



# Outbreaks, Carriers & Patient Zero

## How Language Shapes our Understanding of Pandemic

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July 13, 2020

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Department of Communication  
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **DENVER**

# Do you speak 'Rona?



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# #coronaspeak

- Flatten the curve
- Stay at home
- Doomscrolling
- Superspreaders
- Quarantini
- Locktail hour
- Upperwear
- Coronacut
- Zoombombing
- Second wave



# #coronaspeak

	January	February	March
1	bushfire	COVID-19	COVID-19
2	coronavirus	coronavirus	pandemic
3	Iranian	quarantine	distancing
4	SARS	pandemic	coronavirus
5	Iraqi	virus	self-isolate
6	sign-stealing	outbreak	lockdown
7	koala	caucus	self-isolation
8	virus	locust	sanitiser/sanitizer
9	impeachment	infect	quarantine
10	airstrike	epicentre/epicenter	ventilator
11	human-to-human	self-isolate	non-essential
12	locust	nCoV	self-quarantine
13	airliner	epidemic	virus
14	respiratory	SARS	outbreak
15	outbreak	infected	corona
16	assassination	sign-stealing	PPE
17	flu-like	acquittal	postpone
18	fire-affected	hereditary	disinfect
19	quarantine	stop-and-frisk	isolation
20	militia	evacuee	self-isolating



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20 keywords in the Oxford Corpus, January to March 2020, Oxford English Dictionary, Corpus Analysis of the Language of Covid-19, April 15, 2020

# Covid Lexicon

self-isolation-1834  
self-quarantine-1878  
personal protective equipment-1934  
shelter in place-1976  
face-mask  
coronavirus-1968  
infodemic-2003  
PPE-1977  
Covid19  
elbow bump-1981  
furlough  
WFH-working from home-1995  
lockdown  
pandemic-1659  
social distancing-1957  
frontliners

Flattening the curve

Superspreader

Quarantini

Doomscrolling

Zoom bombing

Quarantimes

corona clickbait

Upperwear

Fomites

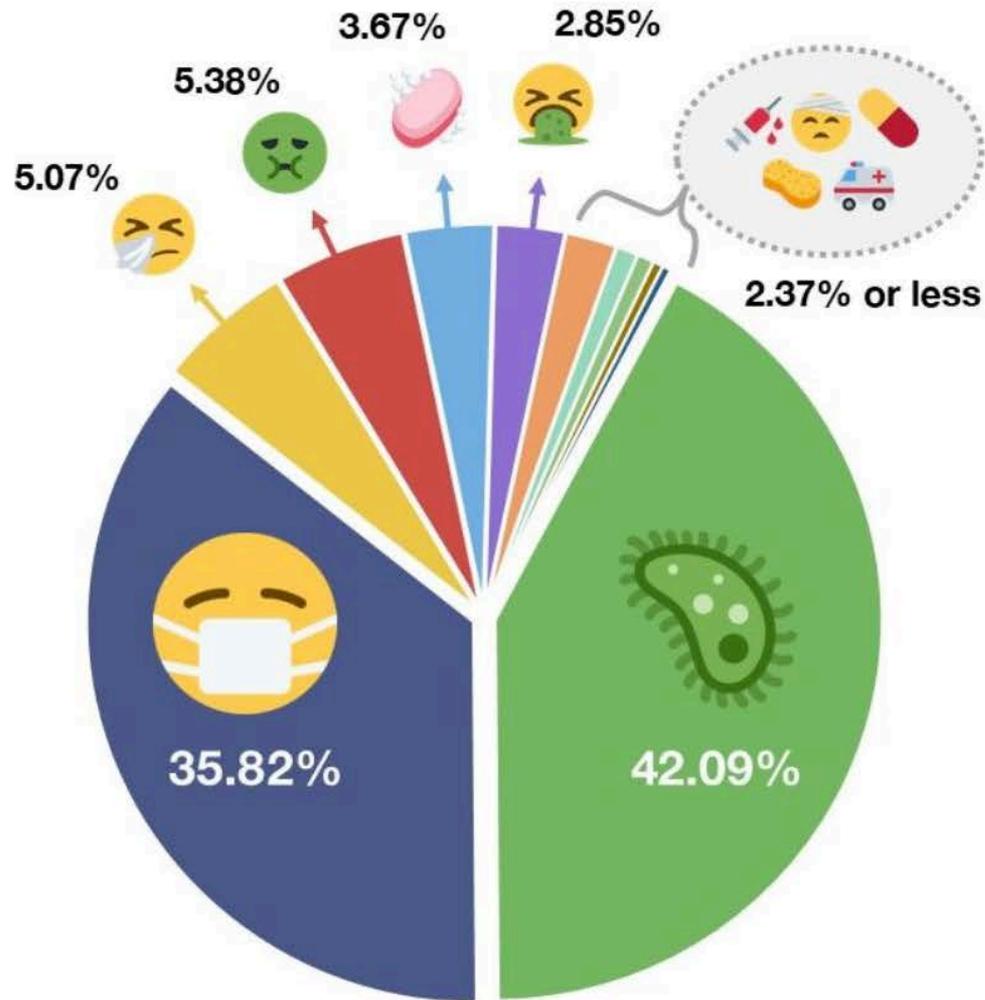
R-nought

Contact tracing

Second Wave

Stay-at-Home orders

Immunity passport



Spread of the Coronavirus Emoji, March 11, 2020, Emojipedia

*Figure 1: "Coronavirus" or "COVID" were the most popular uses of [😷 Face with Medical Mask](#) and [🦠 Microbe](#) in March 2020.*

# Road map

main goal: how language matters to pandemic

1

Background

2

3 language devices  
we use to talk Covid

3

Resilience

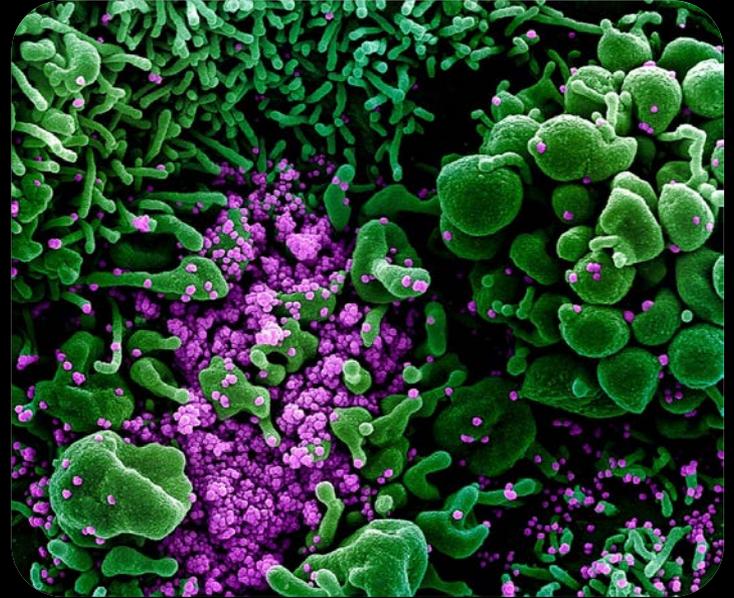


Image: NIAID 2020 CC License via Flickr/Wikimedia Commons



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# At the end of the talk

## Explain

- Explain how metaphor, narrative, Othering, and resilience discourses shape understanding of pandemics

## Identify

- Identify the parts of an outbreak narrative and explain how they function in society

