

*Review Article*

# Using media to re-construct mythologies of power and global hierarchies during COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

If anything, COVID-19 has exposed the lust for power and colonial onslaught against Third World countries across the globe. While COVID-19 has had devastating effects across the globe, being one of the pandemics to imbue such high mortality rate on the human populace within the shortest period, it still presented an opportunity for the neoliberal inclines from the media to use public figures like queens, presidents, prime ministers to recreate mythical powers around vaccine jobs/injections for immunisation from COVID-19. The dominant global media and their remnants in the third world countries including South Africa (SA) were on a drive of injections or vaccine campaigns for purposes of profiteering multinational pharmaceuticals, through the mythical power associated with identified western leaders who were flighted across the world media taking vaccine jabs. Thus, dragging the unsuspecting populace across the globe into accepting, without question, their version of life-saving jabs. This paper seeks to track and qualitatively analyses selected editions (online) of the so-called liberal news (papers) in South Africa (SA) to understand how media headlines and the accompanying reports, using some leaders of the western countries including United States of America, created narratives to enact acceptance of immunity injections (COVID-19) such as Johnson & Johnson for COVID-19. These news reports that were published between 2019 to 2023 marked the height of COVID-19 cases in SA context, hence selected for this paper. The selected reports were analyzed by means of content analysis based on the theoretical underpinnings of Semiotics and Narrative theories. The study found that some news headlines and affiliated reporting of the selected online news (News24) created narratives that were sensationalistic, alarmist and episodic, without providing alternative information of mitigating the threats posed by the pandemic. Such narratives were event based and adopted a biomedical, Eurocentric-based vaccination approach to COVID-19, disguised through the presumed mythical power associated with selected leaders from the Global North.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, Pandemic, COVID-19, Global North, Immunisation, Jab

## INTRODUCTION

Like all other countries around the globe, SA was hard hit by the COVID-19 novel pandemic resulting in more fatalities than any other country in the African continent. By February 2021, official statistics show that SA had recorded 47000 COVID-19 related deaths [1]. Amidst pain and suffering that COVID-19 has brought to bear on the population, the political morass around vaccines and inherent patent monopolies between the western pharmaceuticals and SA was an ensuing sideshow. As Cartello [2] puts it, the outbreak of novel coronavirus was simply a direct

manifestation of the underlying, organic crisis of neoliberal globalisation and its viral legacies.

As SA Minister of Health reports, Johnson and Johnson refused to sign off the supply of a 20 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine unless it received a letter from the department of trade and industry endorsing local investment it has made in Aspen Pharmaceutical. As if that was not enough, J&J and Pfizer were charging SA 10 US dollars per dose of vaccine and no refund should there be cancellation [1]. The debate around vaccine patents and prizing in the midst of public decimation attributed

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to COVID-19 is a confirmation of the view that global health architecture is organised around commodification of the public goods [3]. Thus, neoliberalism, which promotes a view that health and well-being are individual responsibilities and private commodities rather than rights and public goods, took centre stage in public provisioning [2].

### **Neoliberalism defined**

Budzi [4] defines neoliberalism as a mode of governance and package for profit-market policies or the compromises with finance capitalism, with competition as the only legitimate organising principle for human activity. Cartello [2] adds that neoliberalism denotes:

- The hegemonic political ideology in the west and beyond from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.
- A system of policies centred around liberalisation, financialisation, deregulation and privatization.
- A minimalist, non-interventionist and anti-welfarist conception of the state.
- A form of governmentality that restructures relationships between individuals and the State in ways that facilitate 'governing at a distance'.

Therefore, this paper argues that the spectacularisation that came with media's obsession with mythologies of power and hierarchies apportioned to western countries and affiliated leaders was nothing short of neoliberal spectacle. To this end, it is important to analyse how the so-called liberal media in SA context created narratives of life saving vaccines on the heels of patent battles between SA, India on one hand, and World Trade Organisation (WTO) on the other, to temporarily waive intellectual property rights and allow emergency production. But for 18 months, the WTO in a pandemic, could not agree to TRIPPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Waive, blocking it despite 100 countries supporting the SA and Indian governments waiver proposal [5]. Sparke and Williams [6] also note that aspect of neoliberal market that looks set to be even more devastating over the long run is the complex global patent regime now curtailing access to vaccines across the Global South. They recognise that the reasons run far beyond the pay-walls created by patent protected monopoly pricing, extending to the ways in which the WTO's neoliberal TRIPS rules wall off opportunities for vaccine manufacturing capacity in poorer countries into action to create desperately needed vaccine doses. Therefore, the virus has exploited and exacerbated all the associated political, economic and social vulnerabilities in co-pathogenic ways.

