

When China Sneezes

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It is hard to ignore the fact that the initial response in Wuhan — the capital of Hubei province, and the epicentre of the outbreak — was to clamp down on information. At the beginning of last month, eight medical professionals were hauled up for spreading ‘rumours’. Among them was Li Wenliang, a young doctor who apparently succumbed to the virus on Feb 7, sparking nationwide grieving.

BEYOND the inevitably immediate concerns about the steadily rising death toll from the Wuhan coronavirus infection and the prospects of a worldwide pandemic, crucial questions have arisen about its political and economic impact in China as well as internationally.

Economically, whatever happens in China reverberates across the world. It is the global manufacturing hub. It provides both products and parts that keep the international economy humming. When factories cannot function and ships cannot sail, or shipments are quarantined, there are worldwide palpitations. Japan reportedly faces a recession as a consequence.

Japan is also the harbour for the Diamond Princess, one of those massive cruise ships that appear to be the ideal incubators for viruses. The rate at which the coronavirus named Covid-19 has been spreading aboard the vessel bears out that assumption.

More broadly, though, the thus far restricted level of international infections and fatalities suggests that Chinese efforts to curb the spread of the virus have been broadly successful. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has praised China for both its efforts and its transparency. It has not, however, ruled out the risk of a pandemic.

Will the rest of the world catch a cold?

At the same time, the fact that the Chinese authorities have been somewhat less reticent in sharing their information and concerns than they were during the SARS emergency at the turn of the century is commendable — only up to a point.

It is hard to ignore the fact that the initial response in Wuhan — the capital of Hubei province, and the epicentre of the outbreak — was to clamp down on information. At the beginning of last month, eight medical professionals were hauled up for spreading ‘rumours’. Among them was Li Wenliang, a young doctor who apparently succumbed to the virus on Feb 7, sparking nationwide grieving.

Although China is undoubtedly better equipped than almost any other nation to put into place drastic restrictions on movement that stretch from extreme measures in Wuhan to slightly less extreme ones in Beijing and Shanghai, there are obviously limits to its transparency.

Sure, some newspapers and websites were able to get away with a little more questioning of the authorities than was normally permitted, but criticism of President Xi Jinping’s leadership remains beyond the pale, as evidenced by the treatment of Xu Zhangrun, a professor who has been quarantined in more ways than one for daring to criticise Xi’s leadership. Former lecturer in law Xu Zhiyong has been taken into custody on similar grounds. There are likely to be numerous others we will never hear about.



So, sure, totalitarian control helps in locking down half of a more than billion-strong population, but the fear that Xi Jinping’s crown as president-for-life might be tarnished is possibly more of a concern for the Communist Party hierarchy than the coronavirus.

The president is yet to venture into Wuhan, where the bulk of around 1,800 deaths from the affliction have occurred. He sought to burnish his image instead through a masked and well-publicised visit to a hospital in Beijing. Premier Li Keqiang, on the other hand, has visited Wuhan — and may well become a leading scapegoat if the epidemic gets any worse.

If so, he would join the purged health officials and local party stalwarts in Wuhan, who have by and large paid the price for following the Beijing-ordained logic of downplaying any crises and disowning all concomitant errors.

China’s efforts in the context of Covid-19 are commendable at many levels, and it is hard not to be impressed by its capability of setting up huge hospitals within weeks. But it must at the same time be acknowledged that, despite all this, all too many patients in Wuhan remain unattended.

In the past few days, Beijing has been keen to point to an apparent decrease in new infections,

even as the death toll goes on rising. WHO has been less complacent, declaring that it is too soon to tell whether the threat of a global pandemic has been averted. There have not been many deaths outside China, but the virulence of the disease continues to provide cause for concern.

In some eyes, the global economic repercussions are a bigger worry, pointing to the extent to which the rest of the world relies on China as a manufacturing and trade hub. In that sense, the repercussions will play out both domestically and internationally over the coming months and perhaps even years. The architecture of globalisation means that when China sneezes, the rest of the world is not immune from catching a cold.

Future historians may look upon Covid-19 as little more than a blip on the radar in the context of the international economy, but perhaps it will also be seen as the juncture at which the advent of Xi Jinping stopped being viewed as the second coming of Mao, and many Chinese suddenly developed an empathy towards the Uighurs subjected to mass and indefinite incarceration.