## Evaluate

- Evaluate helpful and harmful ways of talking about pandemics

1

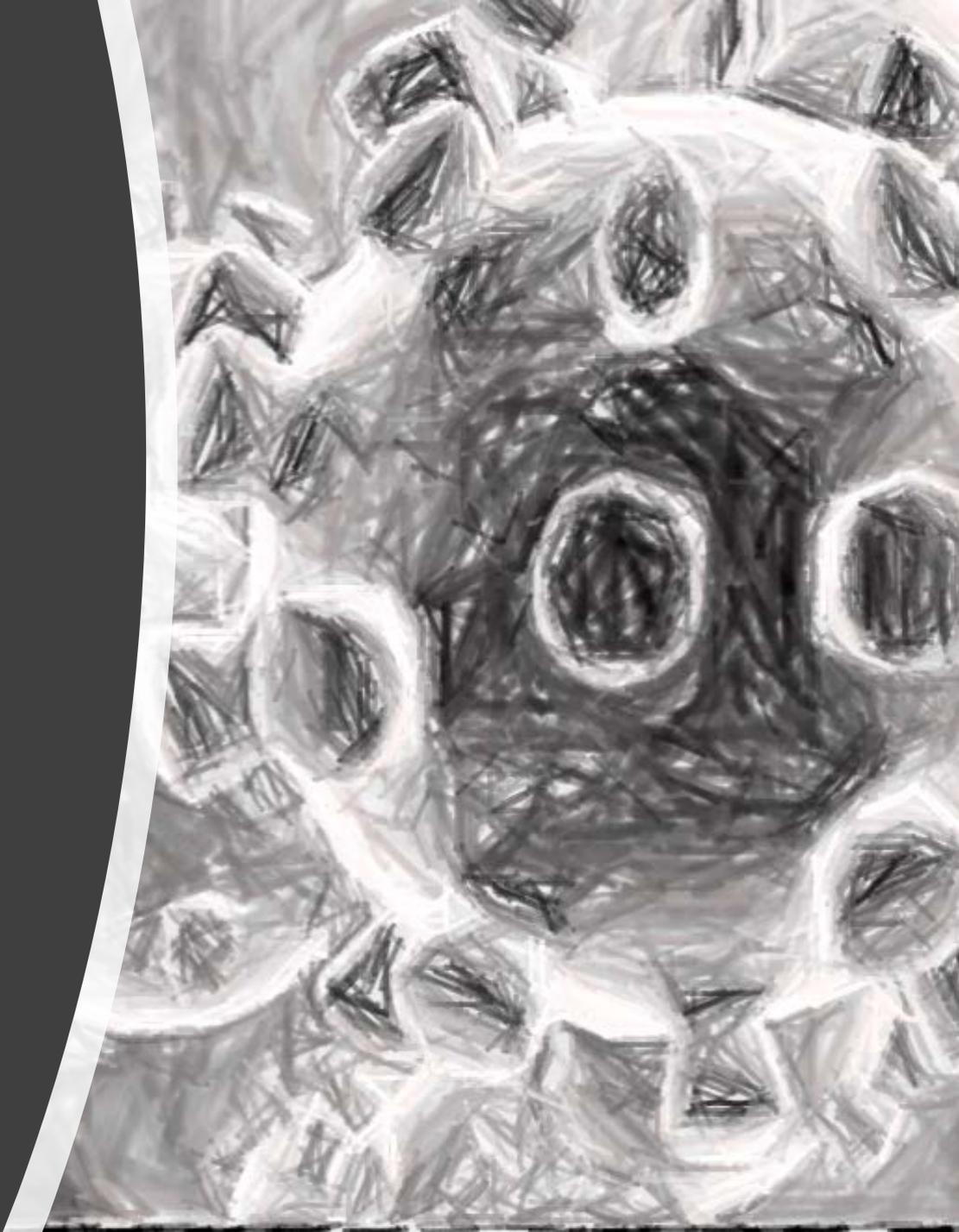
# Background and Perspective

COMMUNICATION



# Contagion and Communication

- “To touch together”
- “To communicate disease”







# The Power of Language

image: Matthew Perkins, Old Bourke hospital bed, Flickr/CC

# Words Matter. Stories Matter.



Share  
(mis)information



Shape  
perception  
and action



Influence  
infection  
and  
mortality  
rates



Promote or  
lessen stigma



Affect  
economies  
and cultures



Create  
communities



The left is a map of Covid19. The right is a map of dense 5G areas. Quite the overlap. Perhaps this virus is not lethal on its own, but it is a binary system and the lethality increases when 5G comes online. Also, don't forget Wuhan is a 5G test bed. #5GTOWERS #COVID19 #Stop5G

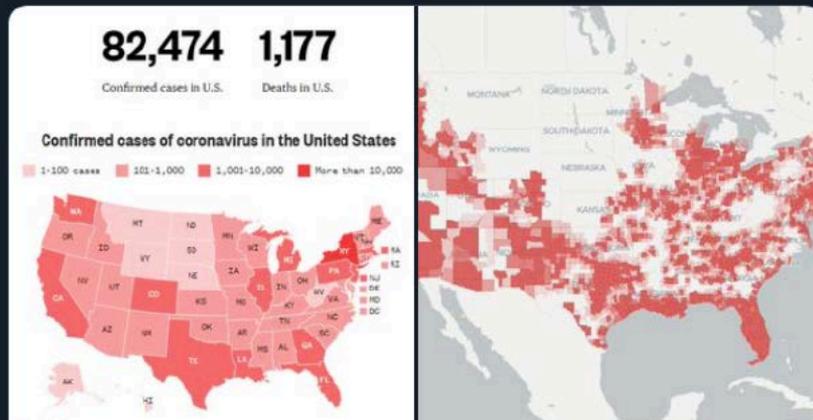


Image from: Moonshot, [5g Coronavirus Conspiracy](#), April 2020

# 2

## Specific Language Devices

Metaphor

Narrative

Othering Language



2A

## Metaphor

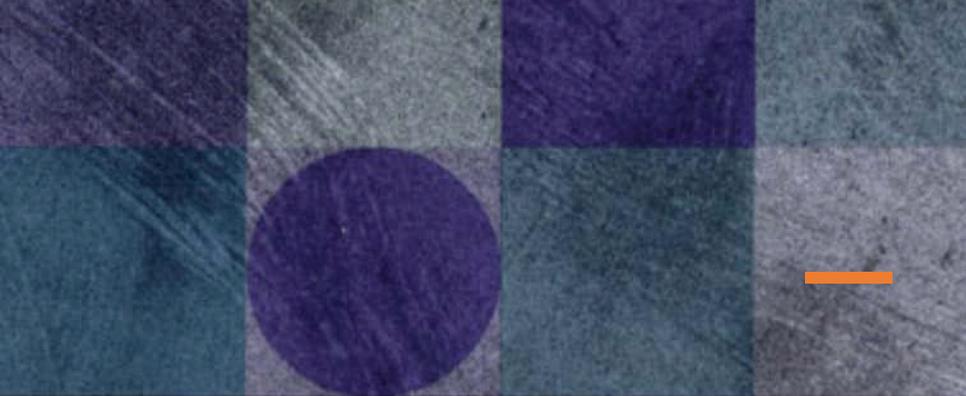
Greek meta (over)  
phrein (carry)  
*carry over*

a comparison of unlikes

“giving the thing a name  
that belongs to something  
else”

