

The Contagion of Stigmatization: Racism and Discrimination in the “Infodemic” Moment

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Arundhati Roy (2020) has argued that the pandemic is a portal, a threshold at which we must make important choices—between cooperation and isolation, between mutual aid and prejudice—that will lead us into a vastly different world from before. This research review is an attempt to bear witness to the ways in which the accompanying “infodemic” (WHO 2020) is not simply a failure to communicate correct scientific facts, but a fundamental moral failure to cultivate cosmopolitan solidarity and empathy.

After an overview of the high stakes of pandemic-related discrimination, this review explores how cultural biases in journalistic reporting and official speech have often reinforced racial prejudices and hierarchies and contributed to discrimination against marginalized communities. I then discuss intentional media manipulation by politicians and authoritarian governments who opportunistically use fears of the virus and “fake news” to seize political control and target dissenters. I end with a reflection on how scholars can support each other and develop tools for community solidarity and allyship while engaging in risky research in the pandemic moment.

This review thus puts disinformation research in dialogue with sociological analysis of racism, crisis events, and the politics of platforms. Drawing on interdisciplinary academic research, national surveys, opinion essays, and investigative journalism around themes of disinformation and digital racism between February and November 2020, this review takes a holistic approach to understanding the dynamics of information warfare during crisis events. I conducted this review from my particular position as a communication researcher engaged in normative debates about care and justice in global media using ethnography (see Ong 2019). I have been mindful to cover a range of work-in-progress academic research as well as powerful investigative journalism that tracks emerging trends of racially targeted disinformation, governments’ weaponization of “anti-fake news laws,” and gaps or double standards in platform policy and content moderation. This review is not exhaustive and will not include research on medical misinformation and conspiracy theories, already covered by an earlier SSRC [MediaWell review](#) (Starbird et al. 2020).

Overview: What's at stake

In Euro-American contexts, large-scale surveys and journalistic reports have documented increases in physical assaults and racial slurs hurled toward people of East Asian descent, accusing their culture of causing the disease (Emerson [2020](#); Darling-Hammond et al. [2020](#)). Within different Asian countries, anti-Chinese sentiment has also surged; neighboring countries' resentments toward Beijing's territorial encroachments and trade disputes have been displaced onto mainland Chinese immigrants or tourists accused of being virus carriers or political spies (Wu 2020).

Beyond these egregious incidents of racism against East Asians in general and mainland Chinese in particular, there have been other targets of Covid-19 discrimination and profiling. Black and Latinx people in the United States were already disproportionately affected by the virus by virtue of professional and economic comorbidities. They then became targets of media manipulators, such as when white supremacists circulated conspiracy theories that Black people could not contract the virus (Collins-Dexter [2020](#)). Statistics show that ethnic minorities, especially immigrants on the front lines of health and elder care, have significantly higher mortality rates (Wong 2020).

Many national governments have seized emergency powers to silence critics, invade privacy, and curb civil liberties (Kingston [2020](#)), often doing greater harm to vulnerable communities, including economic migrants (Baas [2020](#)), sexual minorities (Gitzen [2020](#)), religious minorities (Roy 2020), and political refugees (Nezurugo and Hassan 2020). Reputable global news outlets have occasionally reproduced stereotypical frames in their reportage, praising developed countries for their preparedness while ascribing less agency to poorer non-Western countries. Even the WHO director-general had earlier warned of a doom-and-gloom pandemic scenario for Africa, reifying "a racialized history of objectifying black bodies, and a despondency frame in which Africans are cast as defenseless victims, lacking autonomy and agency, and needing a savior" (Omanga and Ondigo [2020](#)). These frames rely on age-old tropes and narratives that exoticize and stigmatize non-whites and non-Europeans. At the same time, governments' militarized pandemic responses, stereotypical media representations, and unaccountable technological interventions have only laid bare a cruel biopolitics in which some human lives or deaths are accorded more visibility or grievability than others (Sylvia 2020).

