

How to Counter China's Coronavirus Disinformation Campaign

By Natasha Bajema Read bio

Beijing is using lies to undermine America's standing; the U.S. should fight back with science and truth.

Whether we like it or not, the United States is engaged on a new battlefield defined by the “speed, spread, and accessibility of information,” as P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking write in their prescient book, [Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media](#). But our government does not appear to have received the memo. As a result, we're losing the global war over the narrative about COVID-19 in the midst of a global pandemic. And there is much more at stake than words.

Within weeks of discovering the novel coronavirus late last year, the Chinese government began to spin powerful narratives to deflect its responsibility and disguise its accountability for the outbreak, [covering up information](#) that might lead to Patient Zero and the source of the novel pathogen, and presenting itself as the global model and potential international partner for effectively responding to the outbreak—a role the United States might have typically held in the past.

In response to Beijing's brazen attempts to distort the facts, senior U.S. government officials, led by the President, have mostly resorted to racist rhetoric about COVID-19 and pointing fingers of blame at China. This ugly strategy not only hurts the domestic effort to protect the health and safety of the American people against this dangerous disease, it will likely backfire in a struggle for global influence with China. The blame game is not a good look for any country seeking a leadership position on the global stage in the midst of a global pandemic.

A better approach would be to rise above the disinformation battle and seize the narrative with science and technology. As noted in our organization's Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent framework, though we are faced with unprecedented threats, we also possess unprecedented tools for combating those threats. Unlike the past, today we have the tools to fight disinformation campaigns that distort facts that are grounded in science. Using gene sequencing, for example, scientists can trace the origins of the COVID-19 virus and its evolution as well as the future path of the outbreak with genomic data.

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Building powerful narratives around American companies, scientists and government experts leading scientific and technological innovations for overcoming this crisis would reassert the United States as a global leader whilst aiding the global effort to respond to the pandemic.

China proposes U.S. biological weapons program as the source of COVID-19

In mid-March, China [began alleging](#) the U.S. Army was responsible for the outbreak of a novel coronavirus, suggesting that COVID-19 was developed as a genetically engineered bioweapon, either intentionally or accidentally planted by U.S. military personnel in the city of Wuhan. An [official of the Chinese Foreign Ministry](#) tweeted support for a controversial article that suggested the COVID-19 originated in the United States.

The controversial piece fuelling the conspiracy theories was published by Global Research, [a conspiracy website](#) found to spread a variety of anti-U.S. disinformation based out of Montreal, Canada. The article weaves a highly suspect narrative, drawing spurious connections between disparate elements of several true stories.

In August 2019, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, a Level-4 Biosafety Laboratory capable of handling dangerous infectious diseases such as Ebola, [was shut down](#) when it failed to pass a safety inspection by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC.

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Several months later, the CDC released an unrelated report on teen vaping and severe respiratory infections, citing a total of 805 hospitalizations due to lung injuries and 12 deaths with a median age of 23.

During that same month, the U.S. Department of Defense [sent](#) 280 of the top athletes in the U.S. Armed Services to China to participate in the Military World Games. Five athletes suffered from the same illness and were hospitalized at [Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital](#). Allegedly, one of these patients, diagnosed with and treated for malaria, is supposed to be the "patient zero" of the COVID-19 outbreak, [the epicenter](#) of which appears to stem from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

The coincidental timing of these disparate events represents the primary evidence offered by the article, as it seems to track with the potential start of the outbreak in

China sometime in the late fall of 2019. But the article offers at most the stuff of a sensational and unrealistic fiction novel.

Many disinformation efforts

China is not alone in spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 outbreak. The state-sponsored media outlets for Russia and Iran have jumped on the rickety bandwagon as well.

While more than [ten percent](#) of Iran's senior leadership has tested positive for the virus by mid-March, other top Iranian leaders have piled onto the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a biological weapon introduced by the United States.

During the first week of March, the head commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps [claimed](#) that the coronavirus outbreak in Iran might have begun as an American biological weapon (a story [picked up in TASS](#), a Russian English-language new source). Ayatollah Khamenei [repeated this claim](#) the following week—one of many signs that the bioweapons theme is a deliberate campaign by Iran.

Former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not miss his chance to weigh in—[via his Twitter feed](#), no less. On March 9-10, he posted letters addressed to the heads of the World Health Organization and United Nations claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed from a lab-enhanced biological weapon. [He also tweeted](#), “It is clear to the world that the mutated coronavirus was produced in a lab, manufactured by the warfare stock houses of biological war belonging to world powers.”

The U.S. has not done itself any favors in the global competition over narratives.

In the absence of a definitive patient zero for COVID-19, [prominent political leaders](#), [journalists](#), and [media personalities](#) have resorted to spreading conspiracy theories. They have framed the outbreak as [“foreign” or “Chinese”](#), suggesting in some cases that it stemmed from a biological weapons lab in China. Such claims appear to be bolstered by [conspiracy websites](#) and [unsubstantiated quotes](#).