(Aristotle, Poetics, Chapter 21, 1457b1-30)

transference of meaning  
that emphasizes and  
obscures



M E T A P H O R S  
W E L I V E B Y

GEORGE LAKOFF  
AND MARK JOHNSON

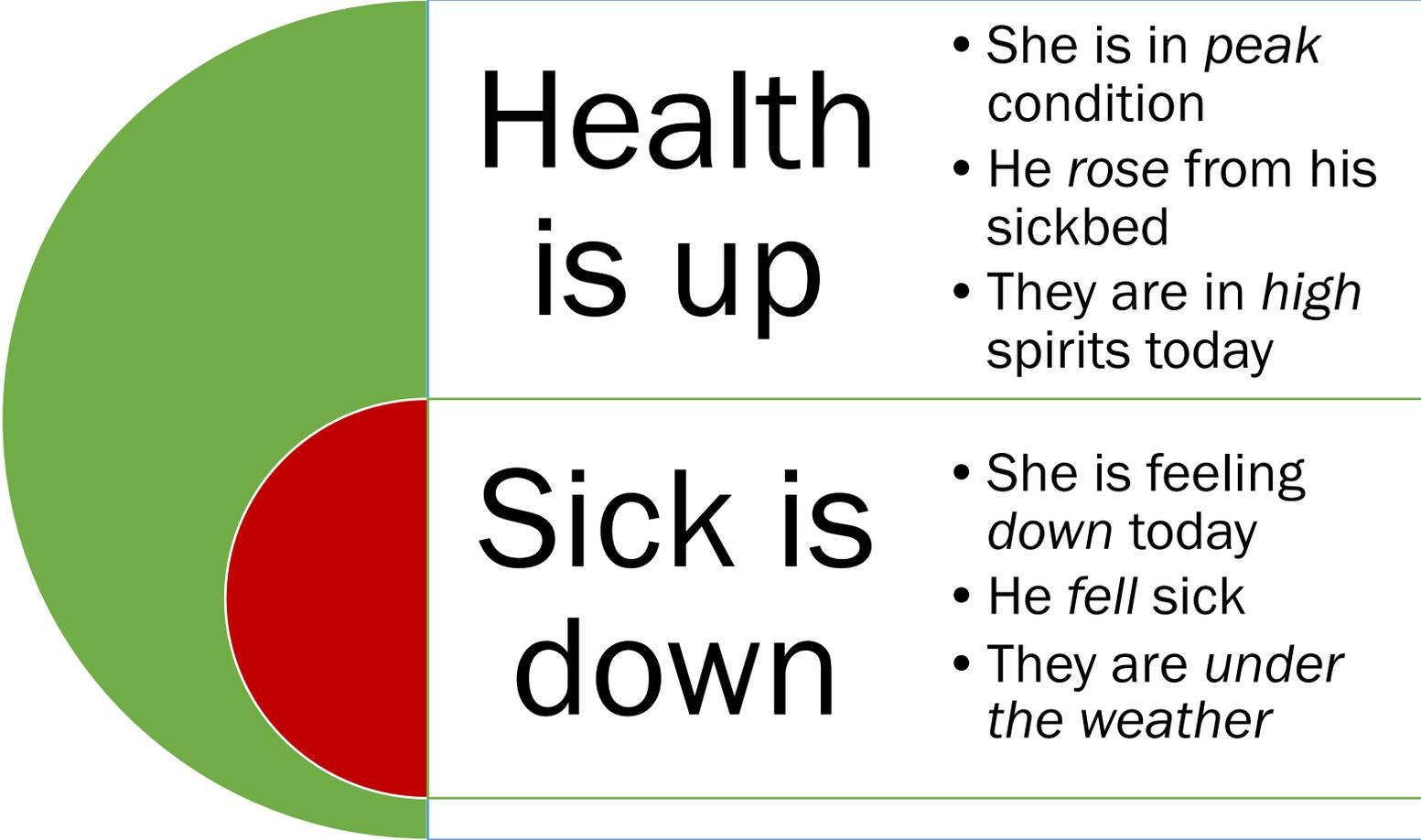
WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

# Metaphor and Thought

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“Our (metaphorical) concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3).

# Oriental Metaphors



Health  
is up

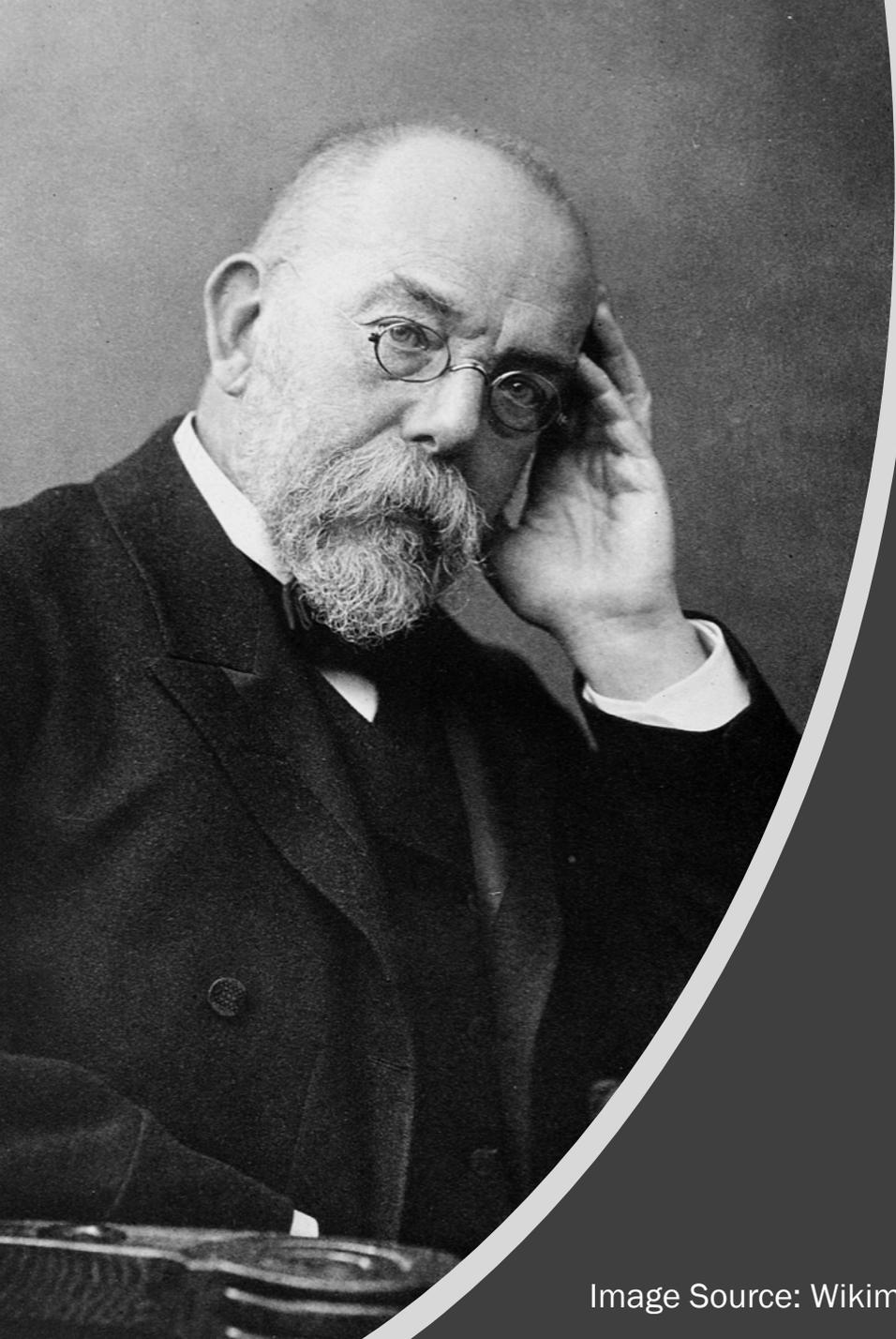
- She is in *peak* condition
- He *rose* from his sickbed
- They are in *high* spirits today

Sick is  
down

- She is feeling *down* today
- He *fell* sick
- They are *under* the weather

# Disease as war

*fought illness  
battled cancer  
succumbed to the flu  
virus as invader  
immune system as defense*



# Robert Koch

## German

Bacteriologist, 1843-1910

Disease as *“invading force per se”* (1890)  
Body as *battlefield*

# 'Our Big War.' As Coronavirus Spreads, Trump Refashions Himself as a Wartime President

ASIA

## China Declares 'People's War' On COVID-19 — Including Reporting Family And Friends

February 13, 2020 · 4:18 PM ET  
Heard on [All Things Considered](#)

TIME

WHITE HOUSE

### Trump drafts everyday Americans to adopt his battlefield rhetoric

### Xi leads people's war on epidemic

China Daily | Updated: 2020-03-12 03:33

### Brits invoke the 'Blitz spirit' when describing virus

April 20, 2020 by Read Sector

UK and US media evoke the spirit of the Second World War during the coronavirus pandemic by using language relating to force and combat, a study reveals.

