

COVID-19, Racism and Politicization

Media in the Midst of a Pandemic

Edited by

Kalinga Seneviratne

Sundeeep R. Muppidi

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

KALINGA SENEVIRATNE
AND SUNDEEP R. MUPPIDI

Since COVID-19 was first identified, infections from the virus and the death toll have spiked abysmally. The pandemic has also paralyzed the economies (particularly, global trade, tourism and transport) of many countries. The dire social and psychological ramifications associated with the pandemic are also immense. The threat posed by COVID-19 on global health and the economic downturn resulting thereof necessitates the development of health technologies (such as medicines and vaccines) – South Centre Research Paper 114 (Boru, 2020).

Globalization has transformed the world into a global village at so many different levels. What happens then, when an unexpected event like a global pandemic, caused by an invisible virus with no known vaccine, and capable of spreading exponentially through contact, emerges and spreads like wildfire through global travel networks? How does one respond to such a global public health emergency?

In a globalized world, interlinked with digital networks that enable high-speed commerce, and with interlinked cultural experiences, the COVID-19 pandemic has redistributed and re-imagined global transactions, interactions, and partnerships. The existential threat posed by this pandemic, and new variants of the virus, has brought almost all countries to a grinding halt for significant periods of time, starting in January 2020 and with some communities continuing to be in lockdown even at the time of writing in January 2021. In these lockdowns, unprecedented curbs have been put in place on all forms of transportation, social interactions and economic transactions. The

unavailability of a vaccine, till recently, has meant that extreme measures of containment, from closures to cleaning protocols have become the norm across the world. Offices, businesses and shopping centers have shut down, companies have shuttered their doors, and while a lot of employees have worked from home, many others have been furloughed or lost their jobs. The enemy is invisible and hence the job of getting the message across in terms of prevention has become much more difficult.

Background

On 31 December 2019, the WHO was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan City, China. A novel coronavirus was identified as the cause by Chinese authorities on 7 January 2020 and was temporarily named “2019-nCoV”. Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. A novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. The new virus was subsequently named the “COVID-19 virus”. On 30 January 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), the WHO’s highest level of alarm. At that time there were 98 cases and no deaths in 18 countries outside China. On 11 March 2020, the rapid increase in the number of cases outside China led Dr Ghebreyesus to announce that the outbreak could be characterized as a pandemic. By then more than 118,000 cases had been reported in 114 countries, and 4,291 deaths had been recorded.

Following SARS, which was first recognized in 2003 in Hanoi, Vietnam, and MERS, which was identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012, this is the third coronavirus disease. COVID-19 was first recognized in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. In late December 2019, the Health Commission of Hubei Province revealed the outbreak of a cluster of severe “pneumonia of unknown causes”. The pneumonia illness was initially believed to have a link to a wholesale seafood and live animal market in Wuhan. As studies show, “bats, snakes and pangolins have been cited as potential carriers” of the new virus. However, a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine and some other journals subsequently showed that most of the first

cases did not “have known exposure to a seafood wholesale and live animal market in Wuhan” (Baru, 2020).

Robin Marantz Henig (2020), a science writer based in New York, pointed out in an article in the *National Geographic*, that science writers have been identifying processes such as climatic change, massive urbanization, and the proximity of humans to farm or forest animals as vital reservoirs that could unleash microbes “never before seen in humans and therefore unusually lethal” (2020: 16). He also noted that except for AIDS, other recent epidemics did not go global – such as SARS in 2003, MERS in 2012 and Ebola in 2014. “It was easy to attribute susceptibility in other countries to behaviors that didn’t exist in ours”, noted Henig (2020: 18). “Most of us didn’t ride camels, didn’t eat monkeys, didn’t handle live bats or civet cats in the market place.”

The spread of COVID-19 from China to other countries did not take much time. On 13 January 2020, six days after the virus was first identified, Thailand reported a case of a tourist from Wuhan who was infected. Japan and South Korea then confirmed cases of passengers from Wuhan on 15 January 2020 and 19 January 2020, respectively. The spread of the virus to countries outside of Asia also took place within a few days. In Italy, after the first patient (a 38-year-old man from the Italian city of Codogno) was identified on 20 February 2020, the virus spread from there at a staggering pace. The spread of COVID-19 to other nations was also very quick.

In the US, the first COVID-19 patient was confirmed on 20 January 2020. However, five months after the first confirmed patient – a passenger from Wuhan – was identified, the number of infections exceeded over 1.6 million people. In South America, the first case was confirmed in Brazil on 25 February 2020. By the end of May 2020, Brazil, Peru and Chile were the three countries with the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the region. In a similar vein, Africa confirmed its first COVID-19 case in Egypt on 14 February 2020. Since then, the virus has reached many African nations such as Ethiopia (Baru, 2020).

In early 2020, as the coronavirus spread globally, fearful shoppers stripped stores bare and caused a worldwide shortage of protective face masks. The media, encouraged by irresponsible politicians, spread various conspiracy theories and began a blame game, while neglecting health information and delaying much needed action to

stem the spread within countries. To what degree do the media deserve scrutiny for their role in the day-to-day coverage that often focused on adversarial issues and not on solutions to help address the biggest global health pandemic the world has seen for over a century?

Overall, COVID-19 is a critical concern not only for least developed countries (LDCs) and developing countries, but also for developed nations like the US, the UK, France and Germany. Unlike HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases the effects of which have been felt mainly in LDCs and developing nations, COVID-19 has ravaged the lives of people in North America and Europe.

Summary of the Chapters

This book explores the role of the national and international media in the initial coverage of the developing crisis, especially between January and June 2020. We will address especially issues such as the trading of conspiracy theories, race factors, media bias, the role of the media in both countering and spreading misinformation, and the politicization of the health crisis.

In chapter 2, Kalinga Seneviratne takes a comprehensive look at how a blame game developed in the international media with a heavy dose of Sinophobia. He discusses various conspiracy theories that were circulated by both the western and Chinese media, the attacks on the WHO as the epicenter of the virus spread to the US, the bias in media language (especially of the American media) in reporting developments associated to COVID-19, and how the propaganda war developed particularly between March and June 2020. The chapter also has a comprehensive analysis of how racism was reflected in the international media coverage and how COVID-19 became excessively politicized with the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's call for an "independent" inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19.

Sundeeep R. Muppidi, in chapter 3, takes a specific look at the US media coverage of COVID-19. He addresses the context and factors leading to such media coverage and its response to the pandemic, while also exploring some of the theoretical and logistical aspects of these responses. In addition, he explores the 'othering' of the blame related to failures and non-performances from politicians, governments and media networks themselves.

Zhang Xiaoying and Martin Albrow give a Chinese perspective on the trend of reporting COVID-19 in the Chinese media, when they discuss the “Moral Foundation of the Cooperative Spirit” in chapter 4. They draw on three main Chinese philosophical traditions - Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism - to identify the sources of its theoretical framework. They argue that the co-operative spirit as represented in China’s English media is essentially grounded in these ancient Chinese political-cultural values, which have all contributed in different degrees to the idea of *Tianxia* as one family, taking “*ren*”, “*shangshanruoshui*” and “*jianai*” as its core values, and maintaining a human-centered orientation. Taking examples from China’s mainstream English media, such as China Daily, Global Times, CGTN, Xinhuanet.com/English and China.org.cn/English, they argue that all these news media have emphasized global cooperation in combating the COVID-19 crisis, instead of contributing to the blame game and politicizing the issue.

In the next chapter, Ankuran Dutta and Anupa Goswami trace the historical background to India’s anti-China nationalism and show how it has been reflected in the COVID-19 coverage, especially after India became one of the world’s hotspots. They argue that “India’s growing affiliation with the Trump regime” has impacted the Sinophobia that was reflective of the coverage of the virus, with some mainstream media even labelling COVID-19 as the “Wuhan Virus”. Taking the Times of India, the Hindustan Times, the Indian Express, the Statesman, the Telegraph, the Hindu, and the Deccan Chronicle, the authors – using 10 key words – analyzed what could be constituted as Sinophobia in the Indian media coverage of COVID-19.

In chapter 6, Yun Xiao and Radhika Mittal look at how misreporting and negative coverage stigmatize certain social groups. In a study that examines the image construction of China from administrative and economic perspectives in *The New York Times*, the authors argue that unsubstantiated criticism of governance measures, lack of nuance and absence of alternative narratives is indicative of a media ideology that strengthens and embeds the process of ‘othering’.

In chapter 7, Sugath Mahinda Senarath examines the role of the media in Sri Lanka’s initial success in combating COVID-19. He gives an interesting analysis of how the media along with the security forces created an environment where general elections could be held safely

in August 2020. He also discusses how the media facilitated discussion on the role of the military in COVID-19 contact tracing and quarantine measures, and also about some “careless” news reporting where minority groups were being blamed for some of the problems created by the battle against COVID-19.

In the next chapter, David Robie focuses on New Zealand, which the western media has praised for its successful strategy to control COVID-19. He analyzes how Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s success in controlling the virus contributed to a resounding election victory in August 2020. He also discusses the sad state of the print media in New Zealand, where it has been devastated by the economic impact of the lockdowns due to COVID-19.

S.M Shameem Reza’s chapter on the battle to control COVID-19 in Bangladesh is a disturbing account of social issues that came up as the virus spread, and the way the media reported them. The media coverage has led to an emerging pattern of stigmatization of the coronavirus infections. It reflected the way people treated the elderly and returning migrant workers. This led to the social harassment and stigmatization of people suspected of having or having had the virus.

In chapter 10, Chen Ling-Hui discusses how Taiwan achieved a unique success in tackling the spread of COVID-19 and how it struggled to get international media attention to highlight it. She describes how Taiwan used tested communication strategies - especially the use of digital technology - to counter misinformation on the virus, thus giving confidence to the population that COVID-19 could be safely controlled in the country.

In the penultimate chapter, Flordeliz L. Abanto, Ma. Theresa M. Rivera and Robert de la Serna look at how the Philippines government set up a “multi-sectoral” information and communication system, where information from various health agencies including the WHO was channelled to the media by the government via live streaming of media briefings and the use of online platforms like Zoom. They discuss how the nature of the reporting in the national media changed between January and June 2020 as the ground situation changed, with the Philippines facing a full-blown crisis by May-June 2020. They also discuss various issues on which the media faced criticism from the public, such as promoting various health remedies. They argue that

the coverage of the pandemic exposed the newsrooms' "lack of skills and knowledge in reporting on health and science".

Challenges Ahead

We are in the midst of a global pandemic and unprecedented shutdown of all societies that has impacted our global transactions in many ways including affecting the physical movement of people around the world. One would think the most logical thing to do, in a globally interlinked society, would be for all humans to put aside their differences and work towards addressing the crisis and resolving it in a united manner.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the perfect storm in which international and domestic politics, misinformation, paranoia and media bias have contributed to an undermining of democratic and community values, and heightened fear and distrust among various sections of the population around the world.

At the time of writing, as new vaccines flood the world to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and the virus itself seems to be mutating into newer strains, a number of other issues still remain, in particular how to combat the viruses of misinformation and conspiracy thinking that have also exploded exponentially with the spread of the pandemic. In the near future, while we may finally have a vaccine for the COVID-19 virus, what we still need is a vaccine for the misinformation virus.

In the concluding chapter written in early January 2021, we look at the challenges ahead as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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CHAPTER 2

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA AMIDST A PANDEMIC: COVID-19 CONSPIRACIES, RACISM AND POLITICIZATION

KALINGA SENEVIRATNE

In early 2020, as the coronavirus spread globally, fearful shoppers stripped stores bare and caused a worldwide shortage of protective face masks. The media, encouraged by irresponsible politicians, spread various conspiracy theories and began a blame game, while neglecting health information and delaying much needed action to stem the spread within countries. To what degree do the media – both international and national – deserve scrutiny for their role in the day-to-day coverage that focused mostly on adversarial issues and not on solutions to help address the biggest global health pandemic the world has seen for over a century?

This chapter will explore the role of the international media¹ in the initial coverage of the developing crisis, and broadly address the major issues covered in this book including the trading of conspiracy theories, race factors, and the politicization of the health crisis.

Global Media – The Battle Ground

On December 31 2019, the WHO China office was informed by the Chinese health authorities that “cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology” had been detected in Wuhan City, and on January 3 2020, a total of 44 patients with such pneumonia had been reported. When

¹ ‘International Media’ in the context of the book mainly refers to the Anglo-American media which is basically the English speaking media of the US, Britain, Australia and Canada.

the WHO asked for more information, the Chinese promptly provided reports giving details of the clinical signs and symptoms². They also said that some patients were dealers and vendors at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan City.

This threat was initially ignored in the West³, where it was thought that like the SARS crisis of almost two decades ago, this would be a health crisis limited to the region, and one which only Asians would have to deal with. On January 22, during an interview with CNBC at Davos, after the first coronavirus case was recorded in the US, President Donald Trump shrugged off the threat, saying “it’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine.” When he was asked by CNBC’s Joe Kernen if the Chinese could be trusted to be transparent about the virus, he replied: “I do. I do. I have a great relationship with President Xi. We just signed probably the biggest deal ever made”⁴.

But, as the weeks passed by and COVID-19 spread rapidly across the US with the world’s richest country becoming an epicenter of the virus and the deficiencies of its public health system being exposed, President Trump began to change his tune. He spearheaded a blame game that pointed the finger at China⁵.

By March, the global media had become the battleground in a propaganda war between the West (mainly the US) and China. The narrative of China as a secretive authoritarian state that hides the truth – and thus cannot be trusted in anything it says – was widely at play in the Anglo-American media and unfortunately transmitted without questioning by some Asian media. It created an international atmosphere of confrontation, when the world desperately needed cooperation.

² See the WHO timeline - <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---COVID-19>

³ ‘West’ in this context mainly refers to the United States and Western Europe.

⁴ Transcript of CNBC interview from Davos – <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/cnbc-transcript-president-donald-trump-sits-down-with-cnbc-joe-kernen-at-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos-switzerland.html>

⁵ Donald Trump just blamed China for his re-election woes – <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-01/donald-trump-throws-coronavirus-blame-at-china/12204356>

With the spread of COVID-19 to Europe and the US a bout of Sinophobia began to emerge in the western media. On March 29, Australia's 60 Minutes program - well known for sensational reporting - broadcast a program that portrayed China as the villain of the COVID-19 pandemic, and just stopped short of calling for war against China. This was reminiscent of the propaganda that the Anglo-American media broadcast around the world about the alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' that Saddam Hussein had stockpiled, that led to the attack on and invasion of Iraq in 2003.

As the US surpassed China on the number of COVID-19 deaths, it seemed that the western media wanted the world to believe that this was because of some form of bio-warfare that originated from China. The 60 minutes program claimed that the virus originated in Wuhan in mid-November and that China intentionally hid it from the world until late January, by which time they had allowed thousands of Chinese to fly out of Wuhan to all parts of the world. The 60 Minutes program showed a map that suggested that China had sent an army of bio-warfare soldiers to infect the world⁶.

Unfortunately, the media in India was no different to the Anglo-American media in their coverage of the COVID-19 threat. There was a clear slant towards labeling the virus as a Chinese virus (see chapter 5 for more discussion on this topic).

The New York Times (NYT) columnist David Leonhardt (2020), writing on March 15, gave a list of the actions (or non-actions) President Trump had taken to play down the threat of the virus to the American population – while China took drastic measures and closed down the city of Wuhan. He noted:

In the weeks that followed, Trump faced a series of choices. He could have taken aggressive measures to slow the spread of the virus. He could have insisted that the United States ramp up efforts to produce test kits. He could have emphasized the risks that the virus presented and urged Americans to take precautions if they had reason to believe they were sick. He could have used the powers of the presidency to reduce the number of people who would ultimately get sick. He did none of those things.

⁶ <https://9now.nine.com.au/60-minutes/china-cover-up-coronavirus-12-missing-days-wuhan-60-minutes/d8426648-f9b3-4439-9089-b733b8e4a6c5>

He listed a number of failures that led to the US becoming the epicenter of the virus, starting in late January, with when President Trump ignored advice from health experts warning about the spread of the virus. Then, on January 31, while he banned foreigners who had been to China from entering the US, this move did not apply to US citizens. Two days later, in a Fox News interview, he said, “we have pretty much shut it down coming in from China” and again repeated that “we have a tremendous relationship with China”.

Leonhardt further pointed out how in early February, when test kits provided by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed technical flaws, the Trump administration was lax about finding a solution, while other countries were working on developing reliable tests. The US didn't go to the World Health Organization (WHO) to source functioning test kits. Thus, the US fell behind South Korea, Singapore and China in fighting the virus. The President spent most of February telling the US public the virus was going away. He had also suggested many times that the virus was less serious than the flu. It was only in mid-March that he admitted the spread of virus was serious and then went on a blame-shifting and misinformation campaign.

Conspiracy Theories

With the virus spreading havoc across the globe by March 2020, many conspiracy theories were quickly in circulation pointing to an outbreak of bio-warfare, with the US and China accusing each other. No one seemed to know that there is a Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) for which both countries had signed up.

According to the popular scientific theory, the virus probably originated in bats and then crossed over to humans, probably via another intermediate host. It then spread rapidly across the globe, piggybacking on the international travel network. While the mainstream scientific theory sufficed for some, a large number of people saw the pandemic as the work of coldhearted military or industrial strategists. An equally large number of people saw it as some kind of divine or natural retribution for an increasingly recalcitrant human race (D. Khan and Y. Khan, 2020).

At the beginning, the most popular conspiracy theory (not necessarily in the western media) was that the CIA had developed and released the virus. It was argued that this was an easy and low-cost way to limit China's growing economic clout. The theory gained support as the next hotspot was Iran – another “problematic” country for the US. However, as the COVID-19 virus spread to other countries - especially in the West - the blame spotlight turned on the Chinese. As per this thinking, it was the Chinese who had developed and released the virus to bring the US and Europe to their knees, and usher in the biggest recession of the century, thus weakening China's military and economic competitors. That view in one form or another gained momentum in the western media.

While the COVID-19 outbreak started spreading at a rapid pace in the US, one widespread theory – espoused especially by the right-wing media in the US – was that the virus had spread from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where it was either being engineered as a bio-weapon or being studied in the lab after being isolated from animals. It had then escaped or leaked because of poor safety protocols. The Chinese have argued that the emergence of the virus in the same city as China's only 'Level 4' bio-safety laboratory is pure coincidence. But, even Trump added fuel to this theory by labeling the virus as the 'China virus' in one of his press conferences, and in India many of the mainstream news channels labeled it the 'Wuhan virus'. Addressing a youth rally in Arizona, Trump labeled the coronavirus the 'kung flu' to cheers from the audience (BBC, June 24 2020)⁷.

On March 3, with Iran's infection rate climbing over 3,000, the Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami alleged that COVID-19 was a US “biological weapon invasion” that first spread to China and then to Iran. He warned "the United States knows if it did that, (the virus) will return (to it)"⁸.

In mid-March, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian accused the US army of bringing the coronavirus to Wuhan in October 2019 (when the US participated in a military Olympic games there) and urged the US to be transparent on such virus cases. He posted

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53173436>

⁸ <https://www.ibtimes.com/coronavirus-outbreak-us-biological-attack-iran-commander-blames-usa-COVID-19-2934762>

these comments on his Twitter account and China's state-owned Global Times⁹ said that similar doubts had been raised by the Chinese public.

Another possible conspiracy theory could be traced to a New York Times (NYT)¹⁰ report from August 5 2019 that a US Army deadly germ research center in Fort Detrick in Maryland had been shut down by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) over safety concerns. The report also said that in 2009, research at the institute was suspended because it was storing pathogens not listed in its database (under the BWC this is a requirement). "The institute is a biodefense center that studies germs and toxins that could be used to threaten the military or public health, and also investigate disease outbreaks," noted the NYT.

Just a few weeks before the first COVID-19 victims were identified in Wuhan, an exercise named "Event 201" was held at Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in Baltimore, Maryland, that was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where the theme was simulating a high-level pandemic exercise, which produces 65 million deaths.

The press release¹¹ said: "Event 201 simulates an outbreak of a novel zoonotic coronavirus transmitted from bats to pigs to people that eventually becomes efficiently transmissible from person to person, leading to a severe pandemic. The pathogen and the disease it causes are modeled largely on SARS, but it is more transmissible in the community setting by people with mild symptoms". It goes on to describe the virus as originating in pig farms in Brazil and quietly spreading to the community. It then transmits by air travel to the US, Europe and China, and ultimately creates health scare chaos globally.

The Global Times that reported Zhao's claims on March 14 2020 also raised an interesting point that the head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Redfield, had told a House Oversight Committee that in the first weeks of the spread of COVID-19 in the US many cases had been misdiagnosed as the common flu. This sparked a

⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182511.shtml>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/health/germs-fort-detrick-biohazard.html>

¹¹ <http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/scenario.html>

heated debate in US social media about how flawed US testing systems may have seriously delayed the response to the virus, while the politicians and the media shifted the blame onto China.

“Such misjudgment of coronavirus cases in the US, in addition to the fact that the source of the coronavirus is still unclear, raised public suspicions on whether the virus had surfaced in the US earlier, as 37,000 Americans had died from the common flu in the US in 2019,” noted the Global Times.

Daud Khan and Yamine Khan (2020) argue that there is certainly a personality type that would choose a good conspiracy theory over other explanations any day. “It is a way of demonstrating that they know more than others and that they can see through the smoke screens and disinformation fed to the general public. It is a way of asserting (or) inserting intellectual superiority,” they note, adding:

In the case of COVID-19, there is also a huge amount of collective anxiety that feeds on a primordial fear of the unknown, of death and of economic deprivation. This anxiety is like a virus that lives in our minds and is spread through millions of messages on Facebook and WhatsApp, by dramatic images on TV, and by graphs and statistics in the print media. Although this fear is universal, it has a particularly strong hold in Europe and the USA where consistent improvements over the last 50 years in living standards, health care and life expectancy has created a feeling of invincibility which COVID-19 has badly shaken (Khan & Khan, 2020).

This is where the BWC¹² passed by the United Nations in 1972 and that entered into force (after the required number of countries ratified it) in March 1975 comes into play. During the Third Review Conference in 1991 State parties agreed to provide annual reports on specific activities related to the BWC such as data on research centers and laboratories, information on national biological defense research and development programs, etc.

Media need to ask - have the US and China adhered to the BWC in their research or simulation activities? The spread of COVID-19 and the accompanying bio-warfare conspiracy theories indicate that the BWC

¹² For more information on the BWC visit - <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/bio/>

needs an urgent review and States need to be transparent in complying with its mandate.

Definition of Biological Weapons

Biological weapons are complex systems that disseminate disease-causing organisms or toxins to harm or kill humans, animals or plants. They generally consist of two parts – a weaponized agent and a delivery mechanism. In addition to strategic or tactical military applications, biological weapons can be used for political assassinations, the infection of livestock or agricultural produce to cause food shortages and economic loss, the creation of environmental catastrophes, and the introduction of widespread illness, fear and mistrust among the public.

Source: United Nations Office Geneva

In a statement¹³ issued on the 45th anniversary of its implementation on March 26 2020, the Indian government called upon the international community to help strengthen the WHO to fully and effectively implement the BWC. With the 9th Review Conference of the BWC coming up in 2021, India has called upon State Parties to negotiate “a comprehensive and legally binding protocol” to the convention. India has also highlighted the dangers from the possible use, in the future, of micro-organisms as biological weapons by terrorists.

Attack on the WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) is an inter-governmental UN agency that works with 194 member countries, across 6 regions with

¹³ <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/COVID-19-india-follows-us-to-remind-the-world-a-1975-treaty-against-bio-weapons-818359.html>

more than 150 offices worldwide. Its aim is to achieve “better health for everyone, everywhere”. According to the profile on the WHO’s website, when a major health crisis occurs in a country or in a region, its health experts comprising of many nationalities would mobilize resources to address and fight the crisis.

The WHO is currently headed by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who was elected as WHO Director-General for a five-year term by WHO Member States at the 17th World Health Assembly in May 2017. He served as Ethiopia’s Minister of Health from 2005–2012, where he led a comprehensive reform of the country’s health system. He was also Ethiopia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2012–2016. He is the first WHO Director-General to have been elected from multiple candidates by the World Health Assembly, and is the first person from the African Region to serve as the WHO’s chief. His election in 2017 was supported by both India and China with the latter helping him by getting his main rival, a Pakistani, to withdraw from the contest. This has perhaps fuelled American suspicions that Dr Tedros is a Chinese stooge.

However, it was not until the epicenter of COVID-19 shifted to the United States that the attacks on the WHO and its head started to emerge from Washington and other western capitals. President Trump’s tirades against the WHO began on April 7 after some health experts, government officials and analysts openly criticized the WHO. The President accused the WHO of being biased towards China and threatened to review US funding to the organization. The US is the WHO’s main voluntary contributor with USD 450 million a year. “They called it wrong, they really, they missed the call. Fortunately, I rejected their advice on keeping our borders open to China early on. Why did they give us such a faulty recommendation?” President Trump asked during a White House briefing. On April 17, in a tweet, Trump said: “Why did the W.H.O. ignore an email from Taiwanese health officials in late December alerting them to the possibility that coronavirus could be transmitted between humans? Why did the W.H.O. make several claims about the coronavirus that were either inaccurate or misleading?”¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-timeline-of-trump-s-attacks-on-the-who-36485>

The WHO's head Dr Tedros responded to this, claiming that he had been racially abused and that this abuse had largely come from Taiwan. China came to his support, but the Taiwanese denied it. Writing in 'The Print', Abhijit Iyer Mitra, a senior fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, argued that the racism issue was carefully couched to shore up western liberal social justice warrior support. "The point was that he used it to deflect from the genuine claims of incompetence levelled against him by those like US President Donald Trump," he added¹⁵.

On May 1, White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said: "The WHO appears to clearly have a China bias. I mean, you look at this timeline and it's really damning for the WHO when you consider the fact that on 31st December you had Taiwanese officials warning about human-to-human transmission, the WHO did not make that public. On 9th January, the WHO repeated China's claim that the virus does not transmit readily between people that was quite apparently false. On 14th January, the WHO again repeated China's talking points about no human-to-human transmission."¹⁶

At the time she made the claim, COVID-19 had infected over 1 million Americans with 63,000 deaths. On May 19 Trump escalated his threats against the WHO and said that America would permanently withdraw funding, unless it "commits to major substantive improvements in the next 30 days." In fact, on April 27, the WHO in a statement¹⁷ gave a timeline of its actions since China reported the suspected virus on December 31 2019. They refuted US charges that the WHO helped China to cover up the seriousness of the virus in its initial stages in January and March 2020 (see box).

¹⁵ <https://theprint.in/opinion/who-and-china-tedros-past-worrying-how-india-fell-for-it/400945/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/01/kayleigh-mcenany-white-house-press-secretary-briefing-who>

¹⁷ Link to the WHO statement - <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---COVID-19>

The WHO Timeline (January – March 2020)

- **31 Dec 2019:** Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, China, reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan and a novel coronavirus was eventually identified.
- **1 January 2020:** WHO had set up the IMST (Incident Management Support Team) across the three levels of the organization: putting the organization on an emergency footing for dealing with the outbreak.
- **5 January 2020:** WHO published the first 'Disease Outbreak News' on the new virus. This is a flagship technical publication to the scientific and public health community as well as global media. It contained a risk assessment and advice, and reported on what China had told the organization about the status of patients and the public health response on the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan.
- **10 January 2020:** WHO issued a comprehensive package of technical guidance online with advice to all countries on how to detect, test and manage potential cases, based on what was known about the virus at the time.
- **12 January 2020:** China publicly shared the genetic sequence of COVID-19.
- **14 January 2020:** WHO's technical lead for the response noted in a press briefing there may have been limited human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus (in the 41 confirmed cases), mainly through family members, and that there was a risk of a possible wider outbreak.
- **20-21 January 2020:** WHO experts from its China and Western Pacific regional offices conducted a brief field visit to Wuhan.
- **22 January 2020:** WHO mission to China issued a statement saying that there was evidence of human-to-human transmission in Wuhan but more investigation was needed to understand the full extent of transmission.
- **22-23 January 2020:** The WHO Director-General convened an Emergency Committee (EC) to assess whether the outbreak constituted a public health emergency of international concern. The independent members from around the world could not reach a consensus based on the evidence available at the time.

- **28 January 2020:** A senior WHO delegation led by the Director-General travelled to Beijing to meet China's leadership to learn more about China's response. While there, Dr. Tedros agreed with Chinese government leaders that an international team of leading scientists would travel to China on a mission to better understand the context, the overall response, and exchange information and experience.
- **30 January 2020:** The WHO Director-General reconvened the EC, which reached a consensus and advised that the outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). The Director-General accepted the recommendation and declared the novel coronavirus outbreak (2019-nCoV) a PHEIC.
- **3 February 2020:** WHO releases the international community's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan to help protect states with weaker health systems.
- **11-12 February 2020:** WHO convened a Research and Innovation on COVID-19, attended by more than 400 experts and funders from around the world, which included presentations by George Gao, Director General of China CDC, and Zunyou Wu, China CDC's chief epidemiologist.
- **16-24 February 2020:** The WHO-China Joint mission, which included experts from Canada, Germany, Japan, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore and the US (CDC, NIH) spent time in Beijing and also travelled to Wuhan and two other cities. They spoke with health officials, scientists and health workers in health facilities (maintaining physical distancing)*.
- **11 March 2020:** Deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction, WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.
- **13 March 2020:** 'COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund' launched to receive donations from private individuals, corporations and institutions.
- **18 March 2020:** WHO and partners launch the 'Solidarity Trial', an international clinical trial that aims to generate robust data from around the world to find the most effective treatments for COVID-19.

* The report of the joint mission can be found here:

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-COVID-19-final-report.pdf>

Source: WHO Statement

Wang Wen, executive director of China-US People-to-People Exchange Research Center at Renmin University, writing in the Global Times, said that on January 3 the Chinese government informed the WHO and the US Department of Health of the novel coronavirus and began to regularly disclose the outbreak's progress. "The US was the first country to withdraw its diplomatic staff from Wuhan, and the first to impose a ban on travellers from China" he pointed out. "It is Trump and a number of senators who have been concealing the breadth of the epidemic in the US. Trump said the COVID-19 was similar to a seasonal flu, even after his government had been informed of the true dangers by China."¹⁸

Draconian and Democratic Lockdowns

COVID-19 spread rapidly across China, authorities took an aggressive stance to fight the coronavirus. They were slow to respond to the outbreak—at first suppressing information and denying that it could spread between humans even as it did just that. But, as case numbers skyrocketed, Beijing went to extraordinary lengths to fight the virus, identified as COVID-19, in a campaign Chinese President Xi Jinping has described as a "peoples war". The most dramatic, and controversial, of the measures was the lockdown of tens of millions of people in what is believed to be the largest quasi-quarantine in human history.

—Time Magazine, March 13 2020¹⁹

On March 9, Italy became the first democratic country since the Second World War to impose a nationwide lockdown, extending measures that had already been in place in northern Italy since a day earlier ... Italy is the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe with more than 41,000 confirmed cases and over 3,400 deaths so far. On Thursday, its death toll

¹⁸ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183464.shtml>

¹⁹ <https://time.com/5796425/china-coronavirus-lockdown/>

overtook China's. Italy's nationwide quarantine has since become a precedent for other countries, including Spain and France.

—Time Magazine, March 20 2020²⁰

In the early days of the coronavirus epidemic, international media lambasted China's quarantine as "excessive", "harsh", "brutal" and "draconian". However, as the West faced growing outbreaks and imposed measures similar to China's, as the above quotes from Time magazine reflect, the lockdowns were not seen as draconian restrictions of liberty but simply necessary measures to control the spread of the virus. As COVID-19 began to spread in the West, while it started to ease in the East, it became evident that strict citywide lockdowns and travel restrictions constituted the most effective measures to fight the epidemic. This created a question as to whether so-called authoritarian states were better placed than democracies to control such a dangerous virus?

In the early stages of the spread of COVID-19, Singapore was able to achieve low infection rates without quarantine by the use of a tracing application, which some international media described as restricting peoples' liberty. But, a couple of months later when the Australian government wanted to use exactly the same application to control the community spread of the virus, politicians and health officials had to plead with the population to download it to their mobile phones, assuring them that the application would be discontinued after the virus was eliminated.

This raises the question of how important are civil liberties when the health of the population is threatened? As Henry Fong, co-founder of the Medici Center Shanghai, noted in a letter published by Hong Kong's South China Morning Post:²¹ "In France, Emmanuel Macron has declared war on the epidemic and put the country on the highest level of epidemic alert. For a country that embraces liberty and freedom above all else, its citizens have welcomed the quarantine. Likewise, many New Zealanders also view their quarantine measures as necessary to battle the epidemic. Even for the world's greatest liberal democracies, personal liberties are not unbridled when collective

²⁰ <https://time.com/5807210/italy-coronavirus-lockdown-photos/>

²¹ <https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3078256/china-style-lockdowns-travel-around-world-time-stop-calling-them>

welfare and public well-being are threatened". Thus, he argued that the media needed to stop calling such measures "draconian".

In mid-June 2020 when China faced a second wave of COVID-19 with a spike in infections in Beijing, the Global Times reported that Beijing's Chaoyang district had called for the promotion of facial recognition technology, automatic temperature checking facilities, and other hi-tech measures to strengthen local COVID-19 prevention and control. By this time, after seeing what Europe and the US had to do to try and stem the spread of COVID-19, the western media had been humbled. CNN simply reported: "Beijing is reintroducing strict lockdown measures and rolling out mass testing after a fresh cluster of novel coronavirus cases emerged from the city's largest wholesale food market, sparking fears of a resurgence of the deadly outbreak"²². The NYT was even milder, reporting that the city had announced an "intensified health emergency" raising the health alert to second highest with schools shut down and the government urging people to work from home. The US government-owned Voice of America said the Chinese capital had gone into what the government called "wartime mode" and was "reintroducing strict lockdown measures and conducting mass testing of residents". But it could not resist the temptation to give it a negative twist, reporting that some unnamed experts and residents had said that Beijing was "cracking down too hard" and there was a need for "people-friendly measures"²³.

In March, the NYT's Jason Horowitz, reporting about Italy closing down most of the country's North to control the spreading of coronavirus, described it as the most sweeping effort outside of China and as tantamount to sacrificing the economy for the short term in order to save it in the long term from the ravages of the virus. "By taking such tough measures, Italy, which was suffering the worst outbreak in Europe, had sent a signal that restrictive clampdowns, while at odds with some of the core values of Western democracies, may be necessary to contain and defeat the virus," he added²⁴.

²² <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/15/asia/coronavirus-beijing-outbreak-intl-hnk/index.html>

²³ <https://www.voanews.com/COVID-19-pandemic/beijing-returns-lockdown-after-106-COVID-19-cases-reported-recent-days>

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/europe/coronavirus-italy.html?auth=login-email&login=email>

Enlightened by such experiences in the West, the western media was more understanding of China's need to lock up parts of Beijing, come June. In March, Time magazine quoted Thomas Bollyky, the director of the Global Health Program in Washington D.C., arguing that China had shown disregard for civil liberties and human rights as demonstrated in its quarantine policy. "No other nation (western or otherwise) can or should seek to replicate China's actions," he said. But in June, Time magazine said that a "vigorous response is vital" for the Chinese Communist Party to safeguard its credibility of being able to control the virus. The report even pointed out that South Korea, Australia and New Zealand had seen new coronavirus cases emerging after the lockdowns were relaxed²⁵.

While the battle to control the virus continues, Vali Nasr (2020), Professor of Middle East Studies and International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University and a former senior adviser in the US State Department, argued that Europe's inability to initially control the virus and the US's lack of leadership in solving a domestic health crisis have lent credence to claims that China's state-led governance model was better equipped than democratic systems – often politically deadlocked and dysfunctional – to respond to "black swans" (major unexpected shocks). "The US may succeed in its bid to prevent its allies from adopting Chinese telecommunications technology. But it cannot stop the world from emulating China's approach to public health or social organization if it proves effective during the COVID-19 crisis," he warned. He also added that what matters is not where the pandemic started but how it ends. He noted (that as of the end of March 2020) "China is doing lot more to help end the outbreak than the United States is".

Propaganda War

There is undoubtedly a high stakes propaganda war between the United States and China on COVID-19 and this will continue until the virus is eliminated or the vaccines that are being introduced are effective and widely accepted by the world community. In early 2020 there were tit-for-tat expulsions or restrictions on Chinese journalists allowed to report from the US and vice-versa. Nossel (2020) argues

²⁵ <https://time.com/5854112/china-beijing-coronavirus-COVID19-second-wave/>

that there are essential differences between Beijing's and Washington's actions in this standoff: "Regrettably, the Trump administration's betrayals, blunders, and jingoism have forfeited the high ground that the United States once claimed on matters of press freedom, allowing China to cast this as a two-way fight. But China's characterization belies the reality of a rising power bent on controlling its global image at all costs and by any means," she notes. Pointing out, for example, that the *New York Times* (NYT) managed to communicate via WeChat with a hospitalized Li Wenliang, the doctor who was disciplined for trying to sound an early warning alarm about the virus before he succumbed to it himself, Nossel points out that "Beijing has now mounted an aggressive domestic and global propaganda campaign to tout its draconian approach to the epidemic, downplay its role in sparking the global outbreak, and contrast its efforts favorably against those of Western governments and particularly the United States." Thus, she seemed to endorse the US government's decision in mid-February to declare five Chinese news outlets—Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio, *China Daily*, and the *People's Daily*—previously all treated as media organizations, as arms of the government in Beijing, and subject to similar rules as those that apply to professional diplomats. "None of these media outlets have any semblance of editorial independence" says Nossel. "As a matter of principle it is hard to argue that the United States was doing more than labeling the agencies accurately". There was no mention whether the Voice of America, the BBC or Radio Australia could be labeled the same.

"Beijing is pursuing superpower status with a steely determination to dictate how its every deed is seen both at home and around the world," she argues. "It is urgent that the United States reclaim the mantle of a nation fiercely committed to a free and independent press. It must then set about to rally the world in insisting that these media outlets be free to cover China with neither favor nor fear."

But, this is not how China's Global Times (GT) views the US's so-called 'independent free media'. Its reporters compiled a list of biased coverage in the NYT and compared it with what they gathered from speaking to frontline patients and medical workers (Staff Reporters, 2020). For example, they pointed out that what the NYT saw as "putting millions of people under house detention" was a measure taken after consultations with medical authorities because it was seen that the only way to prevent a wide scale outbreak of the virus was to

control it at the source (a measure many western countries adopted later). Another example they cited was criticism of isolating many of the victims in shelters. GT quoted Chinese medical experts in explaining that such arrangement is not the best, but the most practical method, which enables a small number of doctors and nurses to conveniently care for the patients and monitor their situation. The measure helps prevent mild patients from infecting family members during residential quarantine.

It is relevant to point out here that when, for example the US, the UK and Australia adopted similar “house detention” measures in the midst of the first wave of coronavirus hitting their countries, the leaders gave press conferences broadcast live where the announcements by President Trump and Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Scott Morrison were accompanied by heads of government health authorities, who explained the need for such measures, and appealed to the population to comply for their own good.

As discussed throughout this chapter, a hallmark of the COVID-19 pandemic reporting in much of the international media has been a tendency to focus on blaming another rather than promoting understanding and cooperation in combating the virus. It has become a democracy versus authoritarian battle, and a futile attempt to prove one ideology is better than the other.

COVID-19 and Racism Factor

The spread of COVID-19 across the world showed that a virus respects no borders, nor is it restricted to a particular racial group. But rather than humanity coming together to cooperate to address the options necessary to tame it, a blame game began with racist connotations. Though President Trump became the villain in this process, it is not restricted to him. The media both in the West and other countries need to take much of the blame to giving oxygen not to the victims but to racists and xenophobia. It includes articles in the western media that ignored or downplayed successes in Asian countries, while giving prominence to isolated success stories in White countries or labeling positive statistics from China and other Asian countries as non-trustworthy. President Trump and the media in the West, as well as those in India, tried to label the coronavirus the ‘China virus’ or ‘Wuhan virus’ (no one labeled HIV-AIDS as the ‘California virus’ when

it originated in the US), which led to people in the US and Australia calling out Chinese-looking people in the streets as “corona spreaders”.

The Indian news portal Swarajyamag in a special issue under a cover story²⁶ with the heading ‘Super Spreader’ with a large picture of President Xi Jinping blamed not only China and ‘wet markets’, but also the WHO for messing up the world. Gupta (2020), writing in this issue, pointed out that once the virus escaped China, in just 93 days the number of cases went from 93 to 1 million and he asked what went wrong? Noting that the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic only on March 11, by which time Italy had almost 6,000 cases and had gone into lockdown, he blames the WHO’s initial “chaos and confusion” for the crisis.

