



Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Re: The sneaky unforeseen virus that will go away if we stay calm

2 messages

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>
To: truthometer@politifact.com

Mon, Mar 23, 2020 at 8:00 AM

Dear Truth-O-Meter,

One of a journalists greatest responsibilities is reporting quotations without taking them out of context. Shefali Luthra failed in that no less than three separate times in a [March 19, 2020 fact check of President Trump](#).

Corrections are in order.

"It snuck up on us"

Luthra claims Trump's argument defending U.S. unpreparedness for the coronavirus was "It snuck up on us":

In particular, the president defended his administration on the issue of insufficient testing resources and what experts say is a looming shortage of medical equipment and personnel. His argument? No one saw this coming. "It snuck up on us," Trump said at a March 18 media briefing.

But [the March 18, 2020 media briefing tells a different story](#) (bold emphasis added)

Q Would you like to see them more than \$1,000?
THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're going to see. I don't want to get into that right now, John. We are looking at different numbers. We're looking at timing that would be different — splitting the times, splitting the payments. We're looking at a lot of different things. It hasn't been determined yet, but it will shortly be determined. And people want to go big, as opposed — everybody seems to want to go big. And they want to get to the recovery.

The big day is — the big thing we can do is get rid of this horrible — I call it the "unseen" — the unseen enemy. You call it — there's a thousand different terms for it, but whatever — **it snuck up on us**. And it's — it did 128 countries, I think. It's in something like that — very close to that. Think of that. So it spreads violently. It's a very contagious — very, very contagious virus.

When Mr. Trump says "It snuck up on us" he isn't making an argument in response to a question about U.S. preparedness. He is noting that the virus spread more quickly than expected ("It's a ... very contagious virus").

"A very unforeseen thing"

Luthra claimed Trump said the virus itself was "a very unforeseen thing" (bold emphasis added):

"It snuck up on us," Trump said at a March 18 media briefing. **Later, he added that the virus is "a very unforeseen thing."**

In fact, the context of the media briefing shows Trump was saying the high demand for ventilators was the "very unforeseen thing."

Q I have a question for you and then I have one for Secretary Wilkie, as well. But I'll start with you. You just said there are a tremendous number of ventilators that we have, but, for weeks, hospitals have been worrying about a critical shortage that they say we are not prepared for. So why did it take so long to invoke the Defense Production Act?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, hospitals are supposed to have ventilators, too. And when we have thousands of ventilators — it sounds like a lot, but this is a very unforeseen thing. Nobody ever thought of these numbers. Nobody ever saw numbers like this, even with regard to testing. Normally, we wouldn't be doing testing. And they decided to do it. Very, very hard to ramp up. Now we're getting highly sophisticated tests, and it's going very well. But nobody has ever heard of testing in the kind of quantities that you're talking about.

Luthra should have obtained information and quotations about Trump's argument from his response to [the next journalist's question \(3:30\)](#). That journalist said that Trump had weeks to order ventilators and asked why it wasn't done. Trump responded that would have been appropriate for a worst-case scenario but not necessarily in the case of a better outlook. In other words, his argument was not that the virus "snuck up on us."

It will go away if people stay calm

Luthra also cobbled together two of Trump's statement into a conditional promise, that if people stay calm the virus would go away (bold emphasis added):

Trump was still comparing the virus' severity to the flu, and arguing that it "will go away" if people "stay calm."

Luthra added the "if." Without the journalist's activist approach to quotations, there is of if/then clause to Trump's statement.

In context, Trump made two separate statements. He said the virus would go away. And he admonished people to remain calm (as well as vigilant and careful).

And we're prepared, and we're doing a great job with it. And it will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away.

We want to protect our shipping industry, our cruise industry, cruise ships. We want to protect our airline industry — very important. But everybody has to be vigilant and has to be careful.

Luthra misrepresented Trump by suggesting he argued the virus would go away "if" people stay calm.

Luthra's use of quotations makes it look like she chose the quotations to fit a preconceived narrative.

I should not have to emphasize the inappropriateness of that approach to fact-checking.

Please clean up the mess with either a series of corrections or else a new attempt at fact-checking the issue.

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

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Sincerely,

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To: truthometer@politifact.com

Fri, Apr 17, 2020 at 1:29 PM

Dear Truth-O-Meter,

I'm taking the time to remind of this complaint from days ago because recent news reports have helped confirm my judgment that PolitiFact misinterpreted President Trump's words and took them out of context.

In my earlier message I suggested the context shows Mr. Trump was not saying the coronavirus itself came as a surprise but instead he was saying that its rate of transmission was the surprise. China downplaying human-to-human transmission accounts for one aspect of the context missing from the PolitiFact account. The other is the [developing view that Covid19 is apparently easily spread during its presymptomatic phase](#). Asymptomatic transmission counts as unusual, and is exactly the type of thing that could lead to an expected virus spreading with surprising rapidity.

Asymptomatic transmission carries obvious implications for the efficacy of testing for coronavirus. Failing to test asymptomatic spreaders would permit them to avoid isolation and continue spreading the disease.

Thanks for reading.

[Quoted text hidden]