Covid-19, The New York Cityscape, and The New York Times

Introduction

New York City (NYC) has a long history of infectious disease epidemics, ranging from yellow fever and cholera in the city's early years to HIV/AIDS in the late 20th century. In the spring of 2020, the city faced a novel threat, Covid-19, as the virus spread early and quickly throughout the five boroughs. It soon became the focus of news coverage readily published online for worldwide consumption during a uniquely international crisis. Located in the early epicenter of the pandemic, The New York Times (NYT) was one of the leading journals of focus during this period, addressing the crisis from an international, domestic, and local perspective. The New York Times, which aims at "helping people understand the world through...independent journalism," became a crucial part of disseminating information during the early months of the pandemic, shifting from covering a pandemic abroad to a hometown crisis (Company). Through the innate focus of the paper on New York City, including a section focused exclusively on the region, the journal was uniquely positioned to evaluate and share the effects of the virus on the cityscape. As the pandemic unfolded, The New York Times commentary on the pandemic shifted as attitudes about the pandemic and reopening changed with prevalence and fatality rates. The paper correlated changes in the city to landscapes familiar to New Yorkers to propose a frame of reference for the changes that occurred. The subway, which is the most extensive public transportation system in the United States, became a particular focus of the pandemic commentary in addition to the general flow (or lack thereof) of people throughout the landscape. The New York Times used the unprecedented changes in the subway system, and movement of people as symbols of the detrimental impact Covid-19 had on New York City during the outbreak. Through drawing comparisons between 'normal' pre-pandemic patterns and what was seen in March through 1 June of 2020, authors tied the subway and people movement to feelings of longing, mourning, and uncertainty surrounding the state of the city while dealing with the trauma that unfolded during the period.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention categorized the period of 29 February to 1 June 2020 as the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in New York City. The first introduction of Covid-19 into the city is believed to be from travelers in mid-February, followed by the first confirmed case reported on February 29. After confirmation of the first case, NYC saw a rapid acceleration of cases that inhibited initial interviewing and contact tracing efforts, forcing the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to adjust epidemiological methods and rely on supplemental materials. During the approximately three-month period, NYC reported 203,000 cases and 18,600 deaths due to laboratory-confirmed Covid-19. The case fatality rate was 9.2%, likely an overestimate given the low testing capacity before the introduction of commercial testing in mid-March. The peak mean cases per day and hospitalizations per day occurred during the week of March 29 with an average of 5,132 cases and 1,566 admissions per day. Deaths peaked the following week (April 5) with an average of 566 deaths per day. Additionally, on average of 36.4% of those admitted between March 22 to April 5 died. During this time the DOHMH began publishing data online in real time for public use (Thompson, et al.).

Within the city, Covid-19 affected New Yorkers differently based on socioeconomic status, location, race, and preexisting health conditions. Areas with high and very high rankings of neighborhood poverty, defined as neighborhoods with 20-29.9% and >30% of residents under the federal poverty level, experienced the highest death rates (241 and 268 per 100,000 respectively). Rates in wealthier neighborhoods are likely underestimates given the exodus of wealthy NYC residents from the city. Age-adjusted incidence, hospitalizations, and death rates appeared highest in the Bronx and lowest in Manhattan. Black and Hispanic/Latino residents ranked the highest in rate of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths between racial/ethnic groups. Underlying medical conditions including heart disease, diabetes, and chronic kidney disease were risk factors for death from Covid-19 (Thompson, et al.).

