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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

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



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Pandemic Media: Introduction

Laliv Melamed and Philipp Dominik Keidl

Media have played a crucial role during the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdowns in 2020. News channels and programs kept viewers constantly updated about the spread of the virus, providing explanations about how it operates and showing graphs and maps about infection rates. Broadcast media featured interviews with virologists and other health experts, and programmed press conferences with politicians announcing new policies to contain the crisis. Likewise, social media fed information about the latest developments to their users who, in turn, used the platforms to document and share their own experiences of the crisis in the form of opinion pieces, memes, or humorous advice on how to practice social distancing. Videoconferencing software enabled white-collar workers to work from home and students to continue their education. After work, the same technologies provided alternatives to all the closed leisure activities by hosting workout sessions, wine tastings, book clubs, dance parties, or just chats with friends and family. Online retailers lured and catered to stay-at-home consumers, while television, streaming services, film festivals, porn websites, and online museum exhibitions provided distraction from fears and sorrows caused by disturbing updates. And although face-to-face dating was out of question for many, dating and hook-up apps provided the interface for online dating and sex. Media also served as the foundation for managing the crisis. Special apps were used to track routes of infection and for governments to control and surveil the movement of their own citizens. Infrared detectors embedded in specialized lenses helped measure and visualize body temperature, alerting a potentially infected carrier. Drones were used to scan urban spaces under closure, guard those who were locked down, and deliver goods to people's homes. Not all aspects of media consumption, however, revolved around the accessibility and elasticity afforded by digital media. With cinemas closed and distribution companies building new on-demand offers, another round of debates about the approaching "death of cinema" came to life. VHS collections were rediscovered, and drive-in theaters became a popular alternative to watch movies on the big screen and among a group of strangers beyond one's own home, showing the longevity of analogue media. In containing the virus and orchestrating new modes of social behavior, media were ubiquitous, whether functioning as an instrument of population control and mass surveillance, or as one of care and relief.

Recognizing the omnipresence of media and screens has become a commonplace notion in film and media studies. Yet, as widely stated and accepted as

the ubiquity of media and screens now is, the mediation of the pandemic and the variety of new media configurations brought forward by the pandemic have opened up new paths of investigation for film and media studies. As with so many other aspects in life that the coronavirus and its consequences put in jeopardy, media are actively shaping these changes as much as they are affected by them. At a time when nearly all of the world has been, and still is, living under some form of shutdown or increased prevention and control measures, media have become even more important for governments, institutions, companies, retailers, and regular citizens to organize, manage, work, educate, entertain, and communicate. Media afforded processes of informing or misinforming, keeping people safe or unsafe, generating hopes or fears, leading to support or sabotage, causing understanding or incomprehension. The results are gestures of solidarity or egoism, calls for changing corrupted social structures or gatekeeping those existing disadvantageous systems, utopian visions for a better future or dystopian narratives about the end of the world. At the same time, the eruption of the pandemic as a global biological and social condition accentuated the constant proliferation and state of media transformation (Parks and Walker 2020). The altered realities of living in a pandemic and post-pandemic time respectively require media to adapt themselves to new conditions of producing, accessing, consuming, sharing, and deploying media for the flow of information, labor, goods, policies, and culture. The proliferation of media and screens as a means of crisis management confronted film and media scholars once again with their own object of research, calling on them to track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change under the altered condition of a global event.

Pandemic Media

The pandemic was a heavily mediated event, if not a media event in itself. Experts such as virologists, public health specialists, politicians, and economists were recruited as spokespeople during the crisis. In these public debates, however, media operations or their instrumentality were deemed invisible or neutralized. The very conditions of conveying information, forging expertise, and representing the virus or the damage it inflicted on bodies, environments, and societies demand equal attention. A film and media studies perspective is needed to unpack the technological and discursive formations through which media channeled the crisis. The theoretical and methodological tools that define the discipline afford new insights into the communication, circulation, and consumption of media during the pandemic by asking: How do media render an invisible virus and its threats visible? What form and format do graphs take to inform policy makers and the public about the crisis? How and why do amateur media get distributed transnationally and win transnational popularity? Where and in which socio-economic contexts do small

cultural institutions fight for their existence while large online corporations expand their dominance? How does the pandemic change how people practice and talk about sex when they are urged not to hook up in person? How are previous viruses and their victims remembered across media? To whom do populists address their demagogic philosophies? When do images of protests and riots revive political movements? How can we mobilize media theories to understand the new pervasiveness of objects such as masks and plastic as media?

