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ENG 280

3 Feb. 2025

Bioweapon or Natural Virus: How Misinformation Can Harm Public Health and Relations.

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation spread rapidly through social media posts and incendiary articles, clouding the public understanding of the virus's origins, potential treatments, and even fueling rumors of bioterrorism. One of the most persistent and damaging conspiracy theories was the claim that COVID-19 was a bioweapon deliberately created in a lab. But how much truth is there to this claim? Why do these rumours persist even today, and what drives the spread of these misconceptions? By examining scientific evidence and the motivations behind these claims, it becomes clear that the bioweapon narrative is not only unfounded but also inflammatory and harmful to public health. In reality, the COVID-19 pandemic did not arise as a leaked bioweapon from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Instead, overwhelming evidence points to its natural origins.

One of the most persistent propagators of this conspiracy was Natural News, a site known for pushing misinformation, especially through sensationalised articles like the one cited here. In the article, "Fauci KNEW COVID-19 is a biological weapon created in Wuhan lab but chose not to tell Trump", Natural News journalist Arsenio Toledo claims that Dr. Anthony Fauci "knew from the very beginning that the Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19) is a weaponized creation of researchers in the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV)" (Toledo). This statement suggests that Fauci was aware of a deliberate bioweapon development and intentionally withheld this information. However, the article fails to provide updated or verifiable sources to support its

allegations. It contains information that directly contradicts credible health organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), and comes from Natural News, a site that was at the time of publication operated by Mike Adams, a columnist who was infamous for controversial and inaccurate writings. The exaggerated language and lack of supported facts also give the impression that the article's purpose is more about fearmongering and political manipulation than informing the public. With statements such as, "It was Fauci's agency that helped fund and orchestrate such experiments at a bioweapons lab in Wuhan, China, where the pandemic almost certainly originated," (Toledo) this article is not only outlandish but, at worst, outright dangerous. So what is true, and what is false in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic and its origins?

To better understand the actual origins of COVID-19, it's crucial to look at credible scientific sources. According to the World Health Organization, a study conducted by international experts concludes that the origin of the virus is natural, specifically a transmission from animals to humans through "an intermediate host, that is another animal species more likely to be handled by humans" ("Origin of SARS-CoV-2" 2). The WHO's report states that "All available evidence suggests that the virus has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed virus" ("Origin of SARS-CoV-2" 2). This finding is compatible with the general scientific consensus, which indicates a high possibility of the virus emerging from wildlife before jumping to humans. The report additionally mentions that "SARS-CoV, the virus that caused the SARS outbreak in 2003 and probably also had its ecological reservoir in bats, jumped from an animal reservoir (civet cats, a farmed wild animal) to humans and then spread between humans," ("Origin of SARS-CoV-2", 2) suggesting that similar viruses have spread through zoonotic transmission in the past, which reinforces the idea that this virus was naturally

conceived. These studies clearly clash with the theories that falsely claim that the virus was engineered and intentionally released from a lab.

To add to the claim that COVID-19 is of natural origin, a study by Petrović and Zezelj titled “Both a bioweapon and a hoax: the curious case of contradictory conspiracy theories about COVID-19.” found that many individuals who believed COVID-19 was an intentional bioweapon also supported contradictory claims, such as the idea that “this coronavirus has been circling in the human population for years, but was just now conveniently revealed” (Petrović and Zezelj 459). This pattern suggests that belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories is not rooted in substantial evidence but rather in a more widespread distrust of official sources and a tendency to accept inconsistent claims as long as they align with their political beliefs. The researchers explain that “endorsement of one theory does not cancel out endorsement of its contradictory pair” and that for many individuals, these theories “are not even independent, but instead support one another, building a larger conspiratorial worldview” (Petrović and Zezelj 466). This explains why, despite overwhelming scientific evidence disproving the bioweapon theory, the claim persists to be propagated. It is not based on legitimate scientific evidence but on a prejudicial sentiment to reject authoritative sources in favor of sensationalised narratives.

