

As Coronavirus Spreads, False Theories Linking Harvard Professor Lieber to Disease's Origin Proliferate Online



As the novel coronavirus spreads, conspiracy theories about its origin have spread with it — including those falsely alleging that the virus was made and sold by Harvard Chemistry professor Charles M. Lieber.

Posts falsely claiming that Lieber was arrested for creating and selling the novel coronavirus have been shared more than 79,000 times on Facebook as of April 7, according to Reuters. Thousands of posts on Twitter and

several YouTube videos have made similarly baseless claims connecting Lieber with the creation of the virus.

In fact, Lieber was arrested in January for [allegedly concealing Chinese funding and lying to federal agents](#). While he reportedly participated in Chinese government research programs in Wuhan — the same city where the novel coronavirus originated — there is no evidence to suggest that Lieber, a nanoscientist, engineered a biological agent, nor did the federal government press charges against him related to the coronavirus.

Lieber, who is currently on paid administrative leave, did not respond to a request for comment.

A growing body of scientific evidence suggests the novel coronavirus originated in nature, without data to the contrary.

A coalition of over 25 public health scientists and medical professionals signed a letter in the medical journal *The Lancet* to “strongly condemn” theories suggesting the virus was artificially constructed.

“Scientists from multiple countries have published and analysed genomes of the causative agent, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), and they overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife,” they wrote. “Conspiracy theories do nothing but create fear, rumours, and prejudice that jeopardise our global collaboration in the fight against this virus.”

Scripps Research — a renowned American medical research facility — wrote in a press release that analyses of the virus’s genome show it evolved in nature. The release cited evidence showing the backbone of the novel coronavirus does not mirror those of any known coronaviruses, but rather those of viruses found in bats and pangolins.

"If someone were seeking to engineer a new coronavirus as a pathogen, they would have constructed it from the backbone of a virus known to cause illness," the press release notes.

Another study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature* found that the virus's genome is 96 percent identical to a bat coronavirus, concluding the novel coronavirus likely originated in bats.

Despite the scientific consensus, conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origin have continued to proliferate online.

Experts said a variety of factors may have contributed to the popularity of these rumors: small kernels of truth, the uncertainty and fear created by the pandemic, and the peddling of the similar theories by political and media elites.

Fenwick McKelvey, an associate professor of communication studies at Concordia University in Canada, said coincidences like Lieber's connection to Wuhan can raise people's suspicions.

"In many ways you can think of a conspiracy theory as something that's attractive and desirable because it's offering a coherent explanation of the world and giving you meaning where there is none," McKelvey said. "Finding these links could be helpful and allow people to manage at a time of great stress and uncertainty."

Brian Levin — a professor of criminal justice at California State University, San Bernardino and director of the university's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism — said the unsettling nature of the pandemic lends itself to conspiracy.

"Whenever you see a catalytic event, you'll see an array of unusual theories and sometimes extremism or propaganda around it too," he said.

Levin added that while some people promote conspiracy theories to find a scapegoat or out of bigotry, others simply believe they are true without malintent.

"With this, there were enough kernels of truth that the lies between the gaps seem not as wide on the Internet as they do in reality," he said.

Lawrence Rosenthal, chair of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, also said conspiracy theories are often attempts to find someone to blame for complex situations.

He added that such theories are an attempt to use stories, rather than facts, to understand an emotional situation.

"This is a wholly different way of going about explaining things, or coming to terms with things, than trying to use empirical facts," he said. "It's closer at once to an explanation and a vehicle to express emotion."

Joshua Hart, an associate professor of psychology at Union College who has studied what leads people to believe in conspiracy theories, said President Donald Trump's dislike of China has fueled the theory by making it a partisan matter.

"The allure of a conspiracy theory is that it points to a kind of tractable source or culprit for the problem so that you can wrap your head around the idea of identifying the perpetrators and stopping them," Hart said.

Hart cited a sense of powerlessness Americans felt after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. After the attacks, he said the false suggestion that they may have been an "inside job" was comforting to some because it meant

Americans could “police ourselves,” while what happened in terrorist training camps abroad could not be controlled.

In addition to the anxiety created by the pandemic, the buy-in of some prominent political and media personalities has elevated these theories, according to University of Miami Associate Professor of Political Science Joseph E. Uscinski, who specializes in the study of conspiracy theories.

“Every pandemic winds up with conspiracy theories, whether it was the Ebola outbreak of six years ago or SARS or AIDS, there’s conspiracy theories about pretty much everything,” Uscinski said. “But because of how big and acute this one is, combined with the fact that many of our political and media elites are trafficking in these theories has made them a little more popular than some previous similar theories have been.”

Uscinski cited a claim made by U.S. Senator Thomas B. “Tom” Cotton ‘99 (R-Ark.) on FOX News in February that the virus could have been manufactured in a Wuhan lab, as well as claims by Trump and radio host Rush H. Limbaugh that the effects of the virus are being exaggerated.

“When we poll on this, we find that Republicans are more likely to believe in some of these theories than Democrats, and it’s likely because Republican leaders and conservative media personalities are pushing these theories,” Uscinski said.

Uscinski added that although many modern conspiracy theories — including those connecting Lieber to the virus — do spread through social media, his research has not found evidence that more people believe in theories today than before the internet.

“In this country’s history, you didn’t need an internet for, you know, witch trials and red scares and Freemason freak-outs and Illuminati scares,” he

said. "You don't need the new communication technologies for these things to spread on their own."

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