Local Organizing is a Global Remedy to COVID-19

By Miryea Sturdivant

Tell me, how many thoughtful interactions with your community have you had in grocery stores, the park and your neighborhood since March 13th? I can guarantee you can recall a lot more of these now than you would have during a time without a pandemic occurring. With the world gripped by fear, many find solace in the smile from the lady across the street, the friendly wave from your neighbor, or even a call from a loved one to check in. However, let us zoom out from our localized interactions for a moment and travel to the other side of the world to China. We can find a neighborhood off of the Yangtze River where they find consolation in a smile, a wave and a call.

Today, all anyone can ever consume through the media is information about the COVID-19 virus. Center-stage of the coverage are the United States and China, yet another match up for the two world leaders. In particular, a substantial amount of media coverage in the United States is comparing our government’s actions to China’s government and the adequacy of their response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Once again, this pits the two powers against one another, a constant fight over whose government acted better. Consequently, this informs each of the country’s citizens about opposing country and creates a sea of perceived differences between the two.

However, when we look past the political differences that are touted in the media, we find citizens who are helping their families, neighbors and countries in the same way. What is missing from the Corona virus coverage is what local communities are doing, on both sides of the globe.

In March of 2020, The Nation posted an article that outlined life inside of Wuhan, China for a young graduate amidst their lockdown. Chen Meili, the young graduate under a pseudo name, recalls being left in a state of anxiety and feeling like things were out of her control. The remedy for this pain? Grassroots volunteering. By using social media platforms of WeChat and Weibo, Chen joined dozens of other of volunteers to drive hospital staff to their jobs, run errands for the vulnerable population and connect others to resources that the volunteers themselves could not provide.

Upon hearing this I thought to myself, why doesn’t the media cover efforts like this? Governments are strong and prominent entities indeed, but they are nothing without their citizens.
Let us jump back across the world to the United States’ epicenter, New York. On a similar timeline, the New York Times published an op-ed piece about young adults coping with the Corona virus in the Boston area. Again, these citizens felt powerless about COVID-19, just drifting through their lives as the nation gets worse and worse.

The remedy for this pain? Mutual-Aid networks. Four young adults from the Boston area organized neighborhoods and obtained phone numbers in order to create neighborhood pods where those within the community could participate in group text chains and find links to resources they may need. However, the heroic and necessary acts of these citizens are not highlighted in the media.

As I sit here on a Zoom call with the Mutual-Aid Network of Washtenaw County in the state of Michigan with these two articles in front of me, I think to myself, maybe we’re all not so different after all. Whether it’s called grassroots volunteering or a mutual-aid network, one thing is clear: there are masses of caring citizens in both countries who are organizing their communities.

In a state of emergency and shock, citizens are organizing and investing in their communities, something neither government has anything to do with. This is the work of the people, for the people. In both the United States and China, community has proven to be an important backbone of support during this pandemic, support that both governments cannot provide.

This similarity gives people from both nations a call to action. In a highly polarized world where media and the nationalism that lies within all of us wants us to find enemies in one another, we must investigate this force. Dig deeper to find the similarities that the media of both countries do not show to each other.

In a time where US-China tensions are rising, we should not forget that support, community and care are universal concepts that link humans together across the globe. These virtues in humanity cannot be compromised in each population no matter what world superpowers are at large or what virus is ravaging across the globe.

“Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed that’s all who ever have” - Margaret Mead.

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