In this volume we seek to track the way the pandemic affected media forms, usages, and locations. Approaching the role of media during the pandemic one can note historical links to former pandemics in how they reorganize media settings and consumption (Napper 2020) or order social narratives.¹ A different strand probes pandemic media through the notion of contagion, highlighting the role of both media and the virus as carriers, their infecting circulation, and their transformation of their hosts (Parikka 2016; Sampson 2012). The concept of media event, an event formed through its mediation, is particularly apt for describing the ubiquity and instrumentality of media during the pandemic. Here we draw on a major thread within film and media studies that explores the interconnection between media and the historical event, its orchestration and management, the narratives or genres it engenders, and its shaping of public as well as domestic spheres. From the explosion of the Discovery to the war in the Balkans, September 11, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the Arab Spring (Katz and Dayan 1994; White 1999; Keenan 2004; Schuppli 2015; Snowdon 2014): in these events, despite their different scale, media are not merely a vessel of information but the very conditions that shaped their cultural, political, and economic footprint. Media are a factor of directing global attention, of visibility and recognition, of connecting spaces, pacing temporalities, and generating narratives. Thinking of the various media operations that are characteristic of the current pandemic moment, media is instrumental in synchronizing and cohering the multiplicity of data, images, opinions, and happenings. As a pattern, the media event frames our reading of media ubiquity and their forming of a crisis mode, yet the radical and unprecedented scale of global reaction and measures of distancing prompted new manifestations, termed here “pandemic media.”

Questions of formation, format, usages, and locations of media have been central to the work of the DFG-funded research collective “Configurations of Film” based at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. As part of the research collective’s book series, this volume reflects on these questions. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability, “pandemic media” refers to media forms and formats, content and narratives, exhibition and distribution,

1 For example, the vacillation between utopian and dystopian narratives brought by former pandemics, for example in Camus’s *The Plague* or Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

locations and settings, practices and uses, as well as analogies and metaphors that have made the invisible virus and its consequences perceptible. The concept captures media operating under pandemic conditions in sectors ranging from leisure to education, medicine, economy, politics, experimental art, and popular culture. “Pandemic media” represent a specific attitude toward media in a moment of transition and uncertainty at a time of a global health crisis. As a means to analyze and communicate the pandemic and its internal logic and logistics, this volume captures the discursive and temporal construction of the current crisis through various media configurations. These configurations have reordered social spaces, rhythms, and temporalities through calls for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, as well as the reconfiguration of media technologies and cultures themselves.

“Pandemic media” have collided and approximated public and private and institutional and non-conformist spaces respectively. They have reordered the domestic space as a sort of headquarters, a screened space that had to cater to and regulate all everyday activities during the lockdown. While being in quarantine at home, one still had to remain open to various transmissions summoning each and every person to put their individuality behind the imaginary global collective. Additionally “pandemic media” have transformed notions of temporality by interconnecting the velocities of the crisis: the immediacy or latency of the authorities’ reactions, the real time tracking of the event unfolding, the anticipation of new measurements to be expressed in the graphs and charts depicting the infection rates. They produced a feeling of urgency that oscillated between an unpredictable spectacularity and the sustaining of everyday routines, a simultaneous communication of rupture and continuity. Considering these media operations, pandemic media needs to be thought of in the context of a wider understanding of the way media functions under crisis (Doan 1990; Chun 2011; Parks and Walker 2020). Here, crisis is not only a condition that invites certain spatio-temporal formations like the ones mentioned above, but is itself a construction mediated and produced by media. As the above analysis maintains, a pre-existing media convention of crisis forged the pandemic as an event, in as much as it invited new forms and conventions.

Transformations of space and time intersect with manifestations of social conditions and social malfunctioning. The pandemic crystalized inequality and injustice, exposing uneven access to resources, intentional neglect of infrastructures, privatization of social services at the expense of the “greater good.” It furthered the exploitation and exhaustion of laborers, debilitation, poverty, hunger, as well as racial, colonial, and gendered systemic violence. The imaginary global community was first shattered a few weeks into the pandemic when images of institutional unresponsiveness and social indifference toward discrimination and harassment became visible yet again. Pandemic

media contributed to these dynamics through the circulation of gifs, memes, videos, and news reports, whose content either sanctioned and reinforced systematic discrimination and oppression or bluntly exposed its brutal outcomes. Thinking through and with pandemic media, a public health state of emergency provoked by contagion necessitates a reflection on larger social, economic, political, and cultural systems that formed the crisis and were reformed by it.