The COVID-19-as-bioweapons conspiracy

The shadowy prospects of clandestine state bioweapons programs offer lucrative opportunities for disinformation campaigns. However, there are obvious problems with any bioweapons-related conspiracies for COVID-19.

Setting off a global pandemic that will cripple the world economy and lead to millions of fatalities is a really terrible strategy for any country. Even if bioweapons were attractive to some country, this highly-transmissible and nearly impossible to control virus would be a least-ideal candidate.

The U.S. developed biological weapons during World War II but never used them due to their perceived liabilities on the battlefield—the fear that once a contagious disease was unleashed, it could not be controlled and could backfire. The U.S. program later focused primarily on pathogens that would incapacitate rather than kill soldiers on

the battlefield.

Even so, the perceived lack of military utility of bioweapons helped lead President Nixon to renounce biological weapons in 1969, commit to the destruction of U.S. stockpiles, and negotiate the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). After experimenting with a bioweapons program for three decades, China also acceded to the BWC in 1984.

This has happened before, and will happen again

This is [not the first outbreak in China](#) to be framed as a biological weapons attack. During the 2002–3 SARS epidemic, a Russian scientist claimed the virus to be a mixture of measles and mumps that could only be made in the lab. The Chinese news media seized on this notion, with the China Youth Daily speculating that SARS was a genetic weapon developed by the National Institutes of Health in the United States.

Such claims are easily dispelled by looking at the data. The CDC [reported](#) that of 166 SARS patients in the United States in 2003, 58 percent were white and 32 percent were Asian.

Conspiracy theories about the source of disease outbreaks gain significant traction because of the dual-use nature of biodefense research. Disinformation campaigns exploit a very fine line that exists between a biodefense program and an offensive biological weapons program.

Under biodefense programs, countries like the U.S. develop diagnostic tools, manufacture personal protective gear, stand up highly secure labs to contain dangerous pathogens, and produce vaccines and other medical countermeasures to protect people from the scourge of disease. All these same capabilities can be leveraged to support a covert offensive bioweapons program.

Unfortunately, the location of U.S. biodefense programs at former sites of its past bioweapons program, e.g. Fort Detrick, help to fuel disinformation.

For this and other reasons, we should have seen this coming and planned for it from the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. We've been here before.

During the Cold War, the Soviets perpetrated numerous bioweapon-related disinformation campaigns, accusing the United States, India, Pakistan, and other countries of developing biological weapons in specific facilities. In one famous operation beginning in the early 1980s, the Soviets [launched](#) a disinformation campaign claiming that AIDS was a biological weapon designed and deployed by the U.S. military.

A more recent wave of Russian disinformation campaigns emerged after the end of the Cold War, in particular as tensions mounted over NATO expansion. In the 1990s, the U.S. began collaborating with countries such as Kazakhstan to dismantle legacy Soviet bioweapons facilities and expand peaceful biosecurity capacities. Russia insisted such efforts were designed to encircle its territory with bioweapons programs. As recently as 2015, Russia [claimed](#) to be threatened by “a network of U.S. military-biological laboratories.”

Russia's disinformation campaigns about bioweapons [reached new heights in 2018](#) when the leader of the Russian military's radiation, chemical and biological protection unit declared that the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, Georgia was engaged in illegal bioweapons activities. Though the lab was designed to study, consolidate, and secure samples of dangerous pathogens, [Russian-driven disinformation campaigns](#) continue to spread via Facebook and other mechanisms in Georgia today.

While the COVID-19 as bioweapon narrative is patently false, it offers a good reminder that a bioweapon attack can be disguised as a naturally occurring outbreak with a strong disinformation campaign to deceive the public.

Conspiracies thrive on the fringes of truth about the COVID-19 outbreak. Many uncertainties exist due to the novelty of the virus, the rapid pace of the outbreak, and the absence of a definitive patient zero. These factors allow for the spread of competing and politically-motivated disinformation campaigns, which hinder the world's ability to contain the outbreak and save lives. They also threaten to undermine U.S. leadership in the current crisis.

How the U.S. can take back the narrative

Although scientists are learning about COVID-19 in real-time, the United States can still take back the narrative with proven science and technology.

Despite the unknowns, scientists have [predicted for decades](#) the potential for a global pandemic originating in China. This is due to the country's previous disease outbreaks caused by coronaviruses and influenza, high levels of biodiversity and conducive climate, and dense populations coexisting with transmitters of zoonotic diseases.

New technologies such as next generation sequencing and machine learning, as well as real-time scientific research, make it possible to counter each element of the conspiracies surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak. We can use science and technology to explain its natural occurrence in wildlife and the jump to humans, its potential origins in the seafood market in Wuhan, the nature of its spread in the United States [and around the world](#), and even the U.S. leadership role in responding to the disease.

Chinese scientists [sequenced the genome of COVID-19](#) from the first identified case of the disease in Wuhan and made it [available](#) in January, only a month later. For comparison look to the SARS outbreak that started in late 2002, when it took more than four months to sequence the genome of the virus.

