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Commentary

Pending crises: Crisis journalism and SARS in Australia

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This commentary examines the broad discourse of crises and crisis reporting/journalism in Australia (and parts of Southeast Asia) during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome health crisis of 2003. It looks at how definitions of crisis/es and crisis journalism were invoked in media reports and broader discourse around the mysterious illness, which was eventually termed 'SARS'. It then considers how Australia and the Australian media, although not a country closely affected as far as victims or casualties were concerned, dealt with SARS. This, we suggest, holds insights for journalism practitioners and researchers in the wayhow we approach and think about crises, especially health crises.

Introduction: SARS in Australia?

In March 2003, a mysterious respiratory illness surfaced in Hong Kong and China, and quickly spread to Singapore and Canada, causing confusion and fear to its people. Part of the confusion was attributed to the fact that there were no medical experts who could identify or adequately explain what was this disease. The World Health Organisation got into the act quickly and named it 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome'. As SARS (the disease) spread to several parts of the world, mostly concentrated in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Hong Kong, China and Canada, SARS (the crisis discourse) also spread via the media. This commentary focuses on the way the SARS discourse was presented in the Australian media, which had expected the disease to arrive on its shores via air links with nearby Asian countries, especially the aviation hubs of Singapore and Hong Kong. With only six supposed confirmed incidences, Australia largely escaped SARS (the disease). As a result, Australia's key encounter with SARS was largely discursive via the mainstream media.

In a documentary on SARS (screened on Australia's SBS TV on May 25, 2003), it was suggested that SARS began in the Guangdong Province of Southern China in November 2002. The disease was reported in the national daily, *The Australian* (March 17, 2003) on the front page. The article was headlined 'Aussie alert as disease sweeps globe' with the victims reported as being in China, Vietnam, Canada, and other cases treated in Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Germany.

The day after, in the 'Nation' section of the same newspaper, another article appeared headlined 'Three feared infected with killer flu bug' (*The Australian,* 18 March 2003). The article implied that there were Australians close to being infected with the disease, buying quite neatly into the fear factor. Another article on the same page by the newspaper's health editor was headlined rather sensationally as 'Medical detectives fight clock'. The three articles, all less than 500 words, reported with minimal medical details, yet they sparked a degree of concern and fear amongst its readers. In the three days that followed, more news items were published. In *The Weekend Australian* (March 22-23, 2003) a more detailed article by science writer Leigh Dayton examined where the disease was first discovered, and explained the brief history of the SARS virus and what the WHO was doing on a global scale to contain the disease (Dayton, 2003).

By April, the Business Section of *The Australian* appeared to have taken over the reporting of SARS, especially SARS's effects on the stock markets. The US-led war on Iraq had started at around the same time. Indeed, there were fears that a global recession was at hand. By April 8, 2003, SARS spread throughout the key sections of *The Australian*, with the general 'Nation' news section, the Business section, The World section, *IT Today* and *IT Business* section all containing news about 'fears of 3000 new killer bug cases'. The headlines/by-lines read: 'Profit in a panic' (Nation); 'Hong Kong panic' *(IT Business)*; 'Asia alert as bug spreads' (Business Extra); and, 'SARS threatens electronics trade' *(IT Today).*

As far as the SARS outbreak in Australia was concerned, the country only reported a total of six cases of the disease. There were no deaths. It was suggested from many comments about the disease since 2003 that the 'defeat' of SARS in Singapore, widely heralded by the WHO as exemplary in the way it managed an impending global crisis, directly protected Australia (Latif 2005).[1] The Australian media reported on the disease

and much coverage was given to the way different countries had tackled the crisis and what the results of the transparency, and risk communications and the Singapore experience. Bearing all that in mind, the main fear in Australia was that the disease would spread to the continent. Expecting the disease to hit Australia in a widespread manner meant that journalists in Australia – certainly those reporting for *The Australian* national daily – reported not with 'truth value' in mind, but with a certain degree of 'fear factor'. Once it was clear that SARS did not impact Australia in the way it was predicted, *The Australian* gave reasonable coverage to what was happening to other countries in the Southeast Asian region and what effect the spread of SARS was having on business affairs in Australia as well as in Southeast Asia. This carries an important lesson for journalists and media educators to avoid the traps (and trappings) of pre-emptive reporting and to report news and events accurately as they happen. This is admittedly difficult in a media culture where scoops, exclusive reports and breaking stories are held in high esteem.