The use of a 'war rhetoric' – particularly verbs to invoke a 'call to action' – are abundant in news reports on British and American news sites, including the Daily Mail.

ÉDITORIAL

Le Monde

### Emmanuel Macron dans la guerre du coronavirus

Dans le combat contre le Covid-19, le président de la République réussit à entraîner derrière lui une majorité de Français, mais il lui faut encore réaliser l'union sacrée.

Publié le 20 mars 2020 à 12h10 - Mis à jour le 20 mars 2020 à 12h14 | Lecture 2 min.

# Covid as war

## + Advantages

- Converge around common cause
- Confers a sense of agency
- Gives hope
- Can create illness communities
- Comfortable, culturally familiar

## - Disadvantages

- Blames/stigmatizes those who don't survive
- Implies deaths are collateral damage
- Reduces complexity of outbreak
- Power-laden, paternalistic, aggressive (vs. CARING)
- Historically, war has been accompanied by ethics abuses
- Doesn't help those without equipment or support

# Alternate Covid Metaphors

TTER  FACEBOOK



al in Dallas pays tribute to nurses working during the coronavirus outbreak. | LM Otero/AP

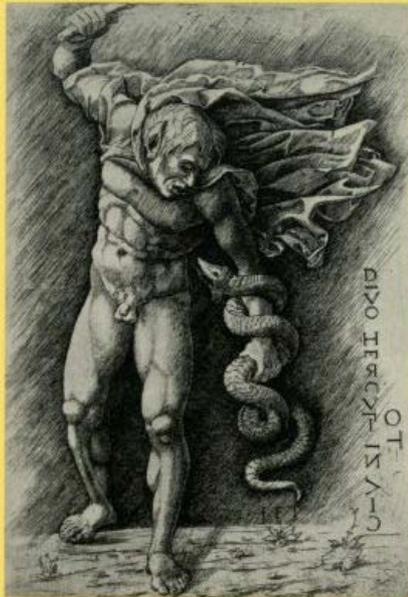
## Pandemics are not wars

There are better metaphors to describe what's happening right now

By Alissa Wilkinson | @alissamarie | alissa@vox.com | Apr 15, 2020, 8:10am EDT

- Natural disaster
- Fire or wildfire
- Apocalypse
- Journey
- Stress test on the system
- Ecological metaphors (spillover)

# Susan Sontag



SUSAN SONTAG  
*Illness as Metaphor*

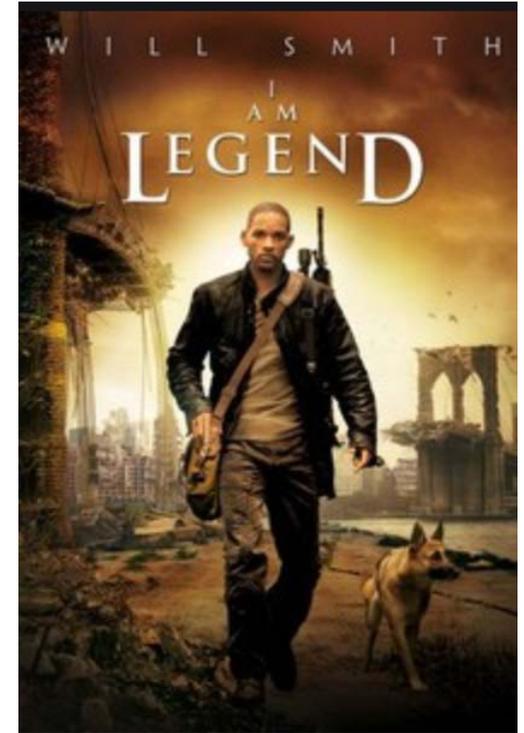
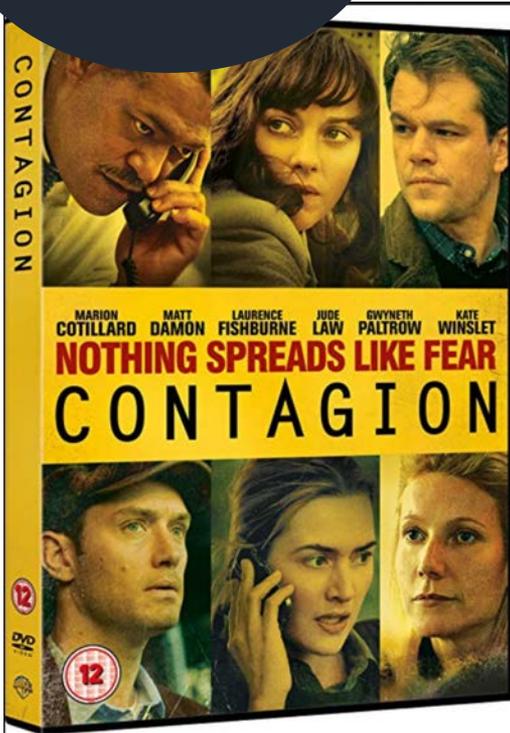
## Think about other Covid metaphors

- Lockdown vs. circuit breaking
- Stress test for the species
- Game or contest
- Whack-a-mole

1978

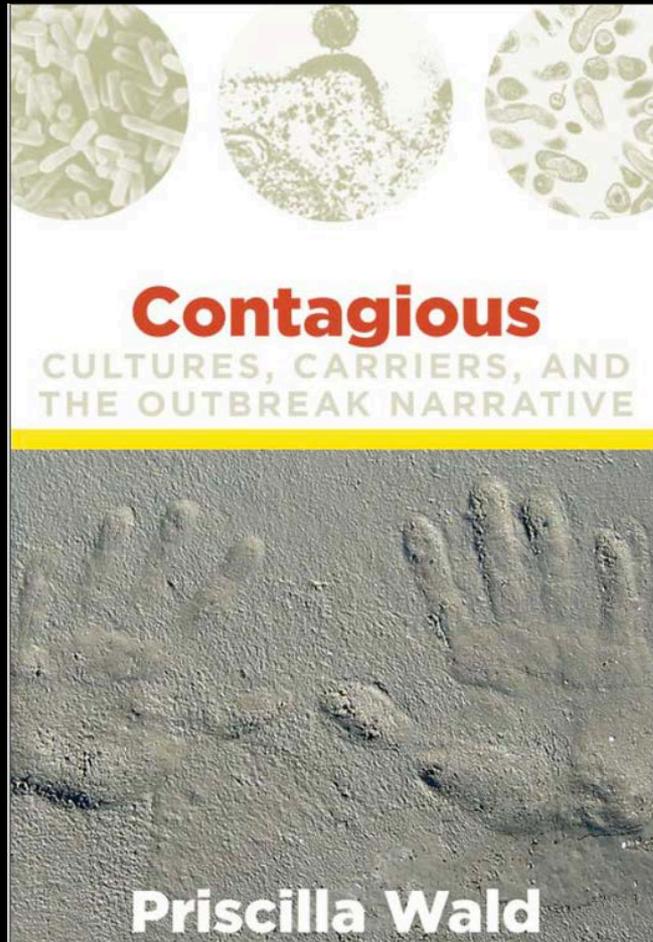
2B

# Narrative



# Standard Outbreak Story

(Wald, 2008, p. 2)



Formulaic plot across media types



Identification of emerging infection



Focus on global networks that facilitate its spread



Features epidemiological work of containment



Concludes with containment



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CORONAVIRUS

# New York area's 'patient zero' says coronavirus 'wasn't on my mind' when he got sick

"I really have not focused on any of the media frenzy in terms of one of the first patients to get it. But I have been focused more on ... getting better," Lawrence Garbuz said.