Yaajnaseni (2020) goes further in criticizing China’s wet markets – echoing a war cry of the West – and blaming the country for the coronavirus crisis. He connects the wet markets and the trade in wildlife there to Chairman Mao’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ and the accompanying famine between 1957 and 1961, when grain production decreased and the people had to find food in wild animals - that are now sold in markets. He points out that COVID-19 has refocused global attention on Chinese food habits, especially bush meat consumption. He relates it to African food habits as well and notes that bush meats used to be consumed only by the poor and the rural people, but now the middle-classes consume them as a luxury food item. In what could be construed as a racist statement, Yaajnaseni says: “There is a well-known Chinese saying that they have no qualms eating the meat of anything that has four legs other than a table, anything that flies other than an airplane, and anything that swims other than a submarine”.

In contrast to the above view, Seneviratne (2020) argues that ‘wet markets’ are a crucial part of Asian economies, and that the West is “oblivious of the fact that these are people’s markets, where fresh vegetables and meat are sold. They are the lifeblood of Asian economies.” He points out that even in squeaky clean Singapore ‘wet markets’ are popular and “the Western campaign is a thinly disguised racist campaign painting Chinese as well as other Asians as

²⁶ <https://swarajyamag.com/issue/super-spreader>

unhygienic, and blaming them for the COVID-19 pandemic". It is unfortunate that the Indian media has joined this western campaign to ban 'wet markets' when India has millions of them spread across the vast sub-continent. Of course, these don't sell wild animals as most Indians are vegetarians. Rather than making somewhat racist arguments about the "unhygienic" wet markets, what Asian media need to focus on is a ban on selling wild animals and other animal products that could spread viruses like coronavirus.

A new Framework Convention on Biological Diversity is expected to be adopted when parties to the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity, signed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, meet in Kunming, China, in October 2021. When they meet, China, along with other Asian countries, should take the lead in adopting a strong, legally binding convention to save nature and wild animals. Asia should draw from its age-old philosophies that promote the conservation of nature and compassion for animals. That would be the best path to silence Western critics. Unfortunately, because of its distrust of the Chinese, the Indian media seems to be camped with the Western media.

The US based Human Rights Watch²⁷ claimed that in early April 2020, Chinese authorities in the southern city of Guangzhou, in Guangdong province, which has China's largest African community, began a campaign to forcibly test Africans for the coronavirus, and ordered them to self-isolate or to quarantine in designated hotels. Landlords then evicted African residents, forcing many to sleep on the street, and hotels, shops, and restaurants refused African customers. Other foreign groups have generally not been subjected to similar treatment.

The Global Times in an article published at a time when China claimed victory in taming the coronavirus argued "as coronavirus fades in China, nationalism and xenophobia flare." It refuted claims in the NYT that foreigners, Africans in particular, were discriminated against as spreaders of the virus. "The recent allegations of some Africans being discriminated in Guangzhou's virus-control efforts were actually enhanced measures as the city is facing the rising risk of imported cases and the measures were applied to all residents regardless of race and nationality", argued Qiang (2020). "It is ludicrous to see

²⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/china-COVID-19-discrimination-against-africans>

Western media reports pinning the racism label on China while there is a growing number of news reports about Chinese and Asians facing racist abuse in the US, proving that xenophobia has flared there”, he added, pointing to a tweet by President Trump that he intended to sign “an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States,” a move some US netizens said was xenophobic.

On April 30 2020, the NYT published an article under the byline of The Editorial Board titled ‘In a Crisis, True Leaders Stand Out’²⁸. It said: “The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom”. The master class of “True Leaders’ it listed in tackling the COVID-19 were all White leaders that included New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Iceland’s leader Katrin Jakobsdottir. Leaders of Denmark, Finland and Norway were also praised. The only Asian leader that got a mention was Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen, a staunch critic of China. They also praised Sweden’s “radical departure from what everybody else was doing” but reserved judgment on whether it was a success or not. They attributed elements of effective leadership to “respect for science, transparent messaging, constant updating of the evidence, and prompt assurance of financial support”. They said that China’s efforts to conceal the outbreak, or President Trump’s to downplay it for far too long, had proved disastrous.

Indi Samarajiva (2020), in a scathing article published in medium.com titled “In the NY Times Only White Leaders Stand Out” questioned the racism ingrained in the NYT’s Editorial Board’s news values. “They spend exactly one sentence on Asia and the rest on white leaders that mostly did worse than Iran. The structural racism is mind-boggling,” he noted.

Pointing out that according to the NYT, Iran had “completely and utterly botched its response to the coronavirus”, Samarajiva (2020) pointed out that countries with higher mortality rates like Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark were listed as true leaders. “It makes no

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/opinion/coronavirus-leadership.html>

sense. It's just racism, so structural that the Editorial Board can't even see it. It's built into the edifice of the paper itself," he noted, pointing out, that Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand and the Indian state of Kerala had done far better than the West in tackling the coronavirus. Successes in Caribbean countries such as Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago were also ignored.

"Vietnam has a similar population to Germany, a fraction of the GDP, and a land border with China. They somehow prevented anyone from dying, but they are not mentioned in this article at all. Because even the New York Times views Asia as hopelessly oriental and foreign and not just different human beings that could be learned from", argued Samarajiva. "In fighting a pandemic, knowledge is power and racism has made the West stupid and weak".

Politicization and Australia's Call for an 'Independent' Inquiry

On June 22 2020 when the world recorded the biggest ever increase in coronavirus cases in a day – 183,020 – the WHO director general Dr. Ghebreyesus warned a virtual health forum organized by the United Arab Emirates that the pandemic was accelerating and the greatest threat facing the world was not the virus itself, which had by then killed over 465,000 people and infected nearly 9 million worldwide, but "the lack of global solidarity and global leadership"²⁹.

"We know that the pandemic is much more than a health crisis, it is an economic crisis, a social crisis and in many countries a political crisis. Its effects will be felt for decades to come," he warned. "We cannot defeat this pandemic with a divided world. The politicization of the pandemic has exacerbated it."

The politicization began when President Trump started to blame China for withholding information about the virus in the initial stages thus helping it spread globally. At the same time there were various conspiracy theories that cropped up from both US and Chinese sources as discussed earlier in this chapter. The politicization reached

²⁹<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/COVID-19-world-health-organization-chief-tedros-adhanom-ghebreyesus-says-coronavirus-pandemic-still-accelerating-2250283>

its peak when Australia called for an 'independent' inquiry into the origins of the virus, which incensed the Chinese government. As Australian sociologist Professor Andrew Jakubowicz noted, China would have welcomed "an inquiry based on the scientific method that rigorously interrogates the emergence of the virus and the more or less successful modes of address across the world, (but) not one that seeks out evidence to convict China of some unnamed crime". Such thinking has spiraled into a serious diplomatic row between Canberra and Beijing that threatens Australia's post-COVID economic revival (see boxed story below).

(boxed article)

COVID-19 Revives Racism Against Asian-Australians and Threatens Relations with China

SYDNEY (IDN) – Australia is entering what observers here say could be a deep recession, the first in almost 30 years. It was the rise of China that helped this sparsely populated vast continent to avoid a recession for the past three decades, the most extended period of economic growth in Australian history.

Rather than being thankful to China, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne in a local TV interview on April 19th called for an "independent" inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 in Wuhan expressing concerns about transparency from China on the issue.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison emphasized that in subsequent media briefings and he led a campaign with the support of the European Union (EU) to press the World Health Assembly (WHA) to trigger an independent probe.

WHO passed the resolution on May 15th with China co-sponsoring it, but, the outcome was far from what Australia (and the U.S.) wanted. It even led to a spat with the Chinese Embassy in Canberra that issued a statement saying that it was "a joke" to claim that the WHO adopted the Australian initiative.

Morrison started the campaign for a so-called "independent" investigation, at a time when the media coverage here on the COVID-

19 issue had invoked the "yellow peril" prejudices of the 19th century that fuelled the 'White Australia' policy. It was lifted only in the late 1970s when Asia was seen as a potential cash cow for Australia. It did, and until the advent of COVID-19, tourists and international students from China, and Chinese mineral and food imports were the major foreign currency earners for the country going into billions of dollars.

"We need to look at the risk factors of the pandemic and the cost and benefits. A blame game will not achieve a constructive and beneficial bilateral relationship between Australia and China," argues Tony Pang, past president of Chinese Australian Forum, pointing out that 90 per cent of Australian exports go to Asia with China taking 37.2 per cent of it. At the same time, the U.S. accounts for only 3.8 per cent according to 2019 data.

"I believe, to some extent, the current racism against Asians is a result of China's growth, influence and economic might and the adverse media coverage over the last few years, and especially after the arrival of COVID-19," he told IDN.

Andrew Jakubowicz, Emeritus Professor of Sociology from the University of Technology Sydney told IDN in an interview that "the language used was either intentionally inflammatory or recklessly loose and undisciplined".

In the past two weeks, China has shown in no uncertain terms, through media briefing from China's Ambassador Jingye Cheng in Canberra and Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian in Beijing, that the Chinese Government is unhappy with the way Australia called for such an inquiry. They have already imposed economic sanctions against Australia dressed up as anti-dumping and hygienic measures.

On May 18, the Chinese Government announced it would press ahead with its threat to impose an 80 per cent tariff on Australian barley — effectively blocking Australian farmers from selling their crops to their most lucrative market. They claimed that the Australian Government was subsidizing the farmers to "dump" barley on the Chinese market at below production costs.

On May 19, Beijing slapped Australian beef exporters with sanctions for "repeated violations of inspection and quarantine requirements." Trade Minister Simon Birmingham was at pains not to paint it as

economic retaliation from China, but an "isolated labelling error" that will be corrected.

Sanctions could hit hard on an economy already facing a severe crisis from both the impact of bushfires in the summer and now COVID-19 lockdowns. This week Birmingham complained that his Chinese counterpart was refusing to take calls to discuss the issue. He hinted that Australia may have to take the barley tariffs to the WTO disputes process.

Australian commercial media, in particular, have been drumming up anti-China sentiments in the country by repeatedly claiming that China was using its economic muscle to bully Australia, after spreading the coronavirus across the globe. They were also appealing to widespread resentment among Australians, of Chinese purchases of large Australian assets as well as real estate in recent years.

"Australia has taken the view that the purchase of Australian assets by Chinese state corporations has strategic as well as economic parameters," argues Professor Jakubowicz. He commented on why there was no such resentment against widespread purchases of Australian assets by British and American companies.

"My sense is (that) the perceived threat of Chinese imperial power from a one-party state bent on extending its empire, is more challenging in Australia than competing corporate interests from other former or existing empires."

This resentment of Chinese economic power and the media's persistent attempts to project COVID-19 as a 'Chinese export' is reflected in a rise in racist attacks on Asian (Chinese)-Australians in recent months, where ordinary Australians have called them spreaders of coronavirus.

"I have been verbally racially abused several times since the arrival of COVID-19," says Pang. "My wife, a third-generation Australian, was called 'coronavirus'. Her grandfather arrived in Australia from China in the late 1800s." Her Chinese-Australian father had served with the Australian Armoured Division in World War II (1939-1945) and her uncle in Borneo in the Infantry.

With the Government taking a blame game strategy, there are concerns among liberal and academic circles that the community sentiments that led to the 'White Australia' policy may be re-emerging.

Source: IDN-InDepthNews – 21 May 2020

** This is an edited version of the original article on IDN In-Depth News.*

Interestingly there are similarities in the way Morrison and Trump view China in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Chung (2020) argues that in Trump's eyes, China bashing has very useful roles to play in the dynamics of the COVID-19 crisis in the US. "Trump can make China the scapegoat, generate anti-China feeling and attribute the blame for Washington's poor anti-virus policy to China. China bashing can be a good tool of covering up the policy failure," he says. Chung points out that China bashing has taken two forms. First, Washington argues that the spread of the virus in the US is due to the lack of cooperation of China in the sharing of information on the virus. Second, Trump has been trying to tell the world that the coronavirus had originated in China. Chung noted that Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, was repeating the expression "Wuhan virus", while Trump seems to love the expression "Chinese virus".

China sees a different aspect to the question of transparency and the Global Times in an article on May 14 2020³⁰ called on Washington to be transparent on their bio-weapons program and said that China and Russia could initiate an international inquiry into bio-labs worldwide with the United Nations to put pressure on the US. "The US can't just claim all reasonable inquiries to its bio-labs as 'conspiracy theories', and when US politicians keep accusing China's lab in Wuhan as the origin of COVID-19 without providing any evidence, they should respond to the questions on US bio-labs, including the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick", noted the GT's Yang Sheng.

³⁰ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188405.shtml>

Media's Dilemma: Adversarial Reporting Defeating Cooperation

The politicization of COVID-19 has fed into the global media's appetite for adversarial reporting and helped to cover up shortcomings in healthcare funding globally, and especially in the so-called "advanced" countries of the West. Media should have reported these issues as a violation of peoples' human rights. It became clear as the virus spread in the US that many of the deaths or infections came from marginalized communities, like Blacks and Hispanics, who had no access to health cover and suffered from chronic illnesses that made them vulnerable to coronavirus. In a country that spends billions or trillions of dollars in defense spending, their healthcare sector was comparatively neglected. This should have been a major international story with a human rights focus – not only about the US but other countries as well.

As the former Indian diplomat, Manish Uprety³¹ notes, earlier, the defense of a Nation was simply a matter of the number of armed men one had. However today, a nation's defense is multi-faceted. He lists these as follows:

- You need to defend stories, or else your narrative can be broken. If your narrative breaks, the astringent which holds a community together goes.
- You need to defend information. Or else misinformation can debilitate you.
- You need to defend economy. Or else lucre will enslave you.
- You need to defend education. Or else competition will devalue you.
- You need to develop health systems. Or else, the one with the better facilities will breach through that weak link and swamp you.
- You have to defend social mooring. Or else, machinations will crumble you.
- You have to defend your inventiveness. Or else, you will just be made redundant.
- You have to defend your heritage. Or else there will not be an identity which will hold you.

³¹ Email communication with author, March 18 2020.

“All this is beyond the defense of Space, the Cyber realm and internal security” argues Uprety. “Today, COVID-19 has shown that the first line of defense in this type of warfare is the medical profession. If the war [Battle] of Britain was won by a few, so too will this war be won by a tireless few. The defense of a realm HAS to be thought on a much wider canvas than just Tanks, Fighters and Missiles”.

China Daily reported on June 16 2020 that a series of meetings on human rights protection amid the novel coronavirus pandemic had been held through videoconferencing in China with the participation of international delegates. “China's measures to contain the novel coronavirus outbreak have prompted the international community to think afresh about the meaning of human rights”, wrote Han Dayuan, director of the Center for Human Rights Studies at Renmin University of China³². “Due to their diverse histories, cultures and traditions, people of different countries may have different understandings of human rights”, he noted.

Looking at the debates in the West about restricting civil liberties in implementing the lockdowns, Dayuan asks, “When people face a life-threatening virus, shouldn't the top priority of a government be to protect their lives, by balancing individual freedom with restrictive measures and medical services?” He argues that a socio-political order needs to be established to guarantee liberty, and liberty is hard to achieve without a reasonable social order. “Western and non-Western countries should try to reach a consensus on how best to protect lives, and make human rights a shared value for humankind,” he says.

Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky (2020), former United Nations Independent Expert on Debt and Human Rights, argues that while COVID-19 is a threat to the rights to life and health, the human rights impact of the crisis goes well beyond medical and public health concerns and this should be addressed by international cooperation. The ‘economy first’ approach to handling the COVID-19 threat would itself amount to a violation of human rights if that leads to people falling into personal debt to survive.

“Some governments appear to be promoting an approach of ‘saving the economy’ at any cost, including through risking the health and

³² <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/16/WS5ee7ffdaa310834817253335.html>

lives of the majority of their populations. This economy centric approach is often accompanied by a lack of enthusiasm to reduce inequalities, promote progressive tax reforms, or acknowledge and address the impacts of pollution and climate change on health. Therefore, 'saving the economy' means prioritizing the interests of a powerful elite", argues Bohoslavsky.

Thus, he adds that the potential impacts of the upcoming recession include challenges to the full enjoyment of human rights including the rights to food, housing, health, education, water and sanitation, social protection, non-discrimination, and just and fair conditions of work. "As clearly established under human rights law, individuals should not have to choose between their basic human rights," argues Bohoslavsky. "For instance, it is unacceptable that economic conditions would leave people having to choose between reducing food intakes or having a home, or accessing medical care". He fears that the recession will leave some people with no choice but to rely on debt to meet their basic needs and rights – for their healthcare, housing, food, water and sanitation, or education.

Thus, as argued throughout this chapter, while politicization, blame games, bio-warfare conspiracies and racism have dominated the global media narrative, the breakdown of structures of livelihood, the lack of proper healthcare facilities, the need for more social welfare programs funded by governments, the wastage of resources in defense spending, the weaknesses of global supply chains, the exploitation of migrants and the structural violence of the global economy that has broadened social and economic inequalities – the reporting of these issues has largely taken a back seat. The pandemic has exposed the need for more grassroots media and communication systems. The alternative that we have seen clearly is violence, social chaos and anger as expressed in protests across the western world in 2020 dubbed as "Black Lives Matter" – which would really be reinterpreted as "Peoples' Lives Matter". This is the lesson for the mainstream media across the world and which mass communicators need to realize and understand.

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CHAPTER 3

INFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, RACISM, AND COVID-19 IN THE USA

SUNDEEP R. MUPPIDI

“If you are emotionally attached to your tribe, religion or political leaning to the point that truth and justice become secondary considerations, your education and exposure is useless. If you cannot reason beyond petty sentiments, you are a liability to mankind.”

—Dr. Chuba Okadigbo

Today, there is a crisis of trust in America. In the last few years, the sanctity of science, facts, and the rule of law has been steadily breached. Fueled by those in authority at the highest levels, and instigated by misinformation, there has been an unprecedented and selective disregard for accepted societal structures, and a loss of faith in democratic processes. All this is being fueled by one’s own beliefs, even when they are contradictory with established external facts and information. Ironically, such actions are also defended, in the guise of constitutional rights, liberty, freedom, and patriotism. It is a potent cocktail.

Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the perfect super storm in US history. As I write this, instigated by President Donald Trump, whining about his lost election and spinning it as ‘fraud’, Pro-Trump protestors fully convinced by the ‘Stop the Steal’ disinformation campaign, have stormed the US Capitol. They forced the evacuation of the joint session of Congress that was meeting to certify the election of Joe Biden as the next President¹. In earlier times, actions such as these, in other

¹ In later days, as events unfolded, it seems to be more than a spontaneous protest that spiraled out of hand. The Department of Justice has uncovered a methodical, planned uprising that included calls to attack and/or kill many members of the Congress, including Vice-President Mike Pence.

countries around the world, would have been quickly labeled as coups and a threat to democracy while being swiftly condemned by America, as the self-professed leader and flag-bearer of 'freedom' around the world. Instead, all that President Trump did was to praise such rioters and ask them to go home. At the end of the day, in any society, we will only be the sum of our fears and actions, and the intended and unintended consequences of those will be evident for generations to come.

Around the world, while governments – state and federal – and non-governmental actors have taken up the fight to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, they have faced a number of challenges – policy, politics, perceptions, and logistics, among others. However, the response has been abysmal in the USA compared to a lot of other countries. It has been worst at the federal level, led by President Trump, deflecting the blame onto the 'other' – from China to the World Health Organization, and even to the individual governors of the opposition Democratic ruled-states. At the same time, the President has also claimed credit for perceived successes and efficiencies in those responses. In most instances, the state governments in the USA have handled the response better than the federal government. At the same time, the response of the US media, in terms of their credibility and the (mis)reporting of facts, has also been all over the spectrum, from good to worse. The media have mostly played on people's fears and misperceptions for furthering partisan or ratings agendas, instead of doing their due diligence and fulfilling their social obligation. If the media's role is to inform and be the watchdog in society, how did we get here?

In this chapter, after laying out the historical context of communication, and a brief theoretical context of media and racism, I argue that the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been inadequate because of failures on three fronts – politics, policy, and people's (mis)perceptions fueled by disinformation.

Historical Context

Truth is relative but facts are indisputable. The political economy of information has always been an integral part of any socio-political system. The Marxist critique of the political economy of the media identifies capital accumulation ideological manipulation and the

marketing/promotion of other industries as some of the distinguishing functions in capitalism. Today, we are on the cusp of a post-information society where community standards and agreed upon facts and ways of interacting are all up for debate, disagreement, and selective interpretation.

Information²	Disinformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstance; news: e.g. information concerning a crime. • Knowledge gained through study, communication, research, instruction, etc.; factual data. • The act or fact of informing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • False information, as about a country's military strength or plans, disseminated by a government or intelligence agency in a hostile act of tactical political subversion. • Deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda.

To inform is to communicate with the intention to make aware, educate and persuade. There are also other purposes of conveying some message content - the form and content is different depending on the channel/medium. In this day and age, a lot of what is communicated is also qualified by the credibility of the source.

Human communication is as ancient as the original humans – the hunter-gatherers, themselves. Its understanding has evolved, over thousands of years, from vocal cues and non-verbal expressions to the current, complex use of multiple forms of communication in a world of mediated, non-mediated, and augmented reality in the information age. From the agrarian through to the industrial and the information/post-information ages, it is interesting to look at how the relationship of humans with machines has changed and how it has impacted not just the nature and role of information, but also how it has changed one's perception and trust in that, based on not just the source but also one's own beliefs and the echo chambers they thrive in today.

² Dictionary.com

Historically, in traditional agrarian societies, people lived and died, for the most part, in the same closely related communities where everyone knew everyone else. One's tradecraft or skill was passed down from generation to generation and people were dependent on each other for goods and services. Trust in a source was based on their own relationships. One's word was considered as good as a bond and one's honor was paramount. The credibility of the individual was built over a period of time and experience. Wisdom and source credibility was obvious and opinion leaders had a major role in the dissemination, trust, and credibility of the message content. For the most part, this role was performed by respected community and religious leaders.

Characteristics	Agrarian Society	Industrial Society	Information Society
Key Institutions	Farms	Factories	Research Institutions
Basic Technology	Manual Labor	Steam Engines	Computers/Electronics
Nature of Mass Communication/Media	Interpersonal, Oral Media	Mass, One-Way Print/Electronic Media	Demassified, Asynchronous and Interactive Media
Time period	10,000 years to present	200 years (about 1750)	About 1955 to current
Economic Element	Food	Energy	Information
Main type of employment	Farmers	Factory workers	IT Workers

Table: Nature of Mass Communication

As Lowery and DeFleur (1995) note, industrialization, urbanization and modernization brought about major changes in the late 18th century. In these times, spawned by the invention of the steam engine, there was a phenomenal growth of factories and industries, which spurred migration to these places for work leading to urbanization. In the age of Fordism, these factories also installed assembly line production systems. Workers became subservient to the machines thereby resulting, over a period of time, in the loss of traditional skills

and knowledge. Lowery and DeFleur (1995: 17) note that, “people in these societies were increasingly isolated from their fellow citizens and dependent on mass media”. In these towns and cities, everyone was a stranger to each other. The need for trusted news sources in such mass societies also led to the proliferation of mass media to cater to their information needs. Through the years, people came to rely on trusted newspapers and radio and television networks based on an accumulated history of each media source.

The birth of the internet and the world wide web thrust the world into the digital age. The convergence of computing, communication and rise of consumption also speeded up the diffusion and integration of new information and communication technologies propelling the world into a faster, information era. Production of media content became commonplace and resulted in the rise of social media. As audiences migrated to social media platforms, “commoditizing relationships – turning connectedness into connectivity by means of coding technologies – is exactly what corporate platforms, particularly Google and Facebook, discovered as the golden egg their geese produced. Besides generating content, peer production yields a valuable by-product that users often do not intentionally deliver: behavioral and profiling data” (Van Djick, 2013: 16).

Theoretical Context of Media and Racism

Media, in every society, in every form, influences social content and processes. Many researchers have pointed out that “race is a socially constructed concept whose meaning has evolved over time” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003: 200). They argue that “most popular media promote, often in subtle and even contradictory ways, perspectives that support our basic social arrangements and endorse the legitimacy of social institutions, marginalizing attitudes and behaviors that are considered to be out of the ‘mainstream’” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003: 192-193). Entman (1992) also argues that the process of media production itself is controlled by the majority racial elite (Whites in America), and that this can be directly linked to the production of stereotypes and influences the content of the media.

Mosco (2003), citing Gandy (1998: 200-201), points out, “Racial divisions are a principal constituent of the manifold hierarchies that make up the contemporary global political economy, and race, as both

a category and a social relationship, contributes fundamentally to individual and collective access to national and global resources, including communication, media, and information technology". As Wilson II, Gutiérrez, and Chao (2013) point out, such stereotyping with prejudice transmits the notion that the dominant cultural group in question is inherently good and at the same time that the 'other' is evil and needs to be overcome. While discussing the portrayal of the other racial and cultural groups (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), they point out that "Whites held negative prejudicial attitudes against each of them well before those attitudes manifested themselves in popular media (Wilson II, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2013: 66). Croteau and Hoynes (2003) do concede that some "media images can and sometimes do challenge this mainstream status quo-oriented ideology by providing a critique of contemporary social organization and norms, but commercialization makes it difficult for media to maintain a critical voice" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003: 193). When one considers the business of media and the strategies to drive up advertising revenues through media ratings, what is in alignment with the stereotypical prejudices of the dominant and mainstream audiences, at the expense of the minorities in any society, mostly shapes media content.

A number of studies have documented that public consumption of news related to the disease spikes during the initial days of the pandemic and is based on media coverage of the seriousness of the disease. Women and minorities are also overlooked in the coverage of the population that is affected³. A study by Human Rights Watch on the impact of the Zika outbreak on women and girls in Northeastern Brazil found that the virus "disproportionately impacted women and girls and aggravated longstanding human rights problems, including inadequate access to water and sanitation, racial and socioeconomic health disparities, and restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights"⁴.

The media in the USA is no exception, as was evident during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. A special report on women's underrepresentation in the news media also identifies the missing

³ <https://www.statnews.com/2020/12/05/women-perspectives-voices-more-inclusion-COVID-19-media-coverage/>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/13/neglected-and-protected/impact-zika-outbreak-women-and-girls-northeastern>

perspectives of women in COVID-19-related news (Kassova, 2020). It argues that the framing of the pandemic in the news is critical as it has a big influence on policy and decision-making while responding to the COVID-19 crisis.⁵ The social and economic impacts of any pandemic, including of COVID-19, are harder on women than on men and hence need to be paid more attention⁶. While the regular current affairs and news shows were consumed with either scaring audiences through spiraling deaths, or airing popular culture and entertainment content, it was the late night and comedy shows⁷ that did a more serious job of addressing audience (mis)perceptions, criticizing policy responses, and helping to raise audience awareness of the role and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in society. While women journalists are underrepresented in newsrooms, a study by The Factual found that voices of women journalists were disproportionately the most credible voices on COVID-19 and dominate the list of the top 100 most credible journalists.⁸

The Conflicted US Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In a Pew Research Center study in the summer of 2020⁹ among 14 advanced economies on questions of national unity and one's own country's response, the USA was more or less at the bottom compared to Denmark, Australia, Germany, South Korea, Sweden, France, and Japan.

Just 20% of US adults said they trusted the government in Washington to “do the right thing” just about always or most of the time¹⁰. Public concerns about the coronavirus have long been divided along partisan lines. Democrat supporters are more likely than their Republican counterparts to view the coronavirus outbreak as a major threat to the nation's public health, and Democrats express greater concern

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/24/female-voices-drowned-out-in-reporting-on-COVID-19-report-finds>

⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02006-z>

⁷ <http://www.cc.com/shows/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah/act>

⁸ <https://blog.thefactual.com/women-journalists-credible-COVID-19>

⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/08/27/most-approve-of-national-response-to-COVID-19-in-14-advanced-economies/>

¹⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>

than do Republicans about contracting a serious case of COVID-19. However, large majorities in both parties – 91% of Democrats and 81% of Republicans – reported that they wore a mask or face covering always or most of the time when visiting stores and businesses over the month prior to the study¹¹.

Overall, the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be termed as inadequate for a nation of its stature. Even though the US ranks among the most advanced, scientific and technologically equipped countries, it was ill-prepared to handle the fallout from the spread of the coronavirus. The failures were more than just a systemic failure. In the initial stages of reports of the virus emerging and spreading in Wuhan, China, the response from the US government was more about denial and an inability to understand the seriousness of the threat. Like the earlier SARS outbreaks in Southeast Asia, that were limited to the region, the US (and other western governments) did not realize the magnitude of the threat. By the time, the virus started showing up in western countries, the emphasis seemed to be more on blaming China and the WHO, and talking about punishing them, instead of taking proactive, serious steps to tackle the spread in the USA. In fact, the federal government's message was more about not taking it seriously and that it would go away on its own. By the time the government stepped up to ban travel from China and other countries (but not from Europe), the virus had already arrived in the country. The entire healthcare system was overwhelmed and there was a severe shortage of much needed critical personal protection equipment and other medical supplies leading to calls for 'flattening the curve' through social distancing, wearing masks, and other strategies.

Projections from the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)¹² indicate that an estimated 567,000 Americans could die of COVID-19 by May 1, 2021, out of a globally estimated 2,970,494 deaths. The institute estimated that (as of January 11, 2021), 76% of people always wore a mask when leaving

¹¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/12/08/the-changing-geography-of-COVID-19-in-the-u-s/>

¹² Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME). COVID-19 Results Briefing, Seattle, USA: IHME, University of Washington, 2020 – <https://www.healthdata.org/COVID/updates>.

their home and all states had mask use over 50%. Only 52.5% of the people said they would accept a vaccine for COVID-19 and 24.1% say they are unsure if they'd accept one.

The numbers are also skewed when one looks at race as a factor. According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to the virus related to occupation, e.g. frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers"¹³. As per a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation¹⁴, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) are dying from COVID-19 at nearly three times the rate of White Americans. And non-Hispanic Black and Asian health care workers are more likely to contract COVID-19 and to die from it than white workers.

As a new report shows, Black Americans are getting vaccinated at lower rates than White Americans¹⁵. "Access issues and mistrust rooted in structural racism appear to be the major factors", as per the report. The digital divide, conspiracy theories, misinformation floated by hate groups, generations of mistreatment, vaccine hesitancy, and even a simple lack of access to registration information (sent out over email), were also additional contributory factors. Some of the misinformation floating around in these groups include rumors that anyone taking the vaccine would contract COVID-19, or be implanted with government chips, thereby leading to the mistrust and fears.

Other studies have found racial disparities in testing, infection, hospitalization, and death with higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and mortality reported in the minority populations.¹⁶ These point to the need for addressing the systemic and structural discrimination and racism that lead to the social and health inequities that are

¹³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/COVID-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

¹⁴ <https://khn.org/news/article/black-americans-are-getting-vaccinated-at-lower-rates-than-white-americans/>

¹⁵ <https://khn.org/news/article/black-americans-are-getting-vaccinated-at-lower-rates-than-white-americans/>

¹⁶ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-COVID-19/issue-brief/COVID-19-racial-disparities-testing-infection-hospitalization-death-analysis-epic-patient-data/>

negatively contributing to health disparities and higher incidences of infection, hospitalization, and fatalities in these populations.

As a CNN report points out, there are two core strains of denialism apparent in mainstream America today – that the election was a fraud, and that COVID-19 doesn't exist. It points out that what ties these two together is President Trump's refusal to concede the election, the democratization of information on the internet enabling everyone to publish their thoughts even if made up, and the fact that the country is getting more tribal in its politics, wherein people find satisfaction in blaming villains, regardless of facts¹⁷. In the following sections, I will address the US response failure specifically on three fronts – Politics, Policy, and People's perceptions. At the same time, the media was consumed more with the spectacle of these failures, and the associated drama, rather than dealing with the substance of the pandemic's spread.

Politics

In the recent past, the political scene in the USA has become very polarized and divisive. While the signs seemed to be there in the period that President Obama was in power, it was only in the last four years that they have come to the fore. In the four years that he was in power, President Trump promoted a campaign of disinformation. He constantly whipped up his base and promoted divisions across various groups in the country – from winning on an election campaign based on “Draining the Swamp” to refusing to concede and calling for a “Stopping the Steal” campaign after losing the election, to everything in between. While in office, President Trump managed to convince and mobilize a large section of the population to support his partisan interests through a campaign of disinformation and divisiveness.

President Trump has been actively or passively enabled by an eclectic coalition of interests including the GOP¹⁸, conservatives, white supremacists, QAnon and militia groups, anti-immigration advocates,

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/09/politics/what-matters-december-9/index.html>

¹⁸ The labels “grand old party” or the “*gallant* old party” were meant to highlight the Republican Party's role in defending *the Union* during the *Civil War* - <https://www.dictionary.com/e/tea-party-gop/>

anti-government and anti-media interests, and others, each for furthering their own interests. Having the leader of the federal government whip up such anti-social and anti-democratic sentiments over a period of time severely corroded public trust and led to an inefficient response to the COVID-19 crisis where mandates to social distance, wear masks, and observe lockdowns were seen as either inadequate or as conspiracies to undermine one's constitutional rights of liberty and freedom. It also did not help to have a President who himself spread 'disinformation' about the virus and its seriousness. At different times, he put out different conflicting messages thereby contributing to the confusion. His tweets, especially, have caused more chaos than help in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

In an interview at Davos on January 22, 2020, speaking for the first time publicly about the COVID-19 virus, President Trump dismissed the threat it posed. Speaking to CNBC, he said, "We have it totally under control, it is one person coming in from China and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine." He in fact went on to praise Chinese President Xi Jinping's response to handling the crisis (which flipped in the weeks after)¹⁹. While privately admitting to the seriousness of the pandemic, publicly he dismissed it as nothing to be taken really seriously²⁰.

In an article in the Atlantic²¹, Christian Paz lays out a compendium of President Trump's repeated lies about the pandemic and his government's preparedness and ability to handle it. All the tweets repeatedly provide misinformation on the seriousness of the virus threat, the government's (in)ability to deal with it, the resources available to counter the pandemic threat, and the availability of effective treatments and vaccines, among other falsehoods. At different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US government's policy was to spread disinformation and to blame the 'other'. From blaming 'China' for deliberately 'unleashing' the virus and 'withholding information' to 'blaming the World Health Organization' (and withdrawing from the organization), President Trump promoted a

¹⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/6a8f85aad99607f313cca6ab1398e04d>

²⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/10/911368698/trump-tells-woodward-he-deliberately-downplayed-coronavirus-threat>

²¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/60847/>

number of baseless claims including deflecting blame on to his predecessor Obama, and faulting the state governors of democratically ruled states that were handling the response better.

Trump's tweets and daily press briefings also became a spectacle filled with disinformation, exaggerated and baseless claims, and/or personal praise about his leadership. It was more a pulpit for exhibiting his megalomania than a platform for a responsible leader directing the federal response. A team from the Cornell Alliance of Science evaluated 38 million articles published by English language, traditional media worldwide between January 1 and May 26 of 2020²². The study found that comments by US President Donald Trump drove major spikes in the "miracle cures" misinformation topic, led by his April 24 musing about the possibility of using disinfectants internally to cure the coronavirus. Trump's advocacy of unproven treatments such as hydroxychloroquine, as well as his admission that he was using the drug in an attempt to stave off the virus, also prompted major spikes in the misinformation conversation. These findings suggest that President Trump was quite likely the largest driver of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic to date, the study authors noted. Other prevalent misinformation about COVID-19 that the study found related to topics such as that the virus was deliberately created to advance a new world order/deep state, for political gain by the Democratic party, as a bio-weapon by China, or that it was accidentally released by a lab in Wuhan, China.

Trump's attacking of Dr. Fauci²³ and anyone else who disagreed with him did not help matters. As Dr. Fauci warned, "Mask wearing, which could save over 129,000 lives this winter, had become a political statement."²⁴ President Trump's rift with Gov. Cuomo and partisan politics in responding to the needs of the states also made matters

²² <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/10/what-drove-the-COVID-misinformation-infodemic/>

²³ Dr Anthony Stephen Fauci has served as the director of the *National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases* (NIAID) since 1984 in the USA. Since January 2020, he has been one of the lead members of the *Trump administration's White House Coronavirus Task Force* addressing the *COVID-19 pandemic in the United States* (Wikipedia).

²⁴ Read *Fauci to Trump: Everyone should wear masks, I'm tired of telling this*, Vanity Fair, Oct 1 2020 - <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/10/fauci-trump-everyone-should-wear-masks>

worse. His egging on of militia that protested the mandating of masks with tweets of 'liberate' were more in line with those of an anti-government campaigner than someone who headed the federal government. From Charlottesville to Capitol Hill, Trump's actions caused harm and have put this country on a divisive and perilous road fraught with minefields on every issue and corner.

Policy

One is hard pressed to identify a specific, scientifically-based, data-driven policy of the government to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the first things President Trump did, after taking office, was to disband the pandemic response group that was envisioned under President Bush and put in place under President Obama. So, when the pandemic hit, there was no way for President Trump's government to respond efficiently. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was also restricted from issuing any advisories without first being cleared by the Vice-President's office. Weeks of warnings were missed before there was even a semblance of a response and signs that it was being taken seriously. Travel continued without any restrictions and no attempt was made to source and stockpile medical supplies and other much needed equipment.

While there were reports of the government trying to get Americans on the ground in China to assess the situation, feuding between the Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar and other members of the President's team, apparently created obstacles to discussing the seriousness of the threat²⁵. It did not help that the initial reports coming out of China, about the spread of the virus, were more optimistic and didn't reveal the full extent of the threat. As a CNN investigative report pointed out, "an inflexible health care system constrained by top-down bureaucracy and rigid procedures were ill-equipped to deal with the emerging crisis in China"²⁶. Such missteps and institutional failings also contributed to downplaying the global threat.

²⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/6a8f85aad99607f313cca6ab1398e04d>

²⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/30/asia/wuhan-china-COVID-intl/index.html>

A special coronavirus funding request to Congress from the HHS was also resisted for weeks by the White House budget office which delayed the purchase and stockpiling of masks, gowns, and ventilators. The administration also kept shuffling responsibility for who would lead the response to the crisis while also calibrating any policy to not roil the financial markets. There were also steps taken to avoid public testing, unless absolutely essential, in a mistaken belief that testing for COVID-19 would make the numbers go high and make the government look bad.

Speaking during a web seminar hosted by the University of Melbourne, Dr. Fauci suggested that “piecemeal attempts to control the virus state by state had left the country in a dire situation and that it would have been nice if all the states did that the same way. Instead of making it like a free-for-all.” However, he might as well have said that about the policy response from the federal government itself. A proactive, coordinated, and policy-based approach would have helped address the COVID-19 pandemic much more effectively and with far less loss of lives.

People's Perceptions

“You are entitled to your opinion, but not your facts.”

—Daniel Moynihan

In today's information overloaded world, a number of people lack the critical ability and the media literacy to distinguish between good and bad information, and find it difficult to evaluate the credibility of the source. As in most societies, even in the US, socio-economic-cultural-political identity dynamics shape media behaviors and responses. Whether it is CNN or Fox or the range of players in between, each news media/channel has a 'bias' that caters to a 'captive' audience that is aligned with those views.

While most of the news media covered stories of the seriousness of the virus threat and had stories about escalating positive cases, rising casualties, overwhelmed healthcare systems, shortage of personal protective equipment, etc., they also had human interest stories of courageous first responders, and other heroes. However, there were a lot of news media that also seemed to dismiss the virus threat as a conspiracy or a hoax. Such disinformation was very blatant on right-

wing radio and television news/talk shows as they initially dismissed the seriousness of the virus and minimized the news of deaths from COVID-19. This set the stage for the lens through which their audiences saw the threat of the virus. Very prominent hosts on the FOX news network minimized any reported COVID-19 incidents to the flu virus, and/or attributed them to conspiracies from the liberal media or left-wing parties.

Several studies have documented a correlation between infection and mortality rates being higher in places where audiences for these shows were higher²⁷. A research project at Boston University developed machine-learning algorithms for interpreting international media coverage and created data visualizations of how journalists around the world have reported on various facets of the pandemic²⁸. Their findings, starting from January 2020, for the USA, suggest that the initial news topics were about the outbreak in China, followed by those about scientific research and opinion, and the impact of the economic consequences. While the focus was mostly on economic consequences, it was only in March that the media coverage of the government response became a top priority relatively but for a short time.

