SARS: 'It's as bad as we feared but dared not say'[1]

JENNIFER EAGLETON

Naming, managing and dramatizing the SARS crisis in Hong Kong

IN 2003, a health crisis took place that severely tested Hong Kong, among a number of other parts of the world, with at 15 June a death toll in the city of 295 (out of 1,755 cases). Schools were closed, an apartment block was quarantined, and businesses suffered as people stayed home. Because no one at that time knew much about what came to be called 'severe acute respiratory syndrome' (shortened to both *SARS* and *Sars*), the disease offered a 'blank screen' onto which various fears could be projected. It seemed to spread directly to close contacts – but airborne contagion could not be ruled out. The death rate was under five percent, but there was a possibility that it could become more virulent. It might turn out like any other flu-like illness, or like the 1918 flu pandemic that killed millions. In addition, it was the perfect mechanism for Hong Kong to project its current uncertainties over its image and place in the world. Thus, the 'pragmatic handling' of this event in the major English language newspaper of the city, the *South China Morning Post*, holds much linguistic interest. The *SCMP* is a major English-language newspaper in East Asia.[2]

The perfect news story?

'News is a representation of the world in language' (Fowler, 1991:11), and because language is a semantic code, it imposes values – social, cultural, or otherwise – on a particular discourse. Like every other kind of discourse, news is constructively patterned to fit, and to cater to, its readership. It encodes meaning and organizes for us how to 'read' the text. Even under the guise of 'straight' reporting, it mentally directs how we experience and react to an event. As Hall puts it (1978:53, italics added):

> The media do not simply and transparently report events which are 'naturally' newsworthy *in themselves*. 'News' is the end product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.

The implication here is that news is not found or gathered but is a creation of the journalistic process. News, in other words, is not something that happens, but what can be regarded and presented as 'newsworthy'. The criteria for this are known as 'news values' and are said to perform a gate-keeping role, filtering and restricting news input. The more newsworthiness criteria that an event has the more likely it is to be reported. These criteria include frequency, threshold (the volume or 'size' of the event), un-ambiguity (which relates to the reader making sense of the event), cultural proximity (news in one's own backyard) and continuity ('once something has hit the headlines and has been defined as "news", it will

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continue to be defined as news for some time, even if amplitude is drastically reduced' (Gatlung & Ruge, 1973:62–72)).[3]

The *Post*'s coverage has generally been considered fairly balanced in spite of the fact that the local press was accused repeatedly of reacting hysterically. It was thought that the World Health Organization's travel advisories on Hong Kong were vindications of the heavy 'hysterical' coverage by the local press, as were restrictions on Hong Kong travellers arriving in other countries.[4] In all of this the Hong Kong government appears to have been following rather than leading. Such a response is relevant to SARS press coverage because media watchers think that the aggressive nature of the press eventually spurred the government into action. It is speculated that, without an aggressive and free press, the situation might well have become worse, as it did in mainland China.

Stereotypes

The occurrence of a striking event will tend to reinforce a pre-existing stereotype. In turn, the firmer a stereotype, the more likely are relevant events to become news (cf. Fowler, 1991:14). As a consequence, 'mysterious illness' can easily slot into the epidemic stereotype. Then the discourse will strongly tend to be framed and seen through such a stereotype, the reader as a result having mental pictures that can be applied to it, as a further result of which the writer of the story gains a captive audience. The 'frame' is the sudden spread of an illness, its mysterious cause, the arrival of investigators, the quest for potential treatments, and so on. The 'script' is then almost always written in the language of fear and hysteria, threat and with 'we must work together' solidarity. In this instance, it also fed on to the gender stereotype 'Cleaning is woman's work', with the woman of the household being shown on television and in print advertisements how to disinfect an apartment and care for her family.

In her commentary on the panic relating to AIDS in the late 1980s, the American critic Susan Sontag noted the widespread 'sense of cultural distress or failure' in Western society that seemed to create a need for an 'apocalyptic scenario' and 'fantasies of doom'. This gloomy mood explained the 'striking readiness of so many to envisage the most far-reaching of catastrophes' (Sontag, 1991:4). Such a sense of gloom and doom fits in neatly with Hong Kong's situation in the new millennium, as in the following excerpt from the *SCMP*:

> The six years since Hong Kong's return to China have not been happy ones. One crisis melds into the next, sorely testing the small group of men and women who have assumed custody of the city's post-colonial administration. (26 Mar 03)

As Thody & Course, citing de Saussure and Barthes have pointed out, the actual subject of a discourse is not what it is about; in semiotic terms, the 'signifier' is in turn the 'signified' of another sign, implicit but with culturally recognizable meaning (cf. Thody & Course, 1999). In effect, the term 'SARS' became a shorthand, a metonymy for an underlying 'it' of a more abstract kind. Topics 'underlying' the SARS signifier were in essence political, in the government's mishandling of the crisis, the problematic image of the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) seen in the accidentally coincidental naming of the virus, as well as in health issues and lack of hygiene, loss of face by association, and no longer being the East Asian economic powerhouse of the recent past.

