

# Face of the virus

Problematic over-representation of East and South East Asian faces in news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic



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## Executive Summary

In an analysis of images of people in news coverage from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, besea.n found that East and South East Asian (ESEA) faces were disproportionately prominent.

Whereas ESEA people are an estimated 1-2% of the UK population, in examining a randomised sample of news coverage of the pandemic we found that ESEA faces were present in 20% of stock images of faces where images of any faces could have been used.

While ESEA people are generally under-represented in UK media, when it comes to the pandemic they look to be problematically over-represented, thus feeding into racialised narratives of the virus and coinciding with a staggering increase in the number of hate crimes and hate incidents against people of ESEA heritage worldwide.

## Background

Since the beginning of 2020 when news coverage of COVID-19 began, those in ESEA<sup>1</sup> communities noticed a disturbing trend. They saw that their faces were being used as stock photos in news articles about the pandemic, including in scenes of everyday life where other faces could easily have been used. A petition on this issue gathered over 30,000 signatures and the issue was brought to Parliament by Sarah Owen MP.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst under-represented in most sectors of industry, politics and media,<sup>3</sup> when it came to talking about the virus and the crisis that followed, it seemed that ESEA faces were repeatedly shown as if they were a representation of the virus itself. A particularly striking example of this, as shown on the cover page of this report, is a Getty Images picture featured by the *Express* shows an ESEA face which has been superimposed onto a graphic showing the COVID-19 virus.

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<sup>1</sup> In recognition of the lack of consensus in the UK on language to discuss different Asian minority groups, we use ESEA to distinguish from West Asian, South Asian and Central Asian. ESEA recognises a large geographic area whose countries and cultures share many commonalities, without making classifications based on skin colour, in acknowledgement of the region's diversity.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/stop-depicting-east-south-east-asians-in-coronavirus-related-media>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <https://www.besean.co.uk/resources-posts/inequalities-report> and [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/124255/bbc1-bbc2-diversity-monitoring.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/124255/bbc1-bbc2-diversity-monitoring.pdf)

Along with harmful rhetoric by some politicians<sup>4</sup>, this over-representation of ESEA imagery associated with the pandemic contributes to the scapegoating of ESEA people. Conscious or unconscious biases associating ESEA people with the pandemic can contribute to an environment of hostility, discrimination, blame and violence.

Hate crimes towards ESEA communities in the UK, Europe and North America have skyrocketed, with statistics from some institutions showing a doubling or tripling of incidents.<sup>5</sup> This only scratches the surface. Many hate crimes go unreported, and reporting an incident is no guarantee of action being taken.

In response to this situation, volunteers at besea.n (Britain's East and South East Asian Network), an organisation that advocates for and champions ESEA people in the UK, examined how ESEA people were visually portrayed in news coverage related to the pandemic.

## Methodology

We started with an initial dataset of over 1.6 million global news articles associated with the Coronavirus pandemic from between January to July 2020 compiled by text analysis company Aylien. From this dataset, a sample was selected for image analysis for this report, focusing on UK-published articles related to the coronavirus pandemic response on various levels: regional, national and global.

The dataset included metadata for each article, such as news source, news source location, article body, and keywords about the article. This was used to filter down and produce the sample.

A subset of 100,000 articles randomised by date was grouped into possible topics using a natural language processing topic modelling (Latent Dirichlet allocation) algorithm. The algorithm uses statistics to assign articles to a topic, according to the frequency and combination of neighbouring words within the article's body of text, by assuming each article is a mixture of various topics to start with. By analysing the words and phrases that appear in each article, the most relevant topic relating to that article could be discerned. Topics were labelled according to the most frequent words used in each article,

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example,

<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-helped-lead-rise-racist/story?id=76530148> or <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18317734.nigel-farage-facing-backlash-blaming-china-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, <https://evresea.com/data> and <https://www.voiceesea.com/police-data-map>

and this was a useful way to filter down further. For articles at a global level, over a third of the articles related specifically to US politics or regional American responses, sport, or entertainment (in the context of the pandemic). For the purposes of our analysis, these articles were removed.

The remaining articles were about themes such as the development and impact of the pandemic (on the economy, education, travel, etc.), the extent of the pandemic (in terms of case counts, new cases, individual stories), and the handling of the pandemic along with any new rules, laws and regulations. To obtain a smaller sample which could be examined by our volunteers, the relevant articles were further filtered to include only publications or sites from the UK, and the remaining 16,366 articles were sorted by publish date.

