Crises Narratives Defining the COVID-19 Pandemic: Expert Uncertainties and Conspiratorial Sensemaking

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Abstract
Experts, news media, and social media commentators struggled to make sense of SARS-CoV-2 January–May 2020 as disease caused by this virus, COVID-19, circulated the globe. This paper represents a longitudinal analysis of the primary narratives produced across expert, media, and social media sources to describe the virus, its phylogenetic origins, and biological effects. High expert uncertainty coupled with amplifying representations of risk across time drove collective sensemaking and conspiratorial narratives.

Keywords
pandemic conspiracies, crisis narratives, COVID-19, populism, geopolitics

In late December 2019, two health-care workers in Wuhan, China notified officials of an emergent disease outbreak (A. J. Li, 2020). Dr Zhang Jixian was recognized by the Chinese government for contacting municipal health authorities December 27 in response to a novel SARS-like disease. In contrast, Dr Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, was chastised by officials for sharing his warning with colleagues on WeChat (A. j. Li, 2020). After his death, the hashtag #WeWantFreedomOfSpeech garnered nearly two

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million views on Weibo, while #WuhanGovernmentOwesDrLiAnApology garnered thousands. The governmental response was “draconian” censorship (J. Li, 2020). Controlling the narrative is regarded as key for effective crisis communication and yet censorship yields whistleblowing and social sensemaking, especially when hazards are perceived as both significant and uncertain.

Uncertainties proliferated in the wake of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) declaration of a global pandemic as contradictory information and recommendations circulated regarding the (a) nature, provenance, and circulations of the virus itself; (b) human susceptibilities and immunological capacities; and (c) the appropriate sanitary practices for combatting infection and transmission. This study offers a longitudinal analysis of expert, news media, and popular narratives regarding the origins, nature, and effects of the virus January–May 2020, with the intent to understand how expert uncertainties drove alternative explanatory narratives that circulated in social media and erupted into mainstream news headlines.

**Crisis Communications**

Crises are socially constructed in multi-faceted framings (Nadesan, 2016). Consider the role of news headlines and media talking points in shaping the public record regarding the purpose and effects of Spring 2020 pandemic lockdowns. Consider also the role of experts in interpreting crises through their high-impact publications and in the statements of expert individuals and associations. In everyday life, these crises interpretations are mediated by individual experience and social networks. Social media platforms offer opportunities for information sharing and collective sense-making, which are energized by salient uncertainties (Liua, Bartzb, & Duke, 2016).

Uncertainties about SARS-CoV-2 origins, disseminations, and effects challenged experts and complicated univocal crisis communications as public health authorities back-tracked on critical issues, such as masks and airborne transmission, eroding trust in recommendations, and encouraging dis-information campaigns (Barnes et al., 2020). For general audiences, uncertainty about hazards, coupled with adverse effects, generates dissonance, leading to information-seeking or risk denial/escapism (see Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). Information-seeking under situations where risk content is perceived as high, but uncertain, creates fertile ground for rumors.

Bordia and Difonzo (2004) explain that rumors, or explanatory accounts, arise in the absence of credible explanations from authoritative sources, are differentiated from news by their lack of verification, and are distinguished from gossip by the relevance of significant event(s) represented for engaged group(s). Rumors represent alternative sensemaking with researchers usually agnostic about truth-value. In their analysis of Zika rumors, Kou et al. (2017) suggest that “conspiracy theories” represent a distinct type of rumor characterized topically by secret actors who conspire to engineer events. These researchers asked the following:
1) who are the conspirators, 2) what malicious purposes do they have, 3) what secretive actions do they do, and 4) how they take these secretive actions.

Conspiratorial narratives were found to be multi-layered in their evidence and logics, incorporating a variety of evidentiary forms and discursive strategies.

Huiling Ding’s (2014) analysis of SARS messaging found that early rumors about virus effects were disseminated through “various layers of actors in extra-institutional communication before reaching demographically diverse audiences” (p. 108). Ding was particularly interested in how first layer “insiders” (including frontline medical workers) deployed guerilla media to warn second layer contacts, consistently mostly of their social circle. These warnings were fueled by spreading disease and official silence. Their transmission “changed, mutated and expanded by a panicked and receptive audience” (p. 109).

**Method**

This research adopts a genealogical methodology to capture the multi-faceted social construction of crises in the journalistic public record, in expert publications and communications, and in social media rumors (e.g., see Nadesan, 2016, 2019). Analysis emphasizes competing accounts, or narratives, of crisis horizons/timelines, characteristics, effects, and accountabilities. Data collection begins in the prodromal stage when the crisis is brewing and social media is highly active. Grounded content analysis seeks recurring themes and narratives, aiming to identify and compare competing logics of intelligibility. Silva (2011) described pandemic logics as “immunological syntaxes” reflecting historicized conditions and cultural representational practices (pp. 14–15).