**Exclusive: New York's coronavirus 'patient zero': 'My wife saved my life'** 

MAY 11, 2020 / 07:43

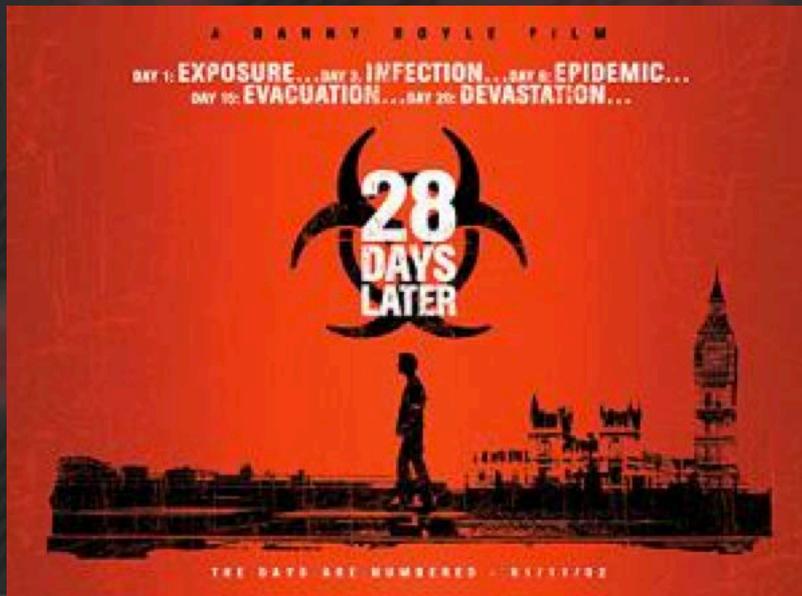




Lab workers testing samples for the coronavirus in Wuhan. Chinatopix, via Associated Press

# Viral Apocalypse

End of life as we  
know it from  
contagious  
disease



emerging infectious  
disease  
pandemic  
globalization  
economic and social  
collapse



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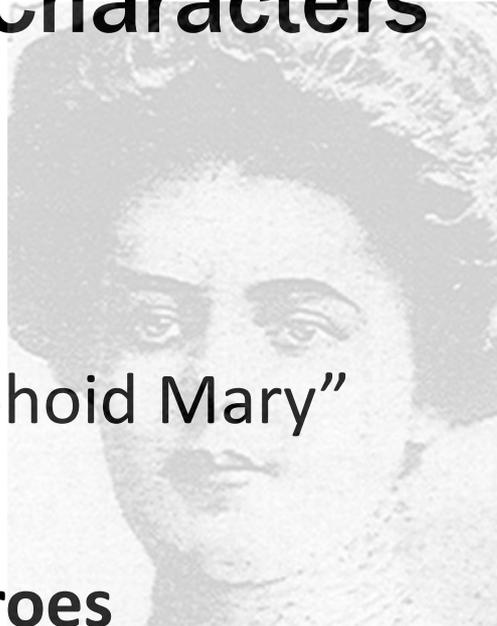
# Recurrent Characters

- Carriers

Example: “Typhoid Mary”

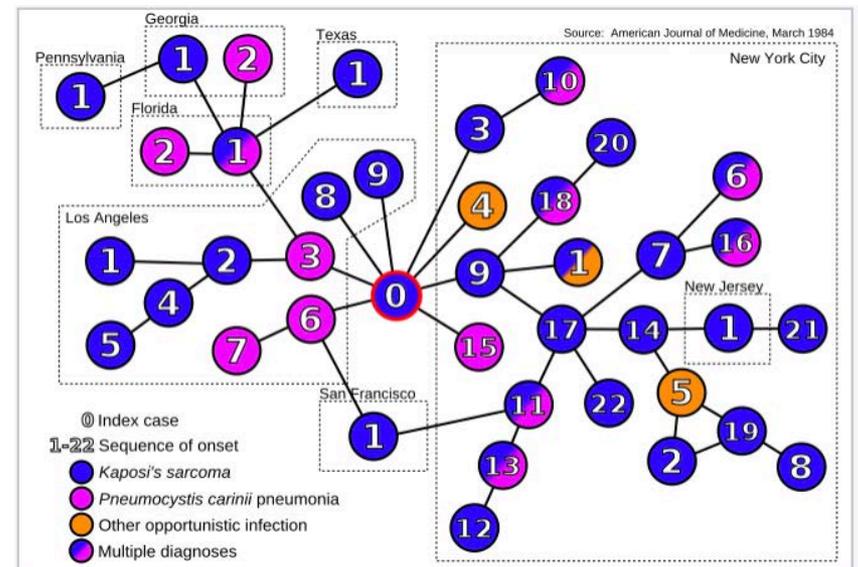
- Everyday heroes

“Frontliners”



- Patient Zero

Example: Gaetan Dugas, airline attendant



# The 'Healthy' Carrier to Superspreaders

**'Typhoid Mary'  
Dead at 70; Gave  
Fever to Many**

- Human vector
- Portrayed as danger to the community
- Illicit sexual histories or criminal behavior
- → **Superspreaders**

November 13, 1938, 'Typhoid Mary' obituary (The San Diego Union)

# Rhetorical Work of Outbreak Stories

- Repackage contagion fears
- Make invisible visible
- Transform uncertainty into risk
- Create rhetoric of expertise
- Set terms and drive agendas
- Assign blame and praise
- Persuade others of their legitimacy

# Narratives are problems when they

- Stigmatize certain people and groups
- Spread misinformation
- Blame/scapegoat the sick

Historical example:  
Persecution of Jews during  
the Bubonic Plague, 1348-  
1351