Pandemic Scholarship

This volume highlights that this very sense of rupture and its mediation summons a particular form of writing. Early on in the crisis, magazines, podcasts, online lectures, as well as academic journals, blogs, and print publications called for expert analysis.² They created an urgency for scholars and public intellectuals to reflect on the ways the pandemic traverses our world, contextualizing the spread of the virus and institutional responses according to their expertise. As editors of this volume, we are aware that it is equally important to pause and reflect on how the rhetoric of urgency itself shapes the way we approach knowledge and critique. Throughout the process of bringing this collection to life, we felt that in its disastrous totality and its global scale the pandemic is threatening to absorb all forms of knowledge. Responding to the urgencies of the now might yield to popular demand while rushing the process of analysis, deliberation, and evaluation, which are unwaivable aspects of scholarship.

Yet we perceive it as a necessary momentum to employ film and media studies as a critical tool to deliberate and even dismantle the mechanisms that are used to attend to the crisis. Spotlighting media operations exposes the very means and narratives through which expertise is presented as such, and this volume is in dialogue with other scholarly interventions on the impact of the pandemic from the field of film and media studies specifically, and the humanities and social science more generally (Baer and Hanich 2020; Bronfen 2020; Gessmann, Halfwassen, and Stekeler-Weithofer 2020; Hennefeld and Cahill 2020; Jones 2020; Newiak 2020; Volkmer and Werner 2020; Walker 2020). Moreover, it allows us to question the very temporal motors for scholarly reflection. Do scholars need to reply to the moment's crisis, or alternately, does informed reflection necessarily demand distance and time? As a matter of fact, many of the questions discussed in this volume have occupied the discipline of film and media studies before. With this we assert that the foundations for the

2 See for example: Critical Inquiry Blog "Posts from the Pandemic" https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/posts_from_the_pandemic/, a special project of *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis* <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> *The New York Review of Books's* Dispatches from the Covid-19 Crisis <https://www.nybooks.com/topics/coronavirus/>.

pandemic media mechanisms were already laid, yet the crisis formation provides them with a new visibility.

Two objectives were particularly important to us in putting together this volume. First, to probe the many media configurations that played into the social, economic, cultural, and political manifestations of the pandemic. Second, to collect and register these configurations and expressions. Whilst the pandemic enabled the emergence of ephemeral and inchoate expressions, an outcome of a mode of transition that the crisis mobilizes, their ephemerality became evident while we were working on the volume between April and September 2020. Between the process of reviewing the essays throughout the summer and writing the introduction in early fall, some amateur videos have already disappeared from the virtual sphere, comments have been deleted from social media, new technologies designed to contain the virus have evolved, social responses have shifted from comprehension to anger, and conspiracy theories have questioned the validity of science and expert opinions. As such, this volume is the outcome of a form of “pandemic scholarship,” representing a certain moment of change as much as it is aware of the effects of the crisis on its own operations.

The Inventory

We invited the authors in this volume to reflect on a specific phenomenon that is part of pandemic media, drawing on their specialized interests and expertise. The result is an inventory of pandemic media, an indefinite sum of the many forms, formats, usages, practices, platforms, functions, and conventions through which media manifest themselves in this demarcated, yet ongoing, event.

Time/Temporality

This section brings together different considerations of the pandemic’s rhythms and temporal distributions—past, present, and future. Neta Alexander explores modes of waiting as a predominant experience in an age of on-demand culture, refuting its myth of immediacy, whereas Malte Hagener highlights parallelism and synchronicity in his study of the split-screen, a common image in the days of the pandemic that goes back to early cinema. In contrast to these either latent or accelerated tempos, time, as a sensation of contemporaneity, informs Ulrike Bergemann’s analysis of a short film that was swiftly produced for the online edition of a film festival. Jaap Verheul’s critique of a renewed interest in the film vault concerns the valorization of past cinematic treasures by industry powers; scholarly interests are reoriented to address current affairs in Felix M. Simon’s conception of

“pivoting”; and modes of cinema viewing are adjusted to the time’s necessities while imbued with nostalgia in Karin Fleck’s study of the drive-in.

Space/Scale

Media alter perception of space and scale, and with it how we relate to ourselves and others. The section opens with two essays addressing different media representations of urban spaces. Teresa Castro criticizes drone images of empty cities as an “aestheticization of politics” and victory of spectacle over critical distance. In turn, Alice Leroy shows that the appropriation of surveillance military technologies can also be used to document otherwise invisible moments of care and solidarity. The subsequent three essays engage with issues pertaining to self-isolation through the lens of platforms. According to Yvonne Zimmermann, videoconferencing creates a relationship of closeness and distance of self and/as other that opens up new modes of self-reflexivity. Joshua Neves and Marc Steinberg probe how platform economies take over most in-person activities, providing customers with the experience of convenience at the cost of putting laborers at risk. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez’s analysis of an animated short depicting the different experience of the rich and poor stresses the expanding rift between cosmopolitan elites and the millions that inhabit the Global South. The last two essays examine the consequences of closed media spaces for visitors and scholars. Distinguishing between film-driven and festival-driven events, Marijke de Valck proposes combining case study-based scholarship with large-scale data projects to theorize the changing festival eco-system. Exploring the rupture COVID-19 has caused for theme park fans and researchers, Rebecca Williams maintains that digital media may become more central for fans and fan scholars when the physical spaces are inaccessible.

