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Was There a Wuhan Lab Leak? Why an Inquiry Won't Dig Out the Truth

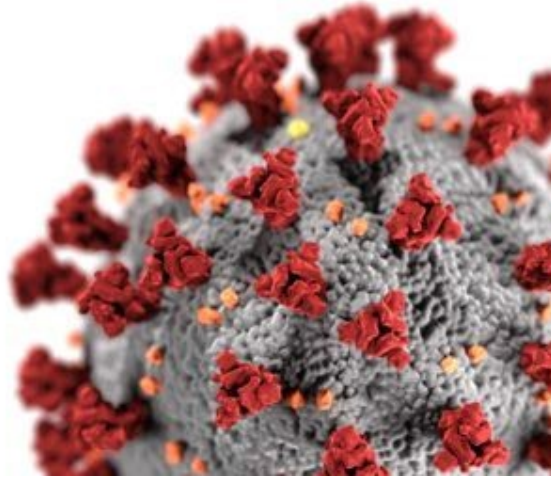


Image by the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov).

A year ago, the idea that Covid-19 leaked from a lab in Wuhan – a short distance from the wet market that is usually claimed to be the source of the virus – was dismissed as a crackpot theory, supported only by Donald Trump, QAnon and hawks on the right looking to escalate tensions dangerously with China.

Now, after what has been effectively a year-long blackout of the lab-leak theory by the corporate media and the scientific establishment, President Joe Biden has announced an investigation to assess its credibility. And as a consequence, what was treated until a few weeks ago as an unhinged, rightwing conspiracy is suddenly being widely aired and seriously considered by liberals.

Every media outlet is running prominent stories wondering whether a pandemic that has killed so many people and destroyed the lives of so many more can be blamed on human hubris and meddling rather than on a natural cause.

For many years, scientists at labs like Wuhan's have conducted Frankenstein-type experiments on viruses. They have modified naturally occurring infective agents – often found in animals such as bats – to try to predict the worst-case scenarios for how viruses, especially coronaviruses, might evolve. The claimed purpose has been to ensure humankind gets a head start on any new pandemic, preparing strategies and vaccines in advance to cope.

Viruses are known to have escaped from labs like Wuhan's many times before. And there are now reports, rejected by China, that several staff at Wuhan got sick in late 2019, shortly before Covid-19 exploded on to the world stage. Did a human-manipulated novel coronavirus escape from the lab and spread around the world?

No interest in truth

Here we get to the tricky bit. Because nobody in a position to answer that question appears to have any interest in finding out the truth – or at least, they have no interest in the rest of us learning the truth. Not China. Not US policy-makers. Not the World Health Organisation. And not the corporate media.

The only thing we can state with certainty is this: our understanding of the origins of Covid has been narratively managed over the past 15 months and is still being narratively managed. We are being told only what suits powerful political, scientific and commercial interests.

We now know that we were misdirected a year ago into believing that a lab leak was either fanciful nonsense or evidence of Sinophobia – when it was very obviously neither. And we should understand now, even though the story has switched 180 degrees, that we are still being misdirected. Nothing that the US administration or the corporate media have told us, or are now telling us, about the origins of the virus can be trusted.

No one in power truly wants to get to the bottom of this story. In fact, quite the reverse. Were we to truly understand its implications, this story might have the potential not only to hugely discredit western political, media and scientific elites but even to challenge the whole ideological basis on which their power rests.

Which is why what we are seeing is not an effort to grapple with the truth of the past year, but a desperate bid by those same elites to continue controlling our understanding of it. Western publics are being subjected to a continuous psy-op by their own officials.

Virus experiments

Last year, the safest story for the western political and scientific establishments to promote was the idea that a wild animal like a bat introduced Covid-19 to the human population. In other words, no one was to blame. The alternative was to hold China responsible for a lab leak, as Trump tried to do.

But there was a very good reason why most US policy-makers did not want to go down that latter path. And it had little to do with a concern either to refrain from conspiracy theories or to avoid provoking unnecessary tension with a nuclear-armed China.

Nicholas Wade, a former New York Times science writer, set out in May, in an in-depth investigation, why the case for a lab leak was scientifically strong, citing some of the world's leading virologists.