In this study, data collection of news reports, expert publications, and social media discussion began January 24, 2020 in the prodromal stage when rumors of a new virus were posted on the social media site, ZeroHedge, prompting collection of three distinct data-streams. First, news reports were collected daily using Google “news” and search terms: novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and coronavirus origins. February 15 Wuhan Lab was added to the search terms. Second, the top 10 expert publications published before April 1, 2021 were identified using the primary search terms and Google Scholar. Press releases by the WHO established the expert timeline. Analysis of these data sets representing news media and expert representations asked the following:

- **R1**: How is the virus explained by experts and what key uncertainties and/or disagreements emerge around expert timelines and narratives?
- **R2**: What themes (ideas) and narratives (ideas linked into stories) are found across news media sources across time line?

Targeted collection of news and expert publications was supplemented with ethnographic immersion (see Seligmann & Estes, 2019) and sampling of reader comments.
at two highly trafficked “news” platforms, ZeroHedge and Yahoo, January 29 through May 1, 2020. Each day, one article was selected from these sites based on topic salience and the top ten up-rated reader comments were collected and analyzed:

- **R3**: What “alternative” and/or “conspiracy” themes and narratives emerge across social media representations across time?

Recurring themes were tracked longitudinally and their posited relationships mapped to disclose distinct narratives, whose epidemiological syntax afforded meaning to discrete elements over time. Narratives that emerged in reader comments were compared and contrasted with expert and media representations.

**Results**

Early scientific publications on the novel coronavirus, posted as preprints beginning January 1, 2020, focused on delineating clinical symptoms of and treatments for the new disease and disclosing risk provenance, as scientists published papers seeking “to know” the virus by its disease symptoms, genetic code, and history. In disclosing risk provenance, scientists distinguished the novel coronavirus from presumed viral precursors, especially SARS. By May 2020, expert representations emphasized viral circulations and the characteristics of human susceptibilities and resiliencies, culminating in a growing shift away from the strictly respiratory, SARS-like narrative syntax to a circulatory one prompted by findings that the virus invades endothelial cells that line blood and lymphatic vessels (see Varga et al., 2020).

Reader comments at Yahoo and ZeroHedge expressed increasing skepticism about expert advice across time, especially regarding the severity of the hazard (i.e., the viral risk) and personal susceptibility to infection peaking late April, 2020. Evidence of alternative sensemaking, especially about the virus provenance and biological impacts, could be found in the very first online comments. The most repeated narratives, beginning with the dominant one, include the following:

1. Novel SARS-like coronavirus bat-virus, similar to RaTG13, zoonotic transfer mediated by unknown mammal, with first human exposure in Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market December 2019 (henceforth Wuhan wet market).
2. Novel coronavirus (a genetically isolated and/or engineered virus) accidentally released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (henceforth the Wuhan lab), timeline unknown.
3. Novel coronavirus (a genetically engineered chimeric bioweapon) deliberately released by China, timeline unknown.
4. Novel coronavirus (a genetically engineered chimeric bioweapon) accidentally released by the U.S. Fort Detrick military lab in Maryland, Spring 2019.
5. Novel coronavirus (a genetically engineered chimeric virus bioweapon) deliberately released by U.S. in China during the World Military Games, October 2019.

6. Novel coronavirus is either a hoax or a genetically engineered chimeric bioweapon, both propagated by depopulation elitists, foreshadowed by Event 201, October 2019.

7. Novel coronavirus is a hoax hiding biological effects of 5G radiation.

Narrative 1 is the expert narrative emerging in news coverage, expert statements, and publications. Narratives 2–7 represent alternative sensemaking and invoke geopolitical nationalism or global populism, with the latter pitting global elites against a victimized global “people.”

**Narrative 1: Zoonotic Transfer and Expert Uncertainties**

Described first as a novel SARS-like coronavirus, the expert timeline is otherwise fractured. Contemporary epidemiological narratives require that the pathogen, in this case the virus, be identified by credentialed experts. Consequently, the place where a virus is identified is not necessarily its source. Chinese doctors allegedly “discovered” the virus in December 2019, but an overlooked publication by Indian researchers described a “Novel 2019-Coronavirus” in China in the October issue of the Indian Journal of Medical Microbiology (Gupta, et al., 2019). U.S. intelligence allegedly warned of a potentially “catastrophic” new virus circulating in China in November, 2019 (Huddleston, 2020). Researchers from Spain detected traces of the novel coronavirus in Barcelona sewage-sludge samples dating from March, 2019 (Allen & Landauro, 2020). The viral timeline and provenance were fraught with uncertainties and controversy across accounts regarding when, where, and how virus emerged. These uncertainties were amplified by institutional authorities, such as the WHO and national governments, which expressed frustration with China’s level of information disclosure (Associated Press [AP], 2020).

