Researchers reveal the 'Viral Language' of the pandemic

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Viral Language

Analysing the Covid-19 Pandemic in Public Discourse

Luke C. Collins and Veronika Koller

Remember "COVIDiots" and the first protests by "anti-vaxxers"?

The early stages of the [pandemic](#) saw plenty of new words enter the public "voice," but many of these novel terms were actually fairly short-lived.

However, according to new research by Lancaster University linguists Dr. Luke Collins and Professor Veronika Koller, some will be here to stay, such as "zoom fatigue," an effect of the increase in video-conferencing, and "lockdown."

In their [new book](#) "Viral Language: Analysing the COVID-19 pandemic in [public discourse](#)," Dr. Collins and Professor Koller look at how [language](#) was used about and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across eight chapters, they demonstrate how experiences of health and illness can be shaped by political messaging, [scientific research](#), news articles and advertising.

Examples include:

- Stay home, save lives: Health ministers in various English-speaking countries used Twitter/X as a broadcast medium to give direct, bite-sized advice to citizens.
- Many [politicians](#) declared "war" on COVID, but another popular metaphor was that of journeys. For example: "we have come through the tunnel." Politicians of all stripes used it to ensure

- compliance with lockdown and other measures and to emphasise togetherness.
- Scientific writing on COVID-19 featured some hyperbolic language. For example: "This is one of the most extensive datasets on individual transmission events." This, say the researchers, suggests increasing competition among academics in the scientific effort to control the pandemic.
- Did politicians follow "the science" or the scientists? British news media participated in a critical discussion of what "the science" is and how it contributes to policymaking.
- And how do you advertise for beer when consumers cannot go out? Advertisers balanced the lockdown context with messages of empathy, community and responsibility. Rather than change course completely though, they adapted their brand values to the new context: Budweiser was still about sports and national identity, Heineken continued to show young people enjoying themselves (although socially distanced), and Stella Artois stuck to its focus on history and heritage.

The book was inspired by the researchers wanting to find out how a globally disruptive crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, leaves traces in the very way we speak and write.

After all, they say, language helps us make sense of events and influences how we experience them.

To investigate the language around COVID-19, Dr. Collins and Professor Koller looked at a variety of sources, from large collections of scientific writing and news, which they analyzed with computer-assisted methods, to crowd-sourced examples, social media and advertising videos.

As Dr. Collins explains, "For the computer-assisted studies, we looked at

224 million words worth of [scientific articles](#), 772 million words of [news articles](#) and 12,000 tweets."

Professor Koller adds, "The studies are of interest to anyone who wants to understand how the language of the news, politicians and advertising changed in reaction to the pandemic."

Provided by Lancaster University

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