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Dawn

Curbing Fake News: Here’s Why Visuals Are The Most Potent Form Of Misinformation

Psychological research has shown that images change the way people consume and remember information.

LISA FAZIO

When you think of visual misinformation, maybe you think of deepfakes – videos that appear real but have actually been created using powerful video editing algorithms. The creators edit celebrities into pornographic movies, and they can put words into the mouths of people who never said them.

But the majority of visual misinformation that people are exposed to involves much simpler forms of deception. One common technique involves recycling legitimate old photographs and videos and presenting them as evidence of recent events.

For example, Turning Point USA, a conservative group with over 1.5 million followers on Facebook, posted a photo of a ransacked grocery store with the caption “YUP! #SocialismSucks.” In reality, the empty supermarket shelves have nothing to do with socialism; the photo was taken in Japan after a major earthquake in 2011.

In another instance, after a global warming protest in London’s Hyde Park in 2019, photos began circulating as proof that the protesters had left the area covered in trash. In reality, some of the photos were from Mumbai, India, and others came from a completely different event in the park.

XTI am a cognitive psychologist who studies how people learn correct and incorrect information from the world around them. Psychological research demonstrates that these out-of-context photographs can be a particularly potent form of misinformation. And unlike deepfakes, they are incredibly simple to create.

Out of context

Out-of-context photos are very common source of misinformation. In the day after the January Iranian attack on US military bases in Iraq, reporter Jane Lytvynenko at Buzzfeed documented numerous instances of old photos or videos being presented as evidence of the attack on social media. These included photos from a 2017 military strike by Iran in Syria, video of Russian training



Out-of-context photos are very common source of misinformation. In the day after the January Iranian attack on US military bases in Iraq, reporter Jane Lytvynenko at Buzzfeed documented numerous instances of old photos or videos being presented as evidence of the attack on social media. These included photos from a 2017 military strike by Iran in Syria, video of Russian training exercises from 2014 and even footage from a video game. In fact, out of the 22 false rumours documented in the article, 12 involve this kind of out-of-context photos or video.

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This form of misinformation can be particularly dangerous because images are a powerful tool for swaying popular opinion and promoting false beliefs. Psychological research has shown that people are more likely to believe true and false trivia statements, such as “turtles are deaf,” when they’re presented alongside an image. In addition,

people are more likely to claim they’ve previously seen freshly made-up headlines when they’re accompanied by a photograph. Photos also increase the numbers of likes and shares that a post receives in a simulated social media environment, along with people’s beliefs that the post is true.

And pictures can alter what people remember from the news. In an experiment, one group of people read a news article about a hurricane accompanied by a photograph of a village after the storm. They were more likely to falsely remem-

ber that there were deaths and serious injuries compared to people who instead saw a photo of the village before the hurricane strike. This suggests that the false pictures of the January Iranian attack may have affected people’s memory for details of the event.

Why they’re effective

There are a number of reasons photographs likely increase your belief in statements. First, you’re used to photographs being used for photojournalism and serving as proof that

an event happened.

Second, seeing a photograph can help you more quickly retrieve related information from memory. People tend to use this ease of retrieval as a signal that information is true. Photographs also make it more easy to imagine an event happening, which can make it feel more true.

Finally, pictures simply capture your attention. A 2015 study by Adobe found that posts that included images received more than three times the Facebook interactions than posts with just text.

Journalists, researchers and technologists have begun working on this problem.

Recently, the News Provenance Project, a collaboration between The New York Times and IBM, released a proof-of-concept strategy for how images could be labelled to include more information about their age, location where taken and original publisher. This simple check could help prevent old images from being used to support false information about recent events.

In addition, social media companies such as Facebook, Reddit and Twitter could begin to label photographs with information about when they were first published on the platform.

Until these kinds of solutions are implemented, though, readers are left on their own. One of the best techniques to protect yourself from misinformation, especially during a breaking news event, is to use a reverse image search. From the Google Chrome browser, it’s as simple as right-clicking on a photograph and choosing “search Google for image.” You’ll then see a list of all the other places that photograph has appeared online.

As consumers and users of social media, we have a responsibility for ensuring that information we share is accurate and informative. By keeping an eye out for out-of-context photographs, you can help keep misinformation in check.

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