Rethinking keywords in media and cultural studies during and beyond COVID-19: Editorial

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Rethinking keywords in media and cultural studies during and beyond COVID-19: Editorial

Simone Natale, University of Turin, Italy
Eva Cheuk-Yin Li, Lancaster University, UK
Aswin Punathambekar, University of Pennsylvania, US
Emily Keightley, Loughborough University UK

Abstract
A few years after the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, discussions surrounding its impact have become noticeably less frequent within communication and media research. While the pandemic no longer occupies the central place it once held in academic discourse and public debate, it is now more crucial than ever to consider how this unprecedented global event has shaped our societies, as well as its lasting implications for communication and media worldwide. This Crosscurrents themed issue invited scholars to reflect on how the cultural and social implications of this global event solicit a reorganization and reframing of some of the existing conceptual and theoretical tools that have shaped media and cultural studies as a field. Contributors moved from one specific keyword to consider how these notions are imbricated by the crisis, either COVID-19 specifically or in more general terms. This editorial provides an overview to the themed issue and highlights the benefit of considering the impact of the pandemic from a broader and longer perspective, which moves away from the language and rhetoric of emergency.

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Scholarly discussions on media and culture at the time of COVID-19 have mainly focused on short-term responses, replicating a rhetoric of emergency that also shaped debates in the public sphere. As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes more distant in time and in people's memories, however, it becomes even more important to reflect on how the cultural and social implications of this global event involved a longer timeframe. The impact of the pandemic appears now much weaker than at the time of lockdowns and huge vaccine campaigns, yet it is arguably now, as the social, economic, political and cultural consequences have settled, that we experience some of the deeper consequences of this event. It is sufficient to think about how the boundaries between what is acceptable and desirable shifted in the course of just a few years regarding the use of online communication for work, education, and social relationships.

When media technologies become ingrained in the fabric of everyday life, they more easily go unnoticed, making it more difficult to reflect on their implications and consequences (Weiser, 1991). Online meetings, for instance, have become an everyday staple for many people in their professional lives; this is taken for granted even though just a few years ago they were far from being deeply integrated into people's work lives. Through this Crosscurrents themed section, we aim to provide an antidote to this oblivion by reflecting on how the longer timeframe before, during and after the pandemic involved a reorganization

and reframing of some of the existing conceptual and theoretical tools that have shaped media and cultural studies as a field. In the effort to promote long-standing reflections with the potential to inform debates within the field beyond the timeline of the emergency, we offered contributors a platform for timely interventions and debates around a number of keywords that are crucial for the past, the present, and the future of the field. We invited submissions of short commentary pieces that move from one specific keyword to consider how these notions are imbricated by the current crisis, either COVID-19 specifically or in more general terms. Contributors were asked to engage not only with current events but also with historical debates in *Media, Culture and Society* and in the wider field, taking a longer, broader theoretical/conceptual perspective.

Faithful to the themed section's goal to unveil longer rather than shorter trajectories of change, and continuing an approach to "open" themed sections that animate debates in Crosscurrents throughout prolonged periods of time (Keightley et al., 2023), the eight contributions were published in three different issues of the journal across two years. This extended timeline made it possible to create an open forum around the special section topic, in a way that is faithful to the objective of the *Media, Culture & Society*'s Crosscurrents section to spark dialogue and discussion on key directions of research in communication and media studies.

In their article, "Between existential mobility and intimacy 5.0: translocal care in pandemic times," Cabalquinto and Buscher (2023) consider how digital media in pandemic times have helped to forge and nurture communication, intimate ties and a sense of continuity and belongingness. Being stuck and simultaneously virtually mobile, however, has also brought difficulties, tensions and paradoxes. Drawing from first insights from a study with 15 members of the older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) population in Victoria, Australia, the article shows how practices of translocal care—i.e., methods of caring for others across distances through digital technologies—have become more intricate due to the pandemic. Such practices are influenced by two key dynamics: on the one side, networked collective "existential mobility" and, on the other side, a process of quantifying emotions that the authors propose to describe as "Intimacy 5.0". This concept encompasses not only the emotive, personalized, and interconnected nature of digital media usage in mitigating immobility during the pandemic, but also underscores the manipulation of emotions for commercial, political, and criminal ends. In fact, Cabalquinto and Buscher show how different sectors of society—including commercial, political, and criminal entities—exploit data produced through translocal care.