Crucial to the discourse is Hong Kong's self-branding as 'Asia's World City' and such assertions as: 'Every world-class city has personality attributes that make it distinctive, memorable and instantly identifiable' (a statement made in the government 'brandhk' website: <http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/brandhk/eboo k5.htm>). These attributes are, again quoting the website, 'reflected in the core values of Brand Hong Kong, values that are avowedly best described by the words *progressive, free, stable, opportunity*, and *high quality*' (italics added).

It could be argued that if you have to keep saying 'world-class' you are trying to convince yourself (words have power when uttered). The following extract from a story published during the crisis (*SCMP*, 17 May) highlights the fear that deep down Hong Kong isn't really a 'world city':

headline HK sewage system world-class, say experts

text extract Hong Kong's buildings have world-class sewage systems, but better maintenance regulations are required…. Lau Ching-kwong, president of the Hong Kong Institute of Engineers, said it was poor maintenance and improper modification, not design, which caused many problems with Hong Kong's

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sewage systems. He described the designs as 'world-class'.

Most outsiders would probably regard this as simply straight news reporting. But residents, with local cultural knowledge, would understand explicitly with the choice of wording that this crisis highlights the fact that Hong Kong is not 'world-class'.

Headlines

Headlines are useful in understanding the media dimension in crisis because they foreground and frame the discourse and set the tone for the article that follows. Twenty such headlines for each month have been selected and can be considered fairly representative. There were several SARS stories per issue. In chronological order, they are:

March

Ward isolated after hospital staff fall ill with mysterious flu
Calm urged over mystery virus
Hospitals are keeping us in the dark over outbreak, say worried patients
Virus 'poses a greater threat to economy than war'
KCRC [a local rail company] to hand out half a million free masks to protect passengers
Four-point strategy unveiled to combat virus
A crisis that is testing HK's mettle
HK makes battle against pneumonia a priority
Waging war on an unknown enemy
The world's second battlefront, a virus
Pneumonia scare further weakens war-weary market
1,000 to be placed under quarantine
HK Quarantine measures spark confusion
Health chief says now is not the time to point fingers
Virus a wake-up call for Hong Kong
City's image needs intensive care, say experts
It's as bad as we feared but not dared say
Life should be for living, not just making money
A disease by any other name is just as deadly
Church leaders urge unity, not criticism

April

Battered hotels send out signals of distress
Calls flood in as community rallies to protect medics
Massive response as public says thank you to medical staff.
Unmasked: new campaign to fight Sars fear
Markets depressed by virus outbreak offer buying opportunity
Lack of will hampers anti-virus strategy
Officials plan to re-launch city
Amid war and Sars, HK exports surprise with 15 pc spurt in March
Dirty movies offered in cleanup campaign
A dead rat and grim: Its all back to normal at Wai Yan street.
Ministers under fire for not wearing masks
Zooming in on a war zone
Setting aside fee to comfort the afflicted
Sleepless nights, dark days for Sars sleuth
Virus kills youngest victim
Tung's 11.8bn Sars rescue package
Wake-up call overdue for the health authority
Sars leads to teaching innovation
Patients under scrutiny after GP catches virus
Hero's burial offered
A campaign fought on three fronts

May

Ideas to revive Hong Kong
Groups pledge to clean up their act to fight outbreak
In the line of duty: others who have fallen fighting Sars
We miss you, we bless you, and we thank you
A leader honed in the art and skills of politics
New weapon to stare down killer virus is tested
Health care legislators seek a Sars monument
Learning a professional lesson about Sars
Tears and tributes for Dr Tse
Attack is the best form of defence, but in this scenario is it wise?
Hotels drop their plans for mask-burning day
[Chief Minister] Tung takes the city's bad-mouthers to task
HK sewage system world-class, say experts
Exhibition lobby group launches rescue plan
Why we should not need medical heroes
Sars show that exercise of power is the priority of principals
Universities offered a $12m Sars war chest
Nurses are working every day with fears they dare not show
New website aims to unmask city's image
Government loan scheme failing to help ailing firms

In brief, it was not long before the fairly nondescript early headlines moved to more emotive

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language. This selection shows that quite early on a full-blown 'epidemic' paradigm came into being, and by April a 'battle' paradigm is fully set, linking in turn with other events. In May, the headlines started planning for life post-SARS, employing the rhetoric of 'bouncing back'.

Drama

poem

> Language and Representation
> Under-reaction
> Hurt us. But what's killing us?
> Overreaction[5]

This haiku has been taken from the responses to an *SCMP* competition, published in April 03. It comments on the comparatively 'hysterical' coverage in the local press, and also shows how dominant the SARS discourse was overall. The use of 'hysterical' here is not intended to downplay the seriousness of the crisis, but relates to the high emotive content and also the scale of press reporting, with its almost 'end of our world scenario': it was calculated that the chances of getting SARS in Hong Kong appeared to be about one in 9,900, and the chance of dying one in 400,000 However, the *SCMP* writers spoke frequently of 'fear', 'threats', 'killer virus', 'anxiety', and 'panic'. The constant use of such words makes the threat seem larger.