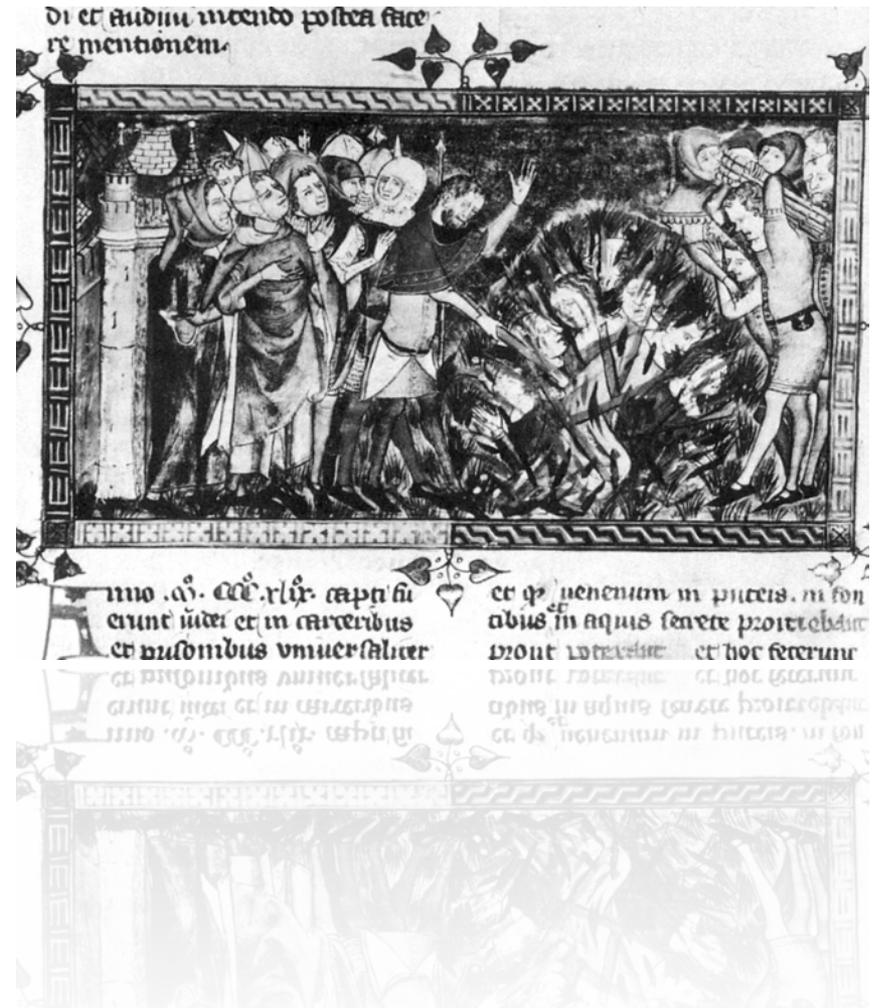


Image from 1349 *Antiquitates Flandriae*, Royal Library of Belgium (via Wikipedia)

# 2C Stigmatizing/Othering Language

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Equation of virus with nationality or group

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Use of racist tropes

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Explicit exclusion and shunning

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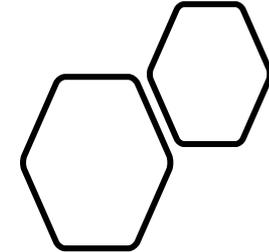
Rumor/misinformation sharing

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Culturally biased 'jokes'

# Introduction

Moonshot gathered 676 million Tweets posted between 21.02.20 and 17.04.20 that included at least 1 'coronavirus', 'COVID-19', or a closely related term, across 18 languages. From this dataset we isolated 1. contained one or more of 69 English language hashtags, which we identified during research as being indicative theories, hate speech, or incitements to violence related to COVID-19.



## Key findings

- A 300% increase in the use of hashtags that encourage or incite violence against China and Chinese people.
- Anti-Chinese conspiracy theories dominated the conspiracy theory discourse on Twitter.
- There are a smaller number of racist and/or conspiratorial hashtags seeking to exploit COVID-19 as a vehicle for anti-S
- References to broad conspiracy theories (#coronaviruscoverup) declined in volume, while those linking COVID rollout of 5G (#5GCoronavirus) increased significantly.

## High-engagement Tweets

Retweet if you think we should place the #Chinese Communist Party at NUMBER 1 on the "Terror List"

#COVID19 #ChineseVirus #CCPVirus



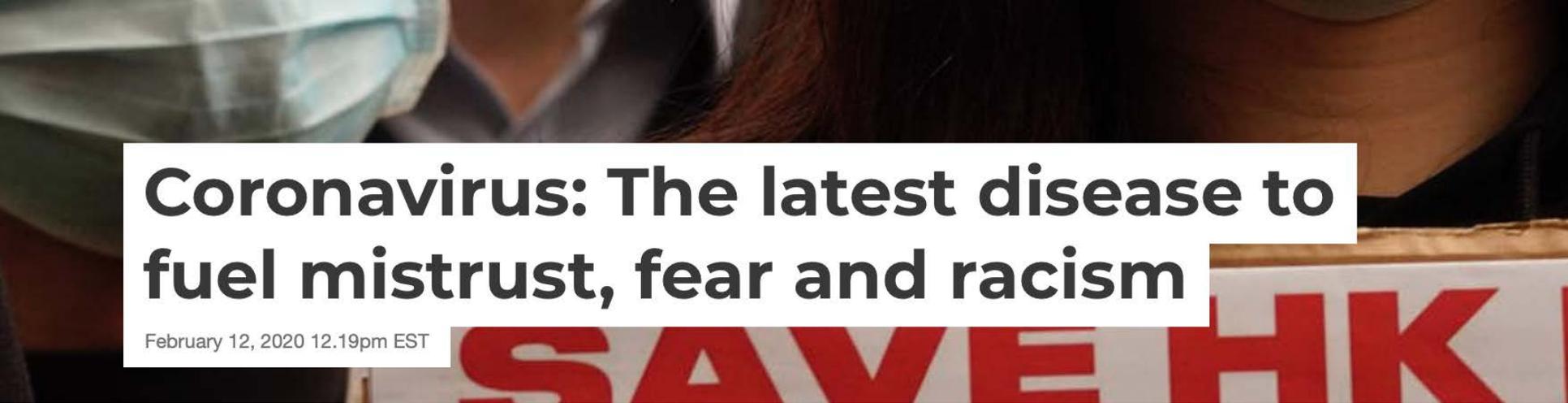
903 Retweets 1.3k Likes

## Top hashtags

- [01] #CCPVirus
- [02] #ChinaLiedPeopleDied
- [03] #KungFlu
- [04] #Chinazi
- [05] #CoronaVirusCoverUp .....

### #CoronaVirusCr

Conspiracy theo  
centre around  
President Tru  
Party in com'  
rolling of US



# Coronavirus: The latest disease to fuel mistrust, fear and racism

February 12, 2020 12:19pm EST

U.S.

## Feds Sound Alarm Over Claims of Asian Discrimination in Schools

Education Department notes increase in reports concerning harassment directed at Asian-Americans, unfairly tying them to coronavirus

CORONAVIRUS

## Some Evangelical leaders are linking LGBTQ people to new coronavirus outbreak

# WHO Infectious Disease Naming Best Practices

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

\*Superscripts indicate those terms further described below

# Infodemic

- an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” [WHO, 2020](#)



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**#FightXenophobia**  
**#IAmNotAVirus**  
**#HumanJustLikeYou**



## DOs and DON'Ts for Everyone

**DO** learn and share accurate information about the virus and how it spreads, referring to trusted sources such as the World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>) and the United Nations ([www.un.org/coronavirus](http://www.un.org/coronavirus)).

**DO** be cautious about the images that you share when communicating about COVID-19. Make sure they do not reinforce stereotypes by focusing exclusively in one nationality, ethnicity or community.

**DO** speak out against negative behaviors and negative statements (online and offline) about any particular group of people or individual.

**DO** post/repost stories about how xenophobia is hurting people and communities, or contact the media to cover such stories.

**DO** respect the privacy and confidentiality of people you know who may have been infected, regardless of their nationality/ethnicity/community.