Epidemiological narratives typically begin with a patient zero, but this imagined patient escaped symbolic containment across clinical timelines. Chinese government-sourced medical data indicated that patient zero, a 55-year-old Chinese man from Hubei Province, became symptomatic November 17, 2019 (Ma, 2020). A study first published on January 24 at The New England Journal of Medicine established the date of the first hospital admittance as December 27, 2019, with the first patient being a 49-year-old woman, the second a 61-year-old man, and third a 32-year-old man (Zhu et al., 2020). Epidemiological narratives typically identify the place where infection first emerges and circulates, but this is complicated if patient zero cannot be identified.

The site of infection is contested across coronavirus narratives, but most institutional authorities, such as the WHO, agreed with China’s early stance that patient zero was infected at the Wuhan wet market. On January 5, the WHO published its first news on the novel coronavirus, then named 2019-nCoV (WHO, 2020), describing its probable
market origin. However, the wet market became a critically contested element after a well-cited research study published in *The Lancet* January 24, 2020 found no link between several early patients and the wet market (Huang, et al., 2020). In February, two Chinese researchers published a pre-print study arguing for the improbability of the wet market origins and pointing to the Wuhan lab as a likely source of the virus (Xiao & Xiao, 2020). This study was retracted, leading to allegations of censorship in conservative U.S. news media (Geraghty, 2020). Retractions around controversial elements fueled conspiratorial social media content, as shall be examined presently.

Epidemiological narratives strive to know their hazards fully to better predict and govern risk. Today, that knowledge is often geneticized. The genetic sequence for the novel coronavirus was posted at pre-publication servers January 5, 2020 by researchers from the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Centre, led by Zhang Yongzhen (Virological.org and GenBank, an open-access data repository). Zhang’s team reported findings to China’s National Health Commission, but subsequently published the sequence online after inaction on their recommendations. In apparent retaliation, Zhang’s Shanghai centre was then closed for “rectification” on January 12 by the Shanghai Health Commission (Pinghui, 2020). Despite this rectification, the team’s genetic sequence, MN908947.1, was updated twice at GenBank, with the third version posted on January 17, 2020 (Zhang et al., 2020). The version published in *Nature* included several author substitutions, such as the inclusion of Australian, Edward Holmes (Wu, et al., 2020). Controversy over the virus origins was exacerbated by the rectification and revelations that China ordered early viral samples used for sequencing to be destroyed in late December (Chin, 2020). The intentions and cooperation of the Chinese government emerge here as central narrative elements under dispute.

Efforts to know pathogens typically entail delineating their genetic provenance, their phylogeny. A second important study published in the same issue of Nature by Chinese scientists titled, “A Pneumonia Outbreak Associated with a New Coronavirus of Probable Bat Origin,” provided the dominant phylogenetic narrative, which found that “nCoV-2019 is 96% identical at the whole genome level to a bat coronavirus,” RaTG13, previously discovered in bat feces in 2013 (Zhou, Yang, Wang, et al., 2020). Authored by researchers from the Wuhan lab, the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, the Hubei Provincial Center for Disease Control, and from Wuhan Jin Yin-Tan Hospital, this *Nature* article operates as coronavirus *cannon*, narrating the disease as an “acute respiratory syndrome” starting December 12, 2019 and positing the bat provenance was mediated through an unknown animal, perhaps a pangolin, a conclusion which was later rejected by other studies (e.g., see Liu, et al., 2020). RaTG13, experts’ best genetic match for the novel coronavirus, emerges as an especially controversial element of the official narrative because no samples exist, nor previous publications document its existence as named, clouding origins (Gardner, 2020).

Understanding the unique features of the novel coronavirus required more laboratory research. Research studies posted February–March aimed at distinguishing the genetic features of the novel coronavirus from SARS and MERS and mapping unique
invasive capacities under laboratory condition, resulting in identification of two special features:

1. SARS-CoV-2’s optimized receptor binding-domain (RBD), which refers to the way the virus binds with the human angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) molecule as a result of its unique S protein, far outstripping the capacity of SARS.

2. The “functional polybasic (furin) cleavage site,” which becomes the target of considerable scientific debate (Coutard et al., 2020). The particular S protein increases the binding power of SARS-CoV-2 to human cells, while the furin, or special enzyme, facilitates its capacity to cleave cell surface proteins to penetrate their exteriors (“How furin,” 2020).

