

Representation in the time of COVID-19

Metaphor, simulacra and framing on the Right and Left

Matteo Di Maio

March 11, 2022

Contents

1 Abstract	1
2 Metaphor and intertextuality on the Right	1
2.1 Brietbart	2
2.2 The Telegraph	5
3 "A nation of science"; binaries on the Left	8
3.1 1pm Daily Conference	8
3.2 IMDb	11
References	13

1 Abstract

This study analyses the nature and implications of mainstream, government and interactive media representations of New Zealand's COVID-19 response over the last two years. A variety of theoretical lenses—Cognitive Sociolinguistics, Simulacra theory, Binary Opposition theory etc—are used to dissect aspects of these representations and their impact in shaping NZ identity/political discourse. This study is divided into two sections, focusing first on Right-wing, then Left-wing presentations of COVID-19 and adjacent issues.

2 Metaphor and intertextuality on the Right

My first angle of analysis looks at the construction, propagation and impact of right-wing representations of New Zealand and our COVID-19 response. I identify key points of analytical significance, notably; commercial pressures, historical intertextuality, thematic memes, and simulacra creation theory.

2.1 Brietbart

Brietbart, an American, far-right news syndication site, has recently taken an interest in New Zealand's COVID-19 situation. As it has evolved, the viral crisis has taken on undeniable political and cultural dynamics (Kerr et al., 2021). It is well known that audiences—and their beliefs—create selection pressures, pressures that drive ideologically-motivated outlets like Brietbart to cater for their audience's particular wider narratives of a given event (Patterson, 2003). As such the recent protests in Wellington—ostensibly over vaccine mandates, but incorporating a melting-pot of cultural/political concerns—are a key contender for inclusion in a certain narrative; namely one of COVID measures as a pretense for state authoritarianism (Sun, 2021). The Brietbart article "New Zealand threatens to use military against civilian anti-mandate protesters" is a good example of some of these narrative creation processes at work (Reyes, 2022). Such a piece is a repackaging of original reporting from Reuters and Stuff; its inclusion in the new site's coverage is due to its narrative relevance.

Figure 1: Toned down representation in the body

The New Zealand Defense Force (NZDF) warned Wednesday it was poised to deploy “Defence Force assets” to Wellington to disband an anti-coronavirus vaccine mandate protest near New Zealand’s parliament building after the rally pushed into its ninth consecutive day.

Figure 2: Toned up representation in the headline

NEW ZEALAND THREATENS TO USE MILITARY AGAINST CIVILIAN ANTI-MANDATE PROTESTERS



We note initially the emotive status of the language employed by the article. An interesting contrast can be made between the linguistic tone of the headline and of the article body. For instance, compare the emotionally-laden verb "threatens" with the more tame "warned" from the intro paragraph. Likewise, contrast the words "military" and "civilian" with their de facto substitutes "defense force assets" and "anti-coronavirus vaccine mandate protest" seen in that same paragraph. This contrast is an excellent illustration of how the conventions of media representation are all shaped not only by the reality they are supposed to correspond to but by the market dynamics of the audience, the outlet, and the medium itself. Between the headline and the article body, we already get different tones of representation. Why? One answer may be the particular demands of online news. Headlines are the disembodied chunks of the representation that make it into the most common modern form of news consumption—the scrolling social media feed. Unlike traditional newspapers, feeds are heterogeneous, which forces outlets to compete for the attention of their (unloyal) readers. As per Lischka and Garz (2021), news outlets are increasingly pressured to design "addictive distractions" in their news presentation, successfully maximizing their capture of user attention (Sismeiro and Mahmood, 2018). It is these economic dynamics that heavily select, in digital outlets like Breitbart, for amplified tones of depiction.

No discussion of online media representation is complete without an awareness of its interactivity. Consider, for example, a quote from the article's comment section:

"Media_Bladders": Oh yeah, excellent plan – make like China and go full Tiananmen Square on them!

A key lens on understanding representation synthesis is that depictions do not exist atemporally; i.e, they are not unaffected by previous, similar historical events. As we can see in this comment (and others, below), historical events and the ideologies associated with them are intertextually referenced to code a current event in a particular light. For example, the representation hinted at in the article (with keywords like "civilian" and "military") is mimicked and added to through interactive synthesis of the representation, drawing on references to the Tiananmen square massacre. Following comments are of the like:

"thefireman": Give up your guns. Give up your freedom.