The myths in relation to vaccines and vaccination in SA are what van Wyk calls performative scientism [7]. Van Wyk further argues that scientism is used to describe an exaggerated kind of deference toward an excessive readiness to accept as authoritative any claim made by sciences and dismiss every kind of criticism of science or its practitioners as anti-scientific prejudice. The science becomes both the shield and a general selling point to boost the legitimacy of vaccines. To the contrary, Wasserman, Uzuegbunam, Bosch and Chuma [8] argue that these media reports were alarmist, sensationalist and negative in

tone. Moreover, these reports did not see much possibility for the individual agency in combating the pandemic. Such reports could have contributed to the public anxiety and fear. Accordingly, reports are defined as alarmist when they are negative in tone, use fearful words and metaphors, use sensationalist and emotionally charged language, focus on worst-case scenarios, and provide limited information to help reduce their personal risk [9]. In this context, this paper seeks to analyse how News24, an English language SA news website/digital platform use metaphors, signs, allegories, exaggerations and other narrative features, in its reporting of the COVID-19, to promote the purported notion of 'herd immunity' adopted more in the global north, despite contrasting socio-economic and political dynamics within which the pandemic thrives. Similarly, by using semiotic and narrative theories to analyse how these reports sought to achieve the larger ends, is to understand the ideological, political, cultural and economic myths underlying global hierarchies and power asymmetries, surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **News24**

News24 is an English language SA news website created in October 1998 by the multinational media company, Naspers. News24 is owned by Media24, a SA media company with interests in digital media and services, newspapers, magazines, e-commerce, book publishing, print and distribution. News24 publishes local news 24 hours a day, and its editorial team updates the website throughout the day and night, seven days a week. In August 2021, News24 launched a digital subscription service that offers premium investigative journalism, opinion, analysis to paying subscribers at R75 per month. It currently has more than 40 000 subscribers. Thus, the website has consistently broke news and reported on COVID-19 in the three years from 2019 to early part of 2023. The news stories about COVID-19 are readily available on the website, and have been selected for analysis for their semiotic and narrative undertones in promoting vaccination amongst the world states.

### **Theoretical framework of the study**

This paper is situated within the theoretical underpinnings of semiotics and narrative theories.

**Narrative theory:** Narrative means somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purpose that something happened to someone or something. Narrative operates on two levels of communication, that is, purposive and multilevel communication: the focus on narrative as purposive means that we are interested in the ways in which elements of any narrative (e.g. characters, setting, plot structure) are shaped in the service of the larger ends; the focus on narrative on multilevel communication means that we are interested not simply in the meaning of narrative, but experiencing of it. Thus, we are concerned with narrative's affective, ethical and aesthetic effects, and with their interactions as we are with its thematic meaning. Audiences are interested in the principles of construction and develop interests and responses of three broad kinds each related to a particular component of the narrative. For example, mimetic involves reader's interest in characters as

possible people and in the narrative world. These responses to mimetic component include our evolving judgements and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments. Therefore, by analysing the narratives used around the selected leaders of some countries from the global north is to understand how the authors deploy emotive language to build hype, desires and hopes around vaccines for COVID-19.

Similarly, the thematic component of the narrative involves readers' interests in the ideational function of the characters and in the cultural, ideological, philosophical or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative. Neoliberalism is shrouded in myths, conspiracies that gained much traction during the COVID-19 novel pandemic. As Richard [10] observes the white nationalist media content contributed to the neoliberal ideological environments in the context of COVID-19 propagandising based on widespread distrust of international political, financial and media elites, while leveraging popularised nationalistic conceptions of individual citizenry rights through libertarian and neoliberal ideological frame of reference. Neoliberalism's fundamental motto asserts that there is no such a thing as society, only individuals and the government is the problem, not the solution [2]. Cartello further cautions that when such matters are translated into policy maxims governing the relations between state and individual subjects, they trigger a fundamental remodulation of the relationship between government and civil society. In this context, the key aspect of such remodulation concerns neoliberalism's historical promotion of a view of health and well-being as individual responsibilities and private commodities rather than rights and public goods.