These are not new trends. Social psychology, media studies, and anthropology have long argued that predictable us-versus-them narratives become especially compelling or comforting in the face of uncertainty (Han and Antrosio [2020](#); Silverstone 2006; Starbird et al. 2020). Previous epidemics from cholera to AIDS have enforced various "politics of exclusion," in which cultural differences were reified and certain communities were blamed

for illness and death (Briggs 2008). Writing in the early weeks of lockdown, *The Atlantic's* Ed Yong (2020) expressed that part of the reason why the coronavirus is “so confusing” is “the desire to name an antagonist, be it the Chinese Communist Party or Donald Trump,” to fit into an archetypal narrative structure we can all make sense of.

While confusion is part of the natural process of collective sense-making, we need to contend with deliberate media manipulation by those who have exploited the crisis and stoked social divisions in order to gain more power. Computational analysis by Neil Johnson and colleagues has mapped out the vast “hate multiverse” of politicians, governments, influence operators, and online trolls who have exploited Covid-19 to spread racism and other malicious agendas on Twitter (in Ball and Maxmen 2020). Joan Donovan’s digital ethnography has spotlighted how social media has connected odd bedfellows around hateful speech and conspiracy theories, such as when US-based white supremacists and pro-democracy activists in Asia expressed similar racist speech against the WHO’s director-general, who is of African descent (ibid.).

Pandemic and the secondary contagion of racism

A February 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) advisory to refer to the novel coronavirus as “COVID-19” or “coronavirus” precisely aimed to avoid repeating the mistakes of past disaster management practices that had stigmatized particular ethno-racial groups. The WHO (2020, 2) warned against “attach[ing] locations or ethnicity to the disease” and emphasized, “This is not a ‘Wuhan Virus,’ ‘Chinese Virus,’ or ‘Asian Virus.’” This advisory applies lessons from previous epidemics that had created a “geography of blame” and emphasized the foreign origins of an illness from which a country can and must be secured (Schoch-Spana 2006, 36). This tactic leads to false assurances that viruses infect only particular “others” who should be isolated or contained and perpetuate a “failure of imagination” (ibid.).

In the United States, this warning was deliberately ignored by elected Republican officials, right-wing news media outlets, and far-right influencers and given official endorsement by then-President Donald Trump. As in other countries, the United States’ official policy on travel bans applied the logics of securitization (Sears 2020) and othering (Giroux and Filippakou 2020) that medical and social scientists had warned against. In many countries, fears of virus contamination were projected onto Asian “others,” while in other contexts, other marginalized populations became deliberate or inadvertent targets.

In the United States, the racial profiling of Asian people in the wake of Covid-19 reactivated

the nineteenth-century discourse of “Yellow Peril,” which associated working-class Chinese immigrants with disease and dirt (Ho 2020). Digital shaming and expressions of disgust at culinary cultural practices such as eating bat soup or other exotic wildlife reproduced this discourse (Campbell 2020; Palmer 2020).

Scholars in Asian and Asian American studies quickly collaborated on the open-sourced teachers and journalists’ resource “Treating Yellow Peril: Resources to Address Coronavirus Racism” to stop the repurposing of old stereotypes into online memes and “jokes” about Chinese culture (Chang 2020). As the Asian studies scholar Linda Hasunuma (2020) remarked, “We all became Chinese in the minds of some Americans who kept seeing and sharing Covid-linked sensational images and stories of Chinese people’s ‘strange’ and ‘exotic’ culinary preferences and their wet markets.”

In the face of widespread racism, a powerful global movement mobilized around the hashtag #HateIsAVirus to creatively and collectively speak out against crimes against people of Asian descent, including hate speech, physical assault, and, in some cases, cold-blooded murder (Giuffrida and Willsher 2020). In May 2020, United Nations secretary-general António Guterres (2020) issued a statement about the “tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering” unleashed by Covid-19 and urged governments to “strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate”.