Similarly, stories of racism and race relations only seemed to occupy the top spot around May-June. Also, the impact on entertainment and sports became the top news by August, followed by the impact on domestic politics.²⁹ With the proliferation of innumerable and multiple sources of information to support any viewpoint, it has become difficult, for the common consumer, to clearly establish the factual basis of credible information. Combined with the absence of a credible federal or government authority, audiences have turned to a number of alternate sites that have started documenting the falsehoods and myths surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.

Access to multiple sources of information, without any credible gatekeeping, has led to opinions passing off as 'factual' news and increased polarization around any given viewpoint. Like in the industrial age where a paucity of credible sources of information led

²⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/25/fox-news-hannity-coronavirus-misinformation/>

²⁸ <https://COVID19.philemerge.com/>

²⁹ <https://COVID19.philemerge.com/the-united-states/>

to the rise of mass media, in the information age, the ease of user-generated information and the proliferation of producer-consumers has created the need for credible players that can in some way help to authenticate facts from fiction. When information was controlled by big players and media entities, it was easy to control and understand it. In a world of social media, where a lot of content is user generated, it becomes capillary and hence difficult to manage, control or understand.

Various groups coalesce around like-minded opinions and conspiracies and in turn go down a rabbit hole. They populate echo chambers that are difficult to get out of because a confirmation bias prevents cross-checking of facts or information that is in opposition to one's own beliefs. Over a period of time, facts become irrelevant and conspiracies become the accepted truth based on where they originate from, and who spews them and takes them forward. A number of groups have resorted to such disinformation tactics by playing to people's fears and raking up baseless conspiracies for their own ends. Their methods include using fake experts, using emotional language in social media posts and framing them as coherent explanations, planting fake stories, etc.

About half of US adults (48%) have reported seeing at least some made-up news or information regarding the outbreak of COVID-19, with 12% saying they have seen a lot. About a third (32%) say they have not seen much such news, and 20% say they haven't seen any at all³⁰. As per a December 2020 Pew Research Center study on news consumption, "just over half of Americans (55%) are at least fairly confident they can differentiate between organizations that do original news reporting versus those that do not, including 46% who are pretty confident but only 9% who feel very confident. The remainder are either not too (35%) or not at all (8%) confident they can identify organizations that do original reporting." There is a serious lack of critical ability when consuming available information and any viewpoint has enough websites and rumors that promote their own version of the 'truth'. What is factual has actually become suspect and science has become just one more way of looking at reality.

³⁰ <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/18/knowledge-and-perception-surrounding-COVID-19/>

The Pew study also found that knowledge of digital media was higher among young adults (18-29) than those aged 50 or older and much starker with those 65 or older. Higher levels of education (and income) were also associated with greater knowledge of new digital platforms. As per the study, “familiarity with some of these newer digital platforms was also higher among Black Americans than White or Hispanic Americans. Among those with at least a little knowledge of these devices or services, only small portions reported using them to get news – with the exception of push notifications. About four-in-ten Americans who are aware of push notifications say they ‘often’ (12%) or ‘sometimes’ (30%) use them for news. An additional 26% say they ‘rarely’ use push notifications for news, while 32% of individuals with knowledge of push notifications never use them to get news. By contrast, around two-thirds of those who are familiar with internet streaming services (67%), streaming devices (66%) and smart speakers (66%) never use them to get news. And an even greater share of Americans with knowledge about smartwatches (79%) never use them to get news”³¹. “Americans are, at least, largely accurate in self-assessments of their news source literacy: Many express little confidence in their ability to identify original reporting”³².

In relation to COVID-19, the myths and falsehoods include various conspiracies about the origins of the coronavirus (from being engineered in a lab in China, to Bill Gates being blamed for it, to Dr. Anthony Fauci personally profiting from it, to the virus escaping from a biological lab in the US, to intentional economic espionage/biological warfare), to various treatments and home remedies that can cure it. Depending on one’s ideological beliefs, people’s responses were calibrated accordingly. The computer algorithms that help media companies profile user habits and serve up content based on user choices and preferences, further contribute to sending them down these rabbit holes.

The narratives that were seen – and subscribed to – were based also on where on the identity and culture wars spectrum one was situated. Whether one identified as liberal/conservative, Republican/Democrat,

³¹ <https://www.journalism.org/2020/12/08/measuring-news-consumption-in-a-digital-era/>

³² <https://www.journalism.org/2020/12/08/the-american-public-shows-mixed-familiarity-with-new-and-evolving-forms-of-news/>

pro-/anti-Trump, etc., determined whether they trusted or distrusted scientific news about the virus and the precautions that were advocated to stay safe. All the social media sites, especially Twitter, Facebook, Parler, and others, have been accused (and rightly so) of not doing enough to control the spread of disinformation.

Conclusion

“And, we must reject a culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured.”

—President Joe Biden, January 20, 2021

For a country that till recently liked to position itself as a global leader in human rights, the beacon of democracy and all things progressive and scientifically advanced, the fall from global leadership was swift under the Trump administration. President Trump’s ‘America First’ agenda successfully managed to undermine the country’s soft power and status as a global leader.

After the Capitol Hill insurrection, a survey by Pew Research Center (conducted January 8-12, 2021) among 5,360 US adults, including 4,040 who say they voted in the presidential election, finds that a sizable majority of Americans do not want Trump to remain a major political figure after he leaves office. About two-thirds (68%) say Trump should not continue to be a major national political figure for many years to come; just 29% say he should remain a major figure in US politics³³. But 34% incorrectly say Trump definitely or probably was the rightful election winner.

Hence, there is a great need for media and information literacy to counter such people from consuming (dis)information in their echo chambers. Globally, a number of efforts to promote media and information literacy have gained prominence across the world and even curriculum has been introduced in schools and colleges for different age groups. Sites like Snopes.com, and others, are also attempting to cater to this need to authenticate good information from bad, while helping separate fact from fiction.

³³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/01/15/biden-begins-presidency-with-positive-ratings-trump-departs-with-lowest-ever-job-mark/>

According to a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, although the US only represents 4% of the global population, it accounts for a disproportionately higher number of COVID-19 cases and deaths and ranks number one among high-income countries as measured by cases per capita. The response of governments and media in other comparable countries is a good reminder of how it could have been different. In New Zealand, China, India, Taiwan, South Korea and others, while the governments acted proactively (fully successful or not), the media played an advocacy as well as a watch dog role. It not only helped identify problems but also helped advocate for what the proper protocols to follow were for the public. No other country witnessed public protests against mask mandates or health advisories especially in the guise of a constitutional right to individual liberty and freedom. On the day the mobs were rioting in Capitol Hill, the US also marked some of the deadliest statistics in the COVID-19 pandemic with over 4,000 deaths a day. Nearly a year after the pandemic had hit the country, the government was still clueless about how to control it effectively.

In the US, there is a need to create a literacy around these issues, and help build integrity of social structures while promoting community awareness – internal and external solidarity around what is good for the community over the individual. While there are fledgling efforts being made to bridge this divide like ‘Millions of conversations’ and ‘Pledge to listen’, there are also a number of sites that are stepping in to play the role of fact checkers and help to combat disinformation. The WHO’s COVID-19 advice for the public lists all the mythbusters³⁴ and how to tell the difference and stop the spread of misinformation. The Harvard School of Public Health³⁵, the Pew Research Center, Gallup, CNN, The Poynter Institute’s Politifact³⁶, The Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center³⁷, and Play GoViral³⁸ – a 5-minute

³⁴ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

³⁵ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/viswanathlab/myths-vs-facts/>

³⁶ <https://www.politifact.com/coronavirus/>

³⁷ https://centerforinquiry.org/coronavirus/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA6Or_BRC_ARIsAPzuer_By8VoUpMb2wQ8Ct5K7qj_VM13haaM0ileBON35wBSsCrW709BZMaAuTYEALw_wcB

³⁸ https://www.goviralgame.com/en?utm_source=EO&utm_medium=SocialMedia&utm_campaign=goviral&utm_content=Eng

game that helps protect against COVID-19 misinformation – are also good examples.

The media needs to be a polestar in this effort but has a long way to go to merit that mantle.

The blaming of the other, in spite of such failures of US policy, people's perceptions, and politics, is not only inefficient and racist, but also a defensive response from those making the accusations themselves in an effort to cover up their own failures by deflecting the blame onto the 'other'. Vice President Kamala Harris made history on January 20, 2021 by becoming the first woman vice president and first Black American and first Asian American to assume this role in the USA. However, only "half of Americans say the vice president-elect is qualified to serve as president, while nearly as many say she is not"³⁹. Such opinions only reveal the implicit biases that lead to 'othering'. There is still a lot that needs to be done to address these perceptions and communication education has a major role in helping us get there.

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³⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/01/15/biden-begins-presidency-with-positive-ratings-trump-departs-with-lowest-ever-job-mark/>

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CHAPTER 4

CHINA: THE MORAL FOUNDATION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE SPIRIT

ZHANG XIAOYING AND MARTIN ALBROW

China's mainstream English media, such as China Daily, the Global Times, CGTN, Xinhuanet.com/English and China.org.cn/English, have been calling for global co-operation in combating the COVID-19 crisis, instead of engaging in a blame game and politicizing the issue. What is meant by co-operation?

This chapter adopts a broader sense of co-operation which eschews a Western winners-and-losers concept and underscores the principle of the inseparability of one and many, the worldview in traditional Chinese culture. The concept of co-operation, in a broader sense, can be seen as the philosophical ideal underpinning world citizenship.

This chapter traces the concept back to the three main Chinese philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism to identify the sources of the theoretical framework for the co-operative spirit. It argues that the co-operative spirit exhibited in China's English media is essentially grounded in the faith of these ancient Chinese political-cultural values, which have all contributed, to a greater or lesser degree, to the idea of Tianxia (天下) as one family. The three different schools of thoughts all maintain a human-centered orientation, emphasizing the values of "ren" (仁), "shangshanruoshui" (上善若水) and "jianai" (兼爱) (see discussion later in the chapter).

We will start with a comparative study of the concept of co-operation between Chinese and Western philosophical culture. Then the ancient Chinese political-cultural values of Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism

will be explored. Finally, we will identify the representation of the three main Chinese philosophical traditions in China's English media – China Daily, the Global Times, CGTN, Xinhuanet.com/English and China.org.cn/English – in combating COVID-19 through both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the media texts between January and June, 2020.

Western and Non-western Interpretations of Co-operation

In the Chinese context, co-operation consists of two words “he zuo” (合作). According to Chinese hieroglyph character, the first word “he” (合) in the oracle bone script, the earliest known form of Chinese writing, looks like a food container with a cap above and a vessel below. Its original meaning is closing, implying that the cap and the vessel match each other well and stay in harmony with each other. The second word “zuo” (作) looks like the shape of a standing collar in the oracle bone script and in bronze script, the latter the writing on Chinese ritual bronzes such as bells and tripod cauldrons from the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) to the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE). Moreover, in the lesser seal character, an ancient style of calligraphy adopted in the Qin dynasty (221-207 BCE), the left side of “zuo” (作) looks like a person and the right side means “sudden”. The original meaning of the word “zuo” (作) thus suggests that a person stands up suddenly, with the implication of rising or flourishing. In short, “he zuo” (合作) together refers to social interactions characterized by harmonious relationships that serve the purpose of making all flourish.

However, co-operation is described differently in the West. In his co-published book *Cooperation in Primates and Humans: Mechanisms and Evolution*, German professor of zoology and anthropology Peter Kappeler defines co-operation as “social interactions characterized by costs to an actor and benefits to other conspecifics” (Kappeler and van Schaik, 2006). This definition embodies current mainstream Western thinking, highlighting co-operation of individuals of the same species and dualism between benefactor and beneficiaries. It is in line with game theory, as pioneered by professor John Von Neumann from Princeton University where the interests of the players contradict

each other totally, and one person's gain is always the loss of the other.

The contrast between China and the West in respect of their approaches to co-operation is profound. Whereas co-operation is a clear and natural corollary of the core value of harmony in Chinese culture, in the modern West the pervasive influence of individualism means the starting point for any common venture or shared activity is to ask, 'What is in it for me?'

The usual historical reference point for the origin of Western individualism is the religious Reformation of the 16th century in Europe. This removed the controlling social and political power of the Roman Catholic Church from large parts of Europe that it had held in its grasp for the previous millennium. The Church had claimed to mediate between the believer and God, but the Protestant Reformation declared that the believer had a direct and personal relation to the Creator.

One consequence of this religious revolution was a personal anxiety to prove oneself in the eyes of God. Max Weber famously pointed to this as a key factor in the origins of Western capitalism. Economic success was reassuring and correspondingly became a sign of personal salvation.

Another result was political chaos, to which there were two main responses. The contemporary observer of the religious wars of the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes¹, asserted that since individuals were basically self-interested only a strong sovereign state could provide for the order needed to prevent continuing conflict.

But many sought to escape these conflicts by fleeing to the new lands recently discovered across the oceans. The United States grew out of the series of colonies founded by religious believers hoping to create a new life for themselves. They had to band together for basic economic and security reasons surrounded as they were by uncomprehending and frequently hostile native peoples. But this co-operation for common purposes was strictly secondary to their deeper religious motivations and personal convictions.

¹ See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes/>

The classic, still regarded as definitive, account of the early drivers of American ideology is that of the 19th century French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville. In his *Democracy in America* he described the outlooks of the early settlers in New England in this way:

*Each individual is assumed to be as educated, virtuous and powerful as any of his fellows. Why then should he obey society, and what are the natural limits of such obedience? He obeys society not because he is inferior to those who direct it, nor because he is incapable of ruling himself but **because union with his fellows seems useful to him** (our emphasis) (De Tocqueville, cited in Mayer, 1994: 66).*

Clearly co-operation was strictly the consequence of a more basic self-interest, or what the great authority in the new political economy, Adam Smith, called self-love. This 18th century intellectual development was focused on finding a point of agreement between the ever-increasing demands and power of a centralizing state and the individualism that was driving trade and capitalism. One could have thought, as indeed the French physiocrats did, that the union of state and economic interests would be a possible way forward, but Smith's answer is epitomized in the well-known passage of his *The Wealth of Nations*.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages (Smith, 2003: 23-24).

Out of their trading interest, out of self-love, arose a division of labor dictated by the market: this has been a fundamental principle for Western economic thinking ever since.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the individualism of the modern period meant that co-operation had been ruled out from the earliest days in the West. The ancient origins of Western thought in Greece and through until the Reformation relied on Aristotle's declaration that human beings were essentially social and made to live in communities. In other words, close to the time that Confucius was stressing human social relations in ancient China, in the West too there was an equivalent emphasis on the social nature of human beings.

It was those ancient roots that were evoked again in the 19th century by Karl Marx and socialists in many Western countries. It was a theme that persisted into mid-20th century when one of the authors used to go with his mother to shop at the local co-operative society grocery store. It was part of the co-operative movement that had grown in popularity in the country ever since its founding in 1844, though today it is a shadow of its past.

But what Western socialism illustrates in its advocacy of co-operation is precisely in opposition to the dominant forces in a capitalist economy based on self-interest. Indeed socialist campaigning for co-operation to combat those forces both recognizes and contributes to the conflicts that have been pervasive in the West throughout the modern period, culminating in the two world wars of the last century. To this day self-interest and conflict continue to predominate over appeals to co-operation as the ideas that shape Western public discourse and outlook on world affairs.

Yet in contrasting the West with China in respect of their different emphasis on co-operation it is worthwhile to take account of their vastly different history and culture. In particular, from the outside looking in, the real contrast between the two is between contradiction and harmony. Another observer of America from a European standpoint in the early 19th century summed it up effectively when discussing slavery.

By the time Harriet Martineau, an early feminist and English traveler in the United States in the 1830s, was writing, slavery had largely been abolished in Europe, but, was still legal in America, even though she pointed to no fewer than 800 societies there for the abolition of slavery. You shouldn't, she wrote, judge the nation by the one side or the other, but by the conflict between them: "Europe now owes to America the justice of regarding her as the country of abolitionism, quite as emphatically as the country of slavery" (Martineau, 1837: 249).

What was true of the United States then is equally true today, and of the West as a whole. It is a mass of contradictions, of conflicts managed, even perpetuated through institutions, as much as resolved by them.

China too finds life pervaded by binary principles, as between human beings and nature, male and female, but they co-exist in creative interaction. In the West two sides engage with each other in conflict as much as in co-operation, then disengage in a compromise, only to resume a contest for dominance at a later date.

The Moral Foundation of Co-operative Spirit in Chinese Philosophical Tradition

1 – Confucianism

The key concept in Confucianism is *ren* (仁). It is the highest moral principle, moral standard and moral state of the human. Centering on the concept of *ren* (仁), Confucius (551-479 BCE), born in the Age of Spring and Autumn, established a system of ethical thought, with a set of connected concepts such as family reverence, loyalty, forgiveness, appropriateness, conscience, courage, courtesy, magnanimity, sincerity, diligence and kindness. *Ren* (仁) is such a central term that it is mentioned 109 times in the *Analects of Confucius* and all 20 chapters of the book dwell on *ren* (仁).

The Age of Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) witnessed the moral degradation of the society. Rites and rituals collapsed and elegant music disappeared. Confucius suggested that the rulers should govern their country by restoring the rites of the Zhou dynasty (1100-221 BCE). As Duke Jing of Qi asked about how to govern a country, Confucius said: “Rulers, subjects, fathers and sons should observe their respective rites” (Cheng, 2007: 120). To restore these rites one must first develop *ren* (仁), because it would be hypocritical to observe rites without *ren* (仁). In the words of Confucius: “If a man has no *ren* (仁) what can his propriety be like?” (Cheng, 2007: 19). Confucius’s ethical system with *ren* (仁) as its core spirit thus aims to restore rites and rituals and maintain a cohesive social order.

The Chinese character for *ren* “仁” is composed of two parts. The left part means “person” and the right part means “two”. From this character we see *ren* (仁) means mutual love between two persons. In chapter 12 of the *Analects of Confucius*, there is a dialogue about *ren* (仁) between Confucius and his student Fan Chi. When the student

asked about *ren* (仁), the Master said, "It is to love all men" (Cheng, 2007: 124). In chapter 17, Zi Lu, one of Confucius's students, asked Confucius about *ren* (仁). The master said, "He who could practice five things wherever in the world would accomplish *ren* (仁)." "What are they?", Zi Lu asked. The Master said: "courtesy, magnanimity, sincerity, diligence and kindness. He who is courteous will not be humiliated, he who is magnanimous wins the multitude, he who is sincere is trusted by others, he who is diligent succeeds in all he undertakes, he who is kind can get good service from others" (Cheng, 2007: 175).

According to the Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius, *ren* (仁) originates from a spontaneous feeling of compassion and commiseration within the human heart-and-mind (*xin* 心). For example, if a woman sees a child on the verge of falling into a well, she would rush over to save the child as if it was her own child. By doing so, the woman has developed compassion and commiseration into *ren* (仁).

How to approach *ren* (仁)? According to Confucius, the practice of *ren* (仁) starts from oneself, the family, the work place and then extends to wider society. In chapter 1 of the *Analects of Confucius*, the Master said "family reverence is the root of *ren* (仁)" (Cheng, 2007: 1). And family reverence starts from oneself. In chapter 6, Zigong asked the Master, "What do you think of someone who gives extensively to the common people and provides aid to the multitude? Would you say he has possessed *ren* (仁)?" The Master answered, "He is far more than having *ren* (仁). He must be a sage. Even Yao and Shun could not have done as much. A person of *ren* (仁) is one who helps others establish what he himself wishes to establish and to achieve what he himself wishes to achieve. To be able to correlate one's own feelings with those of others may be the way to approach *ren* (仁)" (Cheng, 2007: 59).

What is a man of *ren* (仁) like? In chapter 13, Fan Chi asked about *ren* (仁). Confucius said, "Be respectful to parents, be conscientious in official affairs. Be loyal and honest to friends" (Cheng, 2007: 133). A man of *ren* (仁), in the first place, must practice these three basic moral principles. In another chapter, Confucius explained that "fine words and insinuating appearance are seldom associated with *ren* (仁)

仁) ” (Cheng, 2007: 2). From this we can see that a person of *ren* (仁) must place high value on inner cultivation. Inner cultivation is more important than words and appearance.

Ren (仁) has something in common with the notion of love in Christianity, but there is also a difference between them. On the one hand, they share similarities in the promotion of the doctrine of universal love in the first place, encouraging people to connect to the source of all human love. On the other, they are different in terms of the nature of love. The Confucian *ren* (仁) stresses hierarchical order, with love starting from oneself, family, the work place and then to the wider society, and with rulers, subjects, fathers and sons observing their respective rites to develop mutual respect and trust so as to establish a harmonious social order. However, Christian love is first of all the love of God as God loves all and then the love of your neighbors who have helped you in the name of God.

2 - Daoism

According to Laozi’s Daoist cosmogony, *Dao* is the very origin of the universe. *Dao* is both Nonbeing and Being. In its original state, *Dao* is formless, thus Nonbeing. When it takes on form but still remains undifferentiated, it becomes Being or the chaotic One. One bifurcates into Tian and Di, which in turn form the interaction of Yin and Yang, the two opposite principles in nature. When Yin (female) and Yang (male) exchange their vital energy (Qi) and copulate, the Two generates Three, a number symbolizing plurality. This process multiplies generation after generation, generating all things. Thus, all things in the world consist of Yin and Yang elements. Harmony emerges when the vital energy or Qi of Yin and Yang interacts and converges. As chapter 42 of *Daodejing* wrote:

*Dao gives birth to One;
One gives birth to Two;
Two gives birth to Three;
Three gives birth to Ten Thousand things.
All things have Yin on their back and Yang in their embrace;
The Qi of the two converge and become harmony* (Wu, 2013: 102).

As we are living in a world of opposite energies, Laozi teaches us how to establish ourselves and manage to get along in the world. It is his

fundamental principle not to be rude, arrogant and overbearing but to be good, humble and soft instead. This becomes the ultimate standard of value.

Laozi further explains what is the highest good. He sees water as the embodiment of the highest good. Water, from Laozi's point of view, is one of the symbols of humility and competence. Being morally good without accomplishing anything amounts to "good for nothing". Being competent without a good heart is fundamentally flawed. All in all, water symbolizes the highest good because it is capable of accomplishing things but keeps itself in a low profile, taking no credit for its accomplishments. Chapter 8 of *Daodejing* gave a detailed description of water and those people who are like water:

*The highest good is like water;
Water brings good to all things and does not contend;
It goes to places which most people detest
And is therefore akin to Dao.*

*Stay low key;
Keep a broad mind;
Treat people kindly;
Speak in good faith;
Rule with good policy;
Serve with good competence;
Act with good timing (Wu, 2013: 20).*

"The great virtue is like water" (上善若水) thus becomes Laozi's philosophy of life. He described it to be "akin to *Dao*", a symbol of humility, the origin of the universe, and the source of power. In chapter 78 of *Daodejing*, he mentioned water again: "Nothing in the world is softer than water, yet nothing can better attack the strong than water" (Wu, 2013: 176). Laozi believed in the power of humility and humbleness.

3 - Mohism

Mohism was founded by Mozi in the early Warring States. As one of the most important figures in Chinese history, Mozi was often linked with Confucius from the Warring States period (403–221 BCE) to the beginning of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).

The cornerstone of Mohism is *jianai* (兼爱), commonly known as universal love in the West. However, this translation is misleading if we truly understand the original meaning of *jianai* (兼爱). Mozi started with the learning of Confucianism but later abandoned it finding its ritual rites too trivial, complex and costly. Therefore, he established Mohism, advocating *jianai* (兼爱) as the very core of his thought, and economy of expenditure and exalting the worthy as two main pillars. Also, his thinking included reverence for the sky, the spirits, and uniformity on the one hand and anti-fatalism, anti-music, and simplicity in funerals on the other. *Jianai* (兼爱) is thus better translated as inclusive love or impartial love to avoid any Christian connotations.

There are three basic arguments in support of the principle of *jianai* (兼爱). First, *jianai* (兼爱) brings social order. According to Mozi, the cause of social disorder is the lack of mutual love (*xiangai* 相爱):

Feudal lords each love their own state but do not love other states. Therefore, they attack other states in order to benefit their own state. Disorder in the world is entirely this and nothing else. If we examine this, from what source does it arise? In all cases it is due to lack of mutual love (Johnson, 2010: 133).

Mozi thus encouraged the love of others. If people could learn to love others like they love themselves, they would mutually benefit. In his words, if there is inclusively mutual love in the world, then there is order, whereas, if there is exchange of mutual hatred, then there is disorder. This applies at all levels of society – in the family, in the community and between states. In this sense, *jianai* (兼爱) is equal treatment of each other without distinction.

Second, *jianai* (兼爱) benefits the world. For a man of *ren* (仁), his way to conduct affairs is to promote what benefits the world and eliminate what harms it. What harms the world? Mozi wrote:

... if states attack each other, if houses usurp each other, if people harm each other, if there is not kindness and loyalty between rulers and ministers, if there is not love and filiality between fathers and sons, if

there is not concord and harmony between older and younger brothers, then this is harmful to the world (Johnson, 2010: 137).

Lack of mutual love, or loving oneself to the exclusion of others, is at the root of all these problems. That everyone must love others is the only solution. In Mozi's words: "It can be changed by the methods of inclusively mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit" (Johnson, 2010: 139).

Third, *jian* (兼), meaning inclusive, draws our attention to the comparison of "inclusive" and "discriminating" or "partial". In Mozi's own words: "Inclusiveness is the means of changing discrimination" (Johnson, 2010: 147). If people are "inclusive" rather than "discriminating", then they will regard others as they do themselves. So, if "inclusiveness" is established, there is great benefit to the world; conversely, if "discrimination" is established, there is great harm to the world. So we must certainly distinguish and name those in the world who love people and benefit people because it is their inclusive love which gives rise to the world's great benefits.

How can *jianan* (兼爱) be put into practice? From what the sages in the ancient times wrote on bamboo and silk, what they carved in metal and stone, what they engraved on (ceremonial) plates and bowls to hand down to their descendants of later generations, Mozi came to know that the first four sage kings personally practiced it. He cited the story King Wen of the Zhou dynasty in the *Great Oath* (Tai Shi) which saying: "King Wen was like the sun and the moon, creating light and bringing its brightness to the four regions and to the western lands" (Johnson, 2010: 157). To Mozi's interpretation, this speaks of the wide extent and greatness of King Wen's inclusive love of the world being like the sun and moon, which illuminate all parts of the world without discrimination. This was King Wen's "inclusiveness" and is what Mozi means when he speaks of "inclusive", taking King Wen as his model.

It is worth noting that Mozi saw *jianai* (兼爱) as *ren* (仁), but there is a nuance between the two. The former emphasizes the practice of love without distinctions while the latter stresses hierarchical order, with the practice of love toward oneself then

extending beyond the self-world. The concept of *jianan* (兼爱) is undifferentiated love.

The Co-operative Spirit in China's English Media in Combating the COVID-19 Crisis: An Overview

This study selects five major English media outlets in China as the object of study. They are China Daily, the Global Times, CGTN, Xinhuanet.com/English and China.org.cn/English, official media outlets at the national level, all devoted to building connections between China and the rest of the world. The emergence of these English media outlets is a significant sign of China's opening-door policy since the early 1980s, and of China embracing the world in the hope of promoting global communication and co-operation worldwide.

China Daily was established in 1981 with the assistance of The Age, an Australian daily newspaper published in Melbourne. Originally it was targeted at foreigners in China such as business people, students, tourists, diplomats, etc. Now, as the biggest national English-language newspaper, China Daily has developed into a multi-media platform including newspapers, websites and apps with a strong presence on Facebook, Twitter, SinaWeibo and WeChat, serving more than 200 million readers all over the world. It takes "Connecting China Connecting the World" as its mission.

The Global Times was founded in 2009 with the main purpose of helping the outside world understand China's rapid changes. It is most well-known for its innovation, addressing issues once thought sensitive and tough such as child AIDs victims, urban renewal, forced demolition, the fight against corruption, China's use of the death penalty, the changes of forming a new international order, and the nation's growing wealth gap. The paper has often been seen overseas as nationalistic for providing insightful reports on important international issues from Chinese perspectives.

CGTN (China Global Television Network) was launched in 2016. It is the international division of CCTV, which - along with CNR (China National Radio) and CRI (China Radio International) - are now collectively known as the China Media Group. CGTN seeks to report the news both in China and around the world from a global

perspective. It seeks to provide more balanced reporting with a focus on nations, regions, and stories that are often under reported by other international media. Its slogan is 'See the Difference'.

Xinhuanet, established in 1997 by Xinhua News Agency, is a comprehensive service-oriented news information portal, the most influential online medium in China and the Chinese language website of world influence. Xinhuanet has 31 local channels and releases global news and information 24 hours a day in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, German, Tibetan, Uygur, and Mongolian. It leads by far other domestic online media organizations in originality and re-posting rates concerning major news events. It speaks for China and of China, with the modest hope to become a news website that is thinking globally and acting locally.

China.org.cn, published in 2000 under the auspices of the State Council Information Office and the China International Publishing Group (CIPG) in Beijing, is the authorized government portal site to China. It offers broad access to up-to-date news about China, with searchable texts of government position papers and a wealth of basic information about Chinese history, politics, economics and culture in English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Korean and Esperanto.

This study has collected a total of 65,600 news items relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in these English media outlets during a six-month period from January to June, 2020, entering the key words of COVID-19, coronavirus and Xinfadi, the market in Beijing where new COVID-19 cases were found in June 2020. By further entering the key words "new operation", 7,525 news items were obtained, accounting for 11.5% of the total number of pieces.

Media	China Daily	Global Times	CGTN	Xinhuanet .com/ English	China.org.cn/ English	Total
Number of news items relating to COVID-19	8,530	8,130	6,490	30,150	12,300	65,600
Number of news items relating to co-operation	1,657	1,249	699	2,618	1,302	7,525

Source: China Daily's New Media Lab

Chart 1: The number of news items related to COVID-19 and the number of news items related to co-operation in each media platform

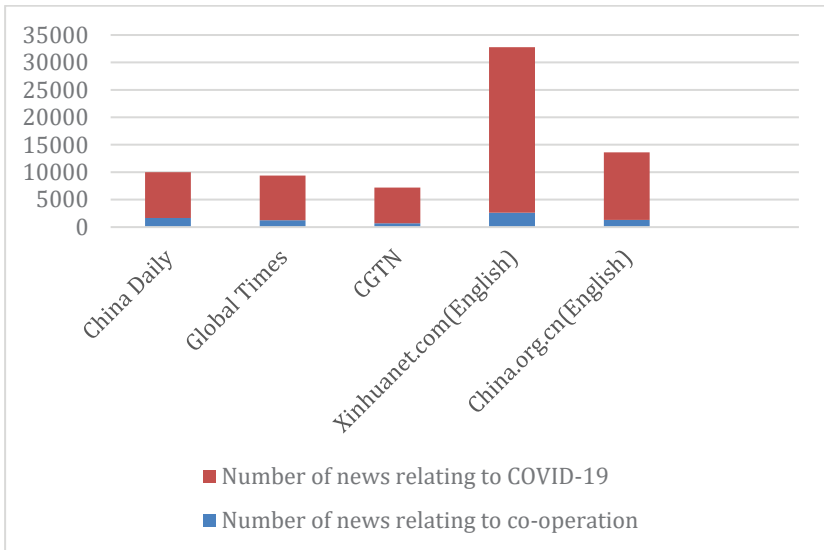


Table 1: The number of news items related to COVID-19 and the number of news items related to co-operation in each media platform (Source: China Daily's New Media Lab).

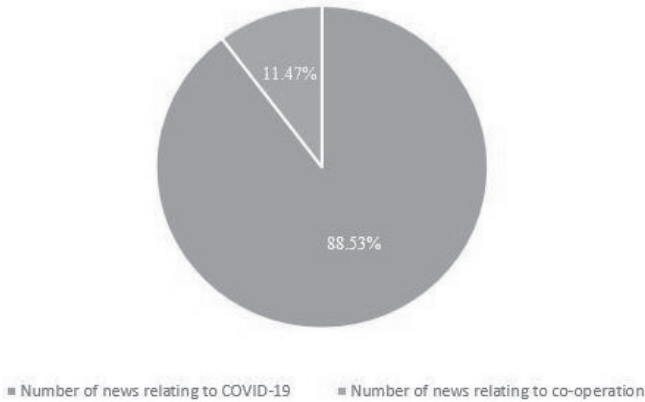


Chart 2: The ratio between news items relating to co-operation and news items relating to COVID-19

In an interview with Dr. Zhou Shuchun², publisher and editor-in-chief of China Daily, he explained why co-operation is an important message to get across to the global audience. Firstly, co-operation has been the basic principle of China's diplomacy and international strategy; secondly, emphasizing co-operation is to take the moral high ground in the interest of China and that of the world as a whole; and thirdly, co-operation is the manifestation of traditional Chinese cultural thoughts.

In an interview with Liu Jiawen³, vice president of Xinhuanet.com, he also emphasized the influence of traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts on media and journalistic practice in China. In his eyes, co-operation means two or more countries take concerted actions to solve an existing problem or reach a common goal. With regard to the COVID-19 crisis, he deems it necessary for all countries to co-operate for it is not possible for a single country to deal with it successfully.

Liu pointed out that traditional Chinese culture features collective interests before individual interests, stressing not only the principle of not imposing on others what you yourself do not desire, but also kindness, inclusiveness, and compassion, etc. Most journalistic

² Interview with Zhou Shuchun via WeChat (September 28, 2020)

³ Interview with Liu Jiawen via WeChat (September 28, 2020)

practitioners, especially those involved in global journalism, have high moral standards, prioritizing collective interests, being conscious of other's perspectives, having a kind and friendly nature, and exhibiting self-reflection and an ability for introspection.

The Co-operative Spirit in China's English Media in Combating COVID-19 Crisis: A Textual Analysis

The co-operative theme is a frequent occurrence in the reports on the COVID-19 crisis by the selected five media. They have expressed the idea of and wish for co-operation with all parts of the world.

CGTN was calling for global co-operation in the manufacture of ventilators. Zhu Min, former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was quoted as saying that China has embraced initiatives that call for global co-operation. He said, "During the pandemic outbreak, ventilators became a rare product everywhere. Many countries started to buy them from China, yet the whole manufacture of ventilators probably requires work from 140 companies at the cost of 50,000 RMB (7,070 U.S. dollars) each. Thus, we need companies from China, South Korea, the United States, Switzerland, and many others to work together".⁴

China Daily quoted Gao Fu, director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, expressing the fond wish for co-operation with the international community. He told media that he had been in touch with arriving WHO experts on epidemic response measures as he co-ordinated research efforts in Hubei province and oversees developments in vaccines and drugs. Gao said China has always upheld transparent, open and responsible principles when handling such situations and is actively seeking and expanding co-operation with the international community.⁵

⁴ Experts endorse multilateral cooperation in post-COVID-19 era:
<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-24/World-experts-endorse-multilateral-cooperation-in-post-COVID-19-era-RAml5Ir2vK/index.html>.

⁵ China, WHO collaborating to conquer disease:
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/17/WS5e49d110a310128217277e7f.html>.

China Daily reported on the strong traditional ties between China and ASEAN members. Although the COVID-19 outbreak will affect China-ASEAN co-operation in different fields in the short term, Sino-ASEAN co-operation may not suffer in the long run since China's strict measures to contain the outbreak is producing results and an increasing number of industries in Chinese provinces and cities are resuming production. China Daily further explained that some ASEAN member states have vowed to jointly fight the epidemic with China despite being affected by the novel coronavirus outbreak, thanks to their long-established friendship. And although the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, ASEAN members have expressed confidence in and support for China's measures to contain the epidemic.⁶

CGTN also reported on China's ties with other Asian countries. Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi was quoted as saying in a phone call with Rasit Meredow, deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, that "unity and co-operation are the best weapons to overcome the pandemic". Wang Yi said that "China is willing to strengthen communication and co-operation in international affairs with Turkmenistan, firmly support each other, and safeguard the common interests of both sides."⁷

Sino-European co-operation is also a frequently occurring theme. For example, CGTN pointed out that "maintaining frank and honest exchanges and keeping open-minded to divergences" laid the prerequisite for meaningful co-operation between China and Europe. However, CGTN stressed harmony of differences by saying that

⁶ China-ASEAN won't be affected in the long run:

<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/27/WS5e56ff16a31012821727a9a4.html>.

⁷ Wang Yi calls unity and cooperation 'best weapons' to overcome pandemic:

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-28/Wang-Yi-unity-and-cooperation-best-weapons-to-overcome-pandemic-RHgErbiujK/index.html>.

“focusing on co-operation by no means suggests that both sides should or would neglect the disagreements.”⁸

Another example is China Daily’s report on President Xi Jinping’s telephone conversations with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel ahead of the Lunar New Year. Xi expressed the hope that “China stands ready to work with the international community to effectively curb the spread of the pneumonia cases caused by a new strain of coronavirus to uphold global health security, and China and Germany could become partners who depend on each other despite their ideological differences”.⁹

China.org.cn/English quoted the Chinese ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming as saying that “When Brexit is done and COVID-19 is over, China and the UK will continue deepening co-operation in areas such as financial services, trade and investment.”¹⁰

There are also reports calling for co-operation with Africa. Xinhuanet.com/English quoted the white paper “Fighting COVID-19: China in Action” released by China’s State Council Information Office saying that China has so far sent medical supplies to over 50 African countries and the African Union, dispatched medical experts to the continent, and held several video conferences to share its anti-epidemic experience. China will offer more assistance to African countries in the fight against COVID-19, and continue to do all in its power to offer support.¹¹ The Global Times interviewed the Chinese Ambassador to Sudan Ma Xinmin who told the reporters that China and Sudan are close friends and strategic partners, who over the years

⁸ Cooperation remains the theme for Sino-European relations: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-24/Cooperation-remains-the-theme-for-Sino-European-relations-RzMpQa2dqM/index.html>.

⁹ Global ties vital to fight coronavirus: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/23/WS5e28a12ea310128217272db4_3.html.

¹⁰ China, UK to deepen cooperation in financial services, trade, investment after Brexit: http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-06/21/content_76186377.html.

¹¹ Expert hails China-Africa partnership to combat COVID-19: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/19/c_139152031.html.

have supported and helped each other. “And we once again stand shoulder to shoulder in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹²

The wish of co-operation with Latin America is clearly expressed in the Global Times report on Chinese communities in Brazil. According to the report, in spite of COVID-19 infections, the Brazilian government insisted on keeping its economy going instead of preventing the virus’ spread. This approach triggered social concerns, especially among Chinese living in Brazil who were aware of the dangers of the disease. Despite their anxiety, Chinese communities in Brazil have been participating in virus mitigation and have great expectations for China-Brazil co-operation in vaccine development. Cheng Pu, chairman of the Brazil-China Cultural Communication Association, told the Global Times that Chinese members of the association have donated a million masks and other protective products to local governments, medical institutions and police, and sent 8,000 basic food baskets to Brazilians living in poverty.¹³

With regard to the co-operation with the US, China Daily first of all emphasized its importance to the world as well as China by saying that “When America sneezes, the world catches a cold.”¹⁴ The newspaper further said that “while it is hugely important that the Chinese economy is restarting and contributing to global supply chains, it is equally important the American economy remains robust. The US administration must follow the lessons from China and other Asian countries now and significantly increase virus protection and detection, or the world economy will get sick. Political issues need to be put aside and maximum cooperation must be the mantra.”¹⁵

Only a few examples of the co-operative spirit as represented in China’s English media are illustrated here. Co-operation has been the

¹² China provides new medical supplies to Sudan to bolster anti-coronavirus fight, 2020/6/19: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192144.html>.

¹³ Brazil-based Chinese merchants assist locals despite own epidemic loss, 2020/6/19: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192139.html>.

¹⁴ US needs to step up COVID-19 response: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/05/WS5e60a01ea31012821727c9bb.html>.

¹⁵ US needs to step up COVID-19 response: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/05/WS5e60a01ea31012821727c9bb.html>.

prevalent idea throughout the reports of the five media organizations. The notion of co-operation is not just a media discourse, but rather a true and natural expression of thoughts and feelings of the Chinese nation and its people who have been steeped in Chinese philosophical traditions such as *ren* (仁), water-like virtue (上善若水) and *jianan* (兼爱).

Conclusion

Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism are considered the spiritual homeland for Chinese people, especially the intelligentsia. As a central element of cultural and civic life in Chinese history, the ideas of these major philosophical schools have shaped the soul and character of the Chinese nation, and are deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people. As Cheng Yuzhen, professor of Chinese language and literature at Beijing Foreign Studies University commented: “we cannot steer away from the trajectory of thinking of influential ancient Chinese philosophers, for their thinking has become the intrinsic spirit of our nation” (Cheng, 2018: 90).

