KEIDL

MELAMED

HEDIGER

SOMAINI

PANDEMIC

MEDIA

μ

Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

Editorial Board

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**

μ **meson press**

KﬄNFIGU
RATIONEﬃN
DES
FILMﬆ

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE
UNIVERSITÄT
FRANKFURT AM MAIN

PIVOTING

INCENTIVES

JOURNALISM STUDIES

COMMUNICATION STUDIES

RESEARCH DYNAMICS

[5]

Pivoting in Times of the Coronavirus

Felix M. Simon

Despite the disruption the coronavirus pandemic has caused in academia, research has not ground to a halt. On the contrary, the early months of the pandemic saw a real boost in productivity in many scientific fields, with many researchers starting to work on COVID-related projects. This essay addresses this "pivot to COVID" in the fields of journalism and communication studies. Interrogating potential reasons for this shift to coronavirus-related research, it identifies four concurrent push and pull factors that co-determine how research agendas are being set in these fields. It ends by outlining some of the potential implications of such a pivot for the quality and long-term direction of research in journalism and communication scholarship.

"History never waits for us to get ready" writes French author Laurent Gaudé in his poem-cum-essay "Our Europe: Banquet of Nations." Of course, this is a truism—profoundly meaningful and banal at the same time. Most quotations

lifted from texts of famous authors and intellectuals are. But thinking of the COVID-19 pandemic it is hard to argue that Gaudé does not have a point. This time, history really did not wait for us to get ready. In just a few short months, a virus listening to the charming name SARS-CoV-2 has unleashed an international public health crisis and brought along economic and political upheaval unlike anything most of us have seen in our lifetimes. States around the world in quick succession introduced measures that most of us would have deemed draconian just half a year ago. Some of us still think that way even though a majority has—at times grudgingly—come to accept their necessity. When and how (let alone if) all of these will be rolled back probably exceeds the imagination of even those who introduced them in the first place. Ultimately, to claim that most of us "got ready" in time for what awaited us also flies in the face of entire governments and societies (with some notable exceptions) simply winging their response to the situation. Some still do so, against better judgment.

Just as the coronavirus has disrupted the world as we knew it, mercilessly laying bare its fragility, the pandemic has also wrought havoc on the academe. In my own case, it not only forced me to temporarily leave behind the current epicentre of my academic life, it has also profoundly rattled the fields I work in. And while there are more aspects to this than I can cover within the scope of this essay, one of them—what I have come to call the "pivot to COVID"—is worth briefly reflecting upon at this critical inflection point. Why? Well, for one because that is essentially what we get paid for as academics. Reflecting on things is in essence the core of our job. Second, because thinking about this particular development can be food for thought when it comes to the dynamics governing our research and fields of study before—and in all likelihood beyond—the COVID era.

Thoughts on Pivoting

What do I mean by "pivot to COVID"? In a nutshell, it serves to describe the ways in which my field—best summarised as journalism and communication studies in the social science tradition—has adapted to the pandemic in terms of what it researches and the questions it asks. Following the outbreak and the subsequent lockdown measures in countries outside of China, many communication scholars have tried to retrofit their research agenda to COVID-19 (Cornwall 2020). I would, by no means, exclude myself here. But why is that so? Why are "we" pivoting?[1] And how should one judge this development?

---

1   It should be noted that by "we," "our," or "our field" I broadly refer here to the fields of journalism and communication studies in the social science tradition of which I am a part, with an emphasis on the US, the UK, and the wider English-speaking world (as opposed to the "relatives" of these fields in other countries, for instance in Germany, who often approach these subjects from a humanities, or cultural studies perspective).

Let us start with the personal, individual reasons. Scholars are humans too—with the same set of emotions as everyone else. Speaking from personal experience and that of friends and colleagues, the rush to start working on COVID-related projects can at least partially be described as a coping strategy, an attempt to mentally process a deeply traumatic event through one's work. While doctors save lives in hospitals and medical experts work on ways to get a handle on the pandemic, including finding a vaccine, it is also easy—and this was the case especially in the early days of the pandemic—to feel useless and powerless as an academic who is not involved in these efforts. While I am not saying that such personal crises generally should be solved through (more) work, for some it is an effective remedy.[2] The expression "working things out" exists for a reason.

A second personal motivation can be found in what might best be described as an activist impetus. Aware of the cumulative effects of the pandemic, particularly in unstable, unjust, or unequal socio-economic and political structures (arguably these attributes often intersect), some academics found themselves compelled to think about the pandemic as part of larger social and political crises (Neff 2020), some of them pivoting to COVID-related work out of a sense of urgency and emergency in order to call attention to the pandemic's role as a catalyst for long-standing structural problems.

Yet, I would submit that the current rush in pivoting to Corona-related research, especially in US and UK-centric journalism and communications research, is mainly the result of several concurrent push and pull factors that largely determine how we operate as fields. By push factors I refer here to the internal dynamics of our fields: the norms and (in)formal logics we have some control over and which characterise our work. Pull factors, on the other hand, are external dynamics: the demands and interests of the media, policymakers, funders, and the public at large, which we cannot control but which to a certain extent shape our work—for good and for ill (Nielsen 2020). So what are some of these?