A final, randomised sample of 2,250 articles was taken by besea.n volunteers, who then assessed whether each image or video used in the article was of a public figure, a named/relevant person to the article, a stock photo of people, photos with no people in them (or no visible faces), and in many cases no media was attached to the text.

Of particular interest and concern was the use of stock imagery in articles. Volunteers were asked to find how many of those stock images used ESEA faces. In cases where ESEA faces were used they were further asked to examine whether the topic of the article was related to ESEA ethnicities, communities, cultures or countries, e.g. an article about the Tokyo Olympics featuring a photo of Japanese citizens in a Japanese city.<sup>6</sup>

If the topic of the article was not specifically related to ESEA communities then pictures of people from any background could have served to illustrate the article. While greater representation of ESEA faces in everyday scenes is to be welcomed, our concern is whether ESEA faces were problematically over-represented in relation to news coverage of COVID-19.

## Results

Of the sample of the 2,250 coronavirus-related articles analysed by our volunteers, around 27% of news articles used imagery with people present as their primary media attached to the text. The full breakdown of media types is as follows (Table 1):

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<sup>6</sup> Given the rapid global spread of the pandemic, another question is whether not only images but articles may have disproportionately focused on ESEA communities and countries, but that was beyond the scope of this study.

Type of media	%
No image/video	18.8
Public figure	19.3
Named individual(s) or individual(s) relevant to the story	20.2
Image/video does not contain faces	14.7
Stock image with face(s)	27.1

Table 1: Breakdown of types of images in sample of COVID19 news coverage.

Of the news articles that used stock imagery with people in them, 34% used images that contained ESEA faces. 18% of these included ESEA faces where the topic of the article was related to ESEA communities or countries (e.g. coverage of the pandemic in China). 16.4% included ESEA faces where any images of faces could have been used.