Formulaic phrases, such as 'the SARS crisis', 'the anti-SARS package', 'the anti-virus strategy', and 'the SARS-led innovation' were used on many occasions. Such patterns in a connected body of discourse have a cohesive effect, providing templates for homogenizing the discourse (cf. Fowler, 1991:173).

Yet another (and typical) stratagem was quantification: 'statistical tags' and daily 'tallies' and 'tolls' were given, as in: '60 new Hong Kong cases emerged yesterday'; '530 Hong Kong people are now in hospital and there are about 1,600 cases worldwide'; '13 people have died in Hong Kong so far and at least 58 people have died worldwide'; '121 residents have been struck down at Amoy Gardens housing estate, with 36 of them admitted to hospital yesterday' (all in the *SCMP* of 31 March 03).

We see the numbers out of immediate context (that is, in terms of the total population, the time of spread, and so forth). Linking this kind of 'statistical tag' with global figures makes them more important than they may in fact be. In other instances, general words that have a numerical bent are used: 'spreading', 'creeping', 'escalating', and the like. They are not numerically specific words – it is their very indistinctness that allows the readers' imagination to make them larger.

Lakoff and Johnson's view (1980:15), on the basic metaphorical structure of language is relevant here; we can apply their metaphor of orientation, as in 'health and life are up' while 'sickness and death are down'. Because Hong Kong was already down economically during the period, the outbreak had a double negative effect. However, and interestingly, on some occasions figures were both up *and* down: for example, death rate up but infection rate down, and vice versa – what might be called 'the roller-coaster effect'.

The significance of cross-issue coverage

Both Fowler (1991:225) and van Dijk (1988) refer to the importance of pursuing concepts across whole issues within the different genres and forms that make up a newspaper, including the effect of typography, photography and layout. The most dramatic headlines are the largest and as the gaze travels across the page they link up with other related stories, often adding an exponential effect to the discourse. In Hong Kong's often sensationalist Chinese press, circles are drawn around people that it wants you to notice and large arrows are inserted to draw attention to key figures or features. For example, in each issue during March to May 03 – apart from the general 'straight' news stories – there were several opinion pieces, editorials, and such features as *Your SARS questions answered* (by the *Post* Doctor), the *SAR* column (whose rather ironic initials mean 'Special Administrative Region', that is, Hong Kong within China) that was full of humorous SARS-related anecdotes; and *Talkback*, an email forum where the paper asked the readers such questions such as 'What else can HK do to tackle pneumonia?' (*SCMP*, 31 Mar). In this way, the newspaper focused on the issue and in the Q&A features sought to get a proactive stance and become an authority and so increase readership.

What's in a name?

At the beginning and for much of the period under investigation, the cause of SARS was

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unknown, as a consequence of which the virus was called by a shifting series of names, each accompanied by its own set of presuppositions and associations. The following is a selection of the names used in the *SCMP* in early March (italics added):

- A public hospital has quarantined one of its wards after three employees were treated for a mysterious *flu-like illness*. (12 Mar 03)
- Patients yesterday accused the Prince of Wales Hospital of keeping them in the dark about the *viral outbreak* and said they would have kept away if they had known how serious it was. (13 Mar 03)
- Health authorities were last night trying to stem public panic over a mystery *flu-like illness* that has downed at least 50 staff at the Prince of Wales Hospital, including 10 with *atypical pneumonia.* (13 Mar 03)
- The *mystery flu* outbreak spread to three more hospitals yesterday, prompting critics to claim staff and patients at the Prince of Wales Hospital should have been alerted earlier over the *virus* to help contain it. (14 Mar 03)
- He said the *infection* attacked hospital workers and close relatives who had been caring for sick patients, with a high proportion of those affected suffering from *atypical pneumonia*. (14 Mar 03)
- The World Health Organisation has sent experts to Hong Kong and Hanoi in a global effort to identify the cause of a *severe form of pneumonia* that is sweeping the region. (14 Mar 03)

This indeterminacy of names itself led to fear because a specific 'handle' could not be put on the disease. By using the names of more familiar diseases like influenza, and to a lesser extent pneumonia, we can infer that even ordinary things that are with us can 'turn' on us – so one must be ever vigilant, as implied by the following:

- Initially, the unwary public was led to believe that the illness was something similar to pneumonia, though somewhat 'atypical' when compared to the usual respiratory infection. (31 Mar 03)

It was not until April that the WHO-designated name *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (*generally *SARS* but also, as in the *SCMP*, *Sars*) was used in headlines. The Hong Kong government was unhappy about the name and wanted to play it down because it was altogether too much like Hong Kong's official title: The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Government officials were first instructed to use either *atypical pneumonia* (in fact a much wider and already established label) or *SRS* (omitting the 'acute'). By having a name closely associated with the name of the region, the virus become inexplicably linked with the locale, this was its 'illocutionary force', but in the world at large, which is not generally aware of the initials *HKSAR* and their meaning, this verbal association between disease and city was, and remains, generally unknown.