The first (push) factor is, I would argue, a legitimate claim of expertise. Some of the conundrums and social phenomena thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic—e.g. people's trust in the media (Nielsen et al. 2020), how information flows affect behaviour, false information (Brennen et al. 2020), or the affordances of virtual environments—yield themselves quite well to topics

2   In fact, there are several inherent risks and problems in such an approach which should not go unacknowledged, in particular the risk to one's mental health. In addition, such behaviour is part and parcel of a system which incentivises but seldom rewards overtime work and unequally distributes opportunities. To put it differently: Not everyone currently has the luxury to drop everything and get started on new projects. Rather than rushing to the keyboards, we would be well-advised to take this moment as an opportunity to think about and change some of the structural problems academia undeniably has.

and questions scholars from the humanities and social sciences interested in communication have been studying for decades. Hence, it is only natural that we would take an interest in them and have something to say about them (and feel an urge to do so).

Second, and following from the first point, is that many scholars seem to see the pandemic as an opportunity for (post-hoc) legitimisation, a chance to prove one's discipline's value vis-à-vis other disciplines and areas of research. While we have studied many of the abovementioned phenomena in great depth, this has not always translated into greater (external) recognition of our expertise in these areas (Nielsen 2020; Lewis 2020). One only needs to consult a handful of the many essays and op-eds that are currently being published around COVID-19 on some of the topics that fall within our area of work to find that a lot of them seem to care little for what we as a community of scholars know—and if they care, then often with a too strong emphasis on some topics at the expense of others. It is often "sexier" to report on bots, the so-called "infodemic," or propaganda than it is, for instance, to think about the long-term implications of trust, the communication strategies and narratives woven around the pandemic, and the long-term structural damage COVID-19 is inflicting on the business of the news (to name just a few).

A third factor is arguably a hybrid between push and pull. As Ruth Falkenberg contends, modern academia is suffused with an epistemic capitalist logic of neoliberal valuation schemes (see also Hicks et al. 2015) where researchers are "drilled to become rapid response experts" and forced to "follow the money while sacrificing long-term epistemic agendas to the needs of short-term productivity" (Fochler 2016; Falkenberg 2020). While I slightly disagree with Falkenberg's all too bleak assessment of the situation, especially regarding the sacrifice of long-term agendas, she makes a critical point that has become visible in the pace with which some scholars have turned on the spot to address the pandemic.

A fourth—and closely linked to the third—pull factor is the demand from funders, policymakers, the media, and the public for answers and more information on phenomena relating to the pandemic. Especially in the first weeks after the outbreak, the available knowledge about its characteristics and effects was as thin as the caramel crust on a crème brûlée. And where there is demand, there will always be people who will try to meet it. It is not an exaggeration to say that demand for information has been overwhelming (Fletcher et al. 2020), not least evidenced by the staggering rise in viewer and readership numbers witnessed by many outlets in the early days. Similarly, many researchers, at least in the UK, have been inundated with money, with funding announcements for COVID-19 related research flooding people's inboxes in the days and weeks following the first lockdown. Likewise,

researchers working on areas related to the topic have been in high-demand, with some of them reaching superstar status within weeks.

Ground Gives, Capstones Shift

Of course, this list is far from exhaustive, but all this begs a second question: Is all this pivoting a good or a bad thing? The answer, I suggest, lies in the past.

In a way, we have all been here before. The last major disruption to the fields of journalism and communication research in recent years has arguably been the Brexit referendum, followed by the election of Donald Trump and the concomitant rise of right-wing populism in various parts of the world. In the wake of these, a flurry of activity ensued and scholars of all backgrounds and research traditions rushed to the case. Everyone suddenly seemed to be working on so-called "fake news" (Nielsen and Graves 2017), the dark arts of the supposedly all-powerful political data analytics industry (Simon 2019), or nefarious bots and other influence campaigns (Karpf 2019). Grant applications were re-written, new grants announced, research agendas re-defined, expertise from other contexts applied to the new paradigm, and so on. In a word: The fields pivoted.

The motivations of scholars at the time to jump on the bandwagon were eerily similar to what we see playing out in front of our eyes at this very moment. For some, it was a way to cope with events that more than a handful of us experienced as deeply disturbing. Some were well-meaning and wanted to help, or hoped to achieve change. For others it was the promise of funding and/or fame and the felt necessity to pursue these lines of research to survive in a hyper-competitive, neo-liberalised academic market. The group dynamics and peer pressure were there, too: everyone else seemed to be doing it. And some truly wanted to understand what was happening and create new knowledge in the process. In many cases, it was a mix of all these. I could go on, but again, the scope of this essay is limited.