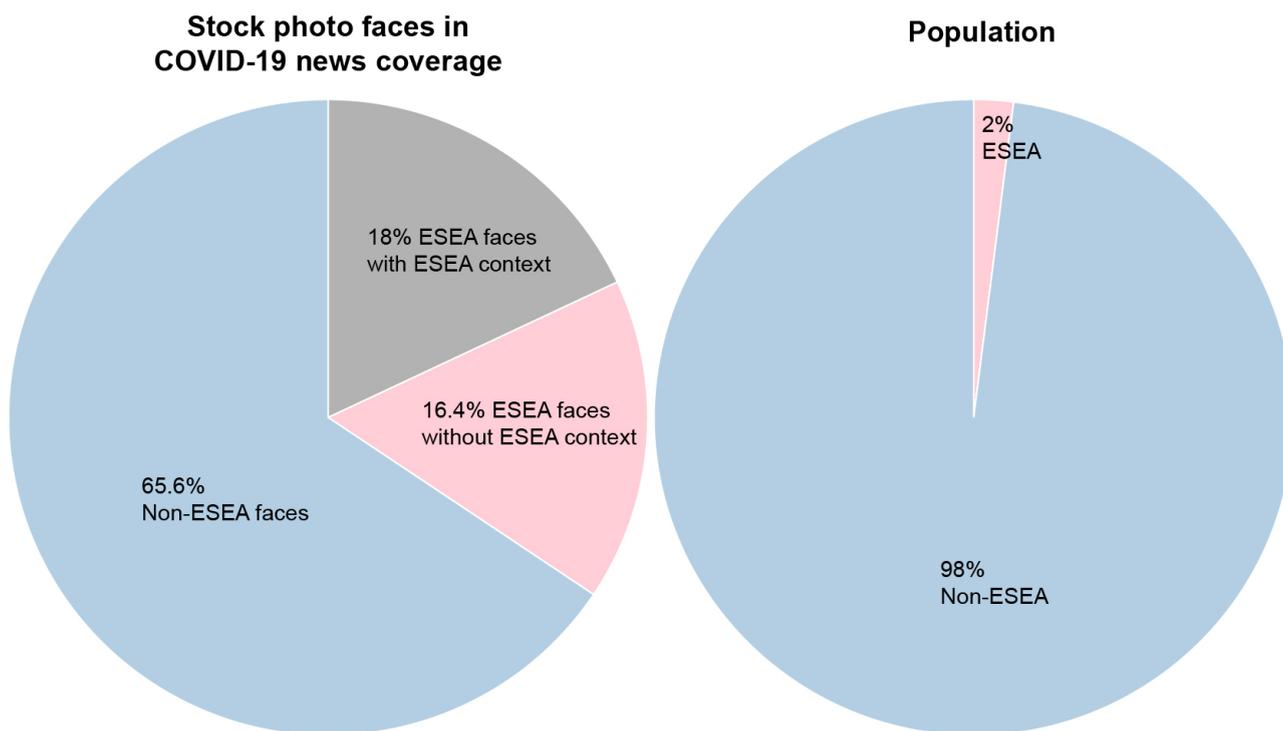


Figure 1: charts showing presence of ESEA faces in COVID-19 news coverage (left) as compared with estimated proportion of ESEA people in UK population (right).

In 2011, ESEA people made up an estimated 2% of the UK population.<sup>7</sup> This means that in the sample analysed, ESEA faces were over-represented by about ten times in news articles about the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Against the background of political and media under-representation, if ESEAs are over-represented relative to their proportion of the population and used as the “face” of the coronavirus, it is perhaps not so surprising that they have been unfairly portrayed as part of the problem, especially given the inflammatory comments by well known politicians as previously highlighted.

As researchers have argued, stock photography plays an important role in relation to matters of identity and representation.<sup>9</sup> Images of apparently everyday scenes which are intended to be illustrative and incidental to news reports nevertheless can carry important and sometimes troubling implications. For example, a news report on contact tracing in Blackburn in July 2020 prominently depicts two ESEA people as the focus for its leading image (Figure 2), rather than any other residents in the area. The fact that the two ESEA people are wearing masks is also noteworthy.



England's contact tracers have only reached about 50% of people who have been in close contact with someone with Covid-19 in an area of Lancashire where new cases are rising.

Figure 2: example of news coverage with ESEA faces

<sup>7</sup> Note that a lack of disaggregated data for non-Chinese ESEA ethnic groups makes it difficult to know the true number. See, for example, <https://www.besean.co.uk/spotlight/whats-in-a-name> or <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/keystatisticsandquickstatisticsforlocalauthoritiesintheunitedkingdom/2013-10-11>

<sup>8</sup> Excluding news coverage where ESEA faces were used in relation to stories where ESEA context was important, this gives 16.4 divided by the total 65.6+16.4, which is 20% in news coverage representations, as compared with an estimated 2% of the UK population.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Aiello, G. and Woodhouse, A. (2016), “When corporations come to define the visual politics of gender”, *Journal of Language and Politics* 15,3, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.15.3.08aie> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/upshot/from-sex-object-to-gritty-woman-the-evolution-of-women-in-stock-photos.html>

Considering that the image in question was taken before the UK mandate on mask-wearing, the focus raises questions about the preconceptions people may have of those from ESEA communities who are more culturally prone to wearing masks, and their possible pre-conceived associations with disease.

A piece on transmission rates in Scotland also leads with an image of two ESEA people (Figure 3), where an image of people from any background in street scenes in Scotland could have served just as well.



*Figure 3: example of news coverage with ESEA faces*

In several cases, images of ESEA faces were combined or overlaid with images of the virus (Figure 4 and cover image), thus strengthening the association between this major public health problem and communities that make up an estimated 2% of the population.



*Figure 4: example of news coverage with ESEA faces*

## Limitations

A sample size of 2,250 out of 16,366 articles is more than sufficient to investigate broad statistical trends. However deeper analysis such as an evaluation of the specific news outlet sources, the types of ESEA stock images used or the frequency of appearance would require analysis of a greater sample size or specifically selected samples. This is beyond the scope of this research and further study will be needed to explore these factors in more depth.

Another limitation of this report is that the impact of articles was not possible to evaluate in this study. Some articles are read by millions, whilst others aren't read at all. An effective assessment of the impact of a COVID-19 article using stock images of ESEA people has to be paired with an analysis of viewership counts, the audience demographic and even its social media reach. This information is often neither collected nor widely shared with the public, and may require further study with the cooperation of media organisations. Nevertheless, the findings of this report do suggest that there is an endemic bias among stock photo photographers, stock photo companies or curators, media editors and journalists at news outlets. The over-representation of ESEA people in COVID-19 imagery, from the stock photo repositories, to their inclusion in COVID-19 articles, are the result of choices being made by people at every stage of this process.

