

MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND HUMAN BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE: A STUDY ON POST ABNORMAL “BOXED-IN” SYNDROME

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed our way of life. The outbreak has altered dynamics across societies bringing into question much of the established technological and social systems in place. Among these factors, the aspect of communication has also been severely affected due to the global health crisis. Precautionary measures of staying indoors, imposed lockdowns, social distancing mandates have influenced people in aberrant ways impacting behaviour and psychology. Unprecedented situations, as these, have led to an increased dependency on media platforms which; subsequently, are sure to have consequences on human behaviour in the post pandemic phase that can be termed a ‘post abnormal world’. The constant representation on media of the recurrent waves of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic, statistics and imageries of fatalities and failure on the part of the authorities worldwide to contain the virus have already created hysteria and paranoia across societies. The gradual transition to a new normal or abnormality that awaits the human race, above everything else, will have repercussions on how humans behave and how they communicate. Fear of the unknown, panic, distrust and low confidence will prevail, affecting relationships and how people

communicate with each other. This will eventually impact how people view and perceive the world around them. This paper attempts to understand the probabilities of the consequences of media's representation of the pandemic in a post abnormal society that is yet to come. Drawing from a theory of the pre pandemic era called the mean world syndrome, propounded by George Gerbner, which explains how the portrayal of violence through images and stories affects one's consciousness and behaviour in the real world. This study attempts to understand how people, bombarded by media with information about a pandemic on a regular basis for the past years, might be affected. This study proposes a syndrome called the "Boxed-in" syndrome, which will supposedly surface in many, if not all, societies that will cultivate fear, anxiety and behavioural changes among people.

Keywords: Human behavioural change, post abnormal, Boxed-in syndrome

The future is already here -it's just not evenly distributed – Walter Gibson

Reminiscing the recent past

The world's normalcy witnessed a major halt with the spread of the Novel Corona virus pandemic in the past year and a half. This global health crisis has altered dynamics across societies bringing into question much of the established technological and social systems. Subsequent waves of the deadly virus have strained all aspects of human life in profound ways. Covid-19 has exposed persistent inequalities by income, age, race, gender and geographic location. Despite recent global health gains, across the world people continue to face complex, interconnected threats to their health and well-being rooted in social, economic, political and environmental determinants of health (WHO, 2021). International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Director Kristalina Georgieva in her address of 2020 "Confronting the Crisis: Priorities for the Global Economy" remarked the pandemic as the "worst economic fallout since the Great Depression" disrupting social and economic order at "lightning speed and on a scale that we have not seen in living memory". The pandemic, moreover, has widened the already existing inequalities and social fissure across societies impacting all but particularly the vulnerable and marginalized.

The escalating and pervasive Covid-19 pandemic scenario has distorted the normalcy that people were accustomed to in unpredictable and ambiguous ways. Lockdowns and other restrictive measures to contain the pandemic across nations have impacted regular day to day activities like socialising and interactions among others. Precautionary measures of staying indoors, imposed lockdowns and social distancing mandates have influenced people in aberrant ways. Various studies

in the recent past highlighted disturbing impact of the pandemic on the public, most significantly on one's behaviour and psychology. According to a survey conducted by Parade Magazine (2020) the pandemic has triggered a wave of mental health issues ranging from addiction, depression, social isolation or general stress. Saladiono et.al (2020) in their study stated that security measures adopted in managing the pandemic had different consequences on individuals, according to the invested social role. People more sensitive to stress seem to be more exposed to the risk of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic symptoms. While for others the "constant fear of contagion affects daily life and leads to social isolation, modifying human relations". The fear of contracting the virus has led to xenophobic situation in many places. Mamuna and Griffith (2020), in their study referred to a case of Bangladesh where a young person in the suspicion of being infected with Covid-19 based on his symptoms of fever, cold and weight loss committed suicide. This act was also the result of people in his village suspecting him of being Covid positive. Similar cases of killing oneself or others out of fear of contracting Covid-19 have occurred worldwide with the onset of the pandemic. In another instance, according to a newspaper report, a 47 year old Builder from Lancashire, 'obsessed' with conspiracy theories, believed Covid-19 to be a ploy to create 'new world order', suffered 'mental breakdown and eventually killed himself (Fenton, 2021).