This is not to say that the research resulting from these efforts—or research resulting from similar "pivots" more broadly—has been bad or low in quality across the board. Some of it has been excellent. A lot of it fell somewhere in between. Unfortunately, some of it has been poor and lacking nuance (and one could probably make a claim that this is often what gained wider traction), with the conceptual work focusing on a supposed "infodemic"—defined by the WHO as an over-abundance of information that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance—providing a pertinent example. Research addressing this "concept" has exploded in recent months (Simon and Camargo 2020). While drawing analogies to epidemiology when it comes to the existence and spread of (mis)information might be intuitive, it is also misleading and fundamentally misunderstands how information is being

produced, shared, and consumed in modern, high-choice media environ-ments. Describing the complex communicative phenomena around the COVID-19 pandemic as an "infodemic" or calling for the establishment of a new field of "infodemiology" is merely giving new names to something we have other names for, without adding additional explanatory power.

Ultimately, the question remains if the current pivot to Corona-related research in the broad fields of journalism, media, and communication is something to cherish or to curse. As with most things in life the answer prob-ably lies somewhere in the middle. These fields are shaped by macro-trends which cage us (Schroeder, 2018), but within that metaphorical cage we have a surprising amount of flexibility to run after the latest fad. To put it differently, trends come and go but some underlying topics and questions remain broadly the same and will continue to matter in the future. As journalism scholar Seth Lewis has argued elsewhere, if history is any guide, "no matter how disruptive this pandemic proves to be, there will be many enduring tensions and tendencies that matter greatly" (Lewis 2020). From this point of view, the rush to Corona-related research is just another trend that will rise, peak, and subside (hopefully like the virus)—at least in the grand scheme of things. Undoubtedly, it will create academic "losers" and "winners" along the way (most likely at greater speed than usual) and crowd out other topics and agendas for some time, before interest and attention will inevitably fade and move on. With any luck and with science in general under more public scrutiny than usual, it might also push these fields towards more open and rigorous research practices, as some have demanded for a long time. But at least for now, the rush to and demand for Corona-related research is here to stay, with all its positive and negative effects.

"Capstones shift, nothing resettles right" writes Seamus Heaney in "Anything Can Happen". I'm sympathetic to Heaney's sentiment in this poem, but I am not quite sure if I agree with him. Yes, nothing resettles right, right away. But eventually it will.

References

Brennen, J. Scott, et al. 2020. "*Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, April 7. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://reutersinstitute. politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation.

Cornwall, Warren. 2020. "Social Scientists Scramble to Study Pandemic, in Real Time." *Science Magazine, AAAS*, April 8. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/04/social-scientists-scramble-study-pandemic-real-time.

Falkenberg, Ruth. 2020. "Being Productive in Times of Crisis, Making the Crisis Productive?!" *STS Blog*, April 1. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://blog.sts.univie.ac.at/2020/04/01/being-productive-in-times-of-crisis-making-the-crisis-productive/.

Fletcher, Richard, et al. 2020. "Information Inequality in the UK Coronavirus Communications Crisis." *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, July 23. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/information-inequality-uk-coronavirus-communications-crisis.

Fochler, Maximilian. 2016. "Variants of Epistemic Capitalism: Knowledge Production and the Accumulation of Worth in Commercial Biotechnology and the Academic Life Sciences." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 41 (5): 922–48. doi:10.1177/0162243916652224.

Hicks, Diana, et al. 2015. "Bibliometrics: The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics." *Nature* 520 (7548): 429–31. doi:10.1038/520429a.

Karpf, David. 2019. "On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths." *MediaWell, Social Science Research Council*, December 10. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/on-digital-disinformation-and-democratic-myths/.

Lewis, Seth C. 2020. "The Objects and Objectives of Journalism Research During the Coronavirus Pandemic and Beyond." *Digital Journalism* 8 (5): 681–89. doi:10.1080/21670811.2020.1773292.

Neff, Gina. 2020. "To Fight this Pandemic We Must Use Stories." *Twitter*, April 30, 3:14 p.m. Accessed July 21, 2020. https://twitter.com/ginasue/status/1255847973797462016?s=20.

Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, and Lucas Graves. 2017. *"News You Don't Believe": Audience Perspectives on Fake News*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, October. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/news-you-dont-believe-audience-perspectives-fake-news.

Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, et al. 2020. "Navigating the 'Infodemic': How People in Six Countries Access and Rate News and Information about Coronavirus." *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, April 15. Accessed 20 Jul. 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronavirus.

Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis. 2020. "Communications Research Has a Lot to Offer during the Coronavirus Crisis. But Are We Offering It?" *rasmuskleisnielsen.net*, May 22. Accessed July 20, 2020. https://rasmuskleisnielsen.net/2020/05/22/communications-research-has-a-lot-to-offer-during-the-coronavirus-crisis-but-are-we-offering-it/.

Schroeder, Ralph. 2018. *Social Theory After the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization*. London: UCL Press.

Simon, Felix M. 2019. "'We Power Democracy': Exploring the Promises of the Political Data Analytics Industry." *The Information Society* 53 (3): 1–13. doi:10.1080/01972243.2019.1582570.

Simon, Felix M., and Chico Q. Camargo. 2020. "Are We Really Living in an Infodemic? Criticising a Buzzword." Working Paper.

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

konfigurationen-des-films.de

KƆNFIGU RATIONƎN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE
UNIVERSITÄT
FRANKFURT AM MAIN

9 783957 960085

µ meson press