselves from the "disgusting" thing. On a societal level, widespread disgust narratives are often used to justify xenophobic movements, segregationist policies and actions, and physical violence such as ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Relatedly, physical threat, the idea that "the other" somehow poses a risk to "our" health and safety, typically leads to a fear response, which can hijack our cognitive functioning to keep us safe. Once fear is activated, we go into "fight, flight, or freeze." On a societal level, this translates to groups taking action to "defend" themselves from the threatening "other." Indeed, this type of narrative - justifying violence against a group as self defense - is clearly seen in the lead-up to and during mass violence. While the threat of the coronavirus pathogen is itself very real, we have seen people across the country responding in a way that clearly demonstrates that they view other *groups of people* as a threat. One strong indicator of this is the increase in gun sales across the country, which have surged since February 2020.

Finally, pandemics may pose threats to people's status - whether politically, economically, or socially. Threats to status often lead to responses rooted in anger, designed to "right a wrong" (for instance for an economic downturn, a time of past hardship, or so on). Often, that can mean punitive action, whether through punitive policymaking, social exclusion, or physical attacks. We can see this playing out in the partisan rhetoric about who is to blame for the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. While a different dynamic than attacking marginalized groups, it nonetheless illustrates how anger and blame are often directed across identity lines.

Existing power structures centrally impact threat dynamics. Here, power refers to the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. It's important to note here that "capacity" and "ability" do not refer to an innate capacity or ability in this context, but rather the realities of the current political, economic, and social structures. "High" power groups are more likely to mobilize to "fight" and take punitive actions when faced with a threat. Consistently, on the other hand, research examining the response of low-power groups to threats from high-power groups finds that people show avoidance when physically threatened but confrontation when group-level resources are threatened.

Existing power dynamics also lay the groundwork for societal narratives regarding who is part of the "us" that's under threat (and in need of protection) and who is part of the threatening "them." Historically marginalized and oppressed groups, already seen as somehow "other," are vulnerable to further dehumanization and scapegoating. Existing cultural narratives about targeted groups as different in their essence, less than human, or impure provide a rhetorical on-ramp to attributing blame and suspicion of these groups specific to a specific disease outbreak.

We see this playing out again with COVID-19 and the rise in anti-Asian narratives and behaviors. The U.S. has a long history of targeting Asian immigrants and those of Asian descent, for example in the complete ban on Chinese immigration through the 1924 Immigration Act or the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in internment camps in the western U.S. during WWII. Further, many of the harmful narratives around Asians and Asian-Americans have centered on disease and contamination. For that reason, references to COVID-19 being a "Chinese" virus are dangerous, as they tap into existing prejudices and perceptions of Asian-Americans as threatening and somehow "other." While associating any disease with any group of people has the potential to cause harm, references to a "British virus" would likely be much less dangerous given the heralded position of Anglo-Americans in the U.S. power structure.

Appendix C: Understanding empathy: its limitations, and how it can be weaponized

During a crisis, empathy can be mobilized in a way that either helps or harms targeted groups. Critical here is the allocation of empathy: whether it's distributed across society, motivating people to come together and help one another, or whether it's focused on one's in-group, leading people to take "protective" actions on behalf of their group. Further, even when empathy is felt across groups, it might not motivate action in the face of fear, disgust, and anxiety.

Empathy is often conceived of as a purely positive thing, a silver bullet for breaking down barriers of discrimination and prejudice. Empathy in itself, however, is neither purely "good" nor "bad" in terms of its influence on prosocial behavior. Rather, it is another survival mechanism that can manifest in helping behaviors (such as helping someone with their bags because you don't want to see them struggle), or in negative actions- such as manipulating other people or more effectively planning a violent attack (as one needs to be able to imagine what an "enemy's" tactics would be).