It is, thus observed that speculations concerning the Covid-19 virus have already created hysteria and paranoia across societies. Amidst such unprecedented situations, media has played a decisive role in disseminating information about the health crisis that the human race has faced in recent times. Media was the only source people across the world could rely on to seek information and form opinion about the pandemic. Media platforms worldwide have played an influential role in reporting and presenting facts and information around Covid-19. There has been an increased dependency on media platforms, as people urge to know more about the new crisis; how it spreads, its impacts and consequences, precautionary measures, etc. It was also observed that with the outbreak of Covid-19 the consumption patterns of the audience have transformed. Globally, there has been a rise in news consumption on television, apps and social media starting early 2020 with the outbreak of coronavirus. When people had no resort but to remain cooped up in their houses to avoid physical contact, media served as the window to the world suffering from the pandemic. People's curiosity to stay updated on the latest news around Corona virus was a good enough reason for the media to stretch its limits in its coverage of the virus. The necessity to stay indoors devoid of any physical connection with the outside world only increased people's dependence on the media as evident from the reports of increasing media consumption during the last one and half years.

According to a report prepared by The Nielsen Company (2020), the time spent online on mobile devices to access current events and news has increased manifold in March 2020 as compared to March 2019 across the globe. According to another survey report, in India, social media use and newspaper consumption had gone up by 75% and 64% respectively compared to the week preceding the lockdown in March 2020. According to the BARC India and Nielsen report (2020), there was a phenomenal rise in overall television viewership during the lockdown in India. Television viewing minutes grew by 8% per week in 2020. The news genre witnessed a 27% rise in viewership in 2020. This growth was driven by the need for regular updates on the pandemic. This is also the reason behind non-prime time news viewership shooting up during that period. There was also a surge in smartphone usage in the country wherein news apps witnessed 8% more users per week with an increase of 17% in time spent by a user per week. The growth was primarily driven by non-English news apps.

With multiple strategies adopted by nations worldwide to curb the spread of the virus, the outbreak of the virus in the near future will either eventually get contained or will enter endemic stage, where the population learn to coexist with the virus. But what is worrisome is, the surety of leaving a lasting impact on generations to come in. This study attempted to understand the role of media during the pandemic. This article is a look into the future under the devised term “Boxed-in” syndrome. The presentation of a version of the future under this concept is at the core of the paper. In it, the researcher discussed about both behavioural and psychological ramifications that could exist in the future as a consequence of the past and present. This article is an attempt to understand how human behaviour and communication would undergo various alterations in the unseen future.

Understanding Mass Media as a Social Determinant of Health

According to an interim report by WHO (2020) “one of the most important and effective interventions in a public health response to any event is to proactively communicate what is known, what is unknown, and what is being done to get more information, with the objectives of saving lives and minimizing adverse consequences.” In instances of prior health crisis including outbreaks of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), influenza A (H1N1), and Ebola virus disease, comprehensive communication played an integral role in responding to and containing the health emergencies. With the onset of the Corona pandemic it was observed that official sources, specifically the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Health Departments across the world, took a front seat in communicating about the virus. In due course media platforms were considered an effective vehicle to reach out to the heterogeneous societies to communicate about the risk. The strategy of Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) was at the core of WHO’s communication agenda that aimed at educating the overall population of their exposure to risk, engage communities to ensure that they

take precautionary measures, initiating public communication and managing misinformation among others. Amid varied medium to communicate, mass media was exponentially used across nations.

During the corona pandemic, people sought information to make informed decisions and behave in ways that would help them prevent risks and uncertainties. Media became a key determinant of informing and educating the masses. Drawing relations on health and communication, scholars opined media as a social determinant of health. Even though “media and public health are distinct social entities, their functions overlap, with the former significantly supporting the development of the latter” (Duggassa, 2016). WHO claims that health is determined by many factors such as social, physical and economic conditions in society. Social determinants of health comprises of socially constructed conditions which come from the interactions between people and society, which include educational attainment, employment and housing. In addition, Florey et al. (2007, p36) considered that “enhanced global communications affects population health through the dispersion of ideas, information, knowledge and technologies. Global media also may influence population health by informing individuals, communities and nations about global issues that may have local impacts and allowing an opportunity for prevention or intervention.”

