

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN UNDERSTANDING COVID-19

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In January 2020, China confirmed that the earlier reported outbreak recorded in its City of Wuhan was of a Corona Virus strain. The now labelled Corona Disease 2019 or COVID-19 (SARS-COV 2) was aired in mainstream media outlets which described it as “zoonotic--transmitted from animal” (Campbell, 2020), “highly contagious” (Grady, 2020), and “deadly” (Uras & Regencia, 2020) signifying its potency and causing negative public response as expressed in social media platforms¹, and as evidenced by the unprecedented gap in face mask supplies (Japan Today, 2020).

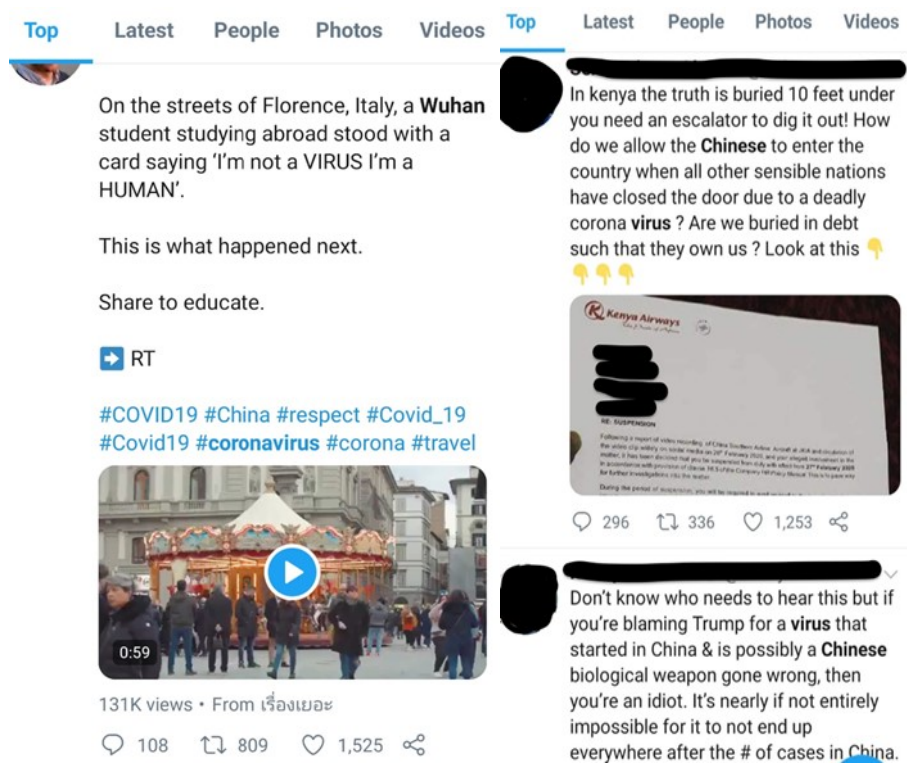


Figure 1. Screen captures highlighting sentiments on COVID 19

Globally, the recorded cases reached 85, 403 with a death toll of 2, 924 covering 54 countries². In an opening remarks, WHO Director-General has called on all country leaders to “prepare for a potential pandemic”³. With Wuhan, China at the Center of the epidemic, the burden of providing the details of the virus was cast on their scientists as the clamor for information grew with not only the public but more so from fellow scholars and state lead-

¹All screen captures from social media platforms were gathered from public posts through MAXQDA2020
²Get updated status through https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200229-sitrep-40-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=7203e653_2
³Read the full statement here: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-mission-briefing-on-covid-19---26-february-2020>

ers. However, the role of Wuhan in this critical period has not been solely confined to their scientific and state accountability. A part of their attributed role is that of a recipient of a global outrage that ascertained blame to the culture and lifeways of the people of Wuhan. From irrelevant bat soup consumption which has recently been discredited, to the production of weapons for biological warfare, the people of China, and most specifically those from Wuhan, were criticized and were subjected to various forms of race-based, geopolitical blaming. As state leaders were pressed to make crucial decisions in ensuring that their citizens avert this health crisis, a common key action made was the imposition of travel bans for individuals from affected regions. For two weeks since the issues of travel bans, only Chinese nationals were banned from entering several states. It was only in February that states have also banned nationals from heavily hit countries like South Korea and Japan.

In the Philippines, where the record remains at 3 confirmed cases and 1 confirmed death, the decision to impose travel ban against Chinese Nationals came later with President Duterte and several officials from the government being cited stating that the reason is primarily that of keeping diplomatic ties with China. This policy-orientation received criticisms from Filipinos despite political affiliation.



