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Pape, T.

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Toni Pape (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

Soon after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the novel coronavirus was described as a "stealth virus" because those who carry it are highly contagious before they show any signs of infection. This is indeed a major public health issue: If people are contagious well before they show any symptoms, strategies of contact tracing and containment are bound to play catch-up. However, the label of the "stealth virus" was also instrumentalized, especially in political rhetoric, to insinuate a lack of transparency of the virus itself. This post briefly explores how the label of the "stealth virus" was rhetorically weaponized for political purposes.

It is important to note that this expression – "stealth virus" – is indeed a medical term. The expression itself was coined around 1910 to describe a pathogen that was only identified and named decades later: the "cytomegalovirus", abbreviated as CMV and a member of the family of herpesviruses (Griffiths 2012, ch. 1). CMV is a real "stealth virus" because infected people do not show any symptoms under normal conditions *ever*. Currently, "60 % of adults in developed countries and 100% in developing countries" carry CMV (ibid.). Yet, as with other herpes viruses, the carriers rarely if ever experience any signs of disease. Its stealthiness is really what makes this virus so successful: CMV can spread among populations for *decades* without any individual showing any symptoms. That is very different from the way in which the Sars-CoV-2 or the coronavirus behaves. This is a first indication that calling Sars-CoV-2 a "stealth virus" may be less about articulating its precise pathology and more about making it serviceable to a political discourse that values stealth and opacity in their own right. Indeed, when various political and social actors refer to the coronavirus as a "stealth virus" or "invisible enemy", they pursue a number of discursive effects that weaponize the opacity of the coronavirus for the purposes of controversy.

On March 18, 2020, then U.S. president Trump made a first effort to politicize the stealthiness of the coronavirus by referring to it as the "invisible enemy." He tweeted: "I want all Americans to understand: we are at war with an invisible enemy, but that enemy is no match for the spirit and resolve of the American people…" This talking point was subsequently repeated by politicians around the world. In the early days of the pandemic, the notion of the "invisible enemy" helped justify the imposition of the first fifteen-day lockdown in the US and elsewhere. In a speech a day earlier, Trump repeatedly mentions the "fifteen days" of the lockdown and explicitly connect them to the "invisible enemy" (see here). So because of the then estimated incubation period of roughly 10-15 days, life as we knew it would have to be disrupted for 15 days so that everyone could protect themselves from the virus and stop it in its tracks. Even though that didn't work as planned, the invisibility of the virus is here still discursively linked to its incubation period. It refers to the lack of transparent, reliable knowledge regarding a person's pathological status right after infection.

But by the same token it also refers to the political opacity of the virus. Same Trump speech: "We have to fight that invisible enemy. I guess 'unknown' but we're getting to know it a lot better." Jack Schafer argued in Politico that Trump pursued this rhetoric strategy partly to justify his earlier dismissal and political neglect of this clear and present danger to public health. This rhetoric serves the purpose of deflecting responsibility. The Trump administration's insufficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic can supposedly be explained by the fact that the stealthy virus simply couldn't be detected, that the enemy had the audacity of being invisible on top of everything else. This is of course a blatant lie cloaked in an obvious fact. The obvious: Viruses are invisible to the naked eye. The blatant lie: Inspite of being somewhat stealthy, the virus had long been detected by the WHO which, in turn, had informed governments in a timely manner.

But the notion of the "invisible enemy" is part of political discourse also to explain the lack of long-term strategies and to justify delays in political decision-making. This is partly due to viruses' higher rate of evolution, which means that they can out-evolve human attempts at capturing them. For example, in the fall of 2021, newspapers reported the emergence of a "stealth variant" of the virus' Omicron variant. This variant was called "stealthy" because standard PCR tests could not reliably identify it as the more infectious Omicron variant of the coronavirus; or differently put, it could not at first be distinguished from the Delta variant. But PCR tests could reliably identify the virus as Sars-CoV-2, just not which variant. That is why some science communicators have called the "stealth" label for this Omicron variant a "misnomer". But that makes it all the more urgent to ask what other reasons might motivate the use of the term "stealth." Here, the term "stealth" refers no longer to the incubation period, but to the fact that the available testing technology is bound to lag behind the development of the virus itself. You can only learn how to identify something after it has begun to exist. So the notion of "stealth" here accounts for a more fundamental, processual unknowability of not only the virus, but the future more generally. Certain futures, especially contingencies, cannot be predicted. Here "stealth" refers to the novel contingency that resists tech-based capture and thus predictability.

In combination with the talking point of "invisible enemy", this stealth rhetoric associates invisibility or unknowability with hostile behaviour. It suggests that the virus' opacity is part and parcel of an offensive act against the American people. On April 5, 2020, Trump tweeted: "We are learning much about the Invisible Enemy. It is tough and smart, but we are tougher and smarter." Designating the virus as a "smart" "enemy" thoroughly others it as an intentional threat: its intrusion into US territory becomes a willful act of attack rather than a matter of biological reproduction within a highly dense and mobile population of homo sapiens. And of course that willful act is also presumed to be hidden. Here the invisibility or stealth of the virus acquire the injurious connotation of willful deception. This also facilitates the war rhetoric that Trump promoted in his approach to the pandemic.

This effect is compounded by the repeated association of the virus with China. Trump called Sars-CoV-2 the "Chinese virus" dozens of times, an association that further legitimizes the militarization of the discourse around a public health crisis. This discursive triangle between the coronavirus, stealth, and China racializes the pathogen in a way that taps into old and new discourses of anti-Chinese fear-mongering. By casting the coronavirus as an outside threat from China, Trump's rhetoric stokes American "ideas of vulnerable sovereignty and xenophobia" (Chen 2012: 168). The discursive ascription of stealth lends itself to a politics of fear and even conspiracy thinking because it suggests that what we believe to see is not all that there is to the story.

In a culture that treats transparency as normative, discourses of stealth insinuate that a lack of knowledge results from the *deliberate* opposition to transparency. This insinuation of stealthy behavior also intimates potential alternative explanations for certain events. So the rhetoric of stealth helps proliferate alter-realities into our heavily media-based experience of the world. Discourses that ascribe stealth to others thus stoke controversy because they participate in the destruction of a shared sense of reality or truth.

References

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