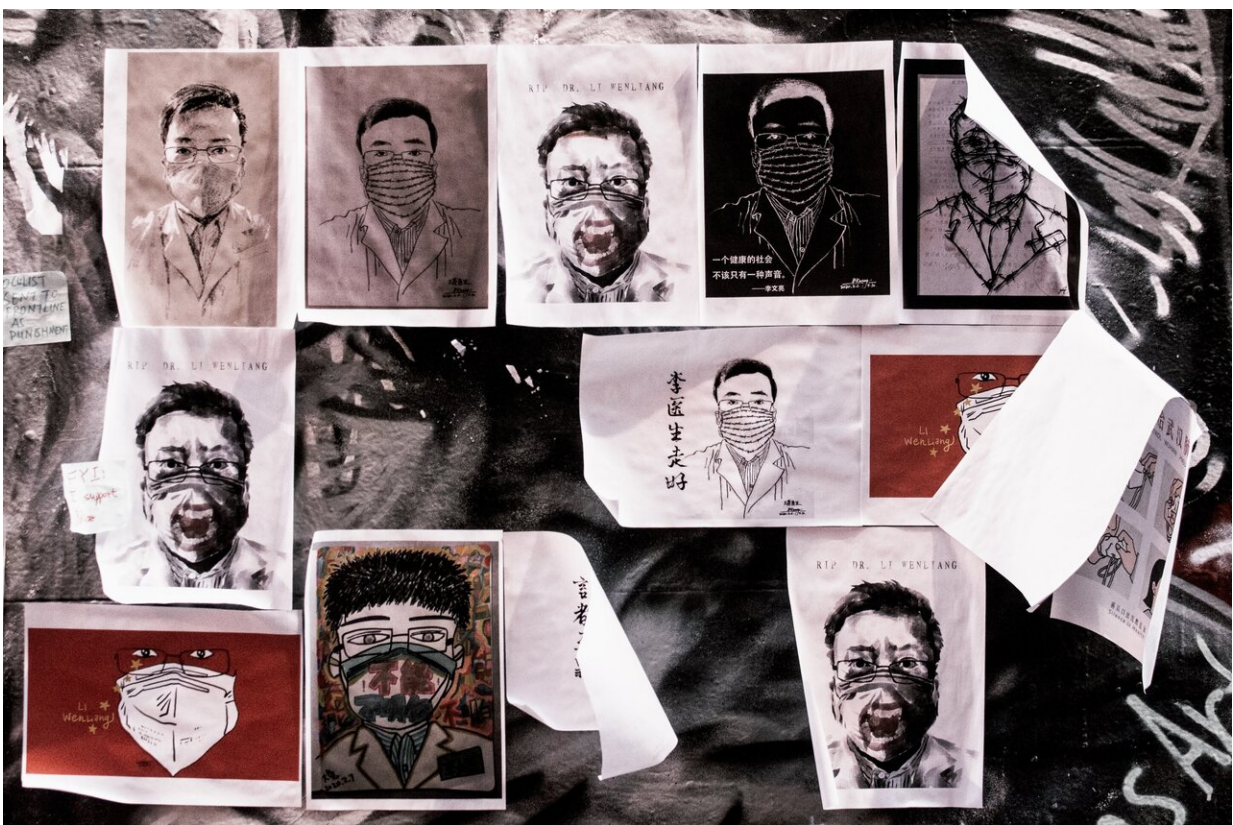


Conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19 outweigh science's influence, researchers say

October 30 2020



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Exposure to conspiracy theories suggesting COVID-19 was human-engineered can have a powerful impact on a person's beliefs,

outweighing the influence of science-based messaging and reducing their willingness to act to reduce the spread of the disease, according to new research at Georgia State University.

A single exposure to [conspiracy](#) rhetoric about the origin of COVID-19, alone or in competition with the natural or "zoonotic" scientific explanation, results in a "conspiracy effect" in which individuals become less likely to view actions such as wearing [face masks](#), frequent handwashing and social distancing as necessary to mitigating the virus's spread.

Researchers Toby Bolsen, Risa Palm and Justin Kingsland randomly surveyed 1,074 respondents during a five-day period from late April to early May. These subjects were exposed to an article formatted to mimic a [news story](#) about the origin of COVID-19, each varying in headline and content. Thirty-three percent identified as Republicans, 40 percent as Democrats and 27 percent as Independents.

People who read only the science-based article, when questioned later, were more likely to believe the virus originated naturally from zoonotic (bat) transmission. They also expressed more support for additional biomedical research funding to identify harmful coronaviruses. Those who read the article suggesting COVID-19 was created in a lab by the Chinese government, as well as those who read both versions, were more willing to penalize China. Their intentions to practice necessary public health and safety measures were also reduced.

"Conspiracy rhetoric can have a profound impact and overpower scientific information," said Palm. "In today's media environment, where individuals may be repeatedly exposed to conspiracy messages, our findings may actually understate the effects of this exposure."

"It is important to account for how repeated exposure to [conspiracy](#)

[theories](#) may influence related beliefs in settings that more accurately mimic the real-world information environment," Bolsen said. "This would provide an opportunity to assess the persistence of the effects of both scientific and conspiratorial messaging on audiences."

The epidemic of misinformation accompanying the spread of COVID-19 has eroded trust in science and misled individuals about the most effective precautions they can take to quell the virus and ensure safety, the authors conclude.

"It is urgent that as we seek to control the spread of this and future viruses, we come up with ways to combat misleading and damaging conspiracy rhetoric," said Palm.

More information: Toby Bolsen et al. Framing the Origins of COVID-19, *Science Communication* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1075547020953603](#)

Provided by Georgia State University

Citation: Conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19 outweigh science's influence, researchers say (2020, October 30) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-conspiracy-theories-covid-outweigh-science.html>

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