



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE LANGUAGE OF COVID-19 DISCRIMINATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE INFODEMIC AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

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*(PhD Candidate, Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language, and Literature at Macquarie University, Australia)*Email: zahrah.sahib@hdr.mq.edu.audoi.org/10.33329.joell.8.1.38**ABSTRACT**

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As the world grapples with mitigating the spread of an unprecedented virus, an equally distressing development has emerged. Alongside the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the infodemic threatens to impede a cohesive response to contain the outbreak.

In this article, the infodemic is defined as the sheer amount of information associated with the coronavirus. The overabundance of information relating to the novel outbreak is problematic: individuals face unique challenges in discerning legitimate news from alternative sources that identify as conspiracy theories.

This article argues that access to false, fabricated and biased 'news' has flourished because of an increased dependency on the digital realm and social media platforms. Within these spheres, personal anxieties are manipulated. The advanced rhetoric places blame, co-opts and validates discriminative worldviews of the pandemic through sources that dis/misinform. This signals a staunch rejection of government mandates and recommendations – endorsed by licensed health practitioners and the scientific and academic community.

The article draws on cross-cultural comparisons of ethnic and racial discrimination resulting from the compounding effects of the pandemic and infodemic. It is concluded that access to reliable sources of information is a human right as dis/misinformation jeopardises democratic values and further disrupts initiatives to contain the pandemics.

Keywords: *Conspiracy Theories, COVID-19, Dis/Misinformation, Infodemic, Racial Discrimination, Social Media.*

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INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 virus and its COVID-19 disease have disrupted any former signs of normalcy through its steadfast spread (Cinelli et al. 1). In these unprecedented times, a return to a pre-coronavirus world is unrealistic. The disproportionate balance of hegemonic power, the structure of international and national economies, the role of multilateral organisations, and the modes of how we socially engage and work with each other will forever be different. Instead, these impediments signal fresh challenges as catchy hygiene mottos and face-masks become emblematic of life in the new decade.

In keeping informed with enactments of social distancing guidelines and public protocols, individuals are overwhelmed with the endless stream of breaking news. By 'doing our bit' through quarantining and social isolation methods, there is a newfound dependency on the digital realm to accommodate schooling, employment, social and daily needs. From this digital shift, access to previously unattainable opportunities are available. Some of the most celebrated has been the flexibility of remote work and the diverse growth of online communities.

Through these virtual spaces, online discourses are mainstreamed and influence public expressions and perceptions of the coronavirus. As such, there are comical examples of the language and coined terms in descriptions like "Covidiot" – one who flouts against public health advice – or, referring to the current day as "Blursday" – the amalgamation of time due to lockdown's disorientating effects (Ro 'Why We've Created New Language for Coronavirus').

Despite the humorous connotations, the corona-inspired language also exposes real-world

trepidations associated with the current pandemic. One example is the popularisation of 'doomscrolling' that saw its entry into Australia's Macquarie Dictionary and took first place as New Zealand's 2020 word of the year. It is best conceptualised as the passive consumption of news-related content. As social media algorithms dictate trends, doomscrolling is the compulsion of "continuing to read news feeds online or on social media, despite the fact that the news is predominantly negative and often upsetting" (Macquarie Dictionary' Word of the Year Category Insight').

When access to information is crucial in reducing virus transmission, delayed and inconsistent messages create personal fears and sociocultural fissures. By choosing to deviate from trusted news sources to alternative ones that conveniently soothe anxieties, the digital shift represents a global trend. In the quest for views, fake news distorts facts to make sense of an uncomfortable reality.

Considering this deceptive nature, it is not just an airborne epidemic that the world must protect itself from. As the World Health Organization Director-General – Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus – warned in 2020, "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic", where fake news "spreads faster and more easily than the virus" (The Lancet Infectious Diseases 875).

Simply put, the Director-General characterises the infodemic as the over-saturation of information. The difficulty arises in discerning legitimate news sources from those that best resembles the tabloid press's alarmist ramblings. In passively doomscrolling, users face a "kind of tsunami of information, but also within this information you have misinformation, rumours, etc." (Zarcostas 679).