"1jasonfarley": Canada, New Zealand, and Australia all former democracies devolved into Covidian Fascism.

To the audiences of Breitbart, the represented entity New Zealand becomes a talking point in a wider ideological universe, in which historical reality is abstracted into political construction.

The road to this simulacra is multi-layered.

Firstly, audiences/economics exert selection pressures on the outlets to frame events in a ideologically palatable/engaging way. As Peng (2022) has noted, political ideology is highly predictive, among American audiences, of support for generalised COVID-19 stances; regardless of geopolitical circumstance.

Secondly, audiences' own confirmation biases filter out unpalatable aspects of the representations they are presented with. (For example, another Breitbart article—New Zealand says it has solved Covid outbreak ‘puzzle’—has received not a single comment, in comparison to the hundreds under the other article.)(AFP)

And finally, intertextual cultural allusions aid audiences in synthesising representations in a particular way. For example, the terms “fascism” and “apartheid” carry developed meaning, and can be used to quickly develop understanding/narrative adherence.

We now turn to the impacts of overseas-born representations back home. It is undeniable that the concerns of the protesters are not imaginary; but a political comment is not in the scope of the paper. Instead, we can gain insight from analyzing the way cultural representations of New Zealand, adapted from narratives born overseas, filtered through digital interactive media, express themselves on the ground/shape the identity of the very people being represented. Note, for example, the use of these key thematic words in the signs and cries of the protesters:

Figure 3: Recent scenes from the protests; these themes and references to past, appalling events tint the protestors' perception of their own reality. Source: Reuters, NYTimes



2.2 The Telegraph

The use of the key codes of metaphorical reasoning and intertextuality characterize much of the more negatively-orientated media representation of New Zealand's COVID-19 response on the Right. Consider a recent Op-ed in the established, conservative British broad-sheet the Telegraph (Cohen, 2022). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit, Cognitive Linguistics conceptualizes metaphor as providing frames for "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." This may sound obvious; however, an understanding of frames is useful. For example, existing frames can provide structure to unfamiliar, novel events. The choice of metaphor—while culturally coded—has implications for, as Semino (2008) puts it: "which aspects [of an issue] are foregrounded and which are backgrounded, what inferences are facilitated, what evaluative

and emotional associations triggered, what courses of action appear to be possible and so on..."

Indeed, as Semino notes, the *war* metaphor is one humans return to often; in "any domain of experience that involves difficulties, danger, effort and uncertain outcomes." In the Telegraph article such allusions to military language include: "hermit kingdom" and "fortress New Zealand", or "marshalled by the army into a requisitioned hotel". Of course, the army do indeed administer MIQ; however the term "marshalled" is ideologically tinted. There are also references to the "siege of Ottawa", or Ardern's "gulag." If we borrow Semino's framework, we acknowledge the ways in which such a metaphorical reliance "frames" conceptions of New Zealand. For one, it implies an intertextual authoritarian reasoning to the COVID-19 restrictions; take the term "gulag" for example. Likewise, the mind decodes military associations with negative emotional connotations; at the word "marshals" we assume harsh treatment, at the word "requisitioned" we assume "taken by force without choice." Naturally, such a metaphor is intentional; the author wishes to protest what they see as the unethical treatment of NZ expats. To do so, they pull on the layered and webbed ontologies of human semantics. In turn, such languages provides justification for more drastic political action by both sides; as Fridolfsson 2008 has noted in studies of the "war frame" in protest media environments.

Figure 4: The "team of five million" catchphrase was ubiquitous in Government messaging



We note one more aspect of the Telegraph author's coding; that of memetic exchange. Memetics views culture through a lens of Universal Darwinism, under which ideas (memes)—as well as genes—can be seen as atomic units that replicate and are subject to selection pressures (Blackmore and Blackmore, 2000). Memes have origin roots, from which they mutate as they are replicated by humans. While genetic evolution is Darwinistic—mutations are random and selected by nature, memetic evolution is Lamarckian—humans apply intentional selection effects/change memes to suit their own ends. The key insight of memetics: that the most popular memes—like genes—are simply those that, rather tautologically, are best at replicating, is relevant here. While we do indeed apply directed mutagens to our memes, wider society is still at the whim of this natural selection process, in which the most reproducible memes build up predominance in the meme pool. Good memes are short, sharp, quippy, building on cultural associations; in this case, the "team of five million" meme, one built on the allusions to NZ's rugby culture, and also the virtue of "team work". From the Telegraph article:

But there has always been another team milling in the shadows, the team of one million, the expatriate Kiwis stranded abroad who have paid a heavy price for their home country's Covid elimination strategy.