Confucius said: “Is *ren* (仁) far away from us? You only have to want it and it will come” (Cheng, 2007: 70).

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* *This chapter is a partial fulfillment of the project at Beijing Foreign Studies University: "The inseparability of one and many: the construction of China's discourse system in global communication".*

CHAPTER 5

COVID-19 AND SINOPHOBIA IN INDIAN MEDIA

ANKURAN DUTTA AND ANUPA LAHKAR GOSWAMI

“For two decades, China had been winning without fighting while the US was fighting without winning.”

—S. Jaishankar, Union Minister for External Affairs, India (Jaishankar, 2020).

The year 2020 has seen an overwhelming number of references to the terms ‘Sinophobia’ or ‘Sinophilia’ in the COVID-19 scenario. The name Sinophobia is self-explanatory, with a clear negative, anti-China connotation.

The global spread of the coronavirus has assuredly aggravated an anti-Chinese mood within India (and many other parts of the world) with the widespread belief that the virus originated in Wuhan in China. However, even in the United States where the history and experience of anti-Chinese feeling are different from other racial groups, anti-Asian sentiment forms a powerful, self-perpetuating foundation that has set a precedent of angst against China that the world is witnessing today. While the American President Trump clearly called the virus the ‘Chinese Virus’, other countries have diplomatically avoided using this term. Between March and August 2020, almost 2,600 racist incidents were reported in the US, including attempted murder, death threats, and verbal assaults. These included a huge spike in online racism, and 31 percent of the registered cases involved anti-Asian slurs (Remtulla, 2020).

China’s authoritarian regime on the one hand is blamed for delayed responses and resultant socio-economic upheavals in many countries in the West (Zhang & Xu, 2020). However, many trace the origin of this anti-Chinese sentiment to the meteoric economic growth of China

that saw a shift in the epicenter of the global economy from Europe and the US.

In India, Sinophobia is a by-product of a racialized sentiment. Emotionally, Sinophobia dates back to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, where, even after the retreat of the Chinese troops, India still lost the psychological battle. India remains alert to any act of intrusion by its powerful neighbor in its seemingly quiet borders. This Sinophobic zealotry saw another fight after the 2020 border conflict at Ladakh¹. This led to heightened Sinophobic sentiments and India exacerbated the border conflict into economic decoupling.

After some Indian nationalists advocated boycotting Chinese goods, surprisingly, the Indian government was soon infected by their irrationality too and abused the concept of "national security" to ban 106 Chinese apps. New Delhi moved even further and irresponsibly disallowed Chinese companies to participate in road construction projects in India (Sheng & Xingchun, 2020).

This disdain for the Chinese led to an increase in the Indian media's negative coverage of China and a number of strong adjectives were used to denounce the country. With India's growing affiliation with the Trump regime in the United States of America, India, as a rising power, finds itself defending its status quo (Jaishankar, 2020).

India's Anti-Chinese Nationalism: Historical Overview

India and China have a long bilateral relationship spanning hundreds of years. There are references in the Indian epic Mahabharata (5th century BCE) to the Qin dynasty (Shah, 2013: 23-29). Chanakya, the great political thinker of the Mauryan Empire, refers to Chinese silk as 'Cinapatta' and 'Cinamsuka' in his Arthashastra. The records of historian Zhang Qian (d. 113 BCE) and Sima Qian (145-90 BCE) referred to greater India as 'Shendu', which was about the Indus Valley. The references in Chanakya's Arthashastra also mention the established trade relationship between the countries since the 2nd

¹ India-China clash – 20 Indian troops killed in Ladakh fighting, 16 June, 2020: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476#:~:text=At%20least%2020%20Indian%20soldiers,in%20at%20least%2045%20years.>

century BCE (Bhargava, 2017). Later, in the first century BCE, Buddhism was transmitted from India to China (Sen, 2019). History also witnessed trade and diplomatic relations between both countries during the Tamil (Cholas) dynasties, the Tang and Harsha dynasties (7th and 8th centuries), the Yun dynasty, the Ming dynasty, etc. (Shah, 2020).

In 1834 the Sikh Empire annexed Ladakh into the state of Jammu and invaded western Tibet in 1841, which planted the seed of conflict between the rulers of both lands. They later signed a treaty in September 1842 that stopped interference in each other's empires. During the British regime, Indian soldiers participated in WWI and WWII conflicts against Qing China and were also involved in the 1900 suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (Moran, 2010).

After India's independence, a new diplomatic relationship was established, and in 1950, India became the first non-communist country to establish an embassy in China. The catchphrase 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers) was born as a result of these bilateral relations. Both countries signed the *Panchsheel* agreement in 1954, which had five principles of peaceful coexistence². In the 1950s leaders of both countries visited each other and established strong diplomatic and trade relations. But in 1962, the Sino-Indian War (or Indo-China Border Conflict) led to a major decline in bilateral relations and anti-Chinese Indian nationalism took the place of the catchphrase 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai'. Since 1962, even though many Indian and Chinese statesmen have visited their counterparts to build a strong and peaceful diplomatic relationship, anti-Chinese nationalism has been fuelled by others, including the media in India which has played a significant antagonizing role, whereas only sections of the official Chinese media like the Global Times based in Beijing have accused India of stirring up trouble on the Ladakh border (Harder, 2019; Sen, 2020; Vu, 2019; Wilcox, 2017; Dasgupta, 2020).

There are 50 dialogue mechanisms between China and India for exchanging views on various topics of bilateral, regional, and global concerns. Twenty inter-parliamentary friendship groups have been

² See Indian Ministry of External Affairs document: http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf

set up by China and India. During the Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi regimes, both countries held frequent exchanges of high-level visits including 16 bilateral meetings since 2014 between both leaders (Ramakrishnan, 2019; Weidong, 2020), but the latent distrust among both countries' populations swelled with the recent border stand-off at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh during the global health crisis, which has created some tensions between the two nations (AP, 2020).

As a result, the government of India banned over 200 Chinese mobile applications (PIB, 2020), including top social media platforms such as TikTok, Helo, and WeChat, to counter the threat posed by these applications to the country's "sovereignty and security". According to a report published in April by the Paulson Institute's Macro Polo think tank, six of the top 10 most downloaded apps in India were from China. This ban is likely to affect Indo-Chinese trade relations in the long-run³.

One of the primary bones of contention in the India-China security relationship is the latter's affinity towards Pakistan (Calabrese, 2017) - and, by extension, the Pakistani military-jihadi complex (Kotasthane, 2017). India has been subject to an increased risk of terrorist strikes and insurgent movements within its territory that are believed to have originated in Pakistan. This problem is also exacerbated by problems relating to the highly disputed Sino-Indian border. While old sources of friction between the two countries persist, China's escalating economic power along with the shifting global power dynamics and technological advancements present new challenges and opportunities (Takshashila, 2019).

Spread of Xenophobia and Sinophobia

In an ongoing research output on coronavirus, John (2020) enumerates how COVID-19 poses serious policy and academic concerns due to the Sinophobic stereotype and racism against people of Chinese and East Asian descent, mostly attributing this information disorder to new media.

³ Full list of Chinese applications banned by India, The Print, 29 June 2020: <https://theprint.in/india/full-list-of-59-chinese-apps-banned-by-indian-govt/451254/>

As a representation of a dominant discourse about China's response to the pandemic and a paradigm frame of China in general, since the lockdown of Wuhan, there have been two ways of looking at it. Firstly, the suffering of the people in China during the time of the virus with the controlling measures, and secondly, the success of the government in curtailing the spread within the country.

As the epicenter of the virus started to shift to Europe and the US and the Chinese authorities re-opened the country's economy, China's "authoritarian regime" was blamed for delayed responses and resultant socio-economic upheavals in many countries in the West. In this regard, orientalism and Sinophobia in many discussions initiated the knowledge hierarchy and fuelled racism and micro-aggression in everyday life (Zhang & Xu, 2020).

In an interesting take on race-based trauma, Litam (2020) examined the relationships between media, increasing rates of xenophobia and Sinophobia, and racial discrimination. She explains the deleterious effects of race-based discrimination on the emotional and physical well-being of people of color and indigenous groups. The researcher elucidates how misleading media coverage of COVID-19 has directed itself towards increased rates of racial discrimination and Sinophobic attitudes towards Chinese nationals and people of Asian origin.

Around the world, Chinese people face xenophobia under the guise of health concerns. A Norwegian cruise ship did not allow a Chinese woman aboard even though she had lived in Canada for 15 years. In Britain, people of Chinese origin have been abused and even pelted with eggs. Italy, which declared a health emergency over the virus, has seen a rise in the banning of Chinese people from shops and restaurants. In America, Chinatowns are empty. In Sydney, a man died of a heart attack in Chinatown because bystanders did not perform CPR on him as they were afraid of contracting the disease. In France, the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus trended because of the rise in racist tropes in the media that feed into xenophobia⁴.

⁴ *How Coronavirus outbreak is fuelling Sinophobia and racism*, CNBC TV 19: <https://www.cnbc.tv/18.com/views/how-coronavirus-outbreak-is-fuelling-sinophobia-and-racism-5319881.htm>

In an op-ed in IDN In-Depth News Seneviratne⁵ explains how the Indian media is no different from the Anglo-American media in their coverage of the COVID-19 threat with its clear slant towards labeling the virus as a Chinese virus. He also pointed out how India Today television reported on the TikTok application being used in India to discourage Muslims from following the social distancing measures introduced by the Indian government. In the report, the television channel, while claiming that the campaign was initiated by Pakistan using TikTok, labeled it as a "Chinese App", thus implying a Chinese hand in the act.

In a master's dissertation on the rising Sinophobia in Kyrgyzstan, Bas (2020) describes how Sinophobia amidst the global health crisis creates problems among the local people due to the increasing Chinese economic presence in the country. The research explores political corruption in Kyrgyzstan and reasons for Sinophobia among the Kyrgyz people, specifically referring to the impact of political corruption in anti-Chinese public demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan.

Indian Media and Hyper-nationalism

The Indian media during the Indo-Chinese faceoff on the border at Ladakh in the summer of 2020 engaged in the use of the rhetoric of war and terror. While the matters may have been reported accurately on certain issues, on some other issues, reports were largely exaggerated by media in order to flare up the nationalistic sentiments. Many Indian media personalities turned commentators demanded immediate retaliation from the Indian front, calling for war and stating the readiness of the Indian army.

Some however warned about India's weak position in case of war, such as an editorial in the Times of India. "The timing of the Chinese

⁵ Sinophobia Could Endanger Strengthening Biological Weapons Convention, 4 April 2020, IDN In-Depth News: <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/sustainability/COVID-19/3435-COVID-19-sinophobia-threatening-to-endanger-strengthening-the-biological-weapons-convention>

aggression and Beijing's assertive claims in the Galwan valley appear to be part of a strategy to remind India of its vulnerabilities," it stated⁶.

While some other media resorted to hyper-nationalism. "We're dealing with medieval brutes," said Arnab Goswami, Editor-in-Chief of the Republic Media Network. "We'll have to go out and give them (China) a very bloody nose"⁷.

"The Chinese army reneged on the promise of pulling its troops back from forwarding posts," said Sudhir Chaudhary, Editor-in-Chief, Zee News. Shishir Gupta, the editor of the Hindustan Times, said the answer to the skirmish "does not lie in mere economic retaliation"⁸.

The dramatic narrative in the case of television media has over-exaggerated the situation. In the Chinese state media, the Global Times blamed the Indian media for significantly damaging China-India relations. This comes together with Pakistan with whom China shares a close affinity. The media reports and the reliance on fake news have been attributed as a reason for New Delhi's worsening relations with other neighbors. Indians have to be called on to act as a check on their nation's media if the country truly wants to improve relations with its neighboring countries, the Chinese state media concluded⁹.

Challenge of Size in Research Design

The biggest challenge while doing a pan-India project on media, is the size of the material involved. As of 31 March 2018, India had 118,239 registered publications, out of which 17,573 came under the newspaper category and 100,666 under the periodicals category. As per the statistics of the Registrar of Newspaper in India, in 2017-18, total newspaper circulation was 430 million, out of which the

⁶ Factbox: Indian media call for strong response to border clash with China, 17 June 2020, *Reuters*: <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-india-china-media-factbox/factbox-indian-media-call-for-strong-response-to-border-clash-with-china-idUSKBN2301RO>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Beijing Blasts Indian Media For Worsening India-China Ties, Triggering A Dangerous War*. 7 September 2020, *EuRasian Times*: <https://eurasianimes.com/beijing-blasts-indian-media-for-worsening-india-china-ties-triggering-a-dangerous-war/>

circulation of the English dailies was 53 million¹⁰. In addition to that India has about 850 television channels, out of which 50 percent are of news and current affairs. Radio news, although a monopoly of the public service broadcasting, still has a huge reach in the sub-continent. The number of web-based news portals is countless since no official registration is required to start a news portal in India. Hence, the sampling of Indian media for a significant topic – such as this – is very difficult.

This study is designed with both quantitative and qualitative methods. Due to the linguistic barriers, in this study, the researchers selected a total of 10 English-language media outlets, out of which 7 leading English dailies and 3 web-based news portals were chosen, based, respectively, on circulation numbers and Alexa rating and popularity. A customized search engine was created with the selected 10 media outlets and 10 keywords for a time period of 9 months from January to September 2020. The collected data, which is huge in number, is used for quantitative analysis of the number of stories published using the keywords. A total of 20 stories were then collected from a random sampling method - 2 stories from each of the media outlets for content analysis. Of these 20 stories, 4 were selected for critical discourse analysis. The basic objective of the study is to analyze the behavior of the selected media outlets covering anti-Chinese nationalism during the global health crisis that is COVID-19.

The biggest limitation of this research is the selection of English newspapers and news-portals only. It was observed by both the researchers that there is an uncountable number of stories that were covered with subjective or opinion-based headlines by many Indian language newspapers. But due to the linguistic limitations of the researchers, only English media were selected, resulting in non-representation of the entire media scene with multi-lingual characteristics.

Analysis

The newspapers chosen for this study are the Times of India, the Hindustan Times, the Indian Express, the Statesman, the Telegraph, the Hindu, and the Deccan Chronicle. The news portals are Scroll.in,

¹⁰ Source: Registrar of Newspapers of India (RNI).

the Wire, and the Print. A total of 10 keywords are searched through a Google customized search with the selected 10 media outlets during the time period from January to September 2020.

With the keyword 'Sinophobia', a total of four stories were found, out of which two stories were carried by the Print and one each by the Times of India and the Hindustan Times. One story in the Print covered China's global diplomacy along with its win over the coronavirus. The other three stories were based on the Hong Kong issue, and not related to COVID-19. With the keyword 'Sinophilia' only one story covered by the Times of India was found, with the headline itself spelling out that India needs both mind and muscle power to counter Chinese hegemony. The author Swapan Dasgupta (2020) refers to China's conviction that it can hurt India more than India can hurt it as being at the root of its aggressive petulance.

In this story, Dasgupta (2020) stated,

The bloody skirmishes involving India and China in the Ladakh region have produced tremors within India. Although the preoccupation with the COVID-19 pandemic has distracted from single-minded excitement, the internal political temperature has nevertheless soared. The revulsion over China's larger designs has prompted demands for a boycott of Chinese goods, services, and investments.

On the other hand, with the keyword 'Chinese Virus', there are about 13,700 stories found and with the keyword 'Wuhan Virus' 16,300 stories are carried by all these 10 media outlets. However, the majority of these stories were covered during January to early March, till the virus came to be known as Novel Coronavirus and later as COVID-19. But, while covering the issue of the repatriation of the migrant labor, both the terms were used under quotation marks.

With the keyword 'eastern virus', there is only one story covered by the Times of India, where the focus is on the security issue in the power sector. It was reported in a story about the power ministry's ban on equipment imports from China without permission and mandated testing of the equipment at designated laboratories for embedded malware or spyware, a common perception on Chinese equipment.

There was no story found with the keyword 'agnotology racism' in these media outlets and four stories were covered with the keyword

of 'sinology'. With the keyword 'wet market' a total of 1,780 stories found and 230 stories were also found with the keyword 'zootopia' in the Chinese context. In the COVID-19 perspective, about 500 stories were found using the word 'fount'. Finally, a huge number of stories were covered by the selected 10 media on Chinese conspiracy theories.

Discussion

Out of a selected 20 stories, five stories were analyzed using critical discourse. The first story was covered by the Indian Express, with the headline '*Coronavirus: China's mystery virus that has triggered worry*' (Express News Service, 2020):

Fears that SARS could reappear linger, and memories of China misleading the rest of the world on the extent and seriousness of the outbreak have not gone away — even though there has been greater transparency this time, and President Xi has ordered that the outbreak “must be taken seriously” and dealt with every measure possible.

This article shifts the blame for non-transparency on matters relating to the pandemic onto China by referencing SARS, and the use of terms like 'misleading' are a clear indication of a lack of trust in the country. It added further:

The statement has increased pressure on Beijing to contain what could become a public health crisis in the peak travel season (Chinese people are projected to make some 3 billion trips during the Spring Festival/Lunar New Year holidays beginning on Friday), and there is heightened concern in countries as far away as in Europe and America.

Here the fear psychosis associated with that of Chinese tourists has been triggered creating a kind of Sinophobia amongst the people. Already fear has been linked to Chinese tourists who are touted as potential carriers of the virus.

Wuhan remains the epicenter of the outbreak, with China's National Health Commission reporting 270 cases for Hubei as a whole as of Tuesday morning. Guangdong saw 14 cases — and on Monday, Zhong said two patients in the province seemed to have caught the virus from relatives who had travelled to Wuhan.

This story in the Indian Express clearly tries to shift the blame for coronavirus onto Wuhan and even has a brief profiling of the city.

“Coronavirus: a Chinese Trojan horse” (Arya, 2020) is a blog at the Times of India. The blog content discourse analysis starts with the background to the coronavirus pandemic, which originated from Wuhan in China and affected and disturbed the world greatly.

The author says:

The Coronavirus pandemic, which originated from the Wuhan city of China last year, has affected and disturbed the world greatly. It has created a war-like situation in public health, economy, and politics, and in international relations around the world. Many theories came up as to the cause of the Coronavirus, a spurt from the Wuhan wet market to an accident in a bio-warfare laboratory to Chinese conspiracy to disrupt the world order. Whatever the theories, one undeniable fact is that the virus originated from Wuhan, and China deliberately suppressed the information at the cost of a global pandemic.

This blog points out the origin of the virus to that of Wuhan and attributes to it the creation of global havoc. It also refers to China as being responsible for triggering a “war-like situation” affecting the political and economic landscape all over the world.

Whatever the theories, one undeniable fact is that the virus originated from Wuhan, and China deliberately suppressed the information at the cost of a global pandemic.

Words and phrases like “deliberately suppressed” and “cost of a global pandemic” point to evidences of a conspiracy by China in ushering the spread of the virus.

With the headline, *Why China has changed tune on ties with India?*, the story in the Statesman (Kakar, 2020) editorially praised the proximity of the leaders of the two countries. This was before the Ladakh standoff between the two countries and invariably had a paragraph on the two nations battling COVID-19 together.

Why are the Chinese suddenly displaying affection for India? The answer is simple. India has adhered to the WHO term of COVID-19. It has not blamed China for its failure in preventing the spread of the virus and delay in sharing inputs.

The language above shows the tilt towards trying to expose China's role in the spread of the virus and the global disdain towards the country on account of its spread. The role of India has been shown as one with an idealist vision, restraining from discrimination against China, unlike other countries.

To cushion itself internationally, every Chinese Ambassador around the world has been tweeting on the country winning the battle against coronavirus as also providing medical assistance to help nations in their struggle against the virus. There is no mention that stores provided by China are not a donation and most are of poor quality and costly. On being questioned on quality, a Chinese spokesperson stated that when China received donations of medical stores from across the globe, many did not meet Chinese standards but were accepted.

The terms like 'cushion', 'poor quality', and 'no mention' show the media's role in portraying the defensive nature of the Chinese government in terms of the spread of the virus.

The attitude of WHO officials who refused to discuss inputs from Taiwan indicated its bias and failure as an organization. Japan went as far as terming the WHO as the CHO (China Health Organization).

Here usage of terms like 'bias' and 'failure' of the WHO reflects the media's antipathy towards the WHO, which had been accused of siding with China.

The fourth story, covered in the Times of India with an ANI news source, is from Nepal. It discusses how Chinese nationals working in Nepal clashed with local Nepali people, defying the lockdown in the tiny Himalayan country, which had been put in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic (ANI, 2020):

A local, Karan Thapa, said that the Chinese retaliated when they were blocked by the local administration ... The locals were agitated as the workers had just returned from China, a country where the coronavirus outbreak was first identified and later spread to the entire world killing over 38,000 people.

The entire news story brings out the threat of coronavirus being brought on by the presence of Chinese nationals and later links the virus to China.

The story from the Print, headlined *'Banned fruit from coronavirus-hit China could force the closure of wholesale markets in India'* (Pandey, 2020), explores how the traders in Kolkata and Patna are in a panic over the presence of dragon fruit and banned Fuji apples from China in markets even as *mandis* (rural markets) across India face falls in sales and exports. "Wholesale fruit sellers fear a coronavirus outbreak in Kolkata due to the presence of a large quantity of banned Fuji apples from China in the market," Mukesh Sonkar, a wholesale fruit vendor from Mechhua, told the Print over the telephone.

Here the link between the coronavirus and China has been established as fruit sellers were scared of "Fuji apples from China in the market," creating a kind of phobia among the people.

Findings

It is observed, that the Sinophobia or anti-Chinese nationalism in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic was primarily seen in the regional language media (both print and electronic) including many Hindi media outlets. There have been debates and discussions primarily linked to how to counter the Chinese army and India's stand against the country.

The English-language media in India used terms like 'Chinese Virus' or 'Wuhan Virus' in the initial stage of the pandemic, from late December 2019 to March 2020, but after April, the use of these terms was not very much visible. However, there was a change of narrative observed after the Galwan Ghati incident¹¹ with Indian media taking a hyper-nationalist stand. They linked the coverage of the news on the banning of Chinese apps to anti-China conspiracy theories and dragged the virus issue into it. The English media also gave much coverage to the criticisms made by US President Donald Trump and other global statesmen on China.

As the COVID-19 virus across India, an overload of information and opinions overshadowed news, manipulating the discourse, adopting a

¹¹ In June 2020, a savage brawl between Indian and Chinese forces in the Galwan river valley in Ladakh, a disputed Himalayan border region, left at least 20 Indian soldiers dead.

xenophobic attitude and creating news anxiety. There could have been a number of reasons for this resorting to hyper-nationalism. One could be the race for Television Rating Points (TRP) and another to promote the views of the current government on any form of attack on its security.

With COVID-19, the role of media comes to the fore with regard to the critical assessment of discourses. In fact, the manipulation of narratives in this entire COVID-19 period has shown the critical role of media. Media in this time of crisis have taken on the role of change agents and moral police, instead of sitting back reporting neutrally. It has acted as the new epicenter of overloaded information, spreading anxieties among the audiences as the issues are misplaced with creating opinions – i.e. views in place of news.

Social media is considered as the primary agent of the infodemic that is unfolding during the pandemic crisis. Hundreds and thousands of such messages are made viral by unknown sources every day, which creates panic among common people (Dutta, 2020). Many people, including the new digitally literate, forward such messages not to harm anyone — instead, they intend to help near and dear ones. There has been the presence of several memes and trolls criticizing China, its way of life, and its role in not disclosing the details of the pandemic early enough.

It is also observed that derogatory messages and hate speech were circulated on a large scale with regard to COVID-19 being the creation of the Wuhan Lab, security issues on Chinese apps, how China collects the individual information of Indians through these apps, and border tensions in the Ladakh-Leh area. Most such messages have been disseminated through WhatsApp forwards and other means of information that lack credibility.

On the contrary, the Indian community media, more precisely the community radio stations, have been playing a significant constructive role during this period with a positive attitude to change the behavior of the ordinary people, without spreading misinformation or disinformation and helping the grassroots community to get the necessary information.

Conclusion

As a country, India is going through a very interesting phase, one that some may call challenging, while others may call it transitory. The pandemic has shaken the whole world's economic base and has rattled the peace of many countries so far contented with their strength in handling crises.

The shifting blame games have happened both internally as well as externally. Indian media has played a pivotal role during the lockdown. Both the English as well as the regional language media have their own sets of readers or viewers. Most of them design their content based on what their audience of readers want to see or hear.

From the qualitative as well as the quantitative analysis it is clear that nationalism has always been at the forefront while reporting any matters. Emotions have certainly overtaken the basic principles of neutral reporting in most cases. The language used is largely picked up from popular references and in many cases done with little or no regard for its repercussions. While the Chinese media has condemned their Indian counterpart for aggravating matters, certain claims made by them cannot be totally considered irrelevant or untrue.

While the regional language media or social media has been largely irresponsible in sowing the seeds of Sinophobia, the English media, be it print or online, has exercised a certain restraint, though not entirely.

The most interesting finding of the research is that loosely used words like Sinophobia have been used in most cases with little understanding of their implications. This could be attributed to the lack of research by the reporters, or the desk in most cases, and the lack of understanding of the situation. The consequent impact on the media consumers could be an interesting area of study in the coming years, but one cannot deny the relevance of the Uses and Gratification Theory, whereby media creates what the consumers want to see and vice versa. Similarly, in the wake of rising nationalism among the people, be it for political reasons or rightist policies, the acceptance of Sinophobic references would be hardly surprising.

The media could take a cue or two in following the principles of neutral reporting to prevent aggravating matters further, and help in

sorting out the strained bilateral ties between India and China in the years to come.

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CHAPTER 6

CHINA'S IMAGE DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON COVERAGE BY *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

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COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is a virus that was first found in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of central China's Hubei province. After an outbreak that caused more than 80,000 infected cases in China during the first two months of 2020, COVID-19 quickly spread to countries all over the world. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially defined COVID-19 as a pandemic, acknowledging that the virus had already become a global issue that every country would have to deal with.

By April 2020, this virus had already infected more than 530,000 people and caused more than 24,000 deaths worldwide (Countercurrents Collective, 2020). In addition to the massive number of deaths, COVID-19 has also triggered a global economic crisis and general stress among the public. China's role as a valuable trading partner for many countries also adversely affected the global economy. Large companies whose supply chains greatly depended on Chinese manufacturing were considerably impacted by the outbreak (Ahani and Nilashi, 2020).

Although COVID-19 did not cause large scale infections in the western world until March, the western media paid great attention to it from the beginning of the outbreak in Wuhan. From the coverage in mainstream newspapers in major western countries, a similar pattern of depicting China in a negative and stigmatizing manner can be observed (Bai, 2020). *The Wall Street Journal* released an article titled

"China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia"¹; the French newspaper *Le Courrier Picard* used the headline "Alerte Jaune" ("Yellow Alert") on their front page²; the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* used the headline "Coronavirus: Made in China" on their front page. Some western newspapers like *The New York Times* used "Wuhan pneumonia" or "Chinese virus" to name the disease and blamed China for its emergence (Bai, 2020). The western media also applied double-standards when discussing similar measures taken by different governments, and they tended to criticize the policies that the Chinese government implemented towards the outbreak, even though countries like Italy adopted similar, inflexible strategies (Peng, 2020). Although these aspects have only been highlighted in Op-Ed contributions to Chinese news outlets so far, it reflects a trend worth examining.



Picture 1: Screen shot of the front page of Der Spiegel,

Being two of the world's largest economies, diplomacy, image-building and relationship management are dominant issues in the ties between the US and China (Qing, 2007; Servaes, 2012). As one of the most influential news sources, *The New York Times* (NYT) represents

¹ *China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia*. 3 Feb. 2020, The Wall Street Journal: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>

² "Alerte Jaune", 26 Jan. 2020, *Courrier Picard*, p. 1.

the national power structure within the press and newspaper industry in the US (Dreier, 1982), and is likely to contribute to both primary and secondary level agenda setting (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Given its substantial coverage on China and considerable prestige amongst the public, this study examines news coverage from the *NYT* to ask: How did *The New York Times* construct the image of China in its early coverage of COVID-19?

Media Coverage: Pandemics and Stigmatization

Media play a crucial role in communicating health information to the public. Epidemics and pandemics, different from diseases like cancer and obesity, have a more urgent need for information communication due to their strong infectivity (Lee and Basnyat, 2013). The frames news media develop in their coverage direct people's understanding of complicated issues, further influencing public perceptions that affect behavior (McCauley et al., 2013; Pan and Meng, 2016). As the impact of the pandemic is unforeseen and far away from an individual's cognitive experience, media face challenges in engaging the public to do the right things (Lee and Basnyat, 2013; Shih et al., 2008).

The nature of what constitutes news value can also make pandemic coverage deviate from what is relevant for public consumption. When selecting news materials, media pursue unexpectedness, unpredictability, continuity, and negativity, which perfectly match with the nature of an ongoing pandemic (Galtung and Ruge, 1970; O'Neill and Harcup, 2009; Vasterman and Ruigrok, 2013). Media prefer the worst-case scenarios and add emotions to the coverage, making it less objective and more sensational (Vasterman and Ruigrok, 2013).

Previous research indicates that in the coverage of HIV/AIDS and the H1N1 pandemic, media have wrongly represented certain groups of society with stereotypical descriptions and linguistic cues in their coverage (Gouda, 2019; McCauley et al., 2013). In the HIV/AIDS case, patients were portrayed through a stereotype already rooted in the public mind to attract an audience (Brown et al., 1996; Gouda, 2019). Journalists perceive AIDS through a western cultural and medical perspective, focusing on how western institutions deal with it (Bardhan, 2001). In the H1N1 case, Latinos who lived in the US faced

discrimination because the media indicated that the origin of H1N1 was Mexican pig farms (McCauley et al., 2013).

In the case of COVID-19, biased news titles like "Chinese virus pandemonium" and "China kids stay home" stigmatized the Chinese nation, applying pressure on Chinese individuals who live abroad (Wen et al., 2020). One study revealed a positive relationship between media exposure and the prejudice towards foreign groups from countries such as China and Italy that were the hot zones of the virus in the beginning (Sorokowski et al., 2020). Sensational and racist content is not only used to catch audience attention but to also club a particular group of people together with the disease in order to relieve anxiety by having someone to blame (Barrett and Brown, 2008; Schoch-Spana et al., 2010).

Biased or negative coverage, including stigmatizing language and terminology, not only results in measurable impacts on our collective biases concerning minority Asian groups who live in Western countries (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), but may also have severe consequences for China's global image (Wen et al., 2020). The negative image depicted in media coverage could increase the anti-Chinese sentiment among western societies and result in an impact on global economic collaboration and other processes of globalization.

China's Image Construction in Western Media

The representation of the other in international journalism is always a controversial affair (Leung and Huang, 2007). Previous research (Peng, 2004) has found that although China's image in some North American newspapers was prominently negative regarding political and ideological aspects, the Chinese economy was depicted through a positive lens. As the Chinese economy is playing an increasingly indispensable role in global trade (Hirst, 2015), it is essential to assess shifts in news coverage during a worldwide pandemic.

In reporting international news, national interest is privileged as a crucial factor while framing news texts – thus the western media always stand in opposition to competing powers such as Russia and China, thereby protecting their own national interests (Saleem, 2007; Yang, 2003). For example, in a comparison study between Aljazeera English (AJE) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the

middle-east media AJE used a cooperation frame for China while the western media organization the BBC used a confrontation frame (Arif and Hayat, 2018). AJE conveyed a message that China was seeking collaboration and mutual development with other countries in the world, while the BBC conveyed a more negative portrayal of the Communist Party of China, indicating that the political system of China was weak and corrupted (Arif & Hayat, 2018). Foreign policy and national interests set the tone for international news coverage by western media.

Western media has become increasingly interested in China as it continues to progress as the largest developing country in the world (Aukia et al., 2017; Zhou and Hu, 2020). However, a large body of research has found negative impressions of China in international news covered by western media. A study of the US print media from 2000 to 2002 showed that China was depicted as a brutal and dangerous 'other' (Liss, 2003). The negative image, which was overwhelming, focused on the Taiwan issue, social crimes, human rights, social unrest, and corruption. In contrast, the positive aspect portrayed China as a promising economic market and focused on reforms and cultural changes.

The media were critical of social phenomenon that was different from the US standard, and these phenomena were regarded as progress only when they were transformed into the US model (Liss, 2003). During the 2002 SARS pandemic, the image of China in western media was negatively constructed in the context of political-institutional faults, local bureaucratic obstacles, leadership contentions, and poor health systems (Leung and Huang, 2007). A study by Arif and Hayat (2018) finds that although China has been changing rapidly in recent years, the frames that western media use to portray China have not changed.

Peng (2004) has summarized three salient news frames on China-related coverage in US newspapers: political, ideological (cultural), and economic frames. Within the political and ideological frames, the portrait of China as a manipulative Communist country, contrasts sharply with the US ideology of liberty, democracy, and human rights, allowing for the development of a particular sentiment amongst the American public (Peng, 2004). The economic frame, however, has a

much more positive tone because the US can gain benefits from the substantially growing economy in China (Peng, 2004).

Western media interprets China's politics and economy differently. Liss (2003) indicates that although the US media mainly portrayed China as a rival to the US in the political aspect, they presented China as an economic partner to some extent. Aukia et al. (2017) also find that coverage about economy and culture are more positive while the political-themed articles are overall more negative. Various reasons, from lack of proper sources to language barriers for journalists, and editorial decisions, organizational routines and stereotyping within the editorial management offices, are likely to play a role in the development of these specific news patterns (Guo, 2012; Peng, 2004).

Nevertheless, the negative image of China is not always the deliberate result of biased media coverage. Leung and Huang (2007) claim that the reason behind China's negative image during the SARS outbreak was mainly due to the Chinese government's own approaches to policies and actions. Media coverage was regarded as mostly objective and impartial since the behaviors of the Chinese government justified the representations (Leung and Huang, 2007).

In examining large-scale data, Aukia et al. (2017) also found a neutral or positive overview in the context of China-related news, thus indicating that some negative results discovered by small-scale studies are probably specific to certain topics and forums. Given this theoretical exploration and existing nuances, examining the image construction of China by the NYT during the COVID-19 pandemic acquires relevance and significance from multiple perspectives, including media framing, public diplomacy and international relations.

Methodology and Rationale

We used qualitative content analysis to examine news stories about China during the early phase of COVID-19 in the *NYT*. Qualitative content analysis is a social research approach to interpret data in a non-numeric way (Babbie, 2018). Compared to quantitative analysis, which examines causal relationships, the qualitative analysis focuses more on meanings and patterns. As this study aimed to examine the overall depiction of China in newspaper coverage, qualitative content

analysis was advantageous for discovering the underlying frames and tones in the news stories.

News coverage is not simply the reporting of facts – it inevitably contains subjective selections of information that journalists think are more important than others (Nisbet, 2009). Resultant media frames filter information, including ideas, feelings, and judgments, thereby shaping audience sentiments and perceptions on a social issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Price et al., 1997; Scheufele, 1999, 2000). Frames also allow audiences to easily make sense of complex social phenomenon and events and interpret the world around them (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Scheufele and Lewinsein, 2005). Frames identify problems, diagnose causes, conduct moral evaluations and offer solutions (Entman, 1993), thereby creating a designated space for judgment and influencing public perception.

As a methodology, framing analysis is used in both public and private arenas, focusing on media representation and individual perceptions respectively (Li and Chitty, 2009). In order to examine image representation by journalists in media content, both inductive and deductive methods can be used to achieve different goals across different scales of data (Li and Chitty, 2009).

This study adopts an inductive, in-depth approach to the data to discover what exactly is represented, not only in the headlines, but also in the texts of media coverage during COVID-19. Although media framing analysis on the coverage of China during global pandemics like SARS has been conducted by previous researchers (Leung and Huang, 2007), the rapidly changing Chinese landscape in the last decade and the precision of measurement indicate that the main frames they generated from their research (political/media institutional faults, local bureaucratic obstacles, leadership contention and poor health systems) cannot fully represent the media image construction during COVID-19. The political, social and economic landscapes of China have changed dramatically from 2002 when SARS took place, as have the international reputation and problem-solving tactics that the Chinese government applied during all periods of the pandemic.

Timeline and Data Organization

The COVID-19 outbreak was still unfolding rapidly all over the world when this research was conducted, therefore it was not possible to conduct an analytical study spanning the entire timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. China was no longer one of the main pandemic-affected areas after the daily-infected cases were reduced and contained from March onward (Xinhua, 2020). Thus, news stories in the first three months of 2020, were anticipated to be more focused and localized. Data was collected from the period of 9 January 2020, when the *NYT* published the first article about the virus³, to 31 March 2020.

In January, COVID-19 started to spread in Wuhan and a few other Chinese cities. On 23 January, the government officially ordered a lockdown of Wuhan (Wang et al., 2020). In February, the cases in China mounted, and the virus started to prevail in other countries like South Korea and Italy. After March, China witnessed a significant drop in new cases. 13 March was the first day that China's number of daily new cases dropped to a single digit (Xinhua, 2020). After that, cases from overseas began to exceed domestic cases in China, changing the focus of reporting on containment measures in China to mainly assessing prevention of imported cases. Additionally, in February 2020, the World Health Organization issued a clear missive to media institutions to not label the virus by attaching it to any country or ethnicity⁴, thereby making the study of media coverage in the initial days of the pandemic even more relevant.

Data was collected by accessing the *NYT* archive on the Factiva database using the keywords 'China' and 'coronavirus'. COVID-19 was not used as a keyword because the newspaper didn't use it frequently, especially in the beginning when COVID-19 had not yet been selected by the WHO as the official name. The *NYT* blogs and international edition were not included in this research. The initial search results displayed 233 news stories. After eliminating duplicates, these articles were manually filtered through to select 105 news stories that

³ *China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonia-Like Illness*, 9 Jan. 2020, *NYT*.

⁴ WHO statement, 24 Feb. 2020, *Social stigma associated with COVID-19*: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/COVID19-stigma-guide.pdf>

focused on China's image and management of the virus. Articles that centered on scientific discussions about the virus, US-focused economic discussions, developments around the virus and policies in other countries, individual experiences from other countries, etc., were identified and eliminated. Of the 105 news stories, 19 stories were from January, 63 stories were from February, and 23 stories were from March. The news stories were then sampled by a random number generator, to get a final data sample of 40 articles (8 in January, 24 in February, and 8 in March; for the article list, see Appendix A). Each month was randomly sampled according to its proportion in the whole body of the data set. Thus, February had many more articles than the other two months.

We used the software Atlas.ti to extract and categorize codes from the data in an inductive approach. News pictures or any other visual elements were not included in the analysis. Each statement, which could be a headline, a lead, and one or several paragraphs related to the image of China, was identified with at least one code (for sample analysis see Appendix A). The preliminary codes were categorized into groups in a way that codes around the same theme formed larger frames. Similar codes were merged to simplify the results.

After all the data were coded, residual codes, which had only emerged once, were eliminated. Finally, five main frames, containing 20 codes, were identified for the codebook (see Appendix B). To ensure consistency and reliability of the coding process, 10 articles were double coded by the two researchers independently as a form of trial coding. We took our lead and methodological direction from Schreier (2014) through the process of data structuring, segmentation and evaluation.

Results

The dataset of articles collected from January to March 2020 revealed that the *NYT* presented China through a largely unfavorable lens during the early phase of the pandemic. Five prevalent frames are generalized: 'Disease mismanagement', 'Poor healthcare and sanitation', 'Repressive political regime', 'Negative public reactions', and 'Economic impact'.

The 'Disease mismanagement' frame centers on how the COVID-19 outbreak was managed in China. It includes descriptions of specific measures and policies taken to contain the virus and the mistakes that were made during the whole process of disease management. The frame of 'Poor healthcare and sanitation' highlights the performance of the Chinese healthcare system and sanitary situation before and during the outbreak. The 'Repressive political regime' frame illustrates a perspective on the Chinese government and political system. It is marked by a strongly negative view of the Communist Party and especially President Xi, who was believed to have absolute control of the country. The 'Negative public reaction' frame consists of the reactions of the Chinese public towards the actions of the government, focusing especially on the negative opinions online and the anti-government and anti-mainland sentiment in Hong Kong. The 'Economic impact' frame is about the domestic and global economic impact triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak in China.