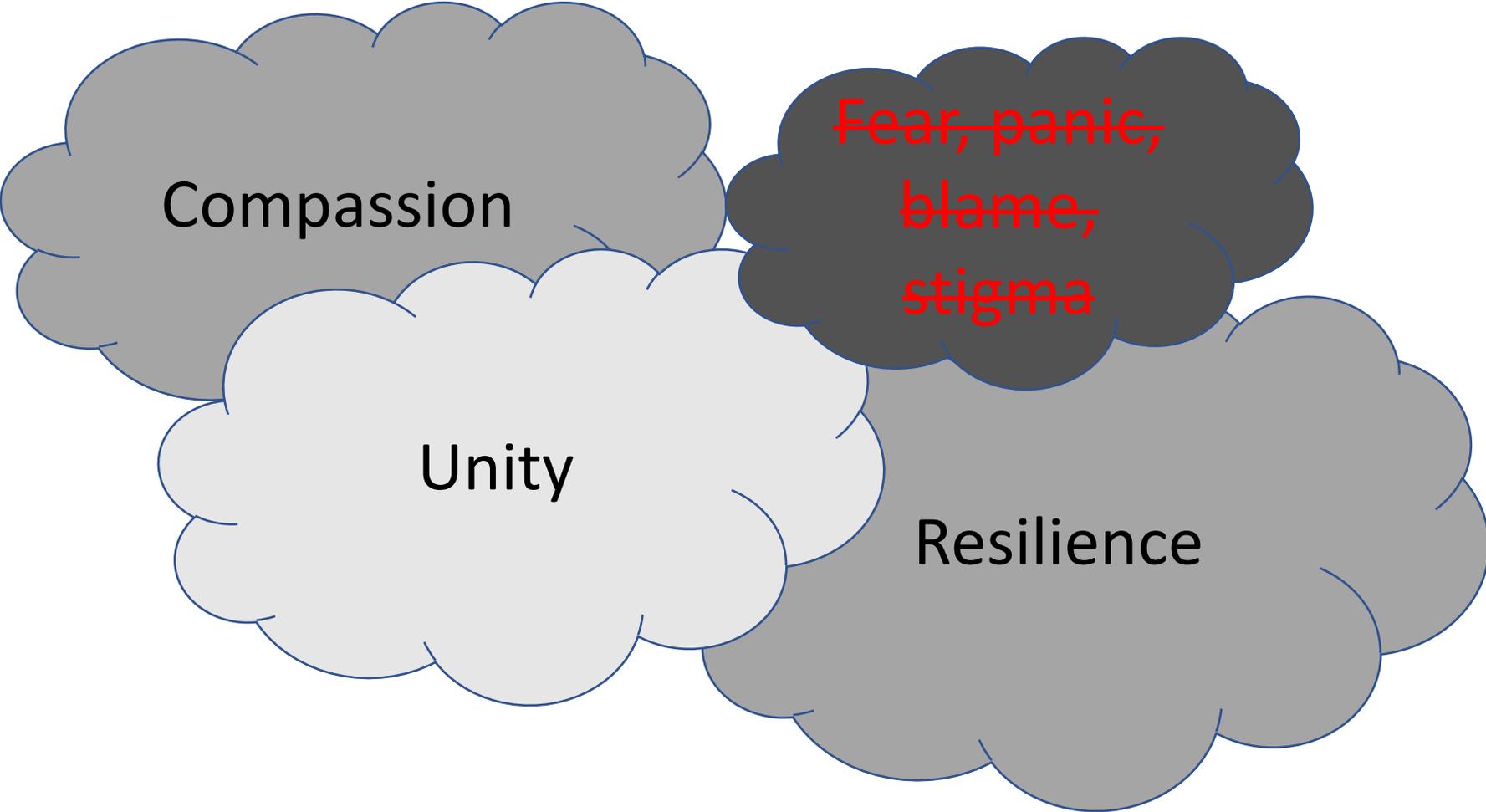
**DO** report to the administrator of the (social) media platform to investigate and take actions such as removal of posts and punishment of authors when discovering or experiencing hate speech

**DON'T** repeat or share unconfirmed rumors, and avoid using hyperbolic language designed to generate fear like “plague”, “apocalypse” etc.



**DON'T** link countries, locations or ethnicities to COVID-19, by using terms such as “Wuhan Virus”, “Chinese Virus” or “Asian Virus”.

# Values for New Stories and Metaphors



Compassion

~~Fear, panic,~~  
~~blame,~~  
~~stigma~~

Unity

Resilience



# The Rise of Resilience

Google books Ngram Viewer

Graph these comma-separated phrases:   case-insensitive

between  and  from the corpus  with smoothing of  .

[Search lots of books](#)

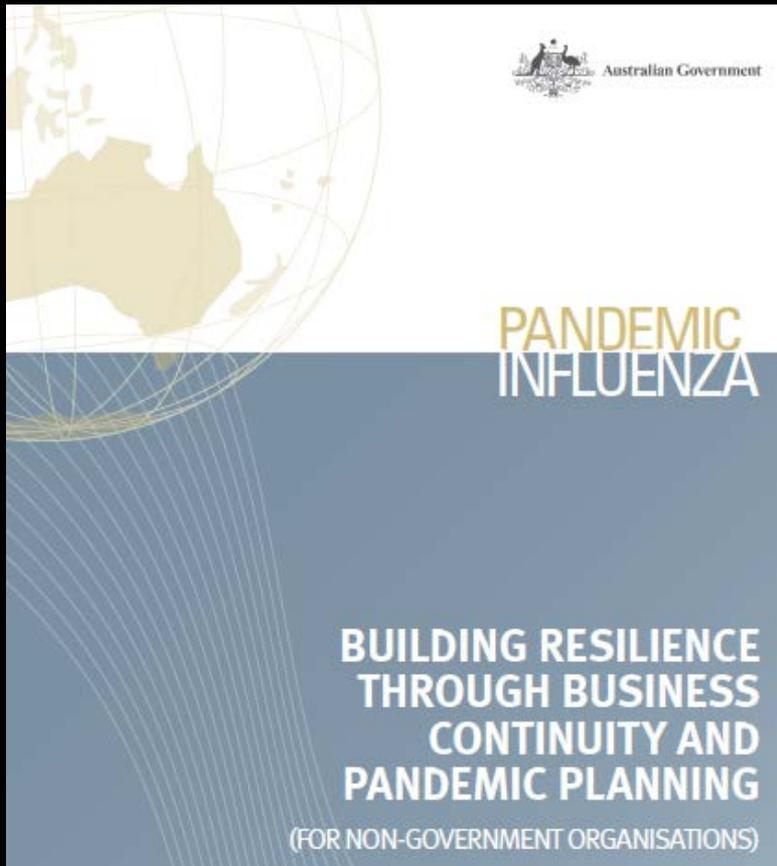


(click on line/label for focus)



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# Pandemic Resilience



Original Research

## Resilience Training for Hospital Workers in Anticipation of an Influenza Pandemic

ANDRIA AIELLO, RN, BScN, MN; MICHELLE YOUNG-EUN KHAYERI, RN, BScN, MScN; SHREYSHREE RAJA, BSc, MEd; NATHALIE PELADEAU, RN, BScN, MSc; DONNA ROMANO, RN, BScN, MSc, PhD; MOLYN LESZCZ, MD, FRCPC; ROBERT G. MAUNDER, MD, FRCPC; MARCI ROSE, OT REG. (ONT.), OTR; MARY ANNE ADAM, RN; CLARE PAIN, MD, FRCPC; ANDREA MOORE, MSW, RSW; DIANE SAVAGE, MSW, RSW; RABBI BERNARD SCHULMAN

**Background:** Well before the H1N1 influenza, health care organizations worldwide prepared for a pandemic of unpredictable impact. Planners anticipated the possibility of a pandemic involving high mortality, high health care demands, rates of absenteeism rising up to 20–30% among health care workers, rationing of health care, and extraordinary psychological stress.

**Method:** The intervention we describe emerged from the recognition that an expected influenza pandemic indicated a need to build resilience to maintain the health of individuals within the organization and to protect the capacity of the organization to respond to extraordinary demands. Training sessions were one component of a multifaceted approach to reducing stress through effective preparation and served as an evidence-based platform for our hospital's response to the H1N1 pandemic.

**Results:** The training was delivered to more than 1250 hospital staff representing more than 22 departments within the hospital. The proportion of participants who felt better able to cope after the session (76%) was significantly higher than the proportion who felt prepared to deal confidently with the pandemic before the session (35%). Ten key themes emerged from our qualitative analysis of written comments, including family-work balance, antiviral prophylaxis, and mistrust or fear towards health care workers.

**Conclusions:** Drawing on what we learned from the impact of SARS on our hospital, we had the opportunity to improve our organization's preparedness for the pandemic. Our results suggest that an evidence-based approach to interventions that target known mediators of distress and meet standards of continuing professional development is not only possible and relevant, but readily supportable by senior hospital administration.

