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The Portrayal of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Media

1. Introduction

To begin, it is important to recall some facts from the time of the pandemic, which after three years is becoming blurred in our memory. In January 2020, Poland received news of a mysterious lung disease in the Chinese province of Wuhan caused by an unknown virus. The “Chinese virus” was visualized as a red sphere ringed by a “crown”, or corona, of protein protrusions, hence the name coronavirus. Images and diagrams of the coronavirus became an iconic symbol. Soon, the disease caused by it was named COVID-19.

News about the virus’ transmission began to alarm Europeans when an epidemic broke out in northern Italy on 21 February. The dramatic efforts of the Italians fighting against the virus and the introduction of sanitary isolation in Lombardy were observed with trepidation. There were reports coming from the area of several thousand infections, hundreds of deaths, and thousands of people under quarantine. The media depicted images of military columns transporting hundreds of coffins. There were reports of piles of corpses being stored on ice rinks due to the lack of space in cold stores. The overwhelming number of cases led to the collapse of the regional healthcare system.

The first infection in a Pole was confirmed on 1 March 2020, and within a week, there were already 31 confirmed cases. On 11 March 2020, the government decided to close all schools, services, workplaces and administrative offices, as well as the country’s borders, and mobilise the healthcare system and uniformed services. It is difficult even to describe the ensuing restrictions on social life, the economy, communication and culture, or the psychological state of people, who were forced into isolation from one another and were

receiving news about rising numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths with fear and apprehension.

In a panic, people began hoarding foodstuffs and hygiene products. The services of sewing establishments were sought as an alternative means of addressing the shortage of masks. People also made masks themselves at home. No one knew the answer to the question of when the epidemic would end. On 30 March 2020, the Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski announced the beginning of a long fight against the virus, expected to last for months or even years.

The press and the Internet started recalling historical epidemics, including the biblical “plagues of Egypt” (which included an “airborne plague”), the Greek plague of Pericles (5th century BC), malaria, which claimed the life of Alexander the Great (323 BC), the Antonine Plague in Rome (2nd century), the Justinian Plague in the 6th century, and recurring epidemics of the bubonic plague and cholera (14th and 18th centuries) [Rosalak 2001]. In Poland, the memory of contemporary epidemics was revived: influenza, the so-called “Spanish flu,” smallpox, typhus, “swine flu,” “bird flu,” AIDS and Ebola.

The pandemic was an unprecedented experience for the contemporary world, and therefore attempts were made to **visualise** it by representing something unknown and using what is known. Concepts such as war, waves, elements (fire, water, hurricane), and imagery from sports (football, marathon), and artefacts were used. Such metaphors were analysed and discussed in e.g. Nerlich 2020, Nerlich & Jaspal 2021 and Semino 2021. It is noteworthy that the discourse surrounding COVID-19, based on metaphor, was not unprecedented – a similar approach was taken during the influenza epidemic of 1918–1919 [Honingsbaum 2013].

2. War

The origins of the metaphor linking diseases with war and battle are ancient, and already in the Middle Ages, the plague was envisioned as arrows sent by Christ or angels to the earth [Sznajderman 1994]. The military/war metaphor in the medical narrative emerged in the 1880s due to the discovery of pathogenic bacteria (which “invade” and “infiltrate” the body, necessitating a fight against them) and the development of immunology as a science (Sontag 1999). Ludwik Fleck, an eminent microbiologist, argued that the concept of an infectious disease is based on the notion of a closed organism and hostile invaders (causative agents) who launch an attack, triggering a defensive response from the body, resulting in a conflict. According to this scientist, “the entire field of immunology is permeated with such primitive war-like images” [Fleck 1979: 59–60],

which trace their origins back to mythical beliefs that diseases were caused by attacking demons targeting humans. Thus, in a natural manner and in contemporary times, the metaphor of **fight/war** against the coronavirus emerged.

In illustrating use of the term **war/fight** during the pandemic, attention should be drawn to the following aspects: 1. War takes place within a specific **timeframe**; 2. War takes place within a specific **location**; 3. **Opposing sides engage in combat**; 4. They utilise **weapons (armaments)**; 5. The objective is to gain **benefits/victory**; 6. War can result in either **victory** or **defeat**; 7. Its participants are regarded as **heroes/victims**.