The unique S protein and furin cleavage generated expert debate regarding the probability these features could have evolved naturally. A computational study posted at BioRxiv January 31, 2020 by Indian researchers challenged the natural evolution of the furin feature, stoking controversy leading to the study’s retraction (Pradhan et al., 2020). More scientific challenges to the natural evolution theme followed (e.g., see Piplani et al., 2020).

The idea that SARS-CoV-2 might be chimeric (i.e., genetically engineered), rather than naturally evolved, was rejected by the study, “Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” published on March 17, 2020:

Although the evidence shows that SARS-CoV-2 is not a purposefully manipulated virus, it is currently impossible to prove or disprove the other theories of its origin described here. However, since we observed all notable SARS-CoV-2 features, including the optimized RBD and polybasic cleavage site, in related coronaviruses in nature, we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible. (Andersen, et al., 2020)

Although widely cited by the news-media, the arguments of this paper failed to dispel expert dissent, prompting the WHO Assembly to pass a resolution in May, 2020 to investigate the “source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population” (cited in Broad, 2020).

These narrative elements—the uncertain wet-market origins and time line of the novel “respiratory disease”; the centrality of work at the Wuhan Lab of Virology, official censorship, and ambiguity about genetic lineage and the mysterious RaTG13—become important for generating rumors and fueling sensemaking challenging the official lineage narrated by China and the WHO. However, in contrast to the uncertainties over origins, medical representations of clinical symptoms and their treatment were less fraught, although shifting with accumulating research studies. First framed (January–February, 2020) in clinical narratives as primarily respiratory and SARS-like, with older men most at risk, the narrative changed in March–April with well-publicized clinical reports of “cytokine storms” in young children. In June of 2020, Dr Gregory
Poland, President of the U.S. Armed Forces Epidemiological Board observed: “This virus has very peculiar immunological secrets wrapped up inside it” (cited in Fottrell, 2020).

Theme II: Lab Leaks and Cold War Geopolitics

The uncertainties of expert narration were exploited in pandemic counter-narratives discerned in news media and social media comments. Narratives 2 through 5 challenged the Wuhan market provenance, but varied regarding origins: was the virus (1) genetically isolated in a lab; and/or (2) was transformed or fabricated into a “chimeric” virus using gain-of-function gene-editing technologies? Was the viral chimera vaccine or bioweapon? News reports entertained the lab leak theme, but the chimeric narrative was primarily found in social media comments.

Wuhan Laboratory Narrative. The Wuhan lab emerged as a key contentious theme across expert, news, and social media representations. The first Wuhan lab news coverage of 2020 yielded by Google emphasized accidental release and was titled, “China Built a Lab to Study SARS and Ebola in Wuhan - and US Scientists Warned in 2017 that a Virus Could ‘Escape’ the Facility Located in the Same City that’s at the Coronavirus Outbreak’s Center” published by the UK tabloid, The Daily Mail January 23 (Rahhal, 2020). The Daily Mail followed up with more specific allegations on February 16 asking “Did Coronavirus Originate in Chinese Government Laboratory?” (Ibbetson, 2020). On January 26, the conservative newspaper, The Washington Times, published the first mainstream U.S. news inquiry into the lab (Gertz, 2020). The article stops short of labeling the novel coronavirus a bioweapon and an editor’s update of March 25, 2020 states “Since this story ran, scientists outside of China have had a chance to study the SARS-CoV-2 virus. They concluded it does not show signs of having been manufactured or purposefully manipulated in a lab, though the exact origin remains murky and experts debate whether it may have leaked from a Chinese lab that was studying it.”

The first social media article addressing the novel coronavirus at ZeroHedge appeared January 9, 2020, titled, “Chinese Officials Confirm Latest Health Crisis Caused by SARS-Like Coronavirus (Durden, 2020a).” Reporting emphasized official statements by China and the WHO, with impacts framed economically in article and reader comments. Comments responding to ZeroHedge’s January 14, 2020, article titled, “First Case Of SARS-Like Pneumonia Reported Outside China as Scientists Scramble to Develop New Test.” (Durden, 2020b) introduced the ideas of a “genotype bio-weapon” and planned de-population effort led by elites, such as Bill Gates, who is a key figure in depopulation conspiracy theories (see Huddleston, 2020). By January 22, 2020, conspiracy elements were flourishing with two separate allusions to Steven King’s “Captain Trips,” the escaped bioweapon from The Stand, and several references to weaponization of the Chinese swine flu (see Durden, 2020c). On January 24, ZeroHedge framed the virus as an accidentally released bioweapon in the article titled,
“The Real Umbrella Corporation” (Durden, 2020d), which referenced the evil bio-weapons corporation in the film (Eichinger et al., 2002), Resident Evil. A reader comment illustrates the emerging chronology of alternative sensemaking:

Who knows at this stage. Anything goes. But the timeline is concerning:

2015-2015 Wuhan BLS4 lab constructed
2017 Maryland-based Bioweapons Contractor predicts Wuhan virus outbreak
2018 Wuhan BLS4 lab begins operating
2018 Bill & Melinda throw a virus drill
2019 OCT – Bill & Melinda throw a coronavirus drill
2019 DEC – Wuhan Coronavirus outbreak begins (symptoms appear 2020)

Prediction: https://www.nature.com/news/inside-the-chinese-lab-poised-to-study-worlds-most-dangerous-pathogens-1.21487

Opening: http://chinaplus.crii.cn/news/china/9/20180107/74886.html

Drill: http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/

The virus emerges as sinister, a potentially dual-use chimeric monstrosity, possibly intentionally released.

Social media comments specifically delineated weaponized provenance and characteristics, as illustrated in this February 7 comment posted in response to the ZeroHedge article, “White House asks Scientists to Investigate Whether 2019-nCoV was Bio-engineered” (Durden, 2020f):

What we know so far:

1) The novel coronavirus’ outer protein coat is identical to a PLA bioweapon on registry:

Bat-SARS-Like coronavirus was issued Reference ID: AVP 70833.1 by the National Center for Biotechnology Information at the U.S. Library of Medicine.

2) The beginning bioweapon was modified with a commercially available gene insertion vector called pShuttle from AddGene corporation addgene.org sells this for $75 …

https://www.addgene.org/16402/

… The finding of 4 unique inserts in the 2019-nCoV, all of which have identity /similarity to amino acid residues in key structural proteins of HIV-1 is unlikely to be fortuitous in nature….
3) The ELISA AIDS quick test tests positive in patient’s with the novel coronavirus. MERS may have been the first virus to have the AIDS spike insertion gene. It was included in the ELISA test.

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6158782/

Dissident experts and whistleblowers promoted the chimeric approach, but only in social media comments does one find the idea that the virus was deliberately released. Yahoo ran its first lab story April 3, 2020, republished from The National Review (Geraghty, 2020), with coverage of the lab narrative peaking April–May drawn mostly from The National Review, Fox News, AFP, and other conservative media. The Yahoo article, “U.S. Sounded Alarm on Wuhan Lab Studying Coronavirus Two Years Ago, Report Says,” reprinted from Fox News April 14, 2020, had 1095 comments with top ranked ones strongly supporting the lab theory. Reader comments at Yahoo were less specific in linking sources as compared to ZeroHedge, although conclusions drawn were similar in attributing responsibility to China, as illustrated by this comment posted April 3 that was upvoted 493 times in 24 hours:

Why did china already have supplies to build a new hospital, supplies for all the other hospitals and why was there no infections in the major cites [sic]. Answer china knew they were going to release this and had a vaccine for it so nothing but Wuhan would get the virus. They had to sacrifice a few to obtain their objective to cause panic in the rest of the world. Had this not been planned in advance there would have been lots of cases in the larger cities. They want the companies of the world to suffer so they can buy them very cheaply. Their plan is working very well at the moment and the lasting affects will continue aiding them for years to come. They know they can’t beat us militarily so this is the way they can take over the world.

Allegations of Chinese complicity were met with few detractors in the top comments found at Yahoo. Yet, at ZeroHedge allegations of Chinese complicity were quickly met by upvoted detractors whose comments were armed with links to US bioweapon leaks and experimentation.

2020 U.S. news coverage of the lab peaked mid-April through mid-May when President Trump stated intelligence agencies were investigating an accidental lab release, causing push-back from China. China not only denied the Wuhan lab theory but also chastised the European Union for claiming Chinese culpability (Brennan, 2020). However, in June the lab narrative suddenly disappeared from U.S. news headlines, overshadowed by Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In contrast, European media continued to query origins. In late April 2020, the staid German newspaper Deutsche Welle (DW) investigated key narrative elements, concluding that “it can’t be said for certain that the pandemic didn’t accidentally enter the world via the Wuhan lab” (Schmidt, 2020). The BBC also examined evidence for a lab release on May 1, 2020 (Rincon, 2020). Two weeks later, May 13, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau
declared that the world had questions, “particularly” for China regarding origins (Connolly, 2020). In June, U.K. media reported that Sir Richard Dearborn, former head of British’s secret service MI6 (1999–2004), insisted lab origins could not be discounted because of the virus’ peculiarly optimized capacities (Gardner, 2020).