Herein lies a key concern. While social media has proved to be a beneficial outlet in fostering resilience through mental health support, this is not always the case. In being dependent on the digital realm, online viewing habits are tailored to personal preferences. By enabling users to seek information that *only* validates personal narratives, the danger lies in judging distorted worldviews and conspiracy opinions as legitimate news sources.

THE COMPLIMENTARY NATURE OF INFODEMICS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

For an infodemic to thrive, there must be an "overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (Awofeso 39). It is unsurprising that the infodemic has continued to mislead personal assessments of COVID-19, due to the sheer amount of material associated with the virus that has dominated search engine queries (Cinelli et al. 2)

In this context, misinformation is understood as spreading false information, despite the content's aim to mislead being present or not. Conversely, disinformation is the deliberate proliferation of false claims intended to sway public opinions through deception (Rubin 1014). Unverified sources of coronavirus news have been inadvertently and deliberately introduced into mainstream discourse.

It should be clear that this is not unique to the current pandemic. Instead, this indicates how conspiracies flourish in times of global upheavals. As Mian and Khan (1) argue, dis/misinformation spread rampantly in the HIV/AIDS epidemic's formative years. This effectively disrupted a cohesive global response, in favour of entertaining homophobic rumours

of virus transmission and conspiracy theories relating to antiretroviral therapies.

By influencing governmental policy, these false claims had deadly consequences that were ultimately avoidable. These disinformation campaigns have proved to be so successful that, despite being repeatedly discredited by a catalogue of scientific publications, unsupported claims about the HIV/AIDS epidemic continue to persist and sway policy today.

This is also true from responses to the H1N1 swine flu pandemic. Though its severity disproportionately affected lesser economically developed countries, the contagious repercussions were felt globally (Chew and Eysenbach 2). However, the legitimacy of a virus that restricted international travel and decimated livestock industries was still called into question by populist media personalities and elected officials.

Referring to it as the "pandemic that never really was" (Evans 296), claims of this nature emphasise how those inundated with power and privilege lack interpersonal empathetic skills. Arguments that align with this polarised narrative allege that the government overreacted to a pharmaceutical ploy by creating an atmosphere of panic that rationalises wasting tax-payers money. Those who believe that the sources of dis/misinformation are legitimate are also less likely to deviate from habitual behaviours that act upon trusted specialists' advice.

Definitive evidence about COVID-19 has been staggered and disputed amongst expert health professionals and scientists (Orso et al. 1). This space of uncertainty has created an ideal environment for false claims to gain traction. When considering the mandatory directives that enact stay-at-home orders, individuals spend



more time in front of their screens in pursuits that employ, entertain, socialise, and educate. As these are stressful times, people seek to alleviate their insecurities through an internet connection and a search engine.

There is nothing inherently wrong with researching COVID related enquiries online, as many users guide their behaviours based on trustworthy digital advice. However, when conclusions are predicated upon inaccurate information – designed to trigger the reader's emotional reactions – opinions are distorted. Through continuous exposure to biased sources, abilities are impaired which objectively judge the quality of information being relayed. In pursuing sources that only gratify affective responses, algorithms prioritise selected content intended to filter through and fulfil confirmation biases (Cinelli et al. 7)

For Mian and Khan (1), learning from the past is imperative. The scholars place the onus on the media as accountable for acting on behalf of public interests. They argue that – in the race to break new stories and increase viewership – the media is more concerned with inciting public sentiments of panic through sensationalistic headlines. This is also true of social media platforms, demonstrating that dis/misinformation sources flourish both on and offline.

Through a comparative analysis, Cinelli et al. (1) found that users are motivated to validate their preconceptions of COVID related content by ignoring dissenting information, and seeking/creating online communities based on shared narratives. Though this may be a platform-specific effect, the overall shift from traditional news sources to digital content sees conspiracy misinformation spreading "faster,

faster, deeper and more broadly" than fact-based news (Vosoughi et al. 2).