Mass media in recent times have become an indispensable social entity that influences facets of people’s lives. In the hour of the pandemic, all platforms of media have played a substantial role in depicting the scenario and providing the updates and developments. Media platforms like news channels, entertainment channels, print media, audio visual media or promotional activities like advertisements, public relations activities run by government or private sectors have fulfilled various purposes during the pandemic. At the same time, constant flow of information around the pandemic has overwhelmed the public in varied ways. Media’s constant representation or rather over-representation of the Covid-19 pandemic along with increasing media consumption are reasons that make this situation unusual from the epidemics and pandemics of earlier times. People have been bombarded with all sorts of information as well as misinformation. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020 hinting at the incessant flow of misinformation stated, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”. Infodemic, as defined by WHO, is “an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution and can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency.” A study conducted by Bruce Sacerdote, Economics Professor of Dartmouth College found that news coverage of the pandemic in the U.S.A was ‘shockingly negative’. He found it “depressing,” and discovered that the more his eyes were glued to the news, the more he realized the media was covering Covid-19 in “the worst possible way (Clayson & McMahon, 2021). It

was no different with the Indian media. News reports focusing on the death rate instead of recovery rate, images of funeral pyres, rivers swollen with dead bodies, reports on shortage of beds and oxygen supply, deaths due to lack of adequate infrastructure, side effects of vaccines, etc. have frequently made the rounds. Headlines across various media outlets such as “After surging cases comes the infra shiver”; “Covid-19: India's holiest river is swollen with bodies”, “Surplus oxygen is no consolation for Kerala”, “Entire families’ wiped out by Covid’s carnage in rural India”, etc. merely reflected the media's role in creating panic, anxiety and fear among people.

The current study is based on the backdrop that media’s depiction of reality has substantial effect on its audiences to varying degree. Media’s agenda of framing the pandemic situation in its various approaches might have strong influence on the global audience. It is therefore, crucial to analyse the impact of media as a social determinant and its impact during a health crisis situation. The researchers in this study believe that media remained a constant reliable source for seeking information, education and entertainment for the masses during the pandemic owing to the varied necessities and circumstances. The constant representation on media of the recurrent waves of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic, statistics and imageries of fatalities and failure on the part of the authorities worldwide to contain the virus will leave deep imprints in the minds of consumers. A section of people, if not all, will start to exhibit behavioural and psychological changes owing to media’s depiction of the pandemic.

Post abnormal society: The Boxed-in syndrome

With the prevalent situation of the pandemic, it is difficult to predict when the world can get rid of the virus entirely. Recent opinions by scholars and medical practitioners however have highlighted another possibility of the pandemic entering into an endemic stage. Dr. Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, in a press conference mentioned “this virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities, and this virus may never go away”. Many countries across the world will enter into an endemic stage, where the population starts to co-exist with a constant presence of a disease or infection within a geographic area (Brenza, 2020).

With apprehension and uncertainties about the virus and the anticipation of a Covid free world and normal times, the human race is set to enter a post abnormal society. A new abnormality awaits the human race where ramifications of the pandemic will certainly leave impressions. Coupled with contextual factors, people’s dependence on the media on one hand and media’s representation of the Covid-19 pandemic on the other, will leave deep imprints in the minds of consumers, resulting in behavioural and psychological changes. It will affect individuals’ fear not just limited to contracting

the virus. Fear of loss of freedom, fear of loss of social contact and separation from loved ones, fear associated with the uncertainties about the disease including the chances of fatality, etc. will create a void and feeling of helplessness in an individual. This will have a dramatic impact on the psychology and behaviour of individuals which will culminate into what we would like to call the 'Boxed-in syndrome'.