The New York Times and Covid-19

The NYT began reporting on Covid-19 on 8 January 2020, focusing on international impacts of the novel virus. The presence of the virus within the city began to draw attention from the journal in early March when a middle-aged women Manhattan woman became the first case of Covid-19 within the city. The early articles are drew attention to the fact that life within the city had not changed much aside New Yorkers participating in the well-known early pandemic buyout of hand sanitizer and antibacterial wipes. As of 1 March, *The New York Times* reported that people within the city (tourists and New Yorkers) felt only slight apprehension about the virus, indicated by packed brunch scenes was still packed, and museums full of visitors. The images used showed a crowded Times Square and bare hand gripping a railing in a crowded subway station (de Freytas-Tamura). Another article posted the same day, 1 March 2020, also

indicated that the woman identified as the first case had not ridden public transportation since her return from Iran, hinting the potential for the virus to spread on public transportation. Similarly, Governor Cuomo is cited in the same article as referring to community spread 'inevitable' (Goldstein & McKinley, 1 March).

Just one day later, on 2 March, the narrative around Covid-19 in the city shifted, despite no change in the number of confirmed cases, the image on the article showing a man in a surgical mask, rather than the crowded scenes used as cover photos in days prior. The scenes depicted were no longer of New Yorkers at brunch or museums but described a rush hour subway with riders with face coverings, hypervigilant of coughs and sneezes. The article marks a shift in coverage in which people are reported missing from the streets, isolated in their homes (Goldstein & McKinley, 2 March). Following the shift in attitudes, the NYT published an article specifically about avoiding infection on the subway, citing concerns from New Yorkers about the safety of the nation's largest public transportation network. Efforts on reassuring safety mainly focused on disinfecting stations and cars and images focused on the physical surfaces that people touch, including turnstiles and poles (Goldbaum). More important than the actual logistics of avoiding the virus, the article began to address directly the highly used public transportation as it relates to a pandemic, and the logistics of keeping a high-density population healthy. Early reports reflected on viral spread in other megacities before it had officially arrived to NYC, and when the virus began local spread in the NYC region, the NYT drew upon what had been previously reported in other cities as a means of trying to predict the future of New York transit. The shift had occurred from problem for distant cities in China, Japan, Europe, and Iran to a local issue, shown through the changed focus of the journal.

New York City Subway and Movement

The subway then became symbol of New York City's crowded nature, a system in which half the city relied on to commute during the workweek. It was far from a symbol of fear or infection. Attitudes changed by 8 March when the "Age of Coronavirus" had descended upon the city as prescribed by an article with that very title, containing three images of the subway differing greatly from pre-pandemic imagery. Images aimed to capture a new reality in which riders began to wear masks and MTA workers scrubbed down surfaces. The written material highlighted a shift in awareness toward acknowledging the health implications of riding a crowded subway with strangers. Despite concerns reports were not alarmist, remaining more hesitant than fearful and lacking anticipation of the deadly result of Covid spread that would plague the city later that month (Knoll).

The view of the subway as reported by the NYT changed in concordance cases rates during the week of March 29, marked by the highest mean cases per day (Thompson, et al.) Goldbaum and Rogers Cook classified the subway as "an emblem of urban overcrowding," and used the decrease in ridership, aside from essential workers, to symbolize the socioeconomic inequality within the city, in which some were forced to risk their lives on the train to commute to work (Goldbaum & Rogers Cook). During this period of late March to mid-April, which was followed the highest death rates earlier in the month, the subway became symbol of the city's faults, rather than its great strengths. Instead of highlighting the adaptations of New Yorkers and the extensive nature of the system, seen earlier in March, the subway transformed into a source of anxiety and a symbol of urban inequality that forced some to continue subway use, while others were able to avoid the system through work from home.

The same week an article mentioning the design of the city was published sharing dystopian photos where only a few people are present in the typically crowded scenes of the city. The written material yearns for a return to normalcy, to the "ordinary troubles" plaguing the city (Knoll, 30 March). While Goldbaum & Rogers Cook use Covid-19 to shed light on the "ordinary troubles" of inequality, Knoll, like many others, wishes for the return of the pre-pandemic existence in which these vices of the city were not as apparent. While acknowledging the city as "never designed for solitude" there is no mention of the city's design as it relates to public health and responding to crisis, rather the design is used to describe the character of the city, describing the crowded nature as endearing, despite Covid-19 dangers. Goldbaum and Cook look upon the state of the city as dystopian while Knoll yearns for a utopia that covered the inequality thrust into the limelight when essential workers are the only ones on the subway cars.