Disease Mismanagement

This frame contains four salient codes identified from the data: inefficient containment measures, delayed response, lack of information and global criticism. Although the *NYT* coverage included plenty of information about measures taken by Chinese policy makers, most of them were presented in a skeptical tone in terms of their effectiveness and legitimacy. The number of containment measures that were described as inefficient and useless largely outweighed the ones that were described as reasonable and effective. For instance, the lockdown of Wuhan was regarded as a controversial measure by the *NYT*, and highlighted as ineffective and an intrusion on personal liberty. The newspaper provided judgment on the Chinese administration at the outset, calling it "another exasperating fumble by Wuhan officials, who many believe have mishandled the epidemic"⁵. It was also written off as "a desperate attempt to stop the virus from spreading"⁶, and projected as not only useless but even harmful. Similarly, when talking about the construction of makeshift medical facilities in Wuhan, journalists wrote: "Desperate officials hastily devised plans to convert stadiums, exhibition centers, hotels and

⁵ *Disease Surges, And Lockdown May Not Halt It*, 27 Jan. 2020, *NYT*.

⁶ *New Timeline of Events as Xi Says He Led Fight Against Virus Early On*, 16 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

schools into temporary medical centers for thousands who could not get admitted to a hospital”⁷.

The employment of words such as ‘desperate’ and ‘hastily’ demonstrates that the journalists were trying to convey an impression of panic and maladministration. Besides the containment measures, other mistakes made by the government authorities were also emphasized. The coverage constantly mentioned the lack of information around disease-related data and the explanation of policies that journalists thought should be provided by the authorities. Also, the delayed response to the rapidly changing outbreak situation was recognized as evidence of disease mismanagement.

Finally, criticism from scholars, activists and spokespersons from organizations all over the world was quoted to prove that the rest of the world did not support the measures being taken in China. Overall, disease management in China is depicted as having failed rather than succeeded.

Poor Healthcare and Sanitation

During the COVID-19 outbreak, China’s medical system naturally became a focus of the news coverage. This frame contains four main codes: medical resources shortage, underdeveloped health system, patients left to die, and hotbed for viruses.

During the early stage of the outbreak, according to the *NYT*, hospital beds, doctors, masks, protective gear, test kits, and other medical resources were all in short supply. A large number of patients were not able to get tested or get accepted by the hospitals and treated because the hospitals were overwhelmed. What is noteworthy is that the *NYT* highlighted the underdeveloped healthcare system in China, blaming the cause of the outbreak on the feeble system but not the uncertainty and unpredictability of the unknown virus. Journalists wrote that “the country is relying on a medical system that is overburdened even in normal times”, claiming that China does not have “a functioning primary system, so most people flock to hospitals”

⁷ *China Expanding a Virus Dragnet*, 14 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

and suggesting that “it was more important to have a working system of family doctors who can act as gatekeepers for the hospitals”⁸.

This suggestion demonstrates a strain of ethnocentrism among media workers with western ideologies, assuming that western solutions and systems are more reasonable than the ones in other countries with very different cultural and operational backgrounds. This trend is also visible in other frames, such as the way the *NYT* covered both the general death toll and some specific cases of death caused by COVID-19. However, some cues could be found in the way deaths were described, indicating that people were left to die by the government. For example, one particular article said that “vulnerable patients were isolated without adequate care and, in some cases, left alone to die”⁹.

Besides language cues, the *NYT* also used metaphors to describe the sanitary conditions in China. The emergency rooms in Wuhan were compared to a “mixing vessel”¹⁰; the market was described as “a thriving lab for virus”¹¹; and the country was singled out as amongst the “hot spots for emerging zoonotic diseases”¹².

Repressive Political Regime

During the COVID-19 outbreak, Chinese politics were also featured as a primary issue in US-based media. This frame includes five codes: incapable government officials, a cover-up mechanism, authoritarianism, narrative control, and human rights violations. The *NYT* depicted the Chinese local and central government as largely incapable and irresponsible. Coverage over all three months mentioned a cover-up mechanism, indicating that the authorities talked down the seriousness of the pandemic and covered up the real number of infected patients.

Authoritarianism is depicted as a prominent feature of the Chinese political system, in which President Xi and the Communist Party are

⁸ *Feeble Health System in China Strains to Combat Deadly Virus*, 28 Jan. 2020, *NYT*.

⁹ *China Expanding a Virus Dagnet*, 14 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

¹⁰ *Disease Surges, And Lockdown May Not Halt It*, 27 Jan. 2020, *NYT*

¹¹ *In China's Markets, a Thriving Lab for Viruses*, 26 Jan. 2020, *NYT*.

¹² *Stop Wildlife Trade to Prevent Next Epidemic, Conservationists Say*, 20 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

portrayed as possessing significant power to manipulate all aspects of society. As the head of the Communist Party and the country, President Xi was depicted as “an agile political operator” who should have taken the responsibility for the mismanagement of the disease but “has emerged from other crises relatively unscathed”¹³ by shifting criticism to the local governments and setting up protégés of himself while dismissing scapegoats. The *NYT* showed great interest in depicting the narrative control imposed by the government, such as domestic political propaganda, censorship to suppress dissent in online speech, and efforts to change the unfavorable global reputation accusing and blaming China for the pandemic. The purpose of the controlled narrative, according to the *NYT*, is “to seize greater control over the thoughts, words, and even memories of China's 800 million web users”¹⁴. The *NYT* also depicted the human rights violations in China, including the police cracking down on free press and free speech, the carrying out of surveillance on citizens violating their privacy, and the imprisoning of innocent people in violation of their personal freedom. In this frame, it is noteworthy that there was a visible trend of accusing the systems that function as the basis of China. A quote in one article claimed that “in China there is no socialism or communism” but only “elite controlled capitalism”¹⁵. American and Chinese political systems were compared to each other, and conclusions drawn to align with western-centric ideology. Overall, the tone of coverage around Chinese politics was very unfavorable.

Negative Public Reactions

Most of the public reactions selected for depiction in the *NYT* were negative. Among them, five main codes were identified: public anger, public fear, public distrust of the government, public criticism against the government, and anti-government protests.

Public anger towards government officials and the measures they took to contain COVID-19 is the most salient sentiment mentioned in the coverage (occurring 24 times in the sample). For instance, when a doctor who acted as the whistleblower of COVID-19 died, the *NYT*

¹³ *China, in Propaganda Push, Boasts of Response to Crisis*, 29 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

¹⁴ *China's Internet Police Crack Down on Outrage*, 18 Mar. 2020, *NYT*.

¹⁵ *An American in a Locked Down Chinese Town: 'Everyone Here Is So Bored.'*, 13 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

depicted the public sentiment by writing that “waves of mourning and anger swept across China's internet”¹⁶.

Fear was also mentioned many times, not only concerning the pandemic but also in the context of suppression by the government. Distrust and criticism of the government was mentioned regularly because of the reasons listed in the previous three frames. The negative public reactions were mainly collected from Chinese social media and through interviews of Chinese citizens.

The frame of ‘Negative Public Reactions’ was found to co-exist with the frames of ‘Disease Mismanagement’, ‘Poor Healthcare and Sanitation’ and ‘Repressive Political Regime’, by way of strengthening and constructing evidence of public dissatisfaction with the government’s severe repression and poor performance.

Economic Impact

There are two main codes in this frame: domestic economic contraction and impact on global economy. On a domestic scale, according to the *NYT*, the economic growth in China is undergoing a slowdown and contraction due to COVID-19. The *NYT* especially emphasized the importance of the Chinese economy for the world: “China has risen into an enormous consumer market” and “has evolved into an essential part of the global supply chain”¹⁷. Quotes described China as “a potentially vast swath of a country that the whole world depends on as a manufacturing workshop”¹⁸ and thus argued that the impact of the wave of stagnated Chinese manufacturing is likely to play out on a global scale, influencing areas like oil prices, global delivery, entertainment, technology, automobiles, travel, food, clothing, and luxury. The *NYT* also pointed out that not only multinational corporations but also governments all over the world depend on China and the Chinese economy quite heavily since they need medical supplies, mainly manufactured in China, to fight COVID-19. For this reason, the *NYT* claimed that some countries were

¹⁶ *China's Internet Police Crack Down on Outrage*, 18 Mar. 2020, *NYT*.

¹⁷ *Trade Networks Face New Menace In a Coronavirus*, 3 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

¹⁸ *Virus's Effect on Commerce Ripples Out*, 11 Feb. 2020, *NYT*.

“asking if their economies are too dependent on China”¹⁹ and cautioned against this dependence.

Discussion

This study examined the portrayal of the Chinese response to the coronavirus outbreak in *The New York Times (NYT)* through a qualitative analysis. Although different points of views were presented in the coverage, the overall tone depicting China was prominently negative. Through its early coverage, the *NYT* portrayed China as a country with a repressive political regime, and that mismanaged the disease with its poor healthcare system during the COVID-19 outbreak. Mistakes made by the government led to negative public reactions from the public. The overall tone around the Chinese economy was also negative. However, the difference between the economic frame and other frames is that it extended the focus from Chinese domestic issues to an international platform, relating it to the US and the global economy.

These results were mainly consistent with previous research on how the *NYT* and other mainstream western media construct China's image (Arif and Hayat, 2018; Peng, 2004). The image of China remained negative, especially from a political perspective where the blame for a poor health system and disease management was ultimately placed on the government and top leaders.

The reason could lie in the fact that China and the US are built on distinct political systems. Alongside this, deeper value differences such as collectivism versus individualism, communism versus democracy, and harmony theory (Callahan, 2015) versus human rights have made it difficult for both journalists and audiences to understand the legitimacy of the Chinese system (Arif and Hayat, 2018). The usage of negative frames is also reflective of the sensationalism that journalists pursued and the existing stereotypes that were being co-opted (Gouda, 2019; Vasterman and Ruigrok, 2013). Therefore, even if China has changed rapidly or improved in disease handling and management since the SARS outbreak, little progress was acknowledged in the coverage by the *NYT*.

¹⁹ *Beijing Battles the Blow To Its Image as a Power*, 7 Mar. 2020, *NYT*.

To what extent do the frames found in this study reflect an accurate construction of China's response to coronavirus? Other information sources spotlight different aspects of the Chinese approach that the *NYT* tends to neglect. For example, after the rate of new cases decreased in March, the WHO acknowledged China's effort in containing the disease and claimed that their actions helped prevent the virus from spreading (Meredith, 2020). The lockdown measure in Wuhan was also proven to be effective, as recent research points out (Taghrir et al., 2020).

Most countries adopted similar lockdown measures at the peak of the virus infection, soon after China. However, this acknowledgement, both regarding the validity and parallel adaptation of China's approach is missing in the coverage by the *NYT* in March. Instead, the newspaper focused on narrative control measures by the Communist Party, highlighting factors from a domain separate from health communication – personal liberty, free speech, surveillance and privacy. Similarly, only negative public reactions were magnified while positive reactions by the Chinese people were not depicted in the *NYT*.

Researchers have praised China's response to the pandemic, attributing its success to “strong governance, strict regulation and spontaneous community/citizen participation” (Hua and Shaw, 2020: 10; see also He et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2020), deviating from the perception generated by the *NYT*.

China's healthcare system was also presented from a largely one-dimensional perspective; the *NYT* described it as “stagnated”. However, research indicates that the healthcare system in China has been developing steadily since the SARS outbreak, with improved funding, access and transformation of resources and service delivery (Sun et al., 2017; Yip et al., 2019). Not all of China's response mechanisms can be deemed praiseworthy, and as Leung and Huang (2007) point out in past research, some government responses are likely to have triggered accurate criticism. However, there is little evidence for the predominantly one-sided perspective provided by the *NYT*.

The presentation of the Chinese economy in the *NYT* after the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak is also noteworthy. Previous research framed the Chinese economy positively, portraying China as a promising market and good commercial partner (Liss, 2003; Peng,

2004). Nevertheless, the *NYT* warns its audience that too much reliance on the Chinese economy is harmful, and advocates for a change in the status quo. This approach may have its roots in the increasing political and economic confrontation between China and the US in recent years (Evans, 2019). When US policy makers approach China more as a threat than a partner, US-based newspapers stay consistent and loyal to the national interest of the US (Peng, 2004).

Along with assembling narratives of discrimination (Wen et al., 2020), the media are a key player in constructing national images and influencing both policy agendas and public attitudes (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McNelly and Izcaray, 1986). Through primary and secondary level agenda setting, as well as tone of reportage (particularly negative) around foreign countries, the media function as diplomatic devices and influence public perception while granting (or dismantling) credibility (Nye, 2008; Zhang and Meadows, 2012). This calls for accurate representation, less sensationalism, and better consideration of news ethics as important news values, in communicating health, improving international relations, maintaining public diplomacy and counteracting discrimination.

Implication and Limitations

This study has two strong implications. First, by studying the coverage of *The New York Times*, both the public and the academic circle are afforded an initial glimpse into how Western elite newspapers constructed the image of China during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Some inconsistencies with previous research reveal how China's image in the Western media has changed during recent decades. Second, this work raises the question of media responsibility in reducing discrimination and maintaining international harmony. Dominantly negative messages by a newspaper, based on poor or no fact-checking, can become a catalyst for broader discriminatory practices, as well as global discord. The initial months of the coverage on COVID-19 seemed to be marked by the practice of blaming and 'othering', instead of providing a valuable opportunity for building international relations based on support and harmony. COVID-19 has highlighted the need for a journalism of ethics and sensitivity.

This study must be considered within the ambit of its limited scope. First, the time frame of this research is limited to the first three months of 2020. Second, as a qualitative study, the analysis focused on just one newspaper and depicted a relatively limited perspective, specific to only one news institution. For future research, the COVID-19 global outbreak could be studied through a wider timeframe, and quantitative research could be conducted to measure and quantify further news output. It could also be worthwhile to explore how different audiences perceive the frames and the significance and impact of improper language usage in any newspaper.

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Appendix A

Article list

Newspaper: *The New York Times*

Month	Date	Headline
January	09/01/2020	China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonia-Like Illness
	16/01/2020	Japan Confirms First Case of New Chinese Coronavirus
	21/01/2020	China Says New Virus Can Be Spread by Humans
	26/01/2020	In China's Markets, a Thriving Lab for Viruses
	27/01/2020	Disease Surges, And Lockdown May Not Halt It
	28/01/2020	Feeble Health System in China Strains to Combat Deadly Virus
	28/01/2020	On Chinese Social Media, Anger Over Virus
	31/01/2020	After Days on Lockdown, Anger Boils Over and Doctors Plead for Aid
February	03/02/2020	Trade Networks Face New Menace in a Coronavirus
	03/02/2020	A Fever of 104, Hours to Wait, And No Relief
	04/02/2020	China Foresees 'Test' as World Shuts Its Doors
	04/02/2020	Coronavirus Spread May Hurt China's Bid to Fulfill Trade Deal
	04/02/2020	In Hong Kong, an Oasis in the Outbreak, a Fight Over Border Controls
	04/02/2020	Virtual Shutdown Clears Out China's Capital
	05/02/2020	Empty Streets, Empty Stores: Virus's Economic Toll in Chinatowns
	07/02/2020	China Cuts Some Tariffs in a Truce That May Not Hold
	09/02/2020	Beijing's Prescription to Fight Virus Buffalo Horn and Roots
	10/02/2020	As Deaths Mount, a Race to Screen Ever More Patients to Slow an Epidemic
	11/02/2020	Virus's Effect on Commerce Ripples Out
	13/02/2020	An American in a Locked Down Chinese Town 'Everyone Here Is So Bored.'

	13/02/2020	Coronavirus Live Updates Hot Zone Infections Skyrocket
	13/02/2020	Number of Cases Reported by Authorities Ebbs and Surges
	14/02/2020	Beijing Ousts 2 Top Leaders in Province Hit Hardest
	14/02/2020	China Expanding a Virus Dragnet
	14/02/2020	Why Numbers for the Sickened and the Fatalities Changed So Sharply
	16/02/2020	New Timeline of Events as Xi Says He Led Fight Against Virus Early on
	19/02/2020	China Blocks Ally in Virus Fight Its Own People
	20/02/2020	Stop Wildlife Trade to Prevent Next Epidemic, Conservationists Say
	28/02/2020	China Bans Consuming and Trading Wildlife
	28/02/2020	To Protect Global Health, Work with China
	29/02/2020	China, in Propaganda Push, Boasts of Response to Crisis
	29/02/2020	Why Is Data on Coronavirus So Limited
March	02/03/2020	In China, Color-Coded Data Raises Red Flags
	04/03/2020	China's Health System, Devoured by Virus Care, Neglects Other Illnesses
	07/03/2020	Beijing Battles the Blow to Its Image as a Power
	14/03/2020	China Makes the Masks the World Needs. It Is Just Starting to Share
	15/03/2020	Two Women Fell Sick. Only One Recovered
	18/03/2020	China's Internet Police Crack Down on Outrage
	20/03/2020	China's Ill-Timed Attack on the Free Press
	28/03/2020	China Fights to Police Surging Supply Pipeline

Appendix B

Codebook

Frames	Key Codes	Brief description
Poor healthcare and sanitation	Underdeveloped health system	China has a feeble health system which was overwhelmed during the outbreak. The health system has not changed much since SARS, and a "functioning primary care system" is missing.
	Patients left to die	The New York Times mentioned especially the deaths of patients. The reason for some deaths was described as the medical supply shortage, while others were described as resulting from the indifference and inability of the government. What's more, some deaths were not even confirmed, they just "appeared to be dead".
	Medical resources shortage	Hospital beds, doctors, testing kits and all kinds of medical supplies ran out during the outbreak. The patients couldn't get tested, or get accepted by the hospital and treated.
	Hotbed for viruses	The New York Times has used metaphors to compare China to a hotbed for viruses. The emergency rooms in Wuhan were described as a "mixing vessel"; China's markets were described as "a thriving lab for virus"; China was described as having "hot spots for emerging zoonotic diseases".
Negative public reaction	Public fear	The public was afraid and panicked, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the suppression of free speech.
	Public distrust of the government	The public did not trust the government mainly due to the nontransparent and even covered-up information about outbreak.

	Public criticism against the government	The public were not satisfied with the government officials and the measures they took to contain COVID-19. They voice their criticism against the government on social media.
	Public anger	The Chinese public was angry towards the government officials and the measures they took to contain COVID-19. The anger was mainly proved by quotations from Chinese social media.
	Antigovernment protests	Protests and strikes against the mainland government took place in Hong Kong, both related and unrelated to COVID-19.
Repressive political regime	Narrative control	The Chinese government made efforts to control the domestic and global narrative. They launched political propaganda (brainwashing), deployed Internet police and set up censorship of online public opinion, and tried to change the unfavorable global reputation accusing China as the one to blame for the pandemic.
	Incapable government officials	Both the local government and the top leaders were described as incapable of managing the outbreak.
	Human rights violations	The Chinese government violated human rights in the following ways: crackdown on free press and online speech; violation of privacy (surveillance); violation of personal freedom; suppression of the Hong Kong protest.
	Cover-up mechanism	From the beginning of the outbreak to March, the government has been covering up the real situation of the pandemic to the public. The seriousness of the pandemic was talked down, and the number of infected patients was not reported truly.

	Authoritarianism	The Chinese political system is authoritarian, which was shown in the great power of President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party. The President and the Party had unlimited control on political, social and economic issues in China. The President drew up political schemes, deflected the blame away and boasted about his achievements; he supported protégés of himself while dismissing scapegoats.
Disease mismanagement	Lack of information	The information on the disease was not sufficient and transparent enough.
	Inefficient containment measures	Although many measures were taken to contain the pandemic, most of them were described as inefficient, useless and even harmful.
	Global criticism	The New York Times quoted a large number of criticisms on Chinese disease management from international scholars and organizations.
	Delayed response	The responses to crisis were always late and not timely enough, according to The New York Times.
Economic impact	Impact on global economy	China's importance in the global economy has been increasing in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the Chinese economy, and thus had a great impact on the global economy since the huge consumer market in China stopped being active and supply chains were broken because factories in China stopped working. The US should be aware of its intense business reliance on China (medical supplies, for example).
	Domestic economic contraction	The outbreak of COVID-19 will make the Chinese domestic economy growth slow down or even fall back.

CHAPTER 7

SRI LANKA'S BATTLE AGAINST COVID-19: MEDIA CAUGHT IN ELECTIONS AND HEALTH CRISIS

SUGATH MAHINDA SENARATH

The COVID-19 pandemic is just like a monster knocking at the door. It has already affected many countries around the world, irrespective of being rich or poor or powerful in the global power arena. The COVID-19 pandemic has also triggered a new paradigm shift in every aspect of human society including communication and politics. It is almost certain that the neo-liberalist phase of global capitalism has reached its peak, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exposing its shortcomings. What will come up in the aftermath of neo-liberalism is not clear. Nonetheless, it is certain that it would be a continuation of capitalism in a different form and content, primarily owing to the fact that the social liberationist forces are not in a position to transform the power equation of global society. It is not yet clear what kind of capitalism would emerge in the aftermath of the neo-liberalist phase at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (Liyanage, 2020).

On August 5, 2020, a parliamentary election was held in Sri Lanka to elect its 16th Parliament, with the post-COVID-19 pandemic and the post-election period expected to lead to growing unemployment, an increasing trade and fiscal deficit, and a heavy debt service burden.

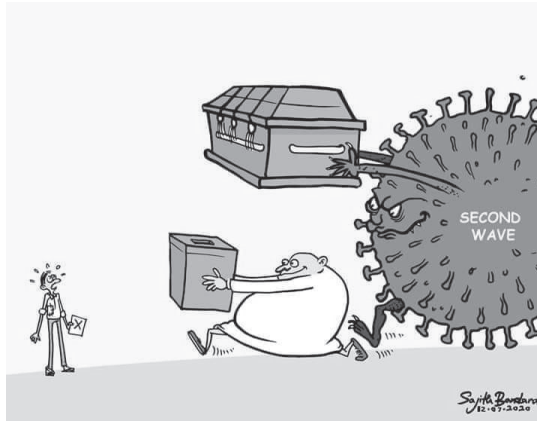
In Sri Lanka, as of election time, thanks to the standard of the public health system, the cooperation of the security forces (including police), the media, and the leadership given by the government, Sri Lanka has been able to keep the COVID-19 pandemic under control. But unfortunately, on October 4, 2020, in post-election Sri Lanka, a COVID-19 positive cluster was found at the Brandix Apparel Factory in

Minuwangoda (approximately 13 km from Bandaranayake International Airport, Katunayake). At the beginning some of the media named it the 'Brandix cluster' on account of the company's name. However, it was later named as 'Minuwangoda Cluster' based on the place that the aforementioned garment factory was situated. Allegations have been leveled against the parent company Brandix Apparel Limited for mishandling the COVID-19 positive cases. Media reports indicated that workers had been forced to come to work when they reported sick. Before the outbreak, there were reports in the media of a planeload of workers brought into Sri Lanka from their factory in India and it was alleged that they were not properly quarantined before being brought into work at the factory in Minuwangoda¹. An investigation was still going on at the time of writing.

However, at least one health official has confirmed the community transmission of the virus in Sri Lanka. Former Medical Research Institute (MRI) director Dr. Jayaruwan Bandara told a private television news network that the virus had been in the community for the past few months outside of the clusters identified by the health officials. He had further said to the Derana TV that there was a danger in that situation. Dr. Bandara was removed from his position as MRI director without any official reason given.²

¹ Economynext (October 7, 2020), Brandix cluster passes 1000 confirmed cases in Sri Lanka's biggest COVID-19 outbreak: <https://economynext.com/brandix-cluster-passes-1000-confirmed-cases-in-sri-lankas-biggest-COVID-19-outbreak-yet-74514/>

² Economynext (October 6, 2020), MRI Director Dr Jayaruwan Bandara demoted and deputy appointed as head: <https://economynext.com/mri-director-dr-jayaruwan-bandara-demoted-and-deputy-appointed-as-head-74445/>



Picture 1. This cartoon depicts the power-driven politics during the COVID -19 pandemic. Source: Sajith Bandara, (July 13, 2020, Facebook). Reprinted with permission

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Elections in Sri Lanka

The parliamentary polls were initially to be held on April 25, but had to be postponed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which prompted the authorities to announce a nationwide lockdown from March 20, 2020. The country was under lockdown from March 20 to June 13, 2020. On June 10, 2020 the Chairman of the Election Commission confirmed that the postponed parliamentary elections could be held on August 5, 2020³.

Sri Lanka was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic before the first patient was reported in the country. Screening of self-declarations at the country's airports began in early January 2020. The first PCR laboratory was started on January 21, which was even before the first case surfaced.

Fight Against COVID-19 and Political Propaganda

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a part of political propaganda since its beginning. For example, when Wuhan city, in Hubei province,

³ Adaderana (June 10, 2020):

<https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=64554>

China, imposed lockdowns at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Sri Lankan students there contacted Sri Lankan media, especially electronic and social media, explaining their grievances living in Wuhan during such a difficult period. They asked the Sri Lankan government to bring them home. The Sri Lankan government sent a charter flight of the national carrier Sri Lankan Airlines with the permission of the Chinese government. This became a huge propaganda victory for the government in Sri Lanka. Media reported that this was the second rescue mission after the 30-year civil war and the crew of the Sri Lankan Airlines flight were presented as heroes. Media also further mentioned that Sri Lankans were now safe and strong because Sri Lanka had good political leadership.

The role of the military in Sri Lanka's COVID-19 battle has received many commendations, and the accuracy of contact tracing with the use of military intelligence and the development of quarantine centers for traced contacts has been a major factor in Sri Lanka's effective control of the virus at the point of time of writing. Meanwhile, community medical specialists under the Ministry of Health did not allow community transmission to happen. In addition to early lockdowns, the steady step-by-step recovery through efficient contact tracing and quarantine missions with the help of the military covered all the gaps to prevent community spread.

These issues were widely covered in the media. Education and awareness programs were seen frequently via mass media including social media that conducted interviews with medical specialists and government officials regarding the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the Sri Lankan health system under the leadership of its Director-General of Health Services built a new environment around what already existed.

Sri Lanka also imposed curfews, which were "Quarantine Curfews", under the provisions of the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance. This was imposed as early as the latter part of March 2020 after the identification of the first cluster of COVID-19 patients. Participating in discussions at the National Operations Center for Preventing COVID-19, Ajith Rohana, the Deputy Inspector General of Police and police media spokesman, said, "If any person fails to follow the guidelines of the health officials, even when the curfew is not in effect, such individuals would be arrested and prosecuted in terms of

the provisions of the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance”. He also said that with the relaxing of the curfew, the Director-General of Health Services vested powers with the Acting Inspector General of Police to take necessary action, in terms of the law. He stressed that the curfew in place was a “Quarantine Curfew”, imposed under the provisions of the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance. He further mentioned, “All those who violate it would be arrested and prosecuted, which would result in a 6-month prison term and a fine”⁴ (Farzan, 2020).

A Chinese woman aged 40 who arrived on January 19, 2020 and fell ill on January 25 was confirmed on January 27 as the first case of coronavirus in Sri Lanka⁵, by the chief epidemiologist at the Ministry of Health. She fully recovered and was released on February 19, 2020. When she was released, it was turned into a huge propaganda stunt by the Sri Lankan government.

On discharge, she was received by Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi and Director-General Health Services Anil Jasinghe⁶. Minister Wanninayake also visited the hospital where the Chinese lady took treatment and gave a fond hug to the Chinese lady (see picture). However, during the early stage of COVID-19 spread in Sri Lanka there were some incidents reported by the media on the ill treatment of Chinese people in Sri Lanka, including not allowing them into shops and taxis, with the assumption that they were possible spreaders of COVID-19 to Sri Lankans.

⁴ Violating “Quarantine Curfew” will lead to 06 months in prison, 23 April 2020, Sirasa News First, Sri Lanka:

<https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/04/23/violating-quarantine-curfew-will-lead-to-06-months-in-prison-dig/>

⁵ Colombo Pages (Jan. 27, 2020). First patient with coronavirus reported in Sri Lanka:

http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20A/Jan27_1580144354CH.php

⁶ Economynext (Feb. 19, 2020). Sri Lanka discharges fully recovered Chinese Coronavirus patient.: <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-discharges-fully-recovered-chinese-coronavirus-patient-51701/>



Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi kisses recovered first COVID-19 patient, Chinese woman who was treated at a government hospital. (Photo credit Ministry of Health Handout Photo adapted from economynext.com, February 19, 2020)

The first infected Sri Lankan was a lady living in Italy and she was lucky to be alive. The first local case found was a 52-year-old tour guide who had contact with a group of Italians. By the time the first Sri Lankan national tested positive, there were 29 patients, including eight foreigners, in government hospitals under observation. Considering this situation, the government imposed a suspension of the 'visa on arrival' process for foreign nationals.

Battle Of Humanitarian Assistance

On March 15, 2020, the Presidential Task Force was established for COVID-19 inquiries and notifications and a hotline (117) was established for the public to obtain or notify any information on the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The Government set up the '*COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund*' on March 23, 2020, to strengthen the activities aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 virus in the country and to support the related social welfare programs in response to the novel coronavirus outbreak in Sri Lanka. This fund, which is managed under a committee consisting of relevant line ministry secretaries, bankers, financial analysts and health authorities, had surpassed Rs. 242 million (USD 1.3 million) by April 3, 2020, with direct deposits and donations received from organizations and individual

donors, including Sri Lankans living overseas⁷. Many private citizens and government officials have been given millions of rupees from this special fund to tackle the COVID-19 crisis on the island.

Between late March and early April the Chinese government and Chinese companies that were involved in major projects in Sri Lanka donated a large amount of medical aid, including masks, PPE and test kits (Kuruwita, 2020). China also granted a concessionary loan of USD 500 million. In this regard, the Government of Sri Lanka and the China Development Bank entered into an agreement on March 18, 2020. The facility was made available on a request by the Government of Sri Lanka to the Chinese Government and the China Development Bank to support the country's development efforts⁸.

Meanwhile, the Acting Ambassador of China in Sri Lanka met Minister Wanniarachchi on March 12, 2020, and promised to provide financial assistance, medications, medical equipment or anything else required to fight COVID-19. And he handed over a report on the measures taken by China during the previous three months to control COVID-19⁹. The USA also donated USD 1.3 million to Sri Lanka to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to help protect healthcare workers¹⁰. Meanwhile, the European Union also promised to provide € 22 million in grants to Sri Lanka¹¹.

⁷ Sri Lankan Embassy website, Australia: <http://www.slhcaust.org/COVID-19-healthcare-and-social-security-fund-sri-lanka/>

⁸ Ministry of Finance (Sri Lanka) announcement, 19 March 2020: <http://treasury.gov.lk/article/-/article-viewer-portlet/render/view/usd-500-million-facility-agreement-signed-between-sri-lanka-and-china>

⁹ China extends fullest support to fight COVID-19, 13 March 2020, Daily News, Sri Lanka: <https://www.dailynews.lk/2020/03/13/local/214291/china-extends-fullest-support-fight-COVID-19>

¹⁰ US donates USD 1.3 million to Sri Lanka, 9 April 2020, Newsfirst: <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/04/09/us-donates-usd-1-3-million-to-sri-lanka/>

¹¹ Press Release of the Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and Maldives, 9 April 2020: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/sri-lanka/77364/COVID-19-european-union-provides-eur-22-million-grant-sri-lanka_en

Internal Debates on the COVID-19 Response

The COVID-19 pandemic also caused internal debates on several issues. Some of the groups criticized or indicated that they were not happy with the involvement of military personnel in COVID-19 control programs and activities. There were questions raised by some of the parties as to whether they had reliable health sources on the real on-the-ground situation of the COVID-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka. They asked for the involvement of independent parties for the assessment of the situation.

Meanwhile, some other groups, including Muslims, raised questions about the ignoring of their Islamic tradition as government officials introduced new regulations that made it compulsory for all those who died of COVID-19 to be cremated¹². Accordingly, Sri Lanka issued an extraordinary gazette on April 11, 2020 (No: 2170/8)¹³.

The Island (2020) newspaper¹⁴ raised this issue with Dr. Deepika Udagama, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL). She sent the following statement¹⁵ on the HRCSL position on the government policy on the disposal of the bodies of COVID-19 victims:

The Commission is of the view that if the government wished to move away from the WHO regulation as well as its own previous regulation which permitted both cremation and burials for COVID-19 victims, the government should have consulted community leaders of the Muslim

¹² Outlook, News scroll (April 12, 2020), Sri Lanka makes cremation compulsory for COVID-19 deaths:

<https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/agriculture-operations-to-continue-in-controlled-manner-in-jk-admin/1800088scroll>

¹³ Gazette (Extra Ordinary) (April 11, 2020). The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Extra Ordinary), No:2170/8, Department of Government Printing:

http://www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/4/2170-08_E.pdf

¹⁴ The Island Online (November 27, 2020), Burial of corona victims: Sabry denies giving assurance to CTJ – The Island: <https://island.lk/burial-of-corona-victims-sabry-denies-giving-assurance-to-ctj>

¹⁵ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (April 7, 2020), HRCSL Position on Regulation on Disposal of Bodies of COVID-19 Victims - HRCSL: <https://www.hrsl.lk/hrsl-position-on-regulating-on-disposal-of-bodies-of-COVID-19-victims/>

community including medical professionals and scientists of the faith. This would have dealt with religious sensitivities in a participatory manner.

It further said that the commission recognized that at a moment of unprecedented health crisis like that at present, views of the public health specialists and other relevant scientists must prevail in the interests of all. However, when cultural or religious sensitivities are involved, the proper path is to dialogue with the particular community concerned so that a final decision is taken in a consultative manner. “It is also important to communicate the final decision to the public explaining reasons for it so as to win public confidence and minimize tensions,” the statement added.

Many government officials including public health inspectors, police and public health doctors were deployed to rectify the mistakes made by the people. Meanwhile, government and privately owned institutions also made enormous contributions to rectify those mistakes and some of them have also launched ‘helping-hand’ campaigns, such as collecting essential foods and other requirements for those who needed it. However, there were concerns within the government about the spreading of false information among the community on COVID-19 pandemic and the criticizing of government officials. Social media behavior, in particular, was questioned by the government and arrests were made by the police on the basis of statements made in social media, regarding the context of the spread of COVID-19 virus in the country¹⁶.

Sending a letter to Inspector General of Police, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) mentioned, “We have observed an increasing number of such arrests since issuing of a letter dated 1 April, 2020 by the Media Division of the Police Department to heads of media institutions warning of strict legal action against those who publish false and malicious statements over the internet against public authorities who are engaged in containing the spread of the virus. The letter clearly conveys the message that criticism of officials would not be tolerated”. The HRCSL further mentioned: “Any action taken to limit freedom of expression and other such rights in a

¹⁶ Statement by Dr Deepika Udugama published by The Island on April 7, 2020: <https://www.hrsl.lk/hrsl-position-on-regulation-on-disposal-of-bodies-of-COVID-19-victims/>

democracy, even during a period of emergency, must be within the framework of the law"¹⁷.

Social Media Rhetoric Against Minorities

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak some of the old media, and especially social media, indulged in anti-minority rhetoric by criticizing the behavior of a particular community for spreading COVID-19. Meanwhile, media was blamed for their careless news reporting on COVID-19-related issues.

Considering this context, the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services issued guidelines for reporting COVID-19. They requested the media not to mention the race or religion of infected persons who died due to COVID-19; not to publish photographs or videos of infected persons without their permission; and not to report in a manner that caused hatred among people (IFJ, 2020). Sinhala nationalist media, including a majority of social media users, launched anti-minority rhetoric by blaming a particular community for the epidemic.

New Challenges on the Threshold of Elections

The media and journalists also faced new challenges in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic in a balanced way. At the threshold of elections, the government wanted to show they had attended to the COVID-19 issue in a scientific manner and that every nut and bolt was working. However, social media, especially Facebook, and some of the old media criticized the efforts, pointing to shortcomings and failures of the involvement of government in the COVID-19 pandemic operation in Sri Lanka.

As a result, on April 1, the media division of Sri Lanka's police force, upon the instructions of the Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP), issued a notice addressed to all media organizations that strict legal action would be taken against those who 'criticize', point out 'minor

¹⁷ The Sunday Morning (April 29, 2020), HRCSL urges Act. IGP to review legal bases for recent arrests for misinformation: <http://www.themorning.lk/hrcsl-urges-act-igp-to-review-legal-bases-for-recent-arrests-for-misinformation/>

shortcomings/failures' or 'scold/chastise' state officials performing their duties (IFJ, 2020).

In a statement, seven journalists' organizations expressed their concern about the IGP's directive and said that it should not be a hindrance to free expression online. Civil society too reacted sharply and said that the move "adversely impacts on the freedom of expression, in particular the expression of dissent. This constitutionally guaranteed freedom is key to holding the state to account for its actions, and questioning the action or inaction of state officials is the civic duty of every citizen, and is fundamental to ensuring a healthy and functioning democracy ... Moreover, there is no provision in law that authorizes the arrest of those 'criticizing' the state" (IFJ, 2020: 75).

Bandara, Thotawaththa and Ranasinghe (2020: 4) noted that:

Unethical use of the media was one of the main reasons for the stigma associated with COVID19. A large proportion of the general public did not receive enough scientific information about the disease and its preventive measures through the media. Instead, they were overloaded with emotionally provocative information. Many media reports were delivered in a judgmental manner, and frequently the fault was attributed to individuals who got the disease whilst some patients were labeled as to have hidden pertinent facts or lied about their symptoms (and) frequent telecasting of patients' family members being taken to quarantine centers also would have contributed to creation of stigma and fear. This may in-turn have led some patients to hide their histories.

Guidelines for Elections

On November 16, 2019, presidential elections were held in Sri Lanka where Gotabaya Rajapaksha scored a resounding win on the back of a strong Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist wave. The newly elected President on March 2, 2020 dissolved Parliament, six months ahead of schedule and called a snap election for April 25, but the Election Commission postponed the election indefinitely after the coronavirus spread and the government declared an island-wide curfew¹⁸. However, ignoring

¹⁸ Outlook, News Scroll (22 May 2020), Sri Lankan Supreme Court told parliamentary election can be held on June 20 under health guidelines: <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/sri-lankan-supreme-court-told-parliamentary-election-can-be-held-on-june-20-under-health-guidelines/1843135>

the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic the Sri Lankan government scheduled the election to be held on April 25. President Rajapaksha, during a video conference with SAARC leaders, confirmed that the parliamentary elections would be held as scheduled. But the Election Commission of Sri Lanka put off the date to June 20, 2020. This created a crisis between the president's office and the Constitution, and the matter went to the courts. Sri Lanka's independent Election Commission said it could not hold parliamentary elections on June 20 as planned because of the coronavirus outbreak¹⁹. On June 10, 2020 the Election Commissioner confirmed that the postponed parliamentary elections could be held on August 5, 2020.

Sri Lanka issued strict health guidelines for the election campaign, after the Election Commission urged the government to legalize the health guidelines, saying that the political leaders were not adhering to the health measures while campaigning, thus jeopardizing the lives of the people attending the campaign. Mahinda Deshapriya, Chairman of National Election Commission, said, "It will be extremely difficult to conduct the election unless the legal effect is given to the health guidelines"²⁰. Accordingly, on July 17, 2020, the Gazette notification (No. 2184/34) under the Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance (Chapter 222) was issued²¹.

These regulations were cited as the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Elections) Regulations, No. 1 of 2020. The gazette notification stated that organizers of election meetings shall not exceed 300 participants. However, where the leader of a political party or an independent group participates at such meetings, the number of persons attending such a meeting shall not exceed 500²².

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *The Hindu* (July 18, 2020), *Sri Lanka issues strict health guidelines for election campaigning*: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-issues-strict-health-guidelines-for-election-campaigning/article32123198.ece>

²¹ Gazette (July 17, 2020), Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance (Chapter 222), The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Extraordinary, No. 2184/34:

http://www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34_E.pdf

²² Ibid.

This Gazette notification further stated that the organizer of the meeting must also, (a) maintain a record of the name, identity card number and contact details of every person attending such a meeting; (b) provide adequate hand washing facility with soap or sanitizer for the persons attending such meeting and ensure that every person who attends such premises washes their hands before entering the premises; (c) ensure social distancing not less than one metre between two persons including speakers attending such meeting; (d) ensure that every person who attends such meetings wears a face mask at all times; and (e) disinfect or cause to be disinfected the equipment including the microphone, immediately after being used by a person.

However, realistically, political campaigns in Sri Lanka were far behind the aforesaid guidelines. There were mass meetings with more than 600 people and the majority of people did not wear masks and keep the distance of one meter.

