

# *COVID-19 and the discursive practices of political leadership: introduction*

Article

Accepted Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Jaworska, S. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7465-2245>  
and Vásquez, C. (2022) COVID-19 and the discursive  
practices of political leadership: introduction. Discourse,  
Context and Media, 47. 100605. ISSN 2211-6958 doi:  
10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100605 Available at  
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/104687/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100605>

Publisher: Elsevier

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

## **COVID-19 and the Discursive Practices of Political Leadership: Introduction**

**Sylvia Jaworska & Camilla Vásquez**

At the beginning of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly unfolded and images of exhausted doctors in hazmat suits, patients on ventilators, and crematoria filled with dead bodies hit the news, political leaders around the world faced the momentous task of responding to this global health crisis of unprecedented scale. Although the properties of the virus, the patterns of its spread, and the harm that it can cause to the human body were the same in every nation, the responses from many of the world's political leaders in early 2020 were much more varied. For example, in March 2020 U.S. President Donald Trump reassured American citizens by predicting that the virus would disappear “like a miracle.” Similarly, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson tried to downplay the virus as a “scare story” and bragged about shaking hands with COVID patients. During the same time frame however, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden began announcing restrictions including national lockdowns. What became crystal clear to us in those early months of the pandemic is that what political leaders have to say as well as how they say it – that is, their discourse (both text and talk) – could not be more consequential. And the consequences of this political discourse clearly extended into all domains: our health, our personal lives, our work and our relationships with others.

Discourse is the trade and tool of politics and a large body of research from critical discourse studies has demonstrated that political discourse is an especially powerful tool. The political discourse during the COVID crisis has simply laid it bare again. How political leaders and their teams conceptualise the virus itself and frame its impacts in their numerous press briefings, public statements, official speeches and social media posts shapes not only our understandings of the pandemic, but more crucially, affects individual behaviours as well as public policies and public health outcomes. While the pandemic has emerged as a political and discursive challenge for leaders across the globe, it has also posed an opportunity; for some, an opportunity to set political divisions aside and achieve goals that serve the public good by minimising health risks; for others, unfortunately, a ‘timely’ chance to reinforce their political agendas, advance their self-interests and strengthen existing populist narratives.

The papers in this Article Collection all highlight the interactions between discourse and leadership during the COVID crisis with the authors sharing the basic premise that discourse is central to our understanding of leadership. Traditionally, leaders – especially effective leaders – were seen as possessing some special innate traits; their discourse was simply viewed as a reflection of this special set of skills and what they had to say as a transmission of information. More recently, scholars have emphasised that discourse is not a simple transmitter of information and meanings but constructs and performs them, at the same time, to create our sense of reality (Baxter, 2010). In this way, discourse is a vital resource that leaders use to present themselves in different ways depending on the context of situation and participants. Therefore, leadership is not necessarily the result of some inborn super traits but a processual activity or performance accomplished *in situ* through discourse (Baxter, 2010; Clifton, 2012; Fetzer and Bull, 2012; Clifton et al., 2019; Schnurr et al., 2015). The way that leaders communicate about what they do, or what they want to do, and how they interact with others (their teams, their constituents, as well as members of the press and journalists) is crucial to their success (Holmes et al., 2011). This is particularly pertinent for political leaders for whom saying the right thing at the right time can bring about the trust of the electorate and more voters. Adding to the performative and discursive character of leadership, each of the contributions to this Article Collection also highlights its mediated nature. Mass media and increasingly social media are essential platforms for leaders to present themselves as political actors and to inform and mobilise the public (cf. Fetzer and Weizman, 2006). Echoing Tagg et al. (2021), each of the contributors to this Article Collection have noted that what political leaders say and how they say it is thus also enabled and shaped by the various media they use for their communicative purposes.

Against this conceptual background, the Article Collection explores the media performances of several powerful political leaders with the aim of contributing to our understandings of political leadership as mediated discourse during a period of crisis. The focus of the 6 articles is on how leaders across different geopolitical contexts used discourse and media to ‘do’ leadership during the COVID pandemic, specifically, on the kinds of discursive strategies they utilised to enact authority and agency, to win public support, and to present themselves as effective political actors.