A few factors are instrumental in how, when, and for whom we feel empathy -- and if and how we act on that empathy:

- **There are individual differences between people regarding how much empathy they have and how it is distributed.** These differences can be ascribed to personality differences, life experiences, beliefs, values, and so on.
- **Social identity dynamics influence how someone feels/acts on empathy toward others.** Studies show that, in general, we reliably feel more empathy for members of our own group than other groups. High levels of this "parochial empathy" (high empathy for our own group vs. another group) has even been associated with a willingness to harm other groups when it is understood as a protective action for the ingroup. Where threat and social identities have been mobilized, we thus need to pay careful attention to how distribution is being activated within groups in comparison to how much empathy is being activated within groups.
- **Empathy often fails to lead to prosocial actions in the face of social pressure and emotions like fear.** Where there is a trade-off between acting on empathy and acting to address emotions like fear, empathy often fails. Further, if there are social pressures against taking compassionate action, or even social costs (such as being ostracized or punished) for expressing empathy toward members of a different identity group, we are less likely to do so.

- In line with the above, environmental dynamics at large influence who we feel empathy for and how we do or do not act on it. For instance, in conflict environments or times of resource scarcity, a sense of threat may override empathy, with emotions like fear, disgust, and anger “winning out” over empathy as the brain makes calculations about increasing chances of survival.

During an outbreak of illness or disease, therefore, when the sense of threat is heightened and identity lines become more singular and rigid, the distribution of empathy may become heavily skewed toward people’s in-groups. Empathy may even be weaponized, with messages such as “don’t you want to protect the vulnerable members of our group?” used to justify negative attitudes, beliefs, and actions against other groups.

Appendix D: How norms shift to further permit harmful attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward targeted groups:

Perceived norms - what we think all or most of our peers are doing or approve/disapprove of - powerfully shape our actions, even more so than our beliefs. During times of uncertainty, people become even more sensitive to cues from others about how to act in and make sense of a new environment. Further, as people turn toward more singular group identities for protection, social norms feel especially binding, as in-group belonging feels much more high stakes. It's thus critical to proactively set and amplify positive norms that reject hate and division and instead emphasize cooperation and helping behaviors.

Social norms are unwritten rules of behavior that dictate what we should do or believe as members of a certain group. Perceived norms are especially influential here, particularly from "social norm referents," people with an elevated status who are deemed trustworthy and respected in our groups. Regardless of their accuracy, our perceptions become our reality and we adjust our behavior accordingly. Indeed, our estimations can be wildly inaccurate and easily skewed by a few loud voices. Further, we tend to overestimate the normalcy of negative behaviors. For instance, imagine you are at a party with 25 people. Twenty people are having calm, quiet conversations, while five are belligerently yelling at one another. When you leave the party, chances are that you will remember it as a party where "there was a lot of yelling and fighting," even though the vast majority (80%) of party attendees were calm and quiet. This same dynamic often plays out on a societal level.

When seeking to correct negative norm perceptions, we may inadvertently call attention to them as the norm, leading to wider acceptance. For instance, saying "hate is on the rise now more than ever," may actually signal to people that hateful actions and rhetoric are accepted or expected behaviors, and that they shouldn't speak out against them or even join in. As another example, a now-deleted January 30th Instagram [post](#) by UC Berkeley's Health Service that outlined potential reactions to COVID-19, from anxiety to anger to xenophobia directed at those perceived as Asian. This signaled that xenophobia is a common and expected reaction, removing a normative barrier to experiencing and expressing anti-Asian sentiments.

Fortunately, we can also model and signal positive norms, even if the positive behavior is not yet the actual norm. The "few loud voices" that can signal negative norms can also create a shared perception that prosocial behavior is expected and common. For

instance, in a community with lingering ethnic divisions, the message “more and more community members are rejecting the ideas that have kept us apart and choosing to live in unity” signals changing norms toward positive attitudes and behavior. As another example, Bill Saffo, the mayor of Wilmington, NC, responded to reports of racist acts with the tweet “We didn't think we needed to say this, but, unfortunately, we do. This virus is not an excuse to be racist. In fact, there's no excuse to be racist.” This message both rejects negative actions and signals wider positive norms in saying “we didn't think we had to say this....” Bias incidents are thus not only rejected by someone in a leadership position, but painted as being completely outside what everyone deems acceptable.

