



# **CANARIES IN THE COAL MINE:** **COVID-19 MISINFORMATION** **AND BLACK COMMUNITIES**

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## Table of Contents

<b><u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u></b>	2
<b><u>INTRODUCTION</u></b>	4
Example 1: <b><u>BLACK PEOPLE CANNOT DIE FROM COVID-19</u></b>	8
Example 2: <b><u>COVID-19 IS INTENDED TO SLOW THE RISING MINORITY-MAJORITY</u></b>	11
Example 3: <b><u>HERBAL AND NATURAL HEALTH REMEDIES CAN CURE COVID-19</u></b>	14
Example 4: <b><u>COVID-19 IS CAUSED BY EXPOSURE TO 5G TECHNOLOGY</u></b>	16
<b><u>CONCLUSION: NO MORE CANARIES IN THE COAL MINE</u></b>	18
<b><u>ABOUT THE AUTHOR &amp; ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</u></b>	21

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The Black community online is awash in medical misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic.**

**Even as Black people are disproportionately dying from the virus due to systemic racism, harmful inaccuracies about how to keep from contracting COVID-19, how to treat it, and where it comes from are metastasizing in Black online spaces, putting people at even greater risk.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the crisis, we have tracked how COVID-19 was being discussed in Black online communities. Using multi-site digital ethnography to track how conspiracies and disinformation cross message boards and tech platforms, we have identified four predominant narratives spreading in Black communities in the United States:

**1. Black people could not die from COVID-19**

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**2. The virus was man-made for the purposes of population control**

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**3. The virus could be contained through use of herbal remedies**

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**4. 5G radiation was the root cause of COVID-19**

Some of this misinformation appears to be targeted directly at the community by outsiders, while some has grown up organically within specific Black communities. In this report, we expose how historical oppression, medical mistrust, and healthcare redlining combined with failures by internet platforms and media underreporting have left the Black community with an information vacuum now being filled by dangerous false narratives online. This leaves individuals at great personal risk, and imperils democracy by harming Black voters' ability to be informed on matters of the highest national importance.

We conclude this report by recommending specific steps that the press can take to better represent the health realities of Black Americans and keep them informed, and that tech companies must take to safeguard accuracy, clamp down on misinformation, and support the dissemination of authoritative medical information in formats that speak directly to the Black community.

Now, as the country grapples with the twin pandemics of racism and COVID-19, and the death toll from the virus surpasses 100,000 deaths, the two illnesses converge on Black bodies. It is yet again Black lives that are being excessively lost. Against that backdrop, memes about melanin, recipes for herbal concoctions, gifs about 5G and conspiracies about Bill Gates may not seem like high stakes concerns. This report shows that right now those online ephemera are actually matters of life and death.



# INTRODUCTION

It began with dangerous speculation: “black people cannot get coronavirus” and “we got the antibodies for that” echoed in text messages, Instagram comments, tweets, and on Facebook.<sup>1</sup>

Soon, the Black community was awash in medical misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, even as Black people were dying from COVID-19 at a rate much higher than other demographics. Dangerous health misinformation hit the community like a second virus, a confounding and inflaming new factor injected into an already depleted immune system, making it that much harder for the Black community to survive the pandemic.

In the US, health disparities have for decades shown the deadly effects of racism. For instance, Black people die at higher rates of treatable diseases due to lack of access to healthcare and hospitals.<sup>2</sup> The pattern holds for COVID-19. Since the pandemic first hit the US in March 2020, locales that are tracking race data have found Black people account for a disproportionately high number of COVID-19-related deaths: 80% in Louisiana<sup>3</sup> and Milwaukee, 70% in



*Tweet posted by a user in response to social media influencer and Space X CEO Elon Musk. Musk posted a series of misleading tweets that downplayed the seriousness of COVID-19. Twitter initially declined to remove the tweets from Musk that violated community standards.*

- 1 Van Jones, “Black America must wake up to this viral threat,” *CNN*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/06/opinions/african-americans-covid-19-risk-jones/index.html>.
- 2 Akilah Johnson and Talia Buford, “Early Data Shows African Americans Have Contracted and Died of Coronavirus at an Alarming Rate,” *ProPublica*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate>.
- 3 Reis Thebault, Andrew Ba Tran and Vanessa Williams, “The coronavirus is infecting and killing black Americans at an alarmingly high rate,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>.

Chicago, and 40% in Michigan.<sup>4</sup> In light of this ongoing and systemic failure, Black people across the US have for centuries and for good reason been skeptical of government interventions and the medical community, relying on community knowledge for their very survival.