As suggested earlier, had there been no Iraq war, SARS would have received more media attention. However, there are differences between the way war and SARS have been reported in the main because of the differences in the historical and global discourse surrounding the two events. The Iraq war received more media coverage; the stories are told across more 'borders' than the SARS stories. In the Iraq case, the media had deemed that more people would have been affected by the circumstances of the war, especially the approach taken by the United States to strike somewhat unilaterally. As a result, the media had (in)tended to concentrate on the war in Iraq and on global terror. Yet, with the unexpected SARS occurrence, it had to also start talking about a potential global health crisis. Thus, in the early years of the 21st century, the world was exposed via the media to what appeared to be pending crises in the management of global terrorism (or extremism) and of a global health scare.

Any approach to the study of modern media and journalism should emphasise that mediated communication is an integral part of, and cannot be understood separately from, the broader contexts of culture and social life. As Thompson puts it, "mediated communication is always a contextualized social phenomenon: it is always embedded in social contexts which are structured in various ways and which, in turn, have a structuring impact on the communication that occurs" (Thompson 1995: 11).

We will now look briefly at how SARS affected Australia's Asian northern neighbours particularly Hong Kong/China and Singapore both economically and socially. In addition, we explore the reporting of a pending crisis in Australia and its relevance to the broader theory of living in a 'risk society'. We also consider to some extent how crisis reporting appears to have taken centre-stage in Australia – and indeed, globally – since just a decade ago. How the media (re)present a crisis (or crises) has become a recurring theme. Ultimately, we hope to spark further thoughts and scholarship about how media and journalism are critical to the communication of health matters.

Crisis journalism and impending crises

The reporting of a crisis anywhere in the world has certain elements in common with the reporting of other events. The word 'crisis' has been used to define and identify many serious situations including wars, riots, terrorism, illnesses, diseases, to name a few. In this commentary, it is used as a definer for SARS as well as a qualifying

adjective for 'journalism' where 'crisis journalism' is used to define a particular aspect of the way different situations are written about and reported. In fact, it is very difficult to find a complete definition of 'crisis journalism'. The words appear in several places, but not really as an academic sub-section of either 'crisis' or of 'journalism'. For example, the American Press Institute (founded by newspaper publishers in 1946 and the oldest centre devoted to the training and professional development of news industry and of journalism educators) produced a handbook entitled *Crisis Journalism: A Handbook for Media Response* in October 2001. Its purpose, according to the author(s)/publisher, is to help journalists deal with the horrific attacks of 9/11, shortly after its occurrence. The Introduction noted their hope that the material would help journalists deal with handling major stories in crisis situations (Watson 2001:.iii). Since then, we have seen an increase in the number of websites devoted to crisis and trauma reporting. A notable website is the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (www.dartcenter.org/index.html), which provides free advisory articles and resources, including 'tips for covering the most difficult stories'. [2] However, the usefulness of these resources for journalism practitioners as well as their veracity remains unclear.

When crises occur, they are usually defined in terms of events that affect the running of an organization or a country. This was evident in the 2003 SARS epidemic in Southeast Asia. Much of the reporting was concerned with how governments went about tackling the public relations problems the disease caused. Roper (2002) presents crisis management as part of public relations with one of its functions being the management of problems and issues. He noted that crises are situations where we run the risk of events escalating in intensity, falling under close media scrutiny or government scrutiny and perhaps reaching the point where events interfere with normal operations, jeopardize a country's image and affect the country's bottom line (Roper 2002: 15-16). Crisis situations are also characterized by surprise, high threat to important values, and a short decision time (Roper 2002: 10). As reported in *The West Australian* newspaper, albeit in a slightly different context, "crisis preparation is now an essential part of company management" (Batt 2007: 66). What needs to be accentuated though, especially for and by journalists and media educators, is that objectivity coupled with an ability to reject pre-emptive reporting (which often includes a varying amount of guesswork) is paramount during a crisis.