Akin to the pandemics which preceded COVID-19, there is consensus amongst governmental bodies, health professionals and the academic community which cautions against relying on advice from specific media personalities, inflammatory 'news' websites, and social media accounts. Imhoff and Lamberty (2) explain that – in masking their dis/misinformation as sources with 'exclusive' insights – the conspiracy mentality cultivates a distorted reality. Viewers learn how powerful entities control state affairs to manipulate society for their malicious agenda. When a global audience disseminates variants of these alternative theories, the conspiracy mentality sows the seeds of distrust and discredits expert opinions.

One does not need to look too far back in pre-coronavirus times to comprehend how problematic this position is. Recent debates disputing the effects of climate change, the efficacy of vaccinations, and even the shape of the earth have been argued to such an extent that there is a strong resistance against scientific literacy and the pursuit of higher education (Miller 2255). By recognising the increased levels of scepticism, which continues to plague the scientific community, the rejection of these values signals the denunciation of a healthy democracy. Where graphs of bell curves and herd immunity speeches have largely dictated daily press briefings, rejecting or playing ignorant to health advice acts as an escapist function.

For this reason, the conspiracy mentality marks a clear departure from normative social conventions (Imhoff and Lamberty 5). As the conspiracy echo-chamber frames logical deduction and problem-solving skills as elitist



aptitudes, individuals are attracted to dis/misinformation sources in restoring a sense of personal calmness. Confronting one's reality may be too challenging: choosing to side with conspiracy allegations provide them with an illusion of control during times of unprecedented crises.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISCRIMINATIVE RATIONALES

COVID denialism undermines a cohesive public health response. Where time is of the essence, delayed or complete inactivity has dire consequences. By attempting to contain the *inevitable* waves of the novel virus, the responsibility is placed upon a swift enactment of policies and legislature that supports health professionals and their government's ability to mitigate the spread.

From doomscrolling through clickbait articles that promise readers an antidote by using pantry ingredients or group texts that promote gimmicky immune-boosting décor or wearable accessories, there should be no illusions held. The flawed logic of conspiracy theories serves as a distraction: dis/misinformation is weaponised by those who have ulterior motives. Placing importance on this aspect reveals a genuine danger in pursuing pseudo-scientific treatments and alternative remedies as legitimate health advice. It is especially true when tested preventive behaviours – such as social distancing and mask etiquette – are perceived with scepticism and, therefore, are non-compulsory. Most disturbingly are the popular conspiracies that simply reject the virus's existence, downplays its contagious global spread, and lessens the debilitating effects of COVID-19 by comparing it to the seasonal flu (Orso et al. 1).

Not the live-streamed recordings of refrigerated trucks and men in hazmat suits burying the

deceased, nor the tearful and angry pleas to follow safety guidelines from exhausted frontline workers has been enough to perturb some from their damaging support of conspiracy theories (Rafi 2). Such is an infodemic's effects that individuals who are susceptible to dis/misinformation will amplify distorted voices who share their distrust. When given platforms, these voices contradict and stand as an affront against the advice offered by a plethora of scientists, academics, medical professionals, governmental bodies, and impartial media sources.

In reinforcing an earlier point, those attracted to the alternative realities which conspiracies theories offer are more likely to reject conforming to social norms. By finding a home that enshrines their suspicious worldviews, people who project their anxieties through COVID-19 conspiracies intentionally behave in ways that differentiate themselves from the crowd while condoning acts of violence (Imhoff and Lamberty 7). This is concerning for several reasons. As the pandemic has progressed, there has been an alarming rise and amalgamation of 'liberative' movements that publicly exemplify their overt disobedience against COVID-19 regulations (Basit 264).

While it appears that the thread that connects the various conspiracies are grounded in the refusal to acknowledge the existence and the severity of the airborne virus, its subversive nature is far-more nefarious. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, disaster scenarios feed into an accelerationist response common to violent extremists and their movements (Basit 265; All Together Now 3). The bolstering of conspiracy networks – which has blurred the lines between several discredited fringe groups – is nothing but opportunistic. However, it is essential to



emphasise how coronavirus scepticism is not always linked to one's support of race-hatred.

