

US conspiracy theorists monetize 'Disease X' misinformation

March 4 2024, by Rob Lever and Anuj Chopra, with Tommy Wang in Hong Kong



Fast-spreading 'Disease X' conspiracy theories pose a threat to public health, researchers say.

Coined by the World Health Organization to denote a hypothetical future

pandemic, "Disease X" is at the center of a blizzard of misinformation that American conspiracy theorists are amplifying—and profiting from.

The falsehoods, including that the unknown pathogen indicates an elitist plot to depopulate the earth, appeared to originate in the United States but spilled to Asia in multiple regional languages, AFP fact-checkers found.

The fast-spreading misinformation, which experts say illustrates the perils of reduced content moderation on social media sites, threatens to fuel vaccine hesitancy and jeopardize preparation for [public health emergencies](#) four years after the outbreak of COVID-19.

Stoking fears about Disease X, right-wing influencers in the United States are also cashing in on the falsehoods by hawking medical kits which contain what health experts call an unproven COVID-19 treatment.

"Misinformation mongers are trying to exploit this [conspiracy theory](#) to sell products," Timothy Caulfield, from the University of Alberta in Canada, told AFP.

"This is often their primary mode of income. The conflict is profound. Without the evidence-free fearmongering about vaccines and government conspiracies, they'd have little or no income."

The conspiracy theories particularly took off after the World Economic Forum—a magnet for misinformation—convened a "Preparing for Disease X" panel in January focused on a possible future pandemic.

Selling products

Alex Jones, the founder of the website InfoWars who has made millions

spreading conspiracy theories about [mass shootings](#) and COVID-19, falsely claimed on social media that there was a globalist plan to deploy Disease X as a "genocidal kill weapon."

As the conspiracy spread to China, posts shared on TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) claimed the Chinese government was rolling out mobile cremation ovens to cope with "mass deaths."

But using reverse image searches, AFP fact-checkers found the videos in the posts actually showed pet cremation services.

Last October, AFP fact-checkers debunked online posts in Malaysia that claimed nurses were being forced to take a nonexistent vaccine for Disease X.

US cardiologist Peter McCullough, known for spreading COVID-19 misinformation, claimed without evidence that Disease X was "expected to be engineered in a biolab."

He made the claim on the website of The Wellness Company, a US-based supplements supplier where he serves as the chief scientific officer.

Urging people to "be ready" for Disease X, the website offers a "medical emergency kit" for around \$300, which contains drugs including ivermectin, an unproven COVID-19 treatment.

The Gateway Pundit, a right-wing website notorious for conspiracy theories, also promoted the kits in a sponsored message titled "'DISEASE X'—Are The Globalists Planning Another Pandemic?"

"Don't be caught unprepared," the message said, leading readers to a link to order the kits.

Misinformation goes unchallenged

"Spreading conspiracy theories in order to make money is a grift long established on the right," Julie Millican, vice president of the left-leaning watchdog Media Matters, told AFP.

"The ones most likely to be spreading conspiracy theories" about topics such as Disease X, she added, "are also looking for a way to take advantage of their audience to profit from it."

The Wellness Company and Gateway Pundit did not respond to AFP requests for comment.

Much of the misinformation appears to go unchallenged as platforms such as X scale back content moderation in a climate of cost-cutting that has gutted trust and safety teams.

The conspiracy theories build on growing [vaccine hesitancy](#) since COVID-19, which is likely to have "far-reaching" public health effects, said Jennifer Reich, a sociologist at the University of Colorado Denver.

"Since COVID, we have seen declining support for childhood vaccines and more support on surveys for parents' rights to reject vaccines for their children," Reich told AFP.

Some believers of Disease X conspiracies vowed to reject future vaccines, according to [social media](#) posts tracked by AFP, a stance that could limit the response to real health emergencies.

"Disinformation can also lead to some segments of the population taking up either ineffective or even harmful measures during an epidemic," Chunhwei Chi, a professor of global health at Oregon State University, told AFP.

"It can become a major barrier for a society to be proactive in preparing and preventing an emerging contagious [disease](#)."

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Citation: US conspiracy theorists monetize 'Disease X' misinformation (2024, March 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-03-conspiracy-theorists-monetize-disease-misinformation.html>

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