The spread of misinformation, like the claims made by Natural News, is not arbitrary, but rather it follows historical patterns of distrust and fear during crises. As history professor Stephen Andrews explains in the Herald-Times, “many conspiracy theories are formed as a coping mechanism to help deal with large issues, like how to solve a global pandemic and why it happened in the first place” (Rahman). In times of uncertainty, people often turn to simple explanations, even if those explanations lack scientific basis. Media professor Robin Blom further supports this, stating, “The reason that these conspiracies get some traction is because it

is confirming a narrative that certain people believe in or want to believe in. It's convenient for them to blame it on another entity than the person they support or themselves" (Rahman). This insight helps explain why, despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, the COVID-19 bioweapon theory continues to circulate. Understanding the social and psychological roots of misinformation is crucial to addressing its impact and restoring trust in factual, science-based explanations.

In "Behavioral and Attitudinal Correlates of Trusted Sources of COVID-19 Vaccine Information in the US", Latkin et al. explain that "there has... been a plethora of COVID-19 misinformation, and concerns have been raised about the trustworthiness of sources of COVID-19 information" (Latkin et al. 2). This is important when fact-checking and understanding the motivation behind the false claim by Natural News that Dr. Anthony Fauci and a laboratory in Wuhan were involved in the creation of COVID-19. The study highlights how relying on politically motivated or unreliable sources cultivates distrust in credible health authorities. Latkin et al. further emphasize that "trusted information sources may ameliorate information overload by helping individuals prioritize information and weed out dubious claims" (Latkin et al. 3). In contrast, Natural News thrives on shock-value and conspiracy-driven narratives that erode public trust in science. Promoting access to accurate, well-sourced information can help counter false claims like those targeting Fauci and support informed decision-making.

In the article, "National identity, institutional trust, and beliefs in COVID-19 origin conspiracies: A cross-national comparative study." Xu et al. found that "Chinese, American, and Spanish respondents with heightened national hubris and restrictive views of legitimate membership showed increased beliefs in conspiracy theories blaming other nations for the

COVID-19 pandemic” (Xu et al. 19). Additionally, their study revealed that “trust in governments, trust in scientists, and trust in mainstream media all amplified the positive relationship between Chinese respondents’ restrictive views of legitimate membership and their belief in the ‘U.S. military’ conspiracy theory” (Xu et al. 19). A similar case can be observed in the U.S., where distrust in scientists led to more pronounced beliefs in the “Chinese lab” theory. These findings demonstrate that misinformation spreads not due to a lack of evidence but because of political and social biases.

The claim that COVID-19 was an engineered bioweapon is not supported by factual scientific evidence. Instead, research overwhelmingly shows that the virus developed naturally, likely through zoonotic transmission, as confirmed by the World Health Organization. Despite this, the conspiracy theory persists due to distrust in traditional sources and the influence of politically motivated misinformation. Studies by Petrović and Zvezelj, as well as Xu et al., reveal that conspiracy beliefs are often shaped by ideological biases, national identity, and trust in institutions rather than facts. The persistence of these narratives highlights the dangers of misinformation, which not only distorts public understanding but also destroys trust in science and fuels social division. By evaluating sources and promoting scientific and media literacy, we can quickly dispel harmful lies and ensure that truth prevails over divisive media.

## Works Cited.

Latkin, Carl A., et al. "Behavioral and Attitudinal Correlates of Trusted Sources of COVID-19 Vaccine Information in the US." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X), vol. 11, no. 4, Apr. 2021, p. 56. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11040056>.

"Behavioral and Attitudinal Correlates of Trusted Sources of COVID-19 Vaccine Information in the US" by Carl A. Latkin et al. was published in 2021 in *Behavioral Sciences*, a peer-reviewed academic journal. Carl A. Latkin is a professor at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, specializing in public health and social behaviour, making him a credible author on this subject. The study examines how trust in different sources of COVID-19 vaccine information influences public attitudes and behaviours. It references multiple studies and data from credible institutions like Johns Hopkins University and the CDC, confirming that the information is well-supported. The purpose of the article is to analyze how trust in mainstream and politically conservative news sources affects vaccine confidence and public health behaviours. While this study is four years old, I think that this research is still valuable in understanding how misinformation spreads and impacts public trust in vaccines, which can help explain how claims made in Natural News can easily convince people and spread misinformation.

Petrović, Marija, and Iris Žeželj. "Both a Bioweapon and a Hoax: The Curious Case of Contradictory Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19." *Thinking & Reasoning*, vol. 29, no. 4, Nov. 2023, pp. 456–87. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2022.2088618>.