SARS is a respiratory illness that was first reported in Asia in February 2003. It was not until early March 2003, when WHO issued a global alert about SARS that the world knew about the mysterious illness for the very first time. Over the following few months, the illness spread to more than two dozen countries in North America, South America, Europe and Asia. By late July, however, no new cases were being reported and the illness was considered contained. According to WHO, the global data set was closed on 31 December 2003, with the total number of affected victims at 8,096 cases (21% among health care workers) and a tally of 774 deaths from 29 countries and areas. Over 95% (or 7,768) of the cases were reported by 12 countries and areas of the Western Pacific Region (WHO 2006: 185). These are frightening statistics by any measure and arguably of somewhat crisis proportions. What was particularly odd and interesting was that throughout the SARS episode in 2003, the infection remained largely mysterious, with scientists unable to identify the root cause of the virus/bacteria. As such, apart from general directives on health and hygiene, travel advisories and legal instructions with regard to penalties for breaching quarantine orders, governments and health officials were unable to communicate effectively to the

public on how to curb the disease. This suggests that the public and readers/listeners of news reports are better able to gauge the level of objectivity during a crisis situation than they are typically given credit for. This is a vital point that media educators and practitioners would do well to heed.

Since the SARS outbreak of 2003 (as well as other animal-related pandemics such as the Avian Flu, Mad Cow Disease, etc.), there have been many warnings of new outbreaks of such diseases as avian/bird flu and in 2009, the swine flu. The ways in which these outbreaks were reported are somewhat different. What has become common, however, is that a much closer watch is being kept on these incidences and the spread of such diseases because of the risk not merely to the health of the populace, but to the state of national and global economies. Some newspaper reports have noted that some governments are either readily utilising or looking for extra powers to act quickly against the spread of infectious diseases to safeguard their economies (Chieh 2007). Chieh (2007) also reported that the SARS outbreak in Singapore caused a rapid amendment to its rarely-invoked Infectious Diseases Act.

The state-managed media in Singapore, especially the flagship *Straits Times* daily, became party to governmental actions, with articles that defended firm official handling of the crisis. Indeed, a strategically-placed article in the paper on October 2, 2007 suggested that the outbreak was the result of modern transportation and insisted that investigations into this modern happening "stick to science and nothing but science" (Reiter 2007). This effectively ruled out any public debate on whether the Singapore government's handling of the crisis was truly exemplary or otherwise. All other (seemingly) unrelated issues, including the granting of increased powers to law enforcement agencies and/or health officials to detain, issue quarantine orders or implement surveillance measures on suspected SARS victims, were almost completely sidelined. The justifications were almost always steered towards the national or public interests.

The situation was vastly different in Australia. As well as regional trade and business concerns (as reported in *The Australian*, 28 April 2003), the emergence of SARS caused a severe downturn for the Australian international airline, Qantas. By the end of April, the airline had carried 68,000 fewer passengers on overseas routes than a year prior (Creedy 2003: 23). Qantas management and staff were fearing the worst, since its counterpart, Singapore Airlines, has had to ground nine planes and was looking to defer the delivery of aircraft until the crisis eased. The management of Singapore Airlines also asked cabin crew to take seven days unpaid leave every two months. Senior management took a pay cut of up to 27.5 % and the airline looked to cut pilots' wages as well (Creedy 2003: 23). In short, although SARS was clearly a health or health-related crisis, the Australian media appeared to be treating it not as a crisis *per se,* but as a 'pending crisis' that struck fear on the economic front.

