

Australia's Murdoch media and the Wuhan COVID-19 lab conspiracy theory

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US President Joe Biden's decision late last month to order an intelligence report on allegations that COVID-19 was released from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology has brought this baseless conspiracy theory to the forefront of the mainstream media.

This "theory" was previously confined to the most right-wing, pro-Trump outlets. The Murdoch media in Australia, which was among these, is now gloatingly claiming vindication, courtesy of the Biden administration.

A review of the Murdoch press's record on the issue, however, demonstrates the baseless and politically motivated nature of the claim that the Chinese government and military are responsible for leaking COVID-19 from a laboratory in Wuhan. This allegation has no credible evidence whatsoever and is being promoted as part of the wider campaign by Washington and its allies to divert public hostility over their own disastrous failure to prevent mass coronavirus infections, and to prepare for aggressive military confrontation with China.

Murdoch journalist Sharri Markson has played an especially prominent role in Australia and internationally in promoting the Wuhan lab conspiracy.

After the *Wall Street Journal* published an article last month claiming that unnamed intelligence sources believed that three Wuhan lab employees were the source of the initial COVID-19 cluster, Markson boasted on Twitter that she had written a report based on the "same intel" for the *Australian* in March.

Many of the details in Markson's article were indeed similar to the *Wall Street Journal* report. Both quoted David Asher, State Department official who was commissioned by Mike Pompeo to investigate the origins of COVID-19, though the *Journal* cited a larger number of anonymous intelligence operatives.

Each article included a brief mention of the assessment made by Dutch virologist Marion Koopmans that the small number of illnesses among Wuhan Institute of Virology employees were explicable as regular, seasonal illnesses. Left out of Markson's article was an important qualifier in the *Journal* report: "It isn't unusual for people in China to go straight to the hospital when they fall sick, either because they get better care there or lack access to a general practitioner."

Whereas the *Journal* article in May triggered a Biden

administration investigation and general about-face within the American press on the Wuhan conspiracy theory, Markson's article in March drew little attention.

This reflected the extent to which the Murdoch press in Australia has been discredited for its bogus reporting on the Wuhan lab allegations. Markson has twice been exposed for promoting "exclusive" stories, purporting to be based on intelligence sources, indicating Chinese culpability for the creation or leaking of COVID-19, that turned out to be nothing of the sort.

On May 2 last year, Markson published a 3,000-word frontpage story for the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, based on what she described as a "dossier prepared by concerned Western governments" and a "15-page research document." When the story was promoted in other Murdoch outlets in Australia and internationally, the purported dossier was repeatedly described as a "Five Eyes" intelligence report.

Markson wrote that the "government dossier claims incurable virus invented at lab." Her lengthy article, spread across seven pages of the *Daily Telegraph* contained very few concrete details and instead mostly comprised descriptions of Chinese scientific research on bat-related viruses, portrayed in the darkest colours, combined with sweeping allegations without any accompanying evidence.

The dossier, Markson's article claimed in a typical passage, "lays the foundation for the case of negligence being mounted against China [and] paints a picture of how the Chinese government deliberately covered up the coronavirus by silencing doctors who spoke out, destroying evidence from the Wuhan laboratory and refusing to provide live virus samples to international scientists working on a vaccine."

Markson's story coincided with a Trump administration push to promote the Wuhan conspiracy theory. On May 3, 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly claimed there was "enormous evidence" to support this allegation, though he failed to provide any.

Markson's report had a significant impact within Republican circles in the US. She was interviewed by several outlets, including Steve Bannon's fascistic *War Room Pandemic* podcast. On May 5, she spoke with Fox News's Tucker Carlson. After denouncing "left-wing sections of the media"

for not lending credibility to the allegations, she stated: “Given that China has lied and it is just a fact, they have lied about everything to do with this virus, so far how can we take [scientists’] word for it?”

Carlson declared that Markson’s story “is the most substantial confirmation of what we’ve suspected that we’ve had so far,” and “because it’s a multinational effort I think it would be hard to dismiss it as a political document.”