"Both a Bioweapon and a Hoax: The Curious Case of Contradictory Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19" by Marija Petrović and Iris Žeželj was published in *Thinking & Reasoning* in

2023, a peer-reviewed academic journal specializing in cognitive science and reasoning. The authors are researchers from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, with a focus in psychology and conspiracy theory analysis. This study explores how individuals support logically contradictory COVID-19 conspiracy theories and what cognitive factors contribute to this ‘doublethink’. It draws on data from multiple studies and references to established psychological theories, providing credible grounds to support their article on. The article focuses on providing insight into why misinformation thrives, especially how people can believe conflicting conspiracy narratives at the same time. Given that it is peer-reviewed, relies on scientific evidence, and is relevant to understanding misinformation, this source is a reliable and valuable contribution to my paper about the misinformation being spread on Natural News.

Rahman, Andrea. “COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theories stem from historical trends.” *Herald-Times*, 20 Aug. 2020,  
[https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc\\_dat=AWNB&req\\_dat=36F5A617829641EC9991B65F32DBDF09&rft\\_val\\_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft\\_dat=document\\_id%3Anews/17CFAD048B308468](https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=36F5A617829641EC9991B65F32DBDF09&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/17CFAD048B308468)

Rahman’s article discusses the historical patterns that contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories during times of crisis, mainly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This source is valuable for my essay because it contextualizes why misinformation, such as the COVID-19 bioweapon theory, persists despite scientific evidence disproving it. By highlighting how fear and distrust in institutions fuel conspiracy theories, Rahman provides insight into the social and psychological factors behind misinformation. While this article is from 2020, it explores tactics used to spread misinformation and why people may fall for conspiracy theories, which remain relevant and factual to this day.

Toledo, Arsenio. “Fauci Knew COVID-19 Is a Biological Weapon Created in Wuhan Lab but Chose Not to Tell Trump – Brighteon.TV.” *Natural News*, 11 Nov. 2021,

<https://www.naturalnews.com/2021-11-11-fauci-knew-covid-bioweapon-created-wuhan-lab.html>

This article spreads misinformation by claiming that Dr. Fauci knew COVID-19 was a weapon created in a lab and didn’t tell President Trump. It also suggests Fauci funded dangerous research and hid treatments. These claims have been proven wrong. Experts, including the World Health Organization, found no evidence that COVID-19 was made as a bioweapon, and there’s no proof that Fauci did anything wrong with research funding or treatment decisions. The article is part of a false narrative to stir up distrust. To add on to their unreliability, Natural News has been credited with a score of 9.27 for reliability in AdFontes on a scale of 0-64.

World Health Organization. *Origin of SARS-CoV-2*. 26 Mar. 2020, <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/332197>.

“Origin of SARS-CoV-2” was published in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO). As a leading international health agency, WHO is a credible source that is always working with scientists and experts around the world to study and inform people about health-related issues. This document references genetic studies on coronaviruses, epidemiological investigations, and environmental sampling to explore the origins of SARS-CoV-2. The article was written to summarize current knowledge about the virus’s ‘zoonotic’ origins, transmission through intermediate hosts, and the timeline of the spread of COVID-19. The document informs people about ongoing research efforts and public health responses in order to prevent future outbreaks. While this document is somewhat dated, I think it is still useful when it comes to presenting and defining the factual origin of COVID-19, as it presents facts that are still true today.



Xu, Hao, et al. “National Identity, Institutional Trust, and Beliefs in COVID-19 Origin Conspiracies: A Cross-National Comparative Study.” *International Communication Gazette*, Dec. 2024, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485241305316>.

The study, “National Identity, Institutional Trust, and Beliefs in COVID-19 Origin Conspiracies: A Cross-National Comparative Study” by Hao Xu et al. (2024) analysed how national identity and institutional trust shaped the beliefs for COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Published in the *International Communication Gazette* by scholars from reputable universities, the study uses international surveys to show how misinformation can spread due to political biases and distrust in institutions. This can relate to the false Natural News claim that Dr. Anthony Fauci knew COVID-19 was a weaponized creation, as the study demonstrates how conspiracy theories gain traction by exploiting fears and skepticism toward authorities.