As the world entered lockdown, social media platforms became the primary sites where a disjointed yet networked public circulated (mis)information. By considering 'TikTok' and 'loss of smell' as keywords, Adrianna Grace Michell (2023) examined viral TikTok misinformation videos on 'curing' COVID-induced smell loss. In her article entitled "On losing the "dispensable" sense: TikTok imitation publics and COVID-19 smell loss", she challenges scientifically unfounded 'cures,' such as the viral burning oranges method, gained significant traction, with hashtags like #covidtastetest and #covidsmelltest garnering millions of views. The virality of these videos reflects TikTok's design, which algorithmically promotes replicable content, fostering an imitation public (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). These communities form through shared content replication rather than personal networks. Michell also contrasts TikTok's communities, brought together by replicating smell loss challenges, with more

'traditional' digital support groups such as AbScent on Facebook. While communities on both platforms illustrate the impact of smell loss and contradict historical views that smell is a dispensable sense, the burnt orange trend and other smell-related challenges show how TikTok users collectively navigate and share their sensory experiences, even when rooted in misinformation. In this sense, those 'cure' videos and challenges on TikTok become cultural archives of COVID-era smell loss. Amidst the circulation of misinformation, the article highlights that public health information could potentially harness the same traits of participation to mobilize an imitation public based on factual, scientifically-sound interventions.

In "Crosscurrents: Welfare," Kaun et al. (2023) reflect on how the Covid pandemic on the one side and the datafication processes on the other side stimulate to rethink the notion of welfare. They note that the nationwide emergency related to the pandemic accelerated digitalization efforts not only in public health, but also in other domains including schools, culture, and public agencies. Revisiting the notion of welfare through the lens of the communication and media studies and as part of datafied society, the authors propose to activate the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2003), which "shifts attention from universalist, predetermined understandings of what a good life is, and instead addresses human flourishing by assessing in empirical, concrete contexts the resources and choices available to various individuals and groups to pursue and lead the lives they have reasons to aspire for" (Kaun et al., 2023: 882). One of the consequences of adopting such an approach is the recognition of the limits of data-based automation, which focuses on streamlining and standardization. In contrast, welfare technologies that allow for different capabilities and acknowledge diverse needs should be imagined and implemented as a response to the challenges ahead.

Jérôme Bourdon's contribution, "Rethinking telepresence: Post- and pre-COVID-19," looks at how the enhanced use of digital communication technologies during the pandemics demands to rethink the concept of telepresence, understood as interpersonal connection at a distance. Through a *longue durée* media history approach, Bourdon reminds us how forced separation motivated by crises, including pandemic events, has encouraged people to use media technologies as a remedy long before the emergence of digital media. Postal services, for instance, have often provided a viable substitution to in-presence communication in exceptional situations. Refusing rigid contrasts between digital media and pre-digital media of the past, the article proposes a framework to compare them, along with the practices of social telepresence, in the course of history. The proposed framework is based on four dimensions: embodiment, synchronicity, the space of the encounter, the ontology of entities other than humans actuated by telepresence, and the social preferences for different forms of telepresence. More broadly, the article shows the value of a historical perspective in helping to assess competing arguments regarding media and social change.

"Ritual check-in, shocked immersion, regained stability: A sequential typology of news experiences in crisis situations" by Moe et al. (2024) interrogates how news audiences react to crises as they develop over time. In order to help address this question, the article proposes a typology that conceptualizes audiences' experiences before, during, and after societal crises. The typology outlines three sequential phases—ritual check-in, shocked immersion, and regained stability—each capturing distinct stages of audience engagement,

and is based on research that examines shifts between various modes of news engagement, specifically analyzing how distant audiences made sense of crises and political upheaval.