To make her political point, Cohen is forced, almost, to adopt the five million meme due to its virulence, applying her modification—"team of one million". Here, again, our simulacra process is at work. We have the original reality—New Zealand and our material experience of the pandemic. Then, we have our abstract representation—"team of five million", designed to characterise NZ in a particular way, as a rugby team, as a collective, as united as opposed to divided. We have memetic spread of the five million meme. Now, we have the politically opposed responding not to the reality of New Zealanders, but to the representation of the reality of New Zealanders, building further layers of abstraction. We do this because it is effective; springboarding off the popularity of a given meme to amplify one's own—or as López Paredes and Carrillo Andrade (2022) puts it "re-appropriating" the meme. Again, such terminology has caught on in the local press (Alpe, 2021).

3 "A nation of science"; binaries on the Left

When understanding how media coverage has shaped positive-conceptions of NZ's COVID-19 response, and NZ identity at large, a structuralist approach is useful. To the structuralist, meaning is created through the interaction of binaries; light is defined by being NOT-dark, etc. The first two years of the COVID-19 crisis in New Zealand saw an noticeable bump in feelings of positive nationalism, as well as trust in science and trust in the government: From the New Zealand Attitudes and Values survey, 2020 (Sibley, 2020):

... our results suggest that people are banding together. Our research found that people in lockdown felt more patriotic and were more satisfied with the government's performance than people pre-lockdown. Trust in politicians, the police, and science were also higher during lockdown.

3.1 1pm Daily Conference

A reasonable part of this new self-conception of NZ—as being a country of unity, respect of science, etc, was synthesised in binary opposition to depictions of overseas COVID-19 responses (particularly America's) as being full of division, and rejection of science.

There is a precedent for identity construction through binary representations (Grimes et al., 2011), (Byessonova and Gordienko). As Triandafyllidou (1998) has written in her study of Macedonian national identity, it is a base assumption of political science that: "National identity becomes meaningful only through the contrast with others." In large part, this national identity of NZ

as compassionate and united in the face of international division was discursively co-constructed by through generalised representations of Kiwis produced in interactions between the Government (in its press conferences and public relations) the mainstream media, and online digital media.

As the socio-linguistics Hafner and Sun (2021) noted in their study of the crisis communication response:

...our findings also highlighted the co-constructed nature of the leadership discourse. As is often the case (Baxter, 2010), leadership was discursively constructed by the combined efforts of leader, leadership team, and media, rather than by the efforts of a single individual.

In particular illustration of this process of co-constructed representations, consider the April 27 2020 daily press briefing. In it, reporter Jason Walls asked the question:

Dr Bloomfield what do you make of suggestions by some leaders overseas that people should be injecting themselves with bleach to kill COVID-19?

After a few seconds of looking shocked, Bloomfield replied that he did not see it necessary to respond to the comment. On further prompting by Tova O'Brian regarding cases of Americans following the health advice, PM Ardern replied:

"I don't think we've had any suggestion of any reported cases in New Zealand... and that suggests to me that no New Zealander has ... given credence to that suggestion"

Follow the discursive process: Firstly, a reference is made to a wacky suggestion overseas, and the same theme is put to our local leaders. They appear scathing of the suggestion, considering it not worth their time. The media then reminds the audience that in America, people have followed the recommendation. This enables Ardern to represent her representation of Kiwi intelligence/responsibility, with the suggestion that "no New Zealander" would do this, placing our culture in opposition to the "stupidity" overseas.

In the online realm, layers of meaning were built upon the representation cultivated at the press conference. In a post on Reddit, in which the clip of the conference was linked, overseas accounts replicated the dichotomy, referencing both American and Kiwi leaders in longing contrast.