The article proposes an operational definition to define the concept of "Boxed-in" syndrome. Boxed-in syndrome can be defined as a state of mind wherein a person will trap or confine oneself in an attempt to dissociate from others. This deliberate, phobic confinement would be both physical and psychological, resulting in behavioural changes. Distress, dissociation and distrust will mark people displaying the Boxed-in syndrome in the post-abnormal world. Fear of contracting the virus, lack of physical contact, norms of social distancing and isolation and associated factors such as lockdown and quarantine coupled with the media coverage on the pandemic will create stress, panic and anxiety in individuals. People will undergo radical changes in behaviour. It will lead to a situation of complete paranoia. Hit by phobia, a person would undergo a change in his or her perception of empathy towards others.

This study predicts the effects of media's representation of the pandemic on the audience in a post pandemic period. These effects will be corollary to audience's dependency level on the media and the health crisis they experienced. The Boxed-in syndrome incorporates the consequences of media consumption about the pandemic and its subsequent behavioural and psychological changes in humans. Drawing from a theory of the pre pandemic era called the mean world syndrome, propounded by George Gerbner, which explains how the portrayal of violence through images and stories affects one's consciousness and behaviour in the real world, this study attempts to understand how people, bombarded by media with information about a pandemic on a regular basis for the past years, might be affected.

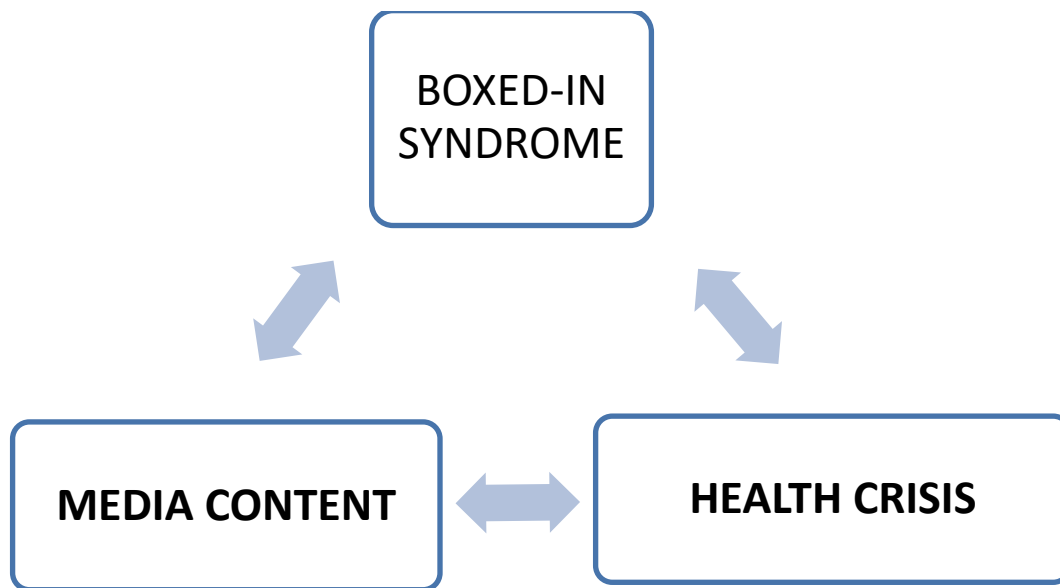


Fig1. Boxed-in Syndrome Framework

The suggested framework of the Boxed-in syndrome is mutually dependent on two parameters; media content and the health crisis the human race is currently experiencing. The parameter of media content can largely contribute towards the syndrome and that is why it operates at a **Macro level**. It further operates at two levels. **Level 1** signifies what media represents. This level functions under the premise of the process suggested by communication scholar Harold Laswell, who defined that for effective communication the following questions need to be addressed “Who Says What In Which Channel To Whom With what effect?” In the context of communication throughout the ongoing pandemic, media has held a prime position as the source in spreading information about the pandemic. For the purpose of spreading information about Covid-19 various media channels were used to reach out to the public. In regard to the information of Covid-19 pandemic, different types of media platforms (print, audio-visual, new media, indoor, outdoor media) were extensively used. Each media vehicle had various approaches of sending across messages. Various format of media content (news, daily soaps, advertisements etc.) were employed and framed with effective messages for achieving the desired agenda of either informing or educating the public. The represented media content incorporated wide-ranging themes of Covid-19 updates, situation briefings, government announcements and undertaken initiatives, opinions of various stakeholders. Apart from it, preventive and precautionary measures such as, social distancing, washing of hands, wearing of masks, vaccination drives, quarantine procedures, etc. have remained prominent aspects of media’s representation of the pandemic. It is also fundamental to consider that media’s content creation can be influenced by power dynamics. Media ownership pattern and propaganda of elites and those in

