

EOC Files (April 2021)

Letter to the Editor of South China Morning Post

Dear Editor,

Recently, there has been a surge in the pandemic risk level, and yet again we see the danger of an entire community being targeted as a consequence. While it is normal for media outlets to give factual details such as the race, age, occupation, area of residence, movements etc. while reporting on COVID-19 cases, this needs to be done with care and objectivity so as not to become a dangerous generalisation of an entire group or community of people. With the coronavirus still lurking in our community, we are bound to face such situations over and over again. It is important that the reporting on the pandemic be done in a manner that is sensitive to the impact it could have.

In that regards, I wish to commend the *Post* for its mature coverage of news since 17 April related to the first local case of the N501Y variant in Hong Kong. Unlike some other publications with front-page headlines blatantly associating the race of the infected person with suggested unruly behaviour and the risk of community spread, the *Post* chose to either avoid all mention of the person's race or report it in a factual manner.

Given the previous reactions we have seen in the form of hate messages and discrimination against entire communities based on reports of infections among their members, we are glad that the *Post* chose to deal with the detail with the details with objectivity and sensitivity.

In volatile times, some people tend to look for scapegoats. Hence the media has an increased responsibility to avoid fomenting tensions. We have seen the backlash on certain communities following the breakout of infection clusters.

South Asian construction workers were stopped from going to their work sites, Indian and Pakistani food delivery staff were targeted by customers, and there have been other openly discriminatory acts. Social media lit up with hate messages vilifying South Asians. I am worried of a repeat of this with the latest reporting of the new variant.

Our society needs to be united to fight the pandemic effectively. Adding social tension to the mix is hugely detrimental and a disservice to all those who are working hard to contain the situation. The virus is not a slave to human boundaries of country, creed, language or colour. If anything, it is a great leveller in many ways.

I urge members of all media to exercise caution and restraint while using racial descriptors in their reporting. The written word carries immense power and with great power comes great responsibility.

The power of the written word is aptly captured in this quote by Friedrich Nietzsche, which should serve as a warning to all, *"All I need is a sheet of paper and something to write with, and then I can turn the world upside down."*

Ricky Chu
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

(The letter was published on [South China Morning Post](#) under the title of “Mutant Covid-19 strain in Hong Kong: media must avoid fueling dangerous generalisations” on 23 April 2021.)