Appendix E: Common Metaphors for Disease and How they can Help or Harm:

Metaphors are an essential tool in how we communicate; it is estimated that we use one metaphor for every 25 words spoken. Metaphors are useful because they allow us to understand something complex and abstract in a familiar way. Given the complex nature of pandemic messages around disease and its spread rely particularly heavily on metaphor. Research suggests that biomilitary and criminality metaphors, some of the most prevalent amidst pandemics, may be especially likely to cause social harm like xenophobia and the targeting of marginalized groups. At the same time there are also helpful ways to use metaphors to contribute towards societal good and help people navigate this moment.

Thus, understanding the power of metaphors--their ability to shape perception and influence action--is central to understanding how to effectively communicate at this moment in time.

Metaphors prime our brains with information about how we should understand a particular concept, and even evoke specific emotions. Take, for instance, the phrase "tax relief." The word relief immediately evokes visceral feelings of being unburdened - whether of a physical pain or a worry and, in turn, frames taxes as a burden. The same holds for the phrase "consumer regulation" vs. "consumer protection." Both refer to the same concepts and set of laws, but regulation frames these standards as burdensome or restricting, while protection frames the standards as benevolent or helpful.

By influencing how we understand different ideas or events, metaphors also prime us to respond in particular ways. For instance, in one experiment, two groups of participants read a story about a city with a high crime rate. In one story, crime was compared to "a beast," while in the other it was compared to a disease. Participants suggested response measures in line with the metaphorical framing of their group, e.g, enforcement, such as calling the National Guard or building more jails vs. containment, such as health care reform.

Clear patterns in how metaphors focused on illness and disease are used play out in current coverage of COVID-19, with existing research suggesting that some of these metaphors carrying greater potential for harm:

- **“Biomilitary” metaphors:** These metaphors use securitized language to frame disease as a war enemy. Research shows they can help fuel xenophobia and the targeting of groups. Evocative words such as “fight”, “attack,” “defenses”, “invasion,” and “battle” are often used. These metaphors often place a moral judgment on the disease, with the “us” being good and the “enemy” (disease) being evil. We see this in headlines such as “Massachusetts Recruits 1,000 ‘contact tracers’ to Battle COVID-19” from NPR and “Americans use 3D printers from China to help fight Covid-19” from CNN.
- **Criminality/ “disease as crime” metaphors:** Much like biomilitary metaphors, these equate disease with a “good vs. evil” framework in which a malintended disease “lurks,” “pounces,” and “preys upon” its victims. These metaphors, too, can fuel xenophobia and the targeting of groups. Criminality and guilt have long been associated with disease. These metaphors can be subtle, such as this Boston Globe article, “As the Coronavirus Lurks, Public Life in Boston Gradually Shuts Down” or more overt, such as this Atlantic piece entitled “The Coronavirus is Stealing our Ability to Grieve.”
- **Disaster metaphors:** These metaphors equate disease to an “act of God,” and draw upon natural disaster terms such as “waves” of disease, diseases spreading “like wildfire,” or cities being “flooded” with new infections. Media coverage of COVID-19 is rife with natural disaster metaphors, such as the Boston Globe feature “The Third Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic is Now,” and the Sky News story entitled “Coronavirus: the Celebrations that Helped COVID-19 Spread Like Wildfire in New Orleans.”
- **Travel/ transit metaphors:** These metaphors are often used to specifically address the spread of disease, both from person to person and throughout an individual’s body. Such metaphors use terms like “traveling,” or being “transported.” Consider the USA Today story, “6 feet enough for social distancing? MIT Researcher says droplets carrying coronavirus can travel up to 27 feet,” and this story from PBS entitled “Watch how Covid-19 traveled the world.”
- **“Bioinformation” metaphors:** These metaphors use mechanized or “systems” language to describe the processes of disease spread and infection. We see this in phrases like the now-ubiquitous phrase “flatten the curve” to a New York Magazine article that describes how the virus takes hold in the body by saying

