

JDMP Special Issue 12.1: ‘Digital Media, Public Policy and COVID-19’

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Editorial

As the Dot Com bubble deflated in 2000, a high-technology banker told *Fortune* magazine: ‘It is true that the Internet will change everything. It is not true that everything will change’ (Useem 2000). Twenty years on, COVID-19’s impact could be described the same way. It has touched almost every part of the world, every corner of human experience, every private and public enterprise, every government and regulatory agency. In this journal’s fields of interest, usage of communications networks has swelled and media content has overflowed with news, views, information and disinformation about the pandemic. Social and industrial practices have transformed overnight. Governments have raced to make and adapt policy on the run (for an early discussion, see Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2021). For some media companies, positioned in the centre of the online digital economy, it has been a bonanza; others have been swept aside.

While the speed and scale of the impacts have been astounding, some of the changes in media have followed familiar vectors. Diversification in the sources of content, rapid expansion of communications traffic, and a shift from physical to online activities and commerce are old trends, accelerated but not originated by COVID-19. The pandemic itself was unprecedented for many but a familiar fate for the human race, especially those living in places where the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreaks earlier in the century were most severe. COVID-19 was clearly the story of 2020 but it interacted with others that had longer trajectories – the rise of China, the relative decline of the United States and the growing tensions between them; climate change; inequality across nations and within them; Britain’s exit from the European Union; the Trump presidency in the United States. Everywhere, responses to the virus worked, as Arundhati Roy said of India’s lockdown, ‘like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things’ (Roy 2020).

As with so much that happens in media, global themes played out in distinctive local, national and regional contexts. Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis wrote in *Rolling Stone* magazine:

Never in our lives have we experienced such a global phenomenon. For the first time in the history of the world, all of humanity, informed by the unprecedented reach of digital technology, has come together, focused on the same existential threat, consumed by the same fears and uncertainties ... (Davis 2020)

The broad observation may be true but ‘all of humanity’ did not experience the pandemic in anything like the same way. Starting with the virus itself, the proportions of populations infected, hospitalised and dying from it varied widely between and within nations and through the year. Responses varied too. Indeed, their idiosyncrasies across geographies, cultures, institutional settings and personality types seem at least as significant as the universality of the virus they responded to. Movements constrained, activities forced online, data gathered, money spent - these things happened in very different ways in different places and with different degrees of compulsion, nudging and personal choice.

This special issue of the *Journal of Digital Media and Policy* brings together scholars of communication and media, political economics, policy and technology to consider the role of digital media in forming public policy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a global journal, we were especially interested in the complex interplay between the universal viral phenomenon and the localised policy responses to it: the extent to which COVID hastened

and deepened or slowed and diverted existing trends; the exposure of policies that were no longer fit for purpose even before the pandemic; the ubiquity of digital platforms, alongside the heterogeneity of their applications. Pandemics, like climate emergencies, cyberwarfare, disinformation, and state-sponsored meddling in other countries' democratic processes, defy policy intervention as we know it.

We received many more submissions to the Call for Papers we circulated in May 2020 than we could include even in what has become a larger-than-usual issue. Those we chose, following rigorous peer-review, are theoretically and empirically strong articles and meanwhile reflect wide geographical coverage. We kick off with **Terry Flew**'s piece on the topical issue of trusting and valuing news in the midst of COVID-19. The author claims that while the global health pandemic has resulted in a growth in news consumption, 'this has not translated into either greater trust or an improved financial situation for news providers'. Flew highlights the main concerns relating to disinformation with regards to public health messaging, and assesses the potentially disastrous consequences for public communication emanating from this mistrust of mainstream news media. After exploring several key issues for the study of news and trust, the study concludes that the turn to subscription-based media raises concerns around the value of news, and the future relationship between subscriptions, advertising revenue and public funding in the future of news publication and distribution.

Andrei Richter says 'COVID-19 has created a situation of global and national disorder for freedom of information'. Under international law, freedom of expression is protected as a fundamental human right, but it may be subject to restrictions, including for the protection of public health. Policies to deal with the pandemic in Europe have generally not claimed a formal derogation from the protected right of free expression but 'have had a disproportionate impact on freedom of information'. Richter analyses three areas of concern in a selection of European countries: restraints on access to information; bans on disinformation; and monopolization of the flow of information. He finds examples of COVID-related limitations 'already abused to solidify control over the information flow'. In some countries, 'they paved the way for the establishment of a state monopoly on truth'.

Despite diverse legal systems, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea share a long legal and social tradition of caring greatly about healthy and safe life conditions, social welfare, and public order. They seemed to adapt and evolve their already advanced digital surveillance measures promptly and effectively to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. **Elena Sherstoboeva and Valentina Pavlenko** establish eight criteria to evaluate the impact of the digital surveillance tools used in these six East Asian jurisdictions from the perspective of privacy and personal data protection. They conclude that 'While the national strategies have been mostly diverse across the region, varying from total to compulsory selective and voluntary selective surveillance, there is a common regional trend towards a more centralized and invasive model that does not look sufficiently justifiable for the protection of public health during the COVID-19 time'.

Kyong Yoon looks at the East Asian country ranked highest in the OECD by a June 2020 report for its ability to mitigate both the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Digital surveillance could be deployed rapidly in South Korea because of the already highly developed state of the country's digital infrastructure and economy. 'By promoting its advanced digital technology and disease control system, the government, often along with the news media, circulated the discourse of national pride and thus mobilized citizens to further comply with the centralized pandemic control', Yoon writes. The generally favourable response encouraged the government to announce a 'Digital New Deal' in July, including plans for a 'data dam' to collect extensive data from public and private sources which can be

used to explore the ‘big data-based economy’. Yoon is concerned about the ‘normalization of exceptional data surveillance measures’, the ‘techno-utopian discourse that emerged in South Korea’s response to the pandemic, through which the country is defined and imagined as a forward-looking digital state’.