In addition, the SARS episode has allowed people to play with another phrase associated with Hong Kong: the Beijing Government's phrase 'one country, two systems', to describe the differences between the rest of China and the special post-colonial situation of Hong Kong: 'one country, two systems'. This 'one—, two—' formula is often used humorously in Hong Kong, as in 'one night, two parties', used for the celebrations on the eve of the Handover in 1997. A more recent dig relating to SARS, which originated on the mainland, has been in the Hong Kong context 'one disease, two names'.

Earlier representations of SARS

The early stories concerning SARS were by and large straight news reporting. Some examples, with descriptions of the disease in italics, are: '[headline] Ward isolated after hospital staff fall ill with *mysterious flu*'; 'A public hospital has quarantined one of its wards after three employees were treated for *a mysterious flu-like illness*'; 'The three employees are among at least 10 staff at Prince of Wales Hospital working on Ward 8A who have fallen ill since Saturday'; 'Of the three admitted to hospital, two showed *symptoms of pneumonia* but were yesterday in a stable condition. At least 10 employees have been reported sick with *fever and flu-like illnesses*, a spokesman for Prince of Wales Hospital said.' The language here is fairly straightforward: the use of 'mysterious' is the only thing of note. However, it was not long before the paradigm 'Disease as War' became fully blown.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3) suggest that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting but also structure our perceptions and understanding. The SARS crisis

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had a natural metaphor: Disease as War. Thinking like this meant that readers would develop a set of expectations about its course, and the newspaper had easy templates to use with various genres within them. Since wars follow patterns, and there are things that we typically do in battles, the discourse follows a similar course in a systematic manner: whence the soldiers (the 'frontline' healthcare workers), their commanders, competent or otherwise (Hong Kong Government and the Health Authority), the citizenry under siege (Hong Kong residents), and the enemy (a mysterious disease). There were campaigns ('clean up Hong Kong') and phrases such as 'hammered on all fronts', 'battlefronts', and 'campaigns on three fronts' (e.g. the 'clean up Hong Kong' campaign). This has the force of channeling readers into a siege mentality in which they 'batten down the hatches' by staying at home or wearing masks wherever they go. Two examples:

1 As if Iraq was not enough, a second war is seizing the world's attention and creating huge pressures on policymakers from Hong Kong to Toronto. The campaign is against a virus whose nature is yet to be pinned down, although the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has said it may be a mutant strain of the common cold. (*SCMP*, 27 Mar 03)
2 What is frightening about the fight against SARS is that it is a 'war with an unknown enemy' (*SCMP*, 30 Apr 03)

These extracts are fairly representative of the tone of much reporting throughout the three-month crisis. They use strong words like *seizing* and *pinned*, while *mutant* implies that what we know can suddenly become unknown. The first extract, by leading with the phrase 'as if Iraq was not enough' builds links the two otherwise very distinct 'conflicts' together, in the process lending the SARS situation some additional severity. The next extract, however, is noteworthy because it brings in a local cultural metaphor:

3 Hospitals told to end warlord mentality: Uncooperative attitudes may be undermining the anti-Sars fight, say critics (*SCMP* 29 Apr 03)

Warlord mentality refers here to the 'serious compartmentalisation' or 'turf wars' of various hospitals and universities in claiming discovery of the nature of the virus. It highlights battles with both good and bad generals and the 'battle' between being modern and holding onto tradition (while being a 'world-class' city). The following is an excerpt from one of the many editorials highlighted this aspect:

- To be sure, there will come a time for reviewing who should be held accountable for what in this crisis. Right now, however, Hong Kong needs to battle not only a deadly virus, but also the *enemy within*. Uncertainty and paranoia have prevailed for too long, and the only way they will be conquered is if we collectively start to believe in ourselves again. Everybody has a constructive part to play in returning Hong Kong to health and prosperity. (*SCMP* 30 Apr 03)

Healthcare workers are the soldiers in this discourse and were generally referred to throughout the crisis as 'frontline' workers, as in:

headline Setting aside fear to comfort the afflicted
text extract As people steer clear of buildings where Sars infections have been reported, registered nurse and midwife Chan Sau-ying *gladly* steps inside to *soothe isolated souls*. (*SCMP*, 27 Apr 03)

Here 'people steer clear' is contrasted with 'gladly stepping inside'. Indeed, the concept of 'barriers' was important to this discourse and fits in with that of quarantine and 'covering up' (such as wearing of face-masks). The stereotype of health worker as selfless saint is evoked:

headline 'Careless, thoughtless' people jeopardising fight against virus
text extract *Frontline* medical workers will be *fighting a losing battle* against Sars unless Hong Kong people stop being "careless, thoughtless and heartless" by jeopardising the environment, the leader of a political group warned yesterday (editorial, *SCMP*, 28 April, italics added)

In the above extract, a 'naming and shaming' modality is employed by the editor, with a third authority lending weight to the newspaper's argument. Although in many texts the *Post* extorted us all to 'put on a united front', it implied that these people were shouldering the bulk of the load. Indeed, a number of these workers died of SARS after contracting the disease from their patients, resulting in the following specimens of 'heroic' rhetoric (italics added):

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南華早報

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Sars claims 7 more lives in Hong Kong

Tues 15 Apr 03

As another healthy, younger victim dies, a hospitals chief announces a probe of deaths among such patients

Mary Ann Benitez, Patsy Moy and **Allen T. Cheng** in Beijing

INSIDE TODAY
City HK schools are due to reopen next week,

Sars claimed a record Hong Kong yesterday 49-year-old man brought warnings chiefs that the virus ger, otherwise healt

The new daily the deaths at the people aged 35 to 5 in good health. Act thority chief Ko nounced an inves deaths, adding th ple must not expe the outbreak.