“It’s like Santa’s workshop, where the elves, dutifully hammering out the toys on Santa’s instructions, are complexes of RNA and protein called ribosomes”

As noted above, research suggests that some of the above metaphors may be more prone to causing societal harm than others. **Some researchers view biomilitary and criminality metaphors as more likely to prime societies for negative behaviors such as xenophobia and other forms of group-targeting because they can conflate people who are ill or may be carrying the pathogen with “the enemy”** . This is because ideas of guilt and criminality can then be transferred to those infected with the disease, in turn portraying people as guilty or criminal and therefore threatening. Indeed, we have seen this play out with media coverage of HIV/AIDS, which often painted the virus as a predatory killer, contributing to the broader narrative that those with the disease were both at fault for their own infection and dangerous to others.

Metaphors around illness, however, may also be informative and have a positive impact. Hanne, a researcher on metaphors and illness, uses the example of comparing precautions against illness to safe driving. In the case of COVID-19, washing your hands, covering your mouth, avoiding crowded places are akin to buckling your seatbelt, stopping at traffic lights, and going the speed limit. While an accident could still occur, following the right protocols in driving greatly decreases the chances of an accident. The value of this metaphor is threefold. First, it equates disease to something familiar that has an accepted level of risk and is something most people feel comfortable with. Second, it empowers the listener to take concrete steps to avoid harm. Third, it does not ascribe any sort of malintent or guilt to the virus, which could thus be transferred to people infected with the virus.

Appendix F: How Mis- and Dis-information can fuel harmful division and hate in this moment:

Mis- and dis-information - such as rumors and conspiracy theories - are consistently used in narratives that promote identity-based violence - often providing (false) examples in support of the arguments that a group is threatening, guilty, or not fully human. They spread quickly by invoking emotions like fear and novelty.

Misinformation is often “sticky” or difficult to correct, but it’s especially so in moments of uncertainty. This is because misinformation can fill a deeper need for certainty or clarity. By understanding how and why misinformation takes hold in people’s minds, we can more effectively work to correct and counteract it.

What makes misinformation such an ongoing challenge? Why can’t we just put the facts out to correct it and be done? First off, misinformation often spreads quickly through appealing to emotions like fear, disgust, and anger. This means that by the time we set out to correct a false piece of information, it could already have reached a significant audience. This also is important because the more we hear something, the more familiar it seems and the more likely we are to believe that it’s true . Additionally, we are more likely to believe information or stories that confirm our existing worldview, while resisting information that challenges our existing beliefs. In other words, when it comes to processing information, we often lead with our emotions and believe what feels good to believe.

Indeed, information about threats spreads fast, whether it is rumor or truth, making a pandemic a risky context. Where stories that provide “evidence” of another group being somehow threatening to our group or guilty of a wrong against our group don’t exist, such stories and examples can be invented. Even well-intentioned attempts at spreading knowledge and alerting fellow group members to a potential threat can end up fueling the spread of rumors and disinformation. A recent Pew poll found that a startling 30 percent of Americans believe the false claim that COVID-19 was created in a lab. Twenty-three percent of those polled went one step further, believing that the virus was made intentionally. Far-right news outlet One America News even went so far as to “conduct an investigation” that falsely concluded that COVID-19 was made in a lab in North Carolina.

Misinformation targeting groups has similarly spread quickly. Communications platforms Telegram and Gab, for instance, have been rife with patently untrue messages claiming that COVID-19 is an international Jewish conspiracy to assert control over the wider population. Even relatively mainstream voices, such as Sheriff David Clarke (former Milwaukee County sheriff turned public figure), have voiced their belief in these anti-Semitic theories, with Clarke tweeting the false conspiracy that George Soros is behind COVID-19.