John Corner, in his article "Media research and proposals for media change: Notes on a key variable" (2024), dedicates attention to the notion of change. He considers how media research also involves suggestions for planned change. Such recommendations vary widely in their scale, specificity and also in their level of engagement with the political, economic and social contexts. Corner examines the various factors influencing how media research promotes ideas of change, often framed as 'reform'—despite the term sometimes being perceived as too limited in scope. Acknowledging the existence of numerous non-academic perspectives on both actual and ideal forms of change that are simultaneously in circulation, the article identifies four dimensions that can help examine and assess diverse proposals: the specificity of the changes indicated, the broader economic or political preconditions, the relationship with the terms of existing debates within the professional spaces in which change is called for, and the connections sought between academic space, political space, public space and professional space.

In "Reawakenings to the improbable: Offerings of the limit situation for media theory in a disorderly world," Amanda Lagerkvist (2023) argues that the pandemic demonstrated the need to consider the role of the disorderly, the uncertain, and the disruptive in media theory. As a conceptual tool to advance the agenda, she offers the notion of the *limit situation*, derived from the work of German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers, according to whom limit situations are our encounters with death, crisis, guilt, and conflict, as well as with birth and love. Limit situations are unprecedented situations in which people face the limits of what we can control, verbalize, and know. Lagerkvist contends that the pandemic accelerated the establishment of the "digital limit situation" by which digital technologies are brought in to fill up the voids of daily isolation, offering both shock and consolation to individuals and groups.

National government responses to COVID-19 were initially framed as a 'war,' a metaphor that was widely circulated and represented in both legacy and new media. Using 'war' and 'military metaphor' as keywords, Li and Lee (2023) examine how geopolitics and local war memories influenced the use of military metaphors during COVID-19. While WWII memories were frequently referenced in the US and UK, Li and Lee's article, entitled "The geopolitics of disease prevention: Military analogies against COVID-19 in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and beyond," explored two cases in East Asia: Hong Kong and Taiwan. Both societies drew from 'war' memories of SARS (2003), as a result of China's initial cover-up of the outbreak. For COVID-19, the contributors observe that in Hong Kong, a bottom-up, citizen-led adoption of war metaphors emerged, fuelled by distrust of the Chinese and Hong Kong governments. As a result, citizens engaged in self-reliance and securitisation practices such as manufacturing masks locally and adapting slogans of the Anti-ELAB protests (2019-2020). In Taiwan, the government and citizens promoted biopolitical nationalism to mobilise against China's military threat and exclusion of Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization (WHO). However, as the prolonged nature of the pandemic became apparent, the effectiveness of those metaphors diminished. This shift led to calls for political accountability and a decline in military metaphors. Their analysis offers a deeper understanding of future pandemic outbreaks and prevention by examining the intersection of geopolitics,

participatory culture on social media, and the mediatisation of discourses surrounding security, safety, and securitisation practices.

About five years have passed since the pandemic took the world by storm, and reflections on the pandemic times have become more and more scarce in communication and media research. Although the pandemic might no longer be a hot topic for academic research and public debates as it was just two years ago, it is even more important today to reflect on what this global event has meant and continues to mean for our societies and also for communication and media worldwide. The discussions animated by the authors of this special section, in this context, demonstrate the benefit of considering the impact of this event from a longer perspective. Avoiding to replicate the language of emergency, "Rethinking keywords in media and cultural studies during and beyond COVID-19" has called for renewed emphasis and reflections on longer trajectories of changes. Although this special section is now closed, Crosscurrents will continue to be open to contributions and interventions that further advance this approach by responding to the published interventions or by advancing new ideas and reflections around the special section's theme.

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