The pandemic also brought strong discussions of inequal treatment of the unhoused population in the United States. The NYT encouraged conversations about the unhoused population crisis in New York with commentary surrounding the use of subway cars for sleeping shelter at a time where the safety of shelters was uncertain. The title of the piece even labeled the crisis as a "symbol of pandemic N.Y.", drawing the parallel between social inequality and the pandemic's impact on the city. Consistent with commentary about the crowded nature of the transportation system, using the subway for transportation or shelter during the time of uncertainty symbolized those who were unable to isolate safely in their homes. Through the discussion about unhoused people using the subway for shelter, public health was inseparably paired with socioeconomic inequality among New Yorkers (Stewart & Schweber).

The articles regarding the subway were published at the same time as pieces about the massive impact of Covid on city morgues as many struggled to bury the dead in a timely manner. Images showed the surreal impact that the massive number of dead bodies left on the city and the dystopian stories that the mass death caused, namely the inability for funeral homes and hospital morgues to keep up with the influx bodies which resulted in horrific conditions (Feuer & Rashbaum). It was within this context that stories of subway delays due to short staff were introduced. The nearly 100 subway workers who passed due to Covid (as of 2 May), were reminders of the traumatic scenes throughout the city where the city struggled appropriately handle the death of 800 New Yorkers per day at its peak. Through the impact of infected, isolated, and fallen workers the subway took a major hit in terms of its ability to function as it would during normal times. Delays in train times were more than a mere convenience but symbolic of the death that the virus inflicted upon fellow New Yorkers. Through this association *The New York Times* paired the diminished subway operations signified the total lack of ability to respond to the pandemic in terms of New Yorkers' safety and the ability of the city to continue through crisis (Goldbaum, 8 April).

During late April, Governor Cuomo chose to shut down the subway from 1 am to 5 am each night to disinfect cars. The government, lacking direction in how to appropriately address the pandemic, resorted to the almost unthinkable action of abandoning the 24-hour system, the NYT was quick to point out that this was unprecedented in the 52-year history of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The choice to do so was strongly affiliated with the crisis of unhoused people residing on the subway for reasons of public safety, as the move hoped to deter people from sleeping on the cars in place of shelters, where the safety of the housing was still debated On 6 May Goldbaum states "no other American city in normal times relies as much on public transit," positioning New York as unique from the rest of the country, similar to how the impact of Covid-19 on New York was not seen at the same scale anywhere else in the country, therefore New York's uniqueness was not just in terms of infrastructure but also in the impact of the virus. Through *The New York Times* articles, the state of the city suffering from the pandemic was tied

to the hours in which the subway ran, using it as a symbol for the changed nature of the city, at least for the time being.

Reports on the subway in relation to Covid-19 attempted to reckon with the massive change in the city landscape that shifted when people left the city or stayed within their homes. The result was a massive lack in people moving within the city, changing the previously established routines of movement within the boroughs. These scenes of during the changed times were juxtaposed with imagery focused on the experience of New Yorkers. The images were meant to reflect a shift in behavior from pre-pandemic to pandemic, describing the current state of the city in comparison to how it operated before. When compared to images presented on 1 March, marking the first report of Covid-19 in New York City, images in The New York Times became dystopian symbols of how the city was being altered by the virus, juxtaposed with reminders of the mass death than resulted. Following the days with the highest death rates, the journal published "What New York Looks Like Now: A Photo Journal." Rather than images of the subway or empty streets, the piece consisted of a temporary morgue, field hospitals, and visibly strained health care workers in a series of black and white photos. New York was unrecognizable despite the familiar above ground infrastructure which was transformed by tents improvising as medical care centers. The New York that was shown familiarly through early March images of crowded subways and later images of empty ones was represented in a completely different light, with no mention of the integral spaces that make New York what it is to locals and tourists alike. Through this the lack of imagery showing the subway was important to signifying that the subway was almost irrelevant to the current city habits.