"Our clinical e very bold in usi cluding combi and steroids. Eig [of all patients well," Dr Ko sa want to send a r ger patients de cover."

The 49-year parently in pre – unlike most o

ity chief executive William Ho Shiu-wei, taking the number of patients discharged to 229.

Meanwhile, a statement from a senior mainland official suggested there had been a delay in reporting Sars cases. In an interview published by the *China Daily*, Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong said the first Sars patient was admitted to a Beijing hospital on March 1, almost a

Thousands ready

Sat 19 Apr 03

The campaign will target housing estates, parks and commercial premises in the fight against atypical pneumonia

Elaine Wu, Peter Michael and **Cheung Chi-fai**

Hundreds of thousands of people from senior officials to retailers and restaurant workers will roll up their sleeves and take part in an unprecedented city-wide cleanup campaign today, as Hong Kong battles to halt the spread of atypical pneumonia.

The concerted action, involving both the public and private sectors, will see the disinfection of housing estates, parks and commercial premises. Everyone in Hong Kong

INSIDE
City

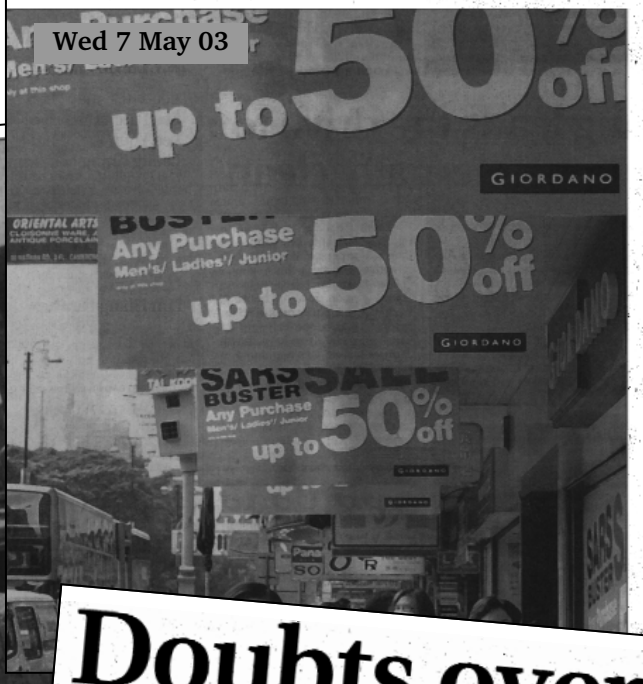
Building inspectors to start checks on public estates
Hospital X-ray team risk their lives to save others C1
Secondary students join an online fight over schools' return C4
The [redacted] hunt to track down a killer C5
Hong Kong and Guangdong agree to border screening A2
Editorials A10



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Hong Kong loses $40b … but things are looking up

Wed 7 May 03



Andrew Collier and **Tom Mitchell**

Hong Kong stands to lose as much as $40 billion from the Sars outbreak, economists and analysts polled by the *South China Morning Post* say. But as the number of active infections continues to fall, the outlook for the worst-hit sectors – retail and tourism – is improving.

Hotels, restaurants and stores together account for 9 per cent of Hong Kong's GDP. If current woes continue in these sectors to the end of next month, the experts estimate this would result in an overall loss of about a third of their $120 billion annual turnover.

The good news, however, is that conditions seem unlikely to get much worse than that – and some analysts are more optimistic.

"The situation seems to have got better," said UBS economist Vincent Chan. "In the past two weeks, I have started to see people going out again."

Indeed, Mr Chan's most optimistic scenario now has losses as low as $17 billion, compared to the $34 billion or more he had been expecting just a few weeks ago.

Perhaps more importantly, it has become clearer that certain other businesses have, at least initially, been spared much damage. Banks, for example, are likely to ride out the storm relatively well. Manufacturing and trade – barring a calamity on the mainland – will also survive the crisis.

As in any downturn, size clearly counts.