These aspects are reflected in the description of the battle against the coronavirus: 1. The war began in early March 2020; 2. Its battlefield is the entire world; 3. The opponent is: an enemy, an aggressor – the coronavirus, an unknown and impersonal entity with which people are fighting; 4. In this war, only the aggressor is “armed” – **the defenders have no weapons** (neither medicine nor a vaccine, which would appear only after a year); 5. The aim of the defenders is to preserve health and life. 6. This battle turned out to be a defeat for many people. 7. This war/battle without weapons primarily involves the active participation of healthcare workers, **medics**, and law enforcement personnel – soldiers/fighters who provide assistance to the **victims** of the war: COVID-19 patients and individuals isolated in quarantine.

The pandemic was also described as a medical war by figures such as the President of the United States, Donald Trump: “This is a medical war. We must win it. It’s very important” (“Time” 19 March 2020), Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo said: “We are fighting a war against this virus” (26 March 2020), and the then-presidential candidate Joe Biden (26 November, 2020) stated: “We are at war with the virus.” In the same spirit, President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro expressed his expectation that the quarantine, “this method of fighting the virus where everyone stays at home”, would soon come to an end (20 April 2020). Around the same time, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison made the following promise to his fellow Australians: “We will rebuild and we will restore whatever the battle ahead takes from us” (8 April 2020). In Europe, “war against the dangerous invisible enemy” was declared as well – by President of France Emmanuel Macron (in his address to the people on 16 March 2020) and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (at a press conference on 12 April 2020). On 17 March 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued an appeal urging the government to act as it would in a wartime situation. He referred to the coronavirus as “an enemy” that is “deadly” but also “beatable”. He also explained that in the face of such a threat, unprecedented steps should be taken “not seen since World War II.”

In Poland, the war metaphor was also present from the beginning of the pandemic. In an interview in “Gazeta Polska” (18 March 2020, p.10), Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski described the division of roles in this war by saying: “When facing an external enemy, which is the virus threatening us all, we must have one goal: to provide reliable information to the people.” He also defined his responsibilities: the role of the Minister of Health during the epidemic is somewhat reminiscent of the role of “the commanding general during a war.” Then, in response to a journalist’s question: “So, you are the Chief of Staff, and the Prime Minister is the Supreme Commander”, he clarified: “The Prime Minister is always the Supreme Commander” (“Gazeta Polska” 18 March 2020, p.12). A newspaper headline with the word *fight* – “Fight against the epidemic in the hands of oligarchs” – not only promised the involvement of various individuals, but also highlighted the frequent use of the words *fight* and *plague*: Ukraine’s Wealthiest Citizen “[...] **is fighting the plague** in the regions [...]”; The second wealthiest Ukrainian oligarch on the list “[...] **is taking the fight** against the coronavirus **upon himself** in the region [...]”; co-owner of the largest port in Odessa “**is helping to fight the epidemic** [...]”; “[...] getting involved **in the fight against the plague** in the Kharkiv region; this is what the map of the Ukrainian **fight against the coronavirus** looks like [...]”; the president asked them to help “**in the fight against the plague**” (“Rzeczpospolita” 27 March 2020, p. A10).

The pandemic, like any war, brought about drastic changes (usually for the worse).

The coronavirus sets different timeframes – just like in a war – a few days pass and suddenly we find ourselves in a different reality. [...] Managing a country at such a moment is a very difficult task. But in this ‘war’, where our doctors are and will be on the front line, once again, we, the Poles, matter. [“Gazeta Polska” 18 March 2020, p.17]

Even at the beginning of the pandemic, the efforts of those working in Poland in healthcare, psychology, education, and business were recognised. For instance, “even mBank analysts, who only a week ago expected that **the fight** against the COVID-19 epidemic would only lead to stagnation in Poland, now anticipate a GDP decline of over 4%”. (“Rzeczpospolita” 1 April 2020, p. A1). Similar words could be found in various sources:

The primary goal of the pro-Polish camp must be stabilisation, enduring the most challenging period of the epidemic and its social, economic, and political

consequences. Just like **in sports and in war**, there is a time for **offence** and a time for **defence**. (“Do Rzeczy” 16–22 November 2020, p. 3).