That necessary self-reliance, when it comes to matters of health, can make the community a vulnerable target for disinformation intended to hurt, and susceptible to spreading well-intentioned but harmful misinformation. That risk is compounded by social conditions that put Black people at more physical peril of dying from COVID-19, by failures of technology platforms to ensure that those most vulnerable to the dangers of misinformation are protected through enforcement of their community standards, and by failures of tech companies and elected officials to speak to the Black community in ways that are culturally accessible.

Tech companies, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest and others, have modified their interfaces to give authoritative information to anyone searching for “COVID-19” or “Coronavirus” in an attempt to provide up-to-date medical recommendations. However, people within Black communities are talking about COVID-19 using different memes, like “rona” and remixing Cardi B’s messages about coronavirus on Instagram.<sup>5</sup>

Because tech companies don’t have the cultural knowledge to understand how different communities talk about COVID-19, searching for “rona” jokes, memes and other cultural conversation, rather than official health-related



*Tweet posted by NBA basketball player Chris Martin Palmer. Similar tweets were circulated in the first weeks of the US outbreak, contributing to the false perception that Black communities were not susceptible to COVID-19*



*Example of popular “Miss Rona” content shared on Twitter, where humor is used to debunk COVID-19 disinformation.*

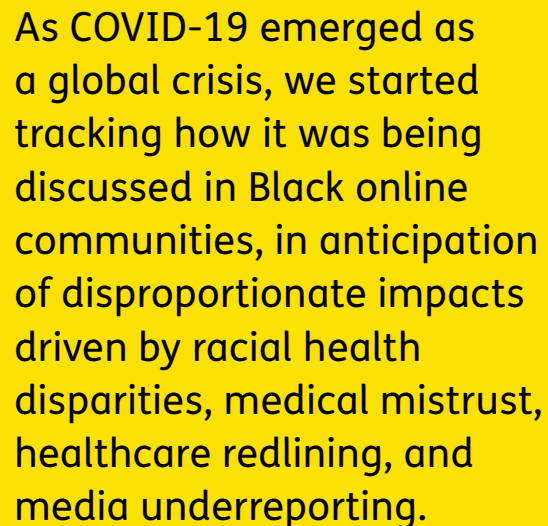
<sup>4</sup> Akilah Johnson and Talia Buford, “Early Data Shows African Americans Have Contracted and Died of Coronavirus at an Alarming Rate,” *ProPublica*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate>.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Zoladz, “How Cardi B’s Off-the-Cuff Video Became a Coronavirus Anthem,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/arts/music/coronavirus-cardi-b.html>.

messages, doesn't always bring up informative results. When entire groups are left out of public health communications, the information asymmetries leave gaps that harmful health misinformation can fill.

We at Color of Change, the largest racial justice organization in America, anticipated this when the pandemic began, since for several years we have tracked disinformation initiatives targeted at Black communities, including voter suppression<sup>6</sup> and attempts to initiate voter disengagement<sup>7</sup> and pushed tech companies to take action on a number of fronts to curb the harmful impacts of this misinformation on and offline. They have largely failed. We have also seen white supremacists use digital blackface to infiltrate Black communities,<sup>8</sup> and spread vile attacks on elected officials.<sup>9</sup>

As COVID-19 emerged as a global crisis, we started tracking how it was being discussed in Black online communities, in anticipation of disproportionate impacts driven by racial health disparities, medical mistrust, healthcare redlining, and media underreporting.



As COVID-19 emerged as a global crisis, we started tracking how it was being discussed in Black online communities, in anticipation of disproportionate impacts driven by racial health disparities, medical mistrust, healthcare redlining, and media underreporting.

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6 Young Mie Kim, "Voter Suppression Has Gone Digital," *Brennan Center for Justice*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/voter-suppression-has-gone-digital>.

7 Scott Shane and Sheera Frenkel, Russian 2016 Influence Operation Targeted African-Americans on Social Media, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/politics/russia-2016-influence-campaign.html>.

8 Neha Rashid, "The Emergence Of The White Troll Behind A Black Face," *NPR*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/21/520522240/the-emergence-of-the-white-troll-behind-a-black-face>.

9 Sarah D. Wire, "FBI to talk to Rep. Maxine Waters' opponent about tweeting of fake letter," *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-waters-fbi-letter-20180827-story.html>.