SARS
THE FINANCIAL FALLOUT

The first of a 3-part series begins in Business today

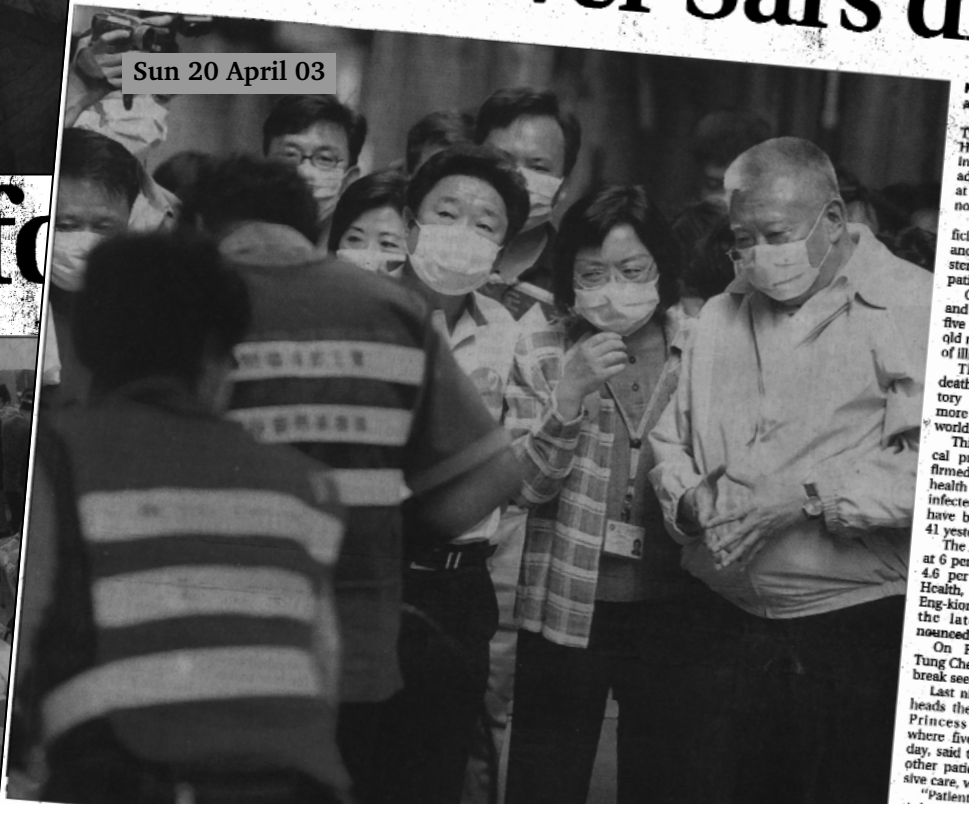
Hope is riding high on the government's plan to offer tax breaks and rebates for those most in need. It could return as much as $11.8 billion to Hong Kong businesses.

Another sanguine note is that for every downturn there is inevitably a rebound. This year may produce some terrible numbers, but once consumer confidence returns, the effect should be seen in next year's earnings.

An assessment of the downside potential in the Sars crisis depends on how long it takes to bring those consumers back if the virus is not

Doubts over Sars drugs

Sun 20 April 03



Mary Ann Benitez and **Niall Fraser**

Twelve people died of Sars in Hong Kong yesterday – the most in one day – as health authorities admitted they were mystified why at least 5 per cent of patients were not responding to treatment.

It also emerged that health officials are re-evaluating the use and dosage of the anti-viral and steroid drugs being used to treat patients.

Of the 12 fatalities – 10 men and two women aged 37 to 87 – five of them, including a 37-year-old man, did not have any history of illnesses.

There have now been 81 deaths from severe acute respiratory syndrome in Hong Kong, more than anywhere else in the world.

Thirty-one new cases of atypical pneumonia were also confirmed yesterday, including two health workers, taking the total infected so far to 1,358. Some 363 have been discharged, including 41 yesterday.

The mortality rate now stands at 6 per cent – slightly up on the 4.6 per cent that Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food Yeoh Eng-kiong quoted hours before the latest figures were announced.

On Friday, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa said the Sars outbreak seemed to be stabilising.

Last night, Tom Buckley, who heads the intensive care unit at Princess Margaret Hospital, where five patients died yesterday, said the conditions of many other patients, not yet in intensive care, were deteriorating.

"Patients are dying f

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headline Tung praises nurse who died trying to save others
text extract A male nurse who died of Sars in a Hong Kong hospital was yesterday *hailed a hero* by Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. (*SCMP*, 29 Apr 03)

headline Hero's burial offered
text extract The family of a male nurse who died of Sars after working on high-risk wards was yesterday offered the chance to give him a permanent burial at Gallant Garden, a site reserved for people who die while *performing exceptional acts of bravery*. (*SCMP*, 30 Apr 03)

By eulogizing medical workers who died while caring for patients, the discourse shifted from questioning whether they should have died in the first place. Although debates on this issue did arise, they never seemed to go very far. Indeed, this kind of discourse often prevents the hard questions being asked.

