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IMAGINING TRANSNATIONAL VIRUS IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE – A CASE STUDY OF ZIKA VIRUS DURING 2016 RIO OLYMPIC GAMES

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Introduction

How do the public imagine contagion? The objective of this research is to examine how infectious disease is represented and articulated in the digital sphere. In today's globalized society, contagious disease is transmitted in an extremely fast and widespread level, becoming a huge threat to the public health of global citizens. Such increased sense of shared threat, which is one of the consequences of globalization, is also related to the weakening legitimization of nation-states as they no longer have the capacity to entirely protect their citizens from such unpredictable and uncontrollable crises (Appadurai, 1996). In this sense, disease outbreaks are global events that are deeply intertwined with the issues of globalization, cultural identity, and national security, by heavily influencing on how these concepts are socially constructed.

In order to explore such research question, this study closely reads the sign and symbols that construct how contagion can be imagined on the digital sphere. Chavez (2017) has theorized 'disease-scapes,' which indicates the building up of signs that represent germs, plagues, parasites and various diseases that are bundled with material and corporal forms. He argued that such disease-scapes that are attached to the immigrant bodies were largely circulated, and constructed meanings about immigrants as threat to the nation. These images gain power through their circulation and variation, and become used to justify political action, such as surveillance, policing, and laws governing the conduct of (im)migrants. Extending such notion of disease-scape, this study focuses on the building of disease-scape on a particular site: Facebook Live videos. Recent studies are showing that social media, especially Facebook is reshaping the ways people consume news, by operating as major pathways to news (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). Major news media, such as The New York Times, CNN, and Wall Street Journal, have their own public pages on Facebook, creating a digital space where the readers can voluntarily interact with the news by writing comments. CNN, especially, actively exploited Facebook's new functions, such as live videos, to deliver the liveliness of the scene and directly receive and respond to

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people's questions regarding the news. Thus, this paper considers CNN's Facebook live videos as sites where discourses are on making, by staging the public perception of risk and transforming the meaning of liveness within the dynamics created by the video content, interface, and comments. Conducting 'critical techno-cultural discourse analysis' (Brock, 2016) to this object of study, the paper explores what kinds of narratives and metaphors of disease outbreaks are constructed over the Facebook-sphere and analyze how does this meaning-making process is structured in the online space.

Method

The study selected the Zika outbreak in 2016 as a case study. This is an interesting case to observe due to its coincidence with the Olympic games that have taken place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Since Brazil was one of the epicenters of the outbreak, there was a worldwide concern on holding the Olympics in Rio. Within this context, this paper examines how the Zika outbreak is conceptualized on Facebook, particularly during the Rio Olympics, in relation to the cultural, social implications of globalization. While the Olympics are framed as a symbol of global unity, it is also a time when there is a heightened sense of national identity and patriotism among global nations. Hence, it is meaningful to observe how a global infectious disease such as Zika is narrated in terms of the legitimation of nation-states and security issues, when the idea of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism are pursued.

CNN posted a number of Facebook live videos about the Zika outbreak during the Olympic season. Each video entailed more than 1000 comments, and around 4000 reactions. Out of the videos, 7 of them that actively discussed about both the Zika virus and the Olympic games were collected as corpus of the study and conducted critical techno-cultural discourse analysis, which is a multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture" (Brock, 2016). Through this methodology, this paper investigates the video contents, the interface of Facebook Live, and the user comments together, because they work in a constitutive fashion in constructing the discourse of the outbreak.

Findings and Argument

The fact that the videos were streaming on real time heightened a sense of urgency, since it meant that what would happen next in the video is completely unpredictable. The video's raw, low quality, hand-held visual components also contributed to the liveliness of the event. Moreover, the amateurishness of the content provides more sincerity, as the audiences feels as if they are actually witnessing the things that are going on in the outbreak region, that has not gone through newsroom editing.

Also, an important feature of Facebook Live interface is real-time comments. While the viewers watch the video, they were simultaneously exposed to other viewers' comments that are uploaded at real-time. The page gets updated every second, posting the most recent comment on the top. Therefore, the viewers are continuously asked to do high level of multi-tasking, which involves watching the video, reading the comments every second, and responding to it. The instantaneous update of the comments that displays

the speed of their accumulation heightens the sense of urgency of this issue, as it visualizes people's anxiety that can potentially increase one's own. More importantly, as people were watching the video and the comments at the same time, both work in a constitutive fashion in constructing the discourse of the outbreak. In other words, it can be suggested that viewer's simultaneous, instantaneous, and capricious interaction with the multiple components of the 'text' shapes his or her understanding of the event as a combined result of the content provided by CNN, the viewer's participatory actions, and the Facebook Live interface's particularities.

When examining the comments, circulation words that re-appropriated the conventional framing of immigrants and gave them new meanings was commonly observed. While considerable number of comments was blaming the citizens of outbreak nations for entering the United States and spreading the virus, which are exemplary articulation of conventional metaphors of immigrants as disease weakening and even killing the body of nation, many pointed out the fact that the Zika virus is mostly transmitted through mosquitoes, which are impossible to be quarantined or contained. Commenting that "mosquitoes cannot travel across borders," the metaphors also frequently borrowed Trump's quotes during his presidential campaign, and revised them such as "build a net, and make mosquitoes pay for it," and "total and complete shutdown of mosquitoes entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on." These quotes reflect that the commentators are imagining the contagion in relation to the previous disease-scapes; however, they are articulated in the form of satire and parody, which are provided as new means to ridicule the discourse of presidential campaigns and current state of affairs. It can be also suggested that the commentators are conducting oppositional reading of the previous metaphors, by pointing out the impossibility of containment strategies on global contagions in our contemporary world. While containment and securitization operations emphasized the imagined boundaries between nation-states and heightened the sense of national identity, these comments show the cases in which such reterritorialization of an infectious disease has failed. Also, metaphors that framed Olympic athletes' bodies as the medium of transmission and as a threat to the body of nation were frequently detected. This also shows a transformation of the conventional metaphors on disease, as the operation of 'othering,' which indicates the marking of boundary between healthy 'us' and unhealthy 'others,' becomes blurred. While the conventional metaphors worked in order to emphasize the category of 'good citizens' and 'bad citizens,' the meaning of boundaries are more complicated and obscured in this case. Therefore, the athletes are portrayed as scapegoats of politics and false ideals of global citizenry and cosmopolitanism.

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