Among researchers of social behaviour, there are **proponents and opponents** of using military metaphors and referencing war. According to proponents, this metaphor has mobilised citizens, evoked heroism, and fostered the pursuit of victory: while scientists searched for remedies and vaccines, governments implemented special economic support measures (anti-virus shields); appeals were made for solidarity with seniors, people with disabilities, and the infected; dedicated hospitals, telemedical consultations, remote work, and remote learning were organised. The war metaphor is linguistically concise and carries significant meaning. It also began to be used to describe the acquisition of vaccines, such as *Vaccine wars* (“Gazeta Polska” 14 April 2021, p. 6). It should be noted that the initiators of the *Support for Doctors* campaign were motivated by their desire to appreciate “the immense dedication and heroism of Poland’s medical personnel” [Kaszuba-Janus 2020], and the CEO of the Belvedere Group, Artur Zymerman, also employed military rhetoric, stating:

The healthcare service plays a crucial role at present, engaging in a daily battle for our health and often our lives. We are well aware of the challenging conditions in which this battle is being fought – with limited contact with loved ones, and no time for moments of respite [...]. Through our assistance, we not only aim to provide support but also express admiration for our frontline heroes. [Kaszuba-Janus 2020]

Opponents of using this metaphor argue that it has negative psychological and social consequences due to experiences, memories, and familiarity with war discourses. In an interview with Dr. Krzysztof Tyburczy conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, a certain “gradation” of war can be observed. When asked by the journalist, “Do you feel like a soldier at war?”, the response was: “This is how I felt in recent weeks, but now we are entering the phase of the Warsaw Uprising or Westerplatte. And I’m afraid that at any moment I’ll start to feel like I am in a concentration camp, meaning that we won’t be able to help anyone” (“Sieci” 16–22 November 2020, p. 30–32). A year later, Krzysztof Simon referred to Poland’s defeat in the September Campaign: “I have been saying for a long time that we may be perishing like in a war, recreating our own September 1939. I warned that we might lose even 200,000 people. In any case, that’s the direction we are heading” (“Newsweek” 29 March 2021).

The metaphor of war evokes fear and even panic, makes it easier to accept death, and can trigger excessive emotional responses and the oversimplification of social messages (e.g., sensationalising the number of deaths). One drawback of perceiving an epidemic as a war is that this can make it easier to justify the lack of preparedness in hospitals during a crisis or the ill-considered steps taken by authorities, especially in the initial phase when there was surprise, akin to an unexpected enemy attack. Additionally, military metaphors can result in the oversimplification of messages and the construction of overly dramatic narratives, as seen during the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, where doctors were portrayed in the media as commanders or generals, and citizens were called upon to be ready and labelled as “SARS warriors” [Baehr 2006: 42].

Moreover, the principles of democracy can be undermined because governing bodies assume extraordinary powers. Opposition from citizens in such cases can be perceived as a lack of patriotism or even betrayal of the country. The military mindset towards the pandemic may stigmatize even the victims as insufficiently courageous, cowardly, and “deserving of their own fate” [Semino 2021: 36]. As a result of the aforementioned ambivalences, a global campaign called #ReframeCovid emerged on Twitter, promoting a departure from the war rhetoric. Its aim was to prevent negative associations with war and the scapegoating of Asians as enemies for spreading *the virus from Wuhan, China*, or the so-called *Chinese virus* that others are fighting against. Similarly, people who were sick or neighbours who did not adhere to lockdown or other sanitary recommendations were in many cases perceived as potential enemies.

The proponents of #ReframeCovid and many Americans advocated for the rejection of the war metaphor, e.g. “Using military language in reference to the coronavirus is dangerous and irresponsible, and the United States must stop doing so” [Tamkin 2020], “The war metaphors for COVID-19 are tempting but also dangerous” [Musu 2020]. Joining these demands, President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphatically stated in his Easter address to the people (11 April 2020): “No, this pandemic is not a war. Nations are not opposed against other nations, soldiers against other soldiers. It is a test of our humanity.”

Moving away from the war metaphor required alternative ways of portraying the pandemic situation, and following appeals to stop using such metaphors, other methods of representation were employed. The metaphors put forward by the aforementioned creators of #ReframeCovid can be classified into three main groups: natural disasters (such as fire, tsunami, avalanche), sports (including football, marathon, mountain climbing), and artefacts and other innovative associations (such as predator or hedgehog). These metaphors originated from various domains and highlighted specific aspects of the pandemic: the

initial phase, the presence at different intensities, the weakening of its activity, and the fight against it.