But Wade also highlighted a much deeper problem for US elites: just before the first outbreak of Covid, the Wuhan lab was, it seems, cooperating with the US scientific establishment and WHO officials on its virus experiments – what is known, in scientific parlance, as “gain-of-function” research.

Gain-of-function experiments had been paused during the second Obama administration, precisely because of concerns about the danger of a human-engineered virus mutation escaping and creating a pandemic. But under Trump, US officials restarted the programme and were reportedly funding work at the Wuhan lab through a US-based medical organisation called the EcoHealth Alliance.

The US official who pushed this agenda hardest is reported to have been Dr Anthony Fauci – yes, the US President's chief medical adviser and the official widely credited with curbing Trump's reckless approach to the pandemic. If the lab leak theory is right, the pandemic's saviour in the US might actually have been one of its chief instigators.

And to top it off, senior officials at the WHO have been implicated too, for being closely involved with gain-of-function research through groups like EcoHealth.

Colluding in deceit

This seems to be the real reason why the lab-leak theory was quashed so aggressively last year by western political, medical and media establishments without any effort to seriously assess the claims or investigate them. Not out of any sense of obligation towards the truth or concern about racist incitement against the Chinese. It was done out of naked self-interest.

If anyone doubts that, consider this: the WHO appointed Peter Daszak, the president of the EcoHealth Alliance, the very group that reportedly funded gain-of-function research at

Wuhan on behalf of the US, to investigate the lab-leak theory and effectively become the WHO's spokesman on the matter. To say that Daszak had a conflict of interest is to massively understate the problem.

He, of course, has loudly discounted any possibility of a leak and, perhaps not surprisingly, continues to direct the media's attention to Wuhan's wet market.

The extent to which major media are not only negligently failing to cover the story with any seriousness but are also actively continuing to collude in deceiving their audiences – and sweeping these egregious conflicts of interest under the carpet – is illustrated by this [article published by the BBC](#) at the weekend.

Covid origin: Why the Wuhan leak theory is being taken

🕒 4 days ago



Coronavirus pandemic



The BBC ostensibly weighs the two possible narratives about Covid's origins. But it mentions none of Wade's explosive findings, including the potential US role in funding gain-of-function research at Wuhan. Both Fauci and Daszak are cited as trusted and dispassionate commentators rather than as figures who have the most to lose from a serious investigation into what happened at the Wuhan lab.

Given this context, the events of the past 15 months look much more like a pre-emptive cover-up: a desire to stop the truth from ever emerging because, if a lab leak did occur, it would threaten the credibility of the very structures of authority on which the power of western elites rests.

Media blackout

So why, after the strenuously enforced blackout of the past year, are Biden, the corporate media and the scientific establishment suddenly going public with the possibility of a China lab leak?

The answer to that seems clear: because Nicholas Wade's article, in particular, blew open the doors that had been kept tightly shut on the lab-leak hypothesis. Scientists who had formerly feared being associated with Trump or a "conspiracy theory" have belatedly spoken up. The cat is out of the bag.

Or as the Financial Times reported of the new official narrative, "the driving factor was a shift among scientists who had been wary of helping Trump before the election or angering influential scientists who had dismissed the theory".

The journal Science recently upped the stakes by publishing a letter from 18 prominent scientists stating that the lab-leak and animal-origin theories were equally "viable" and that the WHO's earlier investigation had not given "balanced consideration" to both – a polite way of suggesting that the WHO investigation was a fix.

And so we are now being subjected by the Biden administration to Plan B: damage limitation. The US President, the medical establishment and the corporate media are raising the possibility of a Wuhan lab leak, but are excluding all the evidence unearthed by Wade and others that would implicate Fauci and the US policy elite in such a leak, if it occurred. (Meanwhile, Fauci and his supporters have been preemptively muddying the waters by trying to redefine what constitutes gain-of-function.)

The growing clamour on social media, much of it provoked by Wade's research, is one of the main reasons Biden and the media are being forced to address the lab-leak theory, having previously discounted it. And yet Wade's revelations of US and WHO involvement in gain-of-function research, and of potential complicity in a lab leak and a subsequent cover-up are missing from almost all corporate media reporting.