Wikipedia (2020) continues to document a disheartening range of racist and xenophobic incidents related to Covid-19 in the global context. Wikipedia’s long catalogue of racist incidents and criminal actions makes frequent reference to digital media as a space where racism is expressed (including social media but also ride-sharing and dating apps), but also as a space of social support and activism. One media studies research project focused on the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits, where community members shifted from their usual playful camaraderie to indignation, mobilization, and fundraising to counteract racism (Abidin and Zeng 2020).

Now it has become commonplace in the health and social sciences to acknowledge and challenge the “secondary contagion” (Chen et al. 2020), or “secondary epidemic” (Ong and Lasco 2020), of Covid-19 racism toward people of Asian descent. The effects of stigmatizing media coverage include “adverse mental and physical health outcomes” among Asian American communities experiencing aggression and hate (Chen et al. 2020). Asian Americans have also suffered disproportionate economic effects of Covid-19 racism, according to a UCLA study of unemployment and labor data in two US states (Mar and P. Ong, 2020). Studies in Australia and the UK document the verbal and physical attacks and high levels of anxiety experienced by people of Asian descent, including international students with limited access to social security (Tran et al. 2020).

Health sciences, communications studies, and ethnic studies researchers arrived at similar findings that right-wing politicians and conservative news media have been the main amplifiers of racist rhetoric and speech. Trump and several Republican politicians consistently racialized the virus in their insistence during the campaign season to make China “pay for the stimulus bill” (Jarvis 2020; Wallace in Hasunuma 2020). Research has found conservative news sites amplified the term “Chinese virus” to their followers in social media (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). Similarly, in the UK, conservative tabloids used clickbait headlines inviting revulsion toward eating bats and other animals, implying that Chinese people are to blame for the outbreak, and circulated a conspiracy theory that Covid-19 could be Beijing’s secret biological weapon to undermine its political rivals (Ong and Lasco 2020).

Reputable global media outlets occasionally perpetuated Orientalist frames in their coverage of Covid-19, with ever-shifting figures of Asia or Orient constructed as others less worthy of empathy. In his discourse analysis, the sociologist Marius Meinhof (2020) parsed out the different strands of Orientalism at play in global media representations of China as the authoritarian “other” that must ultimately become democratic or break down. Meinhof spotlighted the *Wall Street Journal*’s reactivation of colonial-era references to China as “the real sick man of Asia” and *Foreign Policy*’s proposal that to contain China is to contain the virus. Meinhof (2020) argued that a failure of imagination was partly to blame in Western countries’ inadequate preparation for the pandemic, stemming from a “refusal to learn from Chinese experiences due to prevailing notions of Orientalism and colonial temporality” (see also Wake 2020).

As the pandemic raged and caused massive loss of human lives, global media’s focus on blaming “exotic” cultural traits shifted to puzzling over the relative success of countries in the global South compared to those in the global North. In a powerful essay, Indi Samarajiva (2020) spotlights Orientalist speculation by *New York Times* Southeast Asia bureau chief Hannah Beech that Thai people could be inherently immune to Covid-19 instead of first acknowledging the scientific strategy that guided their government’s pandemic response. Samarajiva argues:

[Western news media] attribute agency to rich/white nations like Germany or New Zealand but luck to anyone poorer or dark. And it’s just not true. Poorer nations have done *better* than the rich because they had robust public health responses. Because they worked together. Because they reacted early. These are all lessons worth learning, but the west is unable to learn them because they’re simply too racist to see.