Our Article Collection showcases political leadership discourse enacted across a range of media, both older and newer forms of media, social media and mass media, in some cases blurring the lines between such distinctions. For instance, Jaworska, Hafner and Sun, and Vásquez examine

press briefings, a well-established genre of political communication, which have long been used even daily by politicians to project political messages to the public. Yet, it is also one which is currently broadcast, accessed, and recontextualized across multiple digital platforms. Each of these authors offers a different focus on COVID-relevant discursive leadership within press briefings. For instance, Jaworska compares German Chancellor Angela Merkel's speeches from press briefings during the first months of the pandemic with her public speeches given prior to the COVID crisis. Her analysis demonstrates a considerable change in Merkel's communicative style, which amplified the persuasiveness of the messages that she conveyed during the early days of the outbreak. Hafner and Sun's study, focusing on New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's communication, also takes a longitudinal and comparative approach. Whereas Jaworska's article focuses on the monologic portions of Merkel's discourse, Hafner and Sun's study instead focuses on the interactions between Ardern and journalists during her press briefings, and more specifically, compares how Ardern responded to journalists' questions during New Zealand's first and second outbreaks. Their analysis highlights how leadership is not a matter of individual action but rather a combined discursive effort of the leader, the leader's team, and members of the press corps. In contrast, Vásquez's study takes a synchronic perspective and focuses on a very specific moment of a press briefing from New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, held in the early weeks of the COVID outbreak in the U.S. (March 2020), in which Cuomo announced that his own brother had contracted the virus. Vásquez's analysis demonstrates how Cuomo uses the telling of a set of interconnected personal narratives about his family to underscore his COVID-related public health policies to his constituents, thus enacting both authentic and transactional leadership (Clifton et al, 2019) simultaneously.

The remaining three studies involve different media genres. Hunt's study focuses on South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's televised presidential speeches to the nation during the early months of COVID. While traditionally a more formal monologic genre than the dialogic press briefing, Hunt demonstrates how through his lexical choices Ramaphosa constructs these activities as 'family meetings', and by extension, constructs the nation metaphorically as a one large family. Exploring speeches given by the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in TV and radio broadcast, Sambaraju shows how Modi strategically utilises the media spaces for constructing different relationships with his audiences. On the one hand and similar to Ramaphosa, he constructs himself as a co-member of Indian families and frames the need for compliance as a familial responsibility

and an act of care; on the other hand, he also constructs relationships between audience members of different demographics (elderly vs youth) and certain professions (framers) emphasising the normative and moral expectations that are associated with them, for example, the normative expectation that younger people ought to look after the others, especially the vulnerable groups such as the elderly and the children. In this way, he attempts to achieve compliance not through direct instructions but through creating a sense of duty and obligation between citizens framing adherence to the restrictions as a moral act, while his own political duty to act as an elected prime minister is somewhat downplayed. Finally, Jones' study relies on data from both social media (Twitter) and mass media (i.e., media interviews as well as public remarks from political leaders and their spokespeople), and shows how Donald Trump and Boris Johnson's personal illness narratives remain consistent across multiple forms of mediated communication. Specifically, his analysis highlights similar masculinist discourses among both Trump and Johnson's narratives, in which they construct themselves as strong, resilient leaders whose illnesses made them even more qualified to lead: a message, which Jones points out, is ultimately counterproductive from a public health perspective.

