

COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories

As the COVID-19 crisis worsens, the world also faces a global misinformation pandemic. Conspiracy theories that behave like viruses themselves are spreading just as rapidly online as SARS-CoV-2 does offline. Here are the top 10 conspiracy theories making the rounds.

Blaming 5G

This conspiracy theory should be easy to debunk: it is biologically impossible for viruses to spread using the electromagnetic spectrum. The latter are waves/photons, while the former are biological particles composed of proteins and nucleic acids. But that isn't really the point — conspiracy theories are enticing because they often link two things which at first might appear be correlated; in this case, the rapid rollout of 5G networks was taking place at the same time the pandemic hit. Cue a [viral meme linking the two](#), avidly promoted by anti-vaccine activists who have long been spreading fears about electromagnetic radiation, egged on [by the Kremlin](#).

It's worth repeating, as the [World Health Organization \(WHO\) points out](#), that viruses cannot travel on mobile networks, and that COVID-19 is spreading rapidly in many countries that do not have 5G networks. Even so, this conspiracy theory — after being spread by celebrities with big social media followings — has led to cellphone towers being set on fire in the UK and elsewhere.

Bill Gates as scapegoat

Most conspiracy theories, like the viruses they resemble, constantly mutate and have several variants circulating at any one time. Many of these plots and subplots seem to involve Bill Gates, who has become a new target of right-wing disinformation after gently criticizing Donald Trump's scapegoating (and subsequent defunding) of the World Health Organization. According [to the New York Times](#), anti-vaxxers, members of QAnon and right-wing pundits have seized on a video of a 2015 Ted talk given by Gates — where he discussed the Ebola outbreak and warned of a new pandemic — to bolster their claims he had foreknowledge of the COVID pandemic or even purposely caused it.

A recent variant of this conspiracy theory, particularly beloved by anti-vaccination activists, is the idea that COVID is part of a dastardly Gates-led plot to vaccinate the world's population. There is some truth in this, of course: vaccinating much of the world's population may well be the only way to avoid an eventual death toll in the tens of millions. But anti-vaxxers don't believe vaccines work. Instead some have spread the myth that Gates wants to use a vaccination program to implant digital microchips that will somehow track and control people. The spread of misinformation has meant that [ID2020](#), a small non-profit that focuses on establishing digital IDs for poorer people around the world, has had to call in the FBI. (The Cornell Alliance for Science is partly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.)

The virus escaped from a Chinese lab

This one at least has the benefit of being plausible. It is true that the original epicenter of the epidemic, the Chinese city of Wuhan, also hosts a virology institute where researchers have been studying bat coronaviruses for a long time. One of these researchers, Shi Zhengli, a prominent virologist who spent years collecting bat dung samples in caves and was a lead expert on the earlier SARS outbreak, was sufficiently concerned about the prospect that she spent days frantically checking lab records to see if anything had gone wrong. [She admits](#) breathing a “sigh of relief” when genetic sequencing showed that the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus did not match any of the viruses sampled and studied in the Wuhan Institute of Virology by her team.

However, the sheer coincidence of China’s lead institute studying bat coronaviruses being in the same city as the origin of the COVID outbreak has proven too juicy for conspiracists to resist. The idea was seeded originally via a [slick hour-long documentary](#) produced by the Epoch Times, an English-language news outlet based in the United States with links to the Falung Gong religious cult that has long been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Epoch Times insists on calling COVID “the CCP virus” in all its coverage. The theory has now tipped into the mainstream, being reported in the Washington Post, the Times (UK) and many other outlets.

COVID was created as a biological weapon

A spicier variant is that COVID not only escaped from a lab, but it was intentionally created by Chinese scientists as a biowarfare weapon. [According to Pew Research](#), “nearly three-in-10 Americans believe that COVID-19 was made in a lab,” either intentionally or accidentally (the former is more popular: specifically, 23 percent believe it was developed intentionally, with only 6 percent believing it was an accident).

This theory that the Chinese somehow created the virus is particularly popular on the US political right. It gained mainstream coverage [thanks to US Sen. Tom Cotton](#) (Republican, Arkansas) who amplified theories first aired [in the Washington Examiner](#) (a highly conservative media outlet) that the Wuhan Institute of Virology “is linked to Beijing’s covert bio-weapons program.”

This theory can be easily debunked now that there is [unambiguous scientific evidence](#) — thanks to genetic sequencing — that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has entirely natural origins as a zoonotic virus originating in bats. The Examiner has since added a correction at the top of the original piece admitting the story is probably false.