Samarajiva here captures dynamics that are also present in social media discourse, where memes of good pandemic responses egregiously overlooked successes of Taiwan or Vietnam. On Twitter, a diverse range of hashtags variably expressed hate. The sociolinguist Carmen Lee (2020) offers a valuable analysis of rhetorical techniques of naming (e.g., #chinavirus), metaphors (e.g., #chineseisvirus), blaming (e.g., #ChinaLiedPeopleDied), dehumanization (e.g., #locust), and aggression (e.g., #bombchina). She also discusses moral justifications that have been used to downplay the hateful or aggressive nature of these expressions, including the “just a joke” defense, the disclaimer (e.g., the use of #notracist), and “claiming insider status” (e.g., “I’m Chinese...”). This study illustrates how anti-China political critique can strategically harness racist speech and cultural generalizations and at times offer moral justifications that such expressions are “not racist.” This analysis also raises the question of why such tweets were not de-platformed by Twitter or called out by journalists.

Anti-China and anti-Chinese expressions were not confined to Euro-American countries but were also painfully felt among Asian countries, as social tensions in the region have escalated in response to China’s political and economic aggressions. Political critique of the Chinese government and its silencing of its own frontline health workers and whistleblowers was urgent and necessary. At times, however, this resistance slipped into racist expressions stigmatizing ordinary Chinese people, including immigrant workers and tourists.

Ong and Lasco (2020) brought attention to how the political activism of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement slipped into racist expressions in Twitter hashtags like #chinazi and #WuhanCoronaVirus. This intra-ethnic hostility between Hong-Kongers and mainland Chinese has steadily escalated over the years, as mockery of [mainlanders with the slur “locust”](#) has played out against a political battle for sovereignty from Beijing (Ong and Lin 2017). In order to neutralize public criticism that these are acts of racism or bullying, some claim the position of political victim (ibid.) or insider status as a fellow Chinese (Lee 2020). Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, burdened by China’s recent territorial encroachments in the South China Sea, have also justified discrimination against Chinese workers and residents as a “weapon of the weak” (Ong and Tapsell 2020). In countries with recent histories of racial violence, such as Indonesia, digital racism poses great risk of physical harm to Chinese diasporic communities, who have to “prove” their loyalty, belonging, and physical able-bodiedness in their everyday lives.

We can also see cases of strange bedfellows, such as when prodemocracy activists and journalists in non-Western contexts amplified disinformation and conspiracy theories produced by far-right US and UK websites (Ong and Lasco 2020). Fact-checkers have also failed to call out anti-China disinformation and conspiracy theories (ibid.).

Future research can explore the transnational flows of disinformation and hate speech that advance white supremacist ideology. As these cases show, white supremacist ideology is not simply the property of white people, and racial violence can be inflicted by people of color on minority groups across diverse social contexts.

Securitization and scapegoating: Targeting marginalized communities

Academic and policy researchers have criticized various national governments for securitized responses that prioritize expanding of political control and silencing dissent rather than implementing scientifically informed measures. Securitized pandemic responses frame the virus as a threat to national security, expanding state powers of surveillance and bordering at the expense of citizens' liberties or bridge-building with other countries in similar peril (Sears 2020).

Scholars have attributed the lack of multilateral coordination on the global pandemic to the fact that international agencies such as the WHO and the UN have had to play "second fiddle to great power politics" between China and the US (Pugliese 2020). China's misreporting to the WHO and its targeting of frontline whistleblowers contributed to an initial underestimation of health risks; yet, the US withdrawal from the WHO appears driven not by principled indignation but by populist motivations to construct an "enemy other" out of the pandemic (Kingston 2020; Pugliese 2020). Domestically in China, cultural studies scholars have noted a new kind of nationalism in which state-run news sites and social media heavily praise Chinese discipline and government efficiency while criticizing European and American countries (de Kloet et al. 2020). In the face of competing political narratives between the US and China (Wang 2020), many national government responses have trended toward autocratic governance and "image management" (S. Choudhury 2020), often putting vulnerable communities at greater risk (Amnesty International 2020).

