

Conspiracy and debunking narratives about COVID-19 origins on Chinese social media: How it started and who is to blame | HKS Misinformation Review

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This paper studies conspiracy and debunking narratives about the origins of COVID-19 on a major Chinese social media platform, Weibo, from January to April 2020. Popular conspiracies about COVID-19 on Weibo, including that the virus is human-synthesized or a bioweapon, differ substantially from those in the United States. They attribute more responsibility to the United States than to China, especially following Sino-U.S. confrontations. Compared to conspiracy posts, debunking posts are associated with lower user participation but higher mobilization. Debunking narratives can be more engaging when they come from women and influencers and cite scientists. Our findings suggest that conspiracy narratives can carry highly cultural and political orientations. Correction efforts should consider political motives and identify important stakeholders to reconstruct international dialogues toward intercultural understanding.

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