The screenshot shows a Reddit post with two visible comments. The first comment is from user 'EmpererPooh' posted 2 years ago. The text reads: 'The NZ PM is absolutely adorable and I wish we could have a leader like her instead of a fat old retarded Cheeto.' Below the text are standard Reddit interaction buttons: upvote (4), downvote, reply, give award, share, report, save, tip, and follow. The second comment is from user 'thcheat' posted 2 years ago. The text reads: 'I'd kill for US to have such a capable leader like Jacinda. I guess it'll be much easier just to move to New Zealand.' Below this comment are similar interaction buttons.

Figure 5: Reddit comments from a link to the given press conference

Likewise, members of the NZ media also further syndicated the contrast. On Twitter, after the conference, Walls tweeted:



Jason Walls
@Jasonwalls92

...

'What do you make of suggestions by some leaders overseas that people should be injecting themselves with bleach to kill Covid-19.'

Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield: *stunned silence*

Guess he's not a Trump fan!



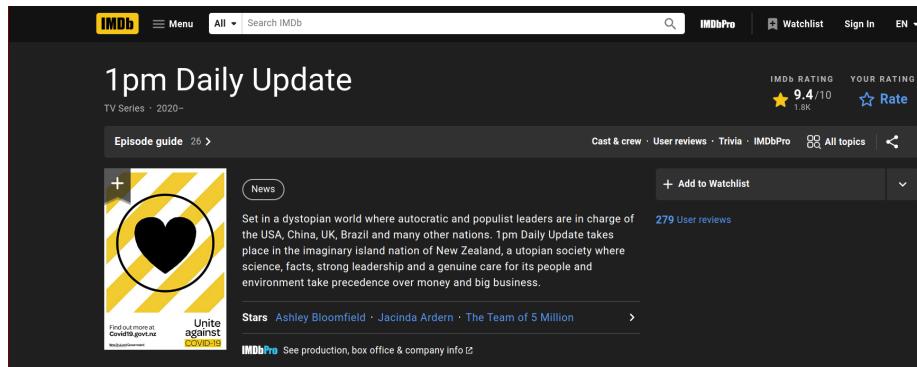
Jafarzadeh et al. (2021), in their quantitative study ($n = 405,427$ tweets) of Kiwi tweets during the crisis, using topic modelling as a de facto barometer of identity formation, surprisingly found a large proportion (25.8%) of the dialogue centering around Trump, and the United States. They write:

Of particular note, [the data] clearly advocate a backlash to President Trump's daily briefing, specifically on 23rd of April when many perceived that Donald Trump was suggesting the injection of disinfectants into people to fight the coronavirus.

3.2 IMDB

If such representations are initially founded in dialectical wordplay between officials and the media, they develop into a national self-identity through discussion and replication by Kiwis themselves. In the digital age, the impact of such representation construction is easier to gauge. A great example is the IMBD page that popped up for "The 1pm Daily Update" (1pm). It introduces itself as such:

Set in a dystopian world where autocratic and populist leaders are in charge of the USA, China, UK, Brazil and many other nations. 1pm Daily Update takes place in the imaginary island nation of New Zealand a utopian society where science, facts, strong leadership and a genuine care for its people and environment take precedence over money and big business.



The page is a collective exercise in metaphorical framing. Ideas hinted at or first synthesised in mainstream or government media are expanded upon in the commentary of the page's authors. While deeply self-ironic, the page develops models of the response through the "tv show" framing. For example, commentators write of the "surprise second season", meaning the second outbreak. Likewise, "Crusher Collins" and Simon Bridges show up as "series villains". Again, a common theme is the positioning of NZ's response in opposition to the American one. For example, one commentator writes:

"fionakiwi": It's obviously based on the American version which is intriguing but completely unbelievable and totally unwatchable because of the casting. I definitely like the characters more in the NZ version...

Another notes:

"mark-4037": Set in a dystopian world with fascism on the rise, the story follows the typical hero's journey style. A young girl (Ardern, played by Stardust McGee), is plucked from an obscure life...

For Baudrillard (1994), abstracted meaning gradually takes precedence over original reality. For example, here we have an intermingling of cultural threads.

We have the pandemic movie—take Contagion, for example—being applied as a lens to the real pandemic. For one, our characters—the PM, Dr Bloomfield—blend with their stand-ins in the typical narrative—the courageous crisis leader, the trustworthy doctor. In a world mediated by digital windows—and in NZ, where actual COVID exposure at the time was low—the line between fictional pandemic and real pandemic is blurred; in reality, pun not intended, for the comfortably middle class, both events are experienced primarily through screens, and understood through common narratives.

