Narrative and metaphors in New Zealand’s efforts to eliminate COVID-19

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Abstract
This commentary considers the ways in which spatialised metaphors were mobilised within a larger narrative in the quest to eliminate COVID-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In doing so, it examines the links between language and socio-political discourse, focusing on tropes that invoke and engage with geographies of everyday life. The foundational contention is that, to a large extent, language constructs our lived reality. After reviewing scholarship linking language and disease, the commentary turns to a case study of New Zealand’s response to COVID-19. The public health goal was to instil caution and protective practices in the population at large as a defence against transmission. The role of narrative and metaphor in daily press conferences from the Prime Minister and Director General of Health through March and April 2020 is examined by drawing on evidence from media reporting. Three key metaphors are considered: bubbles, levels, and the team, with each metaphor having spatialised implications in the popular imagination. The commentary considers perceptual and behavioural implications of this strategic use of metaphor. I speculate on the ways in which language has an agency such that, until the widespread availability of vaccine, an infectious disease can be restricted through mobilising the population.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, disease, language, metaphor, narrative, New Zealand, pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is both a disease and a source of “dis-ease”. In the quest to restrict infections, populations across the globe are suddenly using geographically influenced terms such as “sheltering in place,” “social distancing,” “herd immunity,” and “containment.” As invariably is the case in public-facing health crises, use of such vocabulary has been given momentum by both the news media and the advice provided by public officials (Cassell, 1998). Under the threat of disease, public health leaders depend, to a large extent, on media outlets to alert the public to the risk of infection and opportunities for protection (Lawrence et al., 2008). The pervasive use of such spatially referenced terms internationally speaks to how diseases are both medical conditions and social constructions. In this dual identity, these terms profoundly influence places, perceptions, and behaviours as well as the collective imagination (Gilman, 1988).

The challenge for public health practitioners is managing not only the exposure of populations to viral risks but also more subtle social and emotion-laden risks such as fear, apathy, and dismissal as “fake news.” In this commentary, I examine the ways in which language is a vector by which disease is inscribed into the human experience of everyday places. Specifically, I consider the
case of New Zealand in the first half of 2020, during which the nation first grappled with the experience of COVID-19. As with earlier observations of epidemics and remedial efforts in island nations (Cliff & Haggett, 1995; Kearns & Coleman, 2018), New Zealand’s insular character has perhaps encouraged the aspirational goal of eliminating the virus. However, there have been other potent influences. I examine the use of three spatialised metaphors in New Zealand’s largely successful campaign to eliminate community transmission of the virus: levels, bubbles, and membership of the “team of five million” and I also consider one key context for socialising compliance: the home. This examination allows me to conclude that, with disease being a social and biological entity, there is an enduring spatialised and politicised significance to the language of its containment.

2 | MEDIA, NARRATIVE, AND METAPHORS

The news media is an important vehicle through which the state and its agencies can convey key messages embedded in otherwise complex health policies and epidemiological knowledge (Hayes et al., 2007). The “media” are agents in achieving what Rose (1990) calls the task of governing populations. To this extent, the news media mediates between experts and populations to influence, directly or indirectly, the conduct of its audience.

Whether by design or journalistic licence, figures of speech enter the public imagination, through news “stories” that play on the spatial origins and contemporary agency of viruses (Kearns, 1996). In conversation, we then all participate in processes of “storying” that often draw on metaphor to craft discourses related to disease (Kearns, 1997). Metaphor is the application of a word or idea to something to which it is imaginatively, but not literally, applicable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and in which a particular characteristic of one reality is used to cast light on a less known second reality. Writing about metaphor and illness, Sontag (1978) has illustrated how cancer has variously over time been a metaphorical stand-in for corruption, catastrophe, and evil. In turbulent times, such as engendered by a pandemic, people employ metaphors to link the unfamiliar with the familiar and make sense of the world. Hence, metaphors are used as a discursive coping strategy deployed by interpretive communities in their understandings of changing lives and places (Kearns, 1997).