The assessment of how and when images are harmful or troubling is not always straightforward. Making such assessments is a situated and contextual process, depending on a background of assumptions and associations - and these assessments may change over time, and vary across people, generations and settings. This study shows empirically that ESEA people were shown in UK media coverage of COVID-19 at a much greater proportion than their respective proportion of the UK population, and we recommend further research be carried out to evaluate in detail the impact caused by this over-representation.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This analysis of sample images suggests that in the early phase of the pandemic, ESEA people were unfairly and disproportionately associated with the COVID-19 virus. This coincided with a time when hate crimes against ESEA communities were reported to have spiked (Figure 5).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://evresea.com/data> and <https://www.voiceesea.com/police-data-map>

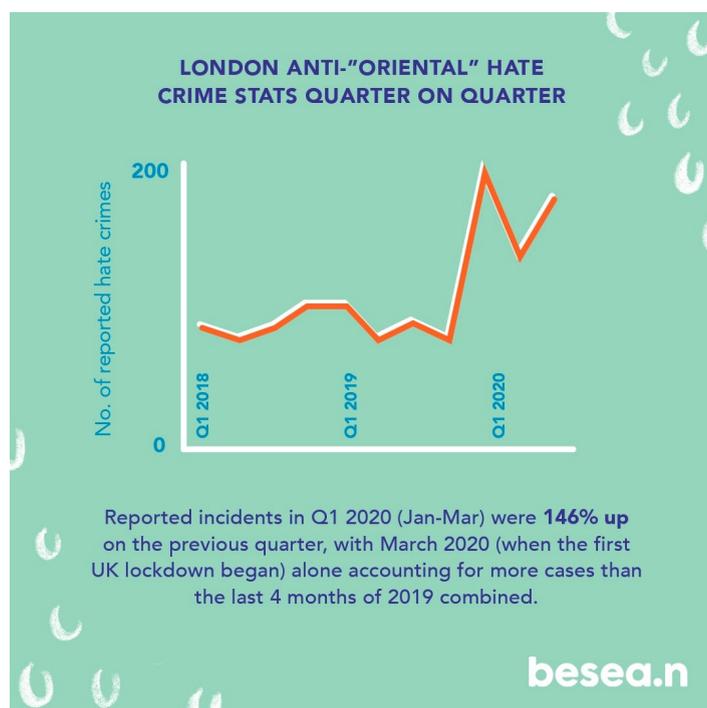


Figure 5: chart showing spike of hate crimes against “oriental” people in London.

Media organisations, journalists, editors, broadcasters, media producers and regulators have a responsibility to ensure that ESEA communities are not unfairly associated, scapegoated or blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic in images they publish.

Drawing on the findings in this report, we advise that:

- News organisations, journalists and media producers should take steps to ensure that their reporting does not contribute to an environment of blame, hostility and violence towards marginalised groups who may become the targets of hate crimes. In the case of the pandemic this includes being careful not to promote associations between ESEA people and the pandemic in images and visual material.
- Photographers and stock photography intermediaries should take responsibility for curating and promoting collections which do not problematise marginalised or minority communities. In the case of the pandemic, this includes taking care not to portray ESEA faces as part of the problem of the pandemic.
- Further research and inquiries should be undertaken on media representations of ESEA people - including not only under-representations but also problematic over-representations and associations, as well as exploration of the limitations mentioned.

## Appendix

Following are some other examples of images which unfairly associate ESEA faces with the COVID19 pandemic, in coverage where any faces could have been used.





News > Health News

## **ON THE NOSE** Young women more likely to suffer new coronavirus symptom anosmia, docs say

**Gemma Mullin**, Digital Health Reporter

16:59, 18 May 2020 | Updated: 17:00, 18 May 2020



**Work from home if you can**  **Wear face coverings**  **Stay alert**  
**Control the virus**  
**Save lives**

YOUNG women may be more likely to suffer from the new coronavirus symptom anosmia, experts have discovered.