Phiri argues that SA's policy decision to borrow from the IMF to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 was purely an ignorance of the political economy of the empire and global power asymmetries. This could be attributed to the fact SA's public provisioning of the COVID-19 doses was largely located in the pharmaceutical chain, which thus opted for the primacy of markets to provide public goods especially healthcare. Therefore, it can be argued that SA's COVID-19 responses were enveloped in a global capitalist financial architecture that is unequal, undemocratic and unstable. To this end, it is the argument of this paper that the dominant media outlets such as News24 hammered the idea of a strictly biomedical approach to tackling COVID-19 pandemic instead of a syndemic approach, which recognises how the co-occurrence of the epidemics and various social factors routinely interact to produce complicated public health outcomes to which state must actively respond. In other words, SA had to prepare for how biological factors such as competing epidemics and comorbidities would interact synergistically with socioecological factors such as poverty, food insecurity, gender based violence, and widespread housing insecurity, and make the disease and negative impacts thereof more likely to cluster among socially disadvantaged groups [7].

### **Semiotic theory**

The basic tenet of semiotics is that it is a theory of sign and sign-use, and is antirealist. Semiotics is credited to one Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure and the American philosopher, Charles

Sanders Pierce respectively. Semiotics is generally defined as the study of signs. Thus, signs make human cultures and always stand for something that people occupying the culture continue to make sense of the world. Curtin posits that semiotics is concerned with meaning, that is, how representation in the broader sense (languages, images, objects) generates meanings or the process of which we comprehend or attribute meaning. In this context, semiotics helps us understand how imagery and inherent signs were deployed in the media texts and headlines on COVID-19 vaccines to enhance power asymmetries associated with leaders from the global north, as well as mystic immunity assigned to vaccination. It is contended that such media narratives are at best manipulative because they venerate the market and strips away the things that make us human.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Research methodology**

This paper uses qualitative research approach to analyse the content/text to understand headlines (News24) and reports affiliated to selected western leaders during COVID-19 between 2019 to 2023.

### **Research method**

The paper adopts content analysis, which is a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. In this context, analysis of myriad social artefacts is significant to provide in-depth understanding of media texts and their specific contexts. Similarly, subjective themes and patterns that emerge from the narratives, visual artefacts, stories, spoken words are identified, interpreted to provide thick descriptions of the social, political and economic realities mirrored in the selected reports around vaccination campaigns as reported in News24 online. Hence, du-Plooy Cilliers opines that content analysis is used to investigate symbolic content such as words that appear in, for example, newspaper articles, comments on a blog, political speeches and so on.

### **Target population**

This paper explores expressive phrases, words, visual signs and codes, social artefacts, clothing, and other semiotics features embedded in selected headlines and the accompanying reports that have been deployed by the authors to reinforce vaccination and purchase of doses for the COVID-19 novel virus in SA context.

### **Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to select headlines and reports that captured and flighted some selected leaders (prime ministers, kings and queens, presidents) around whom stories, narratives, voices were wrapped to publicise vaccines and vaccination of COVID-19 between 2019 to 2023, in SA context.

## **DISCUSSION**

Vaccines and their ineffectiveness in preventing re-infection/re-

contraction of COVID-19.

In the news edition of 10/07/2022, the report entitled “Canada Prime Minister Trudeau says he contracted COVID-19 second time” was flighted. The report goes on to suggest that his lack of severe symptoms was ‘because I got my shots. If you haven’t, get vaccinated or get boosted’, he urged. Let’s protect our health care system, each other, and ourselves” [11].

The above report and quotes underlie Phelan and Rabinowitz’s assertion that narrative as a multilevel communication is not only concerned with meaning, but experience of it, through the integration of narrative with affective, ethical and aesthetic effects. In this context, the report does not seek to explain why the prime minister could still contract the COVID-19 despite that he has taken the vaccine shot before. Instead, the narrative seeks to disguise the fault lines of the vaccination, thus positioning the Prime Minister as the legitimate advocate of the vaccination campaign, and thus smacks of a marketing campaign.