Given the multivocality inherent in metaphors, they do not have fixed meanings but rather provide sets of implied connections. Hence, one outcome of researching metaphors is likely to be a continued release of new connections and understandings. This novelty exists because any such investigation involves “analogical leaps from the familiar to the unfamiliar which rally imagination and emotion as well as intellect” (Buttimer, 1982, p. 90). This commentary seeks to examine some of the implied connections in the strategically deployed metaphors widely used in New Zealand’s COVID-19 response. To establish a context, I first survey New Zealand’s experience of the pandemic during the first half of 2020.

3 | NARRATING THE NEW ZEALAND COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

In the face of escalating cases of COVID-19 early in 2020, many national governments wavered between closing borders and opening their economies. In New Zealand, the experience of COVID-19 was strongly influenced by a narrative co-produced by a robust partnership between political leaders and public health experts. The first case of the virus in New Zealand was reported on 28 February 2020. At that time, public health experts urged the government to act with urgency, convinced that New Zealanders could stop the virus from spreading—and even eliminate it—if a lockdown was implemented rigorously and with haste. In daily press conferences, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield used language aimed at mobilising the public into taking protective measures. Running through these addresses was a narrative that navigated a fine line between being rigorously firm and offering a lightness in the face of a considerable challenge. Smiles, knowing looks, and occasional extemporised humour softened the outreach such that while the imposition of closed borders and “lockdown” requirements were fast and firm, they were nonetheless accompanied by a discourse of kindness and attempts to foster empathy. Briefings that were
covered live on radio and online by Radio New Zealand and other news outlets invariably involved journalists from across the ideological spectrum participating in open question times. Subsequent media stories were built around both prepared press releases and responses to journalists’ questions. Perhaps understandably, lapses in judgement, such as when it was revealed that the then Minister of Health went mountain biking during the lockdown, gained disproportionate coverage and threatened to distract from the key intended messages.

A series of alert “levels” was established, ranging from Level 1 (border control, but business as usual) to Level 4 (complete lockdown). With an emergency alert message sent to New Zealanders’ cell phones on 23 March, Level 3 was imposed. Henceforth “normal” life temporarily ceased. Members of the public were given 48 h in which to prepare for the more austere Level 4 and were told to decide what social grouping defined their “bubble,” with people required to stay within this grouping for the duration of the lockdown. For instance, in the case of children, undertaking exercise and play could only occur with others who were an established part of their “bubble” (Freeman et al., 2021). This unprecedented suspension of usual activity was enacted by utilising Section 70(1)(m) of the Health Act Order (2020), which, under the determination of the Director-General of Health, closed all premises except those “necessary for the performance or delivery of essential businesses.” Mass gatherings of more than 10 people were also prohibited. This national state of emergency (Level 4) remained in place from 25 March to 13 May 2020. After another 3.5 weeks, at midnight on 8 June, the nation returned to the relative freedoms of Level 1 (Klein, 2020).

During the lockdown period, the state enforced closure of all businesses and services not deemed to be essential. Where possible, employees worked from home. Supermarkets were the only food outlets that could remain open. People were required to stay local within their neighbourhoods and undertake no more than an hour of outdoor exercise each day. Public transport services operated on restricted schedules and were free but only available to certified essential workers. Educational institutions were closed for the duration of the Level 4 lockdown.

In the daily briefings provided by the Prime Minister and Director General of Health, New Zealanders were offered clear instructions about what would be deemed lockdown breaches. However, the police were reluctant to enforce the lockdown order, and, in a subsequent High Court challenge, it became apparent that this was because the relevant legislation (Section 70 of the Health Act, 1956) was not adequate to enforce a COVID-19 lockdown. A panel of judges concluded that, between 26 March and 3 April, the requirement for people to stay at home and in their bubbles was justified but unlawful. (A new order was introduced by the government on 3 April that corrected this situation. This was a case of legislation playing catch-up with an emergency: While medical officers of health have long had the power to quarantine individuals presenting a public health risk, the legislation did not allow for, or foresee, the need to detain an entire and largely healthy population) (RNZ, 2020).