For our methodology we used multi-site digital ethnography to track how conspiracies and disinformation crossed message boards and tech platforms. We found four predominant narratives spreading in Black communities in the United States:

**1. Black people could not die from COVID-19**

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**2. The virus was man-made for the purposes of population control**

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**3. The virus could be contained through use of herbal remedies**

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**4. 5G radiation was the root cause of COVID-19**

These four narratives are discussed in more detail below. Some appear to be disinformation targeted directly at the community by outsiders, while some misinformation grew up organically within specific Black communities. While misinformation is based on inaccuracies that stem from error, disinformation is deliberate falsehood designed to mislead and misinform those being targeted. Due to a lack of attention to Black online spaces from researchers and the media, there is a hole in the field of misinformation studies that makes it harder to trace and definitely say where some of these falsehoods originated and whether they were organic or planted. Our research makes clear that the health misinformation surrounding COVID-19 poses an immediate threat to the health of Black people, and is a symptom of an information ecosystem poisoned by racial inequality.

## Example 1:

# **BLACK PEOPLE CANNOT DIE FROM COVID-19**

When COVID-19 first hit the US, much of the online conversation in Black spaces revolved around the fabrication that Black people were somehow inoculated from contracting it or dying from it.<sup>10</sup>

The truth is the opposite: Black people are at higher risk. Many of the ailments that make someone more susceptible to COVID-19 — diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, sarcoidosis and other lung diseases — are all ailments from which Black people disproportionately die.<sup>11</sup> Frontline workers across all sectors, many of whom are still working without paid medical leave, are disproportionately Black.<sup>12</sup> The heightened level of exposure to COVID-19 in cities with dense housing, small supermarkets, and tight convenience stores also places Black people at higher risk.

This dangerous narrative surfaced online in mid-February 2020.



*Tweet posted by a Twitter user reinforcing the lie that Black people are not susceptible to COVID-19. The user retweeted a prolific Twitter and YouTube user that is an advocate for the “Foundational Black Americans” (FBA) movement. FBA is a movement for reparations for Black people who have ancestry that traces back to pre-civil war. Though some prominent members of the FBA movement shared misinformation on COVID-19, there’s not enough information to show this was an intentional, widespread disinformation effort.*

10 Janell Ross, “Coronavirus Outbreak Revives Dangerous Race Myths and Pseudoscience,” *NBC News*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/coronavirus-outbreak-revives-dangerous-race-myths-pseudoscience-n1162326>.

11 “Profile: Black/African Americans,” U.S. Dept. Of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, August 22, 2019, <https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=61>.

12 Deborah Barfield Berry, “Coronavirus Layoffs Disproportionately Hurt Black and Latino Workers: ‘It’s Almost Like Doomsday Is Coming,’” *USA Today*, March, 24, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/24/coronavirus-unemployment-layoffs-blacks-latinos/2900371001/>.

On social media, this conversation was observable by tracking keywords related to COVID-19 and Blackness, and several themes emerged from these evolving theories on immunity.

One of the most prevalent theories as to why Black people were supposedly immune stemmed from the belief that melanin, the pigment found in hair, skin and eyes, offered a layer of protection from the virus.<sup>13</sup> People also often repeated the refrain that “no Black people had died from COVID-19.” As evidence of this claim, some pointed to an interactive map from *The New York Times* that tracks the spread of virus, which at the time showed it spreading in gentrified areas where fewer Black people lived. The data presented in this map was skewed, however, as rural<sup>14</sup> and poor urban<sup>15</sup> communities had less testing capacity and fewer medical staff, and therefore were not able to detect as many cases as more affluent or urban areas. Some of these theories were also based on the comparatively low number of documented cases in Africa in February and early March, a number dependent on myriad factors, none of which is to do with melanin levels or natural immunity.<sup>16</sup>



*Tweets like this one appeared in the first weeks of the US and Africa COVID-19 outbreaks. These tweets continued to suggest that people descended from sub-saharan Africa could not catch or die from COVID-19.*

As with many cases of disinformation, the story was started on a small blog and was amplified by conversation on social media. A since-deleted article from the news blog *CityScrollz* released on Valentine’s Day proclaimed that “Chinese Doctors Confirmed African Blood Genetic Composition Resist Coronavirus After Student Cured.” This article gained viral traction across all major platforms before it was removed and eventually debunked by several fact-checking organizations,<sup>17</sup> and later investigated by *Mel Magazine*.<sup>18</sup>

13 Reuters Fact Check, “False claim: African skin resists the coronavirus,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-coronavirus-ethnicity/false-claim-african-skin-resists-the-coronavirus-idUSKBN20X27G>.

14 Olugbenga Ajilore and Zoe Willingham, “Rural Americans Are Vulnerable to the Coronavirus,” *Center for American Progress*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/03/05/481340/rural-communities-vulnerable-coronavirus/>.

