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Disinformation and the Wuhan Lab Leak Thesis

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It has been a bad week for patronizing crusaders who seek to bar controversial speech on the grounds of “disinformation.” On February 26, the *Wall Street Journal* broke a story regarding a [classified Department of Energy report](#) that the Covid-19 virus most likely originated with a leak from China’s Wuhan lab. FBI Director Christopher Wray [echoed](#) the DOE’s conclusion in a February 28 [interview with Fox News](#). Such developments should be a monumental embarrassment to numerous figures in both government and the establishment news media who worked diligently in 2020-2021 to block accounts that endorsed—or even favorably considered—the lab-leak thesis.

The new bombshell revelations will likely create turbulence in multiple respects. It will exacerbate already contentious relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Xi Jinping’s government made every effort to prevent an independent investigation of Covid’s onset, and PRC officials were aided by Western medical bureaucrats who insisted that it was virtually certain the virus came from nature. The already tattered reputations of those bureaucrats have taken a new hit and may now be damaged beyond repair. That is especially true for Anthony Fauci, who was director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) during the Covid pandemic and was the principal spokesperson for U.S. government policies.

Members of the establishment press worked very hard to bury the lab-leak thesis as wild, baseless speculation. Until May 2021, allegations that the virus may have originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology were [widely dismissed](#) as an [unfounded conspiracy](#) theory. President Donald Trump’s receptivity to the theory led to [knee-jerk conclusions](#) about it being explicitly or implicitly [racist](#) as well. Only a handful of media outlets, principally Fox News, *National Review*, and *The American Conservative*, treated the lab-leak hypothesis seriously, and they were mocked, [denounced, and vilified](#) for doing so. Facebook and other social media information gatekeepers summarily [barred posts](#) embracing the argument that the deadly virus more probably came from the Wuhan virology lab than from bats being sold at a Wuhan market as “disinformation.”

However, it gradually became apparent that it was not “settled science” that the virus originated in nature. Admissions, albeit often grudging, emerged from multiple sources, including the Centers for Disease Control, that it was at least possible the virus could have begun in a laboratory. Another major blow to the blackout on debate came in late May 2021 when the Biden administration authorized a comprehensive investigation to discover the source of the coronavirus. That move was a complete reversal of the administration’s policy during its initial weeks in office when it shut down a similar Trump-authorized investigation by the intelligence community.

The subsequent intelligence report asserted that the source of the virus could not be determined—that both the natural-origins and the lab-leak hypotheses were plausible. An issue involving such uncertainty obviously should have been a legitimate subject of public debate. However, the self-anointed guardians against disinformation smothered that debate.

Wall Street Journal columnist Holman W. Jenkins Jr. asked a highly pertinent question: “On what basis was the lab leak theory ruled out for months by the media despite the lack of any evidence or logic for ruling it out?” His answer was an unsettling one. “We in the press dismissed the lab theory because of an appeal to authority: When anti-Donald Trump spokespeople ridiculed it, that was good enough for us.”

Even if Jenkins is wrong about the blackout being due to pure partisanship, the exclusion of the lab-leak theory from the arena of public debate has been profoundly damaging. The collusion between government and media outlets to suppress maverick views amounted to comprehensive censorship by proxy. *Reason*’s Robby Soave was correct when he wrote nearly two years ago that “the media’s lab leak debacle shows why banning ‘misinformation’ is a terrible idea.” The new revelations from the DOE report and Wray’s interview should establish that point with great clarity.

Preventing debate about the origins of the Covid virus almost certainly reduced public pressure in the United States and other countries for a prompt, genuinely independent, investigation of the Wuhan lab and its security protocols. Whether intentionally or not, the blackout of debate aided the Beijing government’s campaign to exonerate the PRC of any culpability. After such a lengthy passage of time, we now may never be able to discover essential facts.

Enthusiasts for barring the lab-leak thesis as disinformation not only prevented an important inquiry regarding a crucial issue; they damaged the values of free speech and democratic debate.

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