The measures imposed under Level 4 in New Zealand were among the world’s firmest with, for example, the border closed to all but returning citizens and residents, with few exceptions granted. Those who did return were required to remain in managed isolation in a designated and closely monitored hotel for 14 days, during which time a series of health checks was administered (from 11 August 2020 fees of NZ$3,100 and $950 for subsequent accompanying adults were introduced). If the restrictions imposed were hard, however, a softness was apparent in the emotional valences of the messaging declaring these restrictions. I use two examples to describe that messaging. First, Prime Minister Ardern fronted daily press conferences throughout the lockdown period and, along with Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield, promoted a message to “be kind to each other.” Her smile invariably complemented this imperative and seemed, for many, to endorse the message that, throughout this extraordinary period, we were to be a “team of five million.” Second, reflecting perhaps her own relatively new status as a parent, the Prime Minister offered a message to the nation’s children in a post-Cabinet media briefing in early April, announcing she was classifying the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny as essential workers. This blend of humour and empathy maintained a softness of outreach complementing the harshness of boundaries imposed upon everyday life. However, the fast-changing landscape of infection and institutional response did lead to occasional lapses. For example, conflicting advice on whether lone parents could take children to supermarkets generated stigmatising disdain from both retailers and members of the public. While minor, such examples generated media attention and sometimes threatened to undermine trust in the messaging.

An early challenge was a potential disconnect between the language of epidemiology and that of everyday life. By way of example, the term “elimination” was used in press conferences by the Director-General of Health in reference to achieving a complete and permanent reduction to zero new cases within the island nation (Newshub, 2020). However, using the term when there were recovering patients in hospital and new cases
arriving and being quarantined at the border confused some members of the public, for whom elimination was understood to mean no cases anywhere in the country. In response, three spatial metaphors that connected more potently with everyday geographical experience were increasingly used. In his analysis of the drivers of social change, Sunstein (2019) has asked “How does social change happen?” and in response to himself has written of “social cascades” occurring when there is sudden and sustained “buy-in” to political decisions and collective response. These metaphors, sketched below, aligned with both national identity and the Prime Minister’s leadership style, described as “clear, consistent, and somehow simultaneously sobering and soothing” (Friedman, 2020).

4 | THREE SPATIAL METAPHORS

The first spatial metaphor universally applied in New Zealand is termed levels that have been associated with the alert system introduced by the Ministry of Health in March 2020. Alert levels were deployed “to manage and minimise the risk of COVID-19 in New Zealand” and were aimed at “helping people understand the current level of risk and the restrictions that must be followed.” In shorthand, and in terms of human contact, these symbolic and operationalised states of vigilance equate to Prepare (Level 1); 2 Reduce; (Level 2); Restrict (Level 3); and Lockdown (Level 4) (https://covid19.govt.nz/). The idea of levels implies potential elevation, creating an effective spatial metaphor for directional movement between states of relative concern and alertness. As in an elevator, in which the levels of exit onto floors of a building are enumerated, the movement upward into high alert implies the need for a corresponding seclusion away from the ground-level of usual activities and everyday life. Given that a lower level implies an ever-present potential for an ascent to a higher level, the use of this metaphor from early in the crisis assisted in preparing the public for a likely step-up in seriousness. When asked, for instance, what Level 3 would be like, the Prime Minister described it as “a waiting room where we wait it out and make sure we’ve got it right” (Shahtahmasebi, 2020). As this sub-metaphor implies, waiting rooms are both places where people need to be patient and spaces between the surveillance and anxiety of the consultation room and the everyday community spaces outside (Kearns et al., 2020).

