

Objectivity in the historiography of COVID-19 pandemic

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Abbreviations

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019; WHO, World Health Organization.

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Abstract

The world is facing a once-in-a-lifetime situation: the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the World Health Organization announced an infodemic as well. This infodemic caused infollution and sparked many controversies. Pandemics as extraordinary occurrences are always attractive to historians. However, infodemics and biased information threaten objective history-writing. Objectivity as it regards historians is already a much-discussed subject. In this commentary, the fundamental theories about objectivity are delineated. Second, the relationship between the infodemic and COVID-19 pandemic is explained. Lastly, the problems regarding objectivity in the historiography of the COVID-19 pandemic are explored.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; infodemic; historiography; objectivity; fake news

History and objectivity

Events affecting people, society and the world have often been the subject of research. The science of history is to examine the events in the past, to discover, collect and organize the necessary information for this examination, and to follow a consistent methodology throughout this process. Historiography, on the other hand, examines the methods used by historians, actual writing of history, and diversified interpretations of the historical event. E. H. Carr in his influential book defines history as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” [1]. Through the lens of historiography, however, it is debatable whether this continuous process results in objective history writing.

There is a large literature on the history of epidemics as they are one of the events that affect humanity and change the course of history. The COVID-19 pandemic started in 2019 and disrupted the ordinary course of our lives, causing a new normal to form. For this reason, it is an attractive event for historians. However, as stated above such historical events have various interpretations. In this article, I have tried to frame the main problems regarding the objectivity of the historiography of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The discussion of objectivity in historiography centers around the question of whether objectivity is “possible” in historiography. The dominant paradigm of post-Enlightenment Europe, the positivist system of thought, adopts the view that causality and objectivity in natural sciences would also be valid in social sciences. The idea that there could be some causal laws in social sciences, just like in natural sciences, led to the adoption of a positivist approach among social scientists living in this paradigm. The concept of the objectivity of the positivist paradigm accepted the existence of true knowledge above time and space, freed from personal and social values [2]. History has been one of the areas among the social sciences first influenced by a positivist epistemology, in terms of its relationship with the lived and with the search for causality between events as in the natural sciences. Leopold von Ranke, the pioneer of modern historiography, gave importance to archives, made lecture circles with his students, and developed an understanding of history in which sources play a central role in historiography. According to Ranke, there is a reality independent of time, place, and the viewer, and the historian with this approach is obliged to show “how things actually were” (in German: wie es eigentlich gewesen ist) by looking at the facts in historiography [3]. With this approach, he especially assigns the historian to a position that researches facts and works on sources. He asked his students to access primary sources in the archives, find documents and bring them to the lesson, and discuss archival documents in his classes. He is accepted as the pioneer of critical history in this respect [4].

Various objections were raised to this positivist approach in the 20th century, and staggering developments in historiography took place with the historical interpretations of philosophies such as empiricism, postmodernism, and feminism.

Postmodern philosophy can be described as a philosophical movement that emerged as a critique of metanarratives on issues related to history, culture, identity, or language. As Jean-François Lyotard stated: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” [5]. The science of history was based on meta-narratives and natural laws, especially after this positivist movement. For this reason, it was directly exposed to the critical-arrows of postmodern philosophy. Postmodernist philosophers

generally argue that truth always is historical and contextual rather than being absolute and universal, and that truth is always partial and “problematic” rather than complete and precise.

In postmodern philosophy, reality does not only change from society to society, from time to time, from person to person but is shaped through personal narratives. Therefore, according to the postmodern view, objective historiography is not possible.

