

Xenophobia increases as coronavirus cases rise

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Body

When Mary Liu, a Chinese American student, asked passersby for directions at the Philadelphia International Airport, they turned around and refused to talk to her. Another time, somebody yelled "corona" at her friend as they rode the subway.

In the past few weeks, Liu's family and friends have been at the receiving end of judgmental glares, catcalls and racial slurs.

Sometimes this xenophobia takes the form of everyday microaggressions and seemingly harmless memes and TikTok videos that Liu sees on social media.

"I have friends asking me like, 'Oh can I laugh at this?' This is how people define comedy but I feel like there's some limits when it comes to that," said Liu, a junior data science major.

Liu is not alone. Her experience is shared by other Asian Americans and Chinese immigrants as more reported coronavirus cases come to light.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define the 2019 Novel Coronavirus, or COVID-19, as a respiratory disease that first originated in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The coronavirus has infected more than 71,000 people and caused 1,770 deaths around the world as of Monday, Feb. 17 at 5 p.m., CNN reported.

On Jan. 30, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a global health emergency, but urged countries not to restrict any travel or trade with China, BBC reported.

Nevertheless, more than 50 countries have issued travel restrictions on China in response to the coronavirus outbreak, including the United States, Fortune reported earlier this month.

The current fear surrounding the coronavirus displays characteristics of both racism against Asian Americans and xenophobia against Chinese immigrants.

Racism is defined as prejudice and discrimination toward members of a particular race, based on a sense of superiority over them. Xenophobia is prejudice toward people from other countries.

This xenophobia against Chinese immigrant populations dates back to the 20th century and early 21st century during outbreaks of the bubonic plague and SARS, the Washington Post reported. This repeated display of xenophobic attitudes in response to public health crises indicates the presence of a deeper institutional issue.

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"If you look at the history of different types of pandemics or diseases that have some sort of infectious quality to them, there is often a group that gets scapegoated as a part of the unfolding 'crisis,'" said Lauren Olsen, an assistant professor of sociology who researches medical sociology and bias. "They used to think that tuberculosis, in particular, was like an African-American disease and used it to justify a lot of the Jim Crow laws."

SPREADING XENOPHOBIA, MISINFORMATION AND PANIC

In a now-deleted post by the University of California, Berkeley, xenophobia was described as a "normal reaction" to the coronavirus outbreak. Lunar New Year celebrations were canceled in Denver and Chicago even though the coronavirus has a low risk of infecting the general population in America, NBC News reported.

Earlier this month, a case of the coronavirus in Maricopa County, Arizona, led to increased reports of racism and xenophobia toward Asian American students at Arizona State University, according to The State Press, the university's student newspaper.

This panic is also expressed through jokes on social media and light-hearted comments - while they aren't really part of a coordinated hate campaign, they still validate institutional bias and fuel prejudice.

A post by a Twitter user last week definitively connected this public health crisis to a singular Chinese woman eating a bat. Another tweet advised Chinese people to eat "normal" food. These social media posts spread blatantly false information about the virus and use sweeping generalizations to exclude and stigmatize Chinese people all around the world.

"If you were scared for your life, you would not be sitting on Facebook sharing memes," Liu said. "If it was your race being [targeted], you wouldn't be laughing."

HOW MEDIA OUTLETSPERPETUATE FEAR

During an emergency, the boundary between sensationalism and appropriate warning can be blurred. In this case, the media have an important responsibility to spread awareness without stoking unwarranted panic.

Elizabeth De Jesus, a 2016 biology alumna and current member of the Pre-Health Evaluation Committee at Temple, said media outlets need to be careful against spreading unwarranted panic.

"When I watch the news, the kind of adjectives that they use to describe the ongoing hysteria with the coronavirus really sparked an interest with me," De Jesus said. "When they talk about the Center for Disease Control, they use terms such as 'the CDC is scrambling' or 'the CDC is in panic,' and that kind of verbiage is not warranted. This is a typical protocol that the CDC undergoes when they have a new virus."

Serena Zhang, a senior accounting major and an international student from Beijing, China, said she doesn't know what to believe due to misinformation in reporting, as factually incorrect information about the coronavirus has spread rapidly, the Washington Post reported.