The Turkish Government has a long history of ‘discomfort with critical voices on social media’, according to **Asli Tunç**. She documents the many laws passed and the record of requests by authorities for removal of content from the internet before the pandemic. Despite the ‘draconian legal framework’, the country’s social media scene is ‘extremely vibrant’. New restrictions, initially part of a package of economic aid measures, were passed by the Parliament in July 2020, and two particular incidents reignited controversy about social media censorship. Turkey’s new arrangements purportedly draw on Germany’s 2018 Network Enforcement Act, itself criticised by the Global Network Initiative for posing ‘unintended but potentially grave consequence for free expression in Germany, across the EU, and worldwide’ and potentially empowering authoritarian leaders.

The contribution by **André Dorcé, Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed, Jorge Saavedra Utman, and Toby Miller** focuses on the Latin America countries of Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, which, as the authors argue, ‘have long been at the heart of neoliberal experimentation and cybertarian fantasy’. Neoliberalism has denuded these countries’ ability to meet the needs of the citizenry in general, while cybertarianism has failed to provide a democratic media. A key argument here is that the pandemic has put these deregulated, privatized systems under pressure as market solutions to social problems have proven inefficient overall. The article identifies glimpses of hope and provides the example of the domain of education, where the isolation of school pupils and workers, mandated in the interest of public health, has driven a return to public broadcasting. According to the contributors, ‘combined with mass public agitation and media-reform movements, that provides hope for a new landscape’.

Bernadette Califano and Martín Becerra assess the digital policies introduced in the Latin American countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico during the first three months after the outbreak of COVID-19 reached the region. This analysis focuses on the actions implemented by the above big five national governments in terms of connectivity, compares the regulations implemented on connectivity matters to face the pandemic, and provides insights in relation with telecommunications policies in the context of pandemic emergence at a regional level. It argues that national public policies in the telecommunications field show the inertia of the private sector, reflected in the lack of measures to address ICT access, skills and usages. The authors conclude that the unequal structuring of the Latin American societies under scrutiny shows a direct correlation with the materialization of access to ICTs. They stress the importance of implementing macroeconomic policies which can address income and other social inequalities.

Gregory Taylor, Katelyn Anderson and Dana Cramer use the case of Calgary, Canada to explore how a forward-looking municipal policy framework enabled and harnessed a private-public partnership that delivered resilient broadband connectivity in response to the unprecedented increase in public demand that the COVID-19 pandemic put on the telecommunications infrastructure. Drawing on documentary evidence and interviews, the authors show how the City of Calgary developed surplus fibre broadband capacity over nearly two decades, made city-wide public Wi-Fi hotspots available, and worked together with the incumbent providers that adapted quickly to the new conditions in the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak. This case study suggests that policy interventions at the local level can be a significant component in a national strategy to provide essential internet access to all and address emerging digital divides.

Konrad Bleyer-Simon examines how digital journalists in Hungary perceived controversial government initiatives to control the flow of official information further during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with journalists working in independent digital news media organizations suggest that the government measures were introduced under the pretext of managing the spread of harmful disinformation in public emergency conditions, but the perception among interviewees was that the real aim was to contain media scrutiny. Contrasting working practices before and during the pandemic outbreak, this study also seeks to explore how such journalists adapted to the new environment. Pressure had an impact on media plurality, with almost all journalists of Index.hu, ‘the most widely-read government-critical Hungarian online news media’, resigning in protest and being replaced, which highlighted the importance of funding independence. However, ‘especially larger, general-interest newsrooms have proven resilient to political attacks’.

The issue also features two Commentaries. The first, written by **Olga Kolokytha** and **Krisztina Rozgonyi**, goes through the challenges for digital policy in the cultural and audiovisual sectors. Its main thesis is that the pandemic has provided new potential for digital cultural content and created an opportunity to harness the power of European audiovisual cultural heritage. This could eventually develop alternative business models capable of competing with the big giants in the likes of YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+, and helping to reshape power dynamics between the EU and other global actors.

In her commentary, **Melinda Sebastian** discusses Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in the US. This piece of legislation was ‘intended to provide platforms with broad liability protection whether they moderate content or not’, and has been at the centre of controversy for some time, but calls for effective and timely content moderation in the context of the COVID-19 ‘info-demic’ brought this policy issue and its implications for global internet governance into sharp focus. The author looks at the international dimension of the debate, the tensions between advocates of the status quo and increased moderation, and the challenges that the scale of such an undertaking would involve.

In the debates about policy responses to the pandemic, much has been made of the need to balance health and economic goals. Such evidence as is available so far suggests that this is no simple trade-off. The research and analysis in this issue identifies further kinds of balance: between health, on the one hand, and particular human rights on the other, especially rights to free expression, to receive reliable information and honest opinion from diverse sources, and to resist intrusion into personal privacy. Many governments around the world have acted quickly and impressively to deal with the health crisis but the measures they have put in place need old-fashioned scrutiny against familiar benchmarks.

‘Historically’, Roy says, ‘pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next’ (Roy 2020). Entering that new world, scholars of media and communications policy will need to bring well-honed tools along with bold visions.

References

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