Racism and Xenophobia in a Pandemic: Interactions of Online and Offline Worlds

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In "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter," Hswen et al. (p. 956) examine anti-Asian sentiment expressed on Twitter by comparing the use of the hashtags #Covid19 and #ChineseVirus, which represent two different ways of labeling coronavirus disease 2019—one that follows the World Health Organization's recommendations for disease names and one that appears to be oppositional to them. Focusing on tweets sent between March 9 and March 23, 2020, the authors found that roughly 20% of the 495 289 hashtags associated with #Covid19 showed anti-Asian sentiment compared with approximately 50% of the 777 852 hashtags that were associated with #ChineseVirus. The authors conclude that this analysis further substantiates the stigmatizing potential of language on social media that connects diseases with specific locations or ethnicities.

History suggests that disease outbreaks have often been accompanied by a rise in xenophobic or racist sentiment.[1,2] Such attempts at "othering" reflect misguided efforts to assign social meaning and responsibility to disease, even though illnesses do not recognize socially constructed categories such as race.[3] Although systems exist to closely monitor and report on COVID-19 infection and death rates, we currently lack the capacity to monitor racism in response to the pandemic. The reported increase in verbal attacks and physical assaults targeting Asian Americans during the current pandemic[4] and the fact that many Asian Americans are reporting fear and anxiety resulting from pandemic-related discriminatory behavior[5] demonstrate the need to track racism and its impact during public health crises.

Although the data presented by Hswen et al. cannot conclusively establish a relationship between Twitter hashtags and hate crimes, establishing such a connection is not necessary for this problem to be taken seriously. Racism and xenophobia—independent of violence—are a concern for public health, as research shows that perceived racism and discrimination have real and significant impacts on both physical and mental health.[6,7]

Furthermore, there is ample evidence showing that stigmatizing language can influence public attitudes and perceptions. For example, a recent experimental study showed that compared with a neutral description of the origins of the coronavirus, descriptions emphasizing a connection with China increased negative attitudes toward Asian Americans and general xenophobia, suggesting that language used to describe a disease can actually activate prejudice and racial bias.[4] Another study tracking changes in implicit bias after conservative media channels began using terms such as "Chinese virus" in March found that after declining for nearly 13 years, implicit Americanness bias (the subconscious belief that Asian Americans are "less American" than European Americans) began to increase—a trend reversal that was especially pronounced among those self-identified as being strongly conservative.[8]

Beyond the greater anti-Asian sentiment associated with #ChineseVirus, the more striking findings of Hswen et al. concern the shifts that occurred when the term started garnering more attention owing to a tweet posted on March 16 (see page 956 for details). The researchers found that during the week of March 9, #Covid19 was more prevalent than #ChineseVirus, and the number of anti-Asian hashtags associated with either phrase was relatively low. After March 16, however, #ChineseVirus overtook #Covid19 as the more popular hashtag, and #ChineseVirus became associated with significantly more anti-Asian hashtags than #Covid19.

These findings are noteworthy for several reasons. First, the analysis demonstrates the ability of prominent "influencers" to shape online discussions. It is important to understand how those with significant public influence

use social media to increase their offline impact and, conversely, how they use their real-world status to influence social media discussions. There is a tendency to treat social media as separate from the real world, when in fact social media are such a large part of modern life that they do not simply reflect the real world but can actively shape the attitudes, behaviors, and events that occur offline—as recent incidents, including the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, appear to have demonstrated. In terms of implications for social science research on racism and stigma, this finding suggests a need to focus on the online activities of prominent individuals and institutions because stigma may cause even greater harm when it is reinforced and perpetuated by those in power.

Second, growth in the use of the hashtag #ChineseVirus and the fact that it became more strongly associated with anti-Asian sentiment after March 16 suggest that the phrase may have become a way to signal identity and ideological affiliation. Hashtags serve as both symbols and an organizing mechanism on Twitter: they are used not only to categorize information and direct attention to topics or events but also to connect individuals and build communities.[9]

Previous research suggests that hashtags enable users to assert their identity through "ambient affiliation" and offer a mechanism for members of "networked publics" to increase solidarity and align around values without directly interacting.[10] In this way, the observed increase in anti-Asian sentiment related to COVID-19, and the funneling of this sentiment to a particular hashtag, is likely not accidental but rather reflects a deliberate enactment of group affiliation after the term began being used pejoratively. Use of #ChineseVirus may have served as a way to take a stance and signal alignment with a particular worldview.

The analysis by Hswen et al. highlights the critical role of social media in shaping the context of language: how certain terms are used online, and by whom, can alter their meaning. Words themselves may be neutral, but the way they are used gives them social and symbolic significance: language is a system for expressing and transmitting belief systems.[11] Because social media are highly embedded in the social fabric, they are powerful platforms for social and cultural production—helping to shape language and, consequently, construct social meaning.

Methodologically, Hswen et al. demonstrate the value of using social media for surveillance of racial attitudes generally and in response to health crises specifically. In addition to offering a low-cost and rapid method for collecting vast amounts of data, social media are less affected by the limitations of traditional research tools (e.g., interviews and surveys) when it comes to gathering information about sensitive or potentially socially objectionable topics. Observing online interactions enables researchers to gauge explicit and implicit biases in an unobtrusive and potentially more accurate way than, for example, self-report. Social media could, therefore, serve as a potentially useful early warning system for racism and bias (e.g., researchers and public health organizations might look at geotagged tweets to better identify geographic patterns in racist sentiment and potential "hot spots"). However, in addition to research using social media to *monitor* real-world attitudes, we need research to better understand how exposure to social media content *influences* real-world attitudes, behaviors, and health outcomes.

Finally, the editorial by Hswen et al. largely focuses on harms, but it is important to acknowledge that social media also has the potential to be a force for good. Although #ChineseVirus was used to promote anti-Asian sentiment, hashtags such as #IAmNotAVirus also emerged during the pandemic to fight stigma and reinforce the shared humanity of Asian individuals—demonstrating that social media platforms can also be powerful channels for condemning and countering racist rhetoric, expressing solidarity with minority communities, and providing support to those who have been targets of abuse.[12] AJPH

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