power positions can impact media's discourses during a pandemic. It is also certain that despite prescribed media objectivity, personal experiences and opinions of media professionals could manipulate media's content.

The **Level 2** determines the interpretation of audiences. Development in media audience research has established audiences as people who actively decode media text. There exist various ways of reading media text by the audiences, and the interpretation of media content could vary from person to person. Audience interpretation of media text can depend on a range of factors such as personal experiences, socio cultural factors, education level, etc. In regard to decoding messages on Covid-19 pandemic, even if the audiences were presented with the same kind of information the decoding of media text varied by the influence of the "discourses and institutions in which they are situated" (Morley & Brunson, 2005, p269). Factors like preference of media content and exposure to media plays crucial role in influencing the audience's perception. For instance, news reporting Covid-19 fatalities will have different impact on audiences than a public service advertisement on Covid-19. Similarly, long exposure to particular media content will influence audiences differently than shorter exposure.

The second level of the Boxed-in syndrome is the **Micro Level**. This level represents the current health crisis that the world has witnessed. Depicting the crisis, WHO stated the following:

The virus that causes COVID-19, has had a major impact on human health globally; infecting a large number of people; causing severe disease and associated long-term health sequelae; resulting in death and excess mortality, especially among older and vulnerable populations; interrupting routine healthcare services; disruptions to travel, trade, education and many other societal functions; and more broadly having a negative impact on peoples physical and mental health. (WHO, 2020)

Further, social determinants such as socio-cultural background, economic status and education that operate across societies have prevented many from accessing the privilege of better health. Health agencies worldwide have reported instances of inadequate access to healthcare and health communication faced by the public during Covid-19. A report by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP, 2021) highlighted "the COVID-19 pandemic has brought social and racial injustice and inequity to the forefront of public health. It has highlighted that health equity is still not a reality as COVID-19 has unequally affected many racial and ethnic minority groups, putting them more at risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19." Studies in the past have also revealed that the advantages of health information were not evenly distributed across social groups, and there also existed

inconsistencies in “how people attend to and take advantage of health information. These inequalities in communication are parallel with disparities in health. Communication inequality has been offered as one potential mechanism linking social determinants to health outcomes” (Vishwanath & Ackerson, 2011).

Therefore, unequal distribution and access to health resources can dampen a person’s state of mind. This feeling can further get aggravated by media’s irresponsible and ineffective coverage during health emergencies. In such a situation when individuals are experiencing a pandemic and simultaneously bombarded with information from media, there might arise a syndrome of Boxed-in among people, wherein the urge to shut oneself from the outside world emerge. Individuals in a society could be affected with psychological and behavioural changes with the constant fear of getting affected by the virus.

Ramifications of the Boxed-in Syndrome

As already mentioned, the deliberate and phobic attempt to shut oneself from the outside world, physically and psychologically, would arise as a result of the prolonged effects of the pandemic and the media’s representation of the same. This would eventually lead to the Boxed-in syndrome. The culmination of the Boxed-in syndrome, however, would not be immediate. A person would gradually transition into a complete Boxed-in state. This process of transition would bring about numerous behavioural changes.

