

USC students should be critical of media during the coronavirus pandemic

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While sheltering in place, some students have spent the whole day on Netflix, some have caved and joined TikTok and some of us have posted one too many Instagram chains. Others have kept up with coronavirus headlines exclusively through Twitter trends, and some through The New York Times' live updates. In any case, many students have been spending more time than usual on social media and the internet.

This can be a good thing. In a time of great uncertainty, students can count on the inevitable Zoom memes to provide temporary distraction and relief. However, with the constant stream of media regarding the pandemic, it is now more important than ever before to be critical consumers of information.

Social media and the internet have never been the epitome of reliability in regard to many issues, and the coronavirus has proved to be no exception. Indeed, the internet has been the root of many conspiracy theories about the virus's origin, false symptoms and misguided anger toward Asians and Asian Americans. This misinformation is so widespread that some workers from the World Health Organization have been tasked to battle not the pandemic but the spread of inaccurate information.

USC's student population has proven to be no less susceptible to the impacts of what WHO is calling the "infodemic." Back in January, there was a false alarm about a coronavirus case at The Lorenzo apartment complex near USC. A video showing emergency vehicles at the scene quickly began to circulate on social media. The panic escalated when Chance Kidd, then general manager of the complex, sent out an email informing residents that a resident had tested positive for the virus.

This incident shows the possible speed and extent of the spread of false information on the internet. By the time the coronavirus case at The Lorenzo was confirmed false by the USC Department of Public Safety later that night, a "cancel school" petition on Change.org had already gained almost 10,000 signatures. The false alarm caused unnecessary panic that may have been avoided had students taken time to look into the situation before telling all of their followers on Instagram about it. While one can hope that media is fact-checked in the first place, the reality is that it is often the responsibility of consumers to critically analyze the given information.

While the petition's goal did not come to fruition at the time, there are many other ways in which misinformation can lead to real and harmful consequences. As the coronavirus continued to spread, so did the confusion. After the false alarm at The Lorenzo, some students took to Facebook to post xenophobic memes targeting Chinese American students and Chinese international students at USC.

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In an email sent to the student body in mid-March, then Undergraduate Student Government President Trenton Stone addressed the xenophobic attitude adopted not only by some students on campus but by people around the world.

"Remember that anyone can get and spread COVID-19, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, etc.," he said in his message. "Racism, xenophobia, and similar stigmatizing behaviors are unwelcome and directly contradict our collective mission to create a safe and inclusive environment for all of our students. Please speak out against hateful rhetoric wherever possible."

This is not to say all information on the internet and social media is untrustworthy or untrue. Platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have said they will be working closely with the WHO to point users toward accurate information about the virus. The Daily Trojan has also been committed to providing updates about the coronavirus situation on campus to University stakeholders.

However, it is important to know that students must be critical of any information consumed to effectively combat the "infodemic." In the age of the coronavirus, a critical gaze of the media may be as valuable as hand sanitizer or toilet paper.

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