

April 24, 2020

## Evolution of the Wuhan Lab Conspiracy: The Ad-funded Sites Spreading It

While the source of coronavirus is yet to be proven, hundreds of news sites have been inaccurately reporting that a lab in Wuhan, China unleashed the virus onto the public. Whether the release was accidental, intentional, or not from the lab at all, these theories have been circulating on fringe media since January (see screenshots 1 and 2).

**Screenshot 1: Wuhan lab conspiracy story - 26 January 2020: Aldi ad by Google**

Source: [www.greatgameindia.com](http://www.greatgameindia.com).

**Screenshot 2: Wuhan lab conspiracy story - 25 January - Made.com ad served by Criteo**

Source: [www.gnews.org](http://www.gnews.org).

These stories are making money: ads from household brands like Aldi, Cisco, Esprit, Made.com and Vimeo are being served up by Google, Criteo and others on these conspiracy sites. ([Click here](#) for full overview of sites, articles, adverts and ad tech firms involved)

This inadvertent funding provided by advertisers creates a financial incentive to create disinformation. As the [GDI has argued](#), financial motivation is one of the drivers of the “infodemic” that has accompanied the pandemic.

The Wuhan lab conspiracy moved from fringe sites in January to alternative media by February and March 2020 (see screenshots 3 and 4).

According to [Vox](#), far right talking heads like Steve Bannon and Rush Limbaugh started to make racially charged claims that the virus started in a lab back in February. Rush Limbaugh publicly claimed that the “ChiCom (sic) laboratory experiment is in the process of being weaponized” both against Trump, and the American people. (“ChiCom” is likely a disparaging remark referencing Chinese Communism).

**Screenshot 3: Wuhan lab conspiracy story - 14 March - Made.com ad served by Criteo**

Source: [www.americanthinker.com](http://www.americanthinker.com).

**Screenshot 3: Wuhan lab conspiracy story - 27 March - Postbank, Bitdefender and Conrad ads served by Google**

Source: [www.americanthinker.com](http://www.americanthinker.com).

From there, the conspiracy story started to make the rounds in more mainstream media.

By April, **Fox News** bought into the conspiracy. In conjunction with Fox's coverage, President **Trump announced** a US government investigation into the theory that the virus started in a Wuhan laboratory. These confirmations then triggered a second wave of conspiracy lab theories on known disinformation sites (see screenshot 5).

### **Screenshot 5: Wuhan lab conspiracy story - 20 April - Esprit and Vimeo ads served by Google.**

Source: [www.canadafreepress.com](http://www.canadafreepress.com).

All these lab conspiracy theories have been fact checked and proven untrue.

The **BBC** recently debunked evidence of the Wuhan lab conspiracy by breaking down the timeline of events, the protocols in place to protect researchers and civilians from pathogens, and evaluations of lab in Wuhan by U.S. officials.

There is another twist in this conspiracy plot. It seems that this conspiracy, and Trump's subsequent Tweets, may be response to the Chinese government's own promoted conspiracy that the **U.S. planted the coronavirus in China**. Neither conspiracy is based on any evidence of truth.

As the **GDI has argued here**, well-known brands are inadvertently funding sites pushing out these dangerous conspiracy theories. This is due to the ad tech companies which are serving up their ads on these sites without proper screening or assessing site disinformation risks.

This funding line from ad tech must end now if we are going to combat the infodemic of the coronavirus.

There has been a strong focus on how to stop the spread of disinformation. For the GDI, one key way is to defund the network of disinformation sites making money from coronavirus conspiracies.

Stopping these ad services is one area that no tech company has focused on. Tech companies like [Facebook](#), [Google](#) and [Twitter](#) publicly have committed to fact checking, tinkering with algorithms and slowing the sharing of disinformation. But they are not looking at the sites that are the sources.

As [GDI consistently has argued](#), disinformation spreads across networks and starts out on the fringe, before moving into the mainstream. The case of the Wuhan lab conspiracy clearly shows this phenomenon.

Cutting off ads to these fringe sites and their outer networks is the first action needed.

It is time for Google, Criteo and others to make that move.

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