Recognizing that mediated discourse is both context-shaped and context-renewing, the studies in this Article Collection take into account various layers of context, starting with the *sociohistorically* specific context of the outbreak of a global pandemic in a time of increased political polarization around the world and zooming into several different *geopolitical* contexts (Germany, India, New Zealand, South Africa, U.K. and U.S.). How the various leaders studied here responded to this public health crisis reflects the immediate socio-political and cultural realities in which they are situated. These are often directly articulated, as in the case of Ardern, who employs sporting metaphors to tap into the common cultural experience of many New Zealanders, or by Ramaphosa, who in his construction of a family, draws on multilingual repertoires available to citizens of South Africa. Cuomo too, relies on the trope of the family to unite New Yorkers – as well as others watching him from various states across the U.S. – as he reminds viewers that “it's my family, it's your family, it's ALL of our families” who have been directly affected by the pandemic. Angela Merkel conjures national unity in the often politically divided federal states of Germany, and Donald Trump and Boris Johnson interweave their populist agendas into the fabric of their responses, while Modi's addresses specify Hindu populations as the audience and thus, largely neglect the religious diversity of India, specifically its Muslim

citizens, which is part of his larger political and populist program. How the leaders acted and reacted, what they said and did not say was not just a product of the specific socio-political realities of the pandemic; they were also historically contingent. Historical specificities of the national contexts were often strategically taken up to persuade and mobilise, but also to create a distance to events that might evoke painful memories. This happens directly when Merkel draws on her upbringing in the communist regime of East Germany, where life and travel were subject to restrictions and surveillance. She knows what it means to have personal freedoms limited, yet the COVID restrictions are necessary because they can save lives. This also happens in more subtle ways, when, for example, Ramaphosa reverts to language that downplays the degree of control and power differences between state and citizenry because that characterised much of life under apartheid.

Because of the socio-political and cultural specificities and their historical contingencies, the cases of political leadership and responses to the pandemic explored in the contributions to this Article Collection cannot be directly compared; they must be explored and understood as products of their own socio-political contexts. Nevertheless, when reading the articles in this collection, some similarities emerge in the ways in which leadership is discursively constructed and performed. One of the common threads is the focus on inclusive membership – be it through the increased use of inclusive *we* (Hunt, Jaworska, Sambaraju), metaphorical framings such as those of citizenry as a family (Hunt, Sambaraju), or a team (Hafner and Sun), or personal life stories that position the leader as one of ‘us’ (Vásquez). Creating a sense of collectivity and building rapport to inspire and mobilise all people to follow rules was a dominant discursive strategy in the responses of Ardern, Cuomo, Merkel and Ramaphosa, whose discourse enacted relational or distributed leadership, based on working with others. Of course, the spread of a virus cannot be controlled or curtailed with only words; effective management of the pandemic depends on actions, specifically cooperation and collective willingness to give up some freedoms and follow precautionary measures and related restrictions. Yet words, especially when they are uttered by social actors occupying powerful government positions, can persuade and convince, and therefore nudge citizens to engage in actions that minimise health risks and promote safety for themselves and others. It is worth noting that the infections rates and deaths in Germany, South Africa and New Zealand stayed comparatively low during the first wave of the pandemic.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have two leaders Trump and Johnson (Jones) who relied on a different discourse often underpinned by lexical choices from the domain of war. The rhetoric here was based on self-presentations as strong, fighting ‘war’ heroes who are not afraid to take a bullet for the nation. Although both leaders learnt slightly different lessons from their experience of illness, the discourse that they disseminated promoted an authoritarian masculinist style of political leadership. This aligns with the general populist agendas that both leaders have pursued in their respective countries. Yet, this kind of rhetoric is not particularly helpful when it comes to the management of a pandemic; while the situation might appear as a ‘battlefield’, the kind of behaviours and traits that are required from generals and soldiers such as strength, courage and heroism are not going to ‘combat’ a virus and minimise risks. Modi stands here somewhat in between; he too attempted to create a sense of collectivity and mobilised the Indian people into compliance, yet his strategy was different from that of Merkel or Ramaphosa in that he ‘offloaded’ the adherence onto the citizens as the sense of duty and moral obligation, while his own agency was downplayed. It is perhaps against this background that the second wave of the pandemic hit India severely.

