Signalling 'Crisis' in an Affective Manner: Government, Media and Public Cooperation during COVID-19 in South Korea

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During the COVID-19 outburst in 2020, South Korea has operated a unique and successful plan to block the pandemic, while allowing workplaces and extensive parts of daily life to continue to operate. By July 2020, there were only around 13,000 diagnosed patients and less than 300 dead among a population of 51 million that was not put under lockdown. The most broadly mentioned reasons for that success are fast governmental response and the public's cooperation. I suggest that by using unusual visual markers during the media coverage of their actions the authorities managed to signal 'controllable crisis', in a manner that encouraged the public to follow the suggested actions voluntarily.

The media appearances of government officials during the crisis used verbal content and material symbols that drove the public to cooperate with unusual demands and suggestions. This marks a breach from the ways in which other recent crises such as the nuclear tension with North Korea, the sinking of the Sewŏl Ferry in 2014 and the Japan-Korea trade dispute in 2019 were handled. In these previous crises the public reacted with dissent and mass protests, voicing support for or objection to government policies.

Seoul has a unique democratic protest culture and several mass protests in the early 21st century achieved their goals; among them, the notorious weekly rally to impeach the president in 2016-7. The commonly generalized view expressed in world media that Koreans are docile citizens because of their Confucian heritage (for example, Escobar 2020; Purnell 2020) does little to address the actual reality. As my recent ethnography about protest in Seoul shows (Sarfati 2018), the Korean public has proved its power over policy makers through their mass dissent practices, which made the current government especially sensitive to the outcomes of dire conditions. Thus, when the Covid-19 virus outbreak began, the efforts to control the disease and minimize the damage where held simultaneously on the bio-medical and the socio-political levels. In order to implement severe measures, there was a need to signal 'crisis' in a fast and affective manner.

Signal is a word that has been extended into anthropology from its common usage in zoological research to indicate 'a means by which to stimulate an action' (Bertra 2014: 64). I find this word relevant here because, especially in matters of life and death, 'symbolic structures coming out of society must be able to find an equivalent in signals' (ibid.: 70). It is mostly outside the realm of conscious perception that signals are actors that produce human acts. In our times, affective signalling is performed increasingly through mass media that combines verbal utterances with symbolic images. In the case of the Corona pandemic, the danger has been both biological and social, creating confusion and severe regulations in many countries. Less so in South Korea.

The country has demonstrated fast, decisive and effective measures to stop the spread of corona through broad screening for the virus, immediate handling of local outbreaks and general readiness of the health system (a result of the Sars and Mers viruses outbreaks in 2003 and 2015). The five steps plan that the government advertised where nicknamed in English by the ministry of foreign affairs with the acronym TRUST, which stands for: Transparency (announcing publicly the confirmed patients' whereabouts), Responsibility (expecting the public to follow willingly the suggested actions, while the authorities are responsible for maintaining stability in the economy and daily life), United actions (joining the forces of government, research institutions and private companies), Science and Speed (innovative technologies and their fast implementation) and Together (no discrimination against certain social groups, and sharing knowledge globally). This plan was discussed at length in various media outlets.

The officials' outfits were among the most notable recurrent patterns in their media appearances to announce these actions. They used face masks and wore a light-yellow jacket, which is used only in emergency situations in Korea. In a society where wearing less than a formal suit in such media speeches is unthinkable, the casual pattern and outstanding colour of the jacket immediately drew viewers' attention. Moreover, the fact that all the officials, regardless of gender and rank, from the President to the Secretary of the health department wore exactly the same jacket also signalled solidarity and unison in the face of danger rather than normative hierarchy. From February 2020, Mun Chae-in, the President, and other government officials were often shown visiting hospitals, factories and markets wearing masks and the yellow jackets, thus signalling that life can continue but attention must be paid to the prevention of the virus' spread.

I use the word *signal* rather than *symbol*, because this outfit is meant to stir immediate response rather than a culture-informed observation. It serves as an unsettling object, which, like other signals in the world of animals, 'reveals the presence of a thing, a situation, an event, or a condition' (Bertra 2014: 64). Yellow jackets have been associated in Korea with national emergency since 1975, when the dictatorship passed the Basic Civil Defence Act [*minbangwi kibonbŏp*], and have been used by most presidents ever since to note an emergency or national grief over certain deaths. Yellow is a colour through which animals manifest that they are poisonous and dangerous creatures. Moreover, in Korea yellow has come to signify, in the past six years, social solidarity in fighting tyranny in the mass protests against former president Pak Kŭn-hye [Park Gun-hye] (Kim 2018, Sarfati 2018, Sarfati and Chung 2018). Thus, the yellow jackets have an established cultural significance.

Yet emergency yellow jackets were used much more extensively in the Corona crisis, spanning several weeks of constant usage, as opposed to singular media appearances in previous short-term crises. Koreans observing the informative presentations by officials clad in these jackets could not remain neutral. From the early days, they internalized the notion that the situation was alarming. This affective signal was augmented by numerous images of sanitizing crews wearing full protective gear, which always accompanied Corona news. These 'space travel style' crews demonstrated that governmental actions are in process at all times.

With proper signalling of the situation as a controllable crisis, the South Korean authorities managed to solicit their public's cooperation and slow the spread of the virus much better than other countries.

However, as the previous dissent movements in Korea prove, acceptance and public cooperation were not pre-secured reactions to the governmental efforts to signal crisis. The Korean public, who is the recipient of the signal, is not a naïve crowd that ignores the option of manipulation, tyranny and abuse by those in power. Thus, their cooperative response in the times of Corona is tightly related to the manner in which they interpreted that signal. Had they viewed the government as manipulative, they could have interpreted the signal for crisis as a means to control the crowd rather than a reasonable response to a health threat. The public has been aware of cases where 'manipulative signaling' was used through a fake demonstration of emotions (Leys 2017: 370-2). Such a manipulation is performed in order to extract a wanted reaction from the recipient for purposes that are not related to the signal. For example, when in 2016 the impeached president said that she cared for the Korean people, the public viewed this as a false statement.

On the other hand, in 2020, the government's signals were interpreted as 'uncheatable', which are impossible to fake (Leys 2017: 273). The suggested guidelines broadcast in media on a daily basis were not intended only to trigger a basic emotion of fear in the face of danger, but also to drive people to actions that were explained with scientific data. The public was called to use cognitive interpretation for processing and accepting the guidelines as the most rational path of action under the circumstances. There has been little legal outlining or enforcement of social distancing and other similar measures. Instead, the officials stated repeatedly that the public is asked to cooperate. Later, when some individuals or groups refused to be tested for Covid-19, they were prosecuted without much public objection.

Thus, when the authorities implemented self-supervised home-isolation and technological tracking systems to catch violators, people did not take to the streets to protest the breach of privacy rights. When certain groups, such as the Sinchonji Christian church refused to cooperate, no one objected to them being quarantined. Laws that allow doctors to test for Covid-19 even against patients' will were passed and accepted broadly. In general, the public has practiced social distancing, hygiene rules and mask use. The media appearances of government officials successfully signalling 'crisis', led to the perception of their actions as well-informed policies, and resulted in a joint effort to overcome the Covid-19 outbreak. Understanding the psychological as well as socio-cultural need for transparency, consistency, reassurance and scientific knowledge while learning that a crisis is looming was the baseline for the coordinated government-media coverage of the situation. Obtaining extensive public cooperation proved no less crucial than the professional management of the health system and bio-science.

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