The second spatial metaphor shaping the geographies of everyday life under COVID is termed bubbles. The bubbles metaphor was first developed by Dr Tristram Ingham from the University of Otago and was subsequently adopted by the Prime Minister and widely used in the New Zealand Government’s response to the virus. Dr Ingham’s goal was to make public health messages “simple and empowering so that people can have some sense of control” (RNZ National, 2020). Members of the public were urged to quickly identify “the people [who] will be in your life consistently over this period of time” and settle on your “bubble.” Arden offered a rationale for severe policies such as this by using everyday images. Kiwis should “stay local, in their bubbles,” she said, because driving to a distant destination could lead to a breakdown of protective strategies and situations in which others’ bubbles might be compromised. Those who knowingly broke their bubbles were subject to derision and, potentially, arrest. In vernacular, they were branded “covidiot” for letting down the team. Bubbles were most commonly to be household units, but extended bubbles could include, for instance, nearby elderly relatives. There could also be single-person bubbles, distinguished according to personal disposition by loneliness or tranquillity.

The bubble metaphor is malleable and, like levels, easily alludes to a familiar phenomenon experienced in everyday life. Bubbles can be of different sizes but, regardless, take the same form: enclosed spaces that can burst when they collide with other bubbles or objects. To emphasise the importance of maintaining an enclosed sense of social cohesion among one’s chosen household grouping, the implied transparency of a bubble is useful: You can look through bubbles to the outside world. Bubbles take up space but also move across space. In other words, performing everyday activities with, and within, your bubble is possible. Bubbles are also fragile and can easily be compromised. By implication, people had to be very careful to avoid popping their bubble and risking everyone contained within it. Furthermore, given the fascination with blowing and popping bubbles among children, it helps that bubbles are a fun and accessible metaphor for the seclusion within a chosen grouping deemed necessary to minimise viral transmission.

The third spatial metaphor deployed to socialise compliance with COVID restrictions is the team. This metaphor was easily adaptable to emphasising loyalty and commitment of purpose for a nation besotted with sporting successes. Evoking the talk of an All Blacks rugby captain, the Prime Minister repeatedly justified the rapid move to restrictions and border closures with the importance of “going hard and going early,” a reference to front-footing an assertive style of play. In her press briefings, Ardern spoke of “everyone on the team of five million having a part to play” (referring to the approximate size of the nation’s population). While a unit of social organisation, a team always plays somewhere, and that “where” is the playing field. In this case, the field
was the social landscape of the nation itself. Being on a team involves compliance to rules and, in the words of the Prime Minister “winning is important, but so is looking out for each other.” In other words, there is a moral dimension to any victory involving fairness to others through playing one’s part on the team. With kindness and resoluteness equally important, New Zealanders generally maintained their bubbles through levels of lockdown. On a playing field, a strong sports team needs a spirit and unity, not just the talents of a set of individuals. When the promise of moving down levels was within sight, Ardern said “the last thing we should do is celebrate success before the full-time whistle blows.” In other words, a team stays together on the field and continues the work until victory is officially declared. Extending the team metaphor out from sport to a military context, she also reminded the public not to be complacent: “we may have won some battles, but we haven’t won the war.” The “team of five million” metaphor therefore communicated the need for everyone to participate in “beating” the virus. Membership of the “team” was, in large part, the motivation for adhering to the imperatives of the other two metaphors (levels and bubbles).

To return to a theoretical vantage point, the three metaphors played a key role in constructing a narrative that helped “govern” the nation. In this sense, the metaphors assisted political and public health leadership and, drawing on Rose (1990), helped internalise responsibility of confronting the pandemic. With the escalation to Level 4, there was a heightened vigilance with which members of the public exerted this responsibility and extended a gaze upon each other. Many maintained an alertness to real or presumed transgressions from the expected lockdown norms such as coughing in public, excessive exercising, or standing too close to others in public. Hence, the levels and bubbles were the spatialised metaphors that sought to ensure our collective behaviour aligned with the expected public health goals and became operationalised as rules of social engagement in the team. Yet, as forums such as community Facebook pages became populated with reports of observed transgressive behaviour, this heightened public vigilance during Level 4 threatened to erode morale and undermine trust in the wider lockdown project. Arguably, therefore, this third metaphor—the team—assumed a more fluid and contentious role, sitting outside the more rigid frameworks of the other two metaphors.