**U.S. Fort Detrick Laboratory Narrative.** The Chinese vehemently rebutted the Wuhan lab narrative and offered competing conspiratorial accounts of origins. Fort Detrick emerges as another narrative of origins promoted by Chinese officials and in social media comments. This narrative oscillates in attributions of intent, with one version of the narrative describing an escaped, chimeric virus and another version describing a deliberately released bioweapon targeted at China by the U.S.

The idea that the virus was a bioweapon against China was strategically promoted on Chinese social media, especially TikTok and Weibo and by China’s state television anchor (Brazell, 2020). A spokesperson for Chinese’s foreign ministry, Lijian Zhao, tweeted on March 12, 2020 that the US Army might have brought coronavirus to China during the 7th Military World Games held in Wuhan in October 2019 (J. Li, 2020). This tweet was allegedly prompted by remarks made by a Chinese respiratory specialist, Zhong Nanshan, who reported at a February press conference that the virus may not have originated from China (Winter, 2020).

The first time Fort Detrick is mentioned in ZeroHedge comments was January 9 in response to an article titled “Chinese Officials Confirm Latest Health Crisis Caused by SARS-Like Coronavirus.”

Commentator 1:
It came from Fort Detrick

Commentator 2 responding:
Everything comes from Fort Detrick. Or Langley. Or Tel Aviv.

Have I left anybody out?

The most common Fort Detrick narrative explains the US vaping disease crisis in the summer and fall of 2019 as explained by an inadvertent release from the lab and subsequent cover-up, as illustrated by this comment from Yahoo dated April 17:

Fort Detrick Lab suddenly closed by CDC last Oct. Which studied corona virus for years. The cause was some security reason, not allowed to disclose. Weeks later, some member from the lab joined military team to Wuhan. 5 team members was called back to US after medical emergency. And NO China doctors were allowed to check any of them. Weeks later, so called first case reported by… US news in Wuhan. And similar reports from MSM about mysterious virus found in Wuhan flooded the world as early as Dec. Even before China notice that….
Commentators often pointed to the safety lapses at Fort Detrick causing the lab to be closed in August 2019, citing coverage by *The New York Times* (Grady, 2019) and *Military Times* (“CDC Inspection,” 2019). Accidental or deliberate release? The theme of a deliberate attack circulates only in social media comments, with narratives diverging around questions of agencies and intentionalities.

**Theme III: Global Elites and their Monstrosities**

There are three additional narratives that emerge across comments and platforms: (1) coronavirus as conspiracy designed to enact a great economic and political “re-set” planned in Event 201; (2) a “hoax” masking the biological impacts of 5G radiation; and (3) a chimeric virus produced collaboratively by mad scientists from the world’s most powerful countries. These narratives blame heedless and/or duplicitous global elites whose technological pursuits threaten humanity collectively.

*Event 201, the Great Re-Set and De-population Elites.* The Event 201 narrative internationalizes the populist *us-them* relationship as the global public is pitted against diabolical elites allegedly implementing a global “re-set.” This narrative typically represents the pandemic as enabling property seizure, enhanced surveillance, and medical authoritarianism. The narrative emphasizes complicity and foreshadowing by elites in the form of Event 201, which is cast as the dress-rehearsal for the global “plandemic.” Event 201 is described both as a planned hoax and, alternatively, as a bioweapons release.

Event 201 was a pandemic preparedness event held October, 2019 by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Health Security, the World Economic Forum, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This exercise simulates “an outbreak of a novel zoonotic coronavirus transmitted from bats to pigs to people” that eventually becomes efficiently transmissible causing severe pandemic with the pathogen “modeled largely on SARS,” but “more transmissible in the community setting by people with mild symptoms” (John Hopkins Center for Health Security, 2019a; 2019b) The scenario ends at 18 months, after 65 million deaths.

The first reference to Event 201 at ZeroHedge appeared January 24, 2020 and emphasized foreshadowing by linking an official video of Event 201 highlights posted on YouTube. The ZeroHedge comment emphasized premeditated release for-profit in addition to describing disease-transmission characteristics:

Unfortunately, this one looks legit and that this is a preplanned release to sell as cure I kid you not. All of this is coming out now very fast. It may however be too late for a sh*t ton of people as this is a seriously lethal strain and it will most definitely mutate.

That, and this virus can live in the air and on surfaces at least 48 to 72 hours we’re hearing from others in epidemiology.
On top of THAT, the latency is about 7 to 14 days – meaning you may have it a week to two weeks and be infecting people all around you and you will not have known it. This is freakin Stephen King novel come to life….

The airborne quotient, oh man, that’s real real bad. This is an engineered thing its appearing, we have no idea how this virus will change and mutate….

The comment implies whistleblowing of insider information, but is not a neutral description as the virus is described as “an engineered thing,” a King novel, “come to life,” for the purpose of selling cure.