The US military imported COVID into China

The Chinese government responded to the anti-China theories with a conspiracy theory of its own that seeks to turn blame back around onto the United States. This idea was spread initially by Chinese foreign ministry [spokesman Zhao Lijian](#), who Tweeted “it’s possible that the US military brought the virus to Wuhan.” These comments, [according to Voice of America](#) news, “echoed a rumored conspiracy, widely circulated in China, that US military personnel had brought the virus to China during their participation in the 2019 Military World Games in Wuhan last October.” For China, [as the Atlantic reported](#), this

conspiracy theory, and an accompanying attempt to rename COVID the “USA virus,” was a transparent “geopolitical ploy” — useful for domestic propaganda but not widely believed internationally.



GMOs are somehow to blame

Genetically modified crops have been a target of conspiracy theorists for years, so it was hardly a surprise to see [GMOs blamed](#) in the early stages of the COVID pandemic. In early March, Italian attorney Francesco Billota [penned a bizarre article](#) for Il Manifesto, falsely claiming that GM crops cause genetic pollution that allows viruses to proliferate due to the resulting environmental “imbalance.” Anti-GMO activists have also tried to blame modern agriculture, which is strange, since the known path of the virus into the human population — as with Ebola, HIV and many others — was through the very ancient practice of people capturing and killing wildlife.

Ironically, GMOs will almost [certainly be part of any vaccine solution](#). If any of the ongoing 70 vaccine projects work (which is a big if), that would be pretty much the only guaranteed way the world can get out of the COVID mess. Vaccines could be based on either GM attenuated viruses or use antigens produced in GM insect cell lines or plants. If GMOs do help save the world from the curse of COVID, maybe they’ll stop being a dirty word.

COVID-19 doesn’t actually exist

According to professional conspiracy theorists like David Icke and InfoWars’ Alex Jones, COVID-19 doesn’t actually exist, but is a plot by the globalist elite to take away our freedoms. Early weaker versions of this theory were prevalent on the political right in the notion that the novel coronavirus would be “no

worse than flu” and later versions are now influencing anti-lockdown protests across several states in the US. Because believers increasingly refuse to observe social distancing measures, they could directly help to spread the epidemic further in their localities and increase the resulting death rate.

The pandemic is being manipulated by the ‘deep state’

President Trump is a long-time conspiracist and has dabbled in many of the theories mentioned here. Trump and his acolytes believe that a “deep state” of America’s elite is plotting to undermine the president — and that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the face of the US coronavirus pandemic response — is [a secret member](#). Fauci’s expression of disbelief when the president mentioned the deep state during a press briefing supposedly gave the game away.

COVID is a plot by Big Pharma

Many conspiracy theory promoters are in reality clever actors trying to sell quack products. Alex Jones, between rants about hoaxes and the New World Order, urges viewers to buy expensive miracle pills that he claims can cure all known diseases. Dr. Mercola, a quack anti-vax and anti-GMO medic who has been banned from Google due to peddling misinformation, claims that vitamins (and numerous other products he sells) can cure or prevent COVID. NaturalNews, another conspiracist site, sells all manner of pills, potions and prepper gear. These conspiracists depend for their market on getting people to believe that evidence-based (i.e. conventional) medicine doesn’t work and is a plot by big pharmaceutical companies to make us ill. Big Pharma conspiracies are a staple of anti-vaccination narratives, so it is hardly surprising that they have transmuted into the age of the coronavirus.

COVID death rates are inflated

Another far-right meme is the idea that COVID death rates are being inflated and therefore there is no reason to observe lockdown regulations or other social distancing measures. Prominent in promoting this myth is Dr. Annie Bukacek, whose speech warning that COVID death certificates are being manipulated has been viewed more than a quarter of a million times on YouTube. Bukacek appears in a white lab coat and with a stethoscope around her neck, making her look like an authoritative medical source. Dig a little deeper, however, as [Rolling Stone magazine did](#), and it turns out she’s actually a far-right anti-vaccination and anti-abortion activist, previously noted for bringing tiny plastic fetuses into the Montana state legislature. Her insistence that COVID death rates are inflated has, of course, no basis in fact. More likely the current death toll is a serious under-count.

How to recognize and debunk conspiracy theories

It is important to speak out and combat online misinformation and conspiracist narratives, whether on COVID or climate change or anything else. [This handbook](#) (PDF) by John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, both of whom have extensive experience in combating climate denialism, is an essential tool.

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