5 | HOME AS A KEY SPATIAL SETTING

As an enthusiastic user of social media, each evening during the lockdown period Prime Minister Arden would complement her earlier formal press conference with a casual “chat” from home via Facebook in which she conveyed the key messages of the day but in a very informal style, “dressed down,” and without make-up. The tone was one of empathy, seeking solidarity with all those who had endured another extraordinary day without the routine of their usual activities. This home-based “chat” was in counterpoint to the more commonly used and business-like locations and styles of speaking to the public. These addresses via her cell phone were frequently laced with humour, one starting with her saying “Kia ora, everyone. I’m standing against a blank wall in my house—because it’s the only view in my house that is not messy” (Kapitan, 2020). In another, while talking, she noticed that her 2-year-old daughter had left her mark on her clothing. The messages often comprised a colloquially sketched version of her earlier-in-the-day press conferences while dressed casually in a sweatshirt, for example, and the day’s hairstyling no longer evident. Beyond these informal optics, however, is the significance of the “whereness” of her delivery: the home she shares with partner Clarke and daughter Neve.

This choice of setting was not only pragmatic but also can be read as a conscious act of solidarity with Kiwis whose domestic spaces had become characterised by blurred boundaries between home and work. Homes had become spaces where people had spent an unprecedented amount of time during the year’s lockdown. In this sense, these live-streamed chats were a strategic way of reaching the “team of five million” whose membership could be endorsed and affirmed through people potentially feeling connected with their Prime Minister through a more informal visitation to their household bubbles than press conferences allow. In the words of one commentator, “she spoke to Kiwis like an old friend, using the one-way (‘parasocial’) relationship with her audience to speak seemingly off the cuff about the day’s events and what she’s thinking ... she is ostensibly unfiltered—tired, often laughing (boosting) perceptions of her authenticity and expertise” (Kapitan, 2020).

That the Prime Minister chose to communicate casually via Facebook has significance. Facebook both generates and is generated by spatialised community (Witten et al., 2020). Community Facebook pages engage residents within an imagined, if not actual, neighbourhood and offer participants opportunities of interacting with each other for a variety of reasons. In the case of Jacinda Ardern’s Facebook livestreams, a widely dispersed community of interest (commonly over 20,000 tuned in) was engaged at a time of day when people were able to share the experience being in their
home environment, with interactions and questions via the comments function on Facebook adding to her invocation of the metaphor of the team of five million.

6 | CONCLUSION

New Zealand’s insular character arguably assisted containment and encouraged the aspirational goal of eliminating the virus. Ultimately, however, leadership has far outweighed islandness in influence. The science underlying these efforts is positivist in orientation, with epidemiology concerned with revealing singular truths about the origins, transmission and trajectory of the virus. Yet, as confusion over the meaning of “elimination” indicated, the language of science is not the dominant discourse in reconfiguring personal and social conduct in response to the pandemic. Spatial metaphors and the setting of the home have been critically important in shaping the contours of the political and policy response in New Zealand.

While metaphors can mean different things to different people, carefully chosen images can serve to rally a population around a cause and reshape people’s geographies of everyday life. This work of metaphorical discourse is what occurred in the messaging from public health and political leadership in New Zealand in 2020. The three key metaphors discussed (levels, bubbles, and the team) successfully produced compliant subjectivities and, following Rose (1990), internalised collective governance within the pandemic. Such was the power of the messaging early in the Level 4 lockdown that members of the public (“the team”) assumed a surveillance role, “dobbing people in” with reports on Facebook forums and making calls to the police. The first two metaphors (levels and bubbles) had thus effectively become tools of governmentality leading to the calling out of un-team-like behaviour. As a result, the existing emphasis on kindness by the Prime Minister and other leaders was arguably amplified and promoted as a counter-disposition to the potentially corrosive implications of over-vigilance within some communities.

In conclusion, given the invisibility of virus particles, and the relatively few community cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand, the population had to be “won over” and convinced of the need for compliance. That this occurred in New Zealand, and that the nation achieved no community transmission between April and August 2020, speaks to the power of clear messages. It also speaks to the strength of the metaphors chosen to do important work, enter everyday vocabulary, and generate resolve within a population at risk of fear and contagion.

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