3. Wave

Subsequent phases of the pandemic, during which the intensity of virus infections either increased or decreased, began to be referred to as **waves**, and numbered accordingly. The concept of a **wave** was introduced early in the pandemic when experts predicted coronavirus mutations (similar to those in the flu virus) and an increase in infections during certain times of the year. The determination of successive pandemic waves was associated with the **R-factor**. If the value of R falls below 1, it is considered that the wave has ended. If R is greater than 1, it signifies the start of a new wave.¹ In April 2021, Minister of Health Adam Niedzielski stated:

Today's value of the R-factor, which indicates how many people, on average, an infected individual infects, is 0.89 for Poland. There is no region with a value above 1.0. This roughly means that one infected person infects less than one person. [“Rzeczpospolita” 16 April 2021, p. A5]

The first wave of the pandemic (before it was called a wave) lasted from March to the summer of 2020. The second wave occurred in autumn 2020, with the highest number of cases in November. The third wave hit in spring 2021. The fourth one was in December 2021 with infections mutated with the virus variant labelled *Delta*. The fifth wave occurred in spring 2022, involving the activity of the *Omicron* variant.

In lexicographic documentation, the lexeme *fala* (wave) is defined as follows:

1. ‘a moving swell formed on the surface of water, caused by the action of wind, seismic movements, moving objects (e.g., ships), and gravity;’
2. ‘the motion of flying bodies resembling water waves;’
3. ‘a phenomenon that resembles a water wave in terms of its force, repetitiveness, etc. According to *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego (Contemporary Polish Language Dictionary)* [2001: 246].

The most common collocations of this lexeme include: *wysoka // niska fala* (high // low wave), *fala przesuwa się // nabiera impetu, wdziera się* (a wave is moving/gaining momentum, crashing in), *długość fali* (wave length), *fala nadchodzi // odchodzi* (a wave is approaching/receding). The definition of a wave in

1 There is no unified international standard for defining waves over time; the pandemic unfolds differently in various countries.

the context of the spread of a virus includes the following facets: 1. **horizontal motion** – a wave is approaching/coming and receding/going away; 2. **vertical motion** – a wave rises and falls; 3. fluidity and repetitiveness of the motion; 4. the ability to determine its occurrence in specific locations.

The mentioned combinations of the word “wave” with action names occurred in reference to pandemic phases, for example:

The third wave of the coronavirus is weakening, and the number of new infections is no longer rapidly increasing. [“Rzeczpospolita” 16 April 2021, p. A5]

The fundamental strategy in dealing with the pandemic was similar in most countries – to **slow down** the **rising** wave of the pandemic [...]. However, when the second wave of the pandemic **hit** the EU countries, Germany [...] initiated bilateral negotiations for an additional purchase of the vaccine. [“Gazeta Polska” 14 April 2021, p. 7]

But when the COVID third wave **hit** Germany, [Angela Merkel] only called on her fellow citizens to remain calm in the face of this challenge. [Gazeta Polska, 14 April 2021, p. 9]

Countries that will manage to achieve population immunity and **prevent a third wave** will create a new global elite. [“Do Rzeczy” 1–17 January 2021, p. 65]

It is worth wearing masks when we are not in a park or forest. Masks and distancing are safeguards that can prevent the third wave **from reaching a level** that threatens the healthcare system. [“Do Rzeczy” 1–7 March 2021, p. 30]

Waves of the coronavirus pandemic **will** gradually **subside**, but they will not reach a point where they **completely disappear**. [“Rzeczpospolita” 20 August 2021, p. A5]

In the case of a **rapid development of a fourth wave** is the government prepared to quickly hit the brakes in terms of restrictions? [“Rzeczpospolita” 20 August 2021, p. A5]

The use of the word *wave* in various combinations was common and effectively depicted the pandemic. It represented the increase in the number of infections as a rising wave, and the decrease as a falling wave, as well as the direction of its approaching and receding. The term *wave* also appeared in combinations

like *to extinguish the wave of infections*, which may suggest that it was associated with a wave of fire (rather than of water or air).

On 14 July 2022, Professor Robert Flisiak stated that it was then possible to consider whether this was the seventh wave of the COVID-19 pandemic or a new type, COVID-22.

4. Natural disasters

4.1. Fire and wildfire

Among the elements, metaphors of **fire** // **a fire** are the most numerous due to the rapid spread and destructive power of this element, making it an appropriate source domain for phenomena that quickly intensify. In the Polish language, the lexeme *ogień* (fire) has a primary meaning: 1. ‘heat and light produced by the burning of bodies, visible in the form of flames and ember; flame’ commonly referred to in Polish as *pożar* (a fire). It is sometimes metaphorically used to describe intense emotional states, such as *ogień namiętności* (fire of passion) or *strzały z broni palnej* (gunfire). Common collocations include: *bać się czegoś jak ognia* (to be afraid of something like fire), *ogień szaleje* (fire is raging), *stanąć w ogniu* (to stand in the fire), *zaproszyć ogień* (to ignite a fire), *rozpalić // ugasić ogień* (to start // extinguish a fire), *pali się* (Fire!), *strażak* (firefighter).