15 John Eligon, “For Urban Poor, the Coronavirus Complicates Existing Health Risks,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/coronavirus-minorities.html>.

16 Colin Dwyer, U.N. Agency Fears ‘Vulnerable’ Africa May Suffer At Least 300,000 COVID-19 Deaths, *NPR*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/17/836896562/u-n-agency-fears-vulnerable-africa-may-suffer-at-least-300-000-covid-19-deaths>.

17 “No, African blood and black skin don’t ‘resist’ new coronavirus,” *Africa Check*, February 19, 2020, <https://africacheck.org/fbcheck/no-african-blood-and-black-skin-dont-resist-new-coronavirus/>.

18 Zaron Burnett III, “Are Black People Really Safe From Coronavirus Because Of Melanin?,” *Mel Magazine*, March 15, 2020, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/are-black-people-safe-from-coronavirus>.

While some theories remain on social media regarding Black immunity to COVID-19, the data being collected about infection and mortality rates have dramatically changed the conversation. The first recorded deaths in Illinois<sup>19</sup> and upstate New York<sup>20</sup> were Black and underreported by major news organizations. Additionally, many countries have not released race and ethnicity data, making it harder to track how many people of Black and African origin may have already died internationally. As of May 15, there are 10 states and Washington D.C. that are publicly reporting COVID-19 numbers by race.<sup>21</sup> Congressional representatives, such as Massachusetts Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, are pushing for more comprehensive data collection and reporting for COVID-19 cases by race. In states and cities that have made that data publicly available, it is clear that the misinformation about immunity does not match the stark reality.



*One of several tweets posted in the first few weeks of the US COVID-19 outbreak that incorrectly linked melanin levels to the body's ability to fight off infection.*

19 Natalie Moore, "Family Members Mourn The First To Die From COVID-19 In Illinois," *WBEZ*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/family-members-mourn-the-first-to-die-from-covid-19-in-illinois/088281c4-2631-41fa-954d-9942d51c4e8f>.

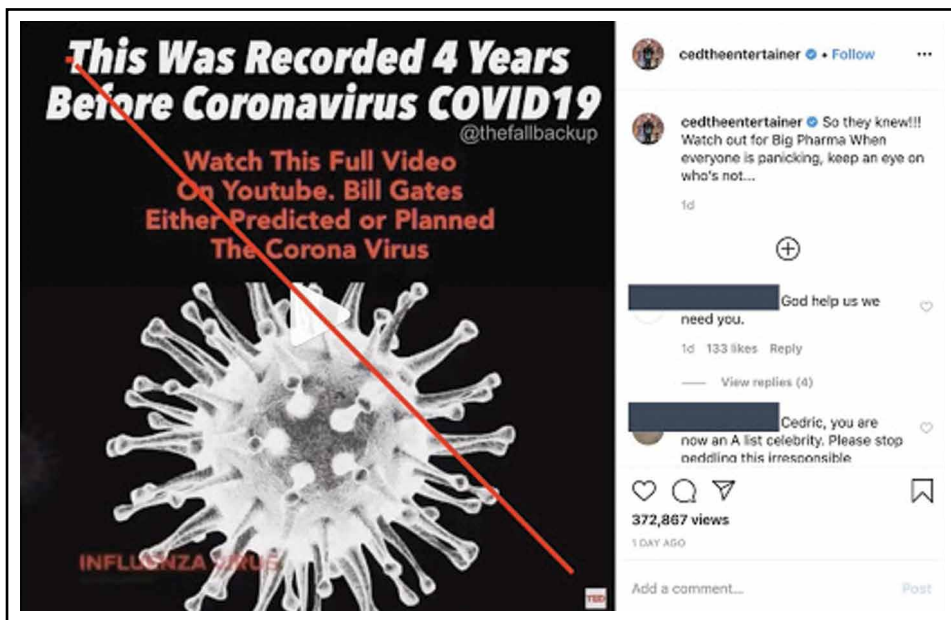
20 Deanna Dewberry, "Family of first person to die from COVID-19-related causes in Monroe County speaks out," *WHEC*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.whec.com/coronavirus/family-of-first-person-to-die-from-covid-19-related-causes-in-monroe-county-speaks-out/5677106/>.

21 Covid-19 Data by Race, *Data For Black Lives*, Last updated May 15, 2020, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ljIxdEFZy7TBQMvImmwFcBzzMCJapejp6FBsK3U2i0>.