COVID-19 infodemic and fake news

COVID-19, which started with pneumonia cases of unknown cause in China at the end of 2019, spread to the world in a short time. After the rapid increase in cases in China, first the city of Wuhan, then Hubei province was isolated. With the emergence of new cases in neighbouring countries and then in Europe, this pandemic made it necessary to take measures that would seriously affect daily life. As of March 11, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization [6]. While restrictions such as social distance, the obligation to wear masks, and curfews affected people's lives, the days spent at home – in quarantine – resulted in their use of mass media for a longer period. While much content was produced and circulated to reduce the spread of the epidemic, the continuous updating of the information about the disease affected the reliability of these circulating contents. In addition, the contradictions between the opinions of the experts who expressed their opinions on the subject, the inability of some countries to take quick action in the face of the severity of the epidemic, and the political discourses of their administrators confused the people who were exposed to unfiltered and unconfirmed information. So much so that while some countries such as Turkmenistan banned the term “Coronavirus”, new cases were detected in a short time by conducting a large number of tests in countries such as South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan [7, 8]. The information produced every day about the epidemic in social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, conspiracy theories circulating in Whatsapp groups, analysis videos published on Youtube channels linking the pandemic and bioterrorism, and similar content caused the official statements to lose their credibility. In addition, the number of detected cases, deaths due to COVID-19, and secret photographs of cemeteries caused governments to be questioned by their citizens. During the pandemic, social media companies failed to fight fake news [9]. Hearsays were always on the stage when epidemics show up. However with the COVID-19 pandemic WHO defined the infodemic and associated it with the pandemic for the first time [10, 11].

Objectivity in the historiography of the COVID-19 pandemic

Some challenges await the historian working in the history of medicine or the field of epidemics. While COVID-19 takes its place among the epidemics of history, the historian who attempts to describe the event after the events have taken place will encounter these difficulties in writing the history of this pandemic. To list the main difficulties faced by historians in general; choice of subject, the problem of historical knowledge, the problem of explanation, objectivity, access of the historian to the sources, reliability of the sources, etc [12]. Where it regards the difficulties of objective writing about the COVID-19 pandemic, we can see the two main problems at first glance:

- The problem of the objectivity of the knowledge sources
- The problem of the historian's objectivity (Table 1)

Table 1 Objectivity problems of COVID-19 historiography

| The problem of the objectivity of knowledge sources | The problem of the historian's objectivity |
|---|--|
| Incorrect information in circulation | The historicity of the historian who reads the past |
| • The manipulation force of government policies and political actors on circulating information | • From the structuralist point of view, the effect of the historian's past on his view of events |
| The problem of the objectivity of information transferred to the future | The influence of values and political atmosphere on the historian |
| • The claim that the history is the history of the winners | • The current political atmosphere, policies, values of society, and social experiences guide the historian. |

When writing the history of a past pandemic, the accuracy and reliability of the sources to be consulted is important. The objectivity of this information can be problematic in two ways. Due to the constantly updating and controversial nature of the information on COVID-19; the information in circulation can be inaccurate and biased. At the same time, this information, which will be used as a source, is affected by the political atmosphere of the period and state policies. Governments can interfere with statistics such as the number of (potentially) detected cases, and the number of deaths, to show their successes or to cover up their failures in the fight against the epidemic. This will negatively affect the objectivity of historiography. Another problem is related to the possibility of the non-objectivity of the knowledge that is transferred to the future. Sources such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube, where a lot of data was produced during the pandemic, are mostly full of subjective information. It is also uncertain whether these sources will be accessible at the time of historiography. On the other hand, what is transferred to the future from the information produced on a subject is open to manipulation and intervention. Although attributed to W. Churchill, as many have said: "...history is the history of the winners". For this reason, the objectivity of knowledge sources depends on the protection of this information without screening, which does not seem very possible.

The objectivity of the historian during historiography can be considered problematic in two respects. The first is the historicity of the historian who reads the past. From a constructivist point of view, the historian has a unique background and unity of experiences. The historian's background will have a compelling impact on the historiography of COVID-19. For example, if the historian has asthma or has experienced shortness of breath and suffers from this disease, it can be claimed that he will display a subjective approach due to his bodily experience, even though the sources of knowledge are objective. In other words, if we accept the proposition that "personal-narratives affect the historiography", then objectivity seems impossible. Another problem is that the values of the society in which the historian lives, the political atmosphere, and the available scientific information have an impact on the written history. For example, when the history of the Spanish flu is written by someone who has not experienced any pandemic before COVID-19, in a year with readers who have not experienced any pandemic, it will be different from the version written during COVID-19.

In conclusion, it can be argued that historiography of COVID-19 will not be objective without solving the problems of the objectivity of the

information sources, and of the objectivity of the historian.

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