Semino [2021], who analysed the discourse surrounding the pandemic in various languages, claims that imaging that uses fire as the source domain is an appropriate narrative in the context of COVID-19. With fire metaphors, the following issues can be effectively expressed and explained: 1. sudden danger and need for immediate response, 2. individual stages of infection and the role of the individual in the mechanism of virus transmission, 3. prevention of infection, 4. the role of the medical services, 5. the relationship between the pandemic and inequalities in access to healthcare and other social problems, 6. the devastating effects and aftermath of the pandemic. Fire metaphors are observed in many languages, including English, Spanish, Danish, German, Greek, Italian, and Polish. Below are some examples, as cited by Semino [2021: 54–56], illustrating the various functions of such fire metaphors.

See 1. In April 2020, when new daily infections were increasing fast in Rhode Island (quadrupling within a month), a “New York Times” article described it as “a state where the coronavirus is a fire raging”. In contrast, in May 2020, Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin described the situation in Ireland as *fire in retreat* but *not defeated*, and he added: “We have to put out every spark, smother every ember”. Similarly, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, who was praised for being an effective leader during the pandemic, emphasised

the importance of “active testing of those most vulnerable to COVID-19 while hunting down smouldering embers of the virus”.

See 2. The transmission of an invisible virus through something as innocuous as breath, and the inevitability of the pandemic’s spread in the absence of social distancing and mask-wearing was explained by scientists on the “Med-scape” website and writers for “The Atlantic” in the following way:

Think of COVID-19 as a forest fire. We are all trees. The value of the R-factor is the wind speed. The higher the speed, the faster the fire spreads deep into the forest. But, like a forest fire, COVID-19 needs fuel to keep moving forward. We are that fuel.

As Semino [2021: 55] points out, such a visualisation of virus transmission does not assign blame to anyone, while emphasising that every individual poses a potential risk.

See 3. The rhetoric of fire and forest fire helps people understand the mechanism of virus transmission and serves a persuasive function, urging caution and adherence to sanitary guidelines. In the above quoted passage from “Med-scape”, the author continues: “Several firebreaks – quarantine and social distancing – prevent the fire from igniting all the trees”. The metaphor of embers has a further continuation:

If only we could refrain from scattering embers every time we speak or cough, fewer people would catch fire. Masks enable us to do that. Since we cannot be certain who is sick, the only solution is for everyone to wear a mask. Wearing a mask also benefits the wearer, as fewer fires mean a lower likelihood that we will all be ablaze. My mask protects you, your masks protect me. [Bryła & Bryła-Cruz 2021: 93]

See 4. Within the metaphor of fire, healthcare workers are likened to firefighters who selflessly rush into *raging flames*. By illustrating the same risks and endangerment, it serves as an argument to persuade people to wear masks, as “our firefighters would not be overwhelmed in that case” [Semino 2021: 56].

See 5. The metaphor of fire also proves effective in highlighting existing social crises and problems, such as unequal access to healthcare or difficult living conditions resulting from poverty. A reporter from South Africa (Hlengiwe Ndlovu from the University of Johannesburg) emphasised that in slums, where people are crowded in unhygienic conditions in small spaces without the possibility of self-isolation, the virus spread incredibly fast, like fire. “Just one spark

is enough to engulf the entire settlement.” In some cases, the metaphorical fire was already burning, meaning the situation was dire before the pandemic hit, and the coronavirus *added fuel to the fire*, for example, in the context of pre-existing tensions in American prisons or on an individual level concerning long-term mental illnesses [Semino 2021: 56].