Savumyamoorthy Arumugam Ramanathan Thondaman, a prominent Tamil representative in the Sri Lanka parliament died on May 26, 2020 as a result of a major heart attack. He was the leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, an important ally of Rajapaksha's political party. Thousands of mourners paid their respect to the body without adhering to the curfew and health guidelines including social distancing rules²³. The government allowed this, despite a statement by a group of government doctors warning that the funeral could undermine public confidence in the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus and lead to a second wave²⁴.

The opposition accused the ruling party of relaxing health guidelines even though there was a possibility of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was feared that the election would be further put off and the country might go back to the lockdown phase. The opposition battled to postpone the election, while the ruling party and their

²³ Arumugam Thondaman, Sri Lankan Tamil minister, dies, May 26, 2020, The Times of India, India: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/arumugam-thondaman-sri-lankan-tamil-minister-dies/articleshow/76013336.cms>

²⁴ Sri Lanka fears new coronavirus outbreak after funeral breaks curfew, 30 May 2020, Straits Times, Singapore: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka-fears-new-coronavirus-outbreak-after-funeral-breaks-curfew>

supporters called for the election soon. However, the Election Commission had declined the opposition's call to postpone the election because, at that moment there was only a small number of COVID-19 cases reported in Sri Lanka.

So, the election was held on August 5, 2020 to elect a 225-member Parliament for five years. It went off peacefully without any complications.

The election had been postponed at least twice due to the spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. During this period the Election Commission of Sri Lanka had also been the target of severe criticism from those who wanted the election as soon as possible, ignoring the COVID-19 situation. Prior to the August general election, on June 20, 2020 the Election Commission of Sri Lanka conducted mock elections as a trial with the intention of complying with health guidelines issued by relevant authorities in Sri Lanka.

The vote counting started at 9 a.m. on August 6, 2020, a day after the election, due to the safety requirements of the counting staff. The Sri Lanka Freedom Alliance coalition of President Rajapaksha won a landslide victory in the general election, taking 145 seats, while the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya, a breakaway fraction of United National Party (UNP), won 54 seats, the Tamil National Alliance won 10 seats, and the United National Party (UNP), for the first time of their long history, faced a nightmare, finishing in fourth place and acquiring only one seat in the new Parliament. The voter turnout at the election was 70 percent – a drop from the over 80 percent voter turnout in the presidential elections in November 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Conclusion

Until the second wave created by the Brandix factory outbreak in October 2020 (discussed earlier), Sri Lanka was one of the most successful countries in the COVID-19 pandemic battle. “Sri Lanka is one of the few countries that controlled COVID-19 more effectively than other countries did”, WHO Representative to Sri Lanka Dr. Razia Pende said on July 20, 2020, addressing the media in Colombo²⁵. She

²⁵ WHO praises Sri Lanka, 20 July 2020, Daily News, Sri Lanka: <http://www.dailynews.lk/2020/07/20/local/223741/who-praises-sri-lanka>

said that Sri Lanka achieved this because of the pro-active actions by the Sri Lankan government and the well-established public health system in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan health sector, the military service (including the police), government officials and the media have made enormous contributions to minimize the COVID-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka. However, when the elections came, and politicians and their supporters launched into the campaign, it seemed that they were ignoring the health guidelines. The Sri Lankan media is highly politicized. Media, including social media, were divided into two parties, the opposition and the ruling party; though claiming to be “impartial”, “independent”, and “balanced” they did not maintain such qualities.

The Chairman of the Elections Commission of Sri Lanka, at his press conference after the election, mentioned that media owners would become candidates in future elections. In Sri Lanka, the media and politics are highly connected and the media is controlled by a few business people with aspirations and interests. Thus, COVID-19 has also been a part of a political game in Sri Lanka.

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CHAPTER 8

‘STAY HOME, STAY SAFE, BE KIND’: HOW NEW ZEALAND CRUSHED, NOT JUST FLATTENED THE COVID-19 CURVE

DAVID ROBIE

In contrast to disastrous Western exceptionalist trends in Europe and the United States in countering the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, New Zealand was influenced by the success of Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. New Zealand was conscious of its strategic responsibility for vulnerable Pacific Island nations and launched a bold ‘go hard and go early’ offensive.

After an impressive two-month lockdown period that gave the country time to strengthen its public health defenses, health experts predicted a 97 percent chance of COVID-19 being eliminated. However, there was a relapse in August 2020 when a sudden cluster emerged in the country’s largest city which threatened New Zealand’s COVID-free status. This cluster in turn was contained and eliminated. But the health issue dominated the economic recovery debate until the general election on October 17 when Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s youngest and most popular political leader, won re-election with a landslide victory.

The news media initially played a decisive support role in Ardern’s ‘kindness’ model in rallying a united nation, but later this fragmented. Ironically, the foreign-dominated local media¹ was decimated in the economic crisis that followed with the magazine industry being

¹ For more details of media ownership in New Zealand read:
<https://theconversation.com/crisis-disintegration-and-hope-only-urgent-intervention-can-save-new-zealands-media-139299>

virtually destroyed (although it later made a revival with new owners) and newspapers hit by massive layoffs.

In the middle of September, President Donald Trump of the United States (population 330 million)² and Prime Minister Ardern of New Zealand (population 5 million)³ faced off from opposite ends of the world in an extraordinary media jousting event. Trump called out New Zealand over the relatively minor August outbreak that ended more than three months of being COVID-free. He condemned New Zealand – whose leader Ardern had been widely praised globally as the poster heroine of COVID-19 pandemic leadership (sparking a Nobel Peace Prize nomination) – as now facing a “big surge” in cases (Roy, 2020). According to Trump:

The places they were using to hold up [as a model], now they're having a big surge ... they were holding up names of countries and now they're saying "whoops!"

Do you see what's happening in New Zealand? They beat it, they beat it, it was like front-page news because they wanted to show me something.

Big surge in New Zealand, you know it's terrible, we don't want that, but this is an invisible enemy that should never have been let to come to Europe and the rest of the world by China (quoted by Roy, 2020).

On that Monday (August 17, 2020), Auckland had recorded nine new cases of the virus, while the United States figure for that same day was 42,000. It was the first time President Trump had mentioned New Zealand in a presidential campaign speech. On the following Friday, Prime Minister Ardern responded, saying there was “no comparison” between the crisis in the US and her country. However, President Trump was like a dog with a bone and he returned to the issue the next day, renewing his ill-founded criticism with no evidence and revealing his disdain for science and knowledge, a situation the world has become very familiar with.

Following up on this, Toby Manhire, one of the editors of a popular New Zealand digital start-up publication, *The Spinoff*, incidentally

² US and World Population Clock: <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>

³ <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/new-zealands-population-passes-5-million>

founded by a journalism graduate at my university, remarked in a twitter feed under his handle @toby_etc:

It was v tricky to say why the scientists, the modellers, the public servants, health workers, teachers, supermarket workers, politicians, businesses, people denied tangi, funerals, weddings, and millions who made myriad other sacrifices did it, but suddenly clear now.

He added that it was to “show Donald Trump something”, taking the president’s quote and turning it back on him (Figure 1). At the time, the facts were that overall, 25 people had died from COVID-19 in New Zealand and 1,833 had become infected, compared with more than 205,000 deaths and 7.14 million infections in the US.



Figure 1: The Toby Manhire tweet, 18 August 2020.

As of October 19, 2020⁴, barely two months later, the statistics showed that New Zealand had had 1,886 cases of infection and still just 25 deaths⁵. Drilling down further into New Zealand coronavirus statistics, the NZ Ministry of Health reported the number of active cases to be 35, while 1,824 people had recovered and no patients were in hospital⁶. More than 50,000 returning New Zealand citizens

⁴ The time of writing this chapter.

⁵ Coronavirus Resource Centre (2020). Johns Hopkins University Global Coronavirus Map: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

⁶ COVID-19: current cases (October 19, 2020). Retrieved on October 19, 2020 from:

and permanent residents had arrived in the country and been placed in managed isolation facilities (MIQ) with a total of 214 confirmed cases being identified at the border and confined in isolation⁷.

A reality check about the New Zealand-United States comparison was penned in *The New Zealand Herald* by Dick Brass, a former editor at *The Daily News* in New York and vice-president of Microsoft and Oracle for almost two decades (Brass, 2020). Writing an extraordinary op-ed for New Zealand's largest and most influential newspaper, he admitted that he had predicted in 2016 that the Trump presidency would be a "colossal train wreck" and had promptly filed emigration papers to New Zealand, but the move was delayed until too late by lockdown. Brass, also known as having developed the world's first modern dictionary-based spellcheck, was dismissive of Trump's future. He argued that the world ought to think of the coronavirus as a stress test for the nations of the world, "like 2008 was a stress test for the economy and the banks".

I'm hopeful that we will muddle through, optimistic but not completely sure. It's hard to ask for re-election when you have allowed about 225,000 Americans to die of COVID, versus less than 460 in South Korea and just 25 in New Zealand ... America has already flunked the biggest stress test of our lives this year (Bass, 2020: A10).

After going for 102 days without recording any case of COVID-19 community transmission (Figure 2), New Zealand became locked down for a second time in August in the campaign to methodically stamp out the coronavirus in what was branded by some as COVID 'Lockdown 2.0'⁸. The impending general election was postponed by a month from 19 September to 17 October because of the sudden outbreak involving a Pasifika 'index' family of four people with an unresolved source, not necessarily a border breach. The country

<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/COVID-19-novel-coronavirus/COVID-19-data-and-statistics/COVID-19-current-cases#summary>

⁷ NZ citizens migrating home in record numbers (May 14, 2020). StatsNZ. Retrieved October 19, 2020 from: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/nz-citizens-migrating-home-in-record-numbers>

⁸ Johnson, G. (2020b). Ardern vs Collins: New Zealand is at the crossroads, October 11, 2020, *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved October 19, 2020 from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/11/new-zealand-elections-4/>

anxiously awaited the outcome of this unexpected single cluster that had grown to 149 people after a period of complacency had set in after the earlier success at containing (and apparently eliminating) the virus. The infections included a former Cook Islands prime minister, popular general practitioner Dr Joe Williams, who died at 85, and triggered fears that the virus could spread to COVID-free Pacific Islands states⁹. Later fears of a community outbreak in October through a marine electronics engineer in a port breach by crew on a visiting ship proved fleeting.

As of September 1, 2020, the country had a total number of 1,757 confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19, 149 from the community outbreak, and 35 imported cases from Managed Isolation Quarantine (MIQ) facilities, with 7 people in hospital. While the leadership of Prime Minister Ardern has been praised internationally for having one of the finest records in coping with COVID-19, she has also enjoyed the most popularity of any New Zealand prime minister due to her qualities of effective communication, trustworthiness and empathy. These qualities carried the Labour party to outright victory in the 'COVID election', with opinion polls predicting the coalition leader would win by a margin of about 30 percent. Although the gap narrowed with Ardern facing the disarray of the conservative opposition National Party with three leaders in less than three months (Banbury, 2020), in the end Labour enjoyed a winning margin of more than 22 percent. It won 65 seats outright in the 120-seat Parliament¹⁰.

⁹ COVID-19 coronavirus: Dr Joe Williams to be farewelled this week, while plans for public memorial are also under way. September 17, 2020, *The New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved October 19, 2020 from: [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/COVID-19-coronavirus-dr-joe-williams-to-be-farewelled-this-week-while-plans-for-public-memorial-also-underway/40JQ2FTXE63MZ3VIZOY4YPW74I/Sept 2020](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/COVID-19-coronavirus-dr-joe-williams-to-be-farewelled-this-week-while-plans-for-public-memorial-also-underway/40JQ2FTXE63MZ3VIZOY4YPW74I/Sept%2020)

¹⁰ NZ Electoral Commission (n.d.). Election Results. Retrieved November 19, 2020 from: https://electionresults.govt.nz/electionresults_2020/

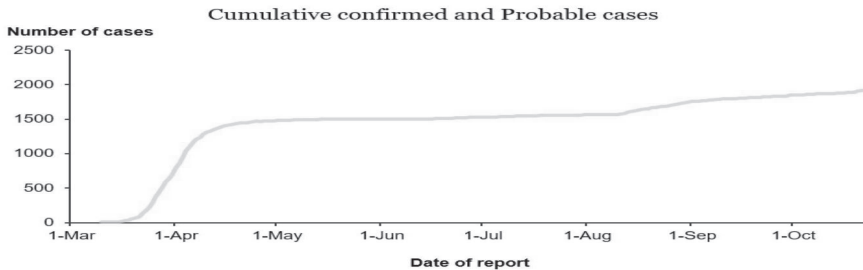


Figure 2: The New Zealand flattened COVID curve. Source: NZ Ministry of Health¹¹

This was a historic victory as the first outright win by a single political party since the Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) voting method replaced New Zealand's first-past-the-post system in 1993. It was also the most dominating triumph of a party in 70 years. In an interactive website¹² billed as "Labour Day ... New Zealand's historic shift to the political left", *Stuff* data journalists Kate Newton and Felipe Rodrigues concluded (Figure 3): "In the throes of a global pandemic, New Zealanders [have] returned a historic result." They added: "In the eight elections since the introduction of the proportional voting system, MMP, no party had won an outright majority of seats in Parliament - until now."

In her victory speech at the Auckland Town Hall Ardern admitted many National Party supporters had deserted the opposition to vote Labour and she pledged to govern for "all New Zealanders". She declared that her government was committed to key infrastructure projects, 100 percent renewable electricity, climate change and environment initiatives, and backing those at risk from the global pandemic. "Over the next three years there is much work to do," Ardern reflected. "We will build back better from the COVID crisis; better, stronger with the answers to the [things] New Zealand already faces"¹³.

¹¹ <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/COVID-19-novel-coronavirus/COVID-19-data-and-statistics/COVID-19-current-cases>

¹² <https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2020/10/election-2020-results-analysis-labour-day/>

¹³ Trevett, C. (2020). Ardern secures glorious triumph for Labour Party, October 18, 2020: 2, *Herald on Sunday*.

Writing about the massive vote of confidence in the judgment of Jacinda Ardern, *New Zealand Herald* political columnist Audrey Young concluded the prime minister had “won a huge victory on the barest of promises”, but mostly over her handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. “It is a mandate to continue to exercise that judgement in a sound and cautious way for whatever the pandemic throws up next,” she wrote. “It was a matter of stability and trust on the red side (Labour) vs a shambles and negativity from the blue side (National) – and electoral carnage not predicted” (Young, 2020: 2). Young added that the election had been a vote of confidence in Ardern’s style of leadership in which she “did not bow to the accepted convention of popular leaders needing to sound tough”.



Figure 3: Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern: COVID and political influence. SOURCE: *Asia Pacific Report, Screenshot of The Conversation, September 4, 2020*

The election result confirmed what had been evident in political polls since the coronavirus was first detected in New Zealand in February – that the ‘nation of five million’ had confidence in Jacinda Ardern to lead New Zealand through the ongoing challenges it has introduced. It has been a tough three years for Ardern since she became Labour leader just seven weeks before the last election in 2017. The youngest ever New Zealand prime minister, she steered her party through difficult and parallel policy negotiations with the Greens and New Zealand First, which held the balance of power at the time. She successfully pulled off a Labour-New Zealand First coalition administration with the support of the Greens on confidence and

supply (providing three ministers outside cabinet), an outstanding feat considering the National Party had gained the largest party vote and most seats in the election. The following year she gave birth to a daughter while in office¹⁴, and then in 2019 had to lead New Zealand through the fallout from the massacre of 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch by an Australian white supremacist. Her empathy with New Zealand's Muslim community and calm leadership in the aftermath led to her being featured on a *Time* magazine cover – “Know us by our deeds”, read the title – and an unsuccessful nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The traumatic incidents included the 2019 Whakaari/White Island eruption¹⁵ and all these crises demonstrated a consistent leadership style. In each case, Ardern used her clear skills to “reassure and unify an oft-divided country; the public has responded positively to this good-faith brand of politics, which prioritises public wellbeing”¹⁶.

However, while many of the international plaudits have been enthusiastic and generous about her handling of the COVID-19 crisis – ranging from “master class” (*New York Times*)¹⁷, to “squashing the curve” and a decisive “voice of reason” (TV presenter Whoopi Goldberg)¹⁸ – several analysts and commentators have been less kind about New Zealand's news media, one describing their “machinations” as “leav[ing] much to be desired”¹⁹.

¹⁴ Thomson, R. (2018). PM Jacinda Ardern gives birth to baby girl. June 21, 2018, Stuff. Retrieved on October 19, 2020 from:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/104884517/pm-jacinda-ardern-gives-birth-to-her-first-baby>

¹⁵ White Island: Last two missing victims declared dead, January 23, 2020, *The Guardian*. Retrieved on October 19, 2020 from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/white-island-eruption-last-two-missing-victims-declared-dead>

¹⁶ How New Zealand's media endangered public health, July 8, 2020, *Al Jazeera English*: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/zealand-media-endangered-public-health-200707103532946.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/opinion/coronavirus-leadership.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/entertainment/whoopi-goldberg-praises-jacinda-ardern-voice-reason-amid-COVID-19-pandemic>

¹⁹ Forrester, G. (2020). Coronavirus: Jacinda Ardern praised for ‘master class’ response to COVID-19 crisis, May 5, 2020, *Stuff*. Retrieved August 18, 2020

According to Al Jazeera English contributor Glen Johnson²⁰:

Taken over time, New Zealand's reporters have appeared focused on managing perceptions, berating, and cajoling a fearful public on numerous fronts. In doing so, and from the earliest stages of a four-level alert system, public health concerns have been eclipsed by a clamouring commentariat, all seeking to score political points and undermine the government's health-first priorities. A case can be made that the nation's media, laundering many of the opposition's attack lines and big business talking points, have repeatedly endangered public health.

COVID-19 Impact On New Zealand Media

The country's magazine industry was virtually destroyed overnight. In early April, Sri Krishnamurthi, writing for *Asia Pacific Report*, warned that the media faced "apocalyptic times" with Bauer Media NZ, the local subsidiary of the leading German publishing house, being abruptly closed (Krishnamurthi, 2020). The company blamed its closure on the "severe economic impact of COVID-19" (Bauer Media Group, 2020). This shut down most of the country's iconic titles, such as the *New Zealand Listener* (founded in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War), *NZ Woman's Weekly* (1932) and the more recent urban and rural lifestyle magazines *Metro* (1981) and *North and South* (1986). The closures cost 237 jobs. The message was bleak: New Zealand journalism must not be left to languish. The sudden closure of Bauer is devastating for New Zealand journalism and for the public which depend on it in this time of national crisis. Among many protesting groups, the Pacific Media Center said:

The media in many respects has been dying a slow death, certainly in print. And although we have a number of small yet successful start-up digital media ventures, we have witnessed the gradual decline of quality media overall in New Zealand. In one foul swoop, a foreign-owned corporate, Bauer Media, has been allowed to destroy the heart of New Zealand's magazine industry. And there has been barely a whimper (Krishnamurthi, 2020).

from:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/121405409/coronavirus-jacinda-ardern-praised-for-master-class-response-to-COVID19-crisis>

²⁰ Johnson, G., Ardern vs Collins: New Zealand is at the crossroads, October 11, 2020, *Al Jazeera English*:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/11/new-zealand-elections-4/>

Critics such as the national radio watchdog *Mediawatch* argued that the struggling German magazine owners were out of step with the Australian and New Zealand markets and several of their recent decisions had indicated this, such as the “quick establishment and closure of *Paperboy*, (Bauer’s) decision to cut back *Metro* to bimonthly publishing, and its attempt to consolidate its well-known titles under the newly established *Noted* brand online as strategic missteps”. (Donnell, 2020). COVID-19 merely provided a pretext for getting out of a costly market.

The good news was that barely three months after independent scholar and economist Brian Easton had penned an obituary for the ‘staunch’ *New Zealand Listener* – ‘RIP 1939-2020’ – news reports began surfacing about a reprieve for some of the Bauer magazines (Easton, 2020). In mid-July, it was announced that Australian investment company Mercury Capital, run by an expatriate New Zealander in Sydney, Clark Perkins, had taken over the German-based firm’s Australasian operations and would begin publishing immediately with the first titles of the New Zealand stable appearing in September (Molyneux, 2020). The Mercury titles included *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* (circulation 82,000), *Woman’s Day*, *New Zealand Listener*, *Your Home and Garden* and *Kia Ora* magazines. It was later reported that Bauer’s flagship current affairs titles, *Metro* and *North and South*, were being sold off to two separate companies - *Metro* magazine (which had just won the Venturer Magazine of the Year award) went to the Simon Chesterman-registered Metro Media Group Ltd, and *North and South* was taken over by New Zealand-resident German journalists and publishers Konstantin Richter and Verena Hasel²¹.

The two mainstream daily newspaper publishing chains were also in crisis for a while with appeals to the Labour-led government to bail them out. The government did respond with a package to ease media companies’ COVID-19 costs by about NZ\$50 million (USD 36 million). However, while it promised medium-term support later in the year, it scrapped that when it seemed as though things were picking up for the media (Peacock, 2020). Chief executive Sinead Boucher made an

²¹ Venuto, D. (2020). Buyers emerge for Metro and North & South; Listener still up in the air, July 10, 2020, *The New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved on January 6, 2021 from: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/buyers-emerge-for-metro-and-north-south-listener-still-up-in-the-air/AS6AQX3DO6MSJWHMY6ZIK6BTTA/>

extraordinarily brave call to sign an agreement with the Australian Nine Entertainment television group to buy the *Stuff* business, which publishes New Zealand's largest news website <https://www.stuff.co.nz/> and a string of newspapers, including the *Sunday Star Times* and the capital city's *Dominion Post*, for \$1.

The price tag is a misnomer as Boucher took over the operating costs of *Stuff* which had been badly hit by the COVID-19 crisis. She planned to restructure the company as a cooperatively owned venture by its staff to save jobs. Boucher set the tone by personally taking a 40 percent pay cut. The rival New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME) group, mostly owned by foreign financial institutions, publishes the country's leading title, *The New Zealand Herald*. It had unsuccessfully tried to take over the *Stuff* business (Ellis, 2020).

However, both *Stuff* and NZME joined the majority of New Zealand's news organizations in being supported by the government's national wage subsidy scheme. *The New Zealand Herald* (circulation 114,000) group received NZ\$8.6 million in wage subsidies and *Stuff* NZ\$6.2 million. The state-owned broadcaster Television New Zealand received NZ\$5.9 million and the private-equity-owned Media Works NZ\$3.6 million.

The subsidy also rescued some of the smaller start-up media companies, even enabling some to expand. Also, some 76 news companies across the Pacific received other 'short-term relief' funding from Google's Journalism Emergency Relief Fund. Concluded Auckland-based media researcher Merja Myllylahti concluded, such positive developments were undermined by negatives such as newsrooms "shrinking substantially" with hundreds of jobs lost: "What is clear, though, is that more government support will be needed in the coming years if New Zealand wants a healthy media system as part of its democracy" (Myllylahti, 2020).

Mediawatch columnist Colin Peacock was critical of the lack of analysis of party media policies during the election campaign, lamenting that while parties pushed policies on "big ticket issues like tax, health and education", plans for broadcasting and media were "often left to the last minute - or overlooked entirely" (Peacock, 2020). During the lockdown, some digital media start-ups and media schools attempted some innovative projects such as the Pacific Media

Center teaming up with Internews for a “climate crisis and COVID-19” initiative (Robie and Krishnamurthy, 2020).

Eliminating COVID-19 Strategy

With multiple, but small, COVID-19 clusters across the country in April - a high school in Auckland, a wedding in the deep south, a bar in the tourist hub of Matamata - the government heeded the advice of leading epidemiologists. The Ardern-led government had opted for an elimination strategy. This meant a sustained approach to “keep COVID-19 out of the country – find it and stamp it out”²². This was done by controlling entry at the border; disease surveillance; physical distancing and hygiene measures; testing for and tracing all potential cases; isolating them and their close contacts; and broader public health controls, depending on the alert level.

Jacinda Ardern is a natural communicator and she forged an alliance with much of the mainstream media to get her public health message across to the general public in a remarkable, disarming and convincing manner. Her daily media briefings, along with Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield, became events with huge appeal as an honest and informative marriage of politics and science. On top of this, she is an ardent user of Facebook, Instagram and other social media to communicate directly with New Zealanders. During the election campaign, for example, when Ardern counted on her handling of the COVID-19 crisis she appeared on social media against a “blank wall in my house” because it was the only room “not messy”. As marketing academic Sommer Kapitan described it, “[Ardern] speaks directly into her phone at day’s end, in a comfortable sweatshirt and with tousled hair, inviting Instagram viewers into her home as she lays out plans for the week ahead” (Kapitan, 2020). Kapitan continued:

Voters and fans view her message from their own phones and smart devices: just over 22 percent of her 1.4 million Instagram followers watched the two-minute video. She is candid, approachable, tired and

²² COVID-19: Elimination strategy for Aotearoa New Zealand (May 8, 2020). Ministry of Health Manatu Hauora. Retrieved on August 18, 2020 from: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/COVID-19-novel-coronavirus/COVID-19-current-situation/COVID-19-elimination-strategy-aotearoa-new-zealand>

funny (Kapitan, 2020).

When a resurgence of COVID-19 happened a few days later, her tone changed to concern. And 34 percent of her 1.3 million Facebook followers tuned in for a livestream message. Just as outgoing US President Trump has been billed as the world's first Twitter president, Jacinda Ardern has been likened as the first Facebook prime minister.

New Zealand media mostly provided an excellent platform for medical and scientific experts to offer informed and nuanced explanations and a policy discourse. Among these specialists who made a difference was University of Otago epidemiologist and advocate for the elimination strategy Professor Michael Baker. He cites two major achievements in facing the pandemic – the rapid development of vaccines, and “eliminat[ing] a virus solely through non-pharmaceutical interventions - masks, social distancing, hand washing, lockdowns and so on” (Daalder, 2020).

COVID-19 thrust politics into the conservative lives of New Zealanders in an unprecedented way and the leadership of Ardern has reaped the rewards. The last time that a Labour government did so well in an election was in 1938 when Michael Joseph Savage was returned to power on the back of far-reaching social democratic welfare reforms. Regarded as New Zealand's best prime minister, Savage, a former brewery cellarman, was credited with “applied Christianity” in his philosophy, or as one historian described it, his politics were more “of the church bazaar, not at all of the barricades” (McLean, n.d.). But contemporary critics do not regard the Ardern government as being at all “transformative” with social justice like the pioneering Savage administration.

Rise In Credibility of Public Interest Media

Ironically, the COVID-19 crisis has been contributing to a rise in the credibility and trustworthiness of the public interest media, and gradually other mainstream media as well after sustained criticism from fourth estate analysts such as Mel Bunce (2019). The state broadcaster RNZ national became the first New Zealand radio station to record more than 700,000 unique listeners each week in a

nationwide GfK industry survey²³. The 2020 survey in mid-October reflected the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown period and “underlined the importance of trusted public media in challenging and confronting times created by the pandemic”. The GfK survey showed that typically 826,500 New Zealanders – comprising 16.9 percent of the aged 10-plus section of the population – were tuned into RNZ radio each week. In the radio’s flagship breakfast program *Morning Report* (6am to 9am), the audience reached 531,800 listeners or 12.1 percent of people aged 10-plus across the country. Chief executive Paul Thompson remarked:

Our RNZ audience results are an emphatic reinforcement of the importance of quality independent journalism, so essential to informing, engaging, and uniting New Zealanders in challenging and confronting times. In a crisis people turn to trusted media²⁴.

The digital channel and website RNZ.co.nz website also consistently outstripped the previous year, 2019. Weekly numbers peaked at 3.3 million during the March lockdown²⁵.

While Ardern’s Labour government achieved a landslide victory for its handling of the COVID-19 crisis, political analyst David Hall warned the risk of a further coronavirus outbreak was ever present: “Nevertheless, international spectators view New Zealand’s pandemic response with a wistful gaze. At a time when many nations went sour on liberal democracy and rolled the populist dice, New Zealand appears on a world stage like a tribute act to third-way politics, a nostalgic throwback to the relative sanity and stability of the long 1990s” (Hall, 2020).

The challenge for both Ardern and the media is how to face up to the many people in Aotearoa New Zealand for whom the status quo has not been working. The danger is that the tensions can intensify.

²³ Growth from Knowledge (2020). 2020 radio ratings toolkit. GfK. Retrieved on October 19, 2020 from:

https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2405078/cmspdfs/fileadmin/user_upload/dyna_content/nz/documents/resources/2020/gfk_new_zealand_ram_toolkit_2020_updated.pdf

²⁴ RNZ breaks radio industry survey records, October 15, 2020, RNZ News:

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/media/158>

²⁵ Colmar Brunton Value Indices Research July 2020:

<https://www.colmarbrunton.co.nz/>

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CHAPTER 9

MEDIA COVERAGE OF STIGMA, ISOLATION AND NONCOMPLIANCE AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BANGLADESH

S M SHAMEEM REZA

The overall COVID-19-related media coverage in Bangladesh has been challenged by the evolving public health issues, crisis management strategies of the government, and political economy of the country's media sector in the time of an unpredictable global pandemic. As the authorities claimed credit for their response measures, some of the traditional media, namely newspapers and television channels, looked critically at the health department's handling of the crisis. Among the news media, newspapers have played a significant and critical role by reporting the realities on the ground and questioning the effectiveness of the health interventions and the management of emergency funds. They also reported incidents of stigma and discrimination, and instances of flouting lockdown rules amid the spread of coronavirus across the country.

At the outset of the outbreak, COVID-19-related reporting was somewhat confused, causing an overflow of information on the pandemic, including unscientific messages. Nevertheless, quite soon most of the news media had overcome this, and gradually focused on issues related to public health, crisis management, and development and livelihood. A few Bangladeshi media also reported the lack of a communication approach in addressing emerging social and cultural issues as the pandemic escalated. Newspapers divulged the community's reaction to the COVID-19 infected, especially the returnees from

overseas¹. The community stigmatized the expatriates or returnee migrant workers, and labeled them as “importers of a foreign virus” – even though their monthly remittances were a lifeblood for the Bangladeshi economy.

A COVID-19 incident mapping project, conducted by the Center for Genocide Studies (CGS) at the University of Dhaka, found a total of 217 incidents concerning verbal abuse/social stigma appeared in the newspapers during 1 March – 27 June 2020². Coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in the press became a vital source for the readers to learn the emerging patterns of stigmatization as the novel coronavirus had begun to spread at the community level. Since Bangladesh recorded its first cases of coronavirus on 8 March 2020³ both mainstream and social media have been critical of the top-down and bureaucratic intervention to address an unprecedented human crisis.

To understand the nature of the coverage of stigma-related instances associated with COVID-19 in the context of Bangladesh, I studied the news stories that appeared during March – June 2020 in the online versions of two leading Bangladeshi newspapers. In this chapter, I have analyzed the key issues and focus of the stories that primarily contain elements attached to stigma and discrimination.

¹ With nearly 8 million of its 160 million residents living abroad, Bangladesh has one of the world’s largest emigrant populations. Bangladeshi migrants remit much of their savings back home every month and their contributions form a crucial lifeblood for Bangladesh, which in recent years has helped to reduced poverty (source: Immigration Policy Institute, USA).

² In an online interview with the Director of the Center for Genocide Studies (CGS) at the University of Dhaka in September 2020, I was informed that for the COVID-19 incident mapping, they collected information both from national and local newspapers. Details of the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO)/CGS COVID-19 infographics can be found at <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/#/peace-highlights-infogr-viewer>

³ Bangladesh recorded its first cases of coronavirus on 8 March 2020. Three people were tested positive in Dhaka, and two of them were foreign returnees. The news can be found at <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/first-coronavirus-cases-confirmed-1878160>

Stigmatization and Discrimination Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 incident mapping by the Center for Genocide Studies (CGS) identifies COVID-19-related incidents of verbal abuse/social stigma, fear, protest, violence, etc., which were reported in national and local newspapers⁴. According to the infographics for 1 March – 27 June 2020 (updated on 2 July 2020), verbal abuse/social stigma-related incidents were attributed to the ignorance of medical professionals (64 cases); denial to burial (50 cases); forced eviction from houses (10 cases); abandonment from family/family members/colleagues (44); harassment/assault originated from social stigma (13 cases); social stigma related to medical professionals (18); and 2 cases of suicide (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, CGS, 2020)⁵. The infographics also suggest that compared to the previous weeks, the stigma related incidents were on the decline from the third week of June 2020.

Using anthropological methods of interview and observation combined with mass media content analysis, on the topic of “rapid assessment of fear and stigma associated with COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh” Zaman and Rahman (2020)⁶ showed that fear and stigma associated with the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh developed and spread roughly over six phases. Those were:

1. phase of false sense of identity (January – February 2020);
2. emergence of fear and formal stigmatization (early – mid March 2020);

⁴ Online interview by author with the Director of Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS) at the University of Dhaka in September 2020.

⁵ COVID-19 infographics published online by BPO/CGS is an open access resource. According to its update for the period of 1 March – 27 June 2020, the total number of COVID-19-related reported incidents was 217. I should note that no number or incident of ‘verbal abuse’ is mentioned in this update. Details of the infographics can be found at <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/#/peace-highlights-infogr-viewer>

⁶ Shahaduz Zaman from University of Sussex presented the findings of their rapid assessment in a live webinar on 1 May 2020, organized by Bangladesh Health Watch (BHW) and which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/Bangladesh-Health-Watch-BHW-109403770656047/videos/3143474829017133/>

3. community gaining informal “Stigma Power” (2nd week of March 2020 onwards);
4. intensification of fear (3rd week of March 2020);
5. multiplicity of fears (3rd week of March – 2nd week of April 2020);
6. period of panic, suspicion and heightened stigmatization (2nd week of April – first week of May 2020).

The findings of Zaman and Rahman’s assessment were analyzed from the perspectives of Bauman’s Theory of Fear and Goffman’s Theory of Stigma (1963). Zygmunt Bauman (2006) suggests three types of fear – primary fear, derivative fear, and liquid fear. According to Ervin Goffman’s theory, stigma takes place when individuals are identified as deviant and with a “spoiled identity” (1963). In the context of Bangladesh, they think the creation of such COVID-19-related stigmatized identities occurred when communities or some people in society got informal power to declare some other people or groups (foreign returnees, for instance) unacceptable or unwanted. The ‘first phase’ started with misperceptions about the disease and the false sense of safety among people⁷; eventually, in the ‘sixth phase’, stigma-related incidents coupled with panic and suspicion intensified.

Approaches to Studying COVID-19 Coverage

The study of the coverage of stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19 in the Bangladeshi newspapers is based on my ethnographic observation and thematic content analysis of the news in the online versions of the two selected newspapers – Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. The period of coverage that I studied starts on 1 March 2020 and ends on 30 June 2020. As already mentioned, the first

⁷ Zaman and Rahman (2020) think the false sense of identity period was characterized by a false sense of safety and misperceptions about the disease among people, as well as a reliance on unscientific information. Some people tried to preach that COVID-19 was a foreign or Western disease which was believed to be associated with the lifestyle and immoral actions of the people in the western countries. Such ideas were shared even by some science-minded people. For further details, see <https://www.facebook.com/Bangladesh-Health-Watch-BHW-109403770656047/videos/3143474829017133/>

COVID-19 cases were identified in Bangladesh in early March 2020, and the lockdown restrictions were gradually eased in June 2020.

Although my analysis period for this chapter covers the news published during March – June 2020, I have been observing the patterns and trends in the coverage of the outbreak from January 2020⁸. As new instances of denial, harassment and discrimination emerged in different parts of the country, the number of stigma related stories in newspapers began to rise in the middle of April 2020, and the upward trend continued till the middle of May 2020. Therefore, I took the news containing issues and elements of stigma linked to COVID-19 from the online versions of the two newspapers published during 14 April – 15 May 2020.

Trends in Media Reporting of a Pandemic

Overall, media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in the Bangladeshi newspapers can broadly be understood by the trends of reporting over four time periods – January to early March 2020; the 2nd week of March to April 2020; May - June 2020; and July 2020 onwards. Newspapers and TV channels began reporting the COVID-19 situation back in December 2019 as the early cases were identified in Wuhan City, China. The global situation, particularly the cases in the USA, Italy and the UK dominated the news coverage in the Bangladeshi media until the first cases were reported officially in the country on 8 March 2020.

In the early period (January – March 2020), some news media were inclined to provide popular information, which at times lacked scientific proof. However, patterns of reporting shifted with the changes in the COVID-19 situation in the country. The coverage eventually focused on issues of crisis management and planning, sufferings of the COVID-19 infected, discrimination of health

⁸ My participant-observation of the Bangladeshi news media goes back to January 2020 as the early coronavirus cases were already evident in other countries. However, I should note that the COVID-19-related coverage (March – June 2020) that I have analyzed in this chapter is based on the coverage in two newspapers – The Daily Star and Prothom Alo. The summary presented in Table 1 provides an overall picture of the issues reported in some widely circulated national newspapers.

professionals, etc. Newspapers focused on instances of abandonment and forced eviction, the stereotyping of foreign returnees, and the stigmatization of health workers. Based on my overall observations, in the following table (Table 1) I have put together some of the key themes and corresponding issues in the COVID-19-related news in the Bangladeshi newspapers:

Table 1: Outstanding issues in overall COVID-19 coverage

Key Focus	Issues Reported
Preparation and (pandemic) crisis management	Measures taken by the government authorities to tackle the outbreak, gaps in crisis mitigating strategies, shortage of medical supplies, lack of essential medical services including testing facilities, and concerns over the ability of the country's health facilities and infrastructure to meet the medical needs related to COVID-19.
Health services and coordination of emergency operations	Lack of coordination among the different departments responsible for COVID-19-related health services and emergency aid supplies, incidents of corruption and anomalies in relief operations, the right to health and COVID-19 treatment, and issues caused by the absence of a comprehensive strategy.
Right to information vs politics of information	Impact of top-down approach in disseminating COVID-19-related public information, legal actions taken under Digital Security Act (DSA) for spreading 'rumor' and 'harmful' information, and civil society demands for COVID-19-related statistics and projections.

<p>Fear, stigma and human suffering</p>	<p>Labeling and stereotyping of foreign returnees and COVID-19 infected, refusal of entry into hospitals, harassment of medical professionals, forced evictions, abandonment of family members, denial of burial to COVID-19 dead, sufferings caused by loss of business or job, uncertainty in education, fear of the uncertain future, and economic hardship.</p>
<p>Challenges to implementing health rules</p>	<p>Public reactions and attitudes towards new health rules, challenges to executing 'quarantine', 'lockdown' and safety instructions, and incidents of flouting lockdowns and other restrictions.</p>
<p>Progress in COVID-19 treatment and finding a vaccine</p>	<p>Latest developments for possible cure of COVID-19, ongoing scientific experiments, possibilities of finding COVID-19 vaccines likely to be developed by foreign companies, and global and regional (e.g. India-China-Bangladesh) politics and diplomacy surrounding trial, production and marketing of COVID-19 vaccine(s).</p>
<p>Good practices</p>	<p>Voluntary or philanthropic contributions to fight the pandemic, private initiatives in medical supply and emergency distribution, supporting the needy and low-income people, health and safety awareness campaigns, and youth initiatives to support starving and stray dogs.</p>

A number of national newspapers, which are on the top of the circulation list, have been critical of the top-down approach to tackling the pandemic and the lack of a community-oriented approach. This has also led them to report the issues related to right

to health. The issue of health care workers' (HCW) right to health is discussed in an opinion on The Daily Star:

The rapid loss of senior doctors of the country is an irreparable loss for the health sector. Right to life and right to health as enshrined in Article 32 and 18(1) of the constitution respectively, are equally applicable to HCWs. If we cannot protect them, we run the risk of losing our ability to control the virus⁹.

Despite some attempts to influence COVID-19 national agendas, the media as a whole did not advocate for any South Asian agenda to combat an unprecedented crisis collectively. Although there were news items on the Indian Prime Minister's call to make a SAARC¹⁰ COVID-19 Emergency Fund (to which Bangladesh contributed USD 1.5 million), followed by the stories published by The Daily Star, for example about medical supply among the SAARC member states ("Saarc COVID-19", 22 March 2020¹¹; "COVID-19: Bangladesh", 22 September, 2020¹²; "India Sends", 6 March 2020¹³ and "Saarc COVID-19 fund", 23 March, 2020¹⁴), no substantive media effort was found towards setting a regional agenda for collaborative actions to address the pandemic.