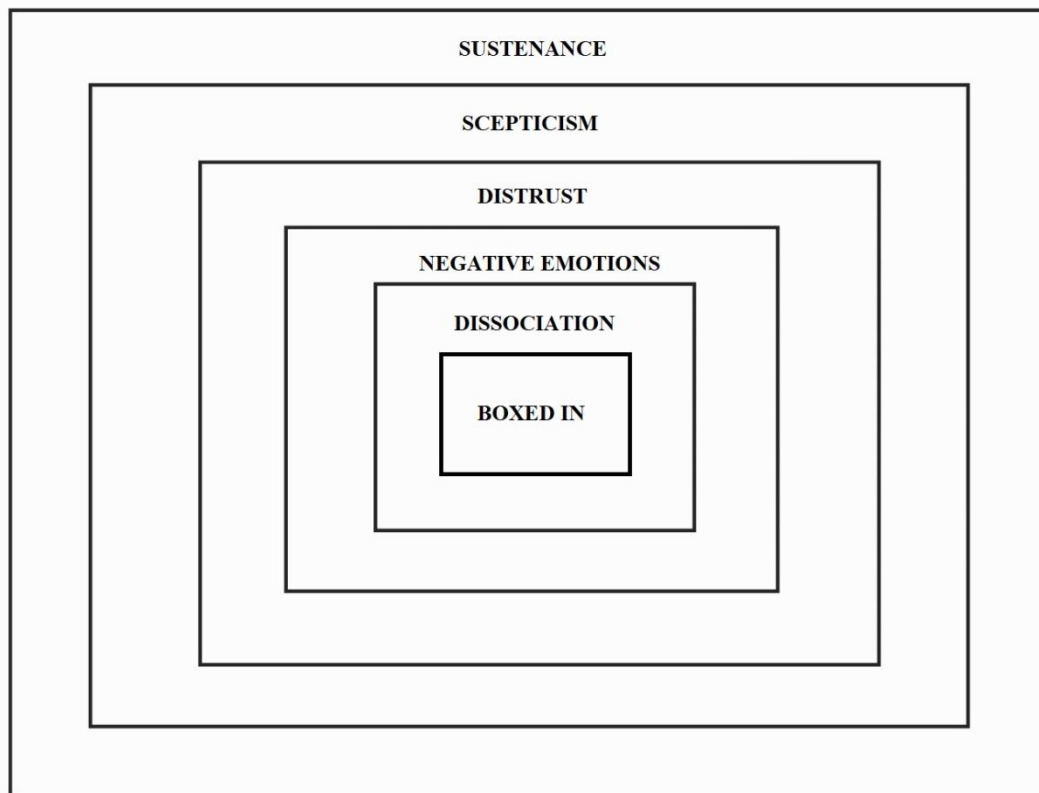


Fig 2. Boxed-in Syndrome

The first level of change would be ***sustenance***. This would be during the early phase of the pandemic, wherein an individual would try to adopt numerous coping strategies and behaviours to escape the deadly virus. Physical distancing and avoiding contact as far as possible, excessive cleaning and hand washing, practicing unproven home hacks, etc. would take precedence. There would be an attempt to confine oneself indoors as much as possible in fear of contracting the virus. In-person communication will dwindle due to lack of physical contact and virtual communication will take over.

The second level of change would be ***scepticism***. Over time and due to prolonged exposure to media reports and its representation of the pandemic, an individual would develop a sceptical behaviour. Doubts about the reality of the virus itself as a result of the numerous conspiracy theories circulated over traditional and digital media platforms, doubt about the government initiatives to contain the virus, inability to believe in vaccine effectiveness, etc. would envelop the mind of an individual.

Scepticism would give way to ***distrust*** - the third level of change. This would manifest in many levels. Feeling suspicious of people around, the overall lack of trust, being doubtful about the world, its

people and what awaits in the future, etc. would be one aspect of distrust that would take over an individual's mind. Another aspect would be disbelief in media reports. The feeling that media representations are false or exaggerated would consume the mind of an individual due to his or her dependence and exposure to the former over a prolonged period.

Distrust will give way to the development of *negative emotions* - the fourth level. These negative emotions will make an individual dislike others and also self, causing sadness and misery. Self-doubt will prevail, thereby drastically decreasing confidence and self esteem and overall life satisfaction. A person would experience emptiness, loneliness, depression, fear, etc. All these factors would make an individual stop all sorts of communication with others in an attempt to gradually detach from the outside world.