In an article by Goldbaum and Hu on 20 April, the challenges facing the subway are referred to as the "biggest crisis" ever to challenge the system. While September 11 and the 1970s financial crises are called upon as reference, neither seem adequate to acknowledge the unprecedented nature of the delays in service and decrease in ridership. The authors mention the impact of the death of at least 79 transit workers, using death rates as seen in greater evaluations of the pandemic in N.Y., to measure the pandemic's destruction of the city. Even politics, crucial to the pandemic response as it became a partisan issue, are drawn into the subway crisis, with federal funding being a topic of concern. The loss of life and revenue are described as detrimental to the system that could have never imagined a crisis of this degree just months prior. Similarly, to efforts in other sectors, all progress was put on pause to address the pandemic, and

city infrastructure was tied to public health in a way never before seen (Goldbaum & Hu). Through this article, major themes observed during the early months of the pandemic on a local and national scale are considered and directly related to the subway, including the "unprecedented nature," obsession with death rates, detrimental economic impacts, and the politicization of the pandemic.

During May, the paper became a means in which New Yorkers were able to express their aching for a return to normal. New York City is often marked by loyal locals who swear by the urban grit. During the period from March to May, much of the city's characteristic bustle and life was lost, leaving those still in the city lacking what they had established as their life within the city hustle. The first of the two articles highlighting what people miss most in the urban space served to mourn the loss of life and livelihood that took place. The author carried the piece with a narrative of a woman who lost her brother to Covid in April, using a story of loss of life to mimic the ache that New Yorkers felt toward their city. There is also a feeling that this mourning must take place because the loss is more permanent than just the two months lost to quarantine. The interviews with New Yorkers about what they miss most serves to connect readers who are isolated in their own homes through paying mutual respect to the loss of a lifestyle, to appreciate all the things that were taken for granted during the times pre-Covid. Interestingly, there is little mention of the hope for a return of these experiences, longing and sadness outweigh any sentiment of hope (Wilson). The imagery used in the piece aimed to represent what the city looked like at the time of the writing. Empty streets and masked individuals added to the sad reality that is the life during a pandemic. The piece highlighting what was missed most about New York, communicated similar feelings of longing for the place that was New York City before March 2020, but rather than conveying the dismay at the current state, reflected on what the city once offered. Each small narrative game a glimpse into life before the pandemic, reflecting on the crowded streets and subways. The images show colorful crowded scenes without a mask in sight. People are enjoying their lives without fear of a novel coronavirus. Again, there is no mention of if or when these feelings of longing with disappear with the return to old routine, but there is more hope as shown by the usage of pre-pandemic imagery to remind New York what they may return to (Feuer).

When questions of reopening began to arise as New Yorkers tired of quarantine and anxiety rose about returning to work, conversations about the reopening of New York City often

occurred surrounding the subway. The subway, which closed for four hours every night, was used to show the pause that the city took, abandoning its reputation as the 'city that never sleeps.' Reopening would entail the once normal practice of standing next to hundreds of strangers, something that the pandemic assured people was an unsafe practice (Goodman & Rothfield). Additionally, the return of the regular number of riders was used as an indicator of reopening, a measurement as to the health of the city. Therefore, when the question of reopening was posed, conversation circulated around if those typically riding the subway would return (Feuer & Newman). The New York Times aimed to tackle the problem of ridership through multiple articles over the span of May and June, a common theme being the potential disaster if riders did return to the scale previously scene and a new fear that riders would not return. While many feared that the subway, with its close quarters and historically high number of riders, would cause another traumatic spike in cases with reminders of death still prominent in people's minds. The fear that riders would not return prompted the journal to outline the potential results of car gridlocks if New Yorkers chose to drive rather than train. Similar to how NYC was not designed for emptiness, as outlined by a previous article, authors made it clear that NYC was not designed for cars. Overall, uncertainty surrounding the city's future was shown through uncertainty about the future of the subway, as an integral part of the city's infrastructure Even the title of the article on 1 June "Can 8 Million Daily Riders Be Lured Back to N.Y. Mass Transit?" posed a question rather than providing an answer to the transit challenges. Throughout the article, no precedent seemed adequate to help in answering the question.