In his analysis of how populist leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, and Donald Trump mismanaged Covid-19, the anthropologist Gideon Lasco (2020) observed several common strategies: (1) simplifying the pandemic by downplaying its impacts, (2) spectacularizing their responses to crisis, (3) forging divisions between the "people" and dangerous "others," and (4) making medical knowledge claims to support the above. Governments have manipulated coronavirus statistics to present their responses in the best possible light, occasionally pitting executive branches against health officials or judiciaries (Zingales 2020).

Marginalized populations such as undocumented foreign nationals, workers in informal

economies, and the homeless have faced “augmented risks” in the pandemic moment (Milan and Treré 2020). In media studies, Stefania Milan and Emiliano Treré (2020) acknowledge conflicting sides of pandemic data management and statistics: on one hand, they “affect our ability to care, to empathize,” yet on the other hand, “many communities at the margins, including many areas of the so-called Global South, are virtually absent from this number-based narration of the pandemic.” Often excluded from government aid databases, vulnerable people may refuse to seek medical or economic aid due to fear, social stigma, and criminalization (Milan and Treré 2020). Scholars of political economy and critical data studies have warned that governments and technology companies are opportunistically implementing surveillance technologies that impinge on people’s everyday freedoms (Zuboff 2020).

A pandemic is the “perfect disaster for disaster capitalism” in the analysis of Naomi Klein (2020), referring to the political strategy of using large-scale crises to enrich elites and deepen inequalities. Media studies research shares this perspective, critiquing digital interventions for introducing “second-order disasters” that compound the effects of the initial disaster (Madianou 2020). For instance, contact-tracing apps have been found to disproportionately hurt racial minorities in the US (Emerson 2020), economic migrants in Singapore (Poetranto and Lau 2020; Liao 2020), and LGBTQ populations in South Korea (Strother 2020). In the pandemic moment when people have become more dependent on digital technology, poor people also find themselves in a “digital vicious cycle” in which various digital exclusions would affect their health but also their education, work, and social networks (Beaunoyer et al. 2020).

In recent months, a promising strand of research has attended to the specific digital harms experienced by ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. Brandi Collins-Dexter (2020) has examined the range of health misinformation targeting Black communities in the US. Although not directly Covid-19 related, there is important new research on political disinformation targeting ethnic minority communities in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and the heated US election campaign. These include analyses of “voter depression” campaigns (Glaser 2020) and election disinformation targeting Latinx communities (Mazzei and Medina 2020). My colleagues and I have also discussed how political campaigners and far-right actors used memes to stoke distrust and prejudice between different racial minorities, such as those that insidiously positioned Asian American entrepreneurs as the targets of “looting” by Black Lives Matter activists (TaSC 2020). More work can be done to uncover the interconnections of disinformation campaigns and hate speech targeting marginalized communities in global contexts. We must also continue to examine how political disinformation targets specific racial and ethnic minorities to sow division and prevent solidarity.

Covid-19 disinformation regulation: When cures are worse than the illness

Fear of the virus and fear of “fake news” have converged and ushered in a wave of controversial regulatory measures aiming to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 misinformation (Hand 2020; IPI 2020a, 2020b; Radu 2020). The global trend of social media regulation during the pandemic appears to be toward “legislative opportunism”—using moral panics about “fake news” and Covid-19 as a pretext to seize control over the information ecosystem. Common features of emergency “anti-fake news” laws in at least 16 countries, including Algeria, Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and Thailand, have been (1) the criminalization of sharing Covid-19 “fake news,” and expansion of penalties to include hefty fines or imprisonment, (2) increased government control and surveillance of social media, (3) broadly phrased definitions of “fake news,” and (4) arbitrary application of these laws.

Just as China censored and intimidated coronavirus whistleblowers and critics demanding government accountability (Liu 2020), other countries have gone after vulnerable targets and vocal critics. For example, Thai authorities have retaliated with lawsuits against health workers who exposed corruption and hoarding in the surgical mask supply chain (HRW 2020). In Egypt, a journalist detained for “spreading fake news” contracted the virus while in custody and died before he could be tried (Hand 2020). Human Rights Watch spoke out about the chilling effects of these “fake news” laws, as well as the public health consequences of locking violators in crowded detention facilities where they run a greater risk of contracting the virus (HRW 2020).