The next level would be *dissociation*. This would lead an individual to completely withdraw and detach oneself from the environment and the people around. An individual would behave in a manner to escape the physical world as a means to disconnect from reality. This would lead to complete isolation and confinement - physical and mental. There would be a feeling of losing one's connection to time, place and identity. This is the level that will also witness phenomenal changes in communication due to lack of trust, phobia, detachment and disconnection from reality and the real world. Contextual factors such as losing loved or known ones due to the virus, isolation and loneliness, etc. will only enhance the feeling of dissociation eventually leading to the state of Boxed-in syndrome.

Boxed-in syndrome, as defined earlier, is a state of mind wherein a person will trap or confine oneself in an attempt to dissociate from the outside world both physically and mentally. Individuals who are heavily dependent on media, who have little or no control over how media influences them, have poor levels of emotional resistance and those who easily allow self-doubt to settle in would be more vulnerable and susceptible to the Boxed-in syndrome in the long run.

Way Forward:

Pandemics and epidemics have surfaced and resurfaced over time, probably since the beginning of human civilization, thereby challenging the human race to constantly come up with solutions and improvise for survival. Given the history of outbreaks, what we are currently experiencing in the form of Covid-19 is, then perhaps, nothing unusual. But there still lies a great deal of nuance. The difference lies in the times we dwell in. The adversity of an outbreak, unlike earlier times, is not limited to a particular geographical area anymore (Oswalia & Vasdev, 2021, p.5). Subsequently the omnipresent media pervades every aspect of our lives. With the advent of the digital media, such is the impact that

it has almost become indispensable. Due to advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), we live in an information-overloaded society.

Media, as a social determinant of health, plays a major role during such crisis situations. However, it is observed that media and news organisations have played a minimal role in fighting Covid-19 infodemic. Infodemic creates confusion and leads to risk-taking behaviours among people that are likely to cause more harm. Additionally, infodemic gives a fillip to conspiracy theories, challenges the public health response to epidemics and pandemics, thereby creating mistrust for the system and authorities. This is clearly evident from the 'Chinese virus', 'Wuhan virus' narratives and conspiracy theories fuelled by the media which only deepen the existing 'Sinophobia' (anti-Chinese sentiment). Media can play a significant role in breaking the fake news ecosystem and information epidemic by providing crucial and credible information from time to time. It should build itself as the trusted source of information. Media's role is not restricted to simply breaking Covid-19 news, but also in-depth coverage of the pandemic in a nuanced manner. While there is no dearth of news coverage on the pandemic, it is quite evident that news media organisations lack journalists who specialises in public health reporting. This is an area that needs to be prioritised.

It is important to understand that media texts are constructed. This means that what we see or read in the media are only constructions of reality and not pure reality. Also, media texts are distributed within a commercial and political environment that influences these constructions. Since people are active recipients of media messages and media representation influences people's perception of reality, the concept of media literacy draws significance. Media literacy enables a person to differentiate between the real and the manufactured world. A media literate person is one who can successfully navigate through the pool of information provided by different forms of media and makes appropriate choices as to what is helpful and beneficial and what should be avoided or is harmful.

Comprehensive efforts to contain the virus and its subsequent ramifications should be adopted at the earliest. The prevalent health crisis in addition to overabundance of both information and misinformation through media has already exhausted the public. The proposed Boxed-in syndrome is one amongst the many side effects that await the human race in its transition to a post Covid-19 world. The need of the hour is to prevent the world from another pandemic which might take a toll on its population's behaviour and psychology. In its transition to a new normal or post abnormality, the world requires "solidarity, as a global community, to promote and protect health today, and in the future" as quoted by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of WHO, 2020. The world requires equilibrium in two of its most interdependent entities- health and media sector. Equitable access to Covid-19 health facilities and information related to healthcare needs priority.

The health care sector along with the media should ensure accuracy in communicating all aspects associated with a health risk and facilitate the public understanding of health crisis.

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