One example of this is the *now*-debunked and outdated conspiracy theory which led to a global movement that destructed 5G towers and permitted the violent abuse of telecommunication engineers (Jolley and Paterson 629). Within this notorious line of thought, conspirators relayed their fears of 5G's potential to induce adverse health effects that spread coronavirus or weakens immune systems. Irrespective of the theory, conspirators organise under a communal theme. By restricting personal movements and limiting social interactions, the current pandemic best exemplifies how democracy has failed to uphold human rights in rescinding personal privileges. However bizarre some conspiracy theories may appear, it does not negate the reality that (a) people continue to mobilise under them, and (b) the current pandemic has been exploited by far right-wing extremist movements.

Given the polarised nature of COVID-19, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (3) found that all nations must confront this disturbing trend. The infodemic has energised glocal movements that promote free speech predicated in race-hatred and ethnic discrimination. Through shared narratives of oppression, the rhetoric serves as a distraction from public health advice, undermining preventive measures and fueling xenophobic inclinations. The Institute (19) further identifies how extremist movements rely on media and information ecosystems that amplify divisive and polarising content. By profiting from the spread of disinformation, a concerted effort is made to mainstream fringe beliefs that exploit potential recruits' emotions.

Not all coronavirus cynics are innately racist or endorse targeted acts of violence against a

discernible other – that is, someone delineated as an outsider with incompatible values and norms (Ahuja and Banerjee 4). Yet, there can be no denial that the language of discrimination is enshrined within popular conspiracy beliefs. Through destructive sentiments which obscures information, hostility manifests under a banner of solidarity that protests the presence of Black, Brown, Asian, Muslim, Jewish, Indigenous, migrant, and refugee bodies (Devakumar et al. 1194).

It is most apparent in the racist assertions that trace the virus's epidemiology to a laboratory outbreak in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 is a human-made, biomedical weapon designed by ruthless Chinese engineers in this skewed line of thought. They seek to destabilise the global political economy by invoking a 'new world order' through a systematic reduction of the world's population. Deviations of this conspiracy have instigated global patterns of anti-Asian hate crimes and abuse, despite the numerous efforts that extensively debunk falsehoods of this rhetoric since its emergence in early 2020 (Imhoff and Lamberty 2).

From this, connotations emerge that negates Asia's cultural diversity. Instead, there is an advancement of a homogenous narrative that associates culpability onto all Asians for the pandemic through their ethnic associations. This discriminative logic is further exasperated when elected officials advocate said conspiracies or endorse derogatory language, such as "Wuhan Virus", "Kung Flu", or "Chinese Flu" (Litam 145; Rafi 4). Nothing is amusing about these racist comments, and it is especially horrendous that they have been upheld by those with political power. The detrimental remarks license the subtle and overt forms of race-hatred based on a body's phenotypical traits and cultural affiliations.



What is also significant is how the oppressive language invokes the 'Yellow Peril' stereotype. It is relevant for several reasons. By attempting to instil a deep sense of personal duty in enduring the detriments that COVID-19 poses, political and media rhetoric will frequently invoke war metaphors to express solidarity (Wicke and Bolognesi 4). The frames are clear to summon nostalgic sentiments. It is the same nostalgia co-opted by extremist groups that rationalise how racial and ethnic privileges are only safeguarded at the expense of dehumanising a minority community. Sinophobia – a localised fear and hatred of China – is perpetuated through this nostalgic lens (Litam 143).

In this way, the sinophobic 'Yellow Peril' trope proves its relevancy as it did with its inception centuries earlier (Li and Nicholson 6; Rafi 11). Though the justification for its use has altered as time has progressed, it is a learnt construct that capitalises upon anxiety over the increased presence of Asians. Their bodies stand as an affront to the Anglo-state's sionormative foundations, thereby personifying tangible characteristics that readily identify them as a threat. Racist expressions akin to 'Wuhan Virus' are – nonetheless – effective in their dog-whistle.