⁹ Aiman, S. U. (2020). COVID-19 and Rights of the healthcare workers, 30 June, The Daily Star, Dhaka: <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/COVID-19-and-rights-the-healthcare-workers-1922485>

¹⁰ SAARC stands for South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation which was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka back in 1985. Currently the member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Further details of the SAARC charter and its activities can be found at <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/resources/saarc-internship-programme>

¹¹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/saarc-COVID-19-emergency-fund-four-countries-pledge-23m-1884139>

¹² <https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south-asia/news/saarc-COVID-19-fund-bangladesh-sends-medical-supplies-nepal-1965709>

¹³ <https://www.thedailystar.net/india-sends-30000-COVID-19-test-kits-part-saarc-initiative-1900048>

¹⁴ <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/COVID-19-bangladesh-adds-15m-saarc-emergency-fund-1884619>

Coverage of Stigma and Discrimination

The elements of stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19 as reflected in Prothom Alo and The Daily Star suggest that as the outbreak evolved, incidents of discrimination, harassment, labeling and stereotyping emerged in different parts of the country. These are somewhat connected to imposing a false identity on individuals and groups, as well as stigmatizing the ‘other’, i.e. the COVID-19 infected or the COVID suspect.

After a thematic content analysis of the news stories, I have categorized the stigma and discrimination related issues into some broader categories. The categories are not rigidly determined, as the elements of the stigma might fall into more than one category simultaneously. For an analysis of the coverage, they are categorized as: labeling and stereotyping, social harassment and denial of burial, forced eviction and discrimination, abandonment, and ignorance and denial of rights.

In this section, Figure 1 presents the number of stigma related news stories that appeared in the online version of Prothom Alo, while Figure 2 shows the number of stigma related news stories in the online version of The Daily Star during the period from 14 April to 15 May 2020.

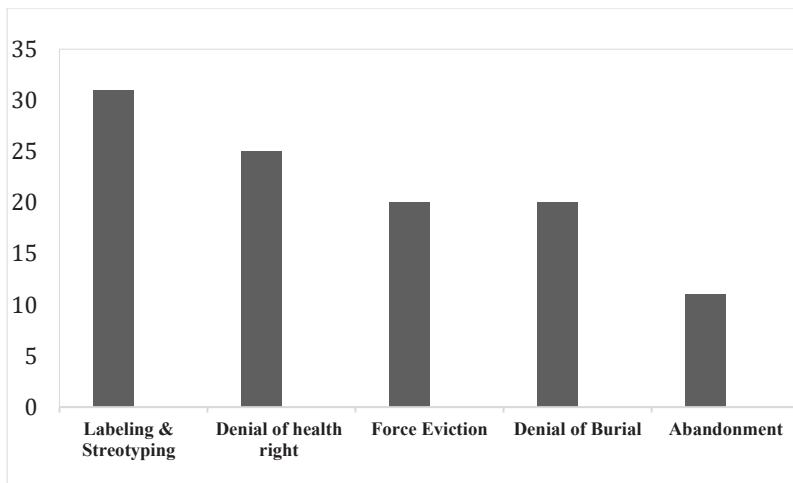


Figure 1: Stigma related news stories in Prothom Alo (14 April -15 May 2020)

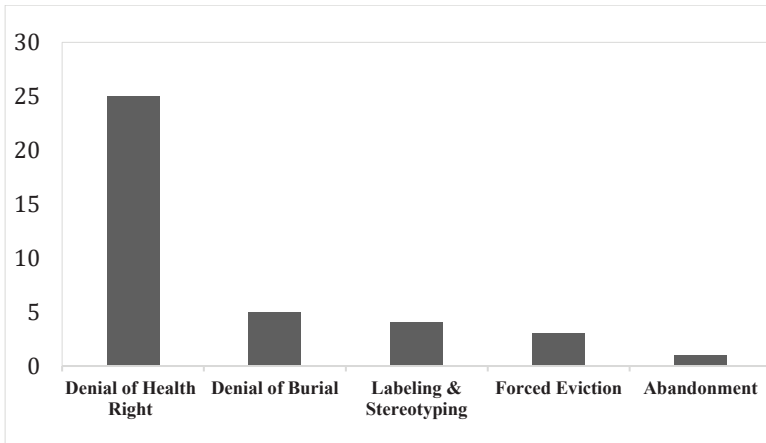


Figure 2: Stigma related news in The Daily Star (14 April -15 May 2020)

Labeling and Stereotyping

The newspapers began to report about the perceived ‘foreign virus’ from the early phase of the outbreak. COVID-19-related news reports rose in number as the first COVID-19 cases in Bangladesh were confirmed in early March 2020. Two of the three infected persons were returnees from Italy while the other person got infected from one of them. As Europe became the new epicenter of the pandemic, and two more cases were confirmed by the end of the second week of March 2020, the government cancelled all flights to and from Europe, except for the UK (“Coronavirus: 2 Biman”, 7 March 2020¹⁵ and “No flights”, 14 March, 2020¹⁶).

Soon after the return of the expatriates from Italy and few other European countries¹⁷ the community shifted their attention from the

¹⁵ <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-outbreak-biman-bangladesh-airlines-2-flights-kuwait-cancelled-1877608>

¹⁶ <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-deadly-new-threat/news/coronavirus-no-flights-europe-till-march-31-1880764>

¹⁷ Although flights to and from Europe were suspended, Bangladeshis living in Italy kept flying to Dhaka through different alternative air routes. Before the Bangladesh authority had canceled flights to and from Europe at the end of the second week of March 2020, several other countries including Kuwait and

so-called 'foreign virus' to the foreign returnees who had just returned from the COVID-19 epicenters. During March – April 2020 one could read news stories about foreign returnees being blamed and harassed by the local people for the alleged spread of coronavirus. First the returnees from Italy¹⁸ became a particular target of stigmatization at the community level. They were stereotyped and labeled as a group that 'imported' the coronavirus from a foreign country. Soon other people – including those infected with COVID-19, those with COVID-like symptoms, and those who had returned to their community from other places within the country – became victims of similar disgrace. Both newspapers covered the instances of labeling and public shaming associated with COVID-19, but with different focuses.

The newspapers published sensational stories, such as foreign returnees protesting at the designated quarantine center, bribing health officials, evading health restrictions and not obeying rules while in self-quarantine. In January 2020, at the instruction of the Prime Minister, 312 Bangladeshis were brought back from China as the COVID-19 cases were on the rise in Wuhan city. While they were quarantined in a makeshift center, news stories focused on the suitability of the place and the facilities available to the quarantined returnees. It was the first time that newspapers revealed the realities of the official 'quarantine' or 'isolation' arrangements associated with COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Eventually most of the foreign returnees were allowed to be in home-quarantine. The Daily Star and Prothom Alo then reported the gaps in the monitoring of such a provision, and issues in the operations aimed at implementing new health rules at the community levels.

One of the elements of the government's monitoring of the implementation of quarantine and isolation was marking the houses of the home-quarantined foreign returnees with a red color. 'Home quarantine' stickers were also posted and red flags hoisted at their residences by the magistrates of a mobile court. The authorities perhaps intended to convey a message to the community that they should refrain from mixing with the returnees from COVID-19

Qatar already suspended air communications with Bangladesh along with other countries.

¹⁸ Bangladeshis form one of the largest immigrant populations in Italy. As of 2016, there were more than 100,000 Bangladeshis living in Italy (Wikipedia).

infected countries. A story in the Prothom Alo – “Red flag in 51 expatriates’ houses”¹⁹ – reports that the Upazila (sub-district) administration at Dohar upazila, an area near the metropolitan areas of Dhaka, had hoisted red flags in 51 foreign returnees’ houses. A mobile court magistrate even fined a returnee from Singapore Tk 5000 (USD 60) for not abiding by home quarantine rules. Some stories in the dailies reported how the foreign returnees were discriminated against by not having access to social and public spaces, such as tea and coffee stalls.

Social Harassment and Denial of Burial

During April – May 2020 a number of incidents related to the harassment of COVID-19 infected people and health professionals involved in the treatment of infected patients were reported in the newspapers. The most astonishing stories related to the denial of burial to people who died of COVID-19 or with similar symptoms. Sometimes deaths caused by other reasons were suspected as deaths from COVID-19. Stories such as those in the articles “Death of a young man by electric shock, corona suspicion prevents burial”²⁰ and “Death of an old man due to shortness of breath in Rupganj, obstruction in burying the body”²¹ bear the testimony of harassment and stigmatization towards the COVID-19 dead.

Newspapers reported how the community took charge and interfered with the burial of the COVID-19 dead. A former senior secretary of the government of Bangladesh recalling that period wrote in The Daily Star:

Bodies of people who died from COVID-19 were found to have been abandoned in forests or on the streets in certain places of Bangladesh. Communities in a few areas even refused burial of such bodies (Karim, 2020).

The news stories focused on the social constraints on the authorities. Cases were reported in the news where the law enforcers faced social

¹⁹ Red flag in 51 expatriates’ houses, 18 April 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

²⁰ Death of a young man by electric shock, corona suspicion prevents burial, 5 May 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

²¹ Death of an old man due to shortness of breath in Rupganj, obstruction in burying the body, 26 May 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

resistance from the local people, and eventually had to find alternative places for the burial. Because of the adversity, for the COVID-19 victims, the authority assigned an area called Khilgaon-Taltala graveyard in Dhaka²². At the same time, newspapers also highlighted the sincerity of the law enforcement agencies and local volunteers as much as they reported the harsh realities faced by the families of the COVID-19 victims.

Forced Eviction and Discrimination

Forced eviction, a discriminatory form of harassment, was reported in the newspapers as COVID-19 patients in isolation were forced to leave their houses, while others were refused entry to their residential areas. A story in the Prothom Alo, “Landlord ousts a COVID patient in isolation”, tells the reader of an incident that happened in Narayanganj, a river port city next to Dhaka, where a COVID-19 patient in isolation was forcefully driven out of his house in the middle of the night. Later, with the help of the local administration, the man was able to return to his house²³. A story “Man denied home access, staying in hospital isolation” informs what happened to a man who was hospitalized with fever in late April 2020 in Rajshahi division. He suffered from fever for four days and got cured, but some locals obstructed him from entering his home. Finding no other way, he had to stay at the isolation ward of the local government hospital although he had no COVID-19 symptoms²⁴.

A lawyer analyzed the rights of tenants in an op-ed, “Protecting tenants’ rights during COVID-19”, published in The Daily Star (Kabir, 2020). It refers to a statement of a police commissioner describing acts of discrimination towards essential workers in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The commissioner admitted the fact that some landlords were threatening the emergency service providers like

²² Later, due to a waterlogging problem, the government chose Rayerbazar (a township in Dhaka city) graveyard as the designated place of burial for COVID-19 victims. For details, see Alam, Helemul, “COVID-19 victims: Burial ground moved to Rayerbazar graveyard”:
<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/COVID-19-victims-burial-ground-moved-rayerbazar-graveyard-1901137>

²³ Landlord ousts a COVID patient in isolation, 7 May 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

²⁴ Man denied home access, Staying in hospital isolation, 29 April 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

healthcare providers and news reporters with eviction from their houses (Kabir, 2020). In another story, “Old man barred from entering house on corona suspicion died in school premise”, the Prothom Alo reported that an elderly man had been denied entry to his own house by locals in suspicion of COVID-19 as he had returned to his village in the northern part of Bangladesh from a city near Dhaka with a fever and cold. Local government representatives helped him to take shelter in a local primary school building where he passed away. His relatives did not come to see the dead body, not even his own sons²⁵.

Abandonment in Fear of Coronavirus

Incidents of the abandonment of persons with COVID-19 symptoms by family or loved ones were covered by The Daily Star with an emphasis on human rights. One story, “He was just Abandoned on a Char”²⁶, gives an emotional account of an elderly person with COVID-19 symptoms who was abandoned in a river char (a mid-channel island), perhaps by his family members. He was rescued after two days. According to the news, the old man with COVID-19 symptoms was left in a char of the river Jamuna in Pabna district. Some locals informed that the man was abandoned there by a passenger boat. The chief administrative officer of the area however suspected that the man’s family members might have abandoned him as he had shown symptoms similar to COVID-19. Quoting a medical officer, the story also informs the reader that the elderly man was actually suffering from fever, cough and COVID-19-like symptoms, and had chronic malnutrition due to starvation. A similar story, “Woman with coronavirus-like symptoms abandoned at DMCH”, narrates how a woman, named Monowara Begum, who had COVID-19 infection-like symptoms, was left at the front gate of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) by her son²⁷.

²⁵ Old man barred from entering house on corona suspicion died in school premise, 8 May 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

²⁶ He was just abandoned on a char, 22 April 2020, The Daily Star, Dhaka – Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/he-was-just-abandoned-char-1895503>

²⁷ Woman with coronavirus-like symptoms abandoned at DMCH, 7 June 2020, The Daily Star, Dhaka. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/woman-coronavirus-symptoms-abandoned-dmch-1910477>

The Prothom Alo reported incidents of abandonment by family members and community people as human-interest news items. In a village of Barishal division, a woman suspected of having contracted COVID-19 was driven out of her home by her son and daughter-in-law. She had to spend around two months in a temple outside of their residence. It was reported in the Prothom Alo that she had caught cold which made the family members suspect her of having a COVID-19 infection. According to the news story, she was not even given proper food while in the temple. This caused her health condition to deteriorate further²⁸.

In another incident, a woman with symptoms similar to COVID-19 was abandoned in a forest by her family members. The incident received widespread media attention. She was rescued later by local administration workers and was put into isolation in a hospital²⁹. Prothom Alo also reported incidents like a mother being abandoned by her son before being rescued by police³⁰, and the misery of a person with COVID-19-like symptoms who was abandoned near a bus stop and ignored by passers-by³¹.

Denial of Peoples' Right to Health

Cases were reported in the news where peoples' access to medical treatment was refused, which even caused death. The news coverage of issues in connection with 'right to health' included incidents of ignoring the patient's right in the time of a pandemic, refusal of admission to hospitals, and instances of unexplained heavy medical bills at hospitals for COVID-19 related treatment.

In such cases, The Daily Star in particular reported from a rights perspective³². A report, "Patients with COVID-19 symptoms: Investigate

²⁸ Mother driven out of home on corona suspicion, 17 June 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

²⁹ Mother with COVID-19 symptoms 'abandoned' in Sakhipur forest, 14 April 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

³⁰ Mother abandoned by son, taken to hospital by police, 6 June 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

³¹ Man with COVID-19 like symptoms left alone in bus stop, 21 April 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

³² Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which Bangladesh is a state party, it has an obligation to

denial of treatment at hospitals”, made a link with a public statement issued by Amnesty International (AI) that expressed concerns about media reports that found hospitals were not admitting people showing COVID-19 symptoms. In their own investigation, AI (see Amnesty International, 2020) also learned that “persons were turned away because hospital staff feared being exposed to potential COVID-19”³³.

A story in Prothom Alo, “Hospital stops admitting patients as ample PPE not supplied”, reported that the doctors in the maternity ward at M A J Osmani Medical College Hospital in Sylhet posted a notice saying that they would not admit any patient as they had not received a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE). The news also describes the sufferings of some pregnant women who came for admission in the maternity department of this major hospital in the divisional city³⁴.

A story in The Daily Star, “Victims of Denial” (Al-Amin, 2020), reported the unbearable situation of a 24-year-old woman squirming in labor pains who was refused treatment without a COVID-19 test result. In fact, it became a common news items in almost all the news media of the period. As the story narrates, the woman and her husband who were from Gazipur, an area on the outskirts of Dhaka, ran around for hours seeking treatment at any hospital. But she was denied access as she had a fever, thought to be a symptom of COVID-19 (Al-Amin, 2020). The story also includes the following view on the capacity (or incapacity) of the hospitals to take care of COVID-19 patients together with patients with other health issues:

If you are running a high temperature, having breathing difficulties, chest pain, need a surgery or dialysis, you are invariably running the

guarantee the right to health that includes “the prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational and other diseases”. For a complete text of Article 12.C, see

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

³³ Patients with COVID-19 Symptoms: Investigate denial of treatment at hospitals, 16 May 2020, The Daily Star, Dhaka –

<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/patients-COVID-19-symptoms-investigate-denial-treatment-hospitals-1902964>

³⁴ Patient admission stopped due to insufficient PPE, 18 April 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

risk of not being treated in any private hospital or clinic ... Otherwise, you are left with the tortuous and often uncertain prospect of seeking medical support from the already-overcrowded public hospitals ... (Al-Amin, 2020).

The Daily Star reported another incident from a suburb in Sylhet city where a 63-year-old woman who was turned away by six different hospitals died. According to the news, she had been suffering from asthma for decades and fell critically ill. First, her family members took her to a private hospital where she was denied treatment. Then she was also refused by five other hospitals, including three medical college hospitals³⁵. In addition to the issue of access to hospitals or medical services for the COVID-19 infected, both the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star reported extensively on the scarcity of testing facilities and the high costs of COVID-19 treatment.

Right of Health Workers

It has already been mentioned that news coverage included instances of eviction, threats of eviction, harassment and discrimination of health professionals. In addition to eviction issues, the COVID-19 coverage focused on medical workers' rights, safety and security among other issues. It reported on shortages of PPE, poor quality medical equipment, the absence of a proper work environment, and the stigma faced by health workers. An opinion-based news item in Prothom Alo titled "PPE crisis: Journalist, doctor and police are at risk" (Islam, 2020) appreciated the role of the journalist in the midst a global pandemic:

The way journalists are providing people with information despite huge risk of being infected by COVID-19. Like what they did in the past during natural disasters, they are doing a great job by keeping the reader updated on coronavirus issues ... this is helping people of the country to stay safe from the risk of being COVID-19 infected (Islam, 2020).

The Daily Star highlighted human rights calls by local and international bodies, including this statement issued by Amnesty International (2020), "Bangladesh must put human rights at the centre of its COVID-

³⁵ Turned away by 6 hospitals, woman dies, 3 June 2020, The Daily Star, Dhaka - <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/turned-away-6-hospitals-woman-dies-1908133>

19 response strategies”, that pointed out: “The shortage of necessary medical equipment has not only made the frontline health workers’ job difficult, it in fact puts them at the greatest risk of being exposed to COVID-19” (Amnesty International Public statement, issued on 14 May, 2020).

The daily Prothom Alo also published news on the harassment of health workers by their landlords, as well as threats of eviction. One such news story reported cases from a divisional town, Mymensingh, where property-owners were reported to have pressurized the doctors working at different hospitals of the city to leave their properties. As these doctors were attending some patients at hospitals who might have been infected with COVID-19, the landlords thought they might put other tenants at risk of contracting the virus³⁶.

In addition to the above aspects of stigmatization and discrimination against caregivers and their families, frontline workers, especially health professionals, and migrant workers or expatriates, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star quite extensively covered issues of corruption and mismanagement as the COVID-19 cases spread across the country. Moreover, they reported instances of mistreatment and the emerging issue of violence associated with the pandemic. Both newspapers, but The Daily Star in particular, focused on the issue of freedom of expression, including articles on the arrests made under the Digital Security Act (DSA).

Conclusion

The coverage of stigma is identifiable in the news through labeling, harassment, discrimination, and the denial of health rights. As the pandemic situation unfolded, peculiar types of social issues emerged, and both newspapers were keen on finding a balance between the coverage of issues linked to stigma, public health, development and livelihood. Prothom Alo had a particular focus on elements and instances of stigmatization and discrimination, while The Daily Star emphasized more health rights.

³⁶ Landlord asking doctors-health workers to leave their properties, 9 May 2020, Prothom Alo, Dhaka.

Thus far, Bangladeshi newspapers have pointed out the possible ramifications of weak planning and poor management of the outbreak, but collectively they did not report much on the absence of a cultural approach to look into the causes that led to social stigmatization. The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a challenge to the current practice of rights-based journalism. At the same time, it also underscores the need to revisit our journalistic approaches in reporting social stigma and human suffering in a period of crisis and beyond.

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CHAPTER 10

COVID-19 AND TAIWAN IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

CHEN LING-HUI

In the initial stages of the spread of COVID-19 from China, the international media predicted that Taiwan (which is excluded from WHO membership) could become the second-worst affected country in the world by the virus. Three of Taiwan's airports are ranked 3rd, 8th and 13th in terms of being the world's busiest, thus the risk of infections from mainland China invading the island was high (Gardner, 2020).

According to traditional Chinese chronology, in the 60-year calendar (sexagenary cycle) the rat year of Gengzi has historically brought turbulence to the Chinese¹. Taiwan, which is only 130 kilometers off the coast of the mainland, and which was the closest foreign country to the epicenter of the virus (Wuhan City), has a total population of 23 million, of which, around 800,000 reside and 400,000 work in China (Pan, 2020)², with six million passengers crossing the Taiwan strait every year (Tourism Bureau, 2020). Thus, Taiwan was regarded as the country (or region) with the highest risk of getting imported COVID-19 cases. However, six months after the outbreak, Taiwan had just 449 confirmed cases and 7 deaths (as of the beginning of July 2020). This made Taiwan among the lowest ranked countries, as far as COVID-19 infections were concerned. Worldwide, at this time, COVID-

¹ Major events in the rat year of Gengzi: China's first Opium War in 1840; the Eight-Power Allied Forces entered Beijing in 1900; and China's three-year famine in 1960.

² Some media estimate that a total of about 2 million people live or work in China:

https://www.dgbas.gov.tw/public/data/dgbas04/bc6/107ebas/1_1.pdf.

19 cases stood at over 11 million and were increasing (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020)³.

Taiwan has achieved relative success in protecting the population from the virus, and is seen as a successful model for resisting the epidemic during its first wave. Time magazine ran a report on June 12 with the heading, "The Best Global Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic" (Bremmer, 2020). It described Taiwan as providing "a truly admirable response in less-than-ideal circumstances". It also stated that "Taiwan's response ranks among the world's best".

The world became very curious and began to notice how Taiwan responded so quickly and effectively. The world also started to wonder how its "advance deployment" had been achieved.

Opportunity to Gain International Recognition?

The story of Taiwan and COVID-19 is very similar to The Ugly Duckling fairy tale. The script begins with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) listing Taiwan as the world's second most high risk country with regard to COVID-19 on January 26, 2020. Then, three months later, on March 24, JHU did a 50-minute interview "Inside Taiwan's Response to COVID-19"⁴ that praised Taiwan's successful achievements and brought out in detail the strategies and operations that Taiwan had implemented in the intervening months. This interview reflected the huge difference in the evaluation of Taiwan's risk factor.

The interlocutor in the JHU interview was Taiwan's Vice President Chen Chien-jen. He is not just a politician but also an epidemiologist trained by JHU. (He received his Sc.D in human genetics and epidemiology from JHC.) He contributed his expertise and his administrative leadership to guide the response to the outbreak. Since this interview, the Vice President of Taiwan has been interviewed many times by the international media. The New York Times even defined him as "Taiwan's Weapon Against Coronavirus"⁵.

³ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

⁴ <https://www.jhsph.edu/COVID-19/news-and-events/events/april-24.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/world/asia/taiwan-vice-president-coronavirus.html>

Taiwan has always fought for international recognition, yet has achieved very little. However it gained an unprecedented amount of international attention at this time. According to the statistics of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at least 389 Taiwan-related articles were published during the 105 days from February 3 to June 24, 2020 in international news agencies, newspapers, radio and television, new media, etc.⁶ Among these, Time magazine had 5 special articles, The New York Times had 9 articles, The Wall Street Journal had 3, The Washington Post 5, NBC News reported 4 times, the BBC (Britain) had 7 reports, and the French newspaper Le Monde had a photo report.

Taiwan Model for COVID-19: A Preparation of 17 Years

Taiwan's successful epidemic prevention has two characteristics. Firstly, Taiwan keeps itself in a crisis-awareness mode with regard to disinformation processes, because it is situated on the Pacific Island chain and between the two powers. It has needed to be on constant self-alert, especially for infectious diseases, for the past 20 years. Secondly, it has a capacity for quick mobilization in response to an outbreak.

Taiwan launched an anti-epidemic disease campaign in 2019, whereas most other countries only started in 2020. It meant that Taiwan was ready and could control the situation by way of "advanced deployment". Research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), analyzed the strategies and summarized how Taiwan responded to the outbreak in no time (Wang et al., 2020). There were as many as 124 actions issued during the first 56 days of the outbreak (December 31, 2019-February 24, 2020) which can be divided into three categories: actions on border control, travel restrictions, and case findings; actions on resource allocation; and actions on communications and politics.

⁶ The list from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan excludes those newspapers that are published on weekends. The total number of articles/reports should be more, and can be estimated to be above 450: <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/NewsNoHeadOnlyTitle.aspx?n=4BA2C167B8A2027E&sms=6E0B2B5E0B815837>

"This success is no coincidence," President Tsai Ing-wen said (Tsai, 2020). Taiwan had learned lessons from the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003. It had caused 73 deaths, including those of several medical staff, and created great social panic. From then onwards, the government has been aware of the importance of restructuring the medical system for the control of communicable diseases in case of an epidemic. Since 2004, Taiwan has reorganized its health system with a constant focus on responding to communicable diseases. As Vice President Chen explains:

We made a comprehensive review and amendment of our Communicable Disease Control Act, and we organized our Taiwan CDC (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control), and we also established a National Health Command Center (NHCC) to coordinate the inter-ministry efforts for containment of pandemic diseases⁷.

The Act also mandated a three-month stockpile of all medical supplies/units, and according to the different classifications, the right to requisition public and private factories for replenishment under medical emergency needs. The "advanced deployment" was not built in a day. It can be said that for fighting a pandemic disease, Taiwan has been actively preparing for 17 years since 2004. During this period, it constantly reviewed and reformed its system based on the experiences that were encountered, such as pandemic flu H1N1 (Influenza A virus subtype) in 2009, H7N9 in 2013, and African swine fever in 2018.

Based on the efforts and experience of the past number of years, Taiwan's epidemic prevention policies and measures have developed certain characteristics. With regards to the formation of the so-called Taiwan model, these include the optimization of border quarantine based on TOCC (travelling, occupation, contact and clustering) history and health check-ups; the wearing of masks and face mask rationing; and CECC (Central Epidemic Command Center) daily press conferences for transparent information and public health education⁸.

Dr. Chang Shang-chwen, chairperson of the top consultants advising CECC, has fought three disease control battles for Taiwan in the past

⁷ <https://www.jhsph.edu/COVID-19/news-and-events/events/april-24.html>

⁸ 'Crucial policies for combating COVID-19', Ministry of Health and Welfare: <https://COVID19.mohw.gov.tw/en/mp-206.html>

20 years: SARS, N1H1 and COVID-19. He is also the key person who engaged several experts to participate in the CECC as it combated COVID-19. In fact, the Taiwan model is actually based on long-term and constant effort.

America's NBC news network in a report titled 'In Taiwan, the coronavirus pandemic is playing out very differently. What does life without a lockdown look like?' noted:⁹

One economy that managed to avoid a lockdown, and which has been functioning better than many others, is Taiwan. The island appears to have emerged from the crisis relatively unscathed. It managed to keep its 11 million-strong labor force working and its economy running.

The NBC reporter was surprised to see that Taiwan's shops, offices, schools, and internal transportation were kept open, and that everyone used hand sanitizer, wore face masks, and maintained social distancing, which were part of the protocols integrated into the daily lives of Taiwan's population and were even considered as a courtesy.

France's Le Monde, in a report on May 15, 2020, described Taiwan's life without lockdown thus:

They cross the markets of Taipei, the capital, where locals like to eat on the go, intrude in the crowd of the popular Ximending district of youth, stop in front of the windows with flashing signs. Together, they rush into the subway to go to schools or to the financial center of Nangang, exploring the "ordinary" life of the Taiwanese, which has become exceptional for the confined of the rest of the world. An animated dog to spread the instructions on the streets of Taipei, the epidemic is lived with a certain nonchalance, in a climate of confidence. The instructions of Chen Shih-chung, the Minister of Health nicknamed "Uncle Chen", are scrupulously followed. These are given with humor on mobile phones, through an animated dog called Zongchai, which has become very popular¹⁰.

⁹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taiwanese-authorities-stay-vigilant-virus-crisis-eases-n1188781>

¹⁰ Translation from original French:

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/05/15/reportage-photo-a-taiwan-ou-l-epidemie-se-combat-avec-efficacite-humour-et-serenite_6039780_3210.html

Images of street shops open and with lights on, crowds wearing masks, commuting people rushing to work, and school children running and jumping, were used by some international reports as scenes of “a surprisingly ordinary life” in Taiwan.

However, among the international news reports, the most popular undoubtedly were The Diplomat’s “Taiwan’s Baseball, Basketball leagues Back in Action as the World Watches”¹¹ and The Washington Post’s “Taiwan’s CPBL becomes first baseball league to allow fans during coronavirus pandemic”¹².

In mid-April, Taiwan started to allow matches where robots cheered from the auditoriums. Fans were allowed to attend in May, with seats arranged in accordance with social distancing of 1.5 meters from each other and with the placement of life-size cardboard cutouts simulating the presence of fans on the seats which had to be left vacated. Of the 140 articles from North American newsgroups on the database of Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as many as 20 focused on Taiwan’s basketball and baseball matches.

Counter-Disinformation in Preventing Communicable Diseases

The general awareness of the population and counter-disinformation campaigns were the key factors of Taiwan’s so-called “advanced deployment”. Early in the crisis, a message placed on PTT (Professional Technology Temple – Taiwan’s equivalent of Reddit) warned that there might have been seven suspected new SARS cases in Wuhan¹³. The message was from Dr. Li Wen-liang, now known as the COVID-19 whistleblower, an ophthalmologist in the Central Hospital of Wuhan who warned fellow doctors on social media on December 30, 2019. Taiwanese medical officers immediately noticed this post¹⁴, and by

¹¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/taiwans-baseball-basketball-leagues-back-in-action-as-the-world-watches/>

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/05/09/taiwans-cpbl-becomes-first-sports-league-allow-fans-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

¹³ <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/3151160>

¹⁴ <https://www.unionesarda.it/articolo/news-sardegna/cagliari/2020/04/18/scacco-matto-al-virus-di-wuhan-dieci-mosse-per-frenare-il-male-136-1009766.html>

the next day the inspection of passengers' health on direct flights from Wuhan was underway. Therefore, Taiwan started to fight the disease as early as December 31, 2019.

Taiwan's vigilance towards misinformation has come at a price. It can be traced back to 1997 when FMD (foot-and-mouth disease) was imported from China, at a time when the cross-strait traffic had begun to open up after half a century of closure. This caused Taiwan huge economic losses, with pork-meat exports completely shutting down. It took Taiwan 24 years of effort to be classified as an FMD-free zone again, on June 15, 2020¹⁵. FMD and SARS are viruses that have been imported from mainland China because of its proximity and the highly frequent traffic across the strait. Since that time, awareness of information about infectious diseases in neighboring countries has been a key element of the Taiwan's self-protection.

Using Digital Technology to Stop the Outbreak

A second key element of Taiwan's strategy was communication with citizens through humorous stunts and digital campaigns. The state hired comedians to help craft viral memes, adopted animal mascots to inform the public about important safety information, and even used teddy bears to encourage social distancing at restaurants (Bendix, 2020).

Audrey Tang, a genius civic-minded hacker, is now Taiwan's digital minister, and the helmswoman for using digital technology in this battle. Her methods included the digital fence system with SIM-tracking for surveillance, to ensure those quarantining at home did not exceed their isolation area; the establishment of the mask rationing plan and a mask map providing real-time information on where masks could be obtained and the places where the people could purchase them; proposing "Humor over Rumor" to counter misinformation; and a digital "spokesdog" and a Google Chatbot that reminds people of the correct epidemic prevention measures and can answer simple questions interactively.

Tang called this a "nerd immunity" strategy (derivative from herd immunity). At the TED 2020 conference, she said: "There's three key

¹⁵ <https://www.oie.int/animal-health-in-the-world/official-disease-status/fmd/list-of-fmd-free-members/>

ideas about digital democracy; that is fast, fair and fun”¹⁶. For example, there were rumors about the materials used for masks – that to increase production, toilet paper was used, and that it would not function properly to block infection. This in turn led to rumors about the imminent shortage of toilet paper in the market. The government immediately launched electronic posters to refute the rumors and designed a self-mocking cartoon of the Executive Yuan’s dean shaking his back and saying “we only have one butt, don’t hoard, don’t trust rumors” (the words “hoard” and “butt” sound the same in Mandarin) (Bendix, 2020).

Communication Strategy: Real-time and Transparency

During the pandemic, “be clockwise” became a catchphrase in Taiwan. It means “everybody altogether follows Chen Shih-chung” (the name “Shih-chung” and “clock” sound the same in Mandarin), which is not only wordplay but also a slogan that is embraced and supported by the people, and a sign of solidarity in fighting the pandemic.

Chen Shih-chung, Minister of Health and Welfare, is also the main speaker in a five-person-team giving daily press conferences for the Taiwan Center for Disease Control. These briefings were given at 2 pm non-stop for 105 days from the beginning of the outbreak to June 7. The members of the team put themselves at the forefront in communicating with the public on the latest situation of the disease, announcing and explaining policies or actions that are under way, and answering questions in the press conference.

These were not like ordinary press conferences normally held by politicians or a spot-lighted newsroom host. These were press conferences based on professional knowledge, and especially since behind the five people were a team of more than 20 experts and the entire government’s disease control mechanism. This real time and daily communication mechanism not only led and educated the public to focus on combating the pandemic, but also addressed the disinformation or misinformation that surrounded COVID-19. The most effective way to respond to the pandemic is to be able to use expert guidance on the issue of diseases and to insist on information

¹⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/audrey_tang_how_digital_innovation_can_fight_pandemics_and_strengthen_democracy#t-43385

transparency as the communication strategy. This was also the foundation for establishing trust between the government and society.

Dr. Christensen, the Director of American Institute in Taiwan, said in an interview with Johns Hopkins University:

*The most fundamental element of the Taiwan model is transparency, transparency between the authorities and the public in Taiwan and transparency between Taiwan and the international community*¹⁷.

The characteristics of Taiwan's successful response are not only the medical processes, but also the public communication. This is the difference between general medical care and a pandemic, where social communication is indispensable. Taiwan has demonstrated this ably.

Conclusion

The successful coronavirus control had brought much praise to Taiwan, and the people of Taiwan have gained self-confidence and they now have more confidence in their country (and government). We can't find another case in Taiwan's history where cooperation between the people and the government has been so harmonious and agreeable; as *Le Monde* described, the pandemic has been fought in Taiwan with "efficiency and serenity"¹⁸.

The disease control mechanism has been well and widely organized by the government for 17 years. The constant preparation has occurred under the different political parties in power since 2004. This shows that it is based on professional considerations rather than political, which can only be achieved if the country is based on a mature democratic system.

There are many stories about Taiwan and COVID-19. These include how the organization of the National Taiwan Mask Production Team took place rapidly, with 100 technicians recruited across the country. Although the recruitment was due to the Communicable Disease Act, it is also true that the technicians went beyond mere profit-making, and

¹⁷ <https://www.jhsph.edu/COVID-19/news-and-events/events/april-24.html>

¹⁸ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/05/15/reportage-photo-a-taiwan-ou-l-epidemie-se-combat-avec-efficacite-humour-et-serenite_6039780_3210.html

instead cooperated to help the country. The daily production of surgical face masks jumped from 4 million to 13 million in 6 weeks. "At my age, it's an honor to still (be) able to do something for my country"¹⁹, said a 63-year-old factory manager who left his job to take part in the project. Another engineer who was away from his family for months, was encouraged and reassured by his wife that "good deeds bring good karma"²⁰. This creates a beautiful ending for the chapter, as someone once said that the most beautiful scenery in Taiwan was its "people".

The world will soon enter into the post-pandemic era, and perhaps the phenomenon of "from globalization to localization" will not happen immediately. Taiwan has always kept technology and agriculture ongoing. Can Taiwan continue to seize its proper advantages to obtain a relatively stable and serene life in the turbulent international circumstance, something which has never been easy for the country? Perhaps, as the Chinese prophet Lao Tzu said 2,600 years ago, the most ideal form of a country is "In a little state with a small population". Passing by its coast a Portuguese sailor named Taiwan "Formosa", a beautiful and well-blessed place.

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CHAPTER 11

PHILIPPINES: COMMUNICATING HEALTH RISKS AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BY FLORDELIZ L. ABANTO, MA.
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The media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines started in early January, when the first news from CNN on January 5 named a mysterious pneumonia that spread in China. In the aftermath of the revelry from the New Year and Christmas seasons, Filipinos got a wave of initial shock after their exuberance over the holidays.

The media covered how the Philippine government soon established a system of protocols and provision of information through press conferences that were live-streamed on the online Zoom platform. The information was provided by the nationally-mounted multi-sectoral response team, called the Interagency Task Force (IATF) on Emerging Infectious Diseases, chaired by the Department of Health (DOH), in coordination with international health agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

Soon, noontime press briefings, regular virtual pressers on COVID-19 statistics, and stories from doctors, victims, and scientists with data analysis, among others, filled up the stream of information on the status of this “mysterious pneumonia”. Caught in the midst of these were the journalists, who had to operate in a Work-From-Home (WFH) arrangement, isolated from their fellow journalists, and were dependent on news sources, messengers, and messages that were all done through online communication. Yet, during the early stages of the disease, many of the journalists took the risks of covering the

news, even to the point where they were called frontliners, along with the health workers who instantly became the news heroes of the time.

This chapter is written from a combination of studies on collected texts from four selected media news sites: a national broadcast organization, and one national and two regional online news sites - *CNN Philippines*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *The Freeman (Cebu)* and *Sunstar Daily (Davao)*. The content of these materials was sampled for COVID-19 reports from January to June 2020, and was focused on the reports from these selected Philippine media as they communicated health and risks of COVID-19. The contents of these news media sites were also studied in terms of the frames applied by the media in covering the pandemic, and their interplay with the political, economic, socio-cultural, and religious milieu of Filipinos. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with communication scholars and selected journalists, to lend a perspective of the challenges posed by COVID-19 to the media industry.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the depth, significance and salience of reports vis-à-vis the evolving nature of the pandemic and how media has helped or limited the understanding of Filipinos on the severity of the disease, as a reflection of their own limitations as persons and as an industry.

The Beginning of COVID-19 in the Philippines: (January-February 2020)

Media reports during the first two months of the year 2020 initially labeled COVID-19 as 2019 novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) to differentiate it from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-Cov). At the start of the year, there were so many blind spots in understanding the disease that the labeling, by itself, could not adequately capture what the impending pandemic was all about.

COVID-19 first captured the media attention in the Philippines when a 5-year-old boy who flew from Wuhan to Kalibo, Aklan tested positive for an unidentified coronavirus. The boy eventually tested negative. Thereafter, the WHO recounted a critical date in Philippine COVID-19 history:

On 30 January 2020, WHO reported a 38-year-old female from Wuhan testing positive for the novel coronavirus. On the same day, on the other side of the world at the WHO headquarters in Geneva, WHO activated the highest level of alert by declaring COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern¹.

The WHO initially named the virus as the “2019 novel coronavirus”², and the identification of the source was at Wuhan, China. However, the WHO, during the early onset of the pandemic (January 2020), did not name it as a pandemic or declare a public health emergency of international concern until January 30 2020. It was around this time that other information was being carried by the media, such as suggestions that the transmission of the virus was possible between an animal and human or from an infected human to another human. Likewise, early reports had cited that coronaviruses were common in many different species of animals, including camels and bats. A report from one media entity even said that “rarely, these coronaviruses can evolve and infect humans and then spread between humans”. This conflicting information from various sources of the media compounded the lack of understanding and added to the mystery of the disease.

Having traced the disease from China, Chinese tourists soon became the center of attention in the country’s media coverage, beginning with the tourists who arrived in Cebu City, and who were reported to have been immediately ordered to either fly back to the Chinese cities where they came from or enter a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Even Filipinos who came from Taiwan were quarantined.

However, media reports covered the flip-flopping of administrative policies on the banning of travel to Chinese territories. Media reported the (then) Presidential spokesperson Salvador Panelo’s decision, along with the IATF, “to lift the travel restrictions effective immediately

¹ *100 days of COVID-19 in the Philippines: How WHO supported the Philippine response*, 9 May 2020, WHO website –

<https://www.who.int/philippines/news/feature-stories/detail/100-days-of-COVID-19-in-the-philippines-how-who-supported-the-philippine-response>

² WHO website - [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(COVID-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(COVID-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)

because of strict measures being undertaken by Taiwan to contain the spread of the new coronavirus or COVID-19” (CNN, Feb. 2020). The government had included Taiwan in the travel ban on China and its administrative regions Hong Kong and Macau that had been ordered on February 2 by President Rodrigo Duterte to contain the spread of the virus.