"I don't know who is telling the truth. I feel on the fence about [coronavirus] because the media kind of has its own bias," Zhang said.

The media's exaggeration of the risks associated with the outbreak and the language used to describe it can inadvertently push xenophobic narratives.

Rush Limbaugh, a conservative radio host, recently came under fire for referring to the virus as the "Chi-com virus" and calling on the U.S. to institute a ban on Chinese travelers. Amy Coulter, a conservative pundit, chastised Congress for not imposing a travel ban to "block the coronavirus that is going to kill Americans." The use of inflammatory language by partisan news sources can ultimately legitimize anti-Chinese bigotry.

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The Asian American Journalists Association released a statement urging journalists to be careful in their coverage of the coronavirus. It advises news outlets to avoid using pictures of people wearing face masks without providing proper context because the practice of wearing clinical masks has different cultural connotations in East Asia.

Using generic pictures of local Chinatowns if they are not directly related to the story can create a sense of "otherness." Chinatowns should not be used to visualize the virus, according to AAJA's statement.

AAJA also advises news outlets against using the term "Wuhan Virus," referencing guidelines by the WHO which discourage the use of geographical location when naming a pandemic as this can stoke bigotry against people from that region.

TRAVEL BANS

Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania suspended university-affiliated student travel to China last month, The Temple News and the Daily Pennsylvanian reported.

In addition, on Jan. 23, the Office of International Affairs sent an email to international students from China, advising them to seek medical care if they were experiencing flu-like symptoms and had recently returned from Wuhan, China.

Earlier this month, Penn also recommended that all students returning from mainland China self-isolate for at least 14 days after arriving in the United States, the Daily Pennsylvanian reported. Officials at the University of Pittsburgh have either cancelled or changed venues for their China study programs, PennLive reported.

Several countries and airlines have also halted travel to China, CNBC reported.

These responses come in the wake of a chief staff member of the World Health Organization stating that travel bans were not necessary to stop the outbreak and could "have the effect of increasing fear and stigma, with little public health benefit," Politico reported earlier this month.

This response is excessive, especially in the absence of an imminent, immediate threat to countries like the U.S. that have robust health care systems.

What is missing from this panic is honest concern toward the Chinese population and the impact the virus and subsequent xenophobia have on them.

"White Americans conceptualize everything in relationship to themselves, so something like a potential for illness is perceived as something that would like uniquely affect them," Olsen said. "It's filtered through the lens of one's white self. I don't think that when people are thinking about the coronavirus, they're not necessarily doing so in empathy. For all the people that are losing their lives, they're thinking about like this more like, 'Oh no, what if I get sick?'"

WAYS TO FIGHT THE ISSUE

The Office of International Affairs sent out an email to Chinese international students on Feb. 6 to express support and connect them with resources to deal with any discrimination. While this is a good thing to offer international students, universities need to take more steps to support students during this time.

An appropriate response to a public health emergency is crucial, but it is also important that these measures are framed sensitively and don't single out a specific population.

"While I understand that an institution of education will need to have steps in place to make sure that their student population is safe, the idea of having explicitly exclusive policies sends a ton of messages to the student body," Olsen said.

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Colleges should set up workshops and lectures that educate students about xenophobia and the spread of false information during crises.

The university administration should also take more concrete steps to deal with institutional bias by actively engaging minority students in the decision-making process. It should ensure that students belonging to marginalized identities have a safe space to voice their concerns about university policies that they may think are exclusionary. Their experiences with discrimination should be acknowledged and used as a guide to educate the larger population about racism and xenophobia.

"A huge responsibility we have is listening to the concerns of the people that have been oppressed by white institutions and caring about more than ourselves," Olsen said.

Students should actively try to educate themselves about the coronavirus to understand the severity of the situation and the impact it has on Chinese and East Asian populations all over the world. They should avoid mindlessly sharing social media posts without critically analyzing their accuracy and realize that the spread of misinformation can lead to unwarranted panic.

The use of racial stereotyping and insensitive humor can undermine the discourse surrounding grave issues. In this case, it is important that we refrain from sharing memes, TikTok videos and jokes about the coronavirus and recognize how non-white populations continue to suffer even during emergencies.

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