In fact, the report was debunked with days of its publication. The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that “senior members of the Australian intelligence community” told them that Markson’s so-called intelligence dossier was nothing more than a collation of news reports and “contained no material from intelligence gathering.”

These newspapers later elaborated: “The document was, in fact, a ‘non-paper’ compiled by the US State Department which contained no classified information, referenced news reports and was merely a timeline of events, according to multiple senior Australian government sources who have read the document.”

The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* added that there were “widespread suspicions within senior ranks of the Australian government and the intelligence community that the document was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph* by a staff member in the US embassy in Canberra.”

The incident had all the hallmarks of a Trump administration provocation, with its operatives collaborating with the Murdoch press to insert bogus “intelligence” against China into the American media.

Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd published an opinion piece in the *Guardian* on May 8 last year suggesting that the discredited *Daily Telegraph* story was part of Murdoch’s efforts to help Trump stay in office.

“Using an intelligence leak pushing Chinese culpability, laundered through a foreign country, turbocharged with the credibility factor of being an alleged Five Eyes product, helps the partisan political cause,” Rudd wrote. “And let’s be clear: Murdoch is campaigning full-bore for Trump.”

Whatever the immediate calculations at the time of the *Daily Telegraph* “exclusive,” the perpetuation of the Wuhan conspiracy theory under the Biden administration points to the wider considerations of the entire political establishment in Washington as it prepares to wage war against China in order to maintain US imperialism’s global dominance.

Last month, Markson published another “exclusive” story connected to the Wuhan allegations, this time for the *Australian*.

Headlined, “Chinese military scientists discussed weaponising SARS coronaviruses,” the article promoted Markson’s forthcoming book *What Really Happened in Wuhan*. The frontpage story was purportedly based on a “document” or “paper” that had been “written by People’s Liberation Army scientists and senior Chinese public health officials in 2015”

and then “obtained by senior officials at the US State Department in May 2020, who were investigating the origins of the pandemic.”

The article breathlessly added that “Robert Potter, a digital forensics specialist who has worked for the US, Australian and Canadian governments, and has previously analysed leaked Chinese government documents, verified the authenticity of the paper.”

The Chinese “paper” reportedly included the assertion that a third world war “will be biological” and that “the core weapon for victory in World War Three will be bioweapons.”

The day after the article was published, Markson promoted it on her Sky News show. “This is a war mentality, teaching Chinese students the best conditions under which to release a bio-weapon,” she declared. “This is very dangerous stuff.”

Such rhetoric is typical of Markson’s television “news” show, which has featured fawning interviews with numerous agitators for a confrontation with China, such as Steve Bannon and academic Clive Hamilton.

Once again, what the Murdoch press palmed off as leaked intelligence documents was nothing of the sort. Researchers on Twitter immediately debunked Markson’s article, noting that the “paper” she cited was in fact a book, *The Unnatural Origin of SARS and New Species of Man-Made Viruses as Genetic Bioweapons*, that is publicly available via Amazon and other outlets. Written by individual Chinese military researchers, the book, which includes a false claim that the 2003 SARS virus was engineered by the US military, has no official status and has reportedly been widely ridiculed within China.

“Our debate should be evidence-driven and not by pure falsehood,” Adam Ni, of the China Policy Centre, told the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. “The theory is ridiculous. It is like saying I can divine US military secrets by reading some random book from Amazon.”

In 2003, every single Murdoch publication, without exception, supported the illegal US invasion of Iraq and promoted the weapons of mass destruction lies used as its pretext. In 2021, the Murdoch media is working to pave the way for an even greater war crime, a US-led assault on China, through the systematic promotion of lies, innuendo and bogus intelligence related to the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory for which there exists not a single credible shred of evidence.

Journalists and media workers must repudiate this filthy campaign, as part of the wider responsibility of all workers, scientists, and intellectuals to oppose the Wuhan conspiracy-provocation.



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