Taiwan was first included in the list of China’s territories where a temporary travel ban was imposed by the President, only to be recalled two weeks later after a diplomatic protest. But in the President’s own city of Davao, a call for total travel ban was pushed. Senators joined in the fray, led by lawmaker Risa Hontiveros, who called on the Senate to enforce a month-long travel ban in the country. Airline companies were also reported to have either cancelled flights or suspended all flights coming to and from Hubei province, but other destinations in China continued to be operational.

Despite this confusion, early February newspaper reports in the cities of Cebu and Davao declared their localities as “COVID-19-free”, with one newspaper stating that there is “No Corona in Cebu”. Nevertheless, this story also stated that health workers had been placed on code white since the middle of January³. There were in fact mixed contentions as to the existence or non-existence of cases, whether from the reports of the national media or the regional media news sites.

The virus was an enigma not only to the government but even to health authorities such as the Department of Health and the WHO, the latter of which initially called it a “mysterious disease” or an “unknown form of viral pneumonia” (Health Secretary F. Duque, CNN Philippines)⁴. As February progressed, the news reports cited the emergence of local cases, and the quarantine and observation of possible COVID-19 infections among some 36 people who were tested at the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM).

The use of facemasks and protocols were immediately enforced on all travel entry points such as airports and ports. Hotels and resorts were

³ The Freeman, 24 January 2020.

⁴ 5 January 2020, CNN Philippines – <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/1/5/DOH-checks-travel-China-pneumonia.html?fbclid=IwAR2>

reported to be included in the enforcement of health guidelines. Also, health forms were required, where passengers in airlines were asked for disclosure of their travel history and contact information while in the Philippines. However, news reports of tourists being allowed to deplane and proceed to the resort town of Boracay in Aklan province after undergoing “rigid” screening from personnel of the Bureau of Quarantine and filling in health forms were met with protests from local communities.

As the virus was slowly being understood, media reported labels and terms that were new to the public, including “patients under investigation” (PUI) and “symptomatic” and “asymptomatic” infections. The reports were even explaining that transmission from asymptomatic people was “not a major driver of transmission” of the disease (WHO)⁵. However, the media later backtracked and admitted that this was one form of transmission. The transmission of PUIs, however, was reportedly from foreign nationals with a history of travel to Wuhan.

Early signs of discontent with the local governments’ handling of the disease soon filled news reports, such as reports that came from Boracay, Aklan province, where residents were alarmed at the lack of Local Government Unit enforcement of the travel ban, as they took note of reports stating the incubation period of the disease and feared possible exposure to it while the ban was not in place. Calls on social media posts focused on the seeming disinformation about the virus. The propagation of unverified information online was matched with some media reports that were likewise lacking in scientific information, which the public needed so badly. Much of the information circulating, verified or unverified, was culled from social media, and access to this compounded the onslaught of information that formed a cloud of chaos on the nature of the pandemic.

Reports on sanitation and protocols soon filled up the media, with health authorities advising the public to observe a healthy lifestyle, practice proper hand washing, do regular exercise, eat the right food, and avoid crowded places to prevent acquiring infectious diseases (Sunstar Davao)⁶.

⁵ WHO website - <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200201-sitrep-12-ncov.pdf?>

⁶ Sunstar Davao, 14 February 2020.

Politics and Policies: COVID-19 Local Transmission and the Lockdown (March-April 2020)

The COVID-19 confirmed cases in the Philippines during the first two months of 2020 were all cases of foreigners who had traveled to Wuhan, China.

The news reports from March to April 2020 on CNN Philippines and in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Freeman and Sunstar Daily Davao chronicled the emergence of local COVID-19 transmissions with patients without travel history abroad. A State of Public Health Emergency was declared on March 8, 2020 by President Duterte as COVID-19 was considered as an “occurrence of an imminent threat of an illness or health condition which could pose a high probability of a large number of deaths”⁷. The declaration allowed a price freeze on certain goods, faster procurement processes for medical supplies, and easier access to financial resources.

A week later, a month-long lockdown from March 15-April 14 was imposed in the National Capitol Region. Local governments were given the discretion to declare similar policies. The lockdown meant the suspension of classes, the closure of some business establishments, the suspension of public transport operations, travel bans, curfew, and border control checkpoints.

A review of news during this period revealed that health-related reports were slightly higher than news pertaining to government policies. These included updates on COVID-19 cases and the high-risk areas, the scarcity of supply of testing kits and, later, donations from abroad, the construction of health facilities, the expansion of testing centers aside from the RITM based in Metro Manila, measures on how to avoid the spread of COVID-19, and monitoring of suspected COVID-19 patients. Contact tracing at this time had not been systematized and posed some problems to the health authorities. Among the stories on contact tracing that caught great attention from the health authorities and the government was the breakout of COVID-19 cases

⁷ 8 March 2020, CNN Philippines – <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/8/Philippines-public-health-emergency.html?fbclid=IwAR00tIW4i97pMMPI-enPjEI9q0GGZxRNY4NicKnO8-d3Wz8NQ49-7radr9U>

in the country's cramped jails; it was feared that jails would become the epicenter of the virus. Jail authorities pleaded with the Department of Health to subject persons deprived of liberty to COVID-19 testing and contact tracing so isolation could be enforced immediately.

As local COVID-19 cases started to emerge, the government adopted measures to control its spread and ensure food supply. It suggested work-from-home arrangements for both government and private employees, and mandated the Philippine National Police to enforce lockdown protocols. News included the procurement of testing kits, establishing more testing centers outside Metro Manila to reduce the backlog at the RITM, construction and identification of isolation facilities, support for health workers, expansion and extension of lockdowns in several parts of the country, financial support and relief goods to poor Filipinos, appropriation of a budget for the hospitalization of COVID-19 patients, and provision for a stimulus package for affected micro and small businesses, among others.

News reports during the period mostly referred to policies pertaining to the imposition of lockdowns that were favored by local government officials in Cebu and Davao City to contain the spread of the virus in their areas. Occasionally, there were reports of violations of the curfew, mass gatherings for cockfights, wet markets, hoarding of goods, etc., including a report of a Senator who tested positive for COVID-19 after he broke the mandatory quarantine of 14 days to visit his wife who had given birth.

To allay fears of the public over the deadly and fast-spreading virus, the government had regular press briefings, which were covered live by media. The Press Secretary and some Cabinet officials conducted virtual press briefings on weekdays at noon, while the Health spokesperson gave updates on confirmed cases, recoveries, deaths, bed capacity, state of health workers and their needs, and reminders on health protocols every day at 4.00 pm, except for instances when errors on figures were noted and this pushed the press conference to the evening or the next day.

Assurances signaling hopes for the containment of the virus and help for the affected sectors were evident in the news reports. Other than the national government's initiatives to provide a budget to augment the funding needs of government hospitals and hazard pay for health

workers, some local governments established their own testing centers and hired health workers to cater to their constituents during the pandemic. Donations were received from the public sector, private companies and even foreign governments. Testing kits from South Korea and China beefed up the meager supply at the RITM and donations of masks, personal protective equipment (PPE) and surgical gloves for health workers, and food packs for poor communities and displaced workers poured in from the public sector and big private companies. Such initiatives gave hope to the public that both health and economic concerns would be addressed through *Bayanihan*, a Filipino tradition of solidarity and helping out.

Interestingly, while COVID-19 is a health issue, media interviews centered largely on government officials (President Duterte, Governors, Mayors, Cabinet members, the Inter-Agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases and legislators) who elaborated on policies to address COVID-19. Legislators landed in the news radar: several senators demanded the resignation of Health Secretary Francisco Duque for “failure of leadership, negligence, lack of foresight, and inefficiency” in handling the COVID-19 crisis while Senator Christopher Go, a close ally of President Duterte, defended the Health Secretary⁸.

Meanwhile, conflicts between national and local authorities were noted. Local initiatives of Marikina Mayor Marcelino Teodoro, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio, and Governor Gwendolyn Garcia ran counter to the policies of the Health Department and the IATF. Also, House Representative Joey Salceda criticized the strict lockdown policies that affected the transport of food supplies as it “threatens immediate supply stability and increases price pressures”⁹. He appealed for the relaxation of rules and regulations in rice importation and “to rationalize the checkpoints to prevent road congestion and protect food security”.

⁸ 16 April 2020, CNN Philippines. From: <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/16/Health-Secretary-Duque-resignation-COVID-19-Senate.html>

⁹ 21 March 2020, Inquirer.net. From: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1245868/irrational-checkpoints-threat-to-bicol-food-stock#ixzz6dlmGoBVx>

While local COVID-19 cases were reported at this stage, the statistics were still low because of border controls and the Balik Probinsya Program had not yet begun. Meanwhile, the greater bulk of the population was reeling from hunger, anxiety, fear and uncertainty during this stage of the pandemic.

The Full Emergence of the Disease (May-June 2020)

The rapidly increasing rate of COVID-19 cases continued to challenge government responses to contain its spread at both the local and national levels. In early May, presidential legal counsel Salvador Panelo hogged the limelight with his proposal to place the country under martial law, likening and justifying the spread of the virus to an ‘invasion’, a requirement for the declaration of this military solution. Another cabinet member, Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra, however, was quick to debunk the fallacy of equivocation, explaining that ‘invasion’ refers to invasion of a country by foreign armed forces. This is analogous to the other grounds for declaring martial law, e.g. a rebellion, which is an armed uprising against the government by its own citizens¹⁰. The National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers called the proposal ‘factually absurd’. Palace spokesperson Harry Roque distanced the executive branch of the government from the position, stressing that only he was authorized to speak on behalf of the President and the cabinet¹¹.

What the rights groups perceived to be a proposal that reeked of political undertones, Panelo’s military-style solution pickd up from President Duterte’s earlier threat to place the country under martial law due to the supposed lawlessness of communist rebels in February, before the urgency of the pandemic response waylaid that issue (Aspinwall, 2020).

Between May and June, the lexicon of the IATF-directed measures would shift on a slide rule of classification, appropriating lockdown measures on the degree of risks evident to a locality. On May 13, 2020, the presidential spokesperson presented guidelines for allowable activities and a list of businesses and industries that could operate in areas placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine, Modified

¹⁰ 6 May 2020, Inq.net.

¹¹ Ibid.

Enhanced Community Quarantine, and General Community Quarantine. These variants of prescriptive controls would have an impact on public behavior, public spaces, travel, and workplaces (e.g. essential work gatherings and religious gatherings were now allowed and restrictions to the mobility of senior citizens were dropped)¹².

Anticipating a lowering of the guard from a general public already manifesting quarantine fatigue, the DOH was not remiss in its incessant reminders for everyone to observe minimum safety standards and protocols (e.g. the wearing of face masks, frequent sanitation and hand washing, and implementation of safe distancing measures) in all areas of the country regardless of the kind of community quarantine imposed. Normally, this would come after the health department had provided its statistical update on the numbers of infections, deaths, and recoveries on government television, updates which were also shown by commercial media stations and broadcast live on social media. Occasionally, the presidential spokesperson would pitch in with his palace updates, while invited officials from key line agencies, including the IATF, would appear with their COVID-19 related action plans and an inventory of activities pertaining, e.g., to the expansion of health capacity units or the creation of new isolation centers or the enhancement of economic and travel protocols. These themes would also resonate down the local levels.

In key metropolises like Cebu and Davao, the relaxation of restrictive measures would result in increased complacency and violations of protocols, earning the ire of the President who, in particular, took umbrage at the wanton overconfidence of Cebuano residents and derided their behavior: “But really, the danger is there. It’s up to you to decide. If you get infected, then I’m sorry,” he said, speaking partly in Filipino¹³. Cebu City would immediately revert back to the policy on Enhanced Community Quarantine (more popularly ECQ) starting from June 15 to June 30 due to its rising COVID-19 cases, accounting for 14% of the confirmed cases nationwide. Elsewhere, sporadic reports

¹² 8 March 2020, CNN Philippines – <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/8/Philippines-public-health-emergency.html?fbclid=IwAR00tIW4i97pMMPI-enPjEI9q0GGZxRNy4NicKnO8-d3Wz8NQ49-7radr9U>

¹³ 23 June 2020, newsinfo.inquirer.net.

of protocol violations were also reported. In Itogon, Benguet, seized bottles of gin from liquor ban violators were used as road disinfectant¹⁴.

With the city of Cebu becoming the new national COVID-19 hotspot, Provincial Governor Gwen Garcia emerged with her controversial endorsement of the practice of *tuob*, a traditional salt water steam inhalation, which reportedly was a cure for COVID-19. A memorandum she issued on June 18 included this folk medication as part of a wellness program for provincial government employees. It was anticipated that this would also help resuscitate the area's tourism industry, the province's primary economic mover which was deeply scarred by the strict quarantine measures. Her unequivocal pronouncement of *tuob* as an effective cure to COVID-19 was quickly denounced by local medical societies, including the DOH. In a virtual presser, Garcia berated two doctors for criticizing her memorandum in her attempt to 'publicly shame' them, a move that would earn her a heavy backlash from the netizens¹⁵.

The governor would figure yet again in June in a policy clash with the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Undersecretary for Operations Epimaco Densing, who sought the retraction of her executive order permitting the return of back riding on private motorcycles in Cebu. This time, Garcia's broadside against the no back riding policy earned her wide support from various quarters, especially since the motorcycle is the most prevalent means of transportation among the working class and low-income families nationwide. Densing invoked science to defend this IATF guideline but did not cite any evidence on how COVID-19 could be transmitted when riding at the back of a motorcycle.

The public backlash would pave the way for the relaxation of the measure: back riding in motorcycles would now be allowed for

¹⁴ 13 June 2020, CNN Philippines – <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/6/13/Seized-bottles-of-gin-used-as-road-disinfectant-in-Itogon-Benguet.html#:~:text=Itogon%20Mayor%20Victorio%20Palangdan%20said,ban%20violators%20during%20community%20quarantine.>

¹⁵ Community Doctors react to 'doctor shaming', 27 June 2020, newsinfo.inquirer.net – <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1298378/community-doctors-react-to-doctor-shaming>

couples provided they set up a barrier shield between them. Senate President Pro Tempore Ralph Recto expressed his reservation on the efficacy of the barrier, and its untested effects on roadworthiness and safety. Netizens would swamp social media questioning the aerodynamic soundness of a barrier, while others scoffed at its wisdom since couples live together anyway.

The public could not seem to reconcile this strict guideline that included threats of arrests for violations committed against IATF measures when, in early May, the media reported that the Philippine National Police Chief General Archie Gamboa, could not even sanction one of his own men at a birthday party. Despite a ban on mass gatherings while Metro Manila was on lockdown, dozens of National Capital Region Police Office (NCRPO) members gathered to celebrate the highly criticized *mañanita* (early morning) birthday of their chief, Major General Debold Sinas, in Camp Bagong Diwa on May 8. This became hot news since it showed that it was tolerated despite the strict guidelines for social distancing and other protocols¹⁶.

Instead, the threats of arrests were trained on relief workers, activists, and authors of social media posts critical of the government (Aspinwall, 2020), invoking the provision found in the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act*, which punishes “false information” about the coronavirus crisis “but in fact constitutes a grave violation of press freedom” (Reporters Without Borders, 6 May 2020).

Anticipating perhaps the growing public discontentment that now extended to questioning the transparency of the Social Amelioration Program, the Department of Justice (DOJ) temporarily banned Independence Day protests on June 12, citing the risks of spreading the coronavirus disease. The DOJ threatened to impose penalties on violators even as the National Union of People’s Lawyers questioned the existence of any law containing such a prohibition (Lalu, 2020).

The government would not see the end of the controversies and challenges besetting its COVID-19 response since the spike in cases would not happen until mid-July 2020. Nonetheless, local authorities were already busy crafting their own programs and anti-COVID-19 initiatives that teetered between human and economic health

¹⁶ In November 2020, Sinas would be appointed as the successor of Gamboa by the president, who cleared him of any culpability.

concerns. Various sectors were also continually demanding attention to their own welfare and activities; e.g. senior citizens asking for greater mobility, churches seeking the resumption of services, frontliners begging for added protection, and businesses pleading for the gradual opening of the economy. The media covered all this adequately.

Challenges in Media Coverage of COVID-19 During the Early Stages of the Pandemic

Based on the analysis on the framing of COVID-19 by selected national and local media from January to June 2020, the virus was primarily presented as a deadly virus that originated in Wuhan, China and the health risks it posed was massive. With little known facts about the virus that spread wildly across powerful nations like the United States, fear crept in as the Philippine healthcare system was doubted for its capability to handle the pandemic in view of very limited medical resources to test, isolate and keep its people safe.

The most immediate response the government had in its disposal was to declare lockdowns to limit the movement of people, including news reporters. Virtual pressers with government officials and the President were resorted to and news sources were remotely interviewed through Zoom or Viber. This posed a challenge to news reporters and the media industry in general.

We interviewed three Cebu-based journalists, one Manila-based journalist, and two media scholars on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the quality, credibility, and balance of news, and the effectiveness in communicating the risks and implications of the pandemic.

All informants observed that the coverage was limited in terms of the sources of information, depth of questioning, and context. The early periods of the pandemic posed operational difficulties to media organizations: they had to implement the work-from-home arrangements, they could not implement the usual deployment of reporters because strict quarantine protocols limited access to news sources, and they had to make housing provisions for essential media workers to ensure continued operations as public transportation was suspended. The field reporter on the other hand, admitted that she

had to confront her own bouts of anxiety and fears for her health. Though provided with the protective gear, the reporters were discouraged from gathering news from hospitals to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus. Whereas some news sources declined a face-to-face interview, reporters grappled for a reliable Internet connectivity. TV reporters were greatly challenged with the quality of audio and supporting video in online interviews (M. Rondina, 2020)¹⁷.

For a time, news sources were mostly from the government, which some informants described as giving contradicting and confusing pronouncements. They “did not know what they were doing and were not transparent about the number of cases, overwhelmed hospitals and health system and assistance to worst-hit families” (L. Lastimosa, 2020)¹⁸.

The media were not given opportunities to follow up questions during the virtual media briefings because the questions were pre-selected and at some point, the Malacanang (Presidential Palace) press office stopped soliciting questions from the regional press. As one informant observed, media merely quoted sources “without or with too little context and even less analysis. The consequence was the dominance of the Duterte regime narrative. With only a few exceptions, much of the media did not raise the question of why there was no national plan to prevent the spread of the contagion, and to make financial assistance to displaced workers more efficient and just, and why responding to the pandemic was mostly left to LGUs” (L. Teodoro, 2020)¹⁹.

The President’s speeches kept the media up till the early hours of the morning and our informants did not find it helpful. Instead it “showed his ignorance of the pandemic and his refusal to know and lead the most basic things his administration should do to address the escalating community transmission and lockdown-induced economic dislocation” and it included irrelevant threats “against critics and the communists”. The seeming void of relevant information and clear guidelines was an opportunity for “fake news” and misinformation to thrive. Media called out the false information and provided the public

¹⁷ M. Rondina, personal communication, 20 November 2020.

¹⁸ Personal communication, 16 November 2020.

¹⁹ Personal communication, 14 November 2020.

with infographics and “broadcast safety and health protocols, providing graphics and even animation to get the message across to the people”, said a news executive who requested anonymity.

News organizations also sought sources from the academe, medical experts, private businesses, the Church, and the social media posts of COVID-19 patients, displaced workers and poor communities to present multiple perspectives. However, it was observed that some sources were wary of questioning the integrity of government data.

Media were blamed for confusing guidelines when in fact, the conflicting orders came from government sources. The flip-flopping of government sources was resolved through “verification and fact checking” and “in editorial meetings where facts are laid down and all the issues are taken into consideration” (sources requested anonymity).

For instance, Cebu media was “caught in the middle” on the controversy of Cebu Governor Gwendolyn Garcia’s endorsement of steam inhalation or “tuob” as an effective measure in fighting COVID-19. Health authorities and some private practitioners contradicted this age-old tradition yet some of the people deprived of liberty and afflicted with the virus avowed to its efficacy. Sunstar Daily had to “report on the different interpretations, get other expert opinions and add background as to how ‘tuob’ was used by our elders” to provide context on the issue (Cabaero, 2020)²⁰.

Teodoro laments that some media did not point out the contradictions in other’s and even in one’s own statements. He added that it has become a “case of he-said-she-said reporting”, or as John Pilger calls it, “stenography, not journalism”.

The Other Gaps in Reporting a Pandemic

The coverage of the pandemic exposed the newsrooms’ “lack of skills and knowledge in reporting on health and science”, as admitted by Cabaero. While young reporters were sent to workshops, the senior reporters and editors needed this training as well.

²⁰ Personal communication, 21 November 2020.

There was a dearth of science reporters who could have made information more understandable since scientists tended to use technical jargon that widened the knowledge gap.

Role of Media in the Time of the Pandemic

Dr. Florangel Braid (2020)²¹ emphasized the need for media to go beyond the statistics and the conventional news elements. She said that there was a dearth of reports on the “psycho-social aspect and intangible costs of the pandemic” and that media could have done more probing and triangulation of sources. More importantly, media should “feel the public pulse” and “relate these concerns to policy”.

Cabaero said that media must continue to question government transactions and make follow-up reports amid the pandemic and other emerging controversies. A critical media must not be perceived as anti-government (or anti-Cebu) and the government must not use the emergency situation as an excuse to expect media to toe the line:

The sentiment being pushed to the public was that, in this emergency situation, government needs everybody's help and there is no room for “fake news.” Governor Garcia and Cebu City Mayor Edgardo Labella initiated separate legal action against two individuals who posted on social media commentary critical of their handling of the pandemic. The cases against these individuals did not prosper and were dropped. But the message to media was to be careful of what we reported so we would not be perceived as anti-Cebu. Being in the community press, this means walking the tightrope while doing the job of informing the public (Cabaero, 2020).

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²¹ Personal communication, 14 November 2020.

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Informants

- Professor Luis Teodoro, former Dean of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines and Deputy Director of the Center for Media Freedom and Journalism Professor
- Dr Florangel Rosario-Braid, past president of the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication and columnist, Manila Bulletin
- Leo Lastimosa, former station manager and radio commentator of defunct DYAB (ABS-CBN Network), TV news anchor and columnist, The Freeman
- Maria Lourdes “Nini Cabaero”, Editor in Chief, Sunstar Cebu and Director for Content
- Mai Rondina, TV news reporter and anchor, GMA-7 Cebu
- News Executive who requested anonymity

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

KALINGA SENEVIRATNE AND SUNDEEP R.
MUPPIDI

On the eve of the International Day for The Eradication of Poverty in October, Thalif Deen (2020), a journalist based at the United Nations in New York, noted that for the first time in 20 years, while there has been a phenomenal rise in extreme poverty worldwide, there has been an upsurge in the income of the world's billionaires and the super-rich.

A report published by UBS Wealth Management and PWC Switzerland to coincide with the day has predicted that by the dawn of 2021 as many as 150 million more people worldwide could be living in extreme poverty, while in contrast the wealth of the world's billionaires has hit record highs in the middle of the pandemic, thanks mainly to a "rebound in tech stocks boosting the fortunes of the global elite". They have provided statistics showing the wealth held by the billionaires has reached \$10.2 trillion in July 2020, compared with \$8.9 trillion in 2017.

As the chapters in this book reflect, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the social fabric of both the rich and poor countries. It has laid bare the poor standard of health services – not necessarily in terms of technology but delivery of community health – in most countries of the world. The countries that have been comparatively successful in combating the pandemic, mainly in the Asia-Pacific region, had well established and tested community health infrastructure. Whereas in western countries, especially in the US and to a lesser extent in Europe, the fact that the virus impacted very badly on the marginalized communities with no health coverage,

should raise question marks on the neoliberal economic policies that have been instrumental in cutting down on public health services in the past three decades, resulting in increased economic inequalities. But, as the pandemic year 2020 came to a close, the media coverage in the West and in turn the rest of the world focused on the race to introduce vaccination programs. The global mainstream media ignored many of the social, ethical and political issues involved in such a race.

In a report published by the South Centre in June 2020, Dr. Zeleke Temesgen Boru (2020) a Consultant at the International Training Centre of the International Labor Organization noted that while the race to develop health technologies (vaccines and medicines) can be hailed as an extraordinary undertaking, the race also reflects the desire of some pharmaceutical companies to dominate the global market, exclusively. "This is expected to affect access to medicines in general and the much-needed access to vaccines" he warned, adding, "price spikes are usually fortified by robust IP (Intellectual Property) protection." Dr. Boru (2020: 17) argues:

Giving monopoly rights in times of the current pandemic will certainly reiterate and reinforce such ineffectiveness and, thereby commodify human lives. From the very outset, COVID-19 has also exposed the inadequacy of the market to serve the public health interest in low-income, middle-income as well as in developed nations. ... Even though IPRs (such as patents) can incentivize the creation of health technologies, one should ask the question, should States allow a monopoly in times of a pandemic?

This is the question the global mainstream media often failed to ask. The western nations had their egos badly dented by the chaos precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and the US. Thus, as the terrible year was coming to an end, it seems they were racing against the Asians and the Russians to roll out vaccinations, and project themselves as saviors in the battle to eradicate the pandemic.

On December 10, on the International UN Human Rights Day, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres complained that "vaccine nationalism" was on the rise and warned that as wealthier nations lined up to buy millions of doses of potential COVID-19 vaccines, it would be done at the expense of much poorer nations. Guterres called for contributions of \$4.2 billion over the next two months for the

COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility, or COVAX¹. He said fully funding COVAX is the only means to ensure any potential vaccines will be available for the African continent and other developing countries².

In an interview with TASS news agency on December 30, 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the pandemic has become another battle ground between East and West. He argued that Russia believes “it is only possible to effectively solve large-scale cross-border problems by uniting on the principles of solidarity.” By contrast, he said, “Western states are trying not only to politicize the humanitarian theme of the fight against coronavirus infections, but also to take advantage of the pandemic to punish governments they don't like.”³

As discussed by Kalinga Seneviratne in chapter 2, unity and principles of solidarity were lacking in the response to the pandemic as everybody indulged in a blame game. But, as Zhang Xiaoying and Martin Albrow discussed in their chapter, the Chinese media's approach to covering the pandemic on what they call the “cooperative spirit” based on traditional Chinese philosophical modes of communication enshrined in Confucianism and Daoism, may have lessons to help develop such solidarity. However, as the year moved on, China, too, ditched such cooperative communication methodologies in order to counter the western blame game.

Sundeep Muppidi in his analysis of the response to COVID-19 in the USA highlights the failure of the government in responding to the crisis. He notes that initially the virus threat was not taken seriously, and that later the response was bogged down in domestic politics and

¹ COVAX is the joint project between the World Health Organization, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, an organization founded by Bill and Melinda Gates to vaccinate children in the world's poorest countries.

² *'Vaccine Nationalism' Leaves World's Poorest Nations Unable to Secure COVID-19 Vaccine, UN Chief Says*, 10 December, VOA – <https://www.voanews.com/COVID-19-pandemic/vaccine-nationalism-leaves-worlds-poorest-nations-unable-secure-COVID-19-vaccine>

³ *'Blackmail & ultimatums': Russian FM Lavrov says it's now up to Western countries to put an end to their COVID-19 'vaccine wars'*, 30 Dec 2020, RT News – <https://www.rt.com/russia/511123-lavrov-COVID19-vaccine-wars/>

policy failures, while being compounded by people's perceptions which were readily susceptible to disinformation.

In this book, through a diversity of perspectives from different countries we have presented the COVID-19 pandemic not merely as a health issue needing a vaccination to eradicate it. All the chapters have tried to bring into focus social and economic inequalities right across the world, which the pandemic has exacerbated. This raises questions about the inefficiencies of the neoliberal economic model. David Robbie's chapter on New Zealand shows how Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in successfully tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, has swung the political spectrum widely to the left culminating in her landslide victory in the polls in October 2020. A similar viewpoint was reflected in the chapter on Sri Lanka, where Sugath Senerath discussed how President Rajapakse was able to win the general election by a landslide in the midst of the pandemic, by successfully controlling the spread of COVID-19 in the country. On the other hand, Shameem Reza's chapter on Bangladesh gave a depressing picture of a lack of social safety nets in the country, and how stigmatization of people suffering from or suspected of being carriers of COVID-19 has led to a sad state of evictions from homes, refusal of medical services and even abandonment.

In the chapter from the Philippines, Flordeliz Abanto, Ma. Theresa M. Rivera, and Robert de la Serna, cite Dr. Braid, who emphasized the need for the media to "feel the public pulse" and "relate these concerns to policy". They argue that the media needs to go beyond the statistics and the conventional news elements, and notes that in Philippines, which has a vibrant media environment, there was a dearth of reports on the "psycho-social aspects and intangible costs of the pandemic". The media could have done more probing and triangulation of sources. However, the same could be said of the global media coverage of the pandemic.

The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of migrant workers right across the world, who were not only infected and isolated in concentration camp-like conditions, but those who lost jobs and faced the threat of exposure to the coronavirus, were also unable to return home because their home countries had closed borders and did not give enough priority to get their citizens back home. In Australia, when the lockdowns were imposed and local workers were paid via a

“job keeper” program designed to protect jobs, migrant workers on short-term visas were exempt from it. Many of them were lowly-paid unskilled workers from Asian countries such as India and Nepal, who could afford neither to return home nor continue to live in Australia without a regular income. Initially, Singapore was seen as a model in controlling the virus. However, when COVID-19 spread rapidly in packed worker dormitories – many of whom were from Bangladesh and India – they were locked inside the dormitories to protect the rest of the population. In the process, they infected each other contributing to the island nation’s high rates of infections.

As Singapore’s Today newspaper noted: “It is a sacrifice that these foreign workers are making for the rest of Singapore society ... As a result, the country owes migrant workers a debt of gratitude, and possibly, a concrete commitment to change when the pandemic is over” (Sen and Ong, 2020). For many years, human rights and labor rights advocates have criticized the way migrant workers are housed in the small affluent island state. The pandemic has brought this to wider international attention, but one cannot expect the Singapore media to advocate for change. It raises the question of whether the international media can monitor whether Singapore changes its policies towards foreign worker accommodation or not. Similar issues have also cropped up in many Middle Eastern countries.

It is not only foreign migrant workers, but many local workers in essential services were also exposed to working in underpaid and undervalued jobs. Thus, on October 7, to mark the World Day for Decent Work, UNI Global Union—a federation of trade unions from 150 countries—launched an international campaign to demand essential rights for essential workers. “Decent work for essential workers means better pay, safe jobs, paid sick leave, union representation, and respect,” Christy Hoffman, General Secretary of UNI Global Union said in a press release. “There is no fair economy in the aftermath of the pandemic that does not radically revalue this essential work. In crisis and in calm, these workers contribute so much, and deserve more than applause or kind words.”⁴

⁴ Unions kick off global push for essential workers on the World Day for Decent Work – UNI Global Union press release retrievable from <https://www.uniglobalunion.org/news/unions-kick-global-push-essential-workers-world-day-decent-work>

In a message marking the International Human Rights Day, UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet called for the building of a more sustainable and just society as the world recovers from the pandemic. “The pandemic has left us exposed, vulnerable, and weakened,” she said at a news conference in Geneva ahead of the observance. “Yet, in its devastation, it has also provided clear insights on how we can turn disaster into an opportunity to reset our priorities and improve our prospects for a better future.” She warned that medical vaccines that are being introduced “will not prevent or cure the socio-economic ravages that have resulted from the pandemic and aided its spread”. She added that a vaccine for hunger, poverty, inequality and many other global ills is at its core, a respect for human rights (Besheer, 2020).

In sharp contrast to the former Chilean President Bachelet’s comments, the European Commission’s President Ursula von der Leyen in a Christmas message hailed the advent of vaccinations against the novel coronavirus and said that the sooner citizens were vaccinated, the sooner life could get back to normal. “This year, Christmas is different. But today my message is of hope: together we can beat this virus. In just two days, vaccinations will start across the EU. Once enough people are vaccinated, we can start getting our normal lives back,” she said in a message posted on Twitter⁵.

The sharply contradictory tones of the messages reflect the challenge facing the media both internationally and domestically, in not only covering the recovery process, but also in helping to build more sustainable and fairer societies. This would mean that we cannot go back to “our normal lives” as these systems have been exposed for their shortcomings and may not be able to avoid another pandemic and/or greater social upheaval.

It is interesting to take note of the countries and regions that were most and least affected, which raises many questions about the definition of the term “developed countries” and “developing countries”. At the beginning of the pandemic there were dire predictions in the global media that Africa, in particular, would be devastated by the pandemic. But, by the end of 2020 Africa seems to have fared far better than Europe and the USA. According to statistics from the

⁵ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1342394706941116418?lang=en>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control⁶ (ECDPC), Africa, a continent of over 1.2 billion people, has recorded 2.67 million cases and about 63,200 deaths. In the same period the US had 19.15 million cases and over 333,300 deaths, while Europe recorded 24.84 million cases and about 552,400 deaths. The western media has often argued that the high rates of infections recorded in western “developed” countries is due to high rates of testing among the population – even President Trump has mentioned this many times⁷. On the other hand, it was argued that infection rates in Africa were low because they did not have the capacity to do widespread testing.

Yifru Berhan (2020), writing in the Ethiopian Journal of Health Science, notes:

The bottom line is that this infection has been exponentially spreading, and becoming highly prevalent and fatal in the richest countries. That is not yet happening in countries within the tropical climate zone... Some may argue that the developed countries' testing capacity is what has inflated the case load, citing USA and Germany as an example. Yes, the high-test uptake has helped the developed countries to identify as many cases as possible in a short period of time. However, the testing capacity alone could not explain the whole picture of the reality on the ground. What has been disproportionately rising in the last three months in the Western countries of the temperate climate zone was not only caseloads, but also the staggering mortality figures and the severely morbid cases (hospitalization for pneumonia, ICU care, dialysis, and blood transfusions), which are the two key measurements to show how severe the actual magnitude of the COVID-19 is. A very important argument is; had the COVID-19 transmission been as contagious as in Europe and USA, by this time, every health facility in Africa and other tropical countries could have been flooded with severely ill patients and deaths. But that is not the case in any of (the) African and tropical countries.

Except for India, infection and death rates from COVID-19 have been comparatively low across Asia, compared to the USA and Europe. If we exclude India's 10.21 million cases and 147,900 deaths, the rest of Asia has recorded 7.46 million cases and about 157,200 deaths. Laos,

⁶ See <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>

⁷ Trump blames rise in coronavirus cases on increased testing, despite evidence of more spread, 23 June 2020, CNBC – <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/23/trump-blames-rise-in-coronavirus-cases-on-testing-despite-signs-of-spread.html>

Bhutan and Mongolia (all generally categorized as ‘Least Developed Countries’) have no deaths from COVID-19, while Singapore had only 29 deaths, Thailand 63 deaths, and Vietnam 35 deaths. China, where the pandemic is believed to have first started, had just over 87,000 cases and 4,600 deaths reported as of the end of December 2020⁸. The international media has largely ignored Asia’s success stories, while New Zealand’s success has been celebrated.

Mongolia’s strategy needs more exposure in the international media. It shares the world’s longest land border (4,600 km) with China, yet the mountainous country has been able to keep the coronavirus at bay (Varagur, 2020). Initially when the virus spread in China, they were afraid that it would devastate the country, as Mongolia has very few ventilators. However, with effective border controls, targeted lockdowns and public information campaigns, they were able to protect their population from COVID-19. They even reduced the seasonal influenza rates in 2020. Hence, there may be lessons to be learned, from Mongolia, in adopting community health measures.

After the initial horror stories from China (as discussed in chapter 2), the world’s most populous nation has been able to successfully control the spread of COVID-19. However, it has not yet been successful in completely eradicating it from their vast country. Rather than raising suspicions, the international media need to examine closely why and how China was able to control the virus. At the time of writing this chapter (early January 2021), COVID-19 seems to be out of control in the UK, with a new homegrown strain of the coronavirus believed to be more contagious than the original one that spread from China. The new wave of COVID-19 that is now spreading to places like Australia, South Africa and some parts of Asia is believed to be this new strain from the UK but no one is calling it the “London virus” or blaming the UK for spreading it overseas. Many countries, including India and Australia, have closed their borders to any arrivals from the UK.

In an eye-opening Opinion piece transmitted by IPS news agency in the first week of 2021, Dr Darini Rajasingham-Senanayaka (2021), a

⁸ See ASEAN Briefing - <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/COVID-19-vaccine-roll-outs-in-asean-asia-live-updates-by-country/>

Sri Lankan social and medical anthropologist, asked, “if COVID-19 is primarily a ‘First World’ virus, why is the Global South⁹ in Lockdown?”

The 2020 qualitative and quantitative data clearly shows that COVID-19 is mild in the Global South ... However, economically, socially and politically devastating curfews, lockdowns and isolation policies were introduced in these tropical countries on the ‘advice’ of the WHO, resulting in fear, isolation, stigmatization of patients living in crowded and poor neighborhoods, and increasing poverty and inequality. Many low income and poor countries fell into bigger debt traps and Governments were urged to sell off strategic assets while giving ‘tax relief’ to various international corporations, investors and airlines (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2021).

She goes on to argue that “highly flawed” PCR tests have created a fear psychosis in many countries, and questions statistics given out by the WHO and Johns Hopkins University. “The COVID-19 narrative and WHO led global policy response has increased poverty and inequality across the world and widened disparities between the Global South and North, while eroding democratic space and practices, and militarizing public life and health systems”, she notes. Rather than listening to WHO advice and taking out loans from the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to buy COVID-19 vaccines, Rajasingham-Senanayake asks “would it not be prudent for governments in countries where the 2020 data shows that there is no COVID-19 health emergency to await non-emergency authorization of use of these vaccines? Moreover, would not the WB and ADB loans be better spent to build back livelihoods lost due to COVID-19 curfews and lockdown policy?”

These are the questions the international media need to raise and discuss, but instead they are cheerleading large pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, even ignoring cases of serious side-effects that were reported in the initial use of the vaccines in early January such as the death of some 29 old-age vaccine recipients in Norway¹⁰.

⁹ ‘Global South’ refers to the developing countries of the South formerly known as the ‘Third World’.

¹⁰ Increasing elder deaths in Norway raise fears over Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, 16 January 2021, Daily Sabah, Malaysia – <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/increasing-elder-deaths-in-norway-raise-fears-over-pfizer-biontech-COVID-19-vaccine>

In his New Year message for 2021¹¹, the WHO's Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the events of 2020 have shown us how closely connected the world is, yet, divisions in politics and communities have fed the virus and fomented the crisis. He emphasized that the world must commit to working together in solidarity, as a global community, to promote and protect health today, and in the future. It is collaboration and partnership that can save lives and safeguard societies.

My brothers and sisters, the events of 2020 have provided telling lessons, and reminders, for us all to take into 2021. First and foremost, 2020 has shown that governments must increase investment in public health, from funding access to COVID vaccines for all people, to making our systems better prepared to prevent and respond to the next, inevitable, pandemic. At the heart of this is investing in universal health coverage to make health for all a reality (Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus).

But, as Bhattacharya and Khan (2020) argue, such cooperation cannot be achieved when there is still a barrier in terms of getting the voices from the South heard in international forums and the media.

The global knowledge ecosystem is tilted towards scholars and institutions from the North¹², with limited access for the South even today. Inclusion of Southern scholars is still limited to participation in pre-set agendas informed by the interests of dominant groups. The gatekeepers of knowledge systems seem uncomfortable with integrating Southern perspectives in agenda setting and scenario building. This is in spite of general recognition that the Global South has a larger stake, and an enormous potential role and capacity to ensure global recovery post-COVID. Southern actors including scholars and experts also need to enhance efforts to claim their rightful place in the global knowledge market through innovative ideas (Bhattacharya and Khan, 2020).

As discussed in this and previous chapters, there are many issues that the media need to be mindful of in reporting the inevitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and beyond. This book has mainly been an attempt to get the voices of the 'Global South' into discussing the media's role in the coverage of the COVID-19 crisis.

¹¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-12-2020-COVID-19-anniversary-and-looking-forward-to-2021>

¹² 'North' refers to developed countries of the West mainly located in the northern hemisphere.

As pointed out before, just focusing on the vaccine rollout is not enough. The world's big pharmaceutical companies are well-known to profit from pandemics like this at the cost of making medicines unaffordable to all. There are many other issues that should be discussed in relation to post-COVID-19 recovery. Investments in public health need to be critically examined along with spending on arms – the billions spent around the world on buying armaments in the name of “defense” have been useless in defending communities/countries when the pandemic hit. These arms could not defend any country from an invading virus. Media need to critically examine such arms spending that has resulted in a lack of funding for public health and other related social services. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the very essence of the neoliberal economic model has to be scrutinized in relation to social spending.

We cannot go back to normal, while such inequalities are not addressed and large populations are left exposed to the next pandemic. This is the challenge facing governments and the media both internationally and nationally.

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