An Analysis of Traditional News Media Coverage of Anti-Asian Racism in 2020
Introduction:

There has been a significant rise in incidents of anti-Asian racism since 2020, resulting from many factors including the global COVID-19 pandemic and tense US-China relations. Many incidents of harassment and violence against Asians were reported, both in person as well as online. Many organizations emerged to combat this growing trend, including Stop AAPI Hate. In addition to incidents of anti-Asian racism, there have also been many incidents of response and resistance. Altogether, the past few years have been a period of great rise in political involvement in Asian Americans. Consequently, describing patterns in the coverage of this phenomenon has been of relevance, as traditional news media seeks to describe these issues.

In this project, we explore the coverage of the rise in violence against Asian Americans. In particular, we aim to investigate the realm of news media coverage on issues related to anti-Asian racism and responses during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We build our analysis on data collected by the Virulent Hate project on incidents of racism and response involving Asian Americans, based on articles published by traditional news media sources. In addition, we have performed other related work such as interviews, including with one of the founders of the Stop AAPI Hate movement, Dr. Russell Jeung. Altogether, we hope this work can contribute to the understanding of anti-Asian racism and responses, and in particular the media coverage regarding these issues.
Literature Review:

Sources and directions for sources for this literature were found using the Internet and library resources, as well as through suggestions from our project mentor Evelyn Mei, and from material from previous classes. Platforms like “movementhub.org” and the “Cross Cultural Solidarity History Project” which highlight and catalog various stories and sources about hate against Asian Americans also provided useful in this literature review. The kinds of literature explored include works on the global structures of white supremacy, racism, capitalism, and imperialism. In particular, the literature explores the way in which Asian American identity has been constructed from a historical perspective, from initial beginnings to today’s “model minority”, as well as the root causes for anti-Blackness in the United States. The sources also explore ways in which digital resources like online media and social media can be used to examine behavior.

It is important to understand the dynamics of racism. In the “Sociology of Racism” article, Clair and Jeffrey discusse how the sociology of racism, which involve the overlapping frameworks of racism, discrimination on the basis of race, and racial inequality, reproduces each of its framework. Throughout their paper, they describe racism in relation to racial domination where the “presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s)of other racial groups” (Clair, Jeffrey). Secondly, they describe racial discrimination on the notion of a racial group not being treated the same as a different racial group. Thirdly, racial inequality entails the unequal outcomes of racial discrimination. Within these categories, it is important to recognize the hierarchical and social relation between racial groups.
As for anti-Asian hate, this concept refers to the ongoing racism, racial discrimination, and violence Asian/Asian-Americans have faced in the United States. In the social-racial hierarchy in the U.S., Asian/Asian-Americans are also seen as subordinates to the White race; their position is seen as being beneath Whites but above the other racial minorities (Harvard Review). Asian/Asian-Americans have been stereotyped to be the model minority, which would lead to assumptions that an Asian/Asian-American is either “a merchant-entrepreneurial class or as rich tourist”, and submissive, assuming they are “physically weak and culturally averse to defending themselves” or bringing attention to themselves (Harvard Review). The model minority myth suggests that Asian/Asian-Americans are exemplary examples of a racial minority American cultural assimilation and succeeding in American society because of their hard work and intelligence (McGowan). Although the model minority myth places a positive view on Asian/Asian-Americans, it tends to disregard the ongoing struggles Asian/Asian-Americans face in the U.S. and perpetrates a belief that “racial minorities have themselves to blame for persistent poverty and lags in educational and professional attainment” (McGowan). Overall, Asian/Asian-Americans continue to face racism, racial discrimination, and racial inequality to this day. Within the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate violence increased enormously compared to pre-pandemic time because American society, including former president Trump, has scapegoated Asian/Asian-Americans for the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic (Findling, Blendon, et al.). However, this is only one of the many instances where anti-Asian hate has detrimentally affected the physical and mental health of Asian/Asian-Americans.

The book “The myth of the model minority Asian Americans facing racism” describes how the “model minority” myth is historically inadequate and misleading to describe Asian
Americans. As a historical work, it explains how Asian Americans have always faced racism, and how the nature of that has changed over time. It is important for our work for this research project to remember that the recent wave of hate against Asian Americans is not a completely novel phenomenon, and that there is a continuation evident here when tying it to the rest of American history.

Another relevant source is Danny Haiphong’s article “Anti-asian racism never stopped being an outgrowth of U.S. imperialism”, which examines the fundamental conditions upon which anti-Asian racism arises in the United States, and relates it to US imperialism abroad. For our research, this helps to globalize the context upon which we are working on, and that the harms we see against Asian Americans here are related to the empire and its effects on the rest of the world.

