Beware of 'expert' consensus. The covid-19 lab leak theory shows why.

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In one light, this is a happy scientific ending. Over time, with study, natural transmission looked less likely, and a lab accident somewhat more so. As the evidence changed, a previously hard-and-fast consensus became more open to other possibilities, as should be the case for any good scientific theory.

But in another light, this story is a disaster. How did so many smart people come to believe, not just that a natural origin was much more likely than a lab leak — which is still, to be clear, the opinion of many scientists — but that a lab leak was basically an impossibility? For that matter, what other things do "we all know" that just ain't so?

You don't have to walk far in my neighborhood to come across one of those ubiquitous front-yard signs announcing that the people living in the house believe "science is real," among other articles of faith. Upper middle-class Democrats have long prided themselves on belonging to "the party of science," but former president Donald Trump's covid denialism supercharged that affiliation into a central part of their identity.

Yet the form this belief in science took was often positively anti-scientific. Instead of a group of constantly evolving theories that might be altered at any time, or falsified entirely, and is thus always open to debate, "science" was a demand that others subordinate their judgment to an elite-approved group of credentialed scientific experts, many of whom were proclaiming the lab leak unlikely in the extreme.

Moreover, no scientist can decisively settle the lab-leak hypothesis without a full and transparent investigation — which has not happened yet — just as I cannot personally assure you that someone working at another newspaper, on a story I wasn't involved in, *definitely* got it right.

In this particular case, there's probably little harm done, except that a bunch of people are understandably peeved at having been silenced without good reason. But that's not necessarily true of the other areas where this dynamic has operated. People who questioned whether masks or lockdowns really worked were shouted down and denounced as a "death cult," or better yet, simply silenced with the click of a moderator's mouse.

I supported masks and distancing, mind you. And having had many, *many* arguments over them, I know how easy it is to fall into the "experts say" trap. For starters, obviously we should listen to experts, because they know more than we do. Just maybe not *so much more* that we should treat their pronouncements as having dropped from heaven on stone tablets.

But the illusion of near-infallibility among experts promised certainty at a time when the world had turned out to be much less predictable than we'd thought. And of course it was an easy way to avoid a nonstop game of whack-a-mole with the amazing series of false memes and "facts" that some conservative skeptics, including Trump, kept generating.

Yet I, for one, expected more out of lockdown and masking policies than we ultimately got, and I wonder how my analysis might have changed if I'd engaged more fully with skeptics. And as a matter of pure scientific analysis, screaming that anyone with a different opinion has joined a science-hating death cult seems to have been among social media's most popular and least effective non-pharmaceutical interventions.

There's little that can be done to fix any of that now, except for people who went overboard in dismissing the lab-leak theory to reconsider. And then ask if there are other policy areas where they confused scientists with "science," value judgments with cold calculation, and a shaky elite consensus with hard scientific facts.