Furthermore, by quoting the prime minister, “let’s protect our health care system, each other and ourselves”, suggests that vaccination is the only way that people can protect themselves against COVID-19. Such a suggestion, I argue, goes against other preventive protocols, such as social distancing, wearing of face masks, washing hands regularly, sanitising-all of which have proven to be effective in some parts of the world, including SA. To this end, it can be argued that the narrative borders on marketisation, profit maximisation rather than providing service to society and thus true to neoliberal orthodox. As Ives argues neoliberalism plays the role of legitimation and justification behind what remains the primary objective, namely ‘the restoration of class power’.

### **Reports are episodic and sensationalist**

Another headline edition of 14 March 2022 goes “Obama tests positive for COVID, encourages vaccines”. The news headline flows from former US president twitter account in which he tweeted “I have a scratchy throat for a couple days, but am feeling fine, otherwise Michelle and I are grateful to be vaccinated and boosted. The vaccination means hope, it will protect you and those you love from this dangerous and deadly disease” [12].

Accompanying the above report, is the ‘drophead’ beneath Obama’s main headline, which reads “Pfizer CEO says fourth booster is necessary to protect against COVID-19”.

The above news reporting is somewhat episodic because it is based on some event rather than thematic and in-depth. In contrast, thematic news coverage typically gives events contexts and analyses trends, while episodic news events tend to be event oriented and are often based on sensational appeals. Wasserman et al., observed that the reporting of the pandemic in SA newspapers front pages was predominantly alarmist, negative and episodic. A large percentage of this reporting also used sensationalist language, which is defined as the specific use of words that play into emotional appeals. For example, the use of

the word ‘hope’, in this context, is transcendent of textual limits but invokes the theological and religious mythologies attributed to vaccines. In this context, ‘hope’, which in theological terms, lies in the assurance that out of a situation of crisis, there is hope for a new life and a new beginning, is a powerful allegory to mystify Obama’s hierarchical power in global affairs [13]. Thus, his stature is deployed subliminally to enact acceptance to vaccination drive as life-saving amidst despair.

### **COVID-19 reports are alarmist characterised by negative tones**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> January, News24 ran a report entitled “Pope, Queen Elisabeth join vaccine drive as UK tops 3 million cases” [14].

Again, the headline typifies what neoliberal framework represents in that the reporting is acutely framed within the numerical orientation. This is the kind of reporting that Wasserman et al refer to as alarmist narrative because numbers are used to instigate fear and anxieties among the populace. Venulelo, Gelo and Salvatore [15] posit that a reaction of fear and more in general an affective activation of anxiety, is the common response to conditions and events that are a major violation of the expected state. As Mair [16] explains neoliberal capitalism tends toward market as a method of provision because its central motivating force is the generation of monetary or exchange value: Exchange value is what monetary value expresses; how many goods and services can be exchanged for another on the market. The premise of the exchange value is that two goods have a common value from which is necessary for market to operate.

Further, the alarmist narrative is more evident in the subsequent text of the reporting, “more than 1.9 million people worldwide have now died from the virus, with new variants adding to soaring cases and prompting the re-introduction of restrictions on movement across the globe, even as some countries begin mass inoculation campaigns”. The preceding text is equally skewed towards numbers and treat other preventive protocols as secondary. By quoting Pope Francis, who referred to vaccination opposition as ‘suicidal denial’ seeks to leverage on the mystic power inherent to the pontif, at least in theological terms. The phrase ‘suicidal denial’ seeks to approximate culpability or responsibility to an individual, an injunction that fits neoliberal framework. Hence, Cartello postulates that COVID-19 is the mirror of a global crisis that reflects the civilisation of neoliberal globalisation that for sometimes has been aiming to paralyse social solidarity and cause distrust in the state on a worldwide scale to restructure the fate of the globe in accordance with the logics of atomisation, individualism, private property and limited government.