The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the power of discourse – especially the discourse of the powerful. More than ever, we need to carefully scrutinise the words and storylines produced by political leaders and other influential social actors. The contributions to this Article Collection adopt a range of different discourse analytical approaches and frameworks, thus extending the methodological repertoire normally used to study political discourse, which often relies primarily on critical discourse analysis. Hunt and Jaworska use corpus-assisted discourse analysis to identify features of discourse employed recurrently by Ramaphosa and Merkel in corpora of their respective speeches and press briefings. A corpus approach also facilitates comparisons. Using the technique of keyword analysis, both Hunt and Jaworska compare leaders’ COVID speeches with speeches produced during pre-pandemic times, showing the specificity of the leadership discourse in South Africa and Germany in the moment of the global health crisis. Hafner and Sun employ analytical tools from interactive sociolinguistics specifically framing, positioning and persuasive appeals to study what Ardern was doing with language in her interactions with journalists during press briefings. This allows the authors to offer an in-depth moment-by-moment analysis of how Ardern constructed her leadership as a joint activity involving herself, her government, citizens and the media. In doing so, she was able to promote a ‘strong’, ‘kind’, and collective response.



Vásquez, too, focuses on very specific moments in the public media performances of Cuomo, specifically the storying of his family's experiences, which he built into his official public broadcasts. She does so by adopting a narrative-as-practice approach, which allows for links to be made between the micro-elements of talk to the larger social and historical contexts in which that talk is embedded. Vásquez shows how personal and context-relevant family stories enabled Cuomo to construct himself as an authentic leader capable of producing compelling narratives to support his public health policies. Also adopting a narrative approach to analysis, Jones draws more specifically on frameworks developed to study personal experiences of illness, to which he adds the sociolinguistic notions of stance and affect. While the narrative approach allows Jones to show how both Johnson and Trump strategically used different stages of their illness journey to construct themselves as heroic leaders, the additional analytic focus on stance and affect reveals the underlying hegemonic masculinity embedded in both politicians' storylines. Sambaraju adopts techniques of constructionist discourse analysis to reveal the discursive ways in which Modi construct the relationships with his 'imagined' audiences as well as the relationship between the audience members.

As we write this introduction, a fifth wave of the pandemic is slowly receding mostly due to a swift roll-out of vaccination programmes (in Western countries). And while we are still in the midst of the health crisis, another political conflict unfolds rapidly on the Eastern borders of Europe as Russia invades Ukraine creating global uncertainties and tensions, and a danger of a nuclear war. It becomes again painfully clear that rhetorical propaganda manufactured through media has contributed to the conflict threatening the peace of the world. More than ever, we see the absolute necessity to pay close attention to what the politically powerful are saying and doing so that we can mobilise collective action, resistance and resilience to turn the tide. Discourse analysis provides us with useful tools for not only exposing selfish and populist agendas but also for highlighting examples of effective and appropriate leadership. To lead us through these crises, we do not need heroes. What we need are leaders who are capable of putting into action policies that will minimize harm, reduce inequalities, foster public safety, and work towards peace. This Article Collection is limited to a selection of leaders, contexts and media formats. There are many more instances of leadership across the world and types of media that need to be investigated. We hope this Article Collection will encourage further research into the discursive practices of political

leadership that offer novel analytical and methodological tools on which to build our collective knowledge contributing to resistance and peace.

## References

- Baxter, J. (2010). *The language of female leadership*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clifton, J. (2012). A discursive approach to leadership: Doing assessments and managing organizational meanings. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 49(2): 148–168.
- Clifton, J., Schnurr, S., and Van De Mierop, D. (2019). *The language of leadership narratives. A social practice perspective*. New York, Routledge.
- Fetzer, A., and Weizman, E. (2006). Political discourse as mediated and public discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38: 143–153.
- Fetzer, A., and Bull, P. (2012). Doing leadership in political speech: Semantic processes and pragmatic inferences. *Discourse & Society*, 23: 127–144.
- Holmes, J., Marra, M., and Vine, B. (2011). *Leadership, discourse, and ethnicity*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Schnurr, S., Homolar, A., MacDonald, M., and Rethel, L. (2015). Legitimizing claims for 'crisis' leadership in global governance. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12 (2): 187-205.
- Tagg, C., Lee, C., Vásquez, C., Eriksson, G., Anderson, C., and Fitzgerald, R. Discourse, context & media: Relevance in a changing world. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100468>