

## CASE STUDY

# Confronting Industry Misinformation in China

Public health advocates in China successfully blocked efforts to spread misinformation during the coronavirus outbreak.



As fears of the novel coronavirus that causes the disease COVID-19 rose in China, opponents of public health seized the opportunity to spread misinformation about tobacco use—an old trick the tobacco industry used during the 2003 SARS outbreak.

The Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund was alerted to the tactic through a WeChat account that misleadingly cited research from a respected epidemiologist and pulmonologist to falsely claim that “smokers are less likely to be infected by COVID-19.” In fact, the coronavirus attacks the lungs, and behaviors that weaken the lungs put individuals at greater risk. The harmful impact of smoking on the lungs is well-documented,<sup>1</sup> and there is a growing body of evidence that e-cigarette use (vaping) can also harm lung health.<sup>2</sup>

## OUR RESPONSE

The WeChat account providing the misinformation, “Yao’s Classroom,” had provided numerous promotions for tobacco products and tobacco marketing articles in the past, strongly suggesting a link with the tobacco industry. Other social media accounts began to repost the article, reaching a growing audience.

The Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund’s China team set out to correct the misinformation with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) tobacco control office, a public health group called ThinkTank, and a former deputy director of the China CDC. Together, we used social media and reached out to journalists to explain how coronavirus spreads, remind people about the well-established dangers of tobacco use and note that the tobacco industry had tried to market their products by taking advantage of well-founded fears of infectious disease before.

The Beijing Association on Tobacco Control (BATC), one of our partners, sat for an interview with the influential *Beijing Youth Daily* paper, while our other partners were quoted and wrote op-eds for the *Southern Metropolis Daily*.

## RESULTS

The *Beijing Youth Daily* and *Southern Metropolis Daily* stories were republished over 40 times by other media outlets, including *People’s Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*. Altogether, the coverage generated over 400 million internet views.

BATC also reported the original misleading article to WeChat’s platform management and the Beijing Cyberspace Administrative Office. As a result, both the article and the account were removed from WeChat.

The true impact is something we can’t measure: all the people who didn’t put themselves at greater risk due to misleading tobacco marketing.

**Get involved:** Join the TakeAPart movement to help us monitor, expose and stop tobacco industry misconduct – [www.takeapart.org](http://www.takeapart.org).

*Pictured: The original WeChat post, tagged as a “rumor.”*

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Smoking and Respiratory Diseases.” 2014. [https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/sgr/50th-anniversary/pdfs/fs\\_smoking\\_respiratory\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/50th-anniversary/pdfs/fs_smoking_respiratory_508.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> BMJ. “What are the respiratory effects of e-cigarettes?” <https://www.bmj.com/content/366/bmj.l5275.long>. 30 Sept. 201.



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