Example 2:

# COVID-19 IS INTENDED TO SLOW A RISING MINORITY-MAJORITY AND CODIFY THE NEW WORLD ORDER

In mid-March, after the number of publicly confirmed cases debunked the theory that Black people were not susceptible to COVID-19, a video on Instagram emerged promoting the theory that Bill Gates was responsible for creating the novel coronavirus.



Instagram post from Cedric the Entertainer, a popular Black comedian.



The video, which was viewed more than 2.2 million times, was promoted by a number of social media influencers, including at least 20 verified Instagram users and more than 50 other users.<sup>22</sup> Since then, conspiracies connecting Bill Gates to some opportunistic plot to take advantage of COVID-19 as a means to seize social control have exploded online.<sup>23</sup>

This conspiracy is consistent with the frame of Black genocide,<sup>24</sup> a reaction to hundreds of years of harm Black people have experienced at the hands of the western medical establishment.<sup>25</sup> Today, chronic undertreatment and testing of Black communities, and disproportionately high Black maternal and infant death rates have helped perpetuate the Black genocide frame and belief that the government and medical facilities are intentionally killing Black people. Since the 1970s, the Black genocide frame is often employed by anti-abortion activists, particularly in attacks against Planned Parenthood that claim the organization is white supremacist.<sup>26</sup>



*Tweet posted by Black right-wing commentator Candace Owens. Owens has promoted several debunked conspiracy theories and in May 2020 was banned from Twitter for inciting violence and encouraging Michigan residents to defy the governor's stay-at-home orders.*

Rumors of COVID-19's creation as a biological weapon cited Bill Gates' connection to Planned Parenthood. Margaret Sanger, who founded the organization which later became Planned Parenthood, had a history with the eugenics movement. She gave a speech at the women's auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan in 1921,<sup>27</sup> and she held a close relationship with Lothrop Stoddard, a known Klansman and Nazi sympathizer.<sup>28</sup>

22 Brandy Zadrozny, "Coronavirus conspiracy video spreads on Instagram among black celebrities," *NBC*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/coronavirus-conspiracy-video-spreads-instagram-among-black-celebrities-n1158571>.

23 Daisuke Wakabayashi, Davey Alba and Marc Tracy, "Bill Gates, at Odds With Trump on Virus, Becomes a Right-Wing Target," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virus-conspiracy-theories.html>.

24 Kathryn Joyce, "Abortion as 'Black Genocide'," *Political Research Associates: The Public Eye*, April 29, 2010, <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2010/04/29/abortion-as-black-genocide-an-old-scare-tactic-re-emerges>.

25 Harriet A. Washington, "Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation On Black Americans From Colonial Times To The Present," (New York: Penguin Random House, 2006), <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/185986/medical-apartheid-by-harriet-a-washington/>.

26 Robert G. Weisbord, "Birth control and the black American: A matter of genocide?," (*Demography* 10, 1973) 571-590, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060884>.

27 Kim Lacapria, "Does a Photograph Show Planned Parenthood's Founder at a KKK Rally?," *Snopes*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/margaret-sanger-kkk/>.

28 Jennifer Latson, "What Margaret Sanger Really Said About Eugenics and Race," *Time*, October 14, 2020, <https://time.com/4081760/margaret-sanger-history-eugenics/>.

Despite the fact that there is no evidence to support the claim that the modern Planned Parenthood organization maintains a eugenics ideology, and the current president is Alexis McGill Johnson — a Black woman and social justice advocate — the conspiracy theory persists. Additionally, people have pointed to Gates’ investment and involvement with vaccination testing in Africa as supporting evidence for his supposed diabolical plan for a “new world order.”<sup>29</sup>



*Memes like this one discouraging vaccinating and linking Bill Gates to Black genocide efforts spread across various social media platforms targeted at Black users. This particular meme uses a popular childhood photo of music artist Cardi B, who has actively used her social platforms to urge precautions against COVID-19.*

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29 Alex Kasprak, “Did Bill Gates ‘Admit’ Vaccinations Are Designed So Governments Can ‘Depopulate’ the World?,” *Snopes*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/bill-gates-vaccinations-depopulation/>.

### Example 3:

# **HERBAL AND NATURAL HEALTH REMEDIES CAN CURE COVID-19**

Several prominent Black herbalists and plant-based dieticians have made the claim that COVID-19 can be treated without medical intervention — a baseless claim that intersects with the invulnerability of Black populations and Black genocide theories.