As to the theory, intentions and implications of this new national identity binary, there is reason to believe that constructing national "in-group" mentalities is an effective strategy in maximising public pandemic rule adherence (Templeton et al., 2020). As Neville et al. (2021) explain, *normative compliance*, where the public "is persuaded to that protective behaviours benefit their social group and are supported by fellow group members", was the pandemic control strategy favoured by the NZ government. They additionally note Government and media use of the "social identity approach" to disaster management—in which identities, with associated responsibilities, are activated during particular circumstances, also activating the associated responsibilities. They write:

For example, a Scottish man may be likely to wear a mask when his Scottish identity is salient and the category definition of being Scottish includes protecting community members during the crisis.

Thus, Ardern's government likely had a key incentive to present a given representation of Kiwis, in the hope that the representation would be accepted and built on by Kiwis themselves. As Haslam et al. (2012) has found, leaders gain and maintain influence by clarifying the particular nature of a social identity; i.e. what New Zealanders do and don't stand for, as in Kiwis being people who don't fall for farcical suggestions like Trump's.

In seeming affirmation of these narrative-construction processes, Bavel et al. (2020)'s 67-country survey found that national identification predicted public health engagement and government support very weakly in the United Kingdom—in which less collective-building language was used by leaders—but more strongly in NZ. Likewise, the socio-political impacts of Kiwis' newfound solidarity were felt at the polling booth. Labour—Ardern's party—won 65 seats, the single largest one-party majority since MMP was introduced in 1996.

In summary, if the COVID-19 crisis was a collective expression as Miller (2021) has suggested, in Billig (1995)'s "hot nationalism" (the formation of a national solidarity in a crisis period), then it was an exercise in identity building executed by government, mainstream and interactive media discourse, in which New Zealand was represented as standing apart, in its newfound values of science and responsibility, from the global Others. In turn, these new collective identities formed the basis for high pandemic restriction compliance and mushrooming Government support.



Sporran Peace

@CardsToast

...

today in New Zealand our kids can go back to school because we have a compassionate government and we listen to science.



Figure 6: A popular tweet that made the rounds in NZ social media after the first lockdown, a great demonstration of this identity expression

References

- 1pm Daily Update (TV Series 2020–) - IMDb.
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12511606/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt.
- AFP. New Zealand says it has solved Covid outbreak 'puzzle'.
<https://www.breitbart.com/news/new-zealand-says-it-has-solved-covid-outbreak-puzzle/>.
- N. Alpe. Opinion: The team of one million Kiwis overseas need to do more.
<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/nicola-alpe-dear-team-of-one-million-why-kiwis-living-overseas-need-to-do-more/HNB7P7BPRZHLN3DNRFKJGPJUOM/>, 2021.
- J. Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
ISBN 978-0-472-06521-9.