In contrast, other references to Event 201 in ZeroHedge comments suggested the virus was a hoax, “complex psyop,” or “false flag” with little-to-no risk, hyped to enable nano-chipping of population, as illustrated in this comment from March 16, 2020:

IMO this is a global psyop, and the virus is being used as a cover for the central bankers to bring in the NOW, with a new digital financial system and a forced vaccine with a nanochip used to create a “digital identity.”

In general, references to Event 201 and the conspiracy of global elites to introduce a new world order were missing from more mainstream news sites and were not found in top comments at Yahoo.

5G Narrative and De-Population Elites. The 5G narrative was relatively rarely cited but it did emerge quite early, as illustrated by this January 9, ZeroHedge comment:

What do all viruses have in common? …The answer is that every type of virus has a negative charge. What a coincidence because every single cell in our body also carries a negative charge. It’s called the Membrane Potential. It’s your “biovoltage.” Negative charges always repel other negative charges. This means no virus can penetrate any one of our cells so long as the cell is healthy with a negative charge…. We are going to see deaths from the flu go much higher as well as deaths from other causes. That is the nature of having our biovoltage shut down by 5G.

Another comment from Feb 11:

10500 antennae for 5 G in Wuhan, and what organisms can “use” electromagnetic radiation- yep, viruses an bacteria, but mutating….

I wouldn’t exclude fringe theories that sound whacked as far as what spreads it. Keep an open mind.

J Environ Pathol Toxicol Oncol. 1997;16(2-3):205-7.
Exposure to a 50 Hz electromagnetic field induces activation of the Epstein-Barr virus genome in latently infected human lymphoid cells. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9276003

Concerns about 5G were not found on Yahoo and tended to circulate primarily at ZeroHedge as an evangelical discourse interrupting the comment flow to insert a novel idea.

The Escaped, Global Chimeric Virus and Heedless Elites. The escaped global chimeric virus narrative is the most sophisticated of the alternative narratives. This narrative emerges in March, 2020, incorporating key thematic elements from Wuhan and Fort Detrick accounts, but articulating them within a global assemblage of scientists, laboratories, and genetically engineered products—including vaccines and bioweapons—whose undecidability invites suspicion.

Comments indirectly referring to this global laboratory assemblage were more likely to be found on Yahoo, while more specific comments with resources linked were found at ZeroHedge. For example, the top-rated comment posted at Yahoo April 18 (out of 49 reactions) in response to an article title, “Coronavirus: US Wants to Enter Wuhan Virology Lab,” provides historical context for bioweapons research:

There is a strong basis for concern that the etiology (i.e. the source) of the deadly SARS-Cov/2 virus might have emanated from a laboratory in Wuhan. It has happened in the past, most notably in 1967, when laboratory workers in Marburg and Frankfurt, Germany and also in Belgrade, were infected with a zoonotic virus (i.e. spread from animals to humans) that caused a deadly hemorrhagic fever…

In contrast, the comments at ZeroHedge offered a timeline of gain-of-function research on coronaviruses responsible for optimized attachment to ACE2 receptors and the capstone furin cleavage feature, as illustrated by this comment posted April 2 in response to “One of The Worst Coverups In Human History” (Durden, 2020e):

Few things to note:

1. The virus was created in the Wuhan Laboratory for infectious diseases. >https://web.archive.org/web/20200214144447/https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339070128_The_possible_origins_of_2019-nCoV_coronavirus

2. Charles Leiber, harvard Nano-Tech and Chemist helped create it (and got caught). Notice he was arrested the same day Trump put together the Taskforce and banned travel from China. https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/harvard-university-professor-and-two-chinese-nationals-charged-three-separate-china-related?fbclid=IwAR3QZrCBOBV7tgJHsrA9ydPPDPse9ZmC_ferId5J5dF6KS2FOyCYmOHnB6g
3. The virus was a bioweapon that wasn’t yet completed, hence the 32 “a’s” at the end of its genetic code. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nuccore/MN908947

4. The virus has protein spikes like HIV and similarities to Ebola. > https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052495/coronavirus-far-more-likely-sars-bond-human-cells-scientists-say

5. It can also lower sperm count and render males virtually infertile. > https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074945/coronavirus-hubei-government-deletes-report-claiming-COVID-19

6. China scrambled to infect the world once they realized it was out.

7. China ransacked other countries for medical supplies to help themselves deal with it and ensure other countries had a more difficult time coping. https://www.skynnews.com.au/details/_6144861607001

8. China is now sending faulty supplies to countries. > https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-test-kits-withdrawn-spain-poor-accuracy-rate

National laboratories and academic institutions globally get drawn into this narrative through their participation in risky genetic engineering, as illustrated in this comment posted in response to the same article:

FWIW, virologists from the US, Australia, and China have jointly researched SARS-CoV including creation of chimeric viruses that can infect humans - https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4797993/

“Utilizing the SARS-CoV infectious clone, we generated and characterized a chimeric virus expressing the spike of bat coronavirus SHC014 in a mouse adapted SARS-CoV backbone…”.