In the *Disease as War* metaphor, the citizenry under siege have their role to play. They have to be 'united', which ties in well with Chinese culture, which places a high premium on working within, and on behalf of, the group. People were even asked to put their materialistic concerns aside and work together:

headline Solidarity in the battle against Sars
text extract It is tempting to join calls for someone – anyone – to resign from the Hospital Authority for its shortcomings in handling the Sars crisis. But this is hardly the time to be expecting those who are leading a desperate battle against a deadly virus to step back. Hong Kong needs *every last capable person to be fully engaged* in the fight to rid us of this disease. This is no time for quitters. (*SCMP*, 27 Apr 03, italics added)

headline United front
text extract Mr. Tung said last week: 'I have seen that we are *joining together in solidarity*' There is no doubt that a sense of crisis has prompted people to act in unison. The fact that there has been no panic or chaos also reflects a degree of *maturity* among the populace. All this represents society's latent power to transform adversity into opportunity. (*SCMP*, 31 March, italics added)

headline Church leaders urge unity, not criticism
text extract Religious leaders said that instead of criticizing the government's shortcomings in handling the crisis, the public should *rally behind* its emergency campaign. (*SCMP*, 31 Mar 03, italics added)

The first of these extracts came from an editorial, the second from an opinion piece. Editorials during this period generally followed the tone of the last extract. Words that signify 'solidarity', such as *maturity* and *unison*, were often employed. They have an authoritive yet conversational quality and it might be supposed that by saying we should pull together despite someone's possible poor performance has the illocutionary force of highlighting their incompetence and hinting at the possible competence of the general public ('We are just ordinary people, but we can do a better job then you'). This also implies that a more thorough investigation and castigation will be done after the worst of the crisis has past.

The *SCMP* itself became a player by initiating 'Project Shield'. The following extract refers to its campaign to supply protective suits to medical workers, an implicit criticism of the government who (with its financial surplus) had failed to provide enough. By entering into, and thereby changing, the story itself it seeks to shape a new discourse, in effect making its own news:

headline Do you want to help?
text extract The doctors and nurses looking after Sars patients are today's heroes. To help protect them in their daily battle against this deadly virus, the South China Morning Post has launched Project Shield. The project will provide hi-tech protective suits for medical staff in Hong Kong's Sars wards. … (*SCMP*, 27 April)

Disease as detection

Another metaphor arose throughout this discourse event, which was especially apt since the disease was referred to as a 'virulent virus', 'killer virus', and 'tiny killer', was the Disease as Detection metaphor, as in:

headline Sleepless nights, dark days for Sars *sleuths*
text extract Continuing our series on health-care workers in the front line against Sars, Chan Siu-sin looks at one researcher's *race against the clock* to identify the disease's genetic *code* and a nurse's risky routine dealing with victims, 808 words Shedding more than 3kg in less than two weeks would delight any weight-loss expert. But for Stephen Tsui Kwok-wing, it is the physical impact of a nightmare. (*SCMP*, 27 April).

headline Computer detectives on the trail of a silent killer
text extract *Crime-fighting* technology is proving crucial to predicting where Sars will strike next

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This type of metaphor fitted in with local culture. The readers could, as it were, gain intertextual knowledge from gangster (triad) and detective films as well as a love of hi-tech objects. The brash commercialism and drama associated with these local genre films is transferred and lends an air of mystery to the discourse. By using words such as 'crime-fighting', 'race against the clock', 'strike next', 'code', and the like, heightens both expectations and fear.

In the issue of the 27th March, a feature writer employed a *noir* style characteristic of 1930-40s detective and mystery fiction to show the insidiousness of the virus. It is worth quoting at length:

headline The virus that stole across the globe
text extract The date is Friday, February 21. A group of strangers gather in the lift lobby on the ninth floor of a Mongkok hotel, one of them coughing and sneezing. The elevator arrives and they share a brief journey to the ground floor before the doors slide open and they part company.

None could have expected this encounter would set in motion a chain of events that would claim the lives of three in their group and spread disease and fear among hundreds of people worldwide.

The man who sneezes is a 64-year-old who has arrived by bus from Guangdong a day ago to attend a wedding. Feeling too sick to attend, however, he is taken to hospital on February 22.

His name is Liu Jianlun, and on being admitted to Kwong Wah Hospital, he warns medical staff they should not touch him as he fears he ha contracted a "very virulent disease".

The date is March 2. A Canadian man of 72 who has stayed at the Metropole since February 12 is transferred from St Paul's Hospital, where he has infected three workers, to Queen Mary Hospital. (*SCMP*, March 27)

The criminal, violence or greed elements in film noir are a metaphoric symptom of society's evils, and here they are used as a modal device to highlight an ambience of anxiety, pessimism and fear. The active voice, the third-person pronoun of the protagonist, the sense of spreading outwards in the use of 'the date is Friday, February 21' and 'the date is March 2' gives us a sense of expectation and foreboding that heightens tension. The piece concludes when the outbreak has been officially declared. The rather disjointed episodic style also adds to the tension.