The ability to quickly, cheaply, and easily sequence the genomes from many patients [allows](#) scientists to trace the origins, path, and evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak in real-time, helping to check unsubstantiated rumors spread by disinformation campaigns.

Even Dr. Shi Zhengli, a leading virologist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (which houses a Level-4 Biosafety Lab), wondered if the coronavirus might have come from samples stored at her lab. Located only ten miles from the Huanan Seafood

Wholesale Market, the close vicinity was enough to ask questions about the prospect of an accidental release caused by a failure in biosafety protocols.

However, the chances of this happening are very slim. A [recent study](#) by Gryphon Scientific found that the risks of accidental release leading to a local outbreak followed by a global pandemic are extremely tiny, making a natural occurrence the more simple explanation for the outbreak, given existing evidence.

Other research raising doubts about the market as the origin of the outbreak has fueled conspiracy theories.

For example, while early patient data clearly [points to the market](#) as the epicenter of the outbreak, there were several early cases of COVID-19 with no direct links. This suggested that patient zero may have introduced it at the market, but that there must be another point of origin. Even though 66 percent of the earliest cases had contact with the market, this research has been cited to serve as evidence for conspiracy theories

Known for her extensive research on bats and zoonotic diseases, Dr. Zhengli predicted the southern, subtropical areas of Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan as having “the greatest risk of coronaviruses jumping to humans from animals —particularly bats, a known reservoir for many viruses.” This also seemed to raise questions about the market in Wuhan as the source of the outbreak.

However, using gene sequencing and genetic analysis, many scientists now believe that COVID-19 may have jumped from bats to pangolins to humans. In early February, researchers at South China Agricultural University found a coronavirus strain in pangolins with a 99 percent match to the novel coronavirus. This would be the closest match so far.

Endangered pangolins are [considered](#) one of the most illegally trafficked mammals in the world and were not listed as items sold at the market—likely because such trade is illegal in China. Pangolins are endemic to the southern, subtropical areas of China. If found to be the source of the COVID-19 outbreaks, these mammals provide a link to the most predicted region for coronaviruses.

Using genetic analysis, scientists have also demonstrated the single point of origin for the outbreak. Across more than two dozen distinct samples from Wuhan, Shenzhen, and Thailand, scientists discovered very little genetic variation, which indicates a common ancestor and a single jump from an animal host. Furthermore, the slow pace of mutation suggests that the virus had not been circulating in humans for very long, corresponding to the start of the outbreak with the timing of the first reported cases in early December.

Many scientists involved in this early research [issued](#) a statement about the origins of the virus to counter rampant conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 outbreak.

American scientists are using gene sequencing, genetic analysis and [online tools such as Nextstrain to trace the evolution and path of the outbreak and identify its source](#) in different regions in the U.S. This work led Dr. Trevor Bedford at the University of Washington [to discover community transmission](#) despite the insistence by public

health officials that sickened travelers were causing the outbreak.

The United States is also using machine learning and other new tools to fight the COVID-19 outbreak, and these programs deserve more attention.

For example, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency runs the [Pandemic Prevention Platform program](#), which provides funding to support the development of novel methods to “dramatically accelerate discovery, integration, pre-clinical testing, and manufacturing of medical countermeasures against infectious diseases.”

[AbCellera, a Canadian company, in partnership with the U.S. National Institutes of Health](#), has developed a new platform for producing field-ready medical countermeasures within 60 days of isolation of a novel virus. They’ve already begun work on a potential treatment for COVID-19 to enter clinical trials by the summer.

A collaborative effort led by Georgetown University’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology across tech companies, philanthropic organizations, and the U.S. government [led to the creation of the CORD-19](#)—an [open dataset of more than 29,000 articles](#) published in journals and on preprint servers. This dataset will support the role of machine learning tools in generating insights for fighting COVID-19.

Meanwhile, one of the world’s fastest supercomputers, IBM’s Summit located at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, [has raced](#) through over 8,000 known drug compounds and medical treatments. Using a model of the COVID-19 virus, the supercomputer has narrowed down a list of 77 potential treatments that may block infection in humans, a task that would have required many months if not years in the past.

The context has changed

Today, we are better positioned than ever to prepare for, prevent and fight the biothreat disinformation campaigns we are dealing with now—and the ones we will inevitably confront in the future—as a result of new scientific and technological tools. And yet, the United States has yet to seize the narrative and demonstrate its global leadership in combating COVID-19.

As Singer and Brooking suggest in *Like War*, social networks reward virality rather than veracity; virality often overwhelms the truth. We can either let social media work against us, or we can leverage its power to shape the narrative and tout the amazing work being done by American scientists, companies, and government experts. Whatever we do, we need to take this battleground seriously.

Disinformation in a time of national crisis can be deadly. Therefore, as the U.S. government responds to protect the American people against COVID-19, a part of that response must include countering biothreat disinformation campaigns. 