



Race-Making of COVID-19 in Early Mainstream Frames: The Production of the Epidemic(ed) Citizen

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What were the tensions, ruptures, and dialectics that evolved in the reporting of the COVID-19 public health crisis? As a scholar fundamentally interested in race, inequality, and health, I write about the early shaping and formations of how the media begin to position mobile transnational citizens as racialized threats. What remained apparent in early reporting is the storytelling of COVID-19 concerning the subject of the virus native. In telling us about the virus native, the media racializes a subject to assemble the blame frame of transmission. We see Chinese citizens discussed in homogenizing ways as primary subjects in mainstream discourses about the origins of the outbreak. The production of the epidemic(ed) citizen as a racialized threat emerges as the key protagonist in early mainstream reports for the spread of COVID-19. The storytelling of a virus native during a pandemic is the very contouring of mediating practices to make sense of the blame frame, racializing specific subjects in the formations of the outbreak narrative.

The nomenclature of how the virus came to be defined and then re-circulated by the mainstream media in Singapore as “the Wuhan Virus” becomes a starting point for the racializing tone that frames the production of knowledge about the virus. Mainstream reports use the term “Wuhan Virus” from 5th January 2020 right up till 3rd February 2020. In a later report on the same day, the labeling of the virus shifted to be Coronavirus in the mainstream press. Despite mainstream reports cautioning against xenophobia, media tropes assembled the image of virus spreaders. The assembling of race and culture were amassed in outbreak frames. The use of the term “Chinese Virus” was located in early mainstream headlines (The Straits Times, 2020). This specific wired article originated from Agence France Press (AFP).

The epidemic(ed) citizen refers to the virus native as a central actor to pandemic threats multiple times, causing media narratives to frame these citizens and their way of life in stigmatizing ways based on old and news reporting. In this definition, the virus native is framed as carriers of viruses from multiple instances of a virus outbreak within a single state. These citizens re-emerge into hypervisibility by the media during infectious disease outbreaks. Narratives constantly re-circulate to tell us that there are actors of blame in every pandemic. The stigmatization of the epidemic(ed) citizen today as a mobile threat needs to be critically interrogated in how the media exercises this narrative during public health reporting.

The dialectics of the reporting of the virus emerges when articles report the outbreak as “mysterious”, while also blaming the Chinese way of life as to why the state was host to such recurring pandemics. On the one hand, a report suggested “The WHO said on Sunday that the Wuhan outbreak appears to be linked to a single seafood market in Wuhan has not spread beyond there so far” (The Straits Times, 2020), other articles in both implicit and explicit ways centralized eating habits as the cause of the infection such as in Lim (2020) and Tan (2020). We begin to see the homogenization of the virus native, even though the reports convey that there was one market in which the outbreak had taken place. Chinese citizens were discussed as the virus native, singularly blamed for their eating cultures. The mediatization of what is viewed as profane eating cultures have ramifications at a global scale for the Chinese who have been subjects of stigma in the realm of pandemics and Chinese eating habits (Lynteris, 2016). The consumption of bats remains central to frames even if it meant including other cultural actors and their way of life to build a transference of an ethnocentric narrative in mainstream reports on consuming the specific animal of blame. Here the building of particular cultural features of the virus (Briggs, 2003) is developed and deployed by the mainstream press. It tells us that news reporting seeks to transfer to readers how to think about the virus from the point of cultural habits, features, and its impact on the body, the posturing of public health messaging to socio-cultural traits.

In the delivery of health communication messages about COVID-19 amid episodic uncertainties, racialized imaginaries of the virus native centralized the etiological news frames about the virus. Mainstream reports codify caution and prevention frames that assemble for the audience the fear of the virus native, and in the case of COVID-19, the reification of the Chinese citizen as the epidemic(ed) citizen of fear. For example, the use of terms such as “Chinese Virus” or “Wuhan Virus” suggests how frames are composed without a critical unpacking of the nation, the state, the race, the culture, and the place.

In Singapore, where COVID-19 discourses begin appearing in mainstream reports incrementally by January 2020, the closing of borders to specific nationalities in a world of global travel and mobile migrants are implicit exclusions that discourses convey as part of the communicative patterns of how knowledge on epidemics and biosecurity are produced and reproduced. While Chinese nationals are viewed as traveling subjects, valuable for the Singaporean and global economy, they are also framed as risky global travelers (Li, 2020; Tay & Heng, 2020). The circulation of such tropes lies at multiple levels, micro (interpersonal), meso (local policy), and macro (borders and bans of citizens). The shutting down and shutting out of specific peoples, places, and spaces were communicated. Embedded in these narratives lie tropes of exclusion to particular citizens, deeply structured within the caution and prevention frame. Amid these reports, the mainstream press continued to discuss the caution and prevention frame regarding Singaporeans who still would like to travel out of the

country, suggesting that Singaporeans were exempted from the biopolitics of exclusion in the early reporting. These reports emerge within similar time frames of each other. We learn later in the outbreak timeline that Singaporeans would also eventually become subject to screenings overseas, “Coronavirus: India starts screening passengers from Singapore” (Ganapathy, 2020).

The neoliberal production and interpretation of borders cannot be ignored in how mainstream reports discuss the role of Chinese citizens/tourists and Singapore’s economy. Chinese workers, migrants, tourists, and students were bodies for surveillance and biopolitical exclusions when the outbreak was made known in dominant discourse. Early mainstream reports manufactured explicit and implicit practices of othering and exclusion during the outbreak.

We must also pay attention to how pandemics reveal citizenship. Borders and what they mean for citizens and non-citizens are amplified in a moral, social, and political articulations of health security during a pandemic (Briggs, 2005). Saving citizens through evacuations, border control, and patrol are very much part of the nation-building theatrics of contemporary global emergencies. Thus, border crossings and movements are fundamentally a product of the neoliberal state, serving a commoditized function. In a pandemic, the image of the profit-generating tourist/immigrant shifts to become the virus native to contained and kept out and,

therefore, threatening. What constitutes local and national space is central to the pandemic narrative (Smith & Lee, 2017), where borders as commoditized imaginations become un(commodifiable) during outbreaks, shining a light on biopolitics, biosecurity, and its complexities. Discourses implicitly convey neoliberal logics of exclusion in the case of borders as economic and (un)commodifiable for specific mobile people during a pandemic response.

Uncertainty in a globalized interconnected world manufactures othering practices of transnational citizens. Journalists can pay further attention to early representational frames that impact outbreak narratives in the making of a pandemic. While challenges arise in making sense of how and why the virus originates, journalists should refrain from pandering to homogenizing opportunities of storytelling about cultures and contexts that contribute to practices of othering (Eichelberger, 2007) during a pandemic.



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