Deng, Yuntian <​███████@g.harvard.edu>

Asking for your help regarding an article from Harvard Medical School

Yuntian Deng <█████@g.harvard.edu>   Thu, Mar 18, 2021 at 8:05 PM
To: ██@harvard.edu, ████@seas.harvard.edu
Cc: Martin Jin <███@g.harvard.edu>

Dear Harvard and SEAS diversity offices,

My name is Yuntian Deng, and I am writing on behalf of 68 Harvard students/alumni to share our concerns about an article from the Harvard Medical School. This article, titled "Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019", analyzed the Chinese search engine data and indicated that COVID-19 started in China in "late summer and early fall 2019". This article was cited by the press even before the preprint became public with the corresponding author being interviewed.

As members of the Harvard community, we respect academic freedom and we are willing to accept hard truths uncovered by impartial scientific investigations. However, after reading the article and looking at the way through which the authors drew this conclusion, we are infuriated by their use of data dredging (a technique used by some pharmaceutical companies to show that a drug is effective by performing multiple statistical tests until the desired conclusion is drawn, such as drug X is effective for disease Y). The usage of data dredging is evidenced by two facts: first, the authors only used a keyword "diarrhea" which ranks lowest on the CDC list of symptoms of COVID-19; second, the authors used an uncommon translation of "diarrhea" (腹泻的症状) instead of the common translation (腹泻) (which is also what's produced by Google Translate, and you guessed it, using the common translation would lead to a different conclusion). While the use of data dredging by pharmaceutical companies is most likely driven by profit, then what's the motivation/intention behind this article?

While one incident might be by chance, putting together these pieces of evidence (the press cited the article even before it became available to the public, the corresponding author of the article got interviewed before this article got peer-reviewed, and the use of data dredging) seems to confirm beyond reasonable doubt that this article intends to send information to the public that COVID-19 was already spreading by China since the fall of 2019, which promotes the hate crimes against Chinese, and by extension, Asians and Pacific Islanders in the US.

You might wonder why we sent you this email almost a year after. In fact, last summer we have already sent an open letter to all parties involved, including the dean and many faculty members of HMS. While they promised to investigate this, it has been 9 months since our original email and 8 months since their promise, yet we heard back nothing. We really hope to get help from you to make our voices heard, to make sure they follow an open, transparent, and fair investigation process, and we are open to discussions. Thank you in advance!

Below we've forwarded our original email, and we've attached the attachment from that email which has more details explaining why this article is intentionally biased in layperson terms. We've also cc'd you in the other email as our one last attempt to get some reply from HMS.

Best,
Yuntian

Below is the original email:

> Begin forwarded message:
>
> **From:** "Deng, Yuntian" <██████@g.harvard.edu>
> **Subject: Concerns about an article from HMS and Boston Children's Hospital (from 68 Harvard students)**
> **Date:** June 15, 2020 at 1:57:27 PM EDT
> **To:** ██████@hms.harvard.edu, ███@childrens.harvard.edu, ████████@hms.harvard.edu, ████@childrens.harvard.edu, ██████@childrens.harvard.edu, ████@childrens.harvard.edu,

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Cc: GSAS Dean Emma Dench <████████████ @fas.harvard.edu>, "Thomas, Sheila" <████████ @fas.harvard.edu>, ███ @fas.harvard.edu, Martin Jin <████ @g.harvard.edu>, █████████ @g.harvard.edu

Dear Dean Daley, Ms. Fenwick, Dean Brodnicki, Dr. Churchwell, Dr. Cervini, Dr. Williams, Dr. Houman, Dr. Kohane, Dr. Ryan and Dr. Brownstein,

Hope this email finds you well.

As Chinese students studying at or graduated from Harvard, we are writing to convey our concerns about a recent article from Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital "Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019" (Harvard Dash: Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019), and request that Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital investigate the case and potentially retract this article.

Our concerns are:

1.   The conclusion in this article is not a scientific one drawn from rigorous data sampling and analysis and potentially involves data dredging. A group of us with statistics and data science backgrounds have carefully studied this article and found many problems in its methodology, sampling, and analysis. You may find more detailed reasonings in the **attachment**.

2.   The not-peer-reviewed article has been widely picked up by the media (even before the preprint was published), and circulated in social media (including President Trump's twitter). The inconclusive or unscientific statement in the title and abstract has been cited as a fact and used to vilify China, provoking hatred against Chinese, especially Chinese students in the US. This not only hurts the feeling of Chinese students at Harvard, but also denigrates Harvard's reputation as an institution that is known for her research integrity.

As members of the Harvard community, we were very concerned to see such a misleading paper affiliated with Harvard. We respect scientific investigations and understand that some hard truths might be disturbing, but to the best of our judgment, this article is misleading to the public. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the Chinese and Asian community in the US has been under continuous racial and xenophobic discrimination, and there is an increasing number of reported racism attacks against Asians despite many collaboration commitments (Harvard Gazette). We are deeply concerned that the situation is exacerbated by this article, published and endorsed by a prestigious institute like Harvard Medical School.

We sincerely hope that you will consider our concerns, and request the Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital to investigate the case. We believe that HMS has the responsibility to maintain research integrity among faculty members. The title of Harvard Medical School lends substantial credibility to this paper despite its substandard analysis. It is in the interest of the school and the wider Harvard community to maintain high academic standards to protect Harvard's academic reputation.

Sincerely,

Martin Jin (corresponding), SEAS rising G4 PhD (████ @g.harvard.edu)
Yuntian Deng (corresponding), SEAS rising G4 PhD (███████████ @g.harvard.edu)
Jiayu Yao, SEAS rising G4 PhD
Yaowei Li, SEAS rising G3 PhD
Joe Zhou, SEAS PhD
Lucy Yip, GSD grad'20

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Maoran Sun, GSD MAUD
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Weiyi Cao, GSD Master in Design Studies
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Yinru Long, HGSE M.Ed
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Xin Chen, GSD MDes 2018
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And more anonymous supporters

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