See 6. The fire and wildfire rhetoric surrounding COVID-19 also provides the means for linguistic creation of the post-pandemic reality. In such cases, the emphasis is placed on being prepared for future pandemics and preventing such epidemic crises altogether. Microbiologist Peter Piot expressed this sentiment in the following way:

I hope we take the lesson that we cannot afford to form a fire brigade when the house is already burning. It must be in a state of readiness at all times, with the expectation that it will never be used. [see: Bryła & Bryła-Cruz 2021: 93]

In March 2020, journalist Paolo Costa wrote about the future using an extended wildfire metaphor, emphasising collective responsibility in preventing future pandemics. He stated:

It is not only the new outbreaks that keep emerging, which we must extinguish, or the vast areas of fire that need to be contained when the situation worsens, but it is the duty of each individual to daily collaborate in the reclamation of the soil, so that sparks, ignition sources, and more or less harmful actions do not cause irreparable disasters now and in the future. [see Bryła & Bryła-Cruz 2021: 93]

The metaphor of fire made it possible to indicate similarities and differences in the development of the pandemic in different countries. For example, “in Italy, the course of the pandemic resembled a rapid outbreak of fire that shot flames high up and then started to die down. In our case, it is more like slowly smouldering coal, without big flames, but the heat persists for a longer time” [“Sieci” 29 June – 5 July 2020, p. 49].

In fire-related metaphors, the term “bonfire” has also been used, which has a primary dictionary definition of ‘a stack of combustible material burning outdoors’, with collocations such as the bonfire is burning, flaming, dying out. Another confirmed meaning in lexicons is ‘a place from which something spreads, a centre, a source, a habitat of something; ‘the hotspot of an epidemic (literally “the fire of epidemic”), a centre of science, art or culture) (literally “a fire at a centre of science, art or culture”): During the pandemic, the word “ognisko” (hotspot) was used in the sense of a place // territory with

COVID-19 infections. This second established meaning was utilised in the following context: “The strongest, albeit diminishing, **hotspot** of the pandemic is in Latin America” [“Polityka” 21–27 October 2020, p. 11]; “Hotspots of the virus will continue to occur here and there for a long time” [“Polityka” 14–20 October 2020, p. 15].

In just one article titled *China: COVID-19 Infection Hotspot Emerges in One of the Cities* (“Rzeczpospolita” e-issue, 12 November 2021), the following connections with the word *hotspot* (of the pandemic // cases) were mentioned: authorities in Beijing called for faster *containment of the hotspot*; local infection hotspots *began to emerge*; the goal is to completely extinguish the emerging **hotspots**; in order to **control the hotspot** more quickly.

In the article *How to Extinguish Future Pandemics*, Maria Alicja Trzeciak used the rhetoric of fire and a fire both to illustrate the spread of epidemics and to emphasise the need for prevention in the future. The author emphasises that after controlling an epidemic, vigilance must be maintained. “When the flames become smaller, one should not be deceived by apparent safety.” It is precisely at that moment that the situation should be analysed, “the causes of the fire sparked should be identified,” and preventive actions should be developed.

4.2. Natural disasters

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been described using a narrative typical of extreme weather phenomena and catastrophes such as storms, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, avalanches, and volcanic eruptions. Both the pandemic and natural disasters have immense destructive power, they emerge suddenly, and are difficult to control. The popularity of such metaphors may also be attributed to the fact that the 21st century has witnessed various global catastrophes extensively covered in the media.

In the headline of an article from “Newsweek” (17 October 2020), the phrase *Coronavirus? We are in water over our heads* is used, which vividly depicts both the helplessness and tragedy of the situation in the face of the pandemic. Below are similar references to natural disasters:

It’s like a flood wave. When a flood wall fails in a certain area, water engulfs us. We are at a point where the wave of the epidemic has breached the defences in many places, and the water is slowly engulfing us. [“Sieci” 1–11 October 2020, p. 89]

Unfortunately, it happens that patients come to our hospital too late, when the cytokine storm is already starting. That’s when the disease takes a thunderous course. [“Sieci” 1–11 October 2020, p. 89]

And yet, COVID-19 has caused an earthquake, dismantling civilisation, degrading culture, education, and media, and shaking ethical principles... ["Sieci" 28 December 2020–3 January 2021, p. 44]

Andrzej Horban, expert and chief advisor to the Medical Council at the Prime Minister's Office in Poland, often spoke figuratively about the unpredictability of the epidemic, for example: "**A storm is coming, but** we don't know **exactly when the lightning will strike**. Sometimes it happens out of the blue". In an interview with "Rzeczpospolita," he stated that we were close to the upper limit of an extraordinary epidemic, and we should make every effort not to exceed that limit. "This is the result for the first half of this year, during which the coronavirus pandemic **ragged**" ["Rzeczpospolita" 1 September 2020, p. A23]. *COVID Pushes Europe into the Arms of China* (headline) ["Rzeczpospolita" 1 September 2020, p. A6].