**Key Words:** pandemic, resilience, hospital workers, health care workers, H1N1, influenza, training



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# Resilience Roadmap

Last updated June 18, 2020 at 2:10 PM

Californians have been staying home and saving lives since the start of our statewide stay-at-home order issued on March 19, 2020. These efforts have allowed the state to move forward on our [roadmap](#) for modifying the statewide order.

We are now in early **Stage 2**, where retail, related logistics and manufacturing, office workplaces, limited personal services, outdoor museums, child care, and [essential businesses](#) can open with modifications. The state is [issuing guidance](#) to help these workplaces reopen safely.





# How to Help Families and Staff Build Resilience During the COVID-19 Outbreak



# Premises

Complex, adaptable systems

Contingent and uncertain knowledge

Anticipatory/preparedness logic unites past, present, and future

Reflection/reflexivity built in

Empowerment and agency



# Promises

Preparation  
for the  
inevitable

Coordinates  
action around  
planning

Creates  
opportunities

Sets stage for  
response and  
recovery

Increases  
market flows



# Potential Pitfalls

Can promote victim blaming

Promotes securitization of other domains of human life

Can advance neoliberal agenda—opening of markets and widening resource gaps

Distributes responsibility to individual or local levels

Constitutes particular way of being in the world



# Key Questions

- Nature of Covid resilience?  
Is it a capacity, a way of being, a process? To what system are we bouncing back?
- Whose resilience?  
Who benefits and who is left out
- When is resilience not desirable?  
Terrorist and hate organizations, pathogens, etc.





# Broader Questions

How am I using language to talk and think about Covid-19?

What do my language choices suggest about how I view Covid-19?

Are they helpful or harmful to myself and others?



# Road map

main goal: how language matters to pandemic

1

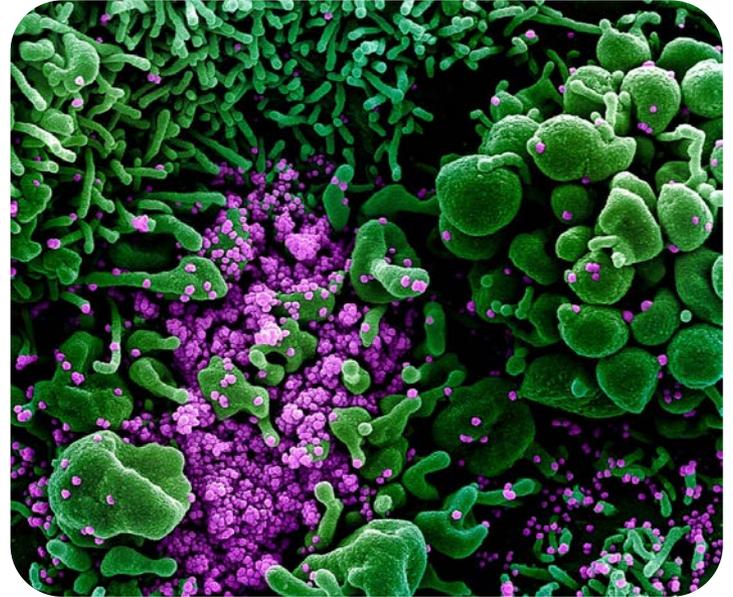
Background

2

3 language devices  
we use to talk Covid  
(metaphor, narrative, Othering)

3

Resilience



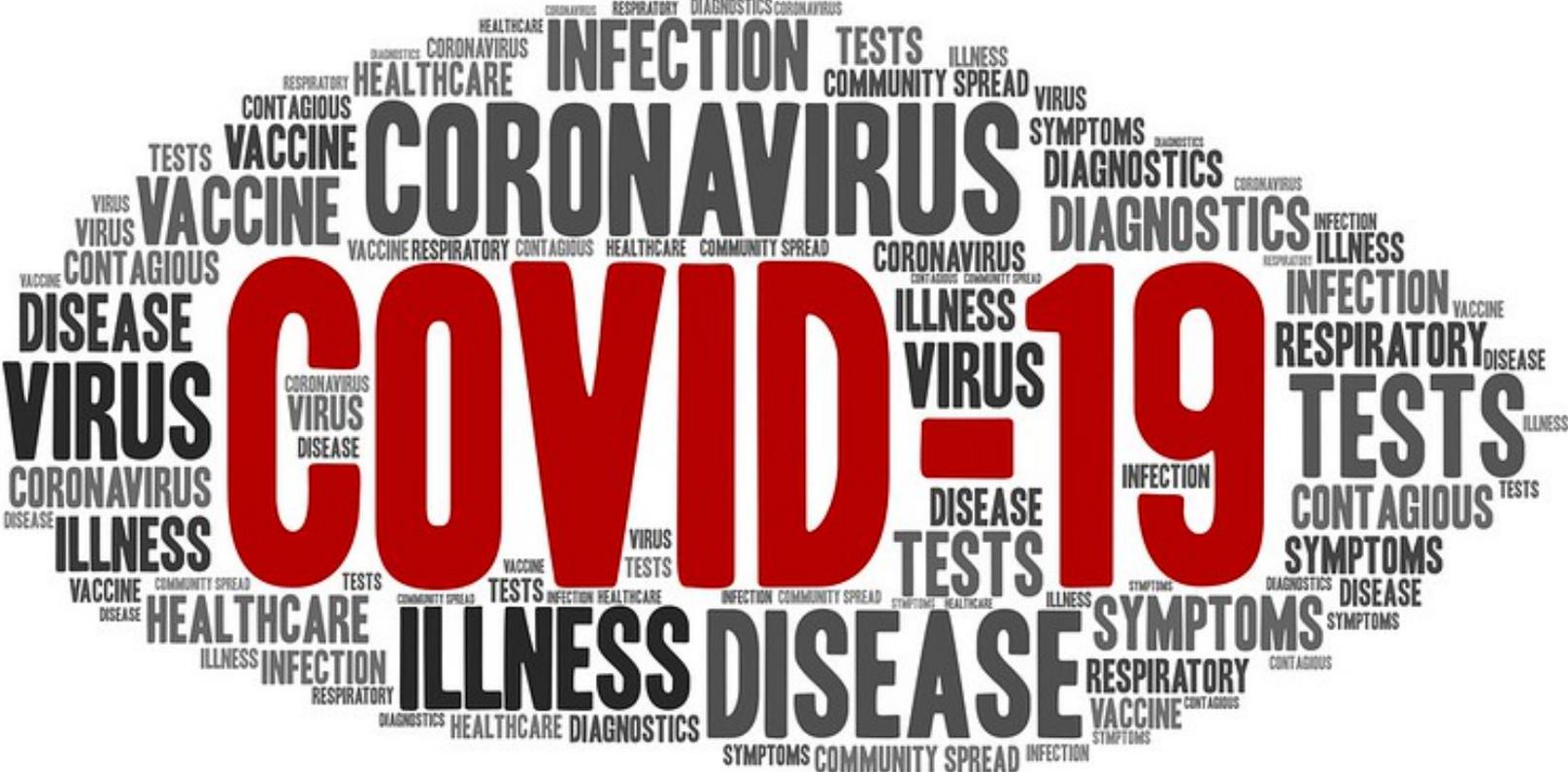
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The healthiest thing we can do  
as interpreters of maladies is  
recognize their symbolic  
potential and, where  
damaging, disarm it with  
careful, historical analysis

--Cynthia Davis, Contagion as Metaphor, *American Literary History*



[lisa.keranen@ucdenver.edu](mailto:lisa.keranen@ucdenver.edu)



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Go to  
**[www.menti.com](http://www.menti.com)**  
and use the code

**63 15 64**