Changes to the physical landscape were proposed by authors during this time using bikes and street closures, opening the potential for a lasting impact of the pandemic period on New York landscape. If bikes were to catch on, the author suggesting that they may become "as essential as the New York City subway" then massive changes in urban planning would uproot the geography to adopt what is referred to as "European" form of transportation. These reports of a changing city landscape echoed a feeling that the city would experience a permanent change because of the pandemic (Goldbaum, 18 May). Similarly, to a permanent change in means of transportation, an article on closing streets for pedestrian use, echoed the sentiment that Covid-19 had the potential to change the city permanently. The piece drew upon history of urban planning to link it with health. It reassured that architecture and health were always inseparable, citing historical cases in which health crises altered urban planning. The whole article offers a feeling that New Yorkers could choose a different normal to return to, without sacrificing the character of the city. The author cites the major sentiment that New York can't do things differently than the previous way of thought because of "New York exceptionalism," but leaves it open to readers, particularly addressing New Yorkers, if a different future should be chosen for the city (Bellafante). Both articles in the journal outlined the ways in which changes to the city due to Covid could render the subway less integral to city life as it had been in pre-pandemic times. Through these articles the conversations surrounding the future of the city used the subway as a symbol of past New York City patterns that may be altered by the virus.

Conclusion

Calling upon the unprecedented changes in the city landscape, namely the subway and the harsh halt to the movement of people around the boroughs, Goodman articulates his hesitation that the city that was left behind will not be back for years. Although he calls upon the 1970s economic crises, September 11, and the 2008 banking crisis as precedent, he is clear to explain how Covid-19 is a unique challenge facing the area, altering the very fabric of the city. Again, the subway is used as a metaphor for the stagnation during the pandemic, and the ability for the city to return to normal is directly correlated to the speed in which the subway can return to normal function. The lower ridership in the subway becomes measuring tool for Goodman to gauge the city's function, citing ridership in years past as reference for how the city is suffering. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic on other cities transportation is drawn upon briefly to explain how the city may look to deal with the transportation problem, but it is only briefly mentioned. This only small mention of other megacities emphasizes the "New York exceptionalism" (justified or not) seen throughout the articles, in which The New York Times positions the city as a distinctive case for Covid-19's impact. All the articles convey that New York, given the detrimental impact of the virus and the character of the city, faces a distinctive challenge in dealing with Covid-19, and infectious disease threats, reassuring that the landscape of the city is special.

The articles reported by the *The New York Times* in the first month of the pandemic displayed a shift in attitudes from feelings of hesitation toward the virus to the acknowledgement of a total shift in how the city operates. During the outbreak period, authors showed sentiments of longing for the New York City they, and others, missed with little hope for a future return of the old habits. This loss of old city ways was juxtaposed with articles explaining and photos

displaying scenes of the mass death that occurred in the city. *The New York Times* tried to reckon with the fact that the city was not designed for a pandemic or even a post pandemic world in which private vehicles appeared safer than train travel. Drawing upon the city design that originally was referenced as the great strength of the city, the articles published during the pandemic showed a more critical side of the New York City design as inconducive to a public health crisis. As time went on, more acknowledgement was given to the return of the city, or rather the fear that the city may not return. Although some articles focusing on what was missed most during the shutdown, separate articles attempted to tackle the intricacies of reopening, attempting to predict a future during a period in which all future planning had been put on hold.

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