Through her research, Litam (144) found that Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders recorded increased levels of race-based trauma due to the infodemic and the visibility of right-wing extremist beliefs. Additionally, she cautions against the logic that Indigenous groups and people of colour are impervious to experiencing COVID-related discrimination. Litam (147) explains that the lack of preparedness for the virus outbreak has illuminated disparities across the political, medical, and institutional spheres. Across these domains, ethnic minorities remain disproportionately affected by systemic

inequalities. This did not perturb how traditional and social media platforms were guilty of inciting sentiments which vilified the vulnerabilities of minority communities, since the beginning of the pandemic.

Misleading articles and inflammatory political speech incite individual health concerns. By internalising feelings of paranoia, conspirators project these anxieties onto said targets. Whether they are 5G towers, telecommunication engineers or innocent bystanders, the final result remains the same: anxiety and aggression prompts extremist behaviours. The anxious sentiments allow inferences of xenophobia, sinophobia and race discrimination to plague social discourse about virus transmission and prevention, spanning online and offline.

FURTHER EXAMPLES OF COVID-19 DISCRIMINATION IN NON-WESTERN COUNTRIES

As mentioned previously, the increased levels of ethnic and racial discrimination resulting from the compounding effects of an infodemic and pandemic are not confined to the West.

Across South Asia, Islamophobic hate speech and disinformation continues to sway negative perceptions of Muslims (Ahuja and Banerjee 2). COVID guidelines have been distorted and weaponised to embolden ethnic, religious and nationalistic divisions. The targeted attacks of anti-Muslim racism from boycotting businesses, stigmatising Islamic congregations and garbs, unlawfully dismissing Muslim employees, to outright, predatory violent behaviour against Muslims are predicated on baseless grounds. Doomscrolling has given life to terms such as "CoronaTerrorism" and "Quranovirus" that have gone viral in their false assertions. The derogatory language frame Muslims as agents of



bioterrorism, who voluntarily infect themselves with the virus to bring about a new wave of 'jihadism' (Soundararajan et al. 7; Ahuja and Banerjee 3).

In Guangdong – home to China's largest African communities – authorities targeted the diasporic group for forced testing and imposed a mandatory period of self-isolation or quarantine in specific hotels (Wang 'From Covid to Blackface on TV, China's Racism Problem Runs Deep'). While other foreigners were not subject to such harsh treatment, landlords from the province cited COVID propaganda and misinformation to justify renter's agreements' immediate termination. In echoing similarities of apartheid practices, many long-time African residents from the Chinese region were left displaced and homeless (Human Rights Watch' China: Covid-19 Discrimination Against Africans'). A similar pattern emerged across the country that delineated the ex-pats as social pariahs who were overtly refused access to public spaces, even hospitals.

Within the Middle East, similar xenophobic distinctions between 'them' and 'us' impinge upon human rights. In Lebanon, COVID protocols were invoked to vilify Syrian and Palestinian refugees (Makhoul et al. 5). Through media and political discourse, refugees are perceived as a disease-ridden community throughout the state. The rhetoric works to justify draconian COVID measures that target and excessively police the displaced population. It proves to be such a dangerous rhetoric that premeditated acts of violence carried out by conspirators – such as arson – are pervasive and further torment those who reside in informal refugee settlements (Hodzic' Plight of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Must Not Be Ignored'). By limiting movement and imposing a blanket curfew for all refugees, some coronavirus provisions were not applicable

for Lebanese nationals in the same strict way (Makhoul et al. 7). The prolonged curfews have perturbed many from seeking healthcare services as infringement may lead to possible deportation, and inevitably, state-sanctioned police brutality.

