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If not the media, who will seek the truth?

US media is becoming increasingly partisan — and less interested in seeking the facts. The investigation on the origin of Covid-19 is no exception

In February 2020, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, asked a provocative question: Was there some relationship between Covid-19 emerging in the Chinese city of Wuhan and the fact that there's a biochemical lab in the city that specialises in studying coronaviruses? Was it possible that this lab was studying an animal that carried the virus and failed to properly secure it?

'We don't have evidence that this disease originated there,' Cotton said of the lab, 'but because of China's duplicity and dishonesty from the beginning, we need to at least ask the question to see what the evidence says, and China right now is not giving evidence on that question at all'.

Cotton's comments were nuanced: He wasn't certain that the virus that causes Covid-19 had leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, but he considered it to be a possibility, and he was troubled that the Chinese government was failing to offer the transparency necessary to prove it one way or another.

But the response to Cotton's theory and nuanced line of questioning was brutal. *The New York Times*dismissed him as repeating a 'Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins', as the headline put it. *The Washington Post*insisted that Cotton 'keeps repeating a conspiracy theory that was already debunked'. And the rest of the mainstream media wasn't much kinder.

But how could the theory possibly have been debunked? There is no official consensus on where the new coronavirus first emerged and, as Cotton pointed out, China's government made it basically impossible for outside observers to investigate the origins of the virus.

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Yet for most of the past year, the mainstream media's consensus was that the lab-leak hypothesis was just a fringe theory promoted by hawkish parts of the right. Facebook, which has increasingly appointed itself the arbiter of global speech, had a policy of taking down posts claiming that the virus was man-made or manufactured.

In recent weeks, that has slowly started to change. Top scientists are calling for a more serious probe into the origins of the virus, including the lab-leak theory. President Biden is ordering our intelligence agencies to do a 90-day investigation into the question of where the virus came from. And Facebook recently lifted its ban on posts that claim that the virus that causes Covid-19 was manufactured.

What should we make of all this?

It appears that for the past year, our media seemed to lock arms in shielding the Chinese government from the scrutiny it deserved for failing to control the virus. Whether or not the lab-leak hypothesis bears out, it is clear that our nation's journalists did not approach this question with an open mind.

In a tweet that she later deleted, Apoorva Mandavilli, a *New York Times* science reporter who has been on the coronavirus beat, offered a window into the mindset of much of the media: 'Someday we will stop talking about the lab leak theory and maybe even admit its racist roots. But alas, that day is not yet here'.

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The other leading origin theory — that the virus emerged from China's lightly regulated wet markets — would place more of the blame on local culture than the lab-leak hypothesis, which directly implicates the government (and only the government).

Perhaps Mandavilli's revealing tweet is emblematic of a wider mindset

among American journalists, many of whom saw their mission as simply opposing any stance taken by the Trump administration — former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has long suspected that the virus leaked from the lab in Wuhan — while also burnishing their anti-racist and anti-imperialist credentials by refusing to blame a foreign government for the pandemic.

But the goal of journalism shouldn't be to craft the most culturally sensitive or partisan narrative. The goal of journalism is to seek the truth. The consequences of telling the truth should be secondary to getting the truth out there in the first place, even if it makes the Trump administration or Republican Senators look good or the Chinese government look bad.

To be clear, there have always been partisan or ideological journalists who openly take sides in social or political disputes. But until very recently, we could at least expect that the mainstream media would make a legitimate effort to seek the facts and report fairly, rather than dismiss stories that could make their favoured political faction look unfavourable or boost the prospects of their political opponents.

Increasingly, the space for nonpartisan journalism that aggressively seeks the truth is shrinking.

It should hardly be a surprise that Americans are rapidly losing faith in the media. As the story of the lab-leak hypothesis shows, too many in our current news media environment are quick to politicise their coverage and seek the truth only when it's convenient for their faction. Ultimately, this will only continue to degrade the credibility of the American press, which may benefit forces like the Chinese Communist Party in more ways than one.

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Zaid Jilani

Zaid Jilani has worked as a reporter for The Intercept, ThinkProgress, United Republic and Alternet, among others. He completed a master's in public administration at Syracuse University in 2014 and is currently a Writing Fellow at Greater Goods Magazine.