On a human level, the treatment of SARS in the Australian media as an economic problem appears rather perverse. But on another level, the repercussions and potential impacts on a range of businesses not just in Australia, but the Asian region, were understandable. Indeed, some of the fears were founded when Qantas was forced to lay off 1,400 jobs as a result of grounded planes (*The Australian*, 8 May 2003: 20). The impact flowed on to hotel occupancies, with the shutting down of whole floors of international hotels in many cities throughout Asia commonplace. Emily Pettafor wrote in *The Australian* (5 June 2003) that hoteliers faced a long road to recovery.

Many senior executives in the hotel industry were commenting that they had never seen anything as debilitating for hotels as the SARS crisis, with staff forced to take unpaid leave just to keep their jobs (Pettafor 2003: 10). The flow-on effect was, for want of a better word, economic, certainly in the case of Australia.

There were certain items of interest that occurred during and after the disease had reached its zenith and then began to wind-down. The Western Pacific Region of the WHO set up a website that gave advice to countries' national health services about how to cope with the problems affecting the public health systems caused by SARS. Although intended for the public, the website became a referent point for the media. Indeed, WHO remarked thereafter that never before had the media been so involved with a public health emergency (WHO 2006: 246). One could surmise that the WHO was the prime beneficiary of the media campaign as it came to be seen as a credible global organization necessary in a time of risk and crises-conscious societies. By the same token, however, more needs to be done to improve tripartite arrangements among the WHO, the media and national governments (WHO 2006: 247). Therefore, within the mediated interactions that occurred before and after the SARS epidemic, some acknowledgement may be necessary that a different discourse or episteme will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new discursive formation, and producing in its turn a new approach towards dealing with health communication specifically, and crisis journalism more generally (Hall 1997: 46).

Conclusion: Australia's pending crisis

It is possible that *The Australian* played its part as the nation's newspaper during the SARS crisis of 2003 by protecting the bulk of Australians from encountering the health – or the real – effects of the crisis. Instead, what occurred in Australia was a flow-on economic effect that was by no means crippling to its broader domestic economy. While SARS hit Singapore, Hong Kong and several other Asian countries with some ferocity, Australia was left virtually untouched. However, the fact that countries in Southeast Asia had more cases of SARS, causing human fatalities through March to July 2003, Australian dailies and media outlets had to include stories of SARS. The effect was almost as though a crisis was pending.

But just as quickly as SARS appeared on Australia's horizon, it ended. By the end of May 2003, Singapore, with the endorsement of the WHO, declared itself SARS-free (*The Australian*, 6 June 2003: 5). Over the months of June and July, the remaining countries also eradicated the mysterious disease. Just like any other news story, when the events being reported cease to have meaning, the story ends. It then becomes history or a historical fact that happened and has now been superseded by other stories that have more 'news value'. By mid-2003, SARS lost its meaning for the editors, the journalists, the advertisers and the readers, as they turn their thoughts and attentions to the next crisis, whatever that turned out to be. But whether or not journalists, media educators and practitioners have taken heed of the importance of objectivity and 'truth-telling' in crisis reporting is another story. We suggest here that journalism and media students be given room early in their university-based training to undertake extensive case studies of various crises so that they may learn not only from excellent reporting practices, but also from errors, oversights and over-enthusiasms.

Notes

[1] In early-June 2003, the Singapore Government took out a full page advertisement in all the global major newspapers to announce: "It's official, Singapore is off WHO's SARS list". The advertisement heralded the WHO's declaration that "Singapore's handling of its SARS outbreak has been exemplary" and was "an inspiring victory that should make all of us optimistic that SARS can be contained everywhere". The advertisement held the signatories of 17 global business leaders or chief executives of major corporations based in Singapore. The advertisement for Australia appeared in the June 6, 2003 edition of *The Australian* (p. 5).

[2] At the time of revising this paper (in May 2009), the authors noted that a 'Tip Sheet' on 'Reporting Swine-Flu Outbreak' was readily available for download and public readership (http://dartcenter.org/content/covering-swine-flu-outbreak).

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