These above cases are a sample of a larger pervasive, global trend. The infodemic has exploited dis/misinformation to establish minorities as scapegoats. At a time when nations are protecting themselves from an airborne virus, public and societal fears are encapsulated in these ethnocentric frames: a tangible enemy is established, where their existence can be criminalised. This type of intolerance licenses attitudes that strengthen racial and ethnic divisions within countries that also extend beyond their borders. Furthermore, there is no dispute that racial discrimination is legitimated within specific messages related to national security and self-protection in the age of COVID-19. It is most apparent when a state's pre-existing milieu has a historic and genocidal legacy of vilifying a minority cohort against the collective culture (Devakumar et al. 1194)

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As 2020 ended, nations worldwide celebrated by gradually rolling out measures for the highly anticipated series of corona-combatting vaccinations. Promises of restoring some resemblance of normalcy posit upon the successful measures to inoculate. However, it is a move that has energised discourses that undermine the roll-out of vaccines, speculates its mandatory nature, while protesting the scientific and medical community's recommendations (Lee 'The Utter Familiarity of Even the Strangest Vaccine Conspiracy Theories').



Despite the war-time imagery that claims 'we are all in this together' – in the 'fight' against an indiscriminate disease – what is apparent is that the 'enemy' takes on a floating signifier. This function is dependent on the sociocultural context from where it is born. Through this perspective, the pandemic and infodemic have stressed the importance of providing evidence-based information in an accessible way to the public.

From this, social media platforms must have a level of accountability in alleviating the harmful spread of dis/misinformation, as they sit at "the nexus of information sharing and public health" (Soundararajan et al. 63). This is not to say that social media firms and media organisations have dismissed this call to action. It would be an oversight to ignore the cohesive efforts to de-platform conspiracy advocates who utilise dis/misinformation for personal gains.

By creating digital campaigns in collaboration with the WHO, online functions allow unsupported 'facts' to be flagged and debunked, signalling a positive improvement in fostering some much-needed media-literacy. This empowering push enables users to "better understand what they should be looking for, because the media sometimes gets ahead of the evidence" (Zarocostas 679).

Yet, this progress does not suggest an end to the infodemic. Alternative social media platforms continue to see their rise to popularity in their promises to restore tenets of free speech (Bond' Unwelcome on Facebook and Twitter, QAnon Followers Flock to Fringe Sites'). In exploiting these platforms, right-wing extremist groups showcase their brazen philosophy through their overt endorsement of conspiracy dis/misinformation. By using violent rhetoric as an effective means to prove the seriousness of

their causes, a shared delusion is premised upon (1) COVID being a hoax, (2) COVID being human-made, and (3) COVID signposting an ethnocultural destruction because of incompatible minority groups. This narrative continues to garner supporters from varying demographics.

There is something to be said about society's nature where media personalities can freely speculate and selectively publish their unsubstantiated claims, when epidemiologists and healthcare professionals are *still* learning about the virus. It is unpredictable what a post-coronavirus world may look like, especially as new strains are being confirmed worldwide (Reuters 'New COVID-19 Virus Strain Found in Japan as Infection Cluster is Found in Tokyo Immigration Centre'). Despite the uncertainty, what is clear is how the unique language that has emerged because of the crisis will forever be engrained into personal vocabularies. Moreover, the unprecedented reliance on the digital realm has forever characterised future responses to health and disaster emergencies.

When considering the novel virus's ambiguity, access to reliable sources of information *needs* to be framed as a human right. Democracy is upheld in the clear and consistent messages that advocate for elected officials and healthcare professionals' impartial recommendations. Irrespective of political, religious, and sexual affiliations, people should feel confident that the news that guides them, their families, and communities is reported from an unbiased, thoroughly-fact checked source.

Responses to COVID-19 proves to be an essential area for future research. There is a need to investigate how coronavirus and its policies relating to the pandemic amplifies and aggravates pre-existing conditions of racial and



social inequality. When considering the detrimental effects of the current infodemic, research is needed to critically assess how content consumption and media engagement may steer individuals towards a conspiracy mentality. Given the habitual practice of doomscrolling, this is especially important as it only compounds anxious tendencies and stress-related symptoms, allowing conspiracy theories to offer an ill-fitting band-aid for personal insecurities.

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