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Chinese Social Media Reactions

January 22, 2014



A collaborative study including Dr. Isaac Chun-Hai Fung, assistant professor of epidemiology, Mr. Braydon Schaible, and Ms. Yi Hao, biostatistics students, at the Georgia Southern University Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health examine “Chinese social media reaction to the MERS-CoV and avian influenza A(H7N9) outbreaks.” As internet and social media use have skyrocketed, epidemiologists have begun to use online data such as Google query data and Twitter trends to track the activity levels of influenza and other infectious diseases. In China, Weibo is an extremely popular microblogging site that is equivalent to Twitter. Capitalizing on the wealth of public opinion data contained in posts on Weibo, this study used Weibo as a measure of the Chinese people’s reactions to two different outbreaks: the 2012 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) outbreak, and the 2013 outbreak of human infection of avian influenza A(H7N9) in China.

Results show that the Chinese people reacted significantly to both outbreaks online, where their social media reaction was two orders of magnitude stronger to the H7N9 influenza outbreak that happened in China than the MERS-CoV outbreak that was far away from China. These results demonstrate that social media could be a useful measure of public awareness and reaction to disease outbreak information released by health authorities.

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