Metaphors based on extreme weather conditions and natural disasters focused on the destructive effects of COVID-19 on the healthcare system, for example: "It is in Madrid where there are the most tensions in coping with the avalanche that has hit the healthcare system", said Prime Minister of Spain P. Sánchez [2020]. "[Professor Hugh Montgomery] said there would be a 'tsunami' of new cases in London within the next two weeks and that there would be a shortage of beds in hospitals" [Trigger 2020]. "Beds and medical staff are running out. We have triggered an avalanche that cannot be stopped quickly, claim epidemiologists" ["Newsweek" 17 October 2020].

The pandemic has often been compared to catastrophes that have a destructive impact on the economy and pose a threat to human life. Sometimes statements have even emerged suggesting situations that it was worse than: "We had various procedures in place on the ward before, knowing what to do in case of a major explosion in the city or a Boeing 737 disaster, but we were not prepared for a pandemic on this scale" ("Newsweek" 14–20 September 2020, p. 33).

5. Sports

In the case of sports metaphors, the focus is often on the confrontation with the opponent (where the virus is the player that needs to be defeated) and the effort required to overcome a challenging distance (similarly to a long-distance race or mountain climbing, the pandemic demands endurance, determination, and patience).

"You can't win a game just by defending. Sometimes it is you that has to attack," said Chairman of the World Health Organization T.A. Ghebreyesus (11 March 2020). "We are in the midst of a marathon, and we have to prepare for the fact that it will be a long time for us," said Prime Minister of Sweden S. Löfven

[Semino 2021: 53]. “We are not yet at the top of the mountain,” said President of Bavaria M. Söder (2020) in his Easter address to the people on 11 April 2020.

On 1 December 2020, during an interview on Radio Zet with Olympic psychologist and three-time Polish Curling Champion Katarzyna Selwant (2020), the entire conversation was based on the metaphor of a marathon. For instance, the journalist asked the following question:

Assuming that a vaccine for the coronavirus will be available next year, we are in the final stretch. What stage of the marathon would you compare this to?

Or

Before our conversation about marathons, I found some advice for beginner runners. First: Run your own race, don't compare yourself to others. Would you say that's good advice?

Katarzyna Selwant responded in a similar manner, comparing the societal fatigue caused by the pandemic to the “wall” experienced by marathon runners. This “wall” refers to the physical and psychological crisis often encountered by runners due to fatigue, muscle stiffness, and low carbohydrate intake. Selwant emphasises the importance of taking a moment to rest, hydrate, consume nourishment, and calm your thoughts during this period. Similarly, during the pandemic, it is important to remain mindful of your own reactions. Selwant advises: “My suggestion is to go at your own pace. I am not in favour of the principle: fall down – get up. I support the principle: fall down – rest”. Selwant also recommends staying focused on the goal (the metaphorical finish line) rather than dwelling on what not to do: “[...] if we constantly think about what not to do, our brain will be fixated on it. If my goal is to stay healthy, mentally it sounds: I remain healthy.”

The journalist also commented on the differences between a marathon and a pandemic, highlighting that we entered the pandemic unprepared. Selwant responded: “We were not prepared for this situation, but that was back in March. Now, just before Christmas, we have gained some experience from the spring, and it is easier for us to implement certain solutions in our lives. It's like we've already completed one marathon.” As can be seen, the domain of long-distance running accurately captures selected aspects of the pandemic.

6. Artefacts

In addition to predictable and unoriginal comparisons of the pandemic to war and natural disasters, more elaborate associations emerged in the public

discourse which had a strong impact on the audience's imagination due to their novelty. A particularly original comparison is the analogy between the response to the pandemic and the behaviour of a hedgehog, which appeared in the Norwegian language. According to this metaphor, "if someone intends to be a hero in these times, they should behave like a hedgehog. Do not roar like a lion or fight like a giant, but curl up in a ball and wait, hoping for better times" [Semino 2021: 53]. This attitude strongly contrasts with the combat tactics prevalent in war metaphors, expanding the meaning of heroism. In the hedgehog metaphor, every citizen is responsible for the transmission of the coronavirus, and their heroism lies in taking care of their own safety, building immunity, maintaining social distance (arming themselves with spikes), and patiently enduring the inconveniences resulting from isolation and restrictions.