This is an extension of widely promoted theories from prominent Black figures such as the comedian and advocate Dick Gregory or the herbalist Dr. Sebi, who proclaimed he could cure HIV and cancer with dietary changes.<sup>30</sup>

Denial of medical treatment in favor of unproven homeopathy is not restricted to Black communities, as multi-level marketing influencers and supplement companies have taken to social media to promote holistic remedies to protect oneself from the virus.<sup>31</sup> The Food and Drug Administration has been forced to issue continuous warnings to companies selling untested treatments.<sup>32</sup>

However, this sentiment is particularly dangerous to Black people who, as noted above, are more likely to have pre-conditions that could make them more vulnerable to COVID-19, and are more likely to be undertreated by doctors. Black communities have more reason to be mistrustful of doctors due to a long documented history of medical experimentation, neglect, and the limited diversity of the medical profession.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Stephen A. Crockett Jr., “5 Mysteries Surrounding the Life and Death of Dr. Sebi,” *The Root*, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theroot.com/5-mysteries-surrounding-the-life-and-death-of-dr-sebi-1790856373>.

31 Laura Bradley, “How Influencers Are Milking the Coronavirus for Clout—and Money,” *The Daily Beast*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-influencers-are-milking-the-coronavirus-for-clout-and-money>.

32 “Beware of Fraudulent Coronavirus Tests, Vaccines and Treatments,” *FDA*, Last Updated April 29, 2020, <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/beware-fraudulent-coronavirus-tests-vaccines-and-treatments>.

33 Aaron Morrison and Jay Reeves, “Amid coronavirus pandemic, black mistrust of medicine looms,” *Associated Press*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.modernhealthcare.com/patient-care/amid-coronavirus-pandemic-black-mistrust-medicine-looms>.

Black people are also more likely to report negative experiences with medical staff that they attribute to race.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, self-isolation and quarantining in Black communities are more difficult because a disproportionate number of Black people are low-wage workers, less likely to be homeowners, more likely to rely on public transportation, and are more likely to live in densely populated areas.<sup>35</sup> Taken together, the idea of treating oneself with herbs and natural remedies can be enticing, especially when so much is still uncertain about medical treatments for COVID-19.

The image is a screenshot of a digital article from Black Enterprise. At the top, the Black Enterprise logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Women of Power', 'Entrepreneurs Summit', 'Black Men Xcel', 'Business', and 'News' are on the right. Below this is a banner for 'SISTERS INC PODCAST' with the tagline 'A PODCAST FOR AND ABOUT WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS'. The main headline reads 'JAMAICAN CORONAVIRUS SURVIVOR SAYS 'CARIBBEAN HOME REMEDIES' HELPED HIM BEAT COVID-19'. The author is listed as 'by Dana Givens' and the date as 'April 7, 2020'. Below the text are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The central image shows a Black man in profile, wearing a blue and white striped blanket, using a white tissue to wipe his nose. In the background, a small white table holds various bottles and containers, suggesting a home remedy or medical preparation.

Article posted on the digital edition of Black Enterprise, a business magazine that caters to Black audiences. Though Black Enterprise has posted content urging Black communities to take precautions against COVID-19, articles like this can discourage readers from seeking medical treatment if they are exhibiting symptoms.

34 Maureen R. Benjamins and Megan Middleton, "Perceived discrimination in medical settings and perceived quality of care: A population-based study in Chicago," *PLOS ONE*, April 25, 2019, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0215976>.

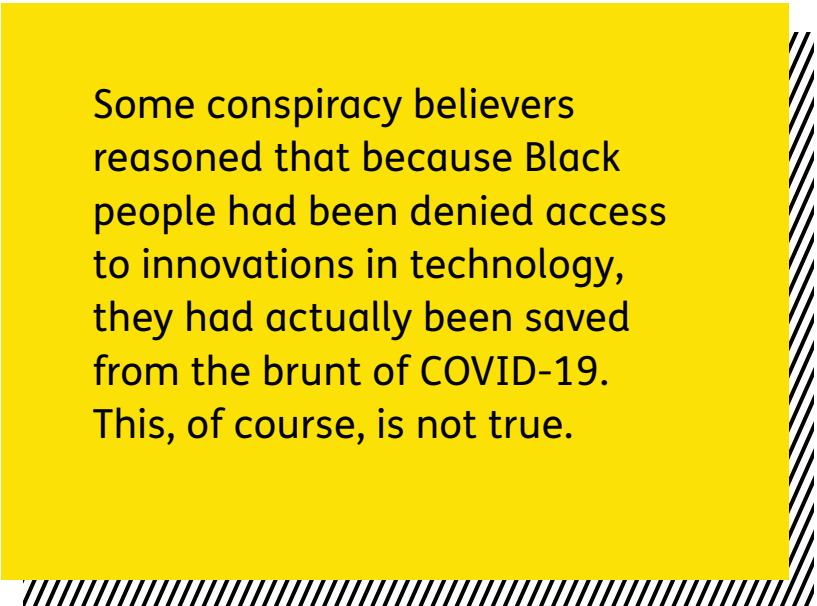
35 Rashawn Ray, "Why are Blacks dying at higher rates from COVID-19?," *Brookings*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/>.