Figure 2. Word Cloud generated from 1700 tweets mined from January 26 to February 1, 2020

Tracking online posts in Twitter during the week of the first confirmed case of COVID-19, themes were generated through a coding system⁴. As depicted in Figure 2, common themes discussed in the tweets include Philippine government incompetence, poor health system, President Duterte and Health Secretary Duque. The peak of the tweets was on Thursday, January 31, which was the day when the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was aired by news outlet.

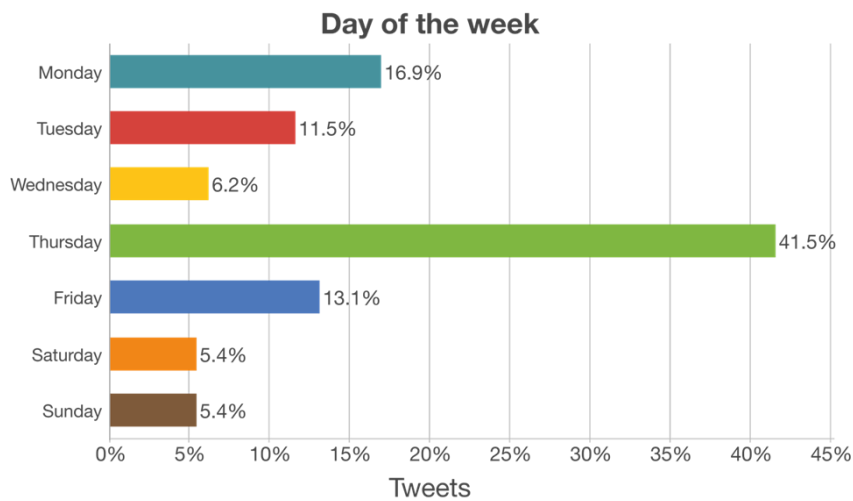


Figure 3. Tweet frequency related to COVID-19 (then, NCOV2019)

⁴Tweets were mined and analyzed using MAXQDA 2020

Apart from dismay towards the political decisions of Philippine leaders, the most common theme among the tweets was related to anti-Chinese sentiments. Although coronavirus was the most used word, it was always written beside either the word Wuhan or Chinese. Hence, labelling the virus as the Wuhan Coronavirus or the Chinese Coronavirus. These trends were often accompanied by “Ban Chinese Entry” and other racially-charged sentiments. These anti-Chinese sentiments are not only present in the Philippine online arena. As seen in sample tweets in Figure 1, a global distrust of Asian nationals has been brought about by this disease.

In 2015, WHO released a new guideline in naming infectious diseases which promoted a non-stigmatizing process such that characteristics like geographic location, culture, and people are not recommended for use in naming newly discovered diseases. This process ensures that the legacy of people and/or places will be free from the potential negative associations with a disease.

Disease names may NOT include:	Examples to be avoided
Geographic locations: Cities, countries, regions, continents	Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, Spanish Flu, Rift Valley fever, Lyme disease, Crimean Congo hemorrhagic fever, Japanese encephalitis
People’s names	Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Chagas disease
Species/class of animal or food	Swine flu, bird flu, monkey pox, equine encephalitis, paralytic shellfish poisoning
Cultural, population, industry or occupational references	Occupational, legionnaires, miners, butchers, cooks, nurses
Terms that incite undue fear	Unknown, death, fatal, epidemic

Table 1. Excerpt from WHO 2015 Guideline in naming new diseases⁵

However, despite this guideline, the usage of Wuhan Coronavirus was prominent in the earlier coverage of news outlets and other institutions. Perhaps attributable to lack of parallel discussions between health offices and media, the public’s usage of the phrase Wuhan Coronavirus may have rooted from this institutionalized gap.



Figure 4. Screen capture of a news agency’s published tracker of COVID-19

⁵Read the guideline here https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/163636/WHO_HSE_FOS_15.1_eng.pdf;jsessionid=640AD65BCB078BFFDFB82CAE9D170BED?sequence=1

In a digital age wherein reality is constantly updated and people's perceptions are highly influenced by 'facts' peddled by agencies with varying agenda, the call for a more engaged role of the social scientists comes resounding. Baudrillard's (1994) discourse on the role of the social sciences to make meaning of the blur that the hyperreality⁶ creates is ever more pertinent in this period of contrasting realities about the COVID-19. As the public grow anxious of the health systems that they have found suspect, social scientists have the task to use their disciplines to join in the discourse and provide critical analysis of illnesses, responses and systems. It is with this objective that the Journal of Social Health publishes peer-reviewed open access research outputs. Through the collaborative engagements among researchers in health, social sciences, and humanities, the Journal of Social Health aims to promote critical stance on how we understand and attain well-being.

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⁶Hyperreality is defined as the inability to distinguish the real from that of the simulation as the society is embedded in a technology.