The source domain of an "animal" was used to illustrate responsible behaviour during quarantine. The coronavirus itself has also been compared to animals, portraying it as a living part of nature. Interestingly, in the Polish language, an analogy was observed between the virus and predatory animals that pose a threat to humans: "We sit in our homes like in caves. We protect ourselves from the predator that is the coronavirus" (Justyna Wawrzyniuk in a stand-up comedy performance, 27 April 2020). In the Croatian language, it was referred to as a domestic animal (*domaća životinja*), probably due to the fact that it invaded households and coexisted with people. In "Fakty" (25 April 2020), the virus was compared to a horse: "The horse ran out of the stable before we made a move."

Especially in the early stages of the pandemic, emotional and personal statements from survivors or their loved ones frequently appeared. The widow of a COVID-19 victim shared her story: "COVID was a huge surprise and [source of] distress [...]. It was like **slamming a door**, taking away his chance [for treatment]" [Newsweek 30 November – 6 December 2020]. A columnist in "Do Rzeczy" (21–27 September 2020, p. 93) compared the pandemic to a show with actors and spectators: "When I told my acquaintances, hungry for news from someone who personally participated in **the great historical spectacle of 2020**, they all nodded their heads understandingly".

In the narrative about the coronavirus, it was often emphasised that everyone has an impact on the course of the pandemic. The concept of a **virus transmission chain** was used, in which people unknowingly become the links: "In this way, an **infection chain** is created, often starting in the workplace, spreading from there to homes, and then, with each infected household member, spreading to other companies and offices" ["Sieci" 6–11 April 2021, p. 35].

Andrzej Horban in a Facebook post (5 November 2020) compared the pandemic to **driving a car**. He expressed the view that *we are very close to hitting a wall* in terms of the resilience of the healthcare system:

And rightly so, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health said: we are hitting the brakes. I'm sitting in the back seat. I've had a few car crashes in my life, so I know what it looks like – we're pulling off to the side of the road, skidding. We are currently in such a place. Even those in the back who never fastened their seat belts are fastening their seat belts out of fear. Either we'll crash into a wall, or we'll manage to get back on the right track with minor injuries, because at this point, there won't be any injuries without consequences.

These injuries are deaths, illnesses, and “enormous problems for the healthcare system”. In other individual statements, the pandemic was portrayed as fuel and a lottery, for example: *The pandemic fuels e-commerce* (“Rzeczpospolita” 1 April 2020, p. A 21); *The Covid lottery* (“Polityka” 21–27 October 2020).

Colours were also used to illustrate the intensity of the pandemic. In Poland, in the autumn of 2020, the level of infections began to be calculated at the county level, using the criterion of the number of infections per 10,000 inhabitants: fewer than 6 cases – green zone; 6–12 cases – yellow zone; above 12 cases – red zone. Sanitary rules were formulated for each of these zones. The colour scheme used is symbolic – red (representing blood) signals danger, threat, and draws attention, similar to a stop sign. In media messages, black (associated with mourning, death, and sadness) was also used, for example: *another black record* (“Wiadomości” 26 April 2020), *black meters* (“Wiadomości” 18 April 2020), *black weekend in the history of emergency services during the pandemic* (“Fakty” 17 April 2020).

7. Summary

The pandemic turned out to be a major shock for societies worldwide, which had not previously experienced diseases and infections on such a global scale. Belief in the capacity of science to solve all human problems was shaken, resulting in great fear and helplessness. In this situation, questions arose about how to talk about the coronavirus and the pandemic. Narratives about historical epidemics of infectious diseases resurfaced, and concepts from that rhetoric were drawn upon, mainly those related to war and natural disasters. New images of the pandemic as a sporting contest or a game were also created. However, it seems that despite evaluating the effectiveness of individual images as more or less accurate, there will never be a universal way to depict such a complex and challenging reality.

Translated by Ewa Kisiel

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The Portrayal of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Media

The aim of the paper is to present and discuss the portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic in the media. Our primary focus is on Polish press articles, supplemented by occasional references to international sources. The analysis reveals that, much like in previous pandemics, the media narrative around COVID-19 is heavily metaphorical, aiming to simplify the understanding of this unfamiliar event. The most common metaphors involve war and battle, which have sparked controversy and significant criticism for their militaristic connotations. Our paper also examines alternative representations of the pandemic, such as natural disasters (with the fire metaphor being particularly apt), sports (including football, mountain climbing, and marathons), and other innovative comparisons (comparing the pandemic to an animal, driving a car, etc.).

KEYWORDS: pandemic; coronavirus; metaphor; language; media.

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