Epidemic as loss of face

In some ways the crisis was a powerful metaphor for 'loss of face' in Chinese culture, especially since the disease spread by close contact. Crowded housing, the sewage system, and such dubious practices as spitting and throwing rubbish out of high-rise apartment buildings came under the spotlight. Ways of improving matters were suggested, some of them frivolous, such as 'wearing a badge to tell others you're implementing personal hygiene measures'. The following comes from the *SCMP*'s *Young Post* supplement for children:

So, did you have a good 'holiday'? Have you been wearing your mask properly and washing your hands regularly? Did you take your body temperature this morning before you headed out for school? I hope all your answers are 'yes'! (*SCMP*, 28 April)

The use of facemasks generated much debate as it directly signified a change in 'image' by a literal 'loss of face': the visual admission of a problem. Headlines such as 'city's image needs intensive care, say experts' (*SCMP*, 29 Mar 03) encapsulated this and were accompanied by photographs of mask-clad faces. The following extracts highlight this issue:

headline Police told not to cause panic by using masks
text extract Hong Kong police officers say their superiors are putting them at risk in the atypical pneumonia outbreak by urging them *not to wear facemasks for fear of causing public panic.* (*SCMP* 30 March, italics added)

headlines Junior police demand clarification on mask "ban"
Health is more important than image, says a staff spokesman
text extract Police officers yesterday demanded that the force clarify whether they can wear facemasks to protect themselves against atypical pneumonia.… Some say they have been told not to put on masks unless it is "absolutely necessary". (*SCMP*, 31 Mar 03)

headline Ministers under fire for failing to use masks
text extract Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's ministers were criticised yesterday for not wearing face masks in public in what doctors say is a *misguided attempt to play down the seriousness of the atypical pneumonia outbreak.* (*SCMP*, 1 Apr 03, italics added)

During the crisis, the *SCMP* had a regular *Behind the mask* feature, 'a daily look at how

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Hopes rise for the travel advisory to be lifted

Sun 18 May 03

WHO says Sars is under control in HK

Patsy Moy and **Agencies**

Hopes were raised last night that Hong Kong will soon be back on the international map, as the World Health Organisation (WHO) said it believed the Sars outbreak had been brought under control.

The WHO's head of communicable diseases, David Heymann, said the eight-week outbreak "has come under control in Hong Kong and soon there will be no new cases".

"This may be two weeks, it may be four weeks, it may be six weeks," Dr Heymann said in Geneva, ahead of the opening tomorrow of the WHO's World Health Assembly.

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to further push Hong Kong's case for a clean bill of health.

Other epidemiologists agreed that the signs were good for Hong Kong but cautioned against excessive premature optimism.

As of 1pm yesterday, 276 patients remained in hospital, including 47 in intensive care.

The four people added to the patients' list yesterday took Hong Kong's total since the start of the outbreak to 1,710. It was the 14th day of single-digit increases. One was a medical worker from Queen Mary Hospital.

A total of 1,191 patients have recovered, after 20 more were discharged yesterday.

The five who died yesterday were aged between 54 and 92, taking the death toll to 243.

Legislator Lo Wing-lok, who is also the president of the Medical Association, said that although the

Hongkongers are dealing with the Sars outbreak'. This 'coming out', can also be seen as 'coming clean' about personal feelings that Chinese culture usually keeps hidden.

Conclusion

On 23 May 03, the WHO lifted its travel advisory against Hong Kong. The next day's front-page headline in the *SCMP* read 'what a difference a day makes'. And it did, as the tone in the city's media lightened considerably. The 'post-SARS' discourse is equally interesting in that a rhetoric of 'launching', 'rebounding' and 'recuperating' came into play, beginning as early as 29 April, with the headline 'officials plan to relaunch city'.

SARS was a signifier for many things, a huge screen on which Hong Kong could project its fears. It is worth speculating whether the epidemic would have caused so much panic if Hong Kong were secure in its image and the economy had been buoyant. Further analysis of SARS discourse would be useful in eliciting further aspects just touched on here. For example, a comparison of the Chinese and English press would further our understanding of different cultural norms of news discourse in such fraught circumstances. ■

Author's notes

1 The title of this paper comes from a *South China Morning Post* story (30 Apr 03).

2 To gather material for the paper I made an online

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search of the *SCMP* archives at <www.scmp.com> from mid-March to mid-May 2003 (using the words *Sars, atypical pneumonia*, and *flu-like illness*) and read and collected issues on a daily basis.

3 SARS stories remain fairly prominent half a year later. Heightened awareness of the potential for another health crisis is shown by stories surrounding the death of a child from anthrax in the first week of June.

4 From a personal conversation with Professor B. McIntyre of the School of Journalism at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

5 It was calculated that the chances of getting SARS in Hong Kong appeared to be 1 in 9,900 and the likelihood of dying 1 in 400,000.

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Fearing the canon

I came to poetry late in life
Far from youth's ignoble strife
When I was just a callow stripling
I'd no time for Keats or Kipling
Rather than admire the canon
I preferred the works of anon.

Then there were the verse recitals
Where I didn't catch the titles
Wondering what – to no avail –
Was owed to Keats's nightingale
And puzzled by the allergy
A country churchyard held for me

And now I find myself at ease
With such fine lines, the irony's
The powers-that-be have put a ban on
Public blessings of the canon

PS
I know it brings out handkerchiefs
But Rudyard, that's a lot of ifs

– Roger Berry
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

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