**Example 4:**

# **COVID-19 IS CAUSED BY** **EXPOSURE TO 5G TECHNOLOGY** **USED BY WIRELESS NETWORKS**

Both inside and outside of Black communities, the belief that radiation from 5G wireless technology is the root cause of COVID-19 has led to more than 100 incidences of arson in the United Kingdom targeting wireless towers and other telecom gear.<sup>36</sup>

This conspiracy gained traction in Black communities after several Black social media influencers, including R&B star Keri Hilson, connected 5G technology, which had been launched in China, to COVID-19. The reasoning on social media went something like this: Many Black communities and African nations have been left out of 5G broadband upgrades, and since initially African countries were reporting low numbers of cases, many people argued the two things were related and causal.<sup>37</sup> As of June 18, Africa CDC reports 276,233 cases to date on the continent, but there remains a suspected undercount due to inaccessibility to tests.



Some conspiracy believers reasoned that because Black people had been denied access to innovations in technology, they had actually been saved from the brunt of COVID-19. This, of course, is not true.

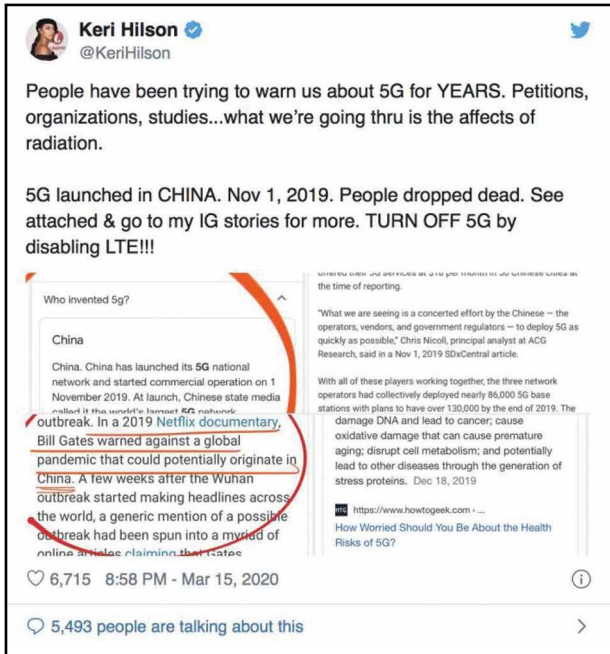
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36 Adam Satariano and Davey Alba, “Burning Cell Towers, Out of Baseless Fear They Spread the Virus,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/technology/coronavirus-5g-uk.html>.

37 “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” *Africa Center for Disease Control*, Last updated June 18, 2020, <https://africacdc.org/covid-19/>.



Some conspiracy believers reasoned that because Black people had been denied access to innovations in technology, they had actually been saved from the brunt of COVID-19. This, of course, is not true. 5G technology is not related to COVID-19 and the digital divide has persisted for decades.



Twitter post by Black singer-songwriter Keri Hilson. Hilson, who has over 4 million followers on Twitter, eventually removed the series of posts linking COVID-19 to 5G technology. Hilson was defended and reposted by several other prominent social media influencers.

# **CONCLUSION: NO MORE CANARIES IN THE COAL MINE**

In the 1790s, a yellow fever disaster nearly decimated Philadelphia's entire Black population. The cause was government, medical, and media neglect.<sup>38</sup> The illness was named the "yellow fever" because it produced jaundice, or a yellow color, in the skin. As many people were succumbing to it, physician John Lining promoted the idea that only white people were susceptible, reinforcing beliefs that newly arriving enslaved Africans had a supernatural inoculation to deadly diseases. This myth of immunity was also part of what helped drive the mass enslavement of Africans, after indigenous communities were ravaged by smallpox.

For Black communities, uncertainty is driven by a longstanding distrust of mainstream media and a history of trauma from interactions with powerful institutions, like medicine and government. Whitewashed newsrooms, blanket reporting on Black issues without layered context, and chronic underreporting of Black trauma and success have left a major gap that's made even more clear in times of crisis. The undertreatment of Black populations combined with the absence of documentation and media coverage for Black cases of COVID-19 played into the idea that Black people could not contract or die from COVID-19 and as such did not need to take extra precautions.