Academics, journalists, and human rights observers have launched important interventions to track how anti-“fake news” measures have been weaponized to target journalists (IPI 2020a), human rights defenders (Amnesty International 2020), and marginalized communities (Milan and Treré 2020). The International Press Institute warned governments against “recklessly misrepresenting media scrutiny as disinformation or misusing the crisis to restrict or punish critical media” (IPI 2020b). Their dashboard has now catalogued more than 400 cases of media freedom violations in global context. For example, one TV station in Albania known to be critical of the prime minister was shut down for allegedly violating social distancing rules in its shows (Associated Press 2020). Elsewhere, the Philippines’ House of Representatives struck an unprecedented blow against press freedom when it voted against the franchise renewal of the nation’s largest broadcast network, which had previously drawn the ire of the country’s populist president (Gutierrez 2020). Media staff considered “essential workers” have faced greater risk of harassment, legal intimidation, and arrests, accelerating global trends of repression and distrust of journalists (HRW 2020; Reporters Without Borders 2020).

Southeast Asian experts had previously warned against securitizing fake news interventions and their challenges to free speech, as the region has implemented “widely overreaching” regulations that compel social media platforms to comply with their orders of content takedowns (George 2019; Lim 2020; Ong and Tapsell 2020). Under Covid-19, governments have been guilty of copy-pasting provisions of the Singaporean anti-fake news law (see Kurohi 2019), ignoring the cautions and objections of critical scholars and journalists.

Human rights organizations have argued that governments have exploited Covid-19 to further shrink civic spaces and attack human rights defenders. An Amnesty International report illustrated the disproportionate and discriminatory impact of the pandemic on women and LGBTQ human rights workers, anti-racism campaigners, workers and trade unionists, environmental and land activists, refugee and migrant rights defenders, and Indigenous rights defenders (Amnesty International 2020; see also Flores-Obanil 2020; Palatino 2020; Segovia and Sempere 2020; N. Choudhury 2020).

Also complicating matters are new regulations introduced by social media platforms that have taken greater action against public health misinformation narratives (Skopeliti and John 2020). The platforms’ promise to elevate “authoritative content” has faced many challenges of implementation. In the early months of lockdown, content moderation decisions became automated as platform companies sent home or furloughed human workers, which led to many “glitches” (Roberts 2020). While certain platforms, such as the Chinese-owned TikTok, have come into focus due to motives of securitization from the Trump administration, other platforms popular in the global South, such as Line and Viber, have not been included in recent regulatory debates. These platforms, especially popular among older people in Thailand and the Philippines, are notorious for coronavirus misinformation as well as conservative-leaning political disinformation in recent elections (Ong and Tapsell 2020).

We also know very little about platforms’ implementation of their hate speech protocols during this period. We do not know what platforms have done to take down slurs, jokes, and propaganda about Covid-19 racism and racial justice movements. Furthermore, there is a critical gap in academic research on the intersection of health misinformation and the surge of hate speech in the pandemic moment. Studies focus on one or the other, but rarely consider how they interact, and how they affect diverse vulnerable communities within specific cultural contexts.

Ways forward: Progressive interruptions and

alternative visions

It's important to note that today's environment of polarization, hateful exchange, and "information war" (Merrin and Hoskins 2020) within and between countries was not an inevitable outcome of the pandemic. Early into the lockdown in March 2020, *Politico* brought together a range of scholars from different fields to sketch out their pandemic predictions. Some envisioned the potential for cosmopolitan solidarity to emerge from a shared global experience of crisis. Peter Coleman speculated that the pandemic could be the formidable enemy that might provide us with "fusion-like energy and a singularity of purpose to help us reset and regroup." Meanwhile, Tom Nichols envisioned a "return to faith in serious experts" (in *Politico* 2020). Elsewhere, Yuval Noah Harari (2020) lyrically rallied for a new "spirit of global cooperation and trust," in which countries openly exchange information and *share* rather than hoard medical equipment and vaccines.