Thus, a myth that accentuates intersecting nexus to the neoliberal logic that markets are best ways to provide almost all goods and services, reducing the value of life to single monetary metric. The above news report was preceded by similar headline on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020, announcing the 94 years old and her husband, Prince Phillip would get the job within weeks due to their ages. In the same report the ‘drophead’ reads that “Britain

has pre-ordered 40 million doses of the vaccine in total and set to receive an initial batch of 800000 to begin next week's rollout, smacks of sensationalism. To this end, it is argued that media headlines like these exemplifies neoliberal sideshows, capitalising on the mythology of power inherent to Kings and Queens, to trumpet massive purchases of doses of COVID-19 vaccines by other global nations, including SA. Mair confirms that capitalism's drive to produce exchange value made many governments hesitate to impose lockdowns because of their effect on the ability to produce exchange value. By borrowing from IMF Rapid Financing Instrument to purchase vaccines, SA policy choices in this instance, can be located as an interlocutor within a hierarchical, racialised financial architecture that privileges Western nations thereby maintaining their genetic survival and dominance. The argument is COVID-19 reified the financial bankruptcy of the current phase of capitalist development which is built and sustained by debt, thus colonial modernity.

### **News narratives are engrossed in opulence and spectacle**

The headline "Biden gets COVID-19 booster shot as additional doses rollout" is another case in point to demonstrate media's elevation of US' dominance of the COVID-19 vaccine narratives.

In an unorthodox fashion, the president of the US, Joe Biden was flighted across media platforms, including news24 online, wearing black pants and 'Polo' golfer shirt taking a booster shot of Pfizer vaccine. The semiotic impact of relaxed, calm and content figure taking a shot on the right arm was nothing more than a spectacle of opulence emanating from a branded golfer shirt, contrary to the conventional formal and conservative dress code associated with US presidency. As if that was not enough, the report further states "US president, Joe Biden rolled up his shirt sleeves for a COVID-19 vaccine booster inoculation on Monday, hoping to provide a powerful example for Americans in the need to get the extra shot even as millions go without their first" [17]. The phrase 'rolled up sleeves' is used metonymically to attribute preparation for hardwork, an acclaimed normative ensconced in neoliberalism's obsession of wealth-creation.

### **SA and COVID-19 vaccine surplus**

Not only did the pharmaceutical conglomerates like Johnson & Johnson had monopoly over vaccine production, but they also had the tenacity to force SA government to continue paying for expired doses. Vaccines could not arrive in time on SA shores due to contamination issue at a US manufacturing plant, albeit that had nothing to do with the government of SA [18]. Gonzalez further indicates that SA could only receive 19.6 million of the 31 million doses it originally ordered. As Neilson [19] observed, neoliberal model of development comprises a global market regulatory form of capitalism that defines the terrain of capital accumulation, which centrally comprises global production and distribution circuit [20]. This mode of globalisation that spreads things and people backwards and forwards, between and within nation states initially carried the virus to the countries of the world. In turn, nation states that have become increasingly integrated into this global market economy and thus less and less self-sufficient, cannot quickly

decouple and switch to localised regimes of accumulation [21]. Phiri argues that SA's policymaking prowess is compromised through political elite bargaining that fail to challenge the pernicious effects of commodified public policy since the demise of colonial apartheid in 1994 and, more specifically, amidst the pandemic [22].

## **CONCLUSION**

The pandemic has raised many questions regarding conventional development discourse, practices, and principles, thus requiring us to reframe our comprehension and approach to development. Similarly, the media has only framed the COVID-19 pandemic through Eurocentric lens, with Europe and the United States used as blueprints for global response to COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, news24 headlines elevated the voices of the Western leaders including the US as authentic to speak about vaccination, while discrediting any contrary voice from some African leaders who called for alternative methods of prevention of COVID-19. The COVID-19 news headlines and affiliated reports in the period 2019 to 2022, were engrossed in narratives that were primarily alarmist, sensationalist and negative in tone. The reports did not particularly provide health information that would ideally assist readers as they grappled with the novel virus itself but also the deluge of misinformation and fake news. It can also be argued that most of the COVID-19 news headlines and reports were episodic, rather than thematic. Thus, episodic reporting negates more critical and contextual reporting that empowers readers, while thematic reporting helps audiences see more clearly the relationship between the issues and societal or structural factors. Therefore, it can be concluded that COVID-19 news headlines and accompanying reports in News24 sought to create myths of power inherent to the leaders of the Global North, in particular the United States of America (USA). Thus, positioning vaccine doses as the only life-saving option that the Global South countries, including South Africa, had to use to protect themselves from COVID-19 pandemic.

## **DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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