Technologies/Materialities

Taken together, the essays in this section manifest a variety of interfaces, platforms, modes of production, views, and medium through which the pandemic was rendered visible, felt, controlled, or inhabited. Offering a long history of machine vision, Antonio Somaini sheds light on the current proliferation of technologies of distance; Alexandra Schneider probes the pandemic media space by looking at a particular interface, the car’s camera-imbedded rear mirror, and its measures of displacement; whereas Ada Ackerman’s analysis of drone-produced images of empty urban spaces explores the spectacle of scale and emptiness. Essays by Bishnupriya Ghosh, Christoph Engemann, and Guilherme da Silva Machado address media logics of close scrutiny. Ghosh dissects the synthetic scientific process of visualizing the virus; Engemann investigates corona tracing apps and the public debates they provoke in Europe;

and, studying telecommunication technologies in the workplace, da Silva Machado situates contemporary production labor in the facial close-up. Lastly, traversing our access to spaces and bodies, the pandemic has brought about new materialities. Diego Semerene argues for the erotic discharge of words on sex platforms, in lieu of the affordability of bodies; Marie-Aude Baronian explores the omnipresence of masks, both as a material object and a medium; and Marek Jancovic tracks an archeology of three conspicuous objects in the urban space: gaffer tape, glass, and boom microphones.

Education/Instruction

A didactic display, a form of authority or its tool, a space to exercise prudence or trust are linked to media instructional and educational imperatives. Florian Hoof observes the different formats through which information about the virus was conveyed as a means to establish trust in a time of growing uncertainty; in Benjamín Schultz-Figueroa and Sophia Gräfe's essay animals are put forward as a medium through which the pandemic was introduced and studied, either as a cultural or scientific signifier. Leonie Zilch understands pandemic porn as a way to enhance moralistic values; while the impact of media on children was also reconsidered by scholars and pedagogues, as contended by Meredith A. Bak in her essay on children's screen time and her proposal of a "stretchy time." John Mowitt's essay thinks through the imperative, often made in teleconferencing teaching, "mute your sound." The proposition of canceling sound, signaled by the icon of microphone with a red strikethrough, leads Mowitt beyond the engineered hearing of the telephone, potentially altering our techno-pedagogical scene. Essays by Kerim Dogruel and Wanda Strauven likewise meditate on the ways the pandemic redesigns pedagogic interactions. Dogruel expands on how online teaching was perceived differently among different groups, borrowing from media and social theories. Strauven reflects on a class excursion to an online film festival, recounting how the mixing of everyday routine and the online platform leads to feelings of exhaustion.

Activism/Sociability

Exacerbating and intensifying existing social conflicts, media was instrumental in forming and keeping alive communities and realizing new activist strategies. The first three essays offer insights into the promise of digital technologies to provide sociability while social distancing. Abby S. Waysdorf analyses fans' use of archives to maintain their fan identity by staging online alternatives for canceled events. Stefanie Duguay investigates dating apps' repositioning as facilitators of (self-)care while corresponding with the commercialization of health and well-being by digital technologies. Shane Denson stresses that

the paradoxes of screen-mediated life during the pandemic are that media serve at once to connect and to isolate, carrying the potential for passive alienation but also active resistance. The next three essays focus on how, and against what, such active resistance materializes. Amrita Biswas examines the formation of solidarity networks in India to create awareness about the severity of the crisis for migrants across the country. Michelle Cho traces anti-racist protests by K-pop fans against the intertwined conditions of police violence and the intensification of structural and environmental racism in North America and Europe. As Vinzenz Hediger demonstrates, these protests are also directed at a US president whose governance is characterized by the presentational modes of home shopping television. The final two essays of this volume encourage new viewpoints and epistemologies to overcome systematic oppression. Didi Cheeka calls for the decolonizing of film archives in the time of pandemic capitalism, and Kester Dyer shows how long-standing Indigenous viewpoints have anticipated the tensions concerning systemic racism magnified by the pandemic.

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**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 configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, 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 politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, 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.

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