Rampant, unchecked misinformation like this can spread fast on social media, and often go further, than follow-up corrections.<sup>39</sup> The situation gets much worse when social media influencers with blue-check verification perpetuate these conspiracies and health misinformation, including President Trump and politicians,<sup>40</sup> while tech companies take little to no action.<sup>41</sup>

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38 Rana Asali Hogarth, "The Myth of Innate Racial Differences Between White and Black People's Bodies: Lessons From the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," *U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health*, October 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6727282/>.

39 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Ara, "The spread of true and false news online," (*Science*, Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151), March 9, 2018, <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

40 Gabrielle Lim and Joan Donovan, "Republicans Want Twitter to Ban Chinese Communist Party Accounts. That's a Dangerous Idea," *Slate*, April 3, 2020, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/republicans-want-twitter-to-ban-chinese-communist-party-accounts-thats-dangerous.html>.

41 Joan Donovan, "Social-media companies must flatten the curve of misinformation," *Nature*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01107-z>.

Social media has become core communication infrastructure for the globe. As such, social media companies have a crucial responsibility to ensure users have access to knowledge.

Back in February, Color Of Change alerted Twitter to COVID-19 misinformation that was spreading in the Black community. Twitter told us they were unlikely to take action. The company made revisions to its standards to address the dangers of Black misinformation and disinformation on the platform only after increased pressure and evidence gathering by Color of Change and other civil society groups. Other tech companies, like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, have been slower to institute new policies and restrict prominent accounts spreading anti-Black health misinformation and dangerous and untested treatments for COVID-19.

While there is much to be learned about COVID-19 and how it works, it is clear that misinformation and conspiratorial frames that suggest that Black people are somehow inoculated from the disease are both dangerous and patently untrue. Black lives are consistently put in danger, and it is incumbent upon community actors, media, government, and tech companies alike to do their part to ensure that timely, local, relevant, and redundant public health messages are served to all communities.

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To its credit, the internet has dismantled the old guard of media gatekeepers and provided essential infrastructure to groups like the movement for Black lives. But, it has also given rise to new tech oligarchies and fueled white supremacist organizing. Without government oversight, tech companies have amassed huge collections of personal data and captured the market for digital communications, which has given them crucial political power over the distribution of information, including news and medical recommendations, across the globe.

The disappearance of community owned media, tech, and communications infrastructure has further compromised the ability to engage in safe and secure organizing by civil society organizations and activists alike. In recent years, tech companies have often failed in their moral obligation to prevent posts and coordination on their platform that can have deadly consequences, such as allowing the spread of racist manifestos after violent attacks, which go on to inspire more violence.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Joan Donovan, "El Paso shooter wasn't a 'lone wolf' — and his so-called online 'manifesto' proves why," *NBC*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/el-paso-shooter-wasn-t-lone-wolf-his-so-called-ncna1039201>.

To stop the unchecked spread of COVID-19 and other medical disinformation in the Black community, tech companies must change their design to clamp down on violent rhetoric that drives up hate crimes and they must completely remove, not just label, debunked conspiratorial framing that compromises public health. They also have to provide trustworthy information for the Black community.

These problems existed before and go beyond COVID-19. But COVID-19 makes it urgently clear: When it comes to the broader harms caused by social media that enables networked harassment and unchecked disinformation, Black communities cannot continue to be the canary in the coal mine, because canaries get sick and die.<sup>43</sup>

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43 Scott Shand and Sheera Frenkel, "Russian 2016 Influence Operation Targeted African-Americans on Social Media," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/politics/russia-2016-influence-campaign.html>.

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## **Brandi Collins-Dexter**

As a visiting fellow at the Shorenstein Center, I research and write about disinformation and coordinated attacks on Black technoculture. As a senior campaign director at Color Of Change (COC), my work involves interrogating the role of media, technology and information integrity in improving or deteriorating community health and economic opportunities. COC is a digital first racial justice organization, started in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. COC campaigns to end predatory, corrupt and inequitable practices that hold Black people back and we champion solutions that move us all forward. We use technology to connect our members, to give voice to unheard stories, and to win change from corporations, elected officials and others. We know both the potential and dangers of unaccountable platforms.

Color Of Change has released a set of demands for the government and private sector related to limiting the harmful impact of COVID-19 on Black communities, which can be found at [theblackresponse.org](https://theblackresponse.org). In partnership with Dr. Ruth Arumala, COC also released a comprehensive guide on the best practices and resources for combatting COVID-19 in the Black community, which can be found at <https://theblackresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Black-Patients-Guide-to-Covid-19.pdf>.

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