Instead, the pandemic moment has unleashed contagions of stigmatization and health misinformation, compounding the adverse health and socioeconomic effects of Covid-19 on marginalized communities. The entanglement of all these issues against the broader backdrop of information wars between and within countries requires more expansive and creative forms of social analysis. These analyses require interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder perspectives, and should lead to rapid intervention. We need big data research that can help us understand the interconnections of manipulative "bad actors" existing within the same "hate multiverse" (Velasquez et al. 2020). Similarly, we need grounded ethnographic insight that can clarify people's behaviors and their interpretations of social distancing, political protest, and hygiene (Han and Antrosio 2020). We should also be mindful of strange bedfellows and warn when divisiveness and hate might find resonance in communities suffering other grievances.

Collaborative initiatives and working groups that bridge academics, activists, human rights workers, and journalists have generated important research focused on harms against health and aid workers (New Humanitarian 2020), journalists and creative workers (Graham et al. 2020; Cabañes and Soriano 2020; Zelizer 2020), human rights defenders (Amnesty International 2020), marginalized communities (Mercado 2020), and academics themselves (Ong and Negra 2020). In some cases, academic research using "investigative ethnography" (Friedberg et al. 2020) aided journalists in their editorial decision-making as to what kinds of visibility or "strategic silence" are best suited to cope with challenging media manipulation events in which bad actors (e.g., armed so-called militias) deliberately sought to incite violence or gain notoriety (Phillips 2018). Holistic approaches that value contributions of researchers across different disciplines can help inform policy and track both deliberate and inadvertent harms to marginalized communities.

Various scholarly and activist initiatives have produced promising new tools for community solidarity, allyship, and civic education, such as the Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit (Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance 2020), the social media activism of hashtag communities such as #YellowPerilSupportsBlackPower, and the “Powerpoint activism” (Nguyen 2020) of Instagram accounts such as @asiansforblacklivesmatter. These initiatives provoke difficult conversations and acknowledge the intersection of divides based on race, gender, sexuality, and class that far-right campaigners and media manipulators have seeded as “wedge issues” in various online communities (Donovan 2020; TaSC 2020). Activists also strategically use memes to counter disinformation and critique overreaching legislation (Abidin 2020).

In these toxic times, disinformation researchers also need to find ways to support each other and manage the emotional and mental health traumas of conducting risky research. It is tricky to balance principles of care and patient attentiveness in the research process with the need to respond to fast-moving provocations in our current political moment (Ong 2020). Hard decisions must be made between “pressing pause” in order to contemplate and reflect, and actively organizing to build conceptual and methodological tools responsive to the specific moment.

We need to find ways to listen and amplify the voices of those less heard while also holding allies accountable. We should be careful not to celebrate coordinated inauthentic behaviors simply because they are employed for causes we might be sympathetic to; these tactics might simply reproduce vicious cycles of hateful confrontation or provide a model for hatemongers to emulate in the future.

In this pandemic moment, it is easy to be lured into an impasse of disappointment as we deal with whiplash from a daily news cycle that can feel like a month or a lifetime. To paraphrase the anthropologist William Lempert (2018, 204), it’s also our duty to enact “generative hope,” or hope with grit—which neither denies the injuries of the present nor renders us misanthropic—in the face of “the post-apocalyptic present.” Indeed, the pandemic is a portal (Roy 2020). The decisions we take in generating hope and inventing alternative futures rely on creating necessary spaces for reflection. In our urgent actions, we must commit to balancing the scales of justice and considering our responsibilities to each other.

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