Our project also involves social media data analysis. The paper “Race, ethnicity and national origin-based discrimination in social media and hate across 100 U.S. cities“ performs a statistical analysis on hate messages in social media data and relates it to hate in real life. This is useful in extending analysis of social media platforms like Twitter to broader real-life statistics; in particular for determining how representative hate speech on Twitter is to hate speech in real life, as well as how it can predict hate in real life. Stop AAPI Hate also published a national report, called “Stop AAPI Hate National Report”, which contains a data breakdown of hate against Asian Americans along with many useful visuals and descriptions of how the data was collected from the community.

For our data analysis in particular for news media coverage trends, we use Virulent Hate’s dataset. Virulent Hate published a report in 2021 titled “Anti-Asian Racism in 2020” to understand trends in coronavirus-related anti-Asian racism, where they identified incidents of
racism and response, and outlined them in a brief breakdown. While this does not talk about coverage, it talks about the specific incidents that were mentioned in articles. They categorized the incidents into different kinds of harassment, identified their location, the perpetrator’s political affiliation when applicable, and more data points in a systematic manner.

Virulent Hate also published two reports in 2020 in collaboration with Stop AAPI Hate, one on the rhetoric of “Yellow Peril” related to the 2020 election, titled “The Return of ‘Yellow Peril’: Anti-AAPI Rhetoric and Policies Leading up to the 2020 Election”, and a second on specifically the anti-Chinese rhetoric, titled “Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Tied to Racism against Asian Americans”. Both of these reports detail specific ways in which the rise in acts of violence against Asian Americans related to the anti-Chinese rhetoric as well as the 2020 election situation simultaneously.

Overall, these sources provide historical background on Asian Americans to contextualize the rise in violence against Asian Americans. Building on this foundational history along with an understanding of their relationships to the global structures of white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism, the literature review also explores the contemporary rise of hate against Asian Americans. Some of the sources also propose ways in which solidarities can be strengthened, which help guide us as we seek to contribute to this understanding of how to solve these challenges in our communities as we fight for collective liberation.


Methodology:

The major component of the project I worked on is a report about the news media coverage based on the Virulent Hate Project’s 2020 dataset. The Virulent Hate dataset contains a collection of articles sourced from two databases, Newsbank and ProQuest, which contain the text of various newspapers and publications for the year 2020. News articles are included in the dataset if they report on anti-Asian racism and its responses. In addition, the specific incidents of racism and responses mentioned in the articles are also listed in the dataset. Altogether, the dataset includes a list of articles mentioning incidents of anti-Asian racism and response, as well as a list of the specific incidents mentioned themselves.

The dataset of incidents includes a measure for the number of mentions of each incident in the articles, which refers to how many times a unique incident was included in an article. Notably, one article can contain mentions of multiple incidents. Each incident in the dataset is classified into two kinds, as either an incident of racism or an incident of response. Incidents of racism fall under many types, classified in the dataset as verbal harassment, physical harassment, avoidance harassment, and vandalism. Incidents of response fall under two types, statements and actions. Notably for incident type, a specific incident often has multiple tags for harassment type, which affects the counting of how many incidents belong to a certain type. For example, an incident can involve both verbal and physical harassment, and hence contribute to the total count for both categories. Each incident is also labeled with the date of its occurrence, the geographic state of its occurrence (when applicable), the location of its occurrence (when applicable), and the political party affiliation of the perpetrator (when applicable). All articles and incidents are also labeled with the date of publication and the geographic state of its publication.
We wish to examine how traditional news media sources have covered anti-Asian racism and response. In order to study this with the dataset, we carefully examined relationships between the number of incidents, the number of mentions of an incident, and the number of articles for various categories of the data. In particular, to determine the relative coverage of various incidents, the number of mentions per incident is a useful metric that we heavily employ to compare how frequently certain kinds of incidents are mentioned. In addition, the total number of articles is a useful measure to see how many different articles talk about different kinds of incidents. For each of the fields of specific analysis (time, geography, incident type, political affiliation, and location), we present an overview of the coverage across that field of analysis, along with a breakdown in comparing coverage for racism and response. We also present any general insights about the data for that field.
Results:

Our results include findings for general trends in the data, as well as for coverage of incidents by type, by geography, by political affiliation, and by location. Here we include a snippet of some of the results we found.

