

Asian Americans use social media to mobilize against attacks

Daily Collegian: Pennsylvania State University

April 4, 2020 Saturday

University Wire

Copyright 2020 UWIRE via U-Wire All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. 1

Length: 1048 words

Byline: TERRY

Body

Kyle Navarro was kneeling down to unlock his bicycle when he noticed an older white man staring at him. Navarro, who is Filipino, tried to ignore him, but that soon became impossible.

The man walked by, looked back and called Navarro a racial slur. He "spat in my direction, and kept walking," Navarro said.

Navarro, a school nurse in San Francisco, already had anxiety about racism related to the coronavirus, which emerged in China and has Asian people facing unfounded blame and attacks as it's spread worldwide. Now, he was outraged.

"My first instinct was to yell back at him in anger. But, after taking a breath, I realized that would have put me in danger," Navarro said.

Instead, he took to Twitter last week to turn the ugly moment into an opportunity for a conversation about racism, generating thousands of sympathetic comments.

Asian Americans are using social media to organize and fight back against racially motivated attacks during the pandemic, which the FBI predicts will increase as infections grow. A string of racist run-ins in the last two weeks has given rise to hashtags - #WashTheHate, #RacismIsAVirus, #IAmNotCOVID19 - and online forums to report incidents. Critics say President Donald Trump made things worse by calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus."

For a group with a history of being scapegoated - from Japanese Americans detained during World War II to a Chinese American man killed by autoworkers angry about Japanese competition in the '80s - there's urgency to drown out both bigotry and apathy.

To that end, the California-based groups Chinese for Affirmative Action and the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council set up a hate reporting center last month. New York's attorney general also launched a hotline.

"We kind of just knew from history this was going to snowball," said Cynthia Choi, co-executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action. "With the rising stress and anxiety, we knew we'd see a rise in hate incidents."

The center has fielded more than 1,000 reports from across the U.S., ranging from people spitting to throwing bottles from cars. An FBI report distributed to local law enforcement predicts the attacks will surge and pointed to the stabbing of an Asian American man and his two children at a Sam's Club in Texas last month, ABC News

Asian Americans use social media to mobilize against attacks

reported. According to the report, the 19-year-old suspect said he thought they were "infecting people." The victims have recovered.

Amid the explosive climate, former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang drew backlash for urging fellow Asian Americans to display more "American-ness." In a Washington Post editorial Wednesday, he called on them to avoid confrontation and do acts of goodwill like volunteering and helping neighbors.

"Being 'the good Asian' has not fared well for Asian Americans," Choi said. "We don't have to prove our worth and that we belong, that we're exceptional. And we certainly don't have to believe that this is something that we should ignore."

Yang's spokesman declined to comment.

Meanwhile, Trump has walked back on calling COVID-19 the Chinese virus, saying at a media briefing and on Twitter last week that Asian Americans should not be blamed "in any way, shape or form."

Democrats in the U.S. Senate and House worry the damage has been done and have introduced resolutions to condemn anti-Asian racism.

"His followers continue to double-down on that term," said U.S. Rep. Judy Chu of California, chairwoman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

Some of the reports received by the advocacy groups describe harassment that appears to parrot Trump, Choi said.

A White House spokesman declined to comment and referred to Trump's remarks at the March 23 briefing.

The president's words also drew some Asian Americans in entertainment and fashion to the #WashTheHate social media campaign last month. Celia Au, star of the Netflix show "Wu Assassins," and others posted videos showing them washing their hands and talking about the effect of racism.

"It comes from the top down at the end of the day," Au said. "Our top leader is not doing the job, so it's time for us to step up."

People turning against Asian Americans in an uncertain time and sputtering economy echoes the climate in 1982, when Vincent Chin was killed in Detroit as laid-off autoworkers blamed a recession on Japanese competition.

"At that time, I knew I had to watch out and be careful - who I was around, how they looked at me," said Helen Zia, a Chinese American author and journalist from Oakland, California, who lived in Detroit at the time. "I think we're in that stage now."

Two white autoworkers beat Chin to death with a bat outside a strip club during his bachelor party simply because they thought he was Japanese. The 27-year-old's attackers were convicted of manslaughter and got just three years of probation.

Zia said she and others contacted advocacy groups, churches and Chinese-language media about protesting the sentence. Relying only on mail and telephones, they found allies in the NAACP and Anti-Defamation League and launched demonstrations nationwide.

"It was a watershed moment," Zia said. "We were drowning, and we had to organize to change what we saw going on around us."

Thanks to social media, younger generations of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are speaking up during what could be another seminal moment. Choi hopes they will rally non-Asians to see the wave of racist attacks in the COVID-19 era as their issue, too. Groups like the NAACP and Council on American-Islamic Relations have condemned anti-Asian rhetoric.

Asian Americans use social media to mobilize against attacks

With attacks escalating, Zia can't help but fear the pandemic could result in another tragedy like Chin's death.

"The level of anger ... it's already here," Zia said. "For Asian Americans, there's the virus of COVID-19 and there's the virus of hate. The hate virus is also going to get much worse."

Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>.

Submit a Letter to the Editor

If you're interested in submitting a Letter to the Editor, [click here](#).

Submit

- [Send Letter to the Editor](#)

Copyright 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Load-Date: April 5, 2020