



On Social Media, Racist Responses To Coronavirus Can Have Their Own Contagion

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Body

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: Even though there are just a handful of confirmed cases of coronavirus in the U.S., federal officials are taking action to limit the spread of the disease. The White House declared a public health emergency on Friday. Americans who were evacuated from China last week are now under a quarantine. And most foreign nationals who visited China within the last 14 days are now banned from entering the U.S. While officials say the risk to the American public is low, fears about a possible outbreak have led to some questionable behavior towards people of Asian descent and, perhaps not surprisingly, some racist comments on social media.

Here to tell us more is NPR's Maria Godoy.

MARIA GODOY: Hey, David.

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: So what's being said out there, Maria?

MARIA GODOY: Well, as you mentioned, we are already seeing racist comments on social media, things like, don't eat Chinese food or you might catch the virus, or, don't go to Chinatown. I spoke with one prominent Chinese American activist in New York. He told me he was walking down Chinatown, and he witnessed a pedestrian telling a vendor, no, I don't want your souvenir; I don't want your coronavirus.

I also spoke with a Korean American woman. She told me she was riding the subway in New York. She sat down and wiped her nose. And the woman she was sitting next to immediately got up and moved away and stood the rest of the ride rather than sit next to her. She said a similar thing happened to her a few days later.

I also spoke with Robert Fullilove. He is the associate dean for community and minority outreach at the School of Public Health at Columbia University. And he told me about something he had just heard from a Asian American student.

ROBERT FULLILOVE: She was in a coffee shop. Someone told her to leave and take the coronavirus with her.

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: OK. So that's intense. What's the dean telling students?

MARIA GODOY: He is really worried about the backlash from this virus. He and other school officials and, frankly, public health officials across the country are trying to put a stop to this. The Centers for Disease Control and

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Prevention on Friday urged people not to let panic guide their actions, not to assume that anyone has the coronavirus. I'm seeing similar messages from local public health departments.

We saw this kind of racism and discrimination with the SARS epidemic back in 2002 and 2003 - in Toronto, a lot of people refusing to go to Chinatown. They lost business. There were workers of Chinese descent who were let go from their jobs.

But Robert Fullilove and other people I spoke with say one thing that's changed since then is now there's a new element. And that, again, is social media.

ROBERT FULLILOVE: I'm really worried about the wildfire way in which things become viral. And with social media, I think we have more of a danger of a kind of a social contagion as a result of this.

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: How prevalent does that reaction seem to be?

MARIA GODOY: David, we are still monitoring the situation. Just like we track the disease, we are tracking the reaction to it.

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: OK. So to prevent the actual spread of viruses, we're told to cough into our sleeves. We're told to wash our hands a lot. What can we do to stop a backlash from building against Asians and Asian Americans?

MARIA GODOY: You know, I spoke with a researcher named Erika Lee. She's a professor of Asian American studies at the University of Minnesota. And she gave me a great question, a question that we should all be asking ourselves, whether it's before posting on social media or just how we interact in public. And this is what she told me.

ERIKA LEE: Would we be reacting in the same way if this was an outbreak of disease from - name a European country. (Laughter) You know, or - and then similarly, name a country in Africa.

MARIA GODOY: You know, she says when you ask yourself that question, it can be pretty revealing. You might be surprised that your attitude instantly changes. You might stop yourself from doing something that could have been a pretty bad decision.

DAVID FOLKENFLIK: That's NPR's Maria Godoy. Maria, thanks.

MARIA GODOY: Thank you, David.

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