Evasion tactic

Biden's so-called investigation is intended to be cynically evasive. It makes the administration look serious about getting to the truth when it is nothing of the sort. It eases pressure on the corporate media that might otherwise be expected to dig out the truth themselves. The narrow focus on the lab leak theory displaces the wider story of potential US and WHO complicity in such a leak and overshadows efforts by outside critics to highlight that very point. And the inevitable delay while the investigation is carried out readily exploits Covid news fatigue as western publics start to emerge from under the pandemic's shadow.

The Biden administration will hope the public's interest rapidly wanes on this story so that the corporate media can let it drop off their radar. In any case, the investigation's findings will most likely be inconclusive, to avoid a war of duelling narratives with China.

But even if the investigation is forced to point the finger at the Chinese, the Biden administration knows that the western corporate media will loyally report its accusations against China as fact – just as they loyally blacked out any consideration of a lab leak until they were forced to do so over the past few days.

Illusion of truth

The Wuhan story provides a chance to understand more deeply how elites wield their narrative power over us – to control what we think, or are even capable of thinking. They can twist any narrative to their advantage.

In the calculations of western elites, the truth is largely irrelevant. What is of utmost importance is maintaining the illusion of truth. It is vital to keep us believing that our leaders rule in our best interests; that the western system – despite all its flaws – is the best possible one for arranging our political and economic lives; and that we are on a steady, if sometimes rocky, path towards progress.

The job of sustaining the illusion of truth falls to the corporate media. It will be their role now to expose us to a potentially lengthy, certainly lively – but carefully ring-fenced and ultimately inconclusive – debate about whether Covid emerged naturally or leaked from the Wuhan lab.

The media's task is to manage smoothly the transition from last year's unquestionable certainty – that the pandemic had an animal origin – to a more hesitant, confusing picture that includes the possibility of a human, but very much Chinese, role in the virus' emergence. It is to ensure we do not feel any cognitive dissonance as a theory we were assured was impossible by the experts only weeks ago suddenly becomes only too possible, even though nothing has materially changed in the meantime.

What is essential for the political, media and scientific establishments is that we do not ponder deeper questions:

- * How is it that the supposedly sceptical, disputatious, raucous media once again spoke mostly with a single and uncritical voice on such a vitally important matter – in this case, for more than a year on the origins of Covid?

- * Why was that media consensus broken not by a large, well-resourced media organisation, but by a lone, former science writer working independently and publishing in a relatively obscure science magazine?

* Why did the many leading scientists who are now ready to question the imposed narrative of Covid's animal origin remain silent for so long about the apparently equally credible hypothesis of a lab leak?

* And most importantly, why should we believe that the political, media and scientific establishments have on this occasion any interest in telling us the truth, or in ensuring our welfare, after they have been shown to have repeatedly lied or stayed silent on even graver matters and over much longer periods, such as about the various ecological catastrophes that have been looming since the 1950s?

Class interests

Those questions, let alone the answers, will be avoided by anyone who needs to believe that our rulers are competent and moral and that they pursue the public good rather than their own individual, narrow, selfish interests – or those of their class or professional group.

Scientists defer slavishly to the scientific establishment because that same establishment oversees a system in which scientists are rewarded with research funding, employment opportunities and promotions. And because scientists have little incentive to question or expose their own professional community's failings, or increase public scepticism towards science and scientists.

Similarly, journalists work for a handful of billionaire-owned media corporations that want to maintain the public's faith in the "benevolence" of the power structures that reward billionaires for their supposed genius and ability to improve the lives of the rest of us. The corporate media has no interest in encouraging the public to question whether it can really operate as a neutral conduit that channels information to ordinary people rather than preserves a status quo that benefits a tiny wealth-elite.

And politicians have every reason to continue to persuade us that they represent our interests rather than the billionaire donors whose corporations and media outlets can so easily destroy their careers.

What we are dealing with here is a set of professional classes doing everything in their power to preserve their own interests and the interests of the system that rewards them. And that requires strenuous efforts on their part to make sure we do not understand that policy is driven chiefly by greed and a craving for status, not by the common good or by a concern for truth and transparency.

Which is why no meaningful lessons will be learnt about what really happened in Wuhan. Maintaining the illusion of truth will continue to take precedence over uncovering the

truth. And for that reason we are doomed to keep making the same screw-ups. As the next pandemic will doubtless attest.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “*Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East*” (Pluto Press) and “*Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair*” (Zed Books). His website is <http://www.jonathan-cook.net/>

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