- J. J. V. Bavel, K. Baicker, P. S. Boggio, V. Capraro, A. Cichocka, M. Cikara, M. J. Crockett, A. J. Crum, K. M. Douglas, J. N. Druckman, J. Drury, O. Dube, N. Ellemers, E. J. Finkel, J. H. Fowler, M. Gelfand, S. Han, S. A. Haslam, J. Jetten, S. Kitayama, D. Mobbs, L. E. Napper, D. J. Packer, G. Pennycook, E. Peters, R. E. Petty, D. G. Rand, S. D. Reicher, S. Schnall, A. Shariff, L. J. Skitka, S. S. Smith, C. R. Sunstein, N. Tabri, J. A. Tucker, S. van der Linden, P. van Lange, K. A. Weeden, M. J. A. Wohl, J. Zaki, S. R. Zion, and R. Willer. Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(5):460–471, May 2020. ISSN 2397-3374. doi: 10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z.
- M. Billig. *Banal Nationalism*. SAGE, Aug. 1995. ISBN 978-1-4462-6457-7.
- S. Blackmore and S. J. Blackmore. *The Meme Machine*. OUP Oxford, Mar. 2000. ISBN 978-0-19-286212-9.
- O. Byessonova and E. Gordienko. Binary opposition ‘us/them’ in British and American media texts about conflicts. page 21.
- D. Cohen. How Jacinda Ardern turned New Zealand into a ‘hermit kingdom’. *The Telegraph*, Feb. 2022. ISSN 0307-1235.
- R. L. Grimes, U. Husken, U. Simon, and E. Venbrux. *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*. Oxford University Press, Mar. 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-983130-2.
- C. A. Hafner and T. Sun. The ‘team of 5 million’: The joint construction of leadership discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 43:100523, Oct. 2021. ISSN 2211-6958. doi: 10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100523.
- A. Haslam, S. Reicher, and M. Platow. The New Psychology of Leadership | Identity, Influence and Power | S. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781351108232/new-psychology-leadershipalexander-haslam-stephen-reicher-michael-platow>, 2012.
- H. Jafarzadeh, D. J. Pauleen, E. Abedin, K. Weerasinghe, N. Taskin, and M. Coskun. Making sense of COVID-19 over time in New Zealand: Assessing the public conversation using Twitter. *PLOS ONE*, 16(12):e0259882, Dec. 2021. ISSN 1932-6203. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0259882.
- J. Kerr, C. Panagopoulos, and S. van der Linden. Political polarization on COVID-19 pandemic response in the United States. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 179:110892, 2021. ISSN 0191-8869. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2021.110892.
- G. Lakoff and M. Johnson. The Metaphorical Structure of the Human Conceptual System. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2):195–208, 1980. ISSN 1551-6709. doi: 10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4.

- J. A. Lischka and M. Garz. Clickbait news and algorithmic curation: A game theory framework of the relation between journalism, users, and platforms. *New Media & Society*, page 14614448211027174, July 2021. ISSN 1461-4448. doi: 10.1177/14614448211027174.
- M. López Paredes and A. Carrillo Andrade. The Normative World of Memes: Political Communication Strategies in the United States and Ecuador. *Journalism and Media*, 3:40–51, Jan. 2022. doi: 10.3390/journalmedia3010004.
- G. Miller. “Team of Five Million”: The crucial role of the New Zealand national identity during the COVID-19 pandemic by Grace Miller – SAANZ, 2021.
- F. G. Neville, A. Templeton, J. R. Smith, and W. R. Louis. Social norms, social identities and the COVID-19 pandemic: Theory and recommendations. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 15(5):e12596, 2021. ISSN 1751-9004. doi: 10.1111/spc3.12596.
- T. E. Patterson. The Search for a Standard: Markets and Media. *Political Communication*, 20(2):139–143, Apr. 2003. ISSN 1058-4609. doi: 10.1080/10584600390211154.
- Y. Peng. Give Me Liberty or Give Me COVID-19: How Social Dominance Orientation, Right-wing Authoritarianism, and Libertarianism Explain Americans’ Reactions to COVID-19. SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 4004357, Social Science Research Network, Rochester, NY, Jan. 2022.
- G. Reyes. New Zealand Threatens to Use Military Against Civilian Anti-Mandate Protesters. <https://www.breitbart.com/asia/2022/02/17/new-zealand-threatens-to-use-military-against-civilian-anti-mandate-protesters/>, Feb. 2022.
- E. Semino. *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK ; New York, 2008. ISBN 978-0-521-86730-6 978-0-521-68696-9.
- C. Sibley. The New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study - The University of Auckland. <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/new-zealand-attitudes-and-values-study.html>, 2020.
- C. Sismeiro and A. Mahmood. Competitive vs. Complementary Effects in Online Social Networks and News Consumption: A Natural Experiment. *Management Science*, 64(11):5014–5037, Nov. 2018. ISSN 0025-1909. doi: 10.1287/mnsc.2017.2896.
- W. Sun. The virus of fear and anxiety: China, COVID-19, and the Australian media. *Global Media and China*, 6(1):24–39, Mar. 2021. ISSN 2059-4364. doi: 10.1177/2059436421988977.
- A. Templeton, S. T. Guven, C. Hoerst, S. Vestergren, L. Davidson, S. Ballentyne, H. Madsen, and S. Choudhury. Inequalities and identity processes in crises: Recommendations for facilitating safe response to the COVID-19

pandemic. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(3):674–685, 2020. ISSN 2044-8309. doi: 10.1111/bjso.12400.

A. Triandafyllidou. National identity and the 'other'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(4):593–612, July 1998. doi: 10.1080/014198798329784.