Since the Surrey case three more victims have been identified in the UK (Image: PA)



The federal government has stepped up measures to protect Australians from the the deadly coronavirus virus after the first case in Australia was confirmed (stock image)



**Italy is battling to contain the killer virus, which has led to 50,000 residents being put under lockdown** Credit: EPA



**Brits also face a possible coronavirus crisis in the coming months if the virus spreads, with many people wearing medical masks as a precaution** Credit: Getty Images - Getty





Passengers from China Southern Airlines flight CZ319 arrive at Perth International Airport on February 2, 2020



A woman wearing a face mask crosses the street in Melbourne on March 5, 2020

## Number of UK coronavirus cases jumps by 45 to 209

 [Comment](#)



**Emma Brazell**

Saturday 7 Mar 2020 2:29 pm



**362**  
SHARES



The Department of Health released new figures on Saturday (Picture: Reuters/PA)

## Number of UK coronavirus cases jumps to 40 after four more are reported

Comment



Joe Roberts

Monday 2 Mar 2020 2:06 pm



5.6k  
SHARES



People wear medical masks on the streets of London amid a global outbreak of coronavirus (Picture: Anadolu Agency via Getty)

Another four people have tested positive for coronavirus, bringing the total number of infected cases to 40.

She had contacted a GP and taken steps to self-isolate, Northern Ireland's Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael McBride said.

Northern Ireland's health minister Robin Swann said 93 tests for coronavirus have so far been completed, with one presumed to be positive.



**Anybody in close contact with Northern Ireland's first Covid-19 patient has been contacted, health authorities north and south of the border said (Kirsty O'Connor/PA)**

He said: "I am reassured that the professionals we have in the health system are well-placed to cope with the eventuality that may come."

Irish health chief Dr John Cuddihy said: "Each of the stages of this person's journey have been identified and all relevant contacts in all of those stages of transport have been contacted (and) traced."

People who sat within two rows of the woman on the plane from northern Italy to Dublin were contacted.

Ireland's chief medical officer Dr Tony Holohan and Dr Cuddihy, head of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, said protocols similar to those used to respond to previous incidents of pandemic influenza – Sars and Mers – have been in place since January and are operating effectively.

Mr Swann said he believed the planning of the past four to five weeks had been effective.

## Coronavirus outbreak: US confirms cases in Chicago and Rhode Island

- Health secretary: 'We will see continued community spreading'
- **Pence defends Trump Jr claim Democrats want 'millions' to die**



▲ A man wears a masks in Chinatown in Chicago, Illinois. Photograph: Kamil Krzaczynski/Reuters

US health secretary Alex Azar has confirmed a new case of coronavirus in Chicago, as the **respiratory illness** spreads in the US.

Also on Sunday, Rhode Island announced its first known case. The new cases came after Washington state confirmed a man in his 50s died from the respiratory illness - the first known death caused by **coronavirus** in the US.

**Azar told Fox News Sunday** the Chicago case was one of 23 to be diagnosed in a person who had not been repatriated from Japan or China.

“Of those individuals, we’ve got cases in **Chicago** as well as Washington and Oregon and two in California where we do not yet know why they contracted the novel coronavirus,” Azar said.

# Coronavirus: Advertising blitz as deadly ‘Wuhan’ flu strikes Britain

A NATIONWIDE drive to highlight the risk of coronavirus launched today, as it emerged a student is one of two people who have tested positive for the deadly infection in the UK.

By **TONY WHITFIELD AND LUCY JOHNSTON**

11:23, Sun, Feb 2, 2020 | UPDATED: 11:23, Sun, Feb 2, 2020



Masked Shoppers in London's China Town (Image: Steve Bell)



Britain is set to ban visitors from China (Image: GETTY)

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The Government said it was unlikely the new travel restrictions would come into play this week (Image: GETTY)

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# Almost 150 coronavirus tests carried out in Scotland and all results negative

By [PRESS ASSOCIATION](#)

PUBLISHED: 15:01, 13 February 2020 | UPDATED: 15:02, 13 February 2020



The number of people tested for coronavirus in Scotland has risen by 42 in a day, but all have proved to be negative.

So far 148 people have been tested for the strain of coronavirus known as Covid-19, but none have tested positive.

Figures published by the Scottish Government on Thursday show there was an increase on the 106 who had been tested by Wednesday, which was up from 82 on Tuesday.

All tests from Scotland are now being processed at two laboratories, one in Glasgow and one in Edinburgh.

The Scottish Government said the new testing facilities, which launched on Monday, mean negative results can be returned quicker than previously when all samples were sent to London for screening.

Should a Scottish test result come back positive, the sample will be sent to Public Health England's Colindale laboratory in London for a confirmatory test.



So far 148 people have been tested for coronavirus in Scotland (Peter Byrne/PA)



People wearing face masks leave a supermarket after buying supplies one day before the country goes on lockdown to stop any progress of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Wellington