Appendix G: Context Analysis Tool

1. How is - or could - COVID-19 and the economic crisis feed the wider narratives related to group targeting and violence? How is or could COVID be used as evidence of these narratives?

Ask yourself:

- Do existing narratives paint targeted groups as responsible for, or as carriers of, COVID-19? As responsible for the economic crisis? As otherwise somehow 'disgusting,' 'contaminated' or posing a threat?
- Who has been spreading those narratives and to what end?
- Are they widespread or spread by a few loud voices?

By developing an understanding of the broader narratives around targeted groups - and how these are connected to emotions and narratives around COVID-19 and the economic crisis - you can identify strategies for undermining these associations. You can also be sure to avoid any messaging that would inadvertently contribute to those associations.

2. Which identities are being activated by COVID-19 and the local or national responses to it?

Ask yourself:

- Which identities are most salient in this moment?
- Are people unifying across identity lines that have previously been in conflict with one another (for example under the umbrella of a neighborhood, a city, parents at a school)? Are competing identities being activated (e.g., partisan identities and community identities may be activated at the sametime)?
- What are the power dynamics between the different identity groups?

Note that these dynamics can change over time. There may be moments of unity in the face of a perceived outside threat, but over time groups can still be blamed or targeted. Pay attention to how this is changing. Remember that moments of unity provide an opportunity to instantiate inclusive frames, build and emphasize cross-cutting identities, etc., while moments of fracture may require intervention.

3. How is threat being communicated and what emotions is this prompting?

Ask yourself:

- Which types of threats are being communicated?
- What words are being used, and what emotions do you think they might be activating -- fear, anger, disgust, a combination?
- Who or what is being blamed as the cause of the threat, or portrayed as threatening (COVID-19? An economic policy? A marginalized group? Elites? Politicians? Members of one political party?)?
- If a person or group of people is being blamed, how is intent being attributed? (Is the narrative that they mean to cause harm?)
- What protective actions are being undertaken or recommended in the face of COVID-19 (social distancing, giving some people priority for services over others, etc.)?

4. How are metaphors and framing being used?

Ask yourself:

- What metaphors are being used in discussions about the pandemic and its wider implications (e.g., economic)?
- Are metaphors linking entire groups of people with the disease and its fallout?
- What frames and emotions are the metaphors priming people with?

5. How is empathy being activated, and for whom?

Ask yourself:

- What are the narratives around who is deserving of empathy?
- Are people expressing empathy only for members of their in-group? Is empathy being weaponized against other groups of people (e.g., we have to protect our vulnerable people from infection by X group)?
- Are people expressing empathy but also talking about limitations (e.g., "I feel bad for X but we just have to protect ourselves")? Do you see anxiety, fear, threat, and uncertainty overpowering empathy?

6. Which narratives are misinformation and disinformation tapping into?

Ask yourself:

- What emotions, identities, or experiences is the misinformation tapping into?
- How is the misinformation spreading? Over what channels and through which speakers?

- What is the audience's relationship with those sources/messengers? Are they trusted? Are they influential? Do they claim to speak for the audience's interests?

7. Are norms shifting, and if so how?

Ask yourself:

- Who is setting norms right now? When people aren't sure what to do or what to believe, who are they taking their cues from? Are there "a few loud voices" promoting division or cooperation? Who are they?
- What is motivating people to follow new norms? Are they being praised? Do they feel more part of a community? Are there more concrete rewards? Are there consequences (real or perceived) for not going along with the new norms?
- How quickly are norms shifting?
- Are local norms in line with national norms? Is one set of norms stronger?
- Are there moderate voices speaking out against violence or group-targeted rhetoric? Can these voices be amplified?

Norms are rarely set in stone. Norms shift with different leadership, with triggering events, as the result of targeted campaigns, etc. Keeping track of how and through whom norms are shifting is central to proactively working toward unity, cooperation, and respect in the face of COVID-19.

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