Study was done at Univ of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and most of the researchers were from that university, but two contributors to this study were from the Wuhan lab in China—… Someone should ask Dr Fauci if the NIH has in any way been involved with the Wuhan lab or virology researchers from Wuhan, just to watch him squirm on national TV. No question COVID-19 was an engineered virus. How it got loose into human populations is a matter of speculation. Dr Boyle thinks it was an accidental release from the Wuhan lab, but who the hell knows for sure https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_TPjbu4FAE

The academic citation refers to a 2015 coronavirus gain-of-function study by U.S. scientists and collaborators from the Wuhan lab (Menachery et al., 2015). The hazardousness of this research trajectory prompted suspension of U.S. federal funding in 2014. Despite concerns, the ban was lifted in 2017.

The chimeric virus narrative was most coherently developed by Dr Francis Boyle, a highly credentialed but controversial U.S. biological weapons expert. His February 20
interview at *NaturalNews* (Adams, 2020) synthesized elements from the Wuhan and Fort Detrick narratives, but attributed responsibility to an international assemblage of experts, primarily in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and China. Boyle provided specific research citations for the gain-of-function engineering he claimed occurred across time (e.g., Hou et al., 2010). His evidence of engineering hinged especially on the unique properties of “furin-like cleavage site” that is identified in scientific research as distinguishing the novel coronavirus from SARS and MERS (e.g., see Coutard et al., 2020) and described U.S. outsourcing research to China due to the national ban.

Dr Luc Montagnier, who helped discover HIV, emerges as the most expert dissident authority on the furin-like cleavage feature, arguing in April 2020 it could not have evolved as alleged (Miller, 2020). However, as with Boyle, a history of idiosyncratic views discredited his claims and mainstream news media ignored him. Yet, a comment linking his interview was highly upvoted at Yahoo April 18, ranked 3rd among 4689 responses and generating 82 responses, and 476 upvotes, posted in response to “Laboratory in Wuhan Breaks Silence to Deny Claims that the Coronavirus Originated There” (see Sullman et al., 2020).

**Conclusions**

Over the spring of 2020, clinical understandings of COVID-19 evolved with greater documentation across time of susceptibilities, impacted organs, and disease sequelae, leading to a paradigm shift away from the SARS-like flu clinical narrative toward a circulatory-inflammatory one. In contrast, expert understandings of the SARS-CoV-2 virus provenance, including the timing and location for disease emergence, remained fundamentally uncertain and contested, fueling international tensions and prompting investigations. Rumors, conspiracy theories, and whistleblowing thrived under uncertainty. As observed by Ding (2014) with SARS, medical workers were among the first to share information about SARS-CoV-2 using social media, as illustrated by the case of Dr Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist chastised for warning colleagues on WeChat. Some comments posted at ZeroHedge after January 24 included factual statements about virus circulations and human susceptibilities pre-dating published information, potentially representing early whistleblowing (see Chakraborty & Diaz, 2020).

However, this study did not seek to verify the truth-value of themes and narrative representations, but rather sought to map them across time. The most compelling alternative narrative of an escaped virus, whether lab-isolated and/or chimeric, trades directly on the uncertainties of viral provenance and includes discursive strategies identified by Kou et al. (2017), such as citing authoritative information selectively, elaborating, connecting the dots, imagining a scenario, meta-discussion of science, and proposing unknowable risks. The challenges of bio-containment and the inherent undecidability of vaccine/bio-weapons research invited speculation. The narrative syntax, or logic, of mad scientists and escaped chimeric viruses has been told many
times by expert whistle-blowers and by science fiction films and novels. The syntax resonates because it is both plausible and highly deniable.

Although the truth of SARS-CoV-2 remains to be written as experts grapple with uncertainties, the alternative narratives of scientific hubris and elite duplicity disclosed in this analysis undeniably resonate with online counter-publics. These narratives are symptoms of fading trust in regulatory institutions and in experts whose promises to protect the public are increasingly regarded as suspect. Rather than censoring or stigmatizing alternative sensemaking, researchers and public health authorities need to consider the messaging posed by populist counter-narratives in relation to their institutional values, objectives, and operations. For only through dialogic inclusion and institutional reflexivity will greater social consensus be achieved regarding such critical matters as pandemic preparedness and management.

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