For the general coverage, we find that it is more likely for an article mentioning racism to also mention response (42.9%) than it is for an article mentioning response to also mention racism (33.1%). Although there are slightly more incidents of anti-Asian response than anti-Asian racism identified in the dataset (by 1.2%), there are more articles that report on racism than articles that report on responses (by 17.2%). Nearly half of all articles (44.4%) contain both mentions of anti-Asian racism and anti-Asian response.

For incident mentions by type, physical harassment incidents were mentioned the most frequently per incident (7 per incident), with vandalism, verbal, and avoidance next in that order. This suggests a disproportionate coverage of physical harassment, and less coverage of verbal harassment and avoidance harassment. The two main types of responses to anti-Asian racism categorized in the dataset are statements and actions. There were 853 incidents with response statements, 431 incidents with response actions, and 170 incidents with both response statements and response actions. While there were more statement incidents than action incidents, there was still a higher number of average mentions per incidents for statements than actions (4.5 vs. 3.2). There also were significantly more articles of statements than actions, more than twice as many. This suggests a higher coverage of response statements compared to response actions.

When observing the number of published articles about anti-Asian racism and response by state, California and New York stand out with the most number of articles. However, notably
many major publishers are located in New York and California, so this may affect the relative
distribution of publications of articles by state. When comparing the racism articles to the
response articles, we do not find significant differences between the state distributions, with a
two-tailed paired t-test returning t-value of 1.5212 and p-value of 0.1346.

Out of the politician incidents, 230 of them were perpetrated by politicians affiliated with
the Democratic Party, whereas 261 of them were perpetrated by politicians affiliated with the
Republican Party. When considering political affiliation of individuals involved in anti-Asian
racism and response incidents, people affiliated with the Republican party are predominantly
involved in reported incidents of anti-Asian racism (200 vs. 61), whereas people affiliated with
the Democratic Party are predominantly involved in reported incidents of response (255 vs. 61).
While the mentions per incident between racist incidents and response incidents is similar for
Republicans (15.6 vs. 14.1), the difference is much larger for Democrats (12.6 vs. 4.7). If for both
racism incidents and response incidents, those that are affiliated with a Republican politician
have more mentions per incident. This suggests that the media tends to mention incidents related
to Republicans disproportionately often, for both response and racism related incidents.

When investigating the relationship between the location of the incident and the coverage
of incidents, we found that businesses are consistent with being the highest count of incidents
and having the highest number of mentions. However, primary and secondary schools receive
more news mentions than other locations with a higher number of incidents. Incidents in the
street are the 2nd highest incident location, yet they are ranked 5th based on mentions per
incident. This suggests that news media cover incidents in locations where children are involved,
such as primary and secondary schools, above other locations with an overall higher incident
count.
Discussion:

Overall, this work aims to cover some general trends in the coverage of anti-Asian racism and responses. We notice a certain number of relevant patterns, such as the disproportionate coverage of physical harassment cases, coverage in NY and CA, and the coverage of Republican politician incidents. The basis for which these trends emerge must be further investigated, to determine reasons for this as well as how to improve coverage.

Our results contain multiple limitations. The databases used to collect the articles and incidents in the Virulent Hate are Proquest and Newsbank, filtered with key words to extract articles relating to anti-Asian racism and its responses. It is likely that some articles about these issues are not included in the database due to our limited set of key words. Furthermore, we comprehend that not all incidents of anti-Asian racism and its responses are reported on traditional news media, and, when they are, these incidents are being told by journalists who have to follow given journalistic guidelines. Therefore, suggestions from the data primarily refer to trends in traditional news media coverage, but may be misrepresenting general news coverage in the United States, particularly with the rapidly evolving ways in which people consume news.

In addition, although we focused on the coverage of anti-Asian racism and its responses with respect to time, geography, incident type, political affiliation, and location, we acknowledge that there are more trends in the data that still need exploration. We hope to continue this work to continue understanding how Asian and Asian American communities have been treated and portrayed in the media. Lastly, with our dataset based on the timeline January 1st to December 31st of 2020, we cannot ensure we covered all the incidents within this timeline considering some news media may take longer to publish an article from the date of incident.
We aim to continue our work in the form of a more polished report, as well as a subsequent journal article. We will continue collaboration with Dr. Melissa Borja of Virulent Hate for both of these publications. We also have worked on some other materials such as the beginnings of a digital magazine to discuss coverage of anti-Asian racism and response, with an interview with Dr. Russell Jeung of Stop AAPI Hate. We may continue this work as time and capacity permits. As a next step for a future report, similar analysis on more recent data (e.g. 2021 and 2022) should be conducted. In the meantime, we plan